

The Grief of a Teacher: Reflections on Trauma,
Dis/Connections, and Institutional Paradox

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Author Note

In memory of Shirley Bostrom and Margaret Bostrom, and in honor of Lawrence Bostrom, Abby, and Jacob. The author wishes to thank the students referenced in this article, all of whom have been assigned pseudonyms. (Note: Faculty and administrators cited in the piece have requested that their real names be used unless otherwise indicated). It is the legacy of courage and honesty left behind by former students that motivates work with new students. Special thanks to Naomi Marks Cohan for revealing in her artwork the value of noticing dis/connections in nature and in life and for demonstrating the magnitude and magic of being an educator. Enormous gratitude goes to Natalee Reese for showing me what is important here, and to Michael Robertson for everything else.

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Abstract

This article examines, first and foremost, the experience of teaching about violence and, secondarily, how being a contingent faculty member uniquely complicates the already complicated task of teaching about trauma. It is this tension—this nexus of relationships between violence itself and the situation of being contingent, each predicated on isolation—that is the subject of this analysis. Through auto-ethnographic methods, case studies of students studying trauma, and conversations with faculty, the author exposes layers of personal, relational, organizational, and institutional brokenness. In delving into the connection of emotion and social structure, she hopes the article appeals to and benefits a range of audiences, especially people interested in: higher education's role and responsibility in preventing and responding to gender-based violence, the emotional life of the classroom, feminist pedagogy on trauma, the mental health crisis in higher education, and the over-reliance on contingent laborers in higher education.

Keywords: gender-based violence, rape, higher education, adjunct, pedagogy, grief, contingent

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

—Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

Introduction

Higher education’s role and responsibility in preventing and responding to gender-based violence involves strengthening the processes and practices of teaching and learning about violence in the classroom. This is important considering the staggering statistics about victimization on campuses and the fact that if colleges and universities are to educate a new citizenry prepared for responsible civic engagement and leadership, they must equip students to grapple with this social problem. This article explores what is involved and what is at stake in teaching about trauma; it also explores the impact of such teaching when done by contingent faculty. In no way do I want the experience of contingency faculty to be conflated with, or seen as comparable to, the experience of trauma victims/survivors. Rather, I demonstrate that the themes figuring most prominently in teaching about violence also serve as hallmarks of the contingent faculty experience. Undercurrents of isolation, entrapment, disembodiment, and resistance—coupled with the significance of developing one’s voice, home, and safe space—are cornerstones of pedagogy on violence, and they reverberate as dimensions of the contingent experience. Relying on excerpts from student e-mails and papers, interviews with faculty, the transcript of a panel I organized at a professional meeting, and auto-ethnography, this paper examines, first and foremost, the experience of teaching about violence and, secondarily, how being a contingent faculty member uniquely complicates the already complicated task of teaching about trauma.

Faculty are well-steeped in the notion that it is best to remove oneself and one’s emotions when conducting research or teaching; we are told that we will be more credible and that our research will be more easily replicable, generalizable, value-free, and objective. Yet it is an odd thing to be told that we are

contaminating the research or teaching that we are producing (Krieger, 1991). Auto-ethnography is a method for engaging in self-reflexivity on pedagogy. Sound pedagogy on gendered violence in particular involves invoking the professor as a vulnerable human being and social actor moved by the grief inherent in teaching and learning about intense pain and despair (Brush, Goetting, & Keating, 2002; Campbell, 2002; Hatch, 2013).

“Holding All That Horror”: An Embodied Meditation on Tapping the Nerve to Teach

I recall getting a massage, and the therapist stumbled upon various trigger points. I kept saying, “Ow, that kills.” She remarked how tightly knotted up I was: “It’s like garbage has accumulated in your body and you’re stuck.” I explained that I am a professor who teaches about violence and that our work is often heady and disembodied. “Ahh, well, of course then ... no human being can possibly tolerate that much tension,” she replied as she hit that nerve again—not just the sciatic nerve or the occipital nerve but the nerve that got me to do this work in the first place. As I tell my students, trauma is stored in the body, and the body remembers. In my body is the story of how I have dealt with the shock waves of intense disclosure from hundreds of students over the years. How do I reconcile that which propels me forward—teaching about intimacy and violence, about dis/connections of domination—with the need to feel less tightly wound and to be more embodied? The massage therapist was not the first to question me about what it has meant to hold that much tension. A friend once asked, “How do you hold all that horror?”

