Only Connect? Empathy and Exotopy in Teaching Social Justice Literature

Kimberly A. Nance
Illinois State University

At a post-MLA-session discussion a few years ago, one participant summed up her hopes for the reception of social justice literature among her students with the famous quote from E.M. Forster’s 1910 novel *Howard’s End:* “Only connect.” Similar aspirations can be found throughout Allen Carey-Webb and Stephen Benz’s collection of essays, *Teaching and Testimony*, as teachers describe their efforts to forge bonds between their students and the people who speak in testimonies of oppression, imprisonment, slavery and torture. Most often the efforts that teachers describe are forms of cultural translation—attempts to persuade students of their common ground with the speaker. My contention here will be that it is not enough only to connect, and that in fact some of the means by which students are induced to connect can make it less likely that they will respond to social justice literature with the social action that the speakers in that literature have hoped for. This essay looks at the ways in which some well-intended approaches to teaching can remove the productive tension from social justice texts, making the students more comfortable by offering an alternative sense of closure.

In *The Differend*, Jean-François Lyotard draws a set of distinctions that is fundamental to the discussion of texts having to do with social injustice, pointing out in particular the difference between acknowledging injustice and feeling any obligation to act against it.

> The question is not even that of obedience, but of obligation. The question is to know whether, when one hears something that might resemble a call, one is held to be held by it. One can resist it or answer it, but it will first have to be received as a call…. One must find oneself placed in the position of addressee for a prescription (the request being a modality of prescription.) (107)

It is by no means a sure thing that a text that is intended as a call to action will be recognized as such. It is possible to approach a social justice text in a variety of other ways: aesthetic or archival, for instance, that do not demand social action on the part of readers. Even if such a call is recognized, a reader may regard it as more properly directed to someone else—the perpetrator, or a generalized posterity, permitting that reader to approach the text without even feeling personally addressed by it, much less obligated.[1]Teachers’ efforts at cultural translation can have a significant impact on how students respond to “something that resembles a call.”

Like the more familiar linguistic translation, cultural translation is a matter of recasting the original text into a form that is expected to be more comprehensible to the reader. Most commonly, images and events in the text are compared to images and events from the reader’s own experience, as teachers look for the closest likely analogy

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[1] For more on the spectrum and sources of such alternative reader responses, along with speakers’ attempts to circumvent them, see Nance, Kimberly A. *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American* Testimonio*, “Mountains beyond Mountains*: Role Models and the ‘Problem of Goodness’ in Socially Engaged Teaching” and “Disarming Testimony: Speaker’s Resistance to Readers’ Defenses in Latin American *Testimonio.”*

in the students' own inventory. Such a mediation is not limited to teachers, of course—collaborating writers and critics frequently report analogies between their own experience and that of the speaker, and students also come up with such comparisons on their own. In many classrooms this sort of comparison is invited and even assigned: students are instructed to think about an event in their own life in which they felt wronged as a means of approaching a text about social injustice. This type of cultural translation is quite similar to linguistic translation: the student's own experience is the second language.

But while linguistic translation is limited to exchanging the original language of a text for another language that the reader knows, cultural translation offers an alternative approach. Rather than limiting the translation to pointing out similarities with the students' own life experience, a mediator may approach the difference between reader and speaker in the other direction, by asking readers to consider how they would feel and respond in the speaker's place. It should be noted here that readers will still tend to draw on analogies with their own experience as they approach such a task of identification, but unless they have in fact experienced the same degree and type of injustice as the speaker, their own analogies will not prove sufficient. To accomplish this sort of cultural translation, most readers will need to imagine themselves in situations both different and far more difficult than they are likely to have experienced.

In comparison with the previous type of cultural translation that requires only that the readers think of the closest analogy in their own lives, this second type is considerably more challenging and potentially more painful—both for the reader and for the teacher. The first approach, the invitation to identify, can already be painful, as students are directed to think about the most traumatic moments that they themselves have experienced. However, both students and teachers report emerging from the quest for personal analogies of pain with some degree of catharsis and closure. They are still here, after all. They have survived those moments, and others in the classroom have helped to validate their responses. In her groundbreaking *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma,* Kalí Tal takes note of similar reader responses to texts describing the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and domestic abuse.

Tal concludes that such responses are part of a familiar cycle in the reception of each new genre of the literature of trauma. At first the testimony of the victims is treated with a quasi-religious reverence. Next such texts are "assimilated" as objects of historical analysis. Finally they are "appropriated," and reading them is seen as itself a sort of trauma—one that the reader "lives through" (Tal 59). Tal analyzes at length Shoshana Felman's description of her own and her students' response to reading about the Holocaust. As Felman describes it,

> [u]pon reading the final paper submitted by the students a few weeks later, I realized that the crisis, in effect, had been worked through and overcome and that a resolution had been reached, both on an intellectual and on a vital level. The written work the class had finally submitted turned out to be an amazingly articulate, reflective and profound statement of the trauma they had gone through and of the significance of their assuming the position of the witness. (52)

The problem here is that witnessing an injustice is no guarantee of action to prevent

it happening again. Witnesses can and often do remain bystanders. Moreover, the laudatory description of the students' own survival of the act of reading tends to imply closure. The event is over, and the students are congratulated. Not only that, they are also assumed to have been somehow transformed, to have become better people for having read.

