DISTURBING THE COMFORTABLE:
AN ETHICAL INQUIRY INTO PEDAGOGIES OF DISCOMFORT AND CRISIS

by

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Abstract

Educators are traditionally expected to provide safe, supportive and caring learning spaces for students. Yet some educational theorists suggest that, if educators seek to disrupt oppression, they must call on students to step outside of their comfort zones to acknowledge and question how one’s privilege implicates one in the oppression of others. Megan Boler and Kevin Kumashiro are two scholars who question the desirability of comfortable learning spaces. Both theorists build upon Shoshana Felman’s use of testimonies of trauma to invite or lead students into discomfort or crisis. But what are the ethical implications of this approach to education? The purpose of this study was to undertake an ethical inquiry into Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort and Kumashiro’s pedagogy of crisis.

This inquiry applied the conceptual framework of Judith Butler, particularly her conception of ethical violence, in order to critique these pedagogies. Butler suggests that subjects are required to appropriate certain discursive norms in order to be considered intelligible human beings. When a subject is unable to appropriate such a norm, that norm is said to be ethically violent. According to Butler, dominant ethical discourses require subjects to present an autonomous, coherent self in order to be considered intelligible. Butler argues that this norm is inappropriable, because subjects are constitutively dependent and incoherent, and thus inflicts ethical violence.

This study considered if and how Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort and Kumashiro’s pedagogy of crisis risk inflicting ethical violence upon students. The principal conclusion was that, left unchecked, the use of testimony in pedagogies of discomfort and crisis risks inflicting ethical violence if students are required to give responses to testimonies of trauma that present an autonomous, coherent self. Narrative responses to testimonies of trauma also risk functioning as a mode for governing students’ subjectivities. Based on this finding, the author suggests ways that educators may minimize, if not eliminate, ethical violence in pedagogies of discomfort and crisis.
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In loving memory of
Mary Jane Ivits
Chapter One

Educating Beyond the Comfort Zone: An Introduction

1.1 Introduction

“Privilege is a headache that you don’t know that you don’t have,” sings Ani DiFranco (2006). I use the term ‘privilege’ to refer to the enhanced and unearned social status that is attributed to people based on certain highly valued social identities. Indeed, people are all too often rewarded based on identity markers such as gender, race, or class, rather than what they contribute to society. As a result of widespread meritocratic rhetoric (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005; Burke, 2004; Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2008), people generally take for granted that they get what they deserve. This belief incorrectly assumes that people are competing on a level playing field when, in fact, that playing field is built to systemically benefit those who most closely resemble the assumed white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied male norm (Boler, 1999, p. 47).

Changing society so that it actually does what it already purports to do, and rewards people fairly for their contributions to society (and hopefully provides the basic needs of those who cannot contribute), certainly requires action by those whom society systemically disadvantages. Social change, however, holds greater promise when people who are unfairly rewarded based on unearned social privilege start acknowledging, questioning, and willingly refusing their privileges. Complicating matters, a person is often oppressed in some ways and privileged in others. When confronted with one’s own privilege, it is quite common to respond defensively with how one is also harmed by oppression, instead of taking responsibility for how one is implicated in the oppression of others. Consequently, it is easy to remain oblivious to one’s privilege until one no longer has it. This raises the question: how might the privileged learn to recognize a headache that they don’t know that they don’t have?
1.2 Confronting One’s Comfort Zone

I am reminded of a transformative moment from my teenage years, a moment when I became painfully aware of my own unearned privilege and wanted to take action to bring about change. I was a sixteen-year old high school student from a white, rural, working-class neighbourhood in Ontario, Canada. One day, a guest speaker named Craig Kielburger came to visit my high school to talk about child labour. Craig explained that thousands of children in developing countries have to work, often in deplorable conditions and for meager wages, in order to help their families survive. Instead of getting an education and a shot at escaping the poverty cycle, they often work in the garment industry, making clothes that are exported and sold under popular brand names in developed countries like Canada. What I felt listening to that speech was more than empathy. Looking down at the shoes on my feet, made in Indonesia and likely the product of sweatshop labour, I was overcome with feelings of anger, shame and guilt. This intensely emotional moment – a moment characterized by what might be called crisis, discomfort, or moral distress – sparked a radical change in who I would become. For the first time in my life I became a self-declared activist for social justice.

Nevertheless, Craig’s visit did not have an equal impact on everyone in the audience. For the most part, my fellow students reacted with empathy for child labourers, but apathy toward the idea of working towards change. Of the various dismissive responses to Craig’s presentation, the following stand out most clearly in my mind: “He’s a rich kid from Toronto so he can afford to be an activist”; “He came off as kind of gay, so I don’t want to be associated with him”; “Canada used to have child labour but naturally grew out of it, and so will developing countries”; and “He’s just in it for all the attention.” To me, most of the student population seemed rather defensive about their penchant for brand name clothing. They were not willing to abandon the comfort zone of their privilege to bring about change.

This example points to the possibility that, contrary to popular pedagogical beliefs, learning should not always occur within students’, parents’, and teachers’ comfort zones. Three scholars—Megan Boler, Kevin Kumashiro, and Eamonn Callan—have
made compelling cases for precisely that: they argue, for various ethical reasons, that learning must involve entering emotionally disconcerting territory.

More specifically, Megan Boler (1999) proposes a “pedagogy of discomfort,” the collective process of questioning fundamental beliefs and assumptions, attending to ensuing emotions, and bearing witness to others, wherein students hopefully emerge as allies working towards change. Likewise, Kevin Kumashiro (2002) advocates a “pedagogy of crisis” which involves learning things that reveal the partial and oppressive aspects of our knowledge, in ways that cause us to desire change in both ourselves and society. A third educational theorist, Eamonn Callan (1997) writes about the educational value of fostering a susceptibility to “moral distress,” not in the context of anti-oppressive education, but in the context of liberal citizenship education. While provocative, the idea that discomfort, crisis, or moral distress should be embraced in schools is, for me, still rather counter-intuitive. After all, education is perceived to be about encouraging, motivating, inspiring, and supporting students. At first glance, the obvious ethical thing to do seems to be to prevent discomfort, crisis, and distress.

1.3 Introduction to Ethical Violence

Theodor Adorno (in Butler, 2005) argues that people sometimes do harm to others in the name of ethics. He refers to this particular kind of harm as “ethical violence.” While violence is commonly understood as being enacted through physical attacks, Adorno draws attention to how violence can be propagated through ethical norms. This is the case when a society requires its members to appropriate an ethical norm in order to be recognized as an equally legitimate participant in that society. If that ethical norm is not appropriable by all subjects in what he calls “a living way,” (cited in Butler, 2005, p. 5) the norm becomes ethically violent insofar as it serves to marginalize or exclude certain subjects from being recognized as equal and legitimate human beings.

Judith Butler (2005) suggests that dominant ethical discourses currently require subjects to present an autonomous and coherent self. In other words, in order to be intelligible as an ethical subject, one must present oneself as a self-knowing and self-determining individual. This runs counter to the constitutive nature of the subject as a
relational (and thus dependent) being whose fluid identity renders it unknowable to both itself and others. Drawing upon Adorno’s conceptualization, Butler asserts that the ethical requirement of subjects to present an autonomous and coherent self inflicts ethical violence.

1.4 Philosophical Questions

I am intrigued by the relationship between ethical violence and pedagogies that make use of discomfort, crisis, and moral distress. On the one hand, discourses that, for ethical reasons, privilege certain social identities (based on race, gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation) at the expense of others inflict a specific kind of political violence that one might refer to as oppression. This is the kind of violence Boler and Kumashiro strive to resist. At the same time, the oppressed are not the only subjects vulnerable to violence; all subjects are potential victims of violence by virtue of being relational, and thus vulnerable, beings. Butler (2005) argues that violence itself must be resisted, no matter whom its target. I am interested in whether anti-oppressive pedagogies, such as those proposed by Boler or Kumashiro, serve to sanction a kind of violence against subjects with privilege, in the name of politics. This preliminary consideration elicits the following crucial questions:

1. Do pedagogies that make use of discomfort, crisis, and moral distress inflict ethical violence? If so, what is the nature of this ethical violence and is it necessarily or contingently incurred?
2. How might these ideas be used to produce more ethically-inclined subjects in ways that minimize, if not eliminate, ethical violence?

These particular questions are of interest because I believe they have potential to enhance anti-oppressive pedagogy. I would like to influence progressive social change, but at the same time, I do not want to become the evil that I deplore by working to replace one oppressive system with another. As such, I will explore an ethical framework that is congruent with anti-oppressive theory and can provide further guidance for inquiring into students’ and teachers’ comfort zones.
Some readers may recognize the parallels between these questions and those that were posed in a similar debate between Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) and critical theorist Henry Giroux (1997). While critical pedagogy claims to be emancipatory, Ellsworth argues that in practice it creates new problems for subjects for the sake of systemic change. Giroux’s response is that the ends justify the means. Similarly, as Kumashiro (2004) acknowledges, “some teachers even assert that forcing students to confront such issues [of oppression] and actually trying to induce states of crises are unethical ways of teaching. But what is the alternative?” (p. 29 – 30). Unconvinced that either potentially unethical ways of teaching must be employed or systemic social change cannot occur, I am interested in whether there are alternatives that aim both to create anti-oppressive change and minimize the ethical violence done to subjects.

1.5 Methodology and Conceptual Framework

My methodology for answering these questions will be neither qualitative nor quantitative; rather, it will be philosophical and consist, in particular, of critique. Helmut Heid (2005) defines critique as:

activities in which people (critics) judge a state of affairs or an interpretation of a state of affairs (an object of critique). This judgement contains a descriptive and a normative component: the description and explanation of the object of critique and (usually) the evaluation of what is specified in the description. One performs this evaluation by applying a criterion. (p. 13)

Likewise, I will offer a description of the object of my critique: discomfort, crisis, and moral distress as pedagogical tools. I will then outline the criterion for assessment, which according to Heid, “cannot be derived from the description [of that object]; it depends on a decision of the critic, and it is expressed in the evaluative position he [sic] takes” (p. 13). The criterion for evaluating these pedagogical tools will be based on Butler’s ethical framework, for reasons that will be clarified shortly. This external criterion will allow me to call into question the fundamental assumptions upon which Boler, Kumashiro, and Callan’s arguments are based. At the same time, I will pay heed to bell hooks’ (1994) assertion that “critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal” (p. 49) by showing how my critique can be used to improve upon these pedagogical tools for the purposes of anti-oppressive education.
I have specifically selected Boler, Kumashiro, and Callan because, while all three scholars emphasize the crucial role of feelings in the learning process, and view discomfort, crisis or moral distress as something to be worked through instead of avoided, they disagree on what this should actually look like in the classroom. For reasons that will become clear below, I find these tensions very productive when thinking about how to maximize anti-oppressive transformation while minimizing, if not eliminating, the ethical violence done to students.

The above allusions to Butler’s framework warrant a brief introduction to the framework itself. Many of Butler’s key ideas are linked to concepts from poststructuralism, including the notion of discourse as consisting “of competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes” (Weedon, 1987, p. 35). Discourses constitute the available modes of subjectivity, another key term which refers to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). The precarious and contradictory poststructuralist subject is constantly reconstituted in discourse each time it acts, marking a break from modernist thought which conceives of the individual as “conscious, knowing, unified, and rational” (p. 21). Butler suggests that the modernist conception of the individual risks inflicting ethical violence on the subject by ignoring its constitutive incoherence and dependence.

Some feminist scholars have expressed concerns about whether the poststructuralist understanding of the subject limits agency and responsibility so dramatically that it leads to “a powerful rationalization for doing nothing/protecting the status quo” (London Feminist Salon Collective, 2004, p. 26). In this inquiry, I have decided to draw primarily upon the work of Judith Butler because she offers persuasive responses to these critics using a conceptualization of agency that holds significant potential for social transformation without being bound by Enlightenment claims of autonomy that overlook how subjects are constrained by external forces such as discourse.

Incorporating the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas as well as psychoanalytic theory, Butler proposes an ethical framework based on subjects’ inability to know either themselves or others. She suggests that suspending the violence incurred
in the name of ethics requires suspending the normalized need for people to present a coherent self. This framework enables me to analyze what expectations of self-knowledge and knowledge of the Other are inherent in the theories of “discomfort,” “crisis,” and “moral distress,” and to ask what ethical tensions may arise in the translation of such theories to the classroom. It also allows an exploration of ethical violence as “the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it” (Weedon, 1987, p. 41). I find Butler’s perspective to be congruent with my anti-oppressive political agenda, due to its desire to expand the definition of who will count as an intelligible human being.

1.6 Significance

This study will perform an in-depth examination of the ethics underlying theories of discomfort, crisis and moral distress in the classroom. Ethics is an indispensable realm of study for educators because education is never value-neutral. As Kenneth Zeichner (1993) writes,

Regardless of our political commitments, we must recognize the reality that neither teaching nor teacher education can be neutral. We need to act with greater clarity about whose interests we are furthering in our work because acknowledged or not, the choices we make every day as teachers and teacher educators reveal our moral commitments with regard to social continuity and change. (p. 2)

Accordingly, this philosophical inquiry strives to help educators act with greater clarity about the ethical decisions they make every day.

While some teachers might feel that ethical and other theory is too far removed from every day practice to be of significance, consider Butler’s (2004b) contention that “we are all, in the very act of social transformation, lay philosophers, presupposing a vision of the world, of what is right, of what is just, of what is abhorrent, of what human action is and can be, of what constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions of life” (p. 2). Indeed, theory and practice cannot be separated; each one relies on the other in order to produce social and political change or reinforce the status quo.