Understanding Violence as Relational Brokenness

Violence consists of acts and beliefs that rupture connection. An abuser spins webs of fear that make a victim feel less valuable and more isolated. When an abuser exerts power and control, s/he is exercising entitlement, and the victim experiences this as a sense of entrapment. Violence can be physical, emotional, financial, sexual, and spiritual and can have far-reaching effects. Violence works by disconnecting people from their core. It is not episodic, though it may appear this way. My work in intervention programs led me to see that there is “connective tissue” tying violent incidents together, making them cumulative and fibrously intertwined. In the body, connective tissue holds organs together, adding structure and support. In an abusive relationship, a violent incident is like an

organ that functions because of what occurs in the times and spaces in between. An abuser may apologize for the behavior; often, a victim wants the relationship to continue and the violence to stop and is understandably moved by both the act of the apology and the promise of change. If another violent incident occurs, it will possibly be supported by the fibers of these connected moments leading up to the incident either because the victim may feel the betrayal of a hollowed-out apology or because the patterns between incidents lead the abuser to escalate the exertion of even more power.

Exposing Layers of Institutional Brokenness

Brokenness Between Thinking and Feeling

Campbell (2002) described the binary between thinking and feeling within the academy. After a gut-wrenching interview with a survivor, Campbell stated:

I walked back to my building, found a deserted bathroom ... and vomited, expunging everything that I had taken in that day. This was only the second time I had gotten sick from my work, once after my first case as a rape victim advocate in a hospital ER, and now ... Both were initiations, rites of passage from which there was no return ... I could not bear the thought of running into any of my colleagues and being asked how my research was coming along, or anything else for that matter. I was quite sure that any detail of academic life—a reminder memo about a faculty meeting, a grant budget—would prompt me to snap. The contrast would be too great. (pp. 7-8)

This passage will undoubtedly resonate with faculty teaching about violence and trauma. It becomes hard to communicate with colleagues about the more profound emotional “rites of passage” going on in their classrooms; similarly, students describe that those close to them also have trouble relating to them given what they are learning. Gardner (1993) has articulated the uniqueness of teaching these classes:

Of all my courses, domestic violence is among the hardest to teach and it certainly is the most emotionally draining. This is due in part to the subject matter of the course, but another key factor is the high proportion of students in the class who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence during childhood or as adults. Typically, about one-third of those who enroll in the course “know” they are survivors and another third come to

this realization about midway through the semester. (p. 95)

Goetting's (Brush et al., 2002) experience of teaching about violence corroborated Gardner's account, adding insight into the gendered overlay when teaching about the connections between masculinity and violence:

Male students might assume an anti-male bias and that's of course true in gender classes. But when you talk about violence, you're escalating all of the emotions that are there in gender courses that talk about inequality and power that raises a lot of hostility and resistance in itself. But when you throw violence in the mix, it just ramps it all up

Contingency Hiring: The Broken Institutional Track

The practice of hiring contingent faculty is so embedded in higher education as to seem normal; in fact, according to current American Association of University Professors (AAUP) statistics, non-tenure track positions account for 76% of instructional staff appointments. Institutions of higher education must examine what this means for rigorous, emotionally complex, and destabilizing classes that deal with violence.

