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# Transformations: A Personal History of Introducing Complicité into Academic Life and Learning Communities

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**Abstract:** This essay documents my three-decade-long journey of connections and resultant transformations between scholarly knowledge and artistic production in my work. In reinvestigating my history with stage and visual arts, I trace the relationship between traditionally 'alien' practices and academic understandings of societal and political mass violence and invite the reader to reconsider what academia stands for in order to engage with borderless histories of conflict, violence, and displacement. This essay dwells on how artistic engagement is both a personal and a profoundly political process through which the experience of violence is communicated through thoughts, emotions, hopes, and expressions of trauma. There are also significant ethical concerns present concerning the portrayal of violence, death, and suffering, which the paper discusses under the aegis of ethics of witnessing as responsibility.

**Keywords:** ethics of witnessing; arts and politics; theatre; complicite; physical theatre; human suffering; Jacques Lecoq; Philippe Gaulier; classroom politics; pedagogical interventions

## 1. Institutions, Identities, and Beyond

This essay documents my three-decade-long journey of connections and resultant transformations between scholarly knowledge and artistic production in my work. In reinvestigating my history with stage and visual arts, I trace the relationship between traditionally 'alien' practices and academic understandings of societal and political mass violence and invite the reader to reconsider what academia stands for in order to engage with borderless histories of conflict, violence, and displacement. The essay dwells on how artistic engagement is both a personal and a profoundly political process through which the experience of violence is communicated through thoughts, emotions, hopes, and expressions of trauma. There are also significant ethical concerns present concerning the portrayal of violence, death, and suffering, which the paper discusses under the aegis of ethics of witnessing as responsibility.

In the following pages, I establish links between my artwork, street and non-verbal/physical theatre, my academic engagements, research, and my work with students as an educator at the university. My artwork and theatre training have been an organic part of my overall stance regarding what I call 'ethics of witnessing' as a form of situated engagement with the world. Here, I dwell on this connection further to shed light on how my personal experiences in life and artistic training gradually shaped my academic work. Specifically, the notion of ethics of witnessing that I employ is *a frame of reference that* investigates normative and affective responses of academia to human suffering. It is built on the acceptance that dehumanization is an intersubjective relationship with the victims. Our involvement with survivors of violence exposes the limits of academic and humanist orientations.[1] In my academic publications and pedagogical practices, ethics of witnessing signifies an essential form of responsibility for conducting and teaching scholarly work concerning human vulnerabilities, historical injustices, dispossessed populations, marginalized groups, mass political crimes, and structural violence.

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I believe scholarly work must be more aggressively engaged with socially embedded and politically sanctioned violence, injustices, and dispossession processes. In this quest, I argue that a creative approach to scholarship as witnessing lends a most needed tool for developing an in-depth understanding of both the structural causes and consequences of the phenomena under investigation. In turn, a deeper understanding of the consequential aspects of academic practices could lead to more engaged ways of addressing societal and global inequalities. This approach to scholarship and teaching alike requires us to rethink the practice of academic work in tandem with the needs of the communities we work with, including our students, and pay closer attention to the complex web of relationships between the two. In this larger context, this essay shares with the readers the history of a personal and institutional transformation during which I began to utilize my artistic training in the classroom to unearth the capacity of my students to feel, to be present, to risk hearing and sharing each other's voices and thoughts, to be confused, and to formulate new ways of asking questions and finding answers themselves. It also provides brief points of entry to the educational practices I gradually developed and how they relate to some of the critical concepts in street and physical theatre, with the hope that others may also find them inspiring and that a further conversation may develop.

I have an established institutional identity: I am a Full Professor at the Department of Politics, York University, Toronto, Canada, and a graduate faculty member at several departments, including Graduate Programs in Social and Political Thought, Sociology, Socio-Legal Studies, Humanities, Osgoode Hall Law School, and a Graduate Program in Public Policy and Law at the same institution. I received my PhD in Social and Political Thought and my SJD (PhD in Law) in international criminal law. I work and live as a Middle Eastern Canadian scholar of forced migration studies, political philosophy, comparative politics and international criminal law. Before joining York University, I was the inaugural post-doctoral fellow of the *Past and Present Society* at Oxford University, a research fellow at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and the European Institute, London School of Economics. I also held teaching posts and several fellowships in Europe. As expected at this stage of my academic career, I am widely published across areas including historical injustices, accountability regimes, politics of dispossession, mass displacement, excesses of nationalism, trauma and memory, ethics of witnessing, and war crimes/crimes against humanity nexus. My most recent research addresses the dispossession of unorthodox minorities in the Middle East and statelessness in the MENA region.

I have public responsibilities as well. I am the current and immediate past Vice President of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM), and the inaugural program co-director for the organization's Arts and Forced Migration initiative.[2] I served on the Advisory Board of the Center for Forced Migration, Northwestern University, USA, Royal Roads University, School of Justice Studies, Canada and Delhi School of Transnational Affairs (DSTA), Delhi University, India. I am the co-editor of the *Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security* (2019–ongoing) and a member of the Editorial Boards of the *Nations and Nationalism* (1998–2006), *Displaced Voices: Journal of Living Archives*.[3], and *Mülkiye SBF Dergisi*. I have been a frequent guest editor for the journal *Refuge*, published by MCRG, Kolkata, India. I have ongoing collaborations with Bilgi University Law School, Istanbul, Turkey, the Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon, and Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan. I regularly teach graduate and undergraduate classes in Canada and abroad on Critical Approaches to Human Rights Law, Politics of International Law, Administrative Law, Law and Social Theory, Politics of Utopia, Minority Rights, and Forced Migration Studies. This is how I am known, as a mid-career member of the academia and a researcher.

