

“What Would it Take You to See Me Unbroken”? Insights from María Lugones on Cultivating Loving Perception in Teaching

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A few years into my career as a high school teacher of philosophy and history, I felt at home, comfortable enough in my classroom. I was in my place. My journey, a teacher’s journey, moved me from beginner to experienced and brought about a sense of being at home in school and in the classroom. I felt safe: over the years I had honed my routines and perfected my wall decoration. I was fluent with the curriculum; my pedagogical hand was steady.

It is safe to say that some teachers might resonate with this description of my journey: being at home, experiencing the classroom as a familiar and safe environment is a worthy and desirable goal. Lately though, I have come to see that seeking out a sense of familiarity with the classroom environment might also yield undesirable consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic upended most of what I knew of teaching. My colleagues and I were scrambling, improvising, and experimenting with remote teaching. Students, and we, were just trying to survive. Some did not. Others did, but dropped out of school, at times discouraged by a certain inflexibility on the part of their instructors to understand and accommodate our shared new circumstances. I realized that it was difficult to extend a loving gaze on my students from a place of fixity. I realized that my sense of familiarity might encourage in myself a certain arrogance. I saw that I needed to work intentionally on my way of perceiving the students and my teaching environment, in order to be able to see with loving eyes.

In my paper, I propose that the idea of “finding home” in the classroom should be complemented through a work on one’s way of perceiving. I draw on feminist philosopher María Lugones to consider that a teacher’s way of looking at her students can come from a place of fixed certainty; or it can

be a loving gaze, perceptive, inclusive, and affirming.¹ I believe that an exclusive familiarity might encourage the teacher's arrogant eye, and, in that way, generate unrealistic and also unethical results. Daily occurrences in the classroom can present aesthetic experiences where the other person is both perceived in comfort and familiarity, as well as seen in newness and uncertainty.² Through a work of self-education, which I translate as learning to see oneself as a whole and learning to travel in each other's worlds, I as a teacher can exercise loving perception. In the paper, I bring into play my own experience and literary examples to illustrate how being at home in the classroom might embolden the teacher's "arrogant eye." I then move to consider what is needed for a teacher to cultivate, instead, a loving perception, one that sees the other person as whole and real. I conclude with the idea of getting to know the other person's worlds.

BEING AT HOME?

Being at home means knowing one's way. When I enter my home, I know where the light switch is and can reach it even in the dark, I know where the dresser's corner bumps out on the hallway so that I am able to avoid it, and so on. I rely on a set of behaviors and strategies that I know to work well, given that I have tried and repeated them over and over. The feeling of home is strictly related with that of familiarity.³ Reliance on habits and routines builds up familiarity, at the same time familiarity is translated into habits and routines. When thinking of a teacher's place in her classroom, familiarity informs a teacher's own unique method of going about her teaching.

Developing and growing as a teacher implies honing a mode of seeing that enhances a sense of familiarity in the classroom. However, it is important to learn how to see elements of unfamiliarity and newness in the ordinary, familiar, habit informed environment.⁴ A more careful, intentional way of looking at students can reveal surprisingly rich qualities, depth, and nuance. As educational philosopher Cara Furman notes, a form of care for the teacher self consists in "practicing a set of activities" in order to "internalize a way of seeing."⁵ The person, thus strengthened, is able to consider challenges to her practice and "shift perspective" through "attending" to the student facing her.⁶

Building on Furman's suggestion, one can see that a teacher can cultivate her perception so as to detect the unexpected and receive it as a surprise, a promise from the other. These *surprises of the other* might go undetected under a less open gaze. The classroom space possesses, so to say, aesthetic texture: it is a space where ordinary experiences take on distinctive aesthetic qualities.⁷ A sense of exclusive familiarity with the environment should be tempered with a feeling for the unfamiliarity also present in there.

Teaching is inhabited by a constitutive uncertainty: uncertainty in the students' learning, in the outcomes of teaching, in the use of authority.⁸ "Uncertainty" can be framed in terms of openness, fluidity, awareness of possibilities, or freedom from rigidity.⁹ Uncertainty seen this way can become a desirable quality of the teaching experience. Too much certainty in the classroom may create a preference for teaching styles in which certainty is easier to attain. Uncertainty is vital to professional practices.¹⁰ It brings about flexibility and breadth instead of rigidity and narrowness.¹¹ It is important to learn how to be at home in uncertainty without being transfixed in it.

