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Reflections on Accidental Testimonies and Spectacular Witnesses

Cover Page Footnote

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Reflections on Accidental Testimonies and Spectacular Witnesses

Lavinia Hirsu

Imagine a writing class where most students have never encountered a refugee. During a discussion on human rights, one of the students starts talking about her traumatizing refugee-camp experience. Not having anticipated or called for this testimony, the teacher and the student's peers fixate their eyes on the speaker. Dead silence falls over the classroom, eyes stare at the student, the student is now looking down. How can we break this silence? How can we take our eyes away from the student? How will we remember this classroom event? Are we going to recall the story or the face of the person who spoke? Are we going to imagine the scene of her trauma or are we stuck in the visual space of the classroom?¹⁰

These are questions that we have to answer if we want to be prepared to address *accidental testimonies* in the classroom. Accidental testimonies, as the one in the scenario above, are testimonies that tear apart the dynamics of a class and stick to our memories as emblematic tableaux that beg to be remembered for their rhetorical force and visual impact on the audience. These events transform the classroom into a space of witnessing. The speaker, who has lived trauma firsthand, discloses her experiences in front of an audience, her peers, who unexpectedly become second-hand witnesses of that traumatic account.

I call these types of testimonies *accidental* not to downplay the value of the accounts themselves but to highlight their volatile nature and disruptive effect on the audience. In courses where traumatic testimonies constitute the core subject of analysis (e.g., courses where students analyze photographs of the Holocaust or recorded interviews with trauma survivors), participants are aware that a certain degree of response-ability is expected from them. Accidental testimonies, however, are unpredictable and oftentimes leave us speechless. They challenge us to respond in the moment although we may feel unprepared to do so.

Scholars in trauma studies, such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer have suggested that what brings us to silence is the spectacular (and spectral) dimension of trauma itself. Because trauma demands that we witness the unimaginable, we find ourselves in the impossibility of finding the right thing to say. In the case of accidental testimonies, we also feel unprepared to respond because of the spectacular presence of the testifier, because of her immediate presence in our field of vision. Turning to the visual dimension of witnessing and to notions of iconicity, I propose that *seeing* a student-peer suddenly turn into a testifier (i.e., an iconic figure of a traumatic account) adds an important dimension to the process of witnessing. The immediate visual impact of the one who testifies conditions how teachers and students can bear witness to traumatic accounts. If we turn to the opening vignette, the peer-refugee telling about her story may easily become the exemplary figure of the refugee experience. The sudden transformation of the student into a testifier turns her into a memorable figure, an unforgettable face that may take precedence over the account itself.

¹⁰ Editors' note: After reading this essay, please read "History 101" in "Connecting," this issue.

Susan Sontag confirms that the immediacy and impact of the other's image are more pressing on the memory than the shared narrative. In "Looking at War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death," Sontag argues that the ways in which we remember and memorialize narratives of trauma nowadays has become a primarily visual experience: "To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture" (94). We have a better visual memory than a narrative one; we pay more attention to images of trauma rather than their socio-historical contexts. Consequently, when we witness an accidental testimony, we may be more invested in the process of looking at the person who testifies rather than in listening to the depths of her narrative.

While Sontag finds this investment in the visual problematic because images can detract us from fully attending to trauma, scholars such as Wendy Hesford and David Bathrick agree that the visual can be a productive pedagogical site. Bathrick notes that we cannot stop our students from staring, nor can we impose on them a form of rhetorical criticism that would simply deny what their eyes have seen (294). A more beneficial approach would be to develop strategies that help students negotiate others' traumatic accounts by acknowledging and working with, not against, the images they see. In the case of accidental testimonies, if we want our students to be able to break their silence, we need to identify strategies that would allow them to pay attention to how they look at the peers who share their extraordinary stories. As teachers, we cannot avoid the spectacle of a testimony, we cannot dismantle the image of a testifier; however, we can help our students re-adjust their lenses and re-view the relationships with their peers in new and complex ways.

In this article, I start by presenting the main challenges that accidental testimonies pose for the classroom. To address these challenges, I argue, we need to develop pedagogical strategies that would help our students *see* the possibilities and constraints of the witnessing process. With this goal in mind, in the second part of the article, I present three strategies—*freeze-frames*, *refiguration*, and *the testimony of absence*—which give teachers and students new ways of engaging with accidental testimonies. I illustrate each strategy with an example from my own teaching experience. Finally, I hope that my reflections will serve as an invitation for other teachers and scholars to contribute their own strategies on how to deal with these complicated classroom events.