Beyond that, however, as I will discuss in detail in the following pages, I have always led a 'double life'. I am a practicing visual artist, a trained physical theatre performer, and a stage décor specialist. In theatre, I have trained with Adam Paolozza, Ardyth Johnson, Adam Lazarus, Coleen Shirin MacPherson, and John Beale in Canada since 2008, and I specialize in grotesque/bouffon and street theatre. Before that, I worked as a dance theatre

actor and stage-maker in Istanbul, Turkey, for nearly a decade. I am a follower of the teachings of Jacque Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier in stage arts.[4] In visual arts, I primarily work in public spaces and paint murals on walls, bridges, stairs, and silk canvases. I feel at home working with large-scale multi-media designs that respond to the places where they are created. For over a decade, I chose not to sign my public artworks. I believed, like the medieval mural painters did, what was displayed in public belonged to the public. I still hesitate and often chose not to sign my works on walls and other public places.

My visual arts work explores how death, human suffering, loss, and hope are articulated through societal relationships, often focusing on the body, natural forms, passage of time, memory, and histories of violence. I have been showcasing my work regularly since 2010 in public venues and designing book covers and posters. I also produce mixed medium academic work which combines my designs with text.[5] I cherish the multiple layers of representation present in physical and visual expressions related to violence, not just because of their emotive effects but also because of how they constitute and challenge our political and moral imagination. For instance, in my designs and murals, artistic representation is always an invitation for more questions rather than providing answers. The political and aesthetic trajectories engage with each other, though without making an authoritative claim. It is rather an 'ethics of witnessing' that I strive to enact in my artwork. However, I will not discuss how I express myself through creating visual art pieces while using the venues like a stage and using techniques of stage décor here. Instead, I will invite the reader to rethink the classroom and academia as a place where encounters of this 'other kind' are not only possible but also necessary. The route for staging such interactions in the classroom has been a physical theatre for me. In physical theatre, which is an ancient and global tradition of discontent refusing the 'fourth wall' and directly relating to the audience as participants rather than as spectators, the main principles of the artistic work and production are building on what is most alive, and to that end, integrating text, music, image, and action to create disruptive performances that transform the way people relate to themselves and the world. These principles have long shaped my academic life, making my scholarly engagements more rooted and meaningful both for myself and for others with whom I have worked. However, it was only after a certain turning point in my life that I began openly practicing them in public. This essay is a detailed history of that transformation.

The background to all this goes back to my years growing up in a Middle Eastern country under a military coup during the 1970s and then 1980s, which hurt so many people near and far, and my witnessing of the first murder of a young person as a child on the street in front of the very wall of my secondary school. Paramilitary forces circled a young man hardly older than me, beat up the curled body, and then crushed his head with a stone. I froze while 'witnessing' the last breath of a person who was neither armed nor protesting. The next day, when he died, there were blood stains still purple-red, not yet oxidized, and they looked so mysteriously beautiful, like the marks of a life taken away before its time. I then witnessed some members of my family disfigured, turned into a human pulp, becoming refugees, running away for life, and never running from life. As a child of multiple generations of displacement, I innately knew how fragile the light of the day always is. However, these early life experiences taught me that words were not enough to tell stories of death and disappearance, and there was something much more profound that humans and animals alike relate to regarding the desire not to give up that last breath.

I began painting on walls 40 years ago and studied physical theatre (otherwise known as theatre without words) and stage arts while completing my university education. The world always felt like an ever-changing stage, and I excelled in site-specific paintings and constructions until I became an émigré student in the late 1980s and left my world of stage and décor behind. Part of me died a slow death. Working three jobs while studying and living in dingy basements or attics often visited by animals, I discovered street performers and fringe theatre in Toronto, Canada. They were kindred spirits, injured acrobats, puppeteers, mime artists, jugglers, clowns, playwrights, and musicians, and

that became my secret world. I hid it from my academic cohorts, except from one other 'bouffon/clown' working at York administration, and we would always knowingly nod to each other when we came across the university's corridors. Otherwise, my intellectual life and sensations of the world were divided into two. My heart continued to beat for physical theatre, murals, and stage décor, but it was like a river running silently and deep, by and large, hidden from the gaze of the institution where I was formally employed. It was not about 'earning money' or moonshining but more about remaining a theatre and stage arts student.

When my children were born, I played with them, creating mini-worlds, kingdoms, and cities, bringing my training to the privacy of the home. I also found out that not much had changed since the days of Silvia Plath when it comes to 'mothering'. I used to make them laugh when they were stressed by showing mime tricks. I painted with them on mirrors, created collages for each year of their early childhood, and turned the houses we lived in into other spaces and places. Nevertheless, they grew, like all children do. And around the time they were no longer 'playing' came cancer. That was the turning point at which I gave up all pretense and had no option but to live as I am, as a whole person, no longer divided between being a mother, a scholar, and an artist. It was a matter of survival. If I was to come back to work and fully engage, I needed all the means that kept me alive in this world for whichever number of days we each may have to go on. I brought my art training and experiences into my classrooms, then eventually openly into my scholarly work. I began to develop how I witnessed the world into a methodology. This essay is a testimony to this struggle, which has been actualized since 2016.

## 2. Physical Theatre and Removal of the Fourth Wall[6]

Physical theatre, experimental theatre, and street theatre share the common conviction that no fourth wall should separate the stage and the act from the audience. To different degrees, they are participatory in their mode of delivery. Exploring the feasibility of using essential techniques in a classroom environment has given me the courage to invite my students to become more engaged in developing strategies to deal with situations that challenge their hope in the world. Since I teach subjects related to violations, violence, lack of accountability, mass crimes, and systemic forms of oppression and dehumanization, enlivening hope year after year was also essential for me as an educator.