Highlighting solely the elements of comfort, mastery, and expertise as traits of a veteran teacher (and therefore as traits that should be pursued in the journey of teacher preparation) might be unrealistic and also morally problematic. It might be unrealistic because this is not how things actually are; it might be morally problematic because one may end up causing harm to the students. As Michel De Certeau noted, the home is "one's own place, which by definition cannot be the place of others."¹² One's perception can get anesthetized when one feels too much "at home." When the teacher privileges certainty and familiarity in her classroom at the expense of other traits of the experience, her perception runs the risk of becoming rigid, unwelcoming, or sealed. The issue seems to be not the all too human need for certainty and safety, but that exclusive emphasis on unproblematic familiarity which might freeze the gaze of the teacher.

A job I had in college consisted in attending an Economics course and taking notes for a student, Giulia, who was deaf. She had learned to read

lips over the years and was an excellent, overachieving student in the Business school. She had reached out to the course instructor and asked him to not walk around too much while lecturing, so she could read his lips. He denied her request. He said he had been teaching like that his whole life and didn't even try to accommodate her. Instead, the University hired me to take notes for Giulia. I will interpret this episode through the lens of the dynamic between familiarity and unfamiliarity in the aesthetic fabric of that course. The instructor held his class as, echoing De Certeau's words, "his own place": a place where others were not welcome. He had built such a sense of habit and routine that he could not imagine breaking out of it.

As a lecturer myself, and one who likes to pace around, I can extend sympathy to that professor. Nevertheless, reliance on familiarity for him had become mandatory and unescapable. What was lost in the process was his chance to work with Giulia and welcome her in the classroom. That professor's choice was, then, in a deep sense, an unrealistic choice, because he refused to accept the reality of his student's needs. It was also an unethical choice, because he inflicted harms on the student that were not necessary. Giulia was harmed because she was cast into needing help for something she didn't need help for (there is nothing bad in needing help, but there is something bad in forcing someone into needing help she would not otherwise need). The other students in the course were also harmed because they were taught that a professor is not held accountable to disability accommodations and can do what he wants.

Familiarity de-sensitizes the subject, also causing a loss of appreciation as daily features go unnoticed.¹³ Familiarity should just be a way that we manage some uncertainty in the classroom so as to best be prepared for the unexpected. If that professor had recognized that his home-building was preventing him from seeing the students, he would have found more ease in changing and welcoming the newness of Giulia.

THE UNLOVING GAZE

In his memoir *Little Failure*, Gary Shteyngart describes the relentless process of adjustment requested of him, as a child who had just emigrated to

the USA with his Russian Jewish family in the 1980s. When Gary starts school, his well-meaning first grade teacher repeatedly exhorts him to “Be more, you know, normal.”¹⁴ I think that by that exhortation she means that Gary should try to blend in, drop his Russian accent, maybe even bring peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in his lunch box. I want to understand the good faith uttering such a piece of advice, but I am also struck by its violence. Gary was new to the teacher. His background, his second language learning processes, his body, the way he sat, raised his hand, understood manners; so much of his being was unexpected to his teacher. She was frozen in place. Rather than unfixing her gaze, and making room for Gary’s unique being, the teacher decided to abide by her own need for certainty and regularity. She had been at home in her classroom, a home built with effort and intention year after year. She felt attached to her home to the point of not seeing her student. She cast an “arrogant eye” on a child who only needed to be “seen unbroken.”¹⁵

The arrogant eye perceives the other person as impossible to identify with. This eye ignores, ostracizes, stereotypes, and leaves behind the other person.¹⁶ Arrogance in the perception of others proceeds from a failure to love. Philosopher María Lugones identifies two ways in which we fail to love the other. First, we fail vertically, top-down, when we express an “injunction to the oppressed to have their gaze fixed on the oppressor.”¹⁷ Gary had to fix his eyes back on to the teacher and become exactly how she expected him to be. Responding to the fixity of the gaze put upon him, Gary had no viable option other than adjusting and reciprocating that transfixing perception. Second, we fail horizontally, because a concomitant injunction is issued, to “not look at each other’s worlds.”¹⁸ Worried, even consumed, with responding to the teacher’s exacting invitation, Gary cannot reach out to other kids, seek solidarity, or mutual knowledge and alliances.

