

Risking Wonder and World-Traveling

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In David Mamet's play *Oleanna*, Carol, a student, has come to her professor John's office because she does not understand. She has tried to understand, she goes to the lectures, reads John's books, but she is failing and considers herself stupid. In her words she asks John: "What in the World Are You Talking About?"

John: I want to tell you something.

Carol: (pause) What?

John: Well, I know that you're talking about.

Carol: No. You don't.

John: I think I do. (Pause)

Carol: How can you?

John: Let me tell you a story about myself...

But Carol cannot see herself in her teacher's lifestory. Further, she views his lifestory as an affront; a failure to recognize her for herself, a failure to address her questions and concerns (*Teach me*, she demands). John holds a mirror up to himself and asks Carol to gaze within it and see herself. But in assuming that their positions are reversible, that his identification with Carol's self-doubt will be reflected when Carol sees herself in his story, John does not give Carol's utterances social uptake. In *Oleanna*, John's egocentric approach gets him in trouble — Carol charges him with sexual harassment.

I begin with *Oleanna* to illustrate the dangers of teacher assumptions about symmetrical reciprocity which Maureen Ford discusses in her paper. Ford suggests that an epistemological stance which emphasizes asymmetrical reciprocity, world-traveling, and loving perception may offer an alternate location wherein teachers can begin to encounter student resistance with wonder, surprise, and openness rather than defensiveness and arrogant perception. While I endorse Ford's project and the deconstruction of too-easy Self/Other symmetries, in this response I am interested in exploring some of the difficulties facing teachers who accept this challenge given that, as Ford maintains, arrogant perception is institutionalized in schools and educational discourse. I wish to suggest that differences in teacher situatedness and the degree of ease with which a teacher exists within the world of her school(s) will affect her willingness and ability to adopt wonder when faced with student resistance.

One of Ford's points about institutional arrogant perception is that schools and our educational discourses operate with assumptions of reversibility and symmetry that are grounded on ideals of sameness and equality. As hegemonic institutions with limited resources and time, schools gloss over the differences among students so that in teachers' eyes their pupils are interchangeable — each having the same needs, interests, and educational goals. Although narratives of difference interrupt, difference is usually reduced to sameness via assimilation or empathy (where in taking the

standpoint of another, the unique and asymmetrical situatedness of Self and Other is conflated with the standpoint of Self). The seductive narcissism of symmetrical reciprocity is thus particularly risky for teachers. Like John in *Oleanna*, many of us are seduced by the idea of making our students relate to us and our experiences, wrongly believing that this is how our teaching can make a difference. Even caring and well-intended responses grounded in empathy can be problematic. In addition, many of us have emotional and ideological investments in conveying certain issues of social justice (such as anti-racism, feminism) and make the mistake of seeing these ideas when adopted by our students as evidence of social change.

Ultimately, if we are to acknowledge asymmetry and embrace wonder and world-traveling, we must be willing to give up the safety and comfort of the “worlds” in which we are at ease and the classroom space in which we are authorities. Active listening would allow for questions and challenges from students so that the classroom would not necessarily be a comfortable or even “safe” place to be all the time. Being open to wonder, surprise, and loving perception also requires that we be open to shock, feeling decentered, feeling “uncanny” in the Heideggerean sense of feeling no-longer-at-home in our world, and feeling not-ourselves (which I have elsewhere referred to as “misrecognition”²).

Nonetheless, meeting the individual demands of students and acknowledging the differences in their particular histories and situatedness can be emotionally exhausting given teachers’ lack of time, resources, and the sheer numbers in our classes. It is one thing to ground friendships and other intimate relationships on wonder and surprise, to look forward to the newness and strangeness of the Other when the encounter is one-on-one, but quite another in a classroom setting with anywhere from 20 to 200 students, many of them hostile presences who feel they are there under duress (because the class is compulsory or attendance mandatory).