Accidental Testimonies—Challenges and Impasses

In this section, I argue that students who are suddenly exposed to peers' accounts of trauma have to confront a crisis of language, a paralyzing silence, the temptation of voyeurism, and the spectacular presence of the testifier.

A crisis of language

Scholars who examine the burden of witnessing generally point to the impossibility of adequately responding to trauma because this phenomenon affects an audience at multiple levels. Confronted with the spectral dimension of traumatic events, second-hand witnesses face a crisis of language, not knowing what to say or how to negotiate what they

hear or read (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer vii-x; Doxtader 278). The inability to respond to a traumatic moment can turn into different forms of ir-response-ability. Incapable of an appropriate answer, some witnesses may freeze in what Wendy Hesford has called “a crisis of reference” and “a crisis of witnessing” (“Documenting Violations” 95). Others may turn their lack of language into “a crisis in cynicism” (Alsup 78). Janet Alsup remarks that in her classroom students exposed to traumatic accounts went through “a type of secondary trauma, a sort of crisis resulting from student experience with the class and its subject” (78). Students’ apparently “cynical” attitudes toward the memory of pain and oppression were in fact the result of a struggle with meaning making.

Silence

A crisis of language is oftentimes accompanied by profound silence. A traumatic narrative awes, overwhelms, and paralyzes. Most of the time, it feels wrong to respond to a person who has just confessed pain. Many of us have probably experienced the profound silence following an accidental testimony. In fact, in the anticipation of such a response, some teachers assign moments of silence as a way to channel students’ first reactions and to give them time and space for introspection (Cooks).

To listen to the speaker is above all, as Marguerite Helmers argues, a moral call: “we must listen to the language and the silences of trauma, experience, and the crises of the wound” (169). Silence buys time for meditation, critical thinking, and exposure to unimaginable experiences. In Barbara Schapiro’s words, “The silence forces us to acknowledge all the separate, inner, private thought processes occurring within both students and teacher” (430). Silence is not a passive process because it has its own internal language and represents a critical form of engagement (Ratcliffe 84-93, Glenn 156). For this reason, silence must be granted its classroom space because it is a vital, productive moment when students are able to discover the distance between them and the testifier.

If we are to turn accidental testimonies into teachable moments, then we should wonder to what extent silence is a satisfying response. Can we rest assured that our students’ silence is an indicator of a reflexive process? Taking into account the complex and heavy burden of trauma, a lack of language could be in fact a sign of confusion on the part of some students who may not know how to negotiate moments of disclosure. A quiet classroom could obscure misunderstandings that students feel uncertain about voicing. We may never know whether our students are able to adopt witness-positions if we do not open up opportunities to make the process of witnessing explicit.

Even if we do not intervene in how students experience traumatic testimonies, silence can prove to be a temporary and insufficient response. In Shoshana Felman’s course on the stories of Holocaust survivors, her students left the classroom in silence but continued to be haunted by their inability to verbalize an adequate response. They called the teacher at home, contacted her outside the classroom, and pursued her under an imperative to talk about what they had experienced. Felman recognized that she had to go back to the classroom and break the silence. She realized that modeling a response through language would help her students enact the kind of witness-position that was called on by the testimonies presented.

The two responses to trauma that I have mentioned above, the crisis in language and silence, represent modes of engagement with the traumatic account itself. Because trauma, by its nature, resists immediate translation into language, students have difficulties making sense of what they hear through words. However, it is important to note that a testimony doesn't only call on the listeners to understand what they hear. Oftentimes, what makes witnessing even more difficult is the negotiation process between what we *see* and what we *hear*. Because we are confronted with the spectacular presence of a first-hand witness who has seen and lived unimaginable things, we are tempted to focus our attention on that face.

Voyeurism

In courses where trauma is presented through visual means (e.g., documentaries or photographs), scenes of pain and horror always risk to trigger some form of voyeuristic response. Transfixed, the second-hand witness dwells in what she sees. Wendy Hesford ("Documenting Violations"), Wendy Wolters, Diana George and Diane Shoos have already warned us against the deadening effects of voyeurism, arguing that such a response to trauma is a reductive way of giving meaning to what cannot be fully explained. Faced with a spectacle,

students are trapped in the immediate moment without the resources necessary to disentangle themselves from that moment and sift out the invisible forces at work. The visible constitutes the only thing with value because the memory of what is *not* present, the memory that would give weight and importance to what is absent, has disappeared. (Fleckenstein 56)

Voyeurism allows the viewer to feel empowered in her position of observer, to maintain control by taking pleasure in the process of seeing (George and Shoos 590). At the same time, voyeurism grants the viewer only a compensatory power because trauma is a profoundly disarming experience. A voyeur finds pleasure in the act of looking just as a way to substitute for her struggle with meaning making.