The arrogant gaze manages to break the person, both in the sense of fragmenting one’s personal world, and also disallowing solidarity with others. It mutes persons that cannot be heard, it meets the reality of difference present in everyone’s life by negating it. The arrogant eye perceives others as existing just for itself (for the arrogant perceiver).¹⁹ To perceive arrogantly, Lugones

says echoing Marilyn Frye, is to “graft the other’s substance to one’s own.”²⁰ Arrogant perception is therefore a tool of oppression. Heeding to her need for purity and control, the teacher, so to say, cannot leave her home, or even actually open the door to let in Gary, Giulia, and every child.

In “American Arithmetic,” the poet Natalie Diaz communicates that same sense of brokenness. When wholeness is offered a broken mirror, the mirror reflects back a broken image. She starts by reciting a well-known statistic:

Native Americans make up less than /
 1 percent of the population of America. /
 0.8 percent of 100 percent.

“O, mine efficient country,” she comments. In the following lines, she offers the number of police killings of Native Americans: 1.9 percent of all police killings. She continues,

I am not good at math-can you blame me? /
 I’ve had an American education. /
 We are Americans, and we are less than one percent /
 of Americans. We do a better job of dying /
 by police than we do existing.²¹

The fractured mirror reflects a broken image to her. She is whole but her image of herself to herself becomes shattered by the broken mirror she is faced with. Natalie’s experience is particularly telling because in it, the personal betrayal is enmeshed with a larger, older structural oppression: that of settler colonialism. The logic of oppression that brutalizes Natalie can be resisted, Lugones tells us, by a logic of resistance and transformation “against the grain of power” and of social fragmentation.²² Coalition building is made possible by maintaining a focus on “multiple visions and multiple sensings and sense makings”; traveling in each other’s world, the two can build coalitions and see

each other lovingly.²³ What would need to happen for Natalie to be met with a loving gaze? Natalie is asking for recognition: she wants to be seen for who she is:

But in an American room of one hundred people, /
I am Native American—less than one, less than /
whole—I am less than myself. Only a fraction /
of a body, let's say, *I am only a hand* [...]

In a reference to personal and communal indigenous invisibility, just above these lines, she had declared: “I am begging: *Let me be lonely but not invisible.*”²⁴ Natalie Diaz’s poem teaches me that there are clear ways of betraying students’ need for a loving gaze: some are indeed the making of the individual teachers; while others reside in the violent silences of curriculum, in the erasures of pedagogies, and in the obtuseness of disciplining systems in schools. The list could go on. A teacher articulates the various dimensions of teaching in her own unique ways. I am interested in describing a general disposition towards comfort and familiarity that, if not complicated, can cause a failure to love. A teacher also continues to teach herself by working on her own way of perceiving: even when structural change is not at hand, it is always possible for one to change her ways, intentionally and carefully. The creativity and intentionality expressed by teachers who resist the logics of oppressions in which they may be caught are the signs of a loving perception.

“WHAT WOULD IT TAKE YOU TO SEE ME UNBROKEN?”²⁵

As I endeavor to consider this question, I feel there are two necessary caveats. First, I am well aware that a large part of the work needs to address structural inequities. The work to be done is policy work, it is political work, it is conceptual work, and it is activist work. In this paper, I am not tasking teachers with all of this, even though I believe that teaching is inherently a political and intellectual activity. I also know that schools cannot solve all problems. So, my first caveat regards the limits for my exploration and of my recommendation.

Further, teacher blaming has become a construct to devalue public education and women’s work, while lifting responsibility off the shoulders of

policy makers. I do not intend to join my voice to that choir. The pressures on teachers are countless and come from every direction. The years 2020-2021 brought upon teachers a new kind of uncertainty and anxiety given the unregulated American response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Good teachers leave teaching every year because they find themselves unable to access the moral rewards of teaching that drew them to this job to start with, given mandates that compromise their ethics, given the isolation, and the awareness to be causing harm to students.²⁶