In addition, do all teachers encounter the risks of asymmetry equally? This brings me to Ford’s other point about institutionalized arrogant perception: that teachers are usually at ease and fluent speakers in the norms and rules of the world of schools. According to Ford, they view schools as places of safety and comfort. The danger here is that anyone too much at home in their world will simply fail to see or will treat with indifference the Others upon whom her world does not depend, thus reinforcing arrogant perception.³ This may be true of a particular demographic of teacher; but for many of us because of our race, gender, sexual orientation, politics, and so on, we are not at ease in our worlds of schools or academe. We might not agree with the norms of the world in which we work and may be constantly reminded that we are “out-of-place” by our students and even our colleagues. We are “able to see [our] own position, assumptions, perspective as strange,” because it is second nature for us to view ourselves as others see us, or to see ourselves as these worlds construct us — in fact, doing so is necessary for us to be able to negotiate these “alien” worlds on a day-to-day basis.⁴ For example, Nuzhat Amin, a non-white female ESL teacher, is constantly challenged on rules of English grammar by her students.⁵ She writes:

In the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) courses that I took in a Toronto academy, we were advised by experienced White teachers to show our humanity to our students by saying “I don’t know the answer to that question, but I will find out.” My white colleagues tell me that they use this strategy, and it does indeed make their relationship with their students stronger because it humanizes the teacher. However, this strategy has not worked for me. My interpretation is that by saying “I don’t know the answer,” I am merely confirming what the students think of me or any minority woman in the position of teacher: that she is not a legitimate teacher.⁶

As a non-white ESL teacher, Amin has never been at-home in this world in which native speakers of English are expected to be white and North American born. To respond to her students’ resistance with openness (“I don’t know the answer”) serves only to reinforce their view that she does not belong in their classroom. Here, the students (many of them non-white themselves), not the teacher, are the arrogant perceivers.

Further, even if wonder were hypothetically easier for those of us ill-at-ease in the world of schools or academe, we do not necessarily meet the challenges of our students’ strangeness or difference with openness. If uncanniness is our being-in-this-world we cannot always afford the vulnerability which accompanies wonder and our very survival may require that we assume a posture of self-importance and correctness. Perhaps it is not always wise for minority teachers and feminists to embrace the playfulness suggested by Maria Lugones. She claims that:

There are “worlds” we enter at our own risk, “worlds” that have agon, conquest, and arrogance as the main ingredients in their ethos. These are “worlds” that we enter out of necessity and which would be foolish to enter playfully....In such “worlds” we are not playful.⁷

Here, Lugones notes that not all worlds should be entered into playfully and perhaps not all people should or can be playful in all their worlds. This is to say that even if we are ideologically committed to the asymmetry of Self/Other relations our world(s) may construct us so that our expressions of wonder and uncertainty may undermine others’ views of our competency and performance on a daily basis. When faced with a student response which we think is out-of-line, over-reactive, or simply wrong, the ill-at-ease or out-of-place may be required to respond defensively and to adopt the institutionalized arrogant stance rather than a self-reflexive deconstructive one.

I believe that none of what I have said contradicts Ford’s paper but that I have complicated the actual practice of world-traveling and teaching premised on wonder and uncertainty. If students as well as teachers are guilty of arrogant perception it is not enough to restructure teacher education programs — mainstream attitudes about teachers and minorities must be tackled. If one is situated as an outsider within a world then adopting a stance of wonder and openness, while not impossible, might be riskier for her than for others more at-ease in that world. These are ideals worth striving for but the situatedness of the teacher (and students), their relative ease and location of privilege within world(s) matters.

1. David Mamet, *Oleanna: A Play* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 15.

2. Hilary E. Davis. "Pleasure, Pain, and Ethical Responsibility: A Felt-Situated Reading of Menace II Society," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael Katz (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994).
3. Maria Lugones. "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," in *Lesbian Philosophies and Culture*, ed. Jeffner Allen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 165.
4. Iris Marion Young. "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," in *Intersecting Voices: Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*, ed. Jeffner Allen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 56.
5. Nuzhat Amin. "Minority Women Teachers of ESL: Negotiating White English," in *Non-Native Educators in English Language Teaching*, ed. George Braine (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), 100.
6. Ibid.
7. Lugones, "Playfulness," 178.