To say that voyeurism is simply a bad way of looking, though, misses the more complex nature of how we engage with what we cannot fully comprehend. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's work with images and post-memory, David Bathrick notes that the problem with voyeurism doesn't rest with the fact that we look passively at trauma. At the core of voyeurism, we encounter a problem of representation. Our students are too often tempted to believe that images of terror have a truth-value and that visual depictions capture the true essence of what others experienced. Because of this propensity, Bathrick encourages teachers to work with students *through* iconic images of trauma. He recognizes that we cannot completely demystify traumatic images of others because visual representations impact us against all our critical intentions. Instead of preventing students from staring, "as teachers in the classroom, we must contend with these images as part of the pedagogical process of disfiguring and imagining" (296). In other words, teachers may not be able to de-fetishize students' viewing practices, but they can try to help position these iconic images in a larger "collective pictorial archive" (294). We can

help students situate their visceral responses at the confluence between the historical context of these images and students' own visual habits (Fleckenstein 98).

Spectacular testifiers

Undoubtedly, in the case of accidental testimonies the danger of voyeurism remains. When a student interrupts a class discussion to confess a painful memory, we do not have any pictures of her trauma, we cannot access any photographs of the things she has seen, and we cannot imagine what it means to move from the scene of lived experience to the classroom. In lieu of a photograph or a film, we may be tempted to stare at the performance of the other; we may be taking her face as the iconic representation of the shared traumatic account. For lack of a better visual frame, listeners may be tempted to dwell in the image of the other as the primary indicator of trauma. This kind of visual engagement should be our starting point in discussing the possibilities of bearing witness.

In *Spectacular Rhetorics*, Wendy Hesford reminds us that the spectacle needs to be understood at two different levels: the spectacle as entertainment and the spectacle as a visual field that the eye cannot simply avoid, forget, or criticize without having been under its transfixing power (8). The first definition of the term, the spectacle-as-entertainment, invites the practice of voyeurism whereby one looks passively, in awe or amusement.

However, voyeurism closes down too easily our discussions about the impact of the visual dimension of witnessing. For this reason, I find Hesford's second definition of the spectacle-as-an-unavoidable-field-of-vision more productive. Besides voyeurism, I want to suggest that an accidental testimony can also engender processes of visual reverence and re-discovery that complicate the process of witnessing. Faced with a *spectacular* testimony, we tend to immerse and dwell in the presence of the speaker not in a passive mode, but actively *seeing* the person in front of us with different eyes. When students listen to trauma, they have to make a shift from seeing their peer as a student to looking at that very same face as a trauma-sufferer. The shift, as I will demonstrate in the following sections through examples from my own experience, doesn't happen immediately or without difficulty.

The attitude of reverence for the speaker implies a paradox: the more a testifier speaks, the more pious the listeners become; at the same time, the more a testifier speaks, the less recognizable she becomes. When we find out unforeseen aspects about our peers, we tend to re-adjust our attitudes, and as we listen to their stories, we look with pleasure or interest to better understand the person in front of us. In other words, when we are fascinated by the presence of a speaker, it is not because we are consuming the other, in bell hooks' terms, but because we make an effort to re-imagine that person in light of the narrative shared. We realize that the individual we thought we knew can no longer fit the portrait that we imagined, and this realization demands that we re-focus our lenses and revise our attitudes toward that person. For this reason, visual reverence is different from voyeurism because it is a productive process of discovery, rather than passive indulgence in the other's presence.