So, it is important to consider whether I might be asking too much of teachers, caught as they are in multiple oppressions already. Reading María Lugones has helped me understand that what is required by the logics of oppression can be exercised resistantly. In response to widespread, systemic oppression, Lugones describes a form of active subjectivity found in “moving with people.”²⁷ She articulates an “attenuated agency” which is a sense of intentionality “in paying attention to people and to the variegated ways of connection among people without privileging a monological understanding of sense.”²⁸ This form of agency is engaged in coalition building, to resist the internalized fragmentation brought about by the colonizing gaze. World traveling—the practice of willfully shifting circles of belonging—is a practice that teachers can take on as an expression of attenuated agency. She continues, “We can reinforce and influence the direction of intention in small ways by sensing/understanding the movement of desires, beliefs and signs among people.”²⁹

María Lugones asks her question in the context of a conversation with a White colleague of hers, “What does it take you to see me unbroken?” “It takes the devotion of friendship,” she answers, “and engaged thinking.”³⁰ The other person, the person working to see me unbroken, must be in an engaged position, which means she needs to see herself in her own position. Disengagement is expressed in the note that “I do not see you because I do not see myself because I understand myself outside of culture.”³¹ What is being suggested here is the insight that, given the reciprocity of gazes, if I want to see you as a whole, I need to be able to see myself as whole as well.

Whole means not fragmented from without, it indicates a multiplicity

that is organic and interconnected. *A whole person* is a person whose difference is generative and not silenced. As Audre Lorde explains, differences exist reciprocally and are only threatening when they are not acknowledged as equal.³² Only when I am able to recognize difference as non-threatening, what Lorde calls “non-dominant difference,” I am able to consider the other person with a loving eye, therefore allowing the whole person to find her power. The shift I just described is characterized by Lugones as an epistemological shift, as it involves perception and therefore knowledge; but it is also and perhaps foremost an ethical transformation.³³ In this very shift I myself can finally access my own power as I, too, can finally find myself whole.

It is difficult to love a person whom one sees arrogantly. This failure to love, this indifference ends up “robbing the other” of her own “sense of solidity.” The arrogant perceiver, Lugones notes, does not feel “a sense of self-loss” for the other’s lack of solidity.³⁴ Under the arrogant eye, like Natalie Diaz beautifully says it, the person is “less than one, less than/whole—[she is] less than [her]self.”³⁵ The person perceived that way has lost solidity because her world is not acknowledged. “Without knowing the other’s ‘world,’” one does not know the other, and without knowing the other, one is really alone in the other’s presence because the other is only dimly present to one.³⁶

A “world” in Lugones’ sense is a very concrete, real environment. It cannot be inhabited exclusively by dead or imaginary people, there need to be actual living people who reside in it (for example, the movie “Encanto” does not form a “world” in this sense, while persons who love Encanto might form a “world”). A world shapes its inhabitants. Worlds may be incomplete, and they may be—indeed they are—multiple for every person. One need not be at ease in a world to inhabit it. A world can offer the experience of being humanly bonded with others who are fluent in that same world. But one might belong in a world where she is not at ease.

Learning to travel in each other’s worlds requires flexibility. Flexibility can be exercised “resistantly,” that means, resisting the ease and comfort of one’s own world to travel in the other’s.³⁷ Flexibility, which translates into stretching, changing, pushing, bouncing, becoming bigger and becoming smaller, is worked

from home. One needs to know the comfort of the familiar, in order to leave it behind when needed. The loving gaze begins from a place of safety, and it pauses expectantly on the other person's world, interested in traveling to that world, so as to start knowing it, seeing it, and unmuting the presence of the other.³⁸ The ethos of a traveler is one of respectful curiosity and also, in some ways, grateful presence—a traveler behaves like a guest when invited in, is interested, appreciates, roams around, doesn't touch or break or steal things. A traveler is not a colonizer. In Lugones' expression, "traveling in each other's worlds," there is also an expectation of reciprocity: where a loving eye is extended on to the other, mutual knowledge of each other's world is attempted.

This ethos seems to me a desirable one for a teacher to cultivate. The teacher's mastery can be like a cracked mirror that reflects us falsely: differences are muted, alterity misunderstood, novelty taken solely as disruption. Rather than striving for an absolute feeling of home, a teacher might want to see with a loving eye and try to travel in the other worlds present in her classroom. The work to be done then is a work of education on the self, encompassing both learning to see oneself as whole, and learning to travel in each other's worlds.