So as not to contribute to the false dichotomy between theory and practice, I strive to make this text as accessible as possible to teachers. I have considered Butler’s (2000) caution against constructing a fiction called “accessible meaning” that assumes we all
inhabit the same linguistic world. I accept her argument that ordinary language and grammar violently constrain our thinking about what people and the world are and can be. As the topic of this dissertation reveals, I am also intrigued by Butler’s assertion that the development of a critical attitude requires estrangement from what is most familiar, including the language of so-called “common sense.”

On the other hand, Butler’s theories and writing style have acquired a degree of notoriety for their perceived difficulty, even among professional academics. Given the everyday pressures that teachers face, few have the time to indulge in “the art of slow rumination” (Butler, 2001, p. 307) that reading Butler’s theory demands. To facilitate her theories’ translation to the classroom, I have sought to write in a way that is perhaps perceived as more accessible than Butler’s writing style. While this goal is somewhat problematic, the ideas in the present text will hopefully entice some readers to indulge in less familiar texts and ideas in the future.

1.7 Positionality

For as long as I can remember, I dreamt of being a teacher. From 2001 to 2005, I was enrolled in a Concurrent Teacher Education Program while I earned my Bachelor of Arts in English Literature. I completed my B.A., but dropped out of teachers’ college, despite my ‘honours’ standing. There are many reasons for my withdrawal from the program. Primary among them was that in 2004, I ‘came out’ as a lesbian. Having only ever lived in communities that were rife with homophobia and heterosexism, I could not imagine a school where I could be, let alone thrive, as an out lesbian teacher. In the four years I spent in the teacher education program, queer issues were addressed only once, and even then the assumption was that one of my students would be queer, not me. This left me fearful of adverse reactions from future students, colleagues, and parents and unsure of how to teach in anti-oppressive ways without being accused of indoctrination.

Consequently, I decided to pursue graduate studies instead of teacher’s college, which has allowed me to clarify and refine my beliefs. I have found myself particularly engaged by anti-oppressive theories, such as those by Boler and Kumashiro. Anti-oppressive theory (heavily informed by queer theory) interrogates “normative
assumptions and practices that exist both in marginalized as well as privileged spaces, [that result in] in the social exclusion of people on the basis of difference from an assumed norm” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 63). Anti-oppressive theories are characterized by a critical approach to mainstream theories that negatively portray difference; the belief that power relations are based on deviation from an assumed white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, male norm; a view of injustice as structural, relational, and cultural in nature; and an objective to eliminate oppression. Moreover, they see knowledge as partial and multiple, view oppression as intersecting in nature, and consider identity to be fluid, and thus not bound by or reducible to static categories relating to race, ability, sexual orientation, etc. (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 61-67).

I anticipate a reader who questions the contradiction that, despite my belief in the fluidity of identity, I have cited certain identity categories throughout this chapter. Butler (1991) discusses this paradox:

Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that signifies. (pp. 13-14)

The need to both use and resist identity categories is itself contradictory. To reconcile this tension, Lisa Loutzenheiser (2005) proposes the notion of the educational imaginary. This concept suggests that, while identity categories “may be perceived as socially constructed and simultaneously, discursively unfixed, [they also remain] categor[ies] around which education is organized” (p. 33). In other words, identity categories currently carry great social and material consequences and are therefore useful as both analytical tools and political rallying points. At the same time, they can simultaneously be used in ways that “disrupt the uncritical usage of categories and labeling—to require interrogations of when these constructions are useful, when they further stereotype and reify, or merely discourage complexity in favour of ease of understanding” (p. 30).

Loutzenheiser’s notion of the educational imaginary, which builds upon Butler’s ideas, informs my use of identity categories throughout this thesis.
1.8 Looking Forward

This thesis is driven by the hope that there may be ways that subjects with privilege can learn to ‘recognize a headache that they don’t know that they don’t have,’ through pedagogical ethics that are appropriable ‘in a living way.’ To this end, the following chapter presents a synopsis of Boler, Kumashiro, and Callan’s theories about discomfort, crisis, and moral distress respectively. This is followed by an analysis of the tensions between these theories, and a consideration of what ethical questions these tensions incite. In Chapter Three, I further explore Butler’s conception of ethical violence in order to establish the framework within which my philosophical inquiry will take place. This framework will be used in Chapter Four to analyze whether (and how) ethical violence is incurred by pedagogies that use discomfort, crisis, and moral distress. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the implications of this analysis for professional practice, with particular emphasis on how these ideas might be used to produce anti-oppressive change in ways that minimize, if not eliminate, ethical violence against subjects.
Chapter Two
Educational Theories of Discomfort, Crisis, and Moral Distress

2.1 Introduction

The objective of the present chapter is to describe this philosophical inquiry’s objects of critique: Megan Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort, Kevin Kumashiro’s pedagogy of crisis, and Eamonn Callan’s approach to cultivating a susceptibility to moral distress. These three educational theorists agree that, for various ethical reasons, classrooms cannot always be comforting spaces. What ethical reasons do they offer to support the use of unpleasant emotions in education? What are the key components of their theories? To what extent do these theories discuss the same concept under different terminology? How do the similarities and differences between these theories shed light on their individual strengths and weakness? And, finally, what questions does an analysis of the tools they propose raise about the possible violence done in the name of ethics, and how this might be minimized or eliminated? This chapter, which is largely descriptive in nature, will be followed by a delineation of the criteria for analysis in Chapter Three, and then the actual critique itself in Chapter Four.

2.2 Contextualizing Crisis in Education

Boler and Kumashiro’s pedagogies are each significantly influenced by Shoshana Felman’s study of crisis and testimony, and so a brief synopsis of Felman’s work may provide a useful contextual starting point. While teaching a class one day, Shoshana Felman (1995) accidentally came upon a realization with compelling implications for teaching: witnessing testimonies fosters in students a susceptibility “to [receiving] information that is dissonant, and not just congruent, with everything they have learned beforehand” (p. 53). In other words, testimonies serve as a medium for engendering a kind of cognitive dissonance that can cause crisis in the student. This crisis has the potential to be transformative in the sense that it enables change – it enables students to
transform themselves in light of what they have witnessed. Felman argues that teaching “takes place only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon a crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught” (p. 53). To support this conclusion, Felman provides a passionate testimony about the classroom experience that led to this intriguing conceptualization of teaching.

By ‘testimony,’ Felman (1995) is referring to a mode of communication that (imperfectly) translates traumatic past events into the present, painfully exposing the witness to human vulnerability. Testimony is composed of bits and pieces of a memory that have 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 frames of reference. (p. 5)

As such, a testimony is not a statement or conclusion about truth, but a discursive practice, or speech act, which produces a mode of access to truth. Much of this truth is ungraspable, embedded in the unintentional, unconscious meaning of the text.

Felman’s (1995) study of the psychoanalytic, literary, and historical dimensions of testimony reaffirms that the practice of giving and listening to testimonies can have powerfully transformative effects. For the speaker, breaking her or his silence can be profoundly liberating by allowing her or him not only to mourn trauma, but find new hope and healing. This healing may stem from the use of testimony as both an attempt to grasp the incomprehensibly horrific and to initiate a historical remembrance. Drawing from Freud, when given to a witness, testimony is a mode for collaboratively accessing the unconscious and bringing the knowledge it holds into awareness, for the purposes of mental wellbeing.

For the listener, on the other hand, the testimony forces one to encounter strangeness\(^1\). Consequently, it can evoke a kind of crisis, characterized by feelings of disconnect, panic, loss, disorientation, pain, speechlessness, and the eventual need to talk. By testifying to one’s experience of bearing witness, the listener can make sense of the

\(^1\) When faced with strangeness, a witness may take comfort in feelings of empathy, rather than experiencing crisis. This possibility will be discussed in the following section.
experience, transform her or himself in light of the event, and reach an intellectual and emotional sense of “resolution” (Felman, p. 52).

The idea that crisis is central to anti-oppressive education has led to the revolutionary pedagogies proposed by Boler and Kumashiro. As will be made evident in the following two sections, testimony also features prominently in both of these scholars’ work. Despite this common ground, their theories build on Felman in ways that are at once divergent and thought-provoking.

2.3 An Overview of Boler’s Pedagogy of Discomfort

The idea that crisis should be embraced in the classroom as a way to transform students’ identities is incongruent with mainstream accounts of teaching, which tend to call for safe, supportive environments (BC Ministry of Education Standards Department, *Safe, Caring, and Orderly Schools: A Guide*, 2004). Boler’s (1999) account of how schools are traditionally sites for disciplining emotions helps to explain why teachers are more apt to rid their teaching of crisis than to embrace it. She argues that the norms surrounding emotions in education have historically been shaped by religious, scientific, and rational discourses that paint emotions as antithetical to reason and truth, and thus something to be disciplined. Drawing on Foucault (1979), Boler illustrates how emotional discipline is achieved through insidious networks of pastoral power, in which governance is dispersed among everyday social relations and people are taught to self-police in order to maintain social control. Pastoral power is enforced through surveillance (or fear of surveillance), peer policing, an increased governance of relationships through hierarchies and norms, and more officials of pastoral power—including teachers.

Significantly, the way in which people are taught to self-police their emotions is determined to some extent by their social class, gender, race, and culture. This is because different people are held to different moral norms (by both the dominant culture and their own culture) based on these identity markers. What counts as a moral norm changes over time based on authoritative discourses, social and economic needs, and historically-specific hierarchies based on the aforementioned identity-traits. These norms are taught through forms of emotional discipline such as shame and humiliation. Boler illustrates
this argument by demonstrating how Western cultures require men and women to control their emotions in different ways. For instance, the absence of emotion has historically signified masculinity, rationality, and virtue, while the presence of emotion has historically signified femininity, motherliness, irrationality, and vice. Women are simultaneously taught to express their emotions (particularly to embody ‘the good mother’), and then subjugated for doing so (scorned for being hysterical and irrational and prevented from taking part in the public sphere; Boler, 1999, pp. 36-40).

Boler (1999) proposes a pedagogy of discomfort that challenges the traditional use of emotions as a site of social control by understanding feeling “as the basis of collective and individual social resistance to injustices” (p. xxi). She writes,

A pedagogy of discomfort begins by inviting 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 see. (p. 177)

In this way, students and educators can challenge the oppressive operations of pastoral power by resisting the use of emotions as a site of social control.

Boler (1999) suggests that one way to enter into this kind of inquiry is by inviting students to engage in collective witnessing, a concept borrowed from Felman. To clarify this concept, she contrasts the role of the witness with the role of the spectator. As spectators, we establish ourselves at a distance from the other, can remain anonymous, and are abdicated of responsibility for the events about which we have seen or heard. As witnesses, on the other hand, we undertake our historical responsibilities and acknowledge our co-implication in the event. Ideally, this precipitates some sort of action toward change.

Witnessing can evoke a range of emotions, both comforting and discomforting, from passion and hope to anger and fear. One common comforting emotion that needs to be troubled is empathy. Boler (1999) highlights the key weakness of empathy: it does not necessarily lead to reflection upon how one is “implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles that the other must confront” (p. 159), nor does it necessarily lead to action. Conceived as the process of ‘putting one’s self in the other person’s shoes,’ empathy is a projection of one’s self, rather than an understanding of the other. As such, the other is really a secondary object of concern. I agree with Boler’s claims about the
limits of empathy, but also wonder if empathy is even possible, given one’s limited ability to understand the other in general (I will return to this in Chapter 3).

The alternative proposed by Boler (1999) is what she refers to as giving a “testimonial reading.” Following Felman & Laub (1992), as a listener or “reader” of a text, one becomes a participant in the traumatic event, feels emotions stirred by the event, but does not become the “victim” of the event (p. 58). The reader acknowledges that she or he occupies “a relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance provided by the mediating text” (Boler, p. 166) and recognizes that she or he cannot fully know the experience of the other. The reader also “accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one’s views are challenged” (p. 164). In this way, testimonial reading is an active process with greater transformative potential than empathy alone.

In addition, Boler (1999) theorizes the discomfiting emotions that can arise in witnessing traumatic events. She distinguishes between moral anger and defensive anger. Following Aristotle, she defines moral anger as a response to something one perceives as an injustice against one’s self or someone else, that can inspire action. Conversely, following Seeburger (1997), Boler defines defensive anger as a response to feeling that one or somebody one is connected to is threatened by something. It signifies a refusal of guilt, as well as a protection of one’s beliefs and sense of identity. Underlying defensive anger is a fear of change and/or a fear of losing something, either felt or material.

Rather than shaming students for feeling defensive anger, exploring these angers and fears and the histories in which they are rooted can be instructive. A pedagogy of discomfort invites students and educators to conduct a genealogy of emotions, or an examination of “how our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment” (Boler, 1999, p. 179). It also asks educators and students to “learn to notice how one’s sense of self and perspectives are shifting and contingent” (p. 177) so that one may learn to inhabit an ambiguous sense of self. By inhabiting ambiguous selves,

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2 I will return to the use of guilt as a pedagogical tool in Chapter Four.
investments shape one’s actions, and evaluate how one’s actions affect others. (p. 198)

Although inhabiting an ambiguous self is discomforting, it is more ethical, according to Boler, than clinging to uncritically rigid habits for perceiving others and the world. This last point is one that the scholar discussed in the next section would surely agree with.