Contingency hiring exerts social control since the structure does not permit a non-tenure track faculty member to easily stop searching for "the one" institution to call his or her intellectual home. There is also the illusory promise that contingent positions are steppingstones to more lucrative ones. K. Cook openly identifies as a survivor of violence and has served as a professor and administrator; she commented on the impact of gendered hiring practices in institutions, the disproportionate number of women working on the contingency track, and the number of women who are trailing spouses:

This adds tentacles to the feeling of "contingent" to their professional lives and to their personal lives—their work is contingent on their domestic partners as well as on their employer. Many have had experiences with complicated trauma prior to being in this contingent situation, and being contingent is, by definition, not a secure or stable arrangement that helps them to maintain a level of security within their personal/professional lives. (personal communication, May 19, 2015)

Just as survivors of violence often describe abusers as Jekyll and Hyde types, there is a sort of institutional Jekyll and Hyde at work in the hiring of

contingent faculty. The message received by many is that they are qualified to do the work but not for the real pay and benefits of the profession. It behooves higher education stakeholders to ask what it means for a person mired in this level of alienation and career “stuckness” to teach about the stuckness of trauma, and it is crucial to question the boundaries of teacher-student relationships when little to no institutional backing is present.

Some research suggests a correlation between adjuncts teaching large introductory courses and student retention problems; this same research recommends assigning adjuncts to smaller advanced-topics courses and seminars (Glenn, 2008). The extent to which resources and a sense of community are offered to the adjunct might go a long way toward increasing retention. It would also be sound policy if search committees followed a careful vetting process in hiring faculty to teach trauma-related courses in light of the sensitivity and rawness of these topics.

Additionally, research supports that education is most effective when done in community (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Schniedewind, 1987). While the transient faculty member may succeed temporarily in generating a sense of community among students, s/he has no bedrock of support to meaningfully sustain this process. Adjuncts operate with the intimate knowledge of how those in power treat those who are disenfranchised. Tenure-track and/or tenured professors enjoy, consciously or unconsciously, the privilege of taking up more physical space, and a visiting member is asked to take up less space in such a way that his or her work and contributions can eventually be rendered invisible when the adjunct leaves. Because a contingent faculty member is isolated from the inner circles of the department and the college with which s/he is affiliated, most other faculty and staff have no idea what that person is doing, and the individual knows virtually nothing of how his or her work is or is not connected to the larger workings of the institution.

There exists the problem of institutionalized spatial and psychic isolation. Adjuncts lack the support and leverage to take initiative and negotiate space in ways that are expected of their tenure-track and tenured colleagues. They are encouraged to acquiesce about pay, workload, space, equipment, community-building activities, etc. Contingent faculty typically share public workspace; consequently, if a student discloses trauma, s/he often runs the risk of doing so in a non-confidential setting. Also, colleges and universities do not usually undergo

as rigorous a search process for contingent faculty; for example, at a state college at which I once worked, the chair hired me by phone to teach over 100 students and never met me in person during my time of employment. The structure of contingency hiring is “McDonaldized” (Ritzer, 1993): Adjuncts are reduced to replaceable objects such that they can then be treated in dehumanizing ways; this process then becomes virtually untraceable because of the migrant quality of the work. As Pratt (1997) stated, “Part-time faculty employment is one of those abusive situations that is just too convenient for institutions to give up ... ‘Part-time’ teaching is often a slow track to nowhere” (pp. 264, 267).

The Problems of Isolation, Entrapment, and Disappearing Work

While college is indeed a transient experience—during which students inhabit an institution for a short period of time and then leave—it arguably becomes more disquieting and disruptive when a topic as intimate and alienating as trauma is taught in the context of an adjunct’s fleeting employment arrangement. I believe that what compels students to stay in touch with faculty, sometimes even years after finishing a class, relates to what happens in the act of teaching and learning about trauma and recovery. Students may encounter a way to give voice to social inequalities that have otherwise gone unspoken and unnamed in their lives. For many, however, a semester is a short time for cutting to the core of their lives and watching as they sit in broken light, putting the pieces back together, at once consumed with the darkness of memory and simultaneously drawn to the glimmers of light offered by language and coming to voice.