Ultimately, what I want to suggest is that the spectularity of a testifier can add to the spectularity of the testimony. Being in the presence of a witness can render the experience of trauma more real and authentic. As Sue Vice and Gwyneth Bodger show, the presence of a trauma-survivor in the classroom does not "universalize" students'

perceptions of trauma (20). To the contrary, looking the speaker in the eyes and seeing trauma on her face helps students better grasp the individual dimensions of suffering. Moreover, the authors suggest, we couldn't fully understand how students take in accounts of trauma without acknowledging the visual impact of the trauma-survivor. Witnessing may, indeed, leave us speechless, but it never leaves us sightless. While second-hand witnesses may never have access to the scene of trauma, they do have to confront, make sense, and remember the testifier's presence in their visual field. To meet this imperative, in the rest of this article I propose pedagogical strategies that could help teachers and students alike pursue the following goals: to keep under scrutiny our immediate visual and verbal responses, to understand the limitations of what we can *see* in the process of witnessing, and to explore ways of channeling our visual attention reflectively and critically.

The Need for Pedagogy

Before I discuss the possible strategies to which we can turn in the case of accidental testimonies, allow me to explain why I find such an endeavor necessary in the first place. According to lore, classroom disruptions can serve pedagogical aims. But an accidental testimony oftentimes puts us in situations where we are not prepared to turn confession into a teachable moment, either because teachers aren't prepared to respond or, more important, because we want to protect the integrity of the person who testifies. But if we are to hold true to the idea that the classroom is an interventionist space, and an accidental testimony is, by definition, an intervention in our learning process, then we should be able to turn testimony from a classroom accident into a teaching subject by helping students understand the possibilities for formulating ethical responses.

Some may argue that, from the beginning, my impetus to identify and practice potential ethical responses to traumatic experiences is misguided. My drive to articulate a fuller pedagogy of bearing witness may be regarded as part of a pedagogy of control, of supervising the multiple possibilities of response and non-response. Such pedagogy may imply that teachers need to tame the accidental nature of certain classroom events. As we know from practice, though, the beauty of teaching relies on a certain degree of unpredictability. The dynamic nature of learning depends on unruly moments, which make the classroom not only the teachers' domain, but the students' territory as well (Skorczewski 12). As Lee Shulman states, interruptions in the classroom are not negative indicators of teaching and learning; on the contrary, "active performance must be balanced with strategic and intentional cessation of performance" (57). From this perspective, accidental testimonies could be considered an integral component of the natural dynamics among individuals and should be left as such, untroubled by our pedagogical agendas.

However, bearing witness is a process that implicitly engages and calls for a response—be it a question, a comment, or a moment of silence. Once an accidental testimony happens in the classroom, we cannot afford to ignore it and move along. In their silence, our students have already formulated their own responses. I do not believe that we can or should control the classroom so strictly, but our mission as educators is to help students see the affordances and limits of their reactions. For this reason, we have the obligation to address questions such as: Will our students leave the classroom with a rich understanding

of what they have witnessed? Will they freeze in that moment of spectacular tension, provoked by the unexpected transformation of their peer into trauma-sufferer? Is students' silence a reflective process or a moment of paralysis? My goal in this article is to suggest that teachers need to bring accidental testimonies under discussion in order to raise students' awareness about the multiple dimensions and consequences of their responses. If we trouble students' silence, it is not because we want to impose *appropriate* answers, but because we want students to think about the implications of their attitudes and responses.

Freeze-frames

In 2005 I was teaching an introductory composition course at a large Midwestern university. Toward the end of the semester, I assigned my students a project that asked them to research and analyze a series of artifacts of their choice that built on similar persuasive strategies on the same topic. To write the final project, students had to present orally their preliminary findings in order to discover what could have been possible counterarguments to their analyses. Based on their peers' feedback, in the final essays the students had to incorporate and account for the counterarguments brought up during class discussions.

In the context of that final unit, I vividly recall Tim's presentation, neither for the strength of his argument, nor for the eloquence of his words, but for the scene that he created in the classroom when he delivered his work. His focus was on war rhetoric, more specifically on the ways in which the army recruits young people to join their forces. When Tim began researching the topic, I did not know that he actually had direct experience with the army, and that he had been deployed for a couple of months in the Iraq war. His presentation sounded very promising and challenging, yet one of his classmates was unconvinced that the material was given proper analysis. I cannot remember the specific issue that the peer brought up, but I can clearly picture Tim's angry face with eyes wide open, punctuating every word: "That's a stupid comment. You don't know what it means to be in the war. I've been in the war and I know what it's like." Dead silence fell over the classroom, Tim standing tall, next to the projector. I was uncertain about my next move at the back of the class in a corner.