2.4 An Overview of Kumashiro’s Pedagogy of Crisis

Along with Felman and Boler, Kumashiro embraces the need for crisis in the classroom. He contends that social injustices occur, not because we do not know enough about oppression, but because we do not want to know about oppression. After all, learning that reveals the partial and oppressive nature of one’s knowledge and actions causes discomfort, while commonsense ideas that make sense of oneself and the status quo are reassuring. Education that challenges oppression must therefore “induce” (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 30) one to step outside of one’s comfort zone and interrupt one’s privilege. Students need to study their own desires for and resistances to learning and how these perpetuate oppression. Such a process often results in feelings of discomfort and disorientation that hopefully move students to make some sort of change in themselves or in the world. This is what Kumashiro (2002) means by the phrase “pedagogy of crisis.”

Kumashiro (2002) proposes that, in order to “lead” (p. 69) students outside of their comfort zones, teachers construct a curriculum of partiality. Just as there is no such thing as an inclusive text, there is no such thing as an inclusive curriculum. This ideal is based on the modernist goal of obtaining full knowledge, when only partial knowledge is ever truly possible. A curriculum of partiality acknowledges this state of affairs and investigates how different approaches to knowledge render certain understandings of the world, and certain solutions to problems, possible and impossible. Building on Felman’s theory of testimony, Kumashiro (2002) suggests that teachers and students examine how different modes of interpretation, referred to by Ellsworth (1997) as “routes of reading,” lead to different conceptualizations of identity, culture, oppression, and anti-oppressive activism.
Kumashiro (2002) proposes re-reading ‘difference’ as multiple and partial. When educators strive to teach students about the Other (individuals and groups that are traditionally marginalized, degraded, or violated), they often integrate lessons about the Other throughout the curriculum. The idea is that these lessons will confront the stereotypes, exclusion, and disparagement of the Other by expanding students’ conception of ‘normal.’ While this approach acknowledges and affirms differences between students, “routes of reading” that focus on otherness and difference risk essentializing the Other’s experience by overlooking how groups with a common identity are still diverse and ever-changing. It is therefore important to seek multiple, partial definitions of any given identification.

This is especially the case when a cultural element is defined as “traditional.” Traditions may, in part, stem from the desire to find a singular and fixed notion of self in order to affirm one’s differences from the mainstream and develop a sense of community. However, competing definitions of who is ‘authentically’ a given identity “work to normalize those identities, regulate those who conform, and exclude those who do not” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 96). For example, a friend recently introduced me to the farcical concept of the “gold star lesbian,” which refers to a lesbian who has never had sex with a man. As ironic as it may be to cast lesbian authenticity as traditional, this concept rewards women who have maintained a stable identity over time, suggesting that they are purer, more authentic lesbians than women who have had sex with men. This latter group of women is thus disparaged for not exclusively inhabiting one side of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The fluid nature of identity is thereby suppressed. It can be useful to examine how cultural elements come to be recognized as “traditional,” what values this social construction upholds, and what the political and material consequences are in order to resist the perpetuation of oppression. Kumashiro asks how a destabilized view of tradition calls on us to read others and ourselves differently.

Another practice Kumashiro (2002) recommends when using testimony to bring about anti-oppressive change is “re-reading normalcy.” Drawing on the work of Deborah Britzman (1998), this involves focusing on “how and why our desires shape the way we read” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 106). How, for instance, does my desire to read Others queerly reinforce the ways in which I see myself as normal? What are the consequences?
How do the answers to these questions call on me to change how I read myself? One might address one’s resistance to this process by: exploring how one can have identities that contradict each other, stepping outside of binaries by exhibiting other ways of being in the world, or experiencing identity as an act of identification rather than an essential part of who one is. Kumashiro’s concepts of re-reading difference and re-reading normality are quite similar to Boler’s concept of conducting ‘genealogies of emotion;’ I will return to this comparison in the analytical portion of this chapter.

An additional way to bring about anti-oppressive change with testimony is to read paradoxically by:

- learning from stories while troubling the very knowledge we produce and reproduce; affirming our differences, while troubling the very identities and cultures that offer affirmation; [and] imagining new forms of activism, while troubling the ways that any practice is always and already partial. (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 117)

This might be accomplished by juxtaposing stories with other cultural texts to open up multiple and contradictory insights, questions, and practices. It can be especially fruitful to focus on how identity intersects in paradoxical ways. For example, I affiliate with the heterosexist, homophobic institution of Roman Catholicism and yet I am a proud lesbian woman. I grew up observing Catholic traditions, attending Catholic schools, and was an altar server and Eucharistic Minister at Church. My sense of belonging with my family and my community was intricately connected to my religion. On the other hand, the ideals of the Church directly contradict many of my own political beliefs, including those about sexuality. As a result, this precarious hybrid of identities is something I constantly negotiate, and being proud of my sexual identity is something I actively struggle toward every day. Being queer has given me a different lens through which I take new meanings from my past, my beliefs and my identity.

Three routes of reading proposed by Kumashiro have been described above. It is important to note that Kumashiro (2004a) is not arguing that all routes of reading are equally anti-oppressive:

The goal for teachers, then, is not to teach the best way to read. Rather, it is to examine how any way of reading has political implications. Teachers might ask: How does this reading challenge stereotypes? How does it reinforce it? What does it leave unchallenged? What does it raise critical questions about? Whom does it
leave invisible? Whom does it call on to contest their own privileges? (pp. 112-113)

Practicing various routes of reading and analyzing their political implications challenges the ways one makes sense of the world and enables one to assume responsibility for one’s meaning-making practices. These processes can instigate a state of crisis, a paradoxical condition of learning and unlearning, which students need to work through in ways that lead to transformation. Borrowing from Felman, Kumashiro (2002) suggests that students might write testimonies about their experiences of the crisis as one method to work through it. These testimonies not only repeat, but supplement the crisis, in ways that alter their relationship to the binary of normalcy/Otherness.

In summary, Kumashiro (2004b) challenges traditional notions of learning as a process of gaining, increasing, or building correct knowledge that should always occur in a safe and supportive environment. A pedagogy of crisis suggests, instead, that learning should be a process of constantly troubling knowledge, resisting our desires for the comfort found in closure, and embracing the insatiable need to do more work.

2.5 An Overview of Callan’s Moral Distress

Located within Rawlsian liberalism, Callan writes in a very different tradition from Boler and Kumashiro. In Creating Citizens (1997), he describes a methodical approach to political education under liberal democracy. This approach conceives of the school as a vehicle for fostering within students the virtues that enable morally competent discussion in a pluralistic society. Equipped with these virtues, citizens will be fit to engage in public reason, a Rawlsian concept denoting the process of creating a consensus on political questions that is reasonably acceptable to all participants. While Callan works in a very different philosophical tradition from Boler and Kumashiro and may, hence, seem like an odd choice in this discussion, he shares with Boler and Kumashiro a concern for the conflicts that arise in a society marked by ethnic, linguistic, religious and other diversity and uses “moral distress” (a concept quite similar to discomfort or crisis).

The “fundamental aspect of virtue” (Callan, 1997, p. 200) of particular interest to this philosophical inquiry is what Callan refers to as a “susceptibility to moral distress.” This concept is curiously similar to Boler’s discomfort and Kumashiro’s crisis. Moral
distress is a concept borrowed from Jeremy Waldron (1993) that refers to one’s emotional response to words or actions that one views as immoral. Callan distinguishes between other-regarding moral distress, a response to the perceived faults of others, and self-regarding moral distress, a response to the negative assessment of one’s own utterances or deeds. A susceptibility to moral distress is a virtue because it signals one’s deeply-rooted critical commitment to those values deemed to be worthy of affirmation. These critical commitments shape one’s motivational patterns, ensuring the maintenance of virtue when temptation tries to lure one astray.

Fostering moral distress in schools goes against the traditional tendency to avoid offending children and parents. Callan argues that, in a pluralistic democracy, true moral dialogue cannot occur without the risk of offence and, furthermore, an offensive moment is a beneficial way to arouse other-regarding moral distress. He also points out that the tendency to avoid giving offence is an attempt to preserve moral innocence, when schools and parents should instead be cultivating virtue. The temptations and opportunities for failure arising from moral dialogue cultivate virtue, whereas the protection of moral innocence does not.

Since moral distress is an inevitable consequence of moral dialogue under pluralism, it must be suitably shaped in the process of moral education. Left uninhibited, other-regarding moral distress may be experienced as a confirmation of one’s own moral superiority. It may even blind us to the complex context of moral failure in other’s lives, a context that could deserve compassion. Such self-righteousness would undoubtedly hinder the ability of the community to engage in public reason.

How can moral distress be fostered in ways that do not fracture community? Callan (1997) first looks to Noddings’ (1994) body of work on the ethic of care for answers. Noddings suggests that interlocutors are more important than the topic of conversation, making caring the regulative ideal of moral dialogue. Based on the gravity of what is at stake and the centrality of critical commitment to the development of virtue, Callan disagrees with Noddings. Valuing care above principles promotes moral relativism, as though critical commitments are mere matters of personal preference. Therefore, the pursuit of moral principles must trump the need for caring and intimacy.
With this in mind, Callan (1997) subsequently turns to the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, who sees moral confrontation, where no one has the right to silence earnest dissent, as the means to collectively finding moral truth. However, as the antithesis of Noddings’ ethic of care, Millian dialogue permits a troubling degree of belligerence. The moral distress aroused by such dialogue may not signify deeply held critical commitments, but rather a distressing uncertainty about the validity of our moral beliefs. The potential outcome may be an embarrassed silence or anxious withdrawal from the conversation, betraying the very purpose of dialogue: conciliation. Callan (1997) writes that “participants need a judicious confidence in their own powers of moral judgment if the experience of uncertainty is not to be disabling” (p. 212) and the belligerence of Millian dialogue may prevent this confidence from forming. Furthermore, dialogue can be affectively coloured and cognitively distorted by disparities of power among interlocutors, and by the residual resentments and misunderstanding deposited by histories of oppression, real or imagined […] If we are to establish supportive conditions for edifying ethical confrontation, one general and very difficult task is to find ways of curbing the influence of the myriad and powerful morally distracting emotions that ethical confrontation is liable to release. (p. 211) Mill’s moral confrontation is thus accepted as a suitable way to foster and shape moral distress, with the exception that certain emotions leading to belligerence will need to be curbed.

The solution to curbing belligerence, as Callan (1997) would have it, is the cultivation of reasonableness as a critical moral virtue. Reasonable people are those who are committed to making, discussing, and complying with proposals intended to fix the rules of fair cooperation with others. Furthermore, reasonable people recognize the “burdens of judgment,” the inevitable inability to come to an expansive agreement based on the many reasonable but incompatible judgments made in a pluralistic society. Reasonable people are able to discern whether sources of conflict are due to the burdens of judgment or the vices of unreason prompted by emotional responses such as excessive self-interest or culpable ignorance. Since emotions involve evaluative judgments, they too can be rationally appraised to determine if they warrant condemnation. In the spirit of moderation and compromise, reasonable people are also imaginatively sympathetic and mutually accommodating with those whose judgments conflict with their own.
Nonetheless, political accommodation must be morally discriminating; only those sources of diversity deserving of respect shall be included in political responses. Students shall therefore learn to distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable pluralism; after all, simple pluralism would permit the oppression of social groups without public condemnation. Yet, reasonable pluralism is not advocated as the criterion for toleration. As citizens are entitled to privacy and freedom of conscience under liberal democracy, some sources of diversity should be tolerated, even though they will not be recognized as admirable political virtues.

Callan maintains that, by evoking and shaping moral distress in the manner described above, students will be able to engage in moral dialogue harmoniously enough to find mutually acceptable solutions to any of the ethical dilemmas found in a liberal democracy.

2.6 Discussion and Preliminary Analysis

The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is to explore the relationship between the aforementioned educational theories and ethical violence. Earlier, ethical violence was defined as an act in which a subject imposes her or his own code of ethics on an Other who is unable to appropriate these ethics in a living way. The Other is subsequently rendered unintelligible as a human being and forced to live a kind of social death. The following discussion and preliminary analysis identifies the key issues that need to be explored in order to answer the primary questions outlined in Chapter One: Do pedagogies that make use of discomfort, crisis, or moral distress inflict ethical violence, and if so, how? Under what conditions might these ideas be used in anti-oppressive education in order to minimize, if not eliminate, ethical violence?

Each of these educational theorists is engaged in a struggle against something moderately different from ethical violence. Boler (1999) contests “social control,” which she defines as the socially enforced rules of power that shape behaviour and expressive conduct. Kumashiro (2002) takes a stand against “oppression,” which refers to “the repetition, throughout many levels of society, of harmful citational practices” (p. 51) “that privilege certain identities and marginalize others” (p. 50). Conversely, Callan takes issue with “the vices of unreason” seen to be at the root of political conflict. How does
each conceptualization of ‘the problem’ open and close certain possibilities for the transformation of self and society?

Moreover, each of these theorists place significant emphasis on a particular mode of communication for fostering ethical subjectivities: Boler and Kumashiro emphasize testimony while Callan emphasizes dialogue. When listening to testimony, a student’s primary task is to assume the position of a witness and attend to how the testimony of the Other requires her or himself to transform in order to be more socially responsible. The testifier and witness are dependent upon each other to make transformation possible. When participating in dialogue, on the other hand, a student’s task is to use reason to ‘autonomously’ judge the validity of her or his own arguments about moral principles, as well as the arguments of others. In these theories about testimony and dialogue, what are the implicit assumptions about who counts as human? What are the ramifications of these assumptions for how one might be considered complicit in the oppression of an Other? In what ways might each mode of communication allow or prevent certain subjects from being recognized as intelligible human beings?