CONCLUSION

I described here the constant tension between needs for safety and familiarity on one side, and needs to see the unexpected, the other, for who they are. This tension inhabits the life of the teacher as she works on herself to undo the fixity of her perception. I have shown how exclusive emphasis on unproblematized familiarity might freeze the gaze of the teacher. Freeze and fixity are cold, unwelcoming, and condemning; that is why emphasis on familiarity needs to be tempered with equal focus on newness and difference. This tempering occurs intentionally when the teacher decides to open up her gaze and look to see the other as unbroke. Given the reciprocity of gazes, this is also an avenue for the teacher to see herself as whole and extend the loving gaze and care onto herself as well.³⁹

It is important for teachers to be able to find comfort and warmth in their classroom. Warmth nourishes and routines reassure, making the classroom

a welcoming place for all students.⁴⁰ As a teacher, I want to be competent, secure, and stable. I also wish to be flexible, curious, and loving. I want to be able to see and connect with the newness and beauty of my students. As long as I can keep these two together, I educate myself by both building a home in the classroom (for myself and my students), and by learning “to travel in each other’s worlds.” I hold the image of travel to open up the fixity of home—to lift, so to say, another mirror in which I can see myself as teacher, and my students see themselves, as whole.

Acknowledgements

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1 See María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

2 David Hansen notes that teaching does indeed have aesthetic dimensions which “materialize when a teacher is moved by the tapestry of human gestures, voices, strivings, and more, that comes alive in any group of students.” In this sense, “aesthetic” is understood not as art-based but rather in line with the aesthetic of everyday life, highlighting dimensions of sense perception, imagination, and reflectivity on the experience itself. From David Hansen, “A Poetics of Teaching,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 1 (2004), 132.

3 Arto Haapala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place,” in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 46.

4 Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, “Private Spaces,” in *Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, ed. Giard Luce, De Certeau Michel, and Pierre Mayol, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 145-48, accessed October 23, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt5vkbhw.15>.

5 This is especially noted in Chapters Two and Seven in Cara Furman and

Cecelia Traugh, *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice: Cultivating Practical Wisdom to Create Democratic Schools* (Teachers College Press, 2021), 28.

6 Furman and Traugh, *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice*, 122.

7 There exists a rich thread of philosophers of education focusing on attentiveness, perception, presence, and careful practice in the preparation of teachers. I understand myself in this thread as well. See Patricia Carini, *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001); David Hansen, "A Poetics of Teaching," *Educational Theory* 54, no. 1 (2004), also see David Hansen, *The Teacher and the World: A Study of Cosmopolitanism as Education* (Taylor and Francis, 2011); Carol Rodgers, *The Art of Reflective Teaching: Practicing Presence*, Teachers College Press, 2020; and Cara Furman, "To Be at Home: Including Each Human in the Classroom," *Philosophy of Education Archive*, ed. Ann Chinnery, 2017.

8 Philip W. Jackson, "Chapter 3: Uncertainties of Teaching," *The Practice of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).

9 Margret Buchmann, *Detachment and Concern: Conversations in the Philosophy of Teaching and Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 216.

10 Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

11 Buchmann, *Detachment and Concern*, 216.

12 Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, "Private Spaces," in *Practice of Everyday Life*, 1998.

13 Arto Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," 50.

14 Gary Shteyngart, *Little Failure: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2014), 105.

15 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 43.

16 Lugones, 83.

17 Lugones, 79.

18 Lugones, 79.

19 Lugones, 123.

20 Lugones, 79.

21 Natalie Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poem: Poems* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf

Press,

2020), 17.

22 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 12.

23 Lugones, 75.

24 Natalie Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, 18.

25 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 43.

26 Doris Santoro, *demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay*

(Harvard Education Press, 2018).

27 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 6.

28 Lugones, 6.

29 Lugones, 6.

30 Lugones, 43.

31 Lugones, 46.

32 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 111.

33 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 84.

34 Lugones, 83.

35 Natalie Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, 83.

36 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 97.

37 Lugones, 77.

38 Lugones, 97.

39 I am grateful to participants in a 2020 NEPEs session for their comments, and especially Ybing Quek for pointing out the aspect of reciprocity of care.

40 Trauma informed pedagogy highlights the importance of establishing safety for the traumatized student by maintaining usual routines. See, Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators, *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network* (2008), <http://www.NCTSN.org>.