The key point for the kind of engagement I created the conditions for in the classroom is related to the notion of complicité/complicity. However, it is a double-edged sword. In theatre, its main features include the creative mixing of storytelling via intertwining stories, the unabashed use of multi-media, puppets and masks, active and ongoing collaboration with other artists and actors, a heavy emphasis on mime, slow motion, and physical movement rather than the spoken word, montages mixed with direct address of the audience, choreographed work based on experiential theatre, experimental lighting and sound which is adaptive to the surroundings, and the idea of the stage not being an enclosed place. As already mentioned, there is no fourth wall. Especially in the traditional carnival as a political form, the actor/performer is part of a conversation with the spectator. According to the teachings of Jacque Lecoq, for instance, training actors in ways that encourage them to investigate ways of performance that suited them best is essential for 'living theatre.' (See Evans and Kemp 2016). This principle amounts to nurturing the genuine creativity and complete presence of the performer instead of teaching a codified set of skills to be achieved via *negative* (see Murphy 2018). Based on the same principle, in a classroom environment, you are never to tell a student how to do something 'right', but you must lead them to discover their sense of 'right'.

Lecoq training also has the *neutral mask* as an essential element of a 'clean and genuine performance' that has depth (see Eldredge and Huston 2005). The neutral mask is a symmetrical mask with no expression, and the mouth is made to look ready to perform any action. The first time I used the mask myself, I was genuinely shaken by the effect this simple device had in amplifying the movements of my body, as one could not read the face

or lips. All attention naturally turned to the slightest angle or change in how we carry our bodies and express our emotions through different forms of breathing. The mask is made to seem as if the person wearing it has no past or previous knowledge of how the world works and cannot react to the audience in a preordained manner. Once Lecoq students became at one with the neutral mask, they would advance through larval masks, expressive masks, the commedia dell'arte masks, half masks, and finally, the smallest mask of all, the red nose. The expressive masks in this series are character masks which depict a very particular character, often associated with a specific emotional make-up and bodily reactions.

It is impossible to wear the intellectual equivalent of a neutral mask in our scholarship. However, to develop an awareness of what we use to make a convincing argument, our blind spots, our preconceptions and biases, and our repertoire of the sacred, it can be beneficial to neutralize our stance before willfully and consciously choosing a 'character' in our research, writing, lecturing, and teaching. Much of this goes against everything about the nature of scholarly work as we habitually represent authority and established knowledge. Truth-seeking and knowledge claims are meant to be above and beyond individual characteristics. Moreover, what I innately and socially know is the biggest untruth of academia. Furthermore, unbeknown to many, the red nose, known as the clown nose, is a neutral mask and donning it often constitutes the most challenging moment of training for physical theatre actors. Lecoq and Gaulier believe that every person can and will develop their clown as no two selves are alike. This belief translates into the uniqueness of each student's voice in the classroom.

The three principal skills that both educators and actors trained by Lecoq and Gaulier alike embrace are *le jeu* (playfulness), *complicité* (togetherness), and *disponibilité* (openness) (see Amsden 2016; Butler 2012). In this essay, I emphasize complicité more than the other two principles, as academic engagement depends on a sense of community and the awareness of and responsibility towards the public. Combined with the efficiency and effectiveness of movement, which is heavily emphasized in physical theatre, creating and delivering simple, direct, and clean delivery language often creates the most significant communicative depth. Both Lecoq and Gaulier also emphasize the importance of finding the most fitting voice for each actor's mask, often using gibberish as the choice language rather than the actual use of words. During a workshop on physical theatre, I remember having to cite a critical text with personal significance in gibberish in front of an audience and deliver all the heaviness and darkness of the text simply by means of the changes in tonality and expression/feeling (but not gestures) through my body. Indeed, perhaps the most essential aspect of physical theatre is building an authentic relationship between the performer and the audience. Therein lies the importance of both mimicry and miming, as we can observe how individuals learn and grasp the world by following how they move and relate to the space around them and others. Another exercise in training that always baffled me is walking into an empty space while delivering the meaning that it is an ancient forest, a significant art exhibition in a historical museum, or an imaginary solitary confinement cell in which you are trying to move about. These training techniques allow for the development of mastery over action, expression, and demonstration. It also requires that we observe others and learn 'through them'.

The fundamental principles of both schools of training in physical theatre include the rule of thinking and questioning everything, as practiced by the exercise of a rapid-fire discussion, where one questions the purpose, uses, motivation, agenda, success, aims, and problems of everyday things and acts such as war and peace, a cabbage, a mop, crying, laughing or sitting, and waiting, and prescribe to the notion of never going in a straight line, as practiced by following random things in all their puzzling aspects, such as a funeral, a garden in bloom, a broken window, etc. Often, training involves creating a whole scene relating to a random object. Furthermore, being an 'honorable clown' and respecting the smallest mask, the simple red nose, involves being fully present and always generous for and with others. Clowning and bouffon took several years of training on my part, and I still feel at the beginning. It is one of the hardest things in the world to make an audience

laugh spontaneously, and even harder to maintain that mode of engagement. You cannot have the luxury of turning your back and leaving the stage when you fail your task. You perform best by accepting failure. People laugh at our failures and vulnerabilities as they see themselves in us, and laughter gives a celebratory relief that they understand what goes on and are relieved it is not them! All of this goes against the classroom setting in contemporary academia, where our students live with the fear of failure, are trained to compete rather than share, and often only relate to the professor and not their classmates. Hence, it takes genuine effort and careful strategizing to bring the spirit of being yourself in the presence of others in an academic learning environment (see Felman 1991a).

One of the standard practices for bouffon is performing against something as simple as a soundtrack of a ticking clock or choosing random objects from a room full of odd artifacts, props, garments, crockery, medals, glasses, and books, and devising a scene that makes no sense and yet makes perfect sense. The particular grotesque track, as Gaulier developed, is about just being you and not character acting. Often in a totally bare, empty space, with no props, furniture, or stimulus, one must create the opening of a captivating story simply via body movements which are not aestheticized as dance and sounds which are not words. If furniture is needed, the actors must use their bodies. In all of this work, movement is the bloodline of performance, and gesturing is considered the most unwanted add-on. Nothing is off-limits while devising, and there is no disgruntlement or allowance for injured egos; one must always stay generous and give to both partners on stage and to even the most challenging audience. The play, the joy of being present as if your life depends on it, and in so many ways it does for the actor, and never pretending but always being fully present, is indeed the most difficult act of all. It brings *the heavy responsibility of witnessing and responding while giving and being vulnerable*. This approach, however, constitutes a real challenge in a classroom setting.