Anita shared with me that she had been raped during the first week of our course. In a paper, she wrote:

Reading Wife Rape: Understanding the Response of Survivors and Service Providers by Raquel Kennedy Bergen (1996) hit close to home... [A]fter being sexually assaulted... you lose a sense of identity of who you are because someone has robbed you of that. It is like he bombed my whole world and I’m now in the reconstruction stages of getting my world back so I can be stronger than I was before.

Often, after the conclusion of a semester, students do not understand why some professors (i.e., contingent faculty) are suddenly unavailable and seemingly disappear. Understandably, because the social forces of contingent hiring are

obscured from students' (and parents') views, students often assume the adjunct was dismissed or was unhappy and left voluntarily. Anita added this note to her paper:

I cannot stress to you enough how much you helped me through my hardships ... [I]f it were not for you I would have not been able to get this far. I want to thank you for your support, and I was blessed to have you as a professor. You have made a lasting imprint and I will never be able to thank you enough for all the knowledge you have given me. I wish I could have had you for a longer period of time in my career here.

In the juggling act performed by a teacher, speech and silence become two of the most powerful and fragile pieces to negotiate. Some scholars claim that only when the voices of teachers, and not just students, are heard and examined will pedagogy become truly emancipatory (Orner, 1992). In this article, I reflect on how I have encouraged students to develop their own voice while not exempting myself from the same process. I see my struggle to voice my experience of teaching about trauma as having evolved in tandem with my students' struggles.

Student Disclosure of Traumatic Events

Parker Palmer (1998) asks, "How can we take heart in teaching once more so that we can, as good teachers always do, give heart to our students?" (p.17). Giving heart and finding heart are centerpieces of good teaching about violence; yet, the uniqueness of trauma both interferes with and makes imperative giving and finding heart. In this section, I discuss case studies of students whom I have taught and whose disclosure of traumatic events and/or processing of our study of violence seemed to have shifted their thinking and mine. Over the years, I have heard grisly accounts: A lesbian student's girlfriend killed herself after being violently raped by a man; a female student reported years of anal rape by her mother's boyfriend; a male student lost his aunt to a domestic homicide in which her boyfriend killed her after she sought a restraining order; and several other students watched the torture as their fathers played Russian roulette with their mothers—to name just a few. Some of these students conveyed trauma in hushed tones during office hours; others revealed survivorship to the entire class.

One semester, I asked the students to make analytical connections to readings, discussions, films, and speakers in their class journals, but these quickly became repositories of intense and overwhelming grief—for the students and for

me. (I was a visiting faculty member at a large research university, without a teaching assistant.) In her journal, Patrice reflected on her own childhood and adolescence:

My great-grandmother before she died used to tell my mother all the time that she was going to die just like her mother did—at the hands of an angry lover. My mother’s mother was stabbed to death in the back by her lover, my grandfather, when my mother was about four years old ... [M]y mother would be hesitant at a touch from her lover, not knowing what to expect. Sometimes, she would flinch or be startled as he would approach her or enter a room. He would say, “What are you jumping for; I am not gonna hit you. If I was gonna hit you, I would just hit you.” I remember my mother pregnant by this same boyfriend and he was drunk and had been smoking dope and he became very violent as she was trying to talk to him. He started pushing her, she was trying to get away from him, he pulled her back in the room, and began to beat on her, pushed her onto the floor, and began to kick her with his shoes on in the stomach. I was probably in fifth grade at the time but the images I have will never fade away.

Patrice reported that her mother’s boyfriend also repeatedly molested Patrice; her mother worked an evening shift and relied on Patrice to make dinner for the family. Patrice confessed that at the age of 16 she was so angry that she considered trying to kill her mother’s boyfriend by folding rat poison into a casserole. At some point in grading, I realized I was skimming the journals to try to get them corrected efficiently, yet when I came across phrases like “he raped me” or “I wanted to kill him,” I realized I needed to slow down. I wept for a long time reading Patrice’s journal. She was an adult learner making sense of her life through my course.