In contrast with the experience of catharsis and validation that attends the cultural translation of trauma literature through events from the readers' lives; the second sort of cultural translation is less readily affirming. Rather than limiting his or her role to offering support and belated sympathy, the teacher/translator in this approach must go on to draw readers' attention to the gaps between their own experience and that of the speaker. This sort of mediator must induce the readers to go beyond already painful memories of their own experience, to imagine experiencing the same injustices as has the speaker. This sort of translation is a more formidable task for all concerned. As opposed to the former role of benevolent and sympathetic quasi-therapist, teachers here run the distinct risk of appearing to belittle the students' own pain by pointing out their relative privilege. Not only does this approach require the readers to bridge imaginatively the safe distance between themselves and the speakers; it should ideally leave them feeling not validated and spiritually purged but instead uneasy and obligated to act.

This unease is the result of a second and too-often overlooked element of productive cultural translation—the promotion of awareness of the contrast between one's own position and that of the victim of injustice, and of one's consequent ability and obligation to act. Such an awareness also has an analogy (albeit partial) in some current literary translation studies, in calls for greater attention to difference, and for disruption of the illusion that a text can remain the same in a different language. In his early writing on ethics, Mikhail Bakhtin termed this stage of recognition of difference "exotopy." He insisted on its importance as a complement to an initial "empathy" as an answer to how to respond ethically in the face of another who is suffering. In the stage of empathy, the obligation is indeed insofar as possible to "come to see and know what the other feels," but Bakhtin warns against lingering in such an imaginative identification. Instead, the ethical witness must "return to his own place," the only place from which action is possible. ("Author and Hero." *Art and Answerability*, 25-26). The message of *testimonio* is not only about injustice but also about the flesh-and-blood reader's capacity to ameliorate it. Lyotard argues, "[I]n 'hearing' *You ought to,* the addressee would at the same time 'hear' a phrase which he or she cannot attest, but which is, as it were, awaiting its formulation under his or her phrase, and which would be *You are able to*" (121). When the focus is only on the reader's status as co-sufferer, this element of ability and obligation to act disappears.

While empathy may sound more familiar than exotopy, Bakhtin's concept of empathy is no less specialized. In Bakhtin's conceptual framework, empathy itself is hard ethical and imaginative work. It is *not* only a matter of discovery of pre-existing points in common, or even of seeking the closest analogies in one's own experiential inventory, but rather of attempting the impossible: to see the world from the other's place. Not only is this type of empathy very difficult, it runs counter to several current critical commonplaces regarding social justice literature. Proposing that readers try to imagine what it would be like to be in the speaker's place experiencing the injustice

appears at first to violate a precept of respect for difference. The essays in *Teaching and Testimony* devote a great deal of attention to means of helping students "locate" or "situate" their reading in the space occupied by Menchú's particular Guatemalan culture. If not carefully coupled with attention to how that relates to the students' own social and cultural position, a move that is present in fewer essays, such localization can facilitate defensive absenting. As should be apparent, it is easier to pay attention to the fascinating elements of the other's culture or to the guilt of others than to the dull and uncomfortable facts of one's own implication in oppression. Readers cannot possibly know fully what it would be like to be that other person, but Bakhtin's formulation is no simplistic suggestion of reader identification. Rather, it acknowledges the impossibility but at the same time insists on the necessity of the attempt.

This difficult type of "constructed" empathy is essential grounding for the exotopic moment—the return to one's own place from which action is possible. In contrast, conventional empathy is best described as an immediate emotional reaction. When asked to explain it, readers generally point to those similarities between their own experience and that of the speaker. Conventional empathy is effectively naturalized as a reaction that "just happens" or as a discovery of pre-existing commonalities, when readers realize how much they themselves and the speaker are alike. Naturalizations of empathy can make exotopy more difficult or even impossible. The ethical work of exotopy will not just happen, and an exclusive focus on concrete similarities between self and speaker is likely to obscure the equally important differences that would enable and obligate the reader to act. In *Teaching and Testimony,* Stephen Mathews' essay "Worlding Students" reflects on the limitations of localizing, and particularly of the sort that casts the reader as co-victim rather than obligated witness, when he discusses the risk of over-identification with Menchú by students from an Iowa farm community.

When the lesson of social justice literature is only that both the reader and the speaker have been victims of injustice, readers can reasonably conclude not that they should act on behalf of others, but instead that they should help themselves, or even that someone else ought to offer help to them as well as to the speaker. Auto-therapeutic readings of social justice literature as self-help abound. When I mention that I work on Latin American testimonial narrative*,* the most common response is a story about how personally inspiring the interlocutor (or his or her class) has found the genre. I hasten to add here that I am hardly opposed to self-help, and I do not wish to deny that some readers of social justice literature have themselves been victims of injustice. Nevertheless, as Tal has noted, when social justice literature is transformed into individual therapy its political reach is significantly curtailed. In the interest of realizing the potential of this literature to catalyze action for social justice, teachers need to help students navigate the difficult distance between empathy and exotopy.

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Contributor's Note

Kimberly A. Nance is a Professor of Spanish and Interim Chair of the Department of Languages, Literatures & Cultures at Illinois State University. Her most recent book is *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American* Testimonio (Vanderbilt, 2006).