## 3. Boundaries of the Classroom in Higher Education

The leitmotif of this essay is how, in my own life and scholarship, I struggled, stumbled, and hesitated but eventually chose to bring my stage and arts training into my scholarship and eventually into the classroom, without stylizing it, so to speak, in the raw format. In this journey, witnessing, fortified by awareness and responsiveness, emerged as the pillar of such an engagement. These are not the only central themes for experimental theatre. Since WWII, witnessing emerged as a crucial practice of agency and engagement which binds individual autonomy to institutional platforms, reflective procedures, and socio-political or legal change (see, among other things, Givoni 2014; Douglas and Barnett 2014; Craps 2013; Holtschneider 2007; Oliver 2004; Coe 2003; Oliver 2000; Baum 1997). In academia and scholarship, the researcher as witness adds new dimensions to the debate regarding witnessing as a form of responsibility (see Canefe 2022). The question remains: if the Holocaust, or any other mass injustice, is construed as unpresentable, how is it possible to bear witness to it? What distinguishes one unpresentable, traumatic historical event from another and renders some open to representation through witnessing, while negating such a possibility for others? The possibility of testifying to something specific when the question of unpresentability may emerge at the point of contextualizing its specificity is a very critical one. We often capitalize the 'non-specificity' or the generic nature of what appears as 'unrepresentable' in terms of the egregious nature of the acts, marking the experiences we try to witness during or in the aftermath of the event we recount. On the other hand, seeking justice requires resistance to both the representation and articulation of the acts of violence that mark the historical construction of specific subjectivities through violation, forgetting, and expulsion. Thus, I have long argued that separating the academic and the ethical should be disestablished when working with violence and suffering (see, inter alia, Canefe 2021a).

I consider my involvement with the art essay format as a celebration of and a call for the cultivation of attentiveness to the diverse forms of remembrance, mourning, and relating and as a form of witnessing without protecting myself behind the shield of my

institutional identity. Being present in this way is not simply an epistemic project. Instead, it is about the difficult work of learning to live with different histories and others' loss and sorrows and perseverance in this challenging time known as the decolonial present and the epoch of post-humanity (see, inter alia, Mbembe et al. 2006; Mbembe 2016; de Sousa Santos 2019). My approach to academia is rooted in a practice of consciously and willingly choosing to become a witness and responding to others, their experiences, and their ethos of life. I also see the conscious engagement with a broad range of ways of relating to the world while nourishing the connectivity and possibilities of often seemingly impossible dialogues as a step towards cultivating different futurities. Creative engagements in the context of scholarship allow us to yield to an unfaltering and yet reasoned optimism, paving the way to an alternate view of our human (and non-human) destiny. It is an engagement that revitalizes rather than paralyzes, and it helps mitigate the worst of our restlessness or ruthless belief in history's forward movement. The spirit of inquiry, connection, and emancipation from the torment of guilt for those acts performed to others in our complicity, complimented by a sense of agency, are parts of the growing pains of the soul.

Building on my lifelong reckoning with things that cannot be understood or expressed by words alone, I concluded that an ethical stance towards teaching/learning together must be built on both the encouragement and opportunity for the desire to be open to things we cannot fully understand or live with. Liberation from fear, conscious fears, and imprisoned terrors is a proposition. It can only be actualized through both individual and collective belief in our ability to feel and engage. All of the problems of the world, even the most abstruse and difficult ones, can dissolve into a hope that day by day, we approach a goal which we may apprehend but cannot yet describe. This is what I teach in my graduate classes on the politics of utopia, as well as dissertation preparation workshops, with specific reference to Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt. I claim that the long gestation of what would become our scholarly work is not only a turning point in our personal histories But it is also a public triumph of making meaning out of seeming chaos and sense out of sorrow. The true mark of academic originality lies in compacting into something so finite, yet so open and inviting, while also being intimate and immediate, which is the reason for this work's vitality and transcendence. I have shared with my students time and time again that when they start finding their voice and saying what they need to say, they are joining a conversation that began long before them and that will continue long after them. This is the acknowledgement of the impossibility of having 'the final say', and it requires a constant embrace of a degree of humility we may initially find not so comforting. And yet, just like in street theatre, we perform to and along with an audience and transform our lives and the lives of others while we give everything we can in utmost honesty. This makes the writer/scholar vulnerable, and yet, the gist of an authentic presence is that very vulnerability. Surely, blazing manifestos for the post-Enlightenment ethos of freedom [from capitalism] and justice [for historical injustices] is making academic work a primary political and personal devotion for change and transformation. The question remains as to where, how, and with whom to engage. This Elysian dream has long been the "Ode to Joy" for the idealist and critical scholar. Moreover, it was enough, in fact, more than enough, to be securely moored in academia to benefit from the bright beam of possibilities enabled by the institution in terms of knowledge production and magnified through the lens of our expertise. However, every generation comes to us with questions of their own, many of which we have to learn from them and with them.

## 4. Pedagogies of Hope, Witnessing, and the Bouffon

From inside a vortex of uncertainty and suffering, the existence we must build up cannot be on shaky foundations. Back in 2016, when I gradually returned to work after a series of cancer-related surgeries and treatments, I started to use my graduate classrooms as a gathering place and actively began to use the term 'learning communities'. I felt it was the only way for me to be genuinely connected with my students, and I wanted to be committed to understanding and relating to them in ways that I had not dared to do

in the previous 15 years of my academic life. Life felt fragile, and I had begun to live as if today was the only gift I could count on. Struggling with exhaustion, chronic pain, and side effects of treatments, the classroom became a place of giving all that I had, and thus a place of rising above the challenges of decreased mobility, my body changing in ways I could not recognize as a result of targeted medications, and my memory becoming the sharpest when I wanted to be there and grasp every breath to give something back to life. Academic discussions on pedagogies of hope became something I internalized in my own life (see Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2019; Hooks 2014; Nayar 2013; McLaren 2001). I wanted the coming together in a classroom to really matter to us all. I used examples from my stage training to highlight the theoretical nuances of what I was teaching and as a tool for inviting my students to find their own standing on critical issues.