Hatch (2013) underscored the importance of teachers caring for students and themselves in the face of intense disclosure:

There is a risk for teachers who teach about sensitive topics, and who hear traumatic stories, to develop symptoms of secondary trauma or feel emotionally drained and “burned-out.” Additionally, there is reason for female instructors to be especially cautious of secondary trauma or emotional burn-out, as female professors are more likely to engage in

emotional labor both in and outside of the classroom ... Instructors also have to remember not to forget themselves in this process. There is potential for the difficult subject matter to impact instructors as well, and thus they need to work to take care of themselves in order to remain not only effective in the classroom, but also be physically and psychologically healthy. (p. 9)

A. Hattery affirmed this:

Every time I teach about violence and trauma ... people disclose experiences ... and I would caution anyone who has limited experience working and teaching with these issues that they need to be prepared for disclosures ... they need to be sure they are in the proper place themselves to accept these disclosures and they need to be sure that they are up to date on the resources available so that they can refer students to appropriate offices. (personal communication, May 21, 2015)

During a conference panel that I organized some years back on teaching about gendered violence, an audience member appropriately pointed out, “I’d recommend to anyone who is committed enough to teaching a course on family violence to put as much time into thinking, ‘What am I going to do if I have a student in crisis? And who in my community is most skilled in understanding the dynamics of abuse and equipped to help these students?’ as they do into choosing readings and assignments.”

Contingent faculty must be ever more mindful about disclosure and self-care; otherwise, they run the risk of rendering their needs even more invisible in a system that has already ignored the myriad issues and challenges they face. A department chairperson shared with me that for reasons of self-care she never teaches domestic violence classes more than once every other year; however, contingent laborers might teach these classes with greater frequency so as to generate more income and to be asked back to teach. A. Hattery points out another central dilemma for contingent faculty and their students in the face of disclosure:

The intersection of the emotion work of teaching about these kinds of issues and the tenuousness and exploitation of contingent faculty is a concern. Additionally, I wonder to what degree contingent faculty are well-connected to the campus resources that students who have had

experiences with sexual or intimate partner violence may need. At least in my experience, contingent faculty are so over worked that they may not be well connected at the university which puts them at a disadvantage in teaching courses where they are likely to get disclosures. Not that they shouldn't but they should be advised to be prepared. (personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Those only loosely connected to the institution may in fact be the first ones facing students in crisis who require institutional resources. I encounter many students who have never sought therapy and have instead approached the classroom as a site of intervention. I explain that the classroom is not a place of therapy but that the classroom experience can be therapeutic. One memorable case that highlights this dilemma involved a student named Monica whom I taught at a prestigious Ivy League school; she engaged in self-injury and had an aggressive presentation in which she wore dog collars, studded bustiers, clothing with prints of skeletons, and blurted out comments in class to shock people. Some students told me privately that her appearance and brash comments scared and intimidated them; they were unable to perceive her behavior as acts of trauma survival, and of course, I could not reveal this. Rather, I had to navigate class discussions in a way that honored all of the students' lived experiences.

Monica proposed projects that were inappropriate given the assignment guidelines. For her final project, for instance, she wanted to research sexual asphyxia by talking with a man involved in it; I would not permit this and asked her to propose another project. Next, she wanted to hire and interview a prostitute from Craig's List. Given the physical and emotional safety concerns associated with these ideas, I suggested that she interview the author of one of our assigned books, Sue William Silverman, who wrote a memoir about incest, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*. Students like Monica certainly enroll in classes in other departments, yet it is unlikely they reach this level of disclosure in other classes, reinforcing the complexity of such disclosure when communicated with a visiting faculty member through the study of violence. However, since trauma survival presents in many ways and not just in trauma-related classes (e.g., in the form of excessive absences, missed and late work, intense perfectionism, eating struggles, body image issues, cutting, etc.), it would be beneficial for institutions to offer training and support to faculty and staff in the areas of trauma and recovery so they are able to more effectively respond to

students in crisis and to support each other as colleagues. While I have regularly contacted school officials about students of concern, it is more complicated as a contingent faculty member to effectively advocate for students to receive resources because the term of employment is transient, the collegial relationships with those offices that could lend support are simply not strong or consistent enough, and the employee does not wish to be misunderstood by colleagues—or assume other professional risks-- in the process.