Boler and Kumashiro argue that, for ethical reasons, one must constantly trouble one’s identities by inhabiting ambiguous selves and practicing multiple routes of reading. To what extent is a coherent sense of self required for a mental and emotional sense of wellbeing? Discomfort and crisis have quite different connotations, with ‘crisis’ sounding more severe and harder to bear than ‘discomfort.’ What degree of emotional instability can an educator ethically work to encourage? Do these practices, in aiming to engender discomfort or crisis, risk compromising a student’s wellbeing in the name of ethics? If so, how might this risk be minimized without stifling the possibility of anti-oppressive change?

Finally, Boler advocates “inviting” students to experience discomfort, Kumashiro (2002) speaks of “intentionally and constant lead[ing] a student into crisis” (p. 69), and Callan discusses fostering a susceptibility to moral distress. What assumptions do Boler, Kumashiro, and Callan make about an educators’ ability to know and affect a student? Do these assumptions inflict ethical violence, and if so, how?
2.7 Conclusion

To summarize, Boler suggests that emotions are traditionally avoided in schools because they are seen as antithetical to reason. She describes how discomfort can be educationally productive as a site of resistance to social control through collective witnessing, testimonial reading, genealogies of emotions and the habitation of ambiguous selves. Kumashiro suggests that people desire to make sense of the world in ways that are congruent with worldviews that they find familiar and comforting. Because such worldviews are often oppressive, he encourages a curriculum of partiality, the use of various modes of interpretation as a way to enter crisis by troubling knowledge and resisting the desire to take comfort in feelings of familiarity and closure. Callan suggests that controversial issues are often evaded in the classroom to avoid the risk of offence, especially in contexts marked by diversity. He argues that a susceptibility to moral distress needs to be cultivated in students, as this is a sign of commitment to a given virtue, which shapes one’s motivations and leads to virtuous behaviour.

Putting these three theories into conversation with one another has yielded many questions. These may be seen as secondary, but nonetheless pertinent to the primary questions of this philosophical inquiry. The following chapter presents the conceptual framework and criteria I will use to evaluate these educational theories in relation to ethical violence. This framework is based on the compelling work of the widely influential philosopher, Judith Butler.
Chapter Three
Ethical Violence and Subjectivity: A Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

Given the questions raised in the previous chapter, a pedagogy embracing discomfort, crisis, or moral distress in the classroom (and in particular, using testimony as a way to critically engage with emotion) steps into largely uncharted ethical territory. I argue here that the writings of Judith Butler provide a helpful ethical compass for doing this kind of work. This chapter utilizes Butler’s ideas regarding ethical violence, identity, and responsibility to build a conceptual and ethical framework by addressing the question: “How might one act in order to allow the Other\(^3\) to lead liveable a life?”

3.2 Ethical Violence

All too often, ethical beliefs are used to justify doing violence against those who do not conform to the dominant moral notion of what constitutes a normal or good human being.\(^4\) Examples of this “ethical violence” appear in the news everyday. The brutal murder of gay college student Matthew Shephard in Laramie, Wyoming and his murderers’ defense is a poignant example. The two men who murdered Shephard attempted to invoke the ‘gay panic’ defence, claiming that Shephard made sexual advances towards them, which they found so morally offensive that they became uncontrollably violent (Janofsky, 1999). As Sara Salih (2004) writes,

Butler points out that the desire to kill someone for not conforming to gender norms by which subjects are supposed to live means that “life” itself requires the norm, while living outside the norm involves placing oneself at risk of death—sometimes actual death, but more frequently the social death of delegitimization and non-recognition. (p. 11)

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\(^3\) Butler’s use of ‘the Other’ here differs from its usage in her earlier work, as well as Kumashiro’s in the previous chapter. In the present chapter, ‘the Other’ will encompass all human others, not just minorities or the ‘abject other’.

\(^4\) Although the terms “moral” and “ethical are sometimes used in distinct ways – the former to refer to day to day decisions, and the latter to more systemic reflections on the concepts and principles informing those decisions (i.e. moral philosophy) – for the purposes of my argument I will use the two interchangeably.
Crucially, violence is not just understood as having physical effects. Conceived more broadly as the subject’s attempt “to reinstall its mastery and unity” (Butler, 2005, p. 64), violence can also have social effects, and it is this latter kind of violence that will be the focus of this chapter.

Butler’s primary project is to expand the definition of “human” to include subjects who are currently condemned to a social (and sometimes actual) death because they do not conform to the available norms (Salih, 2004). This does not mean that all norms must be eradicated and that all behaviour should be socially accommodated. Some norms are required to guide the direction of social transformation. Rather, it means that many norms violently exclude subjects from being afforded social recognition, acknowledgment, and legitimacy as human beings. The never-ending work towards expanding the definition of human must constantly seek to counter violence, including ethical violence, through a decentering of the self in service of the Other..

The intelligibility of people who are intersex exemplifies the concept of social death in more concrete terms. People identify as intersex when they are born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that are not deemed to be clearly identifiable as typically female or male (Intersex Society of North America, 2006). Social structures are rarely set up to acknowledge the existence of people who do not fall into either side of the female/male binary. For instance, when a baby is born, one of the first questions people usually ask is “Is it a boy or a girl?” Public restrooms tend to be designated for use by either women or men. Documents often require people to check a box indicating whether they are female or male, and identify as Miss, Ms, Mrs, or Mr., and the English language does not (yet) have generally accepted pronouns for intersex persons. People who are intersex are condemned to social death in the sense that they are excluded from the current understanding of what it means to be human. If one recalls the definition of violence as an attempt to reinstall mastery and unity, the exclusion of people who identify as intersex is violent in that it upholds a false unity by maintaining the illusion that all people can be categorized as either male or female. It is also violent in that it seeks to

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5 People who are intersex are often subject to violence with physical effects as well. I acknowledge that the line between the physical and social effects of violence is blurred – the two are separated here for conceptual clarity.
uphold the mastery of the heteronormative female/male binary over alternate ways of being.

3.3 Becoming Subjects

In its everyday usage, violence is generally understood as an act that by definition has physical effects. However, according to Butler (1997), violence can have social effects that impinge upon the very core of one’s ability to lead a liveable life, and therefore, one’s survival. Butler argues that the subject is a fundamentally relational being. In order to be recognized as an individual, one must first acquire intelligibility within the available discourse. This acquisition of intelligibility involves subjection (Foucault’s assujettissement) in the double sense of becoming subject in discourse and becoming subjected to that discourse. However, the ways a subject will take up or internalize the discursive norms in this process of subjection are unpredictable. The Other may refuse to recognize the outcome of this subjection as intelligible, preventing that subject’s becoming. That a subject’s existence is always conferred from elsewhere points to a radical dependency upon and vulnerability to the Other. To explore this proposition, Butler focuses on the theoretical relationship between the subject and its Other in what she calls “scenes of address.”

Butler’s (2005) theory of address is inspired by the work of G. W. F. Hegel, Michel Foucault, and Adriana Cavarero. Through an interpretation of Hegel, she argues that it is in scenes of address that the self is incessantly being formed. When the subject engages in the reciprocal act of recognition with the Other, its self-perceptions continuously change through the consequent exposures to gradations of sameness and otherness. Due to this endless cycle of transformation, the self can never achieve a fully-realized identity. Rather, it is always in a state of becoming: “I am, as it were, always other to myself” (Butler, 2001, p. 23). For this reason, the subject’s ability to know itself is thought to be quite limited.

Butler (2005) draws upon Foucault (1979) to reiterate that scenes of address are mediated by regimes of truth: the language, conventions, and norms that precede and exceed the subjects involved, and constrain who will be intelligible as human. Hegel and
Foucault give the impression that regimes of truth operate impersonally; yet, borrowing from Cavarero (1997/2000), Butler insists that the subject experiences regimes of truth through encounters with the Other. Moreover, the regime of truth itself does not determine who will be intelligible; it acts as a constricting frame of reference within which the subject will exercise its freedom to recognize Others. The regime of truth is thus prone to critical openings during such encounters. In these moments, norms of recognition can either be reified or challenged. In this way, the opening scene for the ethical quandary of the encounter with the Other is set.

Generally, Butler avoids making claims about the nature of the subject, because doing so limits rather than expands the notion of who counts as human. However, she does posit two such claims based on the above theorization of scenes of address, namely that subjects are inescapably dependent and vulnerable. The subject is fundamentally dependent upon addressing and being addressed by the Other for its very survival because the norms by which it will be subjected are constituted and presented by the Other. Furthermore, the subject depends on the Other for recognition. This dependence implies a vast vulnerability: as subjects, we exist at each other’s mercy. As such, Butler (2001) writes, “I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no ‘you’ to address, then I have lost myself” (p. 24).

Emmanuel Levinas (1981), whose work Butler draws upon for her ethical framework, argues that it is from this vulnerability, this susceptibility to an impingement by the Other, that our responsibility for the Other emerges. Butler (2005) agrees, “responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other” (p. 91). Therefore, as Theodor Adorno (1963) argues, “our responsibility is not just for the purity of our souls, but for the shape of the collectively inhabited world” (cited in Butler, 2005, p. 110). Our acts, including our speech acts and self-crafting, take place in the context of a social world. For ethical reasons, they must be conscientiously designed to let the Other live. In this unique approach to moral philosophy, not the subject but the Other is primary.
3.4 Letting the Other Live

Butler (2005) recalls Theodor Adorno’s (1963) discussion of the violence sometimes done in the name of ethics. Adorno wrote that when an ethical norm that is impossible to appropriate in a living way is imposed on a subject, the ethos then becomes violent (e.g. the imposition of the female/male binary inflicts violence against people who identify as intersex, among others). Butler accepts this, but adds that a lack of norms preparing a place within the ontological field for a subject also imposes ethical violence. If certain human beings are not recognized as intelligible, their contestation of the norms for recognition itself will not be recognized as legitimate, either. Butler views a refusal to recognize the Other, or the withholding of conditions within which recognition of the Other is possible, as a refusal to let the Other live: “To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other” (Butler, 2003, p. 31). Butler (2005) suggests that countering this violence requires the scene of address to foster self-acceptance and generosity so that the solicitation of a becoming is possible. Here, self-acceptance refers to “a humility about one’s constitutive limitations” and generosity refers to “a disposition towards the limits of others” (p. 80).

I will first explore this notion of “humility about one’s constitutive limitations.” It has been posited that the subject is always other to itself, meaning there are limits to self-knowledge. In more tangible terms, we cannot fully know the history of our selves because memory is incomplete and alters or fades over time. Our knowledge of what we have forgotten, including our emergence into the world, is based on what others recall and share with us. The unconscious is yet another reminder of our limited access to self-knowledge. While psychoanalysis may probe this aspect of the mind in order to inform our consciousness, it still remains by definition that of which we are dispossessed (Butler, 2005).

In each of these examples, it is evident that one is constantly interrupted by otherness. Butler (2005) suggests that the truth about people may be clearer in these moments of interruption than in any narrative account of themselves. A fundamental interruption occurs when one realizes that the “I” or the “self” is not mine. The boundary
between the subject and the Other, or the “I” and the “you,” is impossible to establish definitively. Using ‘common sense,’ that boundary might appear to lie in the corporeality of the body. However, Butler complicates matters by reaffirming psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche’s (1999) suggestion that “others, from the outset, transmit certain messages to us, instilling their thoughts in our own, producing an indistinguishability between the other and myself at the heart of who I am” (Butler, 2005, p. 45). The English language does not accommodate such an understanding of the subject (insofar as there is a strict distinction between “I” and “you”), suggesting that English speakers may not be able to present themselves as they wish in the available discourse. Indeed, the fact that language pre-exists us and was not created by us serves as yet another reminder of how our accounts of ourselves are interrupted by otherness. Due to the ways the social world impinges upon us, Butler indicates that we must be humble about our ability to know ourselves. This has great implications for what we might expect of, and how we might respond to the other.

As previously stated, letting the other live also requires generosity, “a disposition towards the limits of others” (Butler, 2005, p. 80). If the subject’s ability to know itself is limited, surely the same is true of the Other. As such, if identity is inherently unstable, it would be an act of ethical violence for the subject to require the Other to present a perfectly stable identity. Butler (2001) writes, “Suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence, seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence that demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same” (p. 27). This means that when we ask “Who are you?” we cannot expect the answer to satisfy: “By not pursuing satisfaction, and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the Other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it” (p. 28). Allowing the other to lead a liveable life therefore requires that subjects affirm the Other’s limited self-knowledge, incoherence, and instability. Furthermore, Butler (2005) states that “an ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others who may or may not ‘mirror’ one’s own constitution,” rather than judge them (p. 41).

While exercising judgment is certainly part of acting ethically, ethics should not be reduced to making and delivering judgments about others. The subject must first
“apprehend” and “recognize” (Butler, 2005, p. 44) the Other before it can become ethically educated about “what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists, even to prepare ourselves for and against such possibilities” (Butler, 2005, p. 45). In other words, the subject cannot begin to apprehend the Other in its singularity and uniqueness without first asking in some way, “Who are you?” Accordingly, Butler emphasizes the ethical necessity of sometimes suspending judgment in order to enable recognition of the other.

Michael Naas (2005) conveys how such a moment, or scene of address, can unfold as he describes his first conversation with Jacques Derrida. Naas had been a student in one of Derrida’s seminars at the Ecole Normale for over a year, but had never addressed him directly. One day after class, Naas approached his professor’s desk and with a smile, Derrida asked him, “Alors, qui êtes vous?” or “So, who are you?” In the inflection of this question, Naas did not hear judgment (as in, “Who do you think you are?”) or the expectation of a full narrative. He heard an invitation, but not a requirement, to give his name. It was, in short, an act of hospitality. In Of Hospitality, Derrida (1997) likens the scene of address to the arrival of an unexpected and unknown guest at one’s house:

Hospitality consists in doing everything to address the other; it consists in granting him, indeed in asking him, his name, all the while trying to prevent this question from becoming a ‘condition,’ a police interrogation, an inquest or an investigation, or a border check. The difference is subtle and yet fundamental, a question asked on the threshold of one’s home [chez soi] and on the threshold between two inflections (qtd. In Naas, 2005, p. 9)

Derrida’s concept of hospitality helps one to envision what it might mean to suspend judgment in order to offer recognition to the Other, rather than repel or exclude the Other.