For a few good seconds I was paralyzed, looking at the presenter—a tense body of memories untold, a witness dismayed at his audience. I was waiting for him to say more, to fill in the gaps between him and the rest of the class, to tell us how the war hurt. The other classmates were also absorbing his presence. At the same time, I was thinking of the student who had asked the question and whose comment had just been catalogued as "stupid." Judging by his surprised face, I could guess that Tim's peer had no intention to hurt or show ignorance of Tim's experience. All I could do in that moment was to break the silence by making the following remark: "This is not an appropriate way to have an academic argument. I would like to talk about this with you two after class. Now . . . does anyone else have any other thoughts or comments regarding this project?"

According to the definition that I have provided at the beginning of this article, accidental testimonies are disruptions—*freeze-frames*—that reorient students' attention toward the speaker and stop the classroom flow. The first-hand witness, whose narrative captures a lived experience, assumes the position of a subject of trauma and oftentimes

renounces her subjectivity as classroom peer. To use Kenneth Burke's pentad, the first-hand witness situates herself *in the act* (i.e., the testimony) rather than *the scene* of witnessing (i.e., the classroom). This shift was clearly visible in Tim's physical transformations (tensed body, angry face, wide-open eyes), and in his aggressive tone. In that moment, Tim refused to be a student presenting some academic findings and revealed his status as war veteran.

As a consequence of Tim's transformation, the rest of the class was challenged to accept this freeze-frame or deny it, to embrace silence or to move away from it. My students seemed caught between two positions of response—as peers and as second-hand witnesses. Since we could not dwell in silence forever, nor could I ask Tim to say what he did not want or could not say, I merely re-established the classroom frame by asking students to refocus their attention on the academic task, i.e., to ask questions related *only* to Tim's project and not to his testimony.

Then and now, I have felt that my response was insufficient because what I invited my students to do was to deny Tim's intervention, to forget what their eyes had seen, and to ignore the freeze-frame. Instead, a more adequate strategy would have been to actually spend critical time within the framework of Tim's testimony. As Dawn Skorczewski notes, "The freeze frame refers to a process through which we [should] examine student-teacher interactions in a classroom by stopping the action to talk about what is happening at any given moment" (40). In other words, Skorczewski asks us to take advantage of these interruptions and turn them into moments of learning through sharing and reflecting on the classroom events.

However, maintaining a freeze-frame does not mean reflecting only on what is happening in the classroom. This would take us back to the hope that language is able to rescue us from our inability to fully comprehend traumatic narratives (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 259). Instead, we should use freeze-frames as an opportunity to discuss the extent to which we can actually *see* beyond the face of the other, into the testimony itself. The process of reflection should, in fact, speak about our blind spots, about what may prevent us from fully taking in the account shared. Reflection is less about the looking back at what has happened in the classroom, and more about the acknowledgement of our positionality and the limits of our own visual fields. In other words, to dwell in the freeze-frames means to recognize what we see, what we hear, and how we can respond in light of our visual constraints as second-hand witnesses.

In practical terms, when Tim brought the class to silence with his remarks, I should have explained to my students what my silence meant. I could have re-framed the conflict between Tim and his peer in terms of a problem of witnessing. Tim's dissatisfaction with his peer's question reflected an indirect allegation that his peer knew nothing of the war and was not worthy of his testimony. In his frustration Tim was right; we knew nothing of the war because that was our condition as second-hand witnesses. We hadn't seen what Tim had seen; the only thing we could do was to look at him and try to situate his body in the context of war. I should have confessed my own struggle with understanding Tim's position in the classroom not as a way to pressure him more into the spotlight, but as a way to make the scene of witnessing more apparent.

Dwelling in the freeze-frame could have helped my students realize what it means to be a second-hand witness. We should have discussed together, in that moment, the extent to which a second-hand witness can actually *see* into war trauma. This would have helped

both Tim and his peers recognize that his intervention was not out of place, uncontrolled, or impolite, but the manifestation of a negotiation process between two spaces: the war and the classroom. A critical dialogue would have helped Tim be less dismissive of his peers. Finally, Tim could have also understood that his comment was not simple peer feedback, but an important shifting moment in our entire class dynamics.

Refiguration

In Fall 2008, I was teaching an introductory course for multilingual writers. During one of the in-class discussions, I was trying to involve students who were less vocal in the conversation, so I decided to call on Mary to reply to a comment made by one of her male peers. Mary was a first-year student from Saudi Arabia, who would always put a serene smile on her face whenever I looked at her for cues of understanding or approval during lecture segments of our course. This time, however, Mary stood still and was trying to avoid my eyes saying humbly: “I am sorry,” she paused, “I cannot say because in my culture women don’t talk to men like that.” She paused again as her peers’ eyes turned to her. I looked at her as if asking for more. “Maybe I can answer later,” she added with a softer tone and another long pause.