In discussing inevitable student disclosure and the necessity for faculty to provide effective referrals for support, A. Hattery went on to say:

The attention on rape on college campuses has brought awareness to many people who otherwise knew little about the issue ... [A]n unintended consequence is that many really well intentioned people who know NOTHING about rape or other forms of interpersonal violence want to do something to help and they want to incorporate units in their classes ... [A] little information can do a lot of damage. (personal communication, May 21, 2015)

The fact that disclosure takes place in the context of being enrolled in a class leads to another complex issue currently under scrutiny: the contested legislation requiring faculty to be mandatory reporters under the Clery Act. As full-time veteran faculty struggle with the implications of this, the issue may be further complicated for contingent faculty educating about violence, resulting in an even more tangled web of bureaucratization. A. Hattery speaks in opposition to mandatory reporting:

Teaching courses on violence opens up space that is really important for people to disclose their own experiences with violence. I've been advocating hard that this not become law because it will shut down disclosures in one of the most important and safe spaces they can occur. No disrespect to violence prevention programs on campus, but a professor has contact with the student for several hours a week for an entire semester.... [T]he professor has the opportunity to not only have regular contact with the student, which often isn't possible in prevention programs, and it also allows the student to have an academic context in which to process their experience. (personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Out of respect for students and a desire to be honest with them—and long before “trigger warnings” (a statement given to alert students to material that may be distressing to read or view) emerged as a subject of popular debate—I included comments on the syllabus and in class about the volatile nature of the material. In a day and age when there is a spotlight on gendered violence on campuses, there is a simultaneous barrage of material about trigger warnings. The demand for, and discussion of, these warnings seems to be coming less from a place of deep inquiry into challenging topics than from a reinforcement of bureaucratic mechanisms obfuscating, sanitizing, and silencing what, I argue, must be learned and discussed in order to be eradicated. Hanlon (2015) elaborated on the unexamined, blanket use of trigger warnings in the context of contingency labor:

I’m inclined to see the trigger warnings controversy as a more complicated question of university policy and academic labor, as opposed to simply the protection of students’ tender sensibilities. Providing trigger warnings can be sound pedagogy that reflects attentiveness to how students are responding to class material; but trigger warnings can’t be policy...[T]here can be no reliable and systematic way to detect all triggers without throwing virtually everything out the window; they can’t be policy because a significant percentage of U.S. professors lack the institutional support required to make and follow through on such controversial pedagogical choices without putting their jobs on the line.

Teaching (in) Fragments: Emotional Labor Inside and Outside the Classroom

Faculty members are left with the messy and daunting task of what is referred to as managing emotions in the classroom. The more I teach, however, the less convinced I am that faculty can perform such emotional management; furthermore, the notion that faculty might be able to fully plan for emotional responses runs counter to the dynamic, emergent quality of a class focusing on trauma. I am more inclined to see the process as one of emotional coaching and facilitation. One anonymous faculty member claimed (and I concur), “I’ve observed a great deal of silencing in talking about abuse because of the fear of triggering students. Part of the purpose of teaching about this is to break the silence. I don’t think it’s appropriate to teach about abuse and be unemotional.”