In many instances, the act of judgment is expressed through an act of condemnation. Butler notes that “condemnation becomes the way we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn” (p. 46). In this way, Butler argues, condemnation serves to annihilate Others by refusing them a space within the realm of the recognizably human. The extreme materialization of this annihilation is the death penalty, but even less extreme forms of condemnation still target the life of the condemned by undermining, paralyzing or deratifying their capacities as ethical, self-recognizing, and socially recognizable beings. Butler (2005) writes,
for judgment to inform the self-reflective deliberations of a subject who stands a chance of acting differently in the future, it must work in the service of sustaining and promoting life….In a real sense, we do not survive without being addressed, which means that the scene of address can and should provide a sustaining condition for ethical deliberation, judgment, and conduct. (p. 49).

Consequently, suspending judgment creates a space for apprehension and deliberation with respect to the other, a process which should surely precede the casting of judgment, in order to extend recognition to the Other as an intelligible, legitimate human being. Hopefully, this ethical commitment also halts acts of condemnation, making it increasingly possible for the definition of ‘human’ to be expanded to include those who would otherwise suffer a social death.

3.5 Narrating the Subject

In the previous chapter I discussed the theory of Shoshana Felman, who believes that we are living in “the age of testimony.” I also discussed Felman, Boler and Kumashiro’s proposals for using testimony in the classroom to help students work through the discomfort or crisis they may feel as they engage in critical inquiry. Butler theorizes what it might mean to give a testimony or an account of oneself, keeping within the terms of the ethical framework outlined in the present chapter.

Like Felman, Butler (2005) views narrative as performative in that it is not only communicating the past but also “enacting the self I am trying to describe” (p. 66). This act discloses oneself and also puts “power to work in discourse, using it, distributing it, becoming the site for its relay and replication” (p. 125). Specifically, the act exerts itself “on the schemes of intelligibility that govern who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture or revision, consolidating their norms, or contesting their hegemony” (p. 132). In this sense, narrative is an act upon both the Other and myself.

As a result, giving an account of oneself, ethically speaking, requires fathoming the formation of the subject and its relation to responsibility: How am I formed within social life and at what cost to myself and to the Other? In other words, how does giving an account of myself require me to suspend a critical relation to the truth regime in which I live? It requires considering: is the account of myself adequate, have I established a
relationship to an Other (the addressed) and are both parties sustained and altered (Butler, 2005)?

It also involves acknowledging that the truth of who I am runs up against the gridlock of history, sociality, and corporeality and cannot easily, if at all, be narrated. It is tempting to link the fragments and mend the gaps in one’s narratives in order to produce a coherent picture of one’s self. However, narrative coherence forecloses an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others. If violence can be understood as “the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity” (Butler, 2005, p. 64), then insisting on narrative unity or coherence is a violent act. If coherence is violent, then permitting, sustaining, and accommodating interruptions in narrative may be a practice of non-violence. This involves accepting that the ways we fail to know and present ourselves are “essential to who we are” (Butler, 2001, p. 28).

At the same time, Butler (2005) affirms the importance of narrative for alleviating the suffering that life brings:

Learning to construct a narrative is a crucial practice, especially when discontinuous bits of experience remain dissociated from one another by virtue of traumatic conditions. And I do not mean to undervalue the importance of narrative work in the reconstruction of a life that otherwise suffers from fragmentation and discontinuity. The suffering that belongs to conditions of dissociation should not be underestimated. Conditions of hyper-mastery, however, are no more salutary than conditions of radical fragmentation. It seems true that we might well need narrative to connect parts of the psyche and experience that cannot be assimilated to one another. But too much connection can lead to extreme forms of paranoid isolation. In any event, it does not follow that, if a life needs some narrative structure, then all of life must be rendered in narrative form. The conclusion would transform a minimum requirement of psychic stability into the principle [sic] aim of psychoanalytic work. (p. 52)

In other words, narrative work may be needed to achieve some sense of stability (as psychoanalytic theory asserts), without which life would be intolerable. However, overusing narrative also causes suffering by ignoring the incoherence and unknowability of the self. The aim, then, is to use narrative to achieve the minimum amount of psychic stability one needs in order to lead a liveable life, and thereby allowing others to do the same.
3.6 Critique as Virtue

In giving accounts of ourselves, Butler argues that we are ethically responsible for and to the Other. This responsibility involves the ways our actions are taken up by the already-constituted social world and understanding what consequences may follow, even if this understanding is necessarily limited. This is why critique, which sheds light on these consequences, is in fact an ethical practice. Critique, taken in the Foucauldian sense, involves establishing a relationship to norms, which is crucial because, although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose. (Butler, 2004b, p. 206)

How do subjects become critical? Foucault maintains that moral codes require and facilitate certain social categories and certain kinds of subject formation. By exclusion, social categories produce “entire realms of unspeakability” (Butler, 2004a, p. 307). If the subject encounters these realms of unspeakability—if it experiences a rupture in its ability to recognize itself or the Other—it may be compelled to critique the existing regime of truth, as well as its own self-understanding. Butler (2004a) describes this moment as “run[ning] up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives” (pp. 307-308).

Foucault (1997) links this moment with virtue as the practice of critique. Rather than understanding virtue as compliance with prescriptive moral codes, prohibitions, and interdictions, he conceives virtue as a critical relation to pre-established norms: it is “the art of not being governed like that, and at that cost” (p. 29). Butler (2004a) elaborates that critical practice is formed in “the crucible of a particular exchange between a set of rules or precepts (which are already there) and a stylization of acts (which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts)” (p. 313). So a critic’s task is two-fold: to show how the nexus of knowledge and power rationalize the conditions for intelligibility and to expose “the limits of those conditions, the moments where they point up their contingency and transformability” (p. 316). This exposure requires a courageous self-transformation in relation to a rule of conduct. In this sense, virtue is to be found in the risking of the established order.
Foucault (1997) likens this kind of critique to the arts of existence found in Greek and Roman classic cultures, which have to do with the relation of the self to itself. As art, critique is a stylization of acts (not fully determined in advance and not readily knowable) in relation to an established regime of truth. By risking one’s intelligibility as a subject, one effectively desubjugates oneself through critique. The desubjugated can make their life into an oeuvre by conjuring and alluding to what exists beyond the current epistemological limits. It is in this space that liberty is said to be found. This is more than a concern with aesthetics; it is a question of ethics. Butler (2004a) captures this as she describes virtue as,

the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that it risks its deformation as a subject, occupying that ontologically insecure position which poses the question anew: who will be a subject here, and what will count as life, a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgment in favor of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint. (p. 321)

In this open-ended process, we recraft ourselves with and for another. Our bodies can “occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation” (Butler, 2004b, p. 217). Yet, not every resignification of a norm is socially progressive. Only those that “extend the norms that sustain viable life to previously disenfranchised communities” (p. 225) can be said to serve social justice. Critique should precede and follow each transformation, and ask “what forms of community have been created, and through what violences and exclusions have they been created?” (p. 225).

The Butlerian framework outlined in this chapter has some limitations in terms of its translation to educational spheres. First, it is a framework based on a relationship between two people, and does not address how it may be applied to larger groups (such as a class of students). Second, it hinges on an acceptance of the validity of psychoanalytic theory, including concepts such as the unconscious, which is not without its detractors. Third, and perhaps most significantly, decentering the self for the sake of the Other is such a demanding ethical requirement that it may not be entirely achievable. However, the fact that one cannot achieve a non-oppressive state does not mean that one should stop striving to be anti-oppressive. Similarly, even if one cannot always entirely
decenter one’s self for the Other, this does not mean that such a goal is not a worthy ideal.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given an overview of Butler’s argument that ethical violence leads to social, and sometimes physical death and therefore must be countered. I have presented Butler’s theory of subjection, which exposes the fundamental incoherence, vulnerability and dependence of subjects. Subsequently, I put forward Butler’s ethical framework for leading a liveable life that lets others do the same. Essentially, this framework promotes an acceptance of one’s own limitations and a generous disposition towards the limits of others in all that we say and do. It also embraces critique as virtue, in the sense that critique seeks to both minimize ethical violence and expand the definition of ‘human’ to include previously disenfranchised communities. The insights this framework holds for Boler, Kumashiro, and Callan’s educational theories will be explored in the following chapter.
Chapter Four

Education, Emotion, and Ethical Violence: An Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Boler and Kumashiro each make compelling cases for the political importance of teachers’ fostering the conditions in which students may feel discomfort or crisis. The aim of this chapter is to apply Butler’s ethical criteria to the pedagogies of discomfort and crisis in order to discern whether these pedagogies inflict ethical violence, and, if so, how this happens and whether this violence is necessarily or contingently incurred. I will offer a clear set of ethical guidelines for what might constitute justifiable and unjustifiable actions intended to arouse and help students work through discomfort or crisis.

4.2 An Ethical Critique of a Pedagogy of Discomfort

Boler’s (1999) pedagogy of discomfort consists of two moments: a call for critical inquiry and a call to action. As outlined in Chapter Two, the call for critical inquiry invites educators and students to examine how their positionalities and emotional resistances have been shaped by the dominant culture of the current historical moment, and to investigate how they are thereby implicated in the suffering of others. Specifically, it involves collectively witnessing historical and social traumas through various forms of testimony. Rather than responding with passive empathy, the reader is called upon to engage in a testimonial reading wherein she “accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as [her] views are challenged” (Boler, p. 164). One of the primary goals of a pedagogy of discomfort is that students learn to inhabit an ambiguous sense of self.

This mode of critical inquiry meets many of Butler’s ethical criteria. For instance, by learning to connect the dots between my positionalities, the dominant culture, and the
suffering of others, I gain a deeper sense of my interconnectedness with other subjects and my vulnerability to the Other. In concordance with Levinas, Butler (2005) writes,

We are used to thinking that we can only be responsible for that which we have done, that which can be traced to our intentions, our deeds… On the contrary, I am not primarily responsible by virtue of my actions, but by virtue of the relation to the Other that is established at the level of my primary and irreversible susceptibility (p. 88).

A pedagogy of discomfort seeks to unearth this susceptibility, which for many has become buried by the dominant discourse of individualism. It is from this susceptibility to impingement by the Other that one’s responsibility for the Other arises (Butler, 2005).

Taking responsibility for the Other must begin with the ability to recognize the Other as an intelligible human being. Butler (2005) writes, “Given how contested the visual representation of the human is, it would appear that our capacity to respond to a face as a human face is conditioned and mediated by frames of reference that are variably humanizing and dehumanizing” (p. 29). Taking the notion of ‘seeing the face of the other’ more metaphorically (as does Levinas), the strategy of testimonial reading encourages one to examine constructed self images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others, and to recognize how emotions affect how and what one chooses to see and not see. This enables students and educators to take up a critical relationship to the norms governing the intelligibility of the subject, thereby countering ethical violence by assisting them in the recognition of the Other (the testifier) as intelligibly human.

At the same time—and this is very important—a testimonial reader acknowledges that offering recognition to the Other is not the same as knowing the Other. Indeed, the reader cannot know the Other and neither parties can know themselves. In fact, a primary aim of a pedagogy of discomfort is to pay attention to “how one’s sense of self and perspectives are shifting and contingent” (Boler, 1999, p. 177). This aspect of a pedagogy of discomfort affirms the constitutive incoherence of the subject which, according to Butler (2001), counters ethical violence: “suspending the demand for self-identity, or more particularly, for complete coherence, seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence that demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same” (p. 27). For the reasons cited above, the particular kind of critical

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6 In the present chapter, ‘the Other’ will encompass all human others, not just minorities or the ‘abject other’, unless otherwise specified.
inquiry involved in a pedagogy of discomfort counters ethical violence in significant ways.

Yet, Boler (1999) writes that “the safe project of inquiry represents only the first step of a transformative journey” (p. 179). This brings us to the second moment of a pedagogy of discomfort: the call to action. Boler explains,

A pedagogy of discomfort is not a demand to take one particular road of action. The purpose is not to enforce a particular political agenda, or to evaluate students on what agenda they choose to carry out, if any. Further, given the ‘constraints’ of educational settings, we may not always see or know what actions follow from a pedagogy of discomfort. But ethically speaking, the telos of inquiry does not provide sufficient response to a system of differential privileges built upon arbitrary social hierarchies. (pp. 179-180)

Boler reiterates that a call to action is not a demand to transform:

It must be made clear to students that they are not being graded or evaluated on whether or how they choose to “transform,” or whether they undertake “radical” pedagogies of their own. This is not to deny that every educator has particular investments and hopes, and may be disappointed when students “refuse” or “dismiss.” My minimal hope is that students examine their values, and analyze how they came to hold those values. If following such collective self-reflection, they assert: “I am not changing,” my work may be done: I have encouraged them to come to an understanding of their educational philosophy. (p. 199)

Boler puts more energy into explaining what a call to action is not than what a call to action actually is, with an important exception: “A call to action is not a demand or a requirement, but an invitation” (p. 183). Specifically, it is an invitation to transform oneself for the other in light of how one has made meaning of the trauma one has witnessed. This involves ‘breaking’ “these habits that constitute the ‘very structure of the self’” (p. 193) in order to inhabit a more ambiguous sense of self (pp. 196-198).