Gaulier's treatise *The Tormentor* (*Le Gégèneur*), a book discussing his thoughts on theatre and containing exercises designed to develop an actor's skill, has long been by my side. However, after 2016, I started to use it as a point of reference for confronting what I would call the 'discontents of traditional academia'. I dare say, in this case, traditional does not necessarily mean conservative or right-wing. Rather, it encompasses various scholarship, including highly critical forms. The adjective I use here refers to the framing of argumentation, sharing, and teaching in the classroom setting, and our standing in the institutions we are employed at knowledge producers and experts. The alternative I began to propose is inspired by Gaulier's grotesque and bouffon. Back in the Middle East, while staging my own political theatre as a young student, I was already entirely taken by the possibilities presented by the grotesque. During my childhood, attending *Ankara Sanat Tiyatrosu,* where I learnt about every Brecht play scene by scene, I discovered the power of black humor years before being formally introduced to bouffon. Thirty years later, I made a conscious decision to bring the 'inverted clown' into my classrooms and make it alive in my work using the merciless lens of the bouffon and the grotesque combined.

There is a well-known example that I learnt from the late grandmaster Marcello Magni: the way you put your pen down makes so much difference, or the way you close the door behind you. I would show in person what an effect each has in class. I would also start drawing empty world maps on the blackboard and ask people to come and populate them region by region. I wanted us to become painfully aware of geographies we do not include in our world view. I began to insist on 'no PowerPoint' presentations and asked everyone to take their time when asking questions or engaging in a debate and to really listen to the counterarguments. 'No rush' became my motto. I once brought a metronome to class and showed everyone what happens when we begin to speed up as we read or try to explain things. They burst out in laughter but innately understood my point about relating, responding, and witnessing. I started using the techniques both Lecoq and Gaulier used in creating and co-creating screen play to develop my students' research ideas into a coherent yet unique whole. The key point of departure for both is creating your theatre. Their method forces the students of stage beyond the archetype. This is equally essential for creating an environment for producing and sharing original thought.

At the graduate level of education, capitalizing the scholar's responsibility as a witness must aim at tackling not just the conundrums of scholarly research, maximizing its potential and benefits for institutional and social change, but tracing and teaching its most adequate and resonant forms. It is also a deeply personal form of entanglement. To this end, I would ask my students what mattered to them most to be shared with the class in a short paragraph on the subject matter of the day we were learning about or discussing together. I invite them to imagine argument sequences or provide us a title for their prospective final research paper, and others would try to guess what the contents would be according to what they believed would fit that title. I began to develop a pedagogical stance which insisted upon the interpersonal, communal, and societal functions of engaged scholarship being included in graduate education. This required us to combine philosophical argument, methodological analysis, and cases drawn from not just scholarly practice but life and all forms of expression. In a class on Black Lives Matter, we listened and then listened again

to the Billie Holiday performance of Strange Fruit. It was hard for my students to listen to the song and watch the performance again when I explained the background and the song's history.

In so many instances, I created a course plan that would make the participants emote, feel pain, relief, confusion, and have no choice but to be fully present. In courses on systemic violations of human rights at a global scale, documentaries and testimonies were assigned to be watched and commented on not in class but in the privacy of the students' residences. Otherwise, the effect is overwhelming and leads to extended silences. The idea was not to traumatize but to invite full engagement with judgment, an issue I covered extensively in my latest book on Crimes Against Humanity (see Canefe 2021a). Overall, if we are to defend an ethics of witnessing that is focused on the scholar's role in enhancing [human] dignity against all odds, we must start by providing a road map for our students which is not only academic but also directly related to the way one lives and by emphasizing our communal capacities of questioning the 'human condition'.[7]

The role of scholars and academic work in current political and social systems has been construed much too narrowly. Graduate education squarely reflects this limited focus. A more interactive view of graduate training is possible but urgent. This alternative view is characterized by knowledge mobilization (invoking, challenging, and improving societal norms) as a form of legitimate activity by which the scholar/researcher uses their public authority to ask questions and seek and devise answers. This form of public power, although contingent, needs to be considered. Considering the factors which influence knowledge mobilization is important for understanding who uses it and for what ends but also for deciphering the implications of existing frames of reference and political institutions. In line with Mavis Biss' imperative of developing a radical moral imagination, 'striving to transform our understanding of critical issues through creative response and amorally significant appraisals of lived experience,' I would consider our encounters with our students as opportunities for a communal increase in moral insight (see Biss 2013). The scholar/researcher could choose to act as a witness to the demands for social and legal change coming from the society at large and particularly from the margins, and of course in 'borderlands', rather than as a mediator between the state and the citizenry for system maintenance and social control. However, deciding to participate in this process depends upon one's sense of duty to the public and realizing a unique responsibility as a public actor. Witnessing as a scholar and its relationship with transformative practices, especially during civil strife, political upheaval, and regime change, are critically important. My aim as an educator teaching these subjects thus became the creation of versatile pedagogical conditions for students working with human vulnerabilities and human suffering which allow them to become aware of their positionality as critical witnesses to violence, systemic rights violations, political and personal trauma, society-wide multi-generational oppression, and historical injustices. There are significant ethical and political possibilities that emerge through such a framing of teaching. These, in turn, could extend our thinking about the affective possibilities of witnessing as a methodological component in research and scholarship.