In teaching about rape, I require students to read Dworkin’s 1993 piece, “I

Want a Twenty-Four Hour Truce During Which There is No Rape,” in which she makes a plea to men to be allies. I have invited Jennifer, a rape survivor, to the class. She was raped by someone she had considered a friend. When Jennifer was my student, I had a guest speaker, Barbara, a formerly battered woman, visit class. I remember that Jennifer, with tears streaming down her face, asked Barbara, “How do you ever get over it?” and Barbara walked up to Jennifer, took her hand, kissed it, and said, “Eventually you do.” Jennifer has claimed that speaking at my classes is the only place where she has opened up about what happened to her. Moments like these, where a former student was able to forge connections with other students through the prism of trauma work, enhanced the connectivity that otherwise would have been lost when I was a visiting faculty member.

Moreover, technology shapes the communications faculty have with students outside of class. I receive numerous messages that reveal the unique dynamics of a course highlighting violence. After Jennifer came to speak and after reading Dworkin’s article, my student Charlie sent me the following e-mail message:

At first I was angry, because I felt Dworkin was accusing ME of rape, accusing ME for all the wrong that other men do. But I calmed down and realized that she isn't accusing me of rape, she's accusing men of benefiting from a society that rapes. Even though I am not sexist, I don't rape, beat or verbally put down women, I am still a man, and therefore benefit from our society in which this kind of behavior is embedded. Even more so, it is allowed, and perhaps, supported. So, because I have not done anything about this (because I never stopped to even notice it; probably because I am a man and ... not burdened with these pressures and oppressions) I am indirectly being sexist, I suppose. WOW. I mean this is so eye opening. I just never realized this whole aspect of our society; and it's so embedded that it's perhaps, even the basis of our society...

Another student, Katie, disclosed toward the end of that semester that she was raped, which accounted for her absences. Concerned about Katie after our meeting, I sent her an e-mail message, to which she responded:

I'm incredibly stressed and on the verge of an emotional breakdown ... I'll try my hardest to get the paper in to you by tomorrow ... I'm seeing the counselor and I also have to fit in time this week to get tested for STDs,

HIV, and pregnancy. He sent me a message ... “Hey, I was going through deleting friends I've never talked with this year, and I realized you have a Facebook account ... How are you doing? Listen, I gotta apologize for Thursday night. That was dumb of me. You holding up alright?” I didn't respond to him, I didn't really know what to say or think. He was sober, and knew what he was doing, and knew that is was wrong.

Juggling the needs of each of these types of students coming to grips with outrage around violence—bystanders like Charlie and those intimately consumed by violence like Katie—illuminates how faculty must grapple with all aspects of the emotional life of the classroom. Some scholars point out the need for different expectations of students in courses like these, the most recurrent example being not requiring attendance as in other courses (Gardner, 1993) or making exams optional (Brush et. al., 2002). The rationale for this is that survivors might appreciate the chance to feel a semblance of control over certain aspects of the course as they deal with traumatic events.

For a variety of reasons, I do not endorse such opt-out strategies. I consistently have a large number of students who express gratitude for how I compassionately took them to their edge while not letting them fall off. The more regularly students attend class, the less isolated they are and the more they can integrate intellectual and emotional pieces, and missing class means having fewer tools to grapple with the difficult and raw materials that continually follow. Also, the process of grading means staying attuned to issues of what is fair and equal treatment for all students; it is hard to weigh and determine whose excuses are more meritorious since I also have students who need to be absent due to jobs that ensure they can enroll in school and provide caregiving for family members. Furthermore, erratic attendance is not helpful for creating a trustworthy learning community; if a student is absent that much, it exacerbates the obligation the instructor might feel to help him/her catch up because, according to one anonymous faculty member, “The needs of students in my violence classes always feel more urgent. At the big university where I work, this smaller class on violence is the students’ only experience with a professor who knows them personally and there is a heightened expectation for us to be there for them.” And lastly, if a student feels s/he must miss that much, it is probably a signal that s/he lacks the emotional readiness to enroll in the class.

It would be easy to conclude that teaching about trauma may just be too

much trouble, that if done at all, it could be more effectively accomplished by tenured and tenure-track faculty who are woven into the fabric of the institution. This analysis may also lead one to believe that such teaching requires special clinical training. I believe that neither is true, though I believe that possessing clinical knowledge is a helpful augmentation but not a necessary prerequisite. The most important clinically minded prerequisites in teaching about trauma include listening empathically, making appropriate referrals, being open, responsive, non-judgmental, and present, and possessing knowledge of crisis intervention and safety planning.