However, given the power difference between teacher and student I question the degree to which an invitation issued in this context will actually function as an invitation rather than an act of coercion.

To illustrate this, consider the disturbing parallels between the use of crisis and discomfort as pedagogical tools and the use of shock therapy as a psychiatric treatment. Shock therapy is based on the premise that bombarding a patient with overwhelming stimulation shatters the patient’s familiar world, including her very sense of space and time. In this state of deep disorientation, the patient regresses to a child-like state that reduces her defensiveness, enables the depatterning of her personality, and thus makes
her mind more malleable to change. Enter the psychiatrist, who takes on the role of a father-figure, and moulds the patient into a ‘new and improved’ human being (Klein, 2007).

This comparison is limited in that, ethically speaking, there is an enormous difference between shocking a patient by sending volts of electricity into her brain and shocking a student by asking her to read a testimony of trauma. As such, I am not drawing this comparison to suggest that the use of shocking curriculum materials is unethical. What I do wish to highlight are the similarities between the patient-psychiatrist and student-teacher power dynamics when the latter provides some form of shocking stimulation to the former. The patient’s (or student’s) disoriented state leaves her far more suggestible to the psychiatrist’s (or teacher’s) counsel. In this context, what may have been issued as an invitation to transform will be heard by desperate ears as something more akin to ‘the way out’ of the intensely discomforting state: “If I do this, I will finally find some sense of reintegration with the world.” Consequently, the effect of the teacher’s ‘invitation’ has been, as Rak (2003) puts it, “to shock students into feeling ‘appropriate’ responses to atrocity.” If the ‘appropriate’ ethical response to atrocity is to transform for the other (as Boler suggests), aren’t students being coerced not only to transform, but to transform in certain ways?

As a teacher, I may choose to live my life according to an ethical philosophy based on self-transformation for the other. However, I have no right to coerce my students into living according to my ethical norms. Smith and Siegel (2004) make this argument with regards to teaching evolution in the science classroom. Many students reject the theory of evolution in favour of their religious beliefs about creationism. As Smith and Siegel (2004) argue, public education should not be in the business of calling on students to believe something (such as evolution) to be true. Rather, knowledge and understanding are sufficient goals and expectations for public education. While belief “typically (but not always)” follows knowledge and understanding (p. 554), it must not be a requirement, for such is the nature of indoctrination. Instead, anti-oppressive educators might seek to foster a susceptibility to self-regarding moral distress (Callan, 1997), which, in turn, may foster a susceptibility to transformation, a susceptibility to
inhabiting an ambiguous self, and a susceptibility to changing one’s beliefs in light of new knowledges and understandings, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

On the other hand, in the context of a teacher education program, the ‘invitation’ to transform one’s beliefs and actions is more acceptable than in K-12 education. Certifying bodies, such as a College of Teachers, can set professional standards that involve clear expectations for actions teachers will commit or refrain from. This is an essential part of the contract between the profession and the public because it provides the guidelines for how educators will be accountable to the public, in exchange for a measure of autonomy and self-regulation. It is therefore less problematic that a teacher education program would require students to live by a set of professional standards in order to receive accreditation.

That said, even in the context of a teacher education program, certain problems persist if the teacher requires the student to give an account of herself in response to the testimony. In a classroom situation, students are expected to speak and to perform for the teacher and each other. Dominant discourses of knowledge acquisition call for the student to demonstrate movement from ignorance to enlightenment. According to ‘common sense’ then, the implicit questions that might be answered to demonstrate this knowledge acquisition to others are: who were you before encountering the testimony and who are you now? Requiring a student to give an account of herself in this way risks inflicting violence because it disavows the unselfknowing nature of the subject and may become a way for the teacher to govern the subjectivity of the student. There are some signs that Boler’s invitation to write responses to testimonies of trauma does just that. For example, Boler (1999) recounts how one graduate student in her class writes, “[Pratt] made me think of my own life, and how I ‘view the world with my own lenses.’ I want to have the knowledge and understanding to see the complexity and patterns of life…I am confused by the contradictions from what I was brought up believing and what I am now starting to learn” (p. 182). The problem with asking students to provide an account of this transformation is that it may assume students can know who they were before encountering the testimony and who they are now. Such an assignment may fail to honour the incoherence and opaqueness of the subject. It also suggests that
transformation is a moment that occurs in between moments of inhabiting a stable identity. Both assumptions risk doing violence to the subject.

Furthermore, eliciting how students have transformed in response to the testimony may generate confessional responses in the Foucaultian sense. One of Boler’s students confesses, for example, “I myself often fall into the trap of being defensive and trying to separate myself from the situation” (as cited in Boler, 1999, p. 186). Foucault traces the way confession has historically been used by Christianity, psychoanalysis and psychiatry as a way of governing subjects. Rose (1994) elaborates, “In compelling, persuading, and inciting subjects to disclose themselves, finer and more intimate regions of personal and interpersonal life come under surveillance and are opened up for judgment and normative evaluation, for classification and correction” (p. 240).

Similarly, with regard to anti-oppressive education, if a student is required to narrate how s/he has been complicit with oppression, it is all too easy for this narrative to function as a confession. In this context, the student’s wrongdoing is subject to the surveillance and judgment of the teacher. If the student repents and pledges to have changed in response to the text according to the norms and criteria set by the anti-oppressive teacher (a form of atonement), the student may achieve a sense of absolution. The problem with this is that the teacher may have, in effect, used confession to govern the subjectivity of the student.

The final point I wish to discuss about a pedagogy of discomfort is its approach to guilt. Boler (1999) frames guilt as an emotion bound by liberal solipsism. For instance, she advises educators to “avoid the no-win trap of guilt vs. innocence” because “the student who assumes the ‘guilty’ position often stops participating in the discussion, feels blamed, possibly defensively angry, and may refuse to engage further in complex self-reflection or critical inquiry” (p. 187). Alternatively, if one feels guilty, then one assumes one is ‘off the hook,’ preventing action against the suffering of others. For these reasons, Boler suggests that guilt is “unproductive” (p. 187).

Yet, if guilt can be understood as characteristic of an initial susceptibility to an Other’s presence, an awareness of an other’s suffering, and a sense of responsibility for an Other, then perhaps guilt has a place in anti-oppressive pedagogies after all. As Sharon Todd (2001) argues, guilt may at times be debilitating, but it may also, on other
occasions, incite moral action: “guilt, insofar as it involves some feeling of culpability, seems at least a tentative place to begin to think about one’s responsibility in working toward alleviating the suffering of others” (p. 358). In the introductory chapter, I described feeling guilty about having shoes that were manufactured in sweatshops and subsequently taking action against this unjust mode of production. This seems to support Todd’s understanding of guilt as a moral orientation rather than as a moral obstacle. Even though guilt can lead to the urge to ‘make things right,’ it is worth reiterating that this does not mean teachers should strive to induce feelings of guilt in their students, because this would involve the expectation that students take on the teacher’s beliefs and values. Rather, if a student feels guilty, her or his feelings should not necessarily be understood by the teacher as self-absorbed or politically futile.

4.3 An Ethical Critique of a Pedagogy of Crisis

A pedagogy of crisis strives to examine the partial and oppressive nature of our knowledge and actions, and to work through the resulting feelings of crisis in ways that lead to transformation in students and society. Kumashiro advocates engaging in anti-oppressive routes of reading as a way to enter into and work through crisis. Routes of reading refer to how one reads, makes sense of, or interprets a text.

As outlined in Chapter Two, Kumashiro describes three dominant anti-oppressive ways to read identity, culture, and oppression: A reading that focuses on abject Otherness and difference; a reading that focuses on privilege and normalcy; and a reading that focuses on the intersected and situated nature of abject Otherness and privilege. He then explores poststructuralist variations of these three routes of reading to illustrate how their weaknesses can be addressed with poststructuralist concepts. Through these variations, the object of investigation is not just the text, but how the reader reads the text. The reader reads not just to understand different conceptualizations of identity, culture and oppression in the text, but to examine and change her or his own identities, cultures, and social relations.

Engaging in anti-oppressive routes of reading is an ethical practice to the extent that it helps foster the conditions in which recognition of the abject Other is increasingly
possible. Kumashiro’s strategy of “looking beyond” the text involves consideration of the problematic nature of my own routes of reading the abject Other. When I feel discomfort while reading a text, I can ask: What did I desire to see repeated in this text? Which of my identities, knowledges, values, and practices are sustained by these desires? How have these facets of my self been troubled by the text? Kumashiro (2002) writes, “Confronting my desires, working against my resistances, and working through the resulting discomforting spaces of uncertainty and instability can help me work against the repetition of commonsense that often hinders anti-oppressive change” (pp. 131-132). This process of confronting ones desires and resistances aids one in labouring to alter the citational practices that limit what it means to be intelligibly human. It provides a mode for self-crafting in ways that let the Other live by “extend[ing] the norms that sustain viable life to previously disenfranchised communities” (Butler, 2000, p. 225).

Another way that engaging in anti-oppressive routes of reading is an ethical practice is that it fosters a disposition towards the limits of others; namely, it affirms the incoherence of the subject by embracing contradictions within one’s identities. Kumashiro (2002) discusses how “being identities that contradict one another, that invert social hierarchies, and that exceed binary logic” can be a practice to bring about anti-oppressive change (p. 169). This involves both working within and looking beyond binaries. For instance, I do not always identify as a woman and yet I generally identify as a lesbian. As such, I exist within the homosexual/heterosexual binary but through the multiple and contradictory nature of my identity, I simultaneously disrupt it by refusing to operate within the feminine/masculine binary. By exceeding binary logic I can trouble the very foundation of oppressive power relations. Butler (2004a) characterizes this moment as “virtue” in a Foucaultian sense: “the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that it risks deformation as a subject, occupying that ontologically insecure position which poses the question anew: who will be a subject here, and what will count as life” (p. 321).

Engaging in anti-oppressive routes of reading also fosters a disposition towards the limits of others in that it affirms the instability of the subject by working against the essentialization of identities. Kumashiro (2002) advocates a reading that focuses on otherness and difference but refuses to essentialize the abject Other by recognizing that
“what are often considered ‘traditional’ or ‘essential’ are socially constructed and that any definition of who we are is partial” (p. 95). This route “seeks multiple, perhaps contested, but certainly situated definitions” of a cultural identity (p. 96). This practice works against ethical violence by allowing the question ‘who are you?’ to remain open (Butler, 2001, p. 28).

On the other hand, there are ways that a pedagogy of crisis mirrors the problems that arise in a pedagogy of discomfort, namely in terms of denying the unselfknowing nature of the subject and the use of narrative to govern students’ subjectivities. For instance, a pedagogy of crisis relies heavily upon self-reflexivity. Although self-reflexivity in and of itself need not be a problem, Kumashiro expects students to narrate the process of self-reflexive reading. Kumashiro does not offer explicit prescriptions for what educators should or should not do but he does make it clear that he considers the examples he offers of his own reading and writing practices models: “my writing is an instance of the type of anti-oppressive education that I am advocating” (p. 201). What Kumashiro models is that reflexive reading is to be followed by reflexive self-narration. In light of the ethical framework I have laid out in the previous chapter, this raises serious concerns.

For instance, narrating an experience traditionally involves narrating the movement of a subject from ignorance to enlightenment. It follows that, when narrating the experience of reading reflexively, students might (be expected to) give an account of who they were and what they believed before encountering the text (including how they were complicit with oppression) and who they became and what they now believe after encountering the text (including how they have changed to work against oppression).

Kumashiro models this practice when he gives a reflexive reading of the stories told to him by a transgender Asian American woman named Beth. At first, Kumashiro was troubled by Beth’s stories because they worked both to stabilize and destabilize identity categories. As such, her stories contained contradictions that he felt were preventing him from reading in anti-oppressive ways. He writes, after further reflection, “I began to realize that the contradictions I saw in Beth’s stories are not themselves the problems. The problems are the desires, resistances, and identities that prompted me to read Beth’s stories in only particular, and regulating, and common sense ways” (p. 129)
For instance, Kumashiro considers whether he was displeased that Beth did not discuss her own identities as more fluid because he wanted her story to validate his struggle to view his own identities as shifting, situated, and multiple. Kumashiro concludes, “my readings of Beth’s stories certainly troubled my identities as male, as queer, as Asian American, as an activist, and as an educator” (p. 131).

In some ways, Kumashiro’s narrative alludes to who he was before encountering Beth’s stories and how he has since been transformed by Beth’s stories in anti-oppressive ways. Requiring similar narratives from students runs the risk of inflicting ethical violence to the extent that they are required to cite the harmful modernist concept of the knowable self rather than affirm the constitutive incoherence of the subject. Kumashiro states that all knowledge is partial, but this belief needs to be explicitly tied to self-knowledge and kept at the forefront of any reflexive reading process. Butler (2005) elaborates,

If I posture as if I could reconstruct the norms by which my status as a subject is installed and maintained, then I refuse the very disorientation and interruption of my narrative that the social dimension of these norms imply. This does not mean that I cannot speak of such matters, but only that when I do, I must be careful to understand the limits of what I can do, the limits that condition any and all such doing. (p. 82)

As a result, any scene of address requires two elements to counter ethical violence: self-acceptance (“a humility about one’s constitutive limitations” (p. 80) and generosity (“a disposition towards the limits of others” (p. 80).