Mary’s testimony was not an *account of trauma* in itself, but a *trauma in the making*. My request for a response was a cultural taboo for her, and Mary had to risk taking a position that had more disadvantages than benefits. One option was to acknowledge her cultural taboo—in this case, the cultural stigma against women speaking in certain ways to men in public. This decision, however, would have meant risking her role as a student in the American classroom because it would have made her stand out as a rule-breaker of appropriate classroom behavior. The commentary, “Maybe I can answer later,” shows that Mary was not ready to risk her student-position since she was willing to compensate “later” for her silence. Her second option was to respond to the assigned conversation partner and to disregard her cultural rule—which she chose not to do. Knowing Mary’s shyness and judging by her demeanor and hesitations, I noticed that she was caught in a difficult struggle between two choices that were risking her status in the classroom.

As she was speaking, I realized that I could no longer recognize Mary and that I needed to look differently at her in order to better understand how she fit with the rest of the class. While I was silently searching for an immediate response, I looked at Mary with admiration and fascination. She was the student who took the risk of exposing herself through a difficult testimony. At that moment, she became one of my iconic figures—a visual landmark of women’s socio-cultural position in Saudi Arabia, and the image of the courageous student who spoke from a very well-defined standpoint that I had previously disregarded. I do not mean to suggest that, in that moment of silence, I was tokenizing Mary, viewing her face as the exemplary specimen of all women in Saudi Arabia. To the contrary, I was actively trying to *refigure* her face in a larger social context that could better explain to me the tensions between her social status at home and her place in the American educational system.

Mary’s example brings me to the second strategy that I want to propose to teachers who face such classroom disruptions. I call this strategy *refiguration*, and I use it to designate the process by which an individual’s (visual) attention is continuously (re)-

focused, adjusted, and redefined. As I have suggested earlier in this article, witnessing a peer share a traumatic experience doesn't always constitute a moment of voyeurism. The spectularity of the witness may often catch the viewer in a process of refiguration whereby the viewer tries to better understand the person speaking, to better *see* on the other's face the signs of an unanticipated past. Therefore, refiguration is an intrinsic characteristic of accidental testimonies.

The problem is not that second-hand witnesses dwell in their fascination with the speaker or that they cling onto the image of the first-hand witness. In fact, this visual investment needs to remain active beyond the accidental testimony. If our students come too quickly to a sense of closure, having the certitude of "now, I know who this person is," then they are more likely to tokenize the testifier instead of attending more fully to her testimony. To go back to Mary's intervention, in my hope to break the moment of paralysis ensuing her account, I asked my students to return to their academic tasks. In that move, Mary probably remained for many of my students an unrecognizable peer with strange cultural habits and the iconic figure of a taboo.

Instead, to keep my students in that moment of arrested attention when many were probably still asking, "What does she mean she cannot speak? Who is Mary, after all?" I could have turned my students' eyes to the classroom space itself. I could have invited them to think about questions that Mary was implicitly pointing us to: What is a classroom for? What kind of relations does it negotiate or prescribe? How does the classroom induce us to certain expectations and behaviors that we take for granted? Had I asked my students to literally look around at what they do and how they behave, maybe they could have *refigured* Mary not as an exceptional person, but as an individual implicated in larger cultural systems that affect us all. Therefore, refiguration is the process whereby we resist a sense of closure and we continue to engage with the image of the other.

If we wonder further how we can make students aware of these visual and reflective processes—without further exposing the person who testifies—Kristie Fleckenstein calls on teachers to help students see their bodies as imagetexts, to locate themselves and others in multiple sites/sights. This pedagogy implies that we ask our students to focus their attention on the ecology of the body, on the complexity of being. The first-hand witness becomes a spectacular sight not because she is reductively the iconic image of a certain kind of trauma, but because she has been in other places, and she can speak about the tension between being somewhere else and with us (listeners) at the same time. In this sense, refiguration allows the testifier to tell her story through a body that has been affected by the multiple places she has inhabited. As ethical participants in the witnessing process, our duty is to remember and imagine the testifier and her account in similar terms.