Toward Pedagogies of Love

The intensity of trauma, coupled with administrative overreliance on contingent faculty, sends shock waves through the academy that demand inspection and innovation. There are sound, ethical tactics and strategies that faculty who teach about trauma can undertake. For example, when constructing my syllabus, I have included a page that features resources devoted to stopping violence in intimate relationships (Gardner, 1993; Hatch, 2013; Lee, 1989). I have spent time discussing discussion (Cannon, 1990; Hollander, 2002) and establishing rules with the group so that students can extend conversations outside the classroom without compromising confidentiality. As discussed earlier, like many others, I have employed journals. Hollander (2000) created a more focused approach using what she calls “fear journals” to encourage students to analyze gendered violence.

I have invited guest speakers to share personal and professional experiences—for example, survivors, men who work in the movement to end violence, authors of class texts (for author-meet-students/critics sessions), and an activist couple whose daughter was murdered by their son-in-law. Creating a community-connected and activist-inspired classroom makes conditions ripe for a final project that I have assigned in which students interview an activist in the community (e.g., an organizer, poet, musician, dancer, clergy person, etc.) doing work to eradicate violence. Other unconventional yet successful approaches have arisen extemporaneously, at moments when I have tried to find antidotes to the disembodiment and dislocation of teaching about trauma. In a violence seminar, I led the class in yoga and meditation for the first hour of a long evening class. Upon completing this more embodied activity, I had the students do in-class writing connecting this experience to learning about trauma.

Faculty must employ creative assignments that flow with the emotional and intellectual rhythms of the course and empower students to consider action, resistance, and prevention. For example, Yllö (1989) created a symposium in which students could present cumulative projects, facilitate conversations with students not enrolled in the course, show films, have a spirited conversation with campus police, etc.; the symposium was designed to be a capstone experience for an emotionally difficult and draining class and a way to counter heavy forces of despair and hopelessness. Since 1996, I have built on and extended this mini-conference idea in my courses. Students in these classes plan activities such as poetry slams, art shows, candlelight vigils, rallies, fundraisers, donations for local shelters, lectures, the (Clothesline Project (an artistic installation that began in 1990, giving women a place to bear witness to the violence they have experienced by expressing their emotions on t-shirts that are displayed on a clothesline) on campus, and self-defense classes. “Fear into anger, anger into action” has been a central tenet of the battered women’s movement since its inception, and a symposium captures that spirit in an effort to spark people’s thinking about personal and social change. Other scholars agree that planning these events is an indispensable tool for creating awareness about violence and for generating thinking about strategies for prevention, accountability, and healing among the campus community and beyond (Gardner, 1993; Hollander, 2002; Yllö, 1989). However, after years as an adjunct faculty member—poorly compensated, overloaded with courses and students, and under-resourced by the campus—I eliminated this component from my courses because of the limitations of the contingent experience.

While potentially integrative and holistic in its intent, teaching about trauma from the “broken track” of a contingent faculty member remains partial and fragmented in its effects. Those who possess a survivor-centered epistemology (Gilfus, 1999) embody a way of knowing and inhabiting the world that can make us more attuned to structural inequalities and hypocrisies and the “irrationality of rationality” (Runciman, 1978). Teaching and learning about trauma can be a pathway toward healing and the formation of “beloved community” (hooks, 1995). However, the employment arrangement of contingent faculty, as currently configured, make wholeness and connectivity elusive and precarious. This article is an invitation to consider two painfully intertwined stories— that of teaching about the grief and brokenness of trauma coupled with the grief and brokenness of institutional inequalities when teaching trauma. How

higher education institutions negotiate these tender pieces will reveal a great deal about how those systems think about and respond to inequality and abuse on all levels.

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