When engaging with a text in anti-oppressive ways, Kumashiro (2002) states that the object of investigation is not just the text, but the way I read the text. He illustrates ways to help “put myself at the center of my reading” (p. 130) in order to examine my own complicity with oppression and to consider how I can change. However, for Audrey Thompson (2003) this raises an ethical dilemma. Thompson critiques the ways in which anti-racist education is often seen as an individual, rather than relational undertaking. More specifically, she problematizes white anti-racists’ “focus on our emerging anti-racist identity – how far we have come, what it took to get us to where we are now, the cost and occasionally the pleasures of unlearning white privilege” (pp. 390-391). In doing so, we reinscribe “white solipsism” (p. 390) even in disputing it by remaining at the center of our anti-racist projects. While Kumashiro’s work does not
reinscribe white solipsism, one of the dangers of making our own reading practices rather than the text itself the central object of our inquiry is that it becomes about me: “Just as Foucault objects to forms of ethics that consign the subject to an endless and self-berating preoccupation with a psyche, considered to be internal and unique, so Adorno objects to the devolution of ethics into forms of moral narcissism” (Butler, 2005, p. 110). Alternatively, Butler proposes an ethics based on the Other, which requires the decentering of the subject.

On the other hand, there is something more to be gleaned from how Kumashiro (2002) narrates his experience with reading reflexively. When he speaks of his desires and resistances, he often does so in the form of questions rather than answers:

Was I pleased that Beth discussed the patriarchal nature of ‘traditional’ Chinese cultures because I wanted her story to reinforce my discussion of the problems of ‘tradition’? Was I displeased that Beth did not discuss her own identities as more fluid because I wanted her story to validate my struggle to view my own identities as shifting, situated, and multiple? (p. 130)

This compelling approach honours the inability of the subject to narrate all the dimensions of itself. It points to “the non-narratable or even unspeakable dimensions of the unconscious that persist as an enabling foreignness at the heart of my desire” (Butler, 2005, p. 135). Rather than requiring students to narrate a transformation, educators might require students to identify some of the questions that arise for them as a result of reading reflexively. It is not until students are asked to answer these questions that the line to ethical violence is crossed.

In summary, pedagogies of discomfort and crisis can be ethical practices. They do not necessarily inflict ethical violence, but only insofar as they 1) fail to honour the constitutive nature of the subject as unstable and incoherent and 2) govern students’ subjectivities (through narrative, for instance).

4.4 Fostering a Susceptibility to Self-Regarding Moral Distress

An intriguing strategy for confronting these problems arises from a rather unlikely source (i.e. an entirely different philosophical tradition): Eamonn Callan’s liberal approach to moral education. According to Callan (1997), “a discriminating susceptibility to moral distress is a fundamental aspect of virtue” (p. 200). Moral distress refers to the
painful and disturbing emotions one experiences when faced with the morally repellent words or actions of another (other-regarding moral distress) or oneself (self-regarding moral distress). The source of such distress could be a racist joke, a slur, a statement of opinion, or a physical attack, to name but a few examples. Callan argues that a propensity for moral distress is a crucial aspect of the citizen’s ability to live in a democratic society characterized by great diversity.

Consider the difference between fostering a susceptibility to moral distress and instigating moral distress. Fostering a susceptibility to moral distress need not be unsettling, and it still has the potential to move students to reduce the suffering of others. In this way, Callan’s idea may be very helpful for working towards anti-oppressive change in the classroom in ways that minimize the ethical violence done to students.

Nonetheless, Callan’s theory of moral education is largely incongruent with an anti-oppressive paradigm. The liberal understanding of what it means to be a human being inflicts ethical violence because of its focus on the subject’s autonomy and coherence, which results in its feeling self-secure at the expense of others. As Butler (2004b) points out, “to make ourselves secure at the expense [of] every other human consideration, is surely also to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way” (p. 23). After all, one’s dependence and vulnerability is the source of one’s responsibility.

At the same time, a susceptibility to moral distress is also crucially linked to psychic stability. Being susceptible to self-regarding moral distress involves risking one’s feelings of security by recognizing one’s flaws and inconsistencies. The more susceptible one is to self-regarding moral distress, the less secure one feels. The struggle, then, is to find a balance between not being vulnerable and susceptible enough to the suffering of others, and being so vulnerable and susceptible to the suffering of others that one's own life becomes unbearable. The use of witnessing testimony may provide a powerful platform for engaging in this struggle, but educators should stop short of requiring student to give an account of themselves in relation to the witnessing process. The most a teacher can ethically do is foster a susceptibility to self-regarding moral distress. Anything beyond that inflicts ethical violence on the student.
Pedagogies of discomfort and crisis can still further anti-oppressive aims without requiring students to give an account of oneself as they bear witness to testimonies of trauma. In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how the goals of pedagogies of crisis and discomfort can still be realized without inflicting the ethical violence that arises from asking the other to give an account of her or himself.
Chapter Five
Ethically Navigating Discomfort and Crisis in the Classroom

5.1 Introduction

The question remains: How might educators help students work through feelings of crisis or discomfort in ways that produce more ethically-inclined subjects while minimizing, if not eliminating, ethical violence? Firstly, I have argued that asking a student to give an account of herself inflicts ethical violence insofar as this fails to honour the constitutive incoherence of the subject and becomes a mode for governing the student’s subjectivity. Secondly, I have suggested that, since it is unethical to strive to transform students beliefs, anti-oppressive educators should instead strive to foster in students a susceptibility to self-regarding moral distress. In this chapter, I will outline three basic strategies to work towards this aim: 1) teaching the concept of moral distress explicitly; 2) destabilizing dominant understandings of subjectivity; and 3) committing testimonies of trauma to the public memory.

5.2 Teaching the Concept of Moral Distress Explicitly

If anti-oppressive educators hope that students will become more susceptible to moral distress, students will likely want to know why they should bother taking the emotional risk. As such, prior to engaging students in this way, educators might foster a deeper understanding of the social function of certain kinds of moral distress, so that the social consequences of these feelings may be better understood.

A combination of concepts borrowed from Boler and Callan may help students develop an understanding of moral distress. Moral distress is conceived of as a broad umbrella term for the variety of uneasy emotions one may feel when confronted by a perceived injustice. Some of these uneasy emotions can be classified into categories in order to assist an analysis of how moral distress can be utilized in ways that both support anti-oppressive education and minimize ethical violence. I will discuss a few of what may
be perceived as ‘types of moral distress,’ but ask that the reader bear in mind that none of these ‘types’ identified below are mutually exclusive. Several may be felt simultaneously and they are only separated here for analytical purposes.

As previously explained, Boler describes defensive anger as a response to feeling that I, or someone I am connected to, is threatened by something. Defensive anger may signal a refusal of guilt, and the desire to protect cherished beliefs about my identity and the world. In other words, it involves a denial of the dependency and vulnerability of subjects and an inflated sense of subjects’ knowability, both of which serve to increase my sense of psychic stability. For these reasons, defensive anger protects the status quo and refuses to let the Other live. This hampers anti-oppressive change and inflicts ethical violence.

Yet Boler notes that defensive anger provides an opportunity for self-critique that may lead to anti-oppressive change. By exploring my defensive anger, the fears of loss and change underlying it, and the histories in which these are rooted, the frailty of my identities may become more apparent. As such, the ways in which my sense of self can be shifting and contingent may become clearer. This may ease some of my resistance to evaluating and becoming accountable for how my beliefs may affect others. Boler suggests that this kind of critique is the path to inhabiting a more ambiguous sense of self, while Butler would refer to it as a path to achieving minimal psychic stability. Whichever phrase one prefers, the effect is to work toward anti-oppressive change in a manner that minimizes ethical violence.

Drawing from Callan (1997), moral distress can be categorized as either self- or other-regarding. Other-regarding moral distress refers to the painful and disturbing emotions one experiences when faced with the morally-repellant words or actions of another. Self-regarding moral distress refers to “some negative evaluation of what we have done or who we are” (p. 200). This feeling is a necessary component of acknowledging how one is complicit in oppression. However, it is possible that self-regarding ethical anger may lead to a disabling uncertainty about one’s beliefs. Following Callan (1997), students may manifest this as demoralization, humiliated silence, or fearful withdrawal from dialogue. Rather than transforming, students may feel frozen, apathetic, or self-destructive. As such, self-regarding ethical distress needs to be
tempered by self-acceptance in terms of the limits to self-knowledge and the fact that the self is not mine, but is in many ways constituted by the Other. With self-acceptance, students may have enough confidence to dare to transform for the other, even if it means sacrificing some of their own comfort.

Prior to engaging with testimonies of trauma as witnesses, it may be helpful to explore the aforementioned concepts in fiction. The focus may then be on understanding moral distress as a concept from a theoretical perspective prior to viscerally experiencing it as a witness of testimonies of trauma, while trying to negotiate the attached responsibilities of witnessing. Educators and students can explore how the moral issue at hand makes the various characters feel, whether these feelings are comfortable or uncomfortable, how these feelings shape their beliefs and actions, and how their beliefs and actions affect others.

The Garden-Party by Katherine Mansfield (1922) is an exemplary short story for probing the various kinds of moral distress outlined in these pages. It is suitable for senior high school students and pre-service teachers. Set in the early twentieth century, the story follows an upper-class teenager named Laura Sheridan on the day her family is hosting a garden-party for the well-to-do families of the village. A marquee is erected, bouquets of flowers are delivered, cream puffs and sandwiches are laid out, and a band is scheduled to arrive. Amid preparations for the party, Laura and her family learn that one of their neighbours, a working class man, was killed that morning just outside the front gate when a car frightened his horse and flipped the cart in which he was riding. The man is survived by his wife and five young children. Distraught by the death, Laura asks her sister Jose, “However are we going to stop everything?” She considers what the band would sound like to the grieving widow. Bewildered by the suggestion of cancelling the party, Jose tells Laura “if you’re going to stop a band playing every time someone has an accident, you’ll lead a very strenuous life.” So Laura reports the death to her mother and asks whether it would not be heartless to still throw the party. Her mother, relieved the accident did not take place in her garden, responds much like Jose and then places a beautiful hat upon Laura’s head. Taken aback by her appearance in the hat, Laura’s excitement for the party returns and she pushes the man’s death from her mind.
The party goes on to be a great success and when it is all over, Mrs. Sheridan sends Laura to the widow’s cottage with a basket of leftovers from the event. Brimming with sentiments from the party, Laura has no room to feel anything about the man who died. She makes her way into the poor part of the village, and begins to feel embarrassed by how her extravagant dress and hat attract stares. As she enters the widow’s house, she is overcome with dread and the urge to escape. Confronted by the grieving widow’s face, she turns to leave and accidentally enters the room where the man’s dead body lies. In death, he seems peaceful, beautiful, and content. Nonetheless, Laura lets a sob escape, clumsily asks the man to forgive her hat, and then dashes out the door and up the hill to the reprieve of the garden gate.

*The Garden-Party* provides a useful starting place for examining the inadequacy of comforting moral emotions for addressing social injustice. Laura wishes she could befriend the workmen she is supervising during the preparations for the party, and blames “these absurd class distinctions” for being unable to. “Well, for her part, she didn’t feel them. Not a bit, not an atom. . . .” (p. 325), the narrator states. In fact, “she felt just like a work-girl” (p. 325). In this instance, Laura exhibits passive empathy for the working class. By putting herself in the workmen’s shoes, she is erasing the differences between them and relieving herself of the guilt of occupying a privileged position at their expense. In identifying as empathic, she is able to reap the benefits of the men’s labour by enjoying the lavish party they set up, and being credited with the party’s success, without considering herself as exploitive. This illustrates how passive empathy is a comforting emotion that assuages the guilt of those in a privileged position, often preventing them from taking steps to rectify unjust social conditions.

In order to justify their ‘entitlement’ to privilege, the wealthy Sheridan family often belittles the working class. This is a sign of defensive anger; they are defending their entitlement to wealth because the upper-class is viewed as having intrinsically superior character. For instance, when Laura suggests to Jose that they must call off the party, Jose says

‘I’m every bit as sorry about it as you. I feel just as sympathetic.’ Her eyes hardened. She looked at her sister just as she used to when they were little and fighting together. ‘You won’t bring a drunken workman back to life by being sentimental.’ (p. 330)
Jose’s assumption that the workman was drunk was completely baseless, but by assaulting the dead man’s character, she is able to enjoy the party with a clean conscience, in spite of his death. Her comforting identity as a sympathetic person is, in her eyes, left in tact.

Another display of defensive anger occurs when Laura’s mother refuses to take Laura’s concerns seriously: “You are being very absurd, Laura,” she said coldly. “People like that don’t expect sacrifices from us. And it’s not very sympathetic to spoil everyone’s enjoyment as you’re doing now” (p. 331). By painting Laura as absurd and unsympathetic, her mother protects her own self-image as a sensible, sympathetic woman without having to call off the party. Mrs. Sheridan’s sympathetic gesture of sending Laura to the widow’s house to deliver leftovers from the party served to maintain this self-image and soothe her own guilt.

Jose and Mrs. Sheridan refuse to tread into discomforting territory by destabilizing their fixed notions of who they are. As a result, they continue to inflict suffering on others rather than considering how they might sacrifice some of their own comfort in order to let someone else lead a more bearable life. Laura is the only member of the Sheridan family to exhibit willingness to make a sacrifice for the sake of the deceased workman’s family. She is also the only character to demonstrate other-regarding moral anger at Jose and her mother for wanting to continue with the party. However, her uncertainty about her own moral faculties leads her to do nothing.

The end result is that the man who died at the bottom of the Sheridan family’s lane is dehumanized. In Butler’s terms, he has been annihilated. His literal, physical death may be read as a symbol for the social death he suffers as a member of the working class. His physical death is of no consequence for the Sheridan’s because, as a member of the working class, he is not viewed as being fully human, like those of the upper-class. As a result, after the party, Laura is unable to fathom the loss.