## 5. Discontents of Traditional Academia

In my work as a scholar and researcher, I must be able to offer alternatives which can potentially boost our capacity for relating and caring and capture the kind of vision based on the recognition of shared humanity and human dignity of non-citizens, 'alien subjects', *sans papiers,* and stateless populations. Traditional takes on academia view the relevance of scholarship in this area as prosaic. However, it is an issue of profound social and political significance. It will impact our professional and personal lives and the future of the societies within which we produce and disseminate knowledge. Especially in my field of expertise, deficient education on the ethics of witnessing as responsibility has serious consequences due to the harm generated by public and private institutions, including universities, which tend to protect the *status quo*. The cultural, political, and social challenges

faced by marginalized, excluded, and marked individuals, groups, classes, and communities in society must inform the scholarship and pedagogy of research training in a very unmediated fashion. Systemic practices of the exclusion, denunciation, decimation, and annihilation of human lives cannot be taught without a normative commitment. Weaving themes of violence, history, identity, gender, and class together in critical intersectionality, we can offer an expansive take on socioeconomic and politico-cultural awareness before our students 'go into the field'. As such, academic education could become a platform upon which inequalities and injustices are discussed not just openly but with a brutal directness rather than being presumed to fall outside the capabilities of the scholar or the student to engage.

For teaching and working with narratives of traumatic events and systemic political or socioeconomic violence in the curriculum, it is important to explore how educators and students could embrace a new sense of responsibility that encourages a combination of affective, ethical, and political approaches to injustice. Such a stance would move us beyond having reactive responses to trauma and would make us consider alternative meanings of narratives about human suffering, thus rendering academia a venue for debate, critical understanding, and personal engagement. Some of the methods I employed in class are creating polar positions and assigning students to groups where they vehemently oppose the idea but must defend it to the best of their ability all the same.

One such example was the Guantanamo Bay and Bybee Report discussions, where my entire class were against the practices and hated the tenets of the legal arguments presented in the Bybee Reports. I shared the documents with the class in advance, and a group of them had to defend the necessity of having Guantanamo Bay, and defend the Bybee report, another group had to defend the American soldiers' stand point who were appointed to the Guantanamo Bay and had to take the inmates to their homes at the weekend as part of the 'socialization programs', and a third group had to represent the oppositional forces to Guantanamo Bay and similar securitization practices based on mass incarceration above the reach of the law. In each case, year after year, the third group made the weakest arguments as they were coming from a point of 'righteousness', understandably so, but they lost the debate. That was a very hard lesson to learn. In another instance, in a class on extractive industries and blood diamonds, we would communally choose two students to represent a couple who are shopping for an engagement ring, and some students would represent their traditionalist families who truly believed in the necessity of a diamond ring, then we would have a group of international merchants who brandish their safe diamond trade certificates, Canadian shop owners who do not care, one shop owner who lies outright, and then another one who explains the process to young couple. This was something everyone enjoyed partaking in and the class would turn into a live street performance.

When I teach basic principles of genocidal violence, I choose four students as members of a political, racial, or ethno-religious minority who must be eliminated but with state sanction and societal participation. Thus, we first identify the things they have and wear, and a group of students should develop intent to have these things once these students are 'eliminated'. Then, we decide who would do the killings and how, But they must justify it to the whole class, so they have to prepare an ideological speech dehumanizing the victims and alerting the society that it is the only way. Representing the state, I need to orchestrate a sense of normalcy while the killings are taking place and arrange for the silent removal of the bodies. It is an extremely chilling exercise. When the culprits remove the victims from class and retake their seats, we then arrange for the plundering of their belongings. People wear the removed students' hats and scarfs, take over their water bottles and laptops, and we continue as if nothing has happened. It is so difficult to go through it, but nobody ever contested the practice as they really want to know how it feels and how it is possible that ordinary people can engage in acts of societal violence. And the key to all of these methods of intervention is fostering a genuine sense of relationality.

## 6. Witnessing as Responsibility and Ethics of Witnessing

Sociality borrows its potency from relationality. Since I started working with the art essay format for scholarly publications, I began to insist that our methodologies must be regarded as tools for intervention and not just as disciplinary affirmations of our work. Relationality is created and sustained through affect, as affect acts as an amplifier. However, it is also the most fragile of all forms of relating. Both fear and terror are emotions that are deeply affective. Although both drives influence individual choices, affect has a nuanced social and cultural history which is necessary to understand their influence's true nature. Politics of affect allow us to tell and hear specific stories, localizing and humanizing the experiences of 'subjects of scholarly research' rather than allowing for their observation from a safe distance.

My 'field of expertise' in academia comprises institutional and societal accountability or lack thereof in the context of mass deaths, societal and politically organized crimes, disappearances, displacements, and dispossessions. Counting the dead, disappeared, or tarnished and vested bodies with erudite voyeurism with no responsibility attached is the opposite of the ethics of witnessing I personally embrace. Failure to recognize the value of human dignity inevitably leads to the suspension of accountability for the suffering of those who are 'observed' by us scholars while living in limbo, under lockdown, during decade-long periods of normalization of exceptionality. That condition renders the desire for justice and askance of responsibility irrelevant for those chosen subjects of academic interrogation.

Witnessing is a direct form of ethical and political engagement which should be regarded well beyond its original affiliation with legal evidence and testimonial accounts. The witness is an essential part of a process of transformation concerning truth claims advanced by society and sustained by the state apparatus and dominant structures of meaning and knowledge production. However, the ethical redefinition of witnessing advanced by Jean-François Lyotard, Shoshana Felman, and Giorgio Agamben does not fully engage with witnessing as a political practice of the willful self (see, inter alia, Felman 1991b; Felman and Laub 1992; Lyotard 1994; Agamben 1999). Witnessing, mainly undertaken by those trained to document, archive, preserve, and advance claims, can potentially establish an active relationship between individual autonomy and institutional structures, ideological edifices, state practices, and overall strategies of dominance and silencing (see Givoni 2014). I aspire to cultivate this in communities of learning in academia and beyond by resorting to the methods I inherited from my theatrical training.