Yet, visual engagement with the other does not happen only in one direction: from the first-hand witness to the speaker. Students need to know that a testifier also stares back and that piercing look demands the viewers to refigure their positions as well. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, "This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making" (3). The exchange of looks is at the basis of refiguration. Students need to become aware of the fact that an accidental testimony is a moment when they learn to look differently both at the speaker and themselves. Had my students and I spent more time in that freeze-frame, Mary could have also realized that her intervention was not inappropriate, her hesitations were not a personal flaw, but a

challenge to us all.

The negotiation process between how peers remember and look at each other is fundamental. In courses where students interact with testimonies rendered through books, films, or photographs, and even when students meet with an acclaimed trauma-survivor, there is a critical distance between the second-hand witness and the speaker. In the case of accidental testimonies, though, this distance is substantially reduced. Teachers and students all share the same space and will return to this place after the events have happened. For this reason, teachers have to consider that their responses and strategies have multiple goals: to prepare students to respect their peers and their testimonies, to avoid the tokenization of the first-hand witness, and to create a bearable space for everyone in the classroom after an unbearable account.

Testimony of Absence

My final classroom example comes from an argumentative course on “Representations of the Body and the Beauty Myth” that I taught in Spring 2011. Toward the middle of the semester my students and I were discussing bell hooks’ article, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance.” During our conversation, the only black female student in my class, Shauna, acknowledged that she totally identified with hooks’ comments because she oftentimes was put in situations where she had to change her body in order to please others. Moreover, it was not her peers who were putting pressure on her, but her own parents who often commented on her hair. The decision to have a boy-style haircut was her own statement against her parents. This testimony may seem quite innocent, but Shauna’s intervention came after a long series of commentaries from white female students in the class who denied the relevance of racism in their own lives and who vehemently insisted that hooks’ analysis was out of date and the result of her own personal anger.

It was clear from my students’ reactions after Shauna spoke—moments of silence, amazed and embarrassed looks—that I couldn’t overlook this testimony or put more pressure on Shauna to further analyze her own experience. Nor could I adopt a “black voice” that was not my own, to use Jacqueline Jones Royster’s terms (31). I, a white female teacher, could not pretend to speak for Shauna as a way to avoid making her the iconic figure of all black students. Instead, I offered to complement her testimony with my own *testimony of absence*, an acknowledgment of my own visual space. In the silence of the classroom, I confessed that I did not identify myself as a racist person, but to some extent, I was complicit in white privilege by the friends I make, consciously or unconsciously, by the people I surround myself with, and by the places I am most comfortable visiting and living in. As I spoke, I was making conscious efforts to highlight the moral and ethical consequences of my choices as a way of recognizing the complex aspects of my engagements as white. My intervention opened the meaning of the word *racist*, which for the students was an unbearable label because they avoided associating with the term at all levels. At my invitation, some of the other classmates started adding to the discussion their own stories about their friendships and their one-color home neighborhoods. As I listened to these testimonies, I highlighted the diversity and complexity of their accounts in an attempt to reposition Shauna’s testimony, to enlarge the context rather than tokenize her presence in the classroom.

The testimony of absence should occupy an important place next to the testimony of trauma because admitting to an absence, to the inability to see or comprehend the other's position because of one's own location, can be as memorable as admitting to traumatic events. What if, for instance, we have a class, as I did, where issues of race are discussed and only one black student is part of such a class debate? If one cannot speak for the other, and in fact one shouldn't (Sullivan 106), then the testimony of absence and the discussion of its underlying structures can help students see the gap between the lived experiences of the self, versus the lived experiences of others.

In the example above, I asked students to avoid blaming hooks for the racism charge and to imagine how the world around them looked like in contrast with the physical world that hooks described in her article. My own testimony of absence encouraged the rest of the class to share their own personal accounts. This strategy made them literally take away their eyes from Shauna and look from one peer to another as they added more testimonies of absence. The peers' stories validated the legitimacy of Shauna's narrative and revealed that racism is a systemic phenomenon, not her individual problem.

Among all the accounts, Shauna's presence remained central to our discussion. In fact, even here, in the space of this article, I do not offer a thick description of what the other students said, but only of what Shauna confessed. Her lively face is fresh in my mind—but no matter how many details I may offer about her, I cannot make people who were not present in my classroom picture her. However, if I cannot render her full performance and presence, at least my response-ability toward her testimony is to share it further not as a *good story* to tell, but as a narrative that engages more questions than it provides answers.