Here she was going down the hill to somewhere where a man lay dead, and she couldn’t realize it. Why couldn’t she? She stopped a minute. And it seemed to her that kisses, voices, tinkling spoons, laughter, the smell of crushed grass were somehow inside her. She had no room for anything else. How strange! She looked up at the pale sky and all she thought was, “Yes, it was the most successful party.” (p. 333)
What might it mean for Laura to transform for the other in this circumstance? It might mean working to recognize the working class family as being fully human. It might mean undertaking a critical investigation into how the Sheridan’s view the working class, and how they benefit from this view. It might mean paying better wages to the people who work for them, so that the workers may lead more bearable lives. And, at the very least, it might mean rescheduling the garden party out of respect for the grieving family’s loss.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, fiction can vividly illustrate the connection between ethics and certain kinds of discomfort without requiring students to give an account of themselves. It can challenge students to consider such questions as: How does defensive anger reinforce an oppressive status-quo? How might other-regarding moral distress be used to annihilate the Other? When does self-regarding ethical anger help and inhibit anti-oppressive change? Helping students develop a theoretical understanding of the ethical significance of discomfort may foster their willingness to take greater emotional risks for the sake of anti-oppressive change. This is possible without requiring students to give an account of themselves by asking them, for example, “Have you ever felt like Laura?” It is the latter question that, in the context of public education, would cross the line to confessional self-narration and ethical violence.

5.3 Destabilizing Dominant Understandings of Subjectivity

I am certainly not against narrative in any strong sense – I think, frankly, we all need to be able to give some accounts of ourselves in order to live and survive – I think it is equally implausible though to demand that a life always conform to the criterion of a story. (Butler, as cited in Kirby, 2006, p. 154)

In previous chapters, I reiterated Butler’s point that countering ethical violence involves destabilizing one’s narratives of identity and experience in order to affirm the dependent and unknowable nature of one’s subjectivity. And this is quite a challenge, given that dominant discourses about identity and experience, stemming from modernism and liberalism, tend to reify a much more comfortable view of the subject as autonomous and coherent. This view inhibits the self-regarding moral distress that is so crucial to opening up the possibility of transformation for the Other. What kinds of classroom practices resist upholding this notion of the subject?
One approach is to study the genre of autobiography, particularly in its postmodernist incarnations. Traditional autobiography tends to feature certain conventions of storytelling that reify the autonomous, coherent subject. One such convention is the use of the reliable narrator. In this case, the autobiographer leads the audience to believe that s/he is accurately testifying to her or his experience. It is assumed that individuals exist prior to experience, leading to the illusion that one has an essential and independent identity. Another convention is to present a coherent narrative, in which the events logically and purposefully flow from one to the next in a way that takes the meaning of experience as transparent in order to build a coherent picture of the narrator. Still another convention is to create a sense of closure and resolution. This often relies on the assumption that the autobiographer has evolved from innocence to experience, dependence to independence, and ignorance to knowledge. Educators and students can investigate how these conventions are taken up in autobiography, how they serve certain limited conceptions of what it means to be human, and what the social effects of these conceptions might be. In this way, autobiographies provide prime opportunities for exploring the ways that story-telling conventions make only certain experiences and identities intelligible.

Such stories can be contrasted with postmodernist autobiography, which often subvert notions of the autonomous, coherent subject. *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields (2002) serves as a compelling example. This book uses numerous narrative points of view, which often relay events in contradictory ways. These multiple voices take the form of letters, news articles, or narration by several characters. Subverting the convention of the reliable narrator, this technique causes the reader to question the degree to which ‘my’ story is really mine or can be considered ‘authentic.’ Illustrating Joan Scott’s (1992) point that “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (p. 26), these types of stories create a space for students to ask how conceptions of selves are produced *collectively* through discourse - and how these conceptions can be contested.

Furthermore, postmodernist autobiography often features a fragmented narrative. In *The Stone Diaries*, for example, an account of the autobiographer’s college years is conspicuously absent, as are the details of a mysterious encounter with a stranger in
Niagara Falls, recorded only in a travel journal that was conveniently lost. The reader is told, “Her [Daisy Goodwill’s] autobiography, if such a thing were imaginable, would be, if such a thing were ever to be written, an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gaps” (Shields, 2002, p. 75). This fragmented narrative draws attention to what is forgotten, left unsaid, or altogether unsayable, illustrating the inevitable unknowability of both the self and the Other.

Closely related to fragmented narrative is another hallmark of postmodernist autobiography—the resistance of closure. Readers are often left with unsettled feelings or unanswered questions, symptomatic of a narrator who recognizes that “experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation” (Scott, 1992, p. 37). For instance, at the end of The Stone Diaries, the protagonist’s final words before dying are, “I am not at peace” (Shields, 2002, p. 361). Reading these words thwarted my desire for resolution, partly because they unsettled my hopeful belief in death as a restful state, and partly because I was left grasping for the meaning and significance of the protagonist’s life. Would knowing this meaning bring peace, and if so, at what cost? An autobiography might be seen as a response to the question, “who are you?”, a question that, Butler (2005) writes, must remain open and unsatisfied if one is to let the other live, since “life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it” (p. 28). Other postmodernist autobiographical texts that disrupt modernist understandings of the subject in very similar ways to The Stone Diaries include Frog Moon by French Canadian Lola Lemire Tostevin (1994) and Diamond Grill by Chinese-Canadian Fred Wah (1996). Significantly, in the use of such postmodernist narratives students are not asked to write their own autobiographies and destabilize their own identities. Knowledge and understanding of dominant and alternate conceptions of subjectivity is the pedagogical goal.

5.4 Committing Testimonies of Trauma to the Public Memory

Armed with a theoretical understanding of moral distress and a theoretical ability to destabilize dominant understandings of subjectivity, I believe students will be better prepared to work through their emotions and make ethical decisions as they witness
testimonies of trauma. This section will explore how such testimonies can be used in the classroom in anti-oppressive ways, without requiring students to give an account of themselves, by engaging in the process of committing testimonies of trauma to the public memory.

First, the social significance of the specific testimony at hand needs to be considered by teachers and students. I would like to contrast two educators’ approaches to helping students consider the social significance of testimonies of trauma. As part of a graduate class she taught at Yale University in 1984, Felman showed a number of filmed testimonies of Holocaust survivors to her students. In witnessing these testimonies, the students were thrown into crisis. They felt overwhelmed, disconnected from the world, and in need of a restored context (in terms of understanding the relationship between the class material, their experience, and the social meaning of trauma). In order to resolve this crisis, Felman (1992) prepared an address to the class that summarized the students’ reactions and provided “an integrated view of the literary texts and videotapes – of the significance of all the texts together, in relation to their own reactions” (pp. 48-49). In doing so, Julie Rak (2003) suggests “Felman took over the work of witnessing from the students and mediated between their experiences, the material of the class, and the social meaning of trauma” (p. 65). Rak suggests that the role of the teacher is not to recontextualize the experience for the students but to participate alongside the students in the construction of context. This allows students to work through their emotional response to the testimony, rather than positioning the teacher as the one who will ‘rescue’ students by restoring context.

Rak (2003) then elaborates her approach to teaching a different testimony of trauma, the book *Don’t: A Woman’s Word* by Elly Danica:

I asked students to look for book reviews and other interviews which Danica had done, so that they could assess how *Don’t: A Woman’s Word* had been received when it was first published. I was asking them to create a reading context for the text, but I hoped the result would be an interpretive community for *Don’t: A Woman’s Word* which stressed the communal nature of the text’s effects on its readership (p. 66).

Having communally created context for the testimony, educators and students enable the trauma to become “part of the public memory which can be acted on and worked out” (Rak, p. 59) rather than repeated.
Rak’s critique of Felman could be extended to Boler as well. Boler (1999) describes a moment from her own teaching practice when she found that a student’s essay response to *Maus*, a graphic novel about a Holocaust survivor, was troublingly decontextualized and empathetic. She had a discussion with the student and pushed her “to think deeply about her relationship to the text, to her own audience, and to her experience” (pg 171). The student then revised the essay to give a testimonial reading of *Maus* in which she describes a turning point where she was able to confront her own complicity in oppression in ways that move past guilt, toward a desire to understand the origins of oppressive forms of cruelty. It would seem that, like Felman, Boler recontextualized the text for the student in order to elicit the response from the student that she desired. Had Boler asked her to create a reading context for *Maus*, her response would have been very different. She would not have depended so much on her teacher to be able to give a ‘more correct’ reading of the text. In addition, the student’s ‘transformation’ would not have figured so centrally, allowing the actual victims of the trauma to be at the forefront of the reading.

Anti-oppressive educators might adopt some of the strategies of building communities of memory⁷, as suggested by Roger I. Simon and Claudia Eppert (1997). Simon & Eppert define communities of memory as “moments of social life wherein practices of remembrance are contested, shaped, and deepened by consideration of the shared significance of what has been heard, seen, or read” (p.186). A community of memory could be a space wherein students and teachers heed Butler’s (2003) call “to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving” (p. 25). Such conversations may work in service of expanding the conception of the human. To this end, teachers and students can “consider what of (and about) these testimonies should be remembered, why, and in what way” (Simon & Eppert, p. 187). Communal acts of remembrance continue to decenter the subject, allowing the focus to be on the Other, rather than on ‘how anti-oppressive I have become.’ At the same time, participation in such acts may provide an outlet to work through feelings of discomfort and crisis.

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⁷ Certainly the notion of “community” creates exclusions. At the same time, I wish to emphasize a collective versus individual educational process.
For an example of how students and teachers can work together to commit historical traumas to public memory, I turn to artist Mary Taylor (2004) and her multi-media installation, *Homophobia Kills*. Taylor states, “This work memorializes people murdered in North America since 1998 because they were alleged to be, or were, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual. *Homophobia Kills* illustrates both the heinous nature of these crimes and the ideologies that justify them” (http://marytaylor.ca/Homophobia.htm). It does so through three components: the hate-based language used with each murder is projected onto the wall, a replica of the type of weapon used in each crime is mounted onto panels on the wall, and from every murder weapon dangles a tag with facts about each victim (such as name, date and location of her/his murder, cause of death, and the name of her/his murderer). Taylor adds,

While my work is not ambivalent or ideologically neutral, I do attempt to avoid a personal narrative by relying on fact-based knowledge - through this, I hope to stimulate dialogue and to persuade the viewer to examine social relations that pit different cultures against each other. (http://marytaylor.ca/Rant.htm)

Taylor’s work can be read as an example of the kind of remembrance practice I am advocating in these pages. Through in-depth research, she created a social context for each hate-based crime, focussing not only on what happened, but on the underlying ideologies that made the crime conceivable and even ‘justified.’ Then she fashioned a non-narrative response - a response that was not about her projections of what the victims had suffered, nor about her own transformation. The fragments allow glimpses at the trauma, but the viewer is not permitted to pretend to know what really happened or to pretend to know the victims’ suffering.

However, the memorial does invite witnesses to grieve. Butler (2003) argues that grief can play an important political and ethical function:

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility (p. 12).

Taylor’s work is on display so that the public may co-participate in the grieving and memorialization of the trauma. From this, a sense of political community may be born,
potentially leading to a conscientious remaking of the traumas’ social context, including a 
remaking of the norms surrounding whose lives shall be worth protecting.

I envision teachers and students following Taylor’s lead, labouring together to 
create memorials as a way to work through and work beyond the feelings of crisis and 
discomfort they encounter when witnessing historical trauma. Such memorials can 
function to inscribe in the public memory how certain norms have violently excluded the 
abject Other, so that the need for the norm to be reworked is made glaringly apparent, and 
so that perhaps, with an increased susceptibility to self-regarding moral distress, a student 
might decide to risk their own comfort to help prevent a traumatic piece of history from 
being repeated.

5.5 Conclusion

This thesis opened with the question: how might the privileged learn to recognize 
a headache that they don’t know that they don’t have? Rather than questioning, 
acknowledging, and resisting one’s privilege, it is more comforting to think that one’s 
privilege is deserved. This comfort comes at a price, however, and this price may be the 
inability of the Other to lead a liveable life. Anti-oppressive educators seek to eliminate 
oppression in society, but in carrying out this political agenda, ethical considerations 
must not be overlooked. In many ways, the anti-oppressive movement needs to be 
situated within a larger, anti-violence movement or it risks creating new norms that work 
to oppress in new ways.

In the interests of creating the conditions in which a person with privilege may 
question, recognize and willingly refuse their privilege, I have argued that a worthy goal 
of anti-oppressive education is to foster a susceptibility to moral distress. Furthermore, I 
have called for a more cautious use of testimony in the classroom, one that affirms the 
dependent and incoherent subject. I have suggested that this could involve explicitly 
teaching about moral distress, alternative understandings of subjectivity, and committing 
testimonies of trauma to public memory. Perhaps these educational experiences will 
inspire, rather than coerce, students to perform the self in ways that ‘push the envelope’ 
in terms of who may count as a human being.
In order to facilitate the translation of these theories into the classroom, further study is needed to identify additional media that teachers and students may find helpful in exploring moral distress and destabilizing dominant understandings of subjectivity. Empirical studies of the usefulness of different methods for employing these materials to these ends would also be beneficial. Qualitative studies of communal acts of remembrance are needed to refine our understanding how a collective can determine, in anti-oppressive ways, what should be mourned, what should be remembered, and how. In closing, I call for further inquiry into what it might mean to ethically follow that age-old adage: comfort the disturbed, disturb the comfortable.
References