In legal and overall academic training, reflective procedures that address the pitfalls of generic forms of witnessing are essential for maximizing its potential in the classroom and beyond. Truth be told, bearing witness is not a solution or a panacea to social problems or deep-seated political violence. It is, however, a very potent way of engaging with victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and benefactors, hoping to advance the reconfiguration of moral and political truth claims. Witnessing also has a unique capacity to question the location, forms, and dimensions of societal silence practices and challenge what testimony habitually stands for. In this case, the kind of testimony in question is not one of a direct victim but that of a witness who survived or the one who observed the aftereffects but who was not there when the events unfolded. Thus, retelling 'contemporary history' through acts of bearing witness is an essential part of working with human suffering. In particular, the problem of incorporating traumatic experiences related to mass, structural, and multi-generational political violence into individual and collective memory is a real challenge when the society in question does not want to remember or relate to the events we recount. Redressing the reductionism inherent in the traditional take on art and aesthetic experiences as essentially a means for uncensored expression and potential healing, in my pedagogical work and hybrid academic writings, I wanted to create a "witnessing presence." (See Rose 1996). A direct engagement with social and political responsibility requires us to develop expertise for using the tools we need and to be creative and innovative in our approaches to 'collecting data' and deciphering relationalities. This approach allows the scholar/researcher to decipher the firsthand experiences and testimonies about

discrimination, dispossession, violence, and atrocities carried out against individuals, groups, and communities and to treat their unit of analysis no longer as the 'vulnerable individual.' The intended effect of directing scholars to hear, think about, collect, and examine life stories, testimonies, case documents, reports, witness accounts, interviews, and other forms of direct records is to urge them to bear witness to societal traumas and injuries which have not found direct address in dominant socio-legal approaches to mass violence. The coupling of moral imagination and hope reveals to us the capacity of our own and our students' 'capacity to generate new possibilities for morally engaged forms of learning and knowledge production' (see Biss 2014; as well as Bogues 2012).

Secondly, since these practices of learning, sharing knowledge, and research often prove to be difficult exercises under chronic and acute human suffering and mass violence, it is of utmost importance to constitute communities of learning and trust. This pedagogical approach could be set in motion by asking direct questions about narratives of injustice that cannot be addressed within the current social order. Such questions elicit thoughts that, at least in some sectors of society, are eager to talk about these events and thus potentially create counter-publics by bringing to light issues not readily acknowledged or expressed. In this way, the research community could move towards a belief system in which the utterance of 'there must be and are other ways' is embraced. Using the cases at hand as a springboard to think about social and historical justice in political and ethical terms is a must for scholars who work within the context of gross and systemic human suffering. Whenever such communities are created, our research practices become a site of engagement and transformation. We perform our roles as witnesses and advocates for social justice defined in the most inclusive and often challenging of terms.

The many years of training and exposure that I had in the tradition of physical theatre, particularly during my Canadian journey of being exposed to Lecoq and Gaulier methods of being present, daring to find your way through the mess of the act that we call life and being at home with your voice, and the fact that performing for an audience is a genuine relationship that comes with a heavy responsibility, finally made me stand back and reconsider my standing not just as a scholar but also as an educator. I made a conscious decision that we must provide direct, hands-on means for our students to bear witness to historical traumas and present wrongdoings in the very context of their research projects and establish a collaborative environment of daring support for each other. There is a direct relationship between witnessing as a form of responsibility and assuming agency and power to affect change. Being 'fully present' is the first step towards acknowledging the social, political, and legal system's shortcomings or malfunctions. Introducing and managing such forms of engagement in research have ethical, pedagogical, and emotional implications for our students, whom we ask to bear witness to individual and societal injustices that are yet to be addressed.

Furthermore, thinking about our responsibility as scholars and researchers to act beyond 'expert witnesses' requires progressive pedagogies above and beyond classroom presence. The methodology I advocate regarding the ethics of witnessing as responsibility is also in tandem with the main tenets of what has come to be known as 'action research,' a transformative approach through which the understanding of complex social situations has been sought hand in hand with the aim to improve the quality of life of affected populations. The significance of this kind of engagement with research is not merely to instill an ethics of witnessing to raise awareness about differences and suffering in society. Instead, the aim is to move away from simply acknowledging injustice and toward considering possibilities of substantive changes that could emerge from witnessing as scholars and researchers. Witnessing is an act that connects us and obligates us to each other. It is not a passive presence but an active engagement with society that engulfs the researcher/advocate. At times when silence is the only option and where immediate recovery or remedies are not possible, witnessing sustains the hope that another horizon for justice would emerge. The two golden rules of physical theatre are no gesturing and no dialogue. One must be uncompromisingly open, vulnerable, and human to the core, with all its beauty and

ugliness. Academia has a distinct potential to become a parade of masques and we should not train our students to wear masques to hide but to shed light, dare, and be present.

## 7. Concluding Thoughts

Teaching through the method of 'ethics of witnessing' is about sharing the importance of an ethos that approaches the world less as a terrain of clashes between individual actors from which to extract recognition, restitution, or rights but more as a place whereby affect, sensibilities, and a notion of responsibility are integral to scholarship (Zembylas 2015). However, realizing this potential requires that we acknowledge that witnessing means taking the risk of being ourselves, being 'ordinary,' and being directly involved under challenging processes, such as collecting testimonies of grave injustices, death, destruction, large-scale and multi-generational ills, and injuries, without feeling important. Just as the clown training at Gaulier's school of physical theatre, the relationship with the audience/interlocutor *must* play the defining part in our scholarly practice. Moreover, the presence of peers in our self-built and institutionally sustained universes as academics is a vital feature of the learning of the world.