Needless to say, I do not suggest that the testimony of absence should get the same treatment as the testimony of trauma because the speakers in both cases do not share an equal position of power. A black student recounting a narrative of oppression does not speak from the same position as I or my other students did. Instead, I want to emphasize that those who speak of absence can create memorable scenes as well. In those moments, the students can better understand the underlying structures that make their peer's testimony spectacular. They can begin to see how the exceptional status of an individual is the result of a larger problem, and not the attributes of one person. To that end, "we should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice for speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" (Alcoff 111). If left in the middle of silence, the classroom is but a room of icons that we may respect and look up to, but we may never learn from them if we do not engage in a critical dialogue.

Conclusion

Accidental testimonies do not require a pre-determined pedagogy because they structurally escape notions of pedagogy in the traditional sense. What I have suggested in the previous sections are only a few of many possible strategies that we can use to help our students practice constructive responses in the classroom. Unplanned and unexpected, accidental testimonies remind us to be sensitive to the rhetorical contexts where traumatic accounts are made public. These events can happen in writing, in face-to-face interactions, as well as in a variety of other public or private places or across a wide range of media (e.g.,

photographs, videos, digital documents, etc.). Whatever the situation may be, it is more important that we understand the full impact and the multiple dimensions, discursive and non-discursive, that an accidental testimony activates when it engages our critical abilities.

In a larger sense, the reflections I offered in this article will hopefully lead to a renewed effort to research and investigate classroom events that we may think of as tangential to our focused work, extra-curricular happenings that we oftentimes like to label as lore. According to Stephen North, lore is hard to fit into well-defined theoretical frameworks because lore relies on pragmatic logics and experiential structures (24). At the same time, teachers are practitioners *par excellence*, and lore is consequently part of our pedagogies. Disruptive events and anecdotal stories inform how we teach and what we need to do differently from one classroom to the next. In fact, in many cases we start drafting pedagogical theories based on scattered interactions and challenges that take us by surprise.

Due to their accidental nature, unexpected testimonies also pose a methodological problem. To track and prove the spectacularity of a student who confesses is a difficult endeavor. How can we identify or re-trace the visual dimension of a student account without filtering that experience through language? How can we speak about our internal process of remembering a face, without a verbal reconstruction of what we have retained by looking at others? Finally, how can we avoid the temptation to believe, once more, that language is able to recover what we hear, feel, and see? Still, these aspects should not discourage us from looking more closely at what appears to be an ephemeral event. My classroom observations, as well as my own reflections about the ways in which I remember my students, will hopefully serve not as “proof” in the strictest sense, but as evidence for the kinds of problems that arise in our face-to-face encounters.

The three examples from my own experience have left a profound mark on my teaching history; they have turned me into a better prepared teacher, and they have changed me at a personal level. The three student portraits (Tim, Mary and Shauna) are now images in my mind that I could recognize immediately, among the many students I worked with. I recognize their faces with facility, but I still struggle to understand their experiences. This is the kind of reflective work that we need to encourage inside and outside the classroom walls. While our students are looking in the eyes of their peers, they should learn how to dwell and speak from their own position as second-hand witnesses (*freeze frames*), how to re-see their peers’ presence in the classroom (*refiguration*), and how to focus on their own blindspots (*testimony of absence*). In turn, students who take the risk and share their narratives can discover that they need not feel excluded or misunderstood. A writing class will not fully heal their wounds, but at least that process can start or continue from here (Anderson and MacCurdy 15).

To give one more reason to consider the urgency of thinking about the implications of accidental testimonies, let’s take into account the changing population of our writing classrooms. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, the number of veterans returning to complete their education increased by 40% between 2009 and 2011 (“New Programs”). For the most part, these students have faced exceptional circumstances and many have gone through traumatic experiences. We may know about their backgrounds at the beginning of the course or we may discover, by accident, as it happened in my experience with Tim, that their past is still part of the present—pressing, haunting, and

painful. Some may be willing to share their experiences; others may open up against their will. For these students, we have to prepare ourselves, not as psychologists or moralists, but as compassionate human beings who are willing to watch and listen, learn and respond in ways that are less likely to risk anyone's presence in the classroom. For those who choose to testify, we need to live at the borders of our visual fields and be willing to look them in the eyes in order to begin to *see* rather than *know* what it means to be different. Accidental testimonies, as I hope to have shown, create the context of such extraordinary encounters.

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