Since 2016, I have been reconsidering the nature of graduate learning and not necessarily 'teaching', thus removing myself from the center stage, by examining my own experiences learning clown, grotesque, bouffon, and in general, physical theatre and politics of the street acting, and comparing these experiences with the learning communities' positionality in the classroom vis-à-vis what we call 'the outside world' in the classroom. The ethics of witnessing I embrace encourages a pedagogy of spectatorship, focusing students' attention first and foremost toward their classmates and then towards the 'subjects of their studies' rather than their relationship with their professor or their standing. For instance, silence is very crucial feedback. The flow of a conversation, on the other hand, is the antidote for long silences. The principle of complicité, the *jeu* as an essential part of 'play,' the ability to survive failure, and the necessity of learning through failure, which is otherwise known as the 'flop,' are elements that generations of students from École Philippe Gaulier and Jacques Lecoq provide us as lessons and skills necessary to listen to the other side, to be fully present, and to dare to engage. This presence could also lead to the uncomfortable and angry fleshing out of deep-seated societal divides and histories of trauma, well captured in the discussions on epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). However, it also allows for pedagogical encounters to enter spaces marked by demands beyond the mere recognition of otherness and others' suffering and toward doing something about it. As such, we are guiding our students toward an understanding of witnessing as a presence and as a formidable responsibility that will cultivate ethical sensibilities with a transformative potential for thinking about, practicing, and relating to scholarship.

The types of commitment and effectiveness of existing strategies concerning knowledge dissemination as mandated by this learning and training model could be further expanded by providing the active promotion of engaged scholarship by determining the key questions to be asked through a dialogical model. Establishing organically linked exchanges between universities and research centers and those who are 'studied' requires the enhancement of improved and structurally sustainable knowledge transfer and the translation of expertise. For instance, in my minority rights-related courses, I ask my students to identify an organization or a key figure who spearheaded struggles and tell us about their personal lives, turning points in their advocacy and activism, and the fruits of their efforts in the larger context of the communities they are engaged with. As such, 'ethics of witnessing as method' could provide a pathway to increase the ability of our students to directly relate to systemic abuses and inequalities that may or may not have effected them personally and to pursue the definition of a well-entrenched ideal of justice in the context of systemic human suffering that is not conceived as individual, neutral, or naturalized.

In this sense, this essay explored what comes *after* Paulo Freire's philosophy of hope and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (see Freire 1996, 2021; Carmen 1998). For Freire, human hope is the keystone of education. As such, education is necessarily political and inter-

relational. And yet, despite his principled stance regarding the objectives of pedagogical engagement and the cultivation and experience of hope in the classroom, Freire himself refused to provide a 'blueprint' for the demands placed on the 'radical educator'. This framework provides ample space for our agency in academic institutions (See, inter alia, Hickling-Hudson 2014; Lesley 2011; Mayo 1997). The agency needs to be redefined regarding epistemic injustices, which an increasing number of our students are subjected to as the cohorts entering higher education change (see Medina 2017; Origgi 2012). It also refers to those of us in academia who currently fall under the 'EDI mandate', standing for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, defined in terms of race, ethnicity, gender identities, and other forms of systemic marginalization. In this second instance, since both implicit and explicit prejudices mark the boundaries of what is possible in a classroom setting, our role as a witness is not limited to our research and should be extended into the critical teaching area. Epistemic injustice is not just the idea that "someone can be unfairly discriminated against in our capacity as a knower and that unfair and unjust communicative structures, institutions, and practices have the potential to reproduce and further exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequalities and injustices." (See Byskov 2021, p. 114). We are actively involved in the workings of the very institutions and acts that constitute the conditions of it. In the words of Karen Barad, a *performative* understanding of discursive practices is needed to challenge the representationalism that marks communication through words.[8] In my experience, foundational principles of physical theatre provide fertile grounds for overcoming the linguistic, conceptual, and historically marked barriers tripping us in the classroom as a learning community.

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## Notes

1 See Nergis Canefe, "Ethics of Witnessing: Method as Intervention" at https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/rrudoctoralconference2021/chapter/ethics-of-witnessing-method-as-intervention/. Also see the open-access website I prepared for working with human suffering at https://sites.google.com/view/workingwithhumansuffering (accessed on 9 November 2023).

2 See https://iasfm.org (accessed on 9 November 2023).

3 See https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/about/living-refugee-archive/ (accessed on 9 November 2023).

4 Jacques Lecoq was a French stage actor and acting movement coach best known for his teaching methods in physical theatre, movement, and mime. He trained generations of actors at Ecole International de theatre Jacques Lecoq. The Lecoq method's point of departure always starts with how the body moves and how it is related to expressing both human emotions and sociality. Phillippe Gaulier is a French master clown, a director, pedagogue, and professor of theatre and the founder of École Philippe Gaulier. He studied under Jacques Lecoq. In Toronto, Canada, I have been trained in both Lecoq and Gaulier methods by teachers and performers who were students of these two giants of physical theatre, the latter being a potent mixture of clown and bouffon allowing for biting satire that not only mocks but also curses.

5 Examples are Canefe (2021b); https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2021.1917856; Canefe (2020); https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/exhibitions/drowning-by-numbers-online-exhibition-by-nergis-canefe/. The book covers I prepared to include the following: https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=30171423592&cm_sp=SEARCHREC-_-WIDGET-L-_-BDP-R&searchurl=an%3Dnergis%2Bcanefe%26sortby%3D17; https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=30820404188&cm_sp=SEARCHREC-_-WIDGET-L-_-BDP-H&searchurl=an%3Dnergis%2Bcanefe%26sortby%3D17; https://www.amazon.ca/Deadly-Voyages-Migrant-Journeys-across/dp/1498584675; https://press.ucalgary.ca/books/9781773850856/; https://www.kirmizikedi.com/kitap/urun/11d56e6b525748c2af63f56229725e54 (accessed on 9 November 2023).

6 In traditional stage arts, the fourth wall symbolizes a necessary divide between the performer and the audience. (See Brown 2013; LaFrance 2012).

[7] The term is not only used by Hannah Arendt in her *The Human Condition* (Arendt 2013) but also discussed by (Heller 1987; Fineman 2008; Tsing 2009; Bednarik 2011; Berkowitz 2018; McNeill 2019). For the application of Arendt's work in education, see Hayden (2013).

[8] See Barad (2003). In her words, "[p]erformativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real." p. 801.

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