

# Seeing Us as Unbroken: Learning with Others to Gaze with Love

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In responding to Cammarano’s fine paper I pick up with her conclusion:

As a teacher, I want to be competent, secure, stable. I also wish to be flexible, curious, 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.”<sup>1</sup>

As a teacher educator and former elementary school teacher, I hear a question: how do we help teachers find safety and security while welcoming the newcomer? Through story and poem Cammarano brings us into classrooms bearing witness to the often fraught dynamics.

In considering how we teach the ethos Cammarano calls for, I echo her classroom stories with one of my own. I am a first-year teacher not at home in my classroom. Because children in our school stay for two years in one class, my students had expected to have their beloved teacher, Carol, for a second year. Opening the classroom doors on the first day, the children had run in to reclaim the space—rummaging to find materials they remembered. They are not at home with my changes nor with me. Within this mess, I keep a journal and log the following entry in October:

Hymena drains me. She yells at the America Reads tutor to be quiet and I have her leave the room because I'm shocked and she doesn't leave or she leaves but won't go to Christine's [a colleague] room and then she's rude when she returns and I call Alison [assistant principal]. Alison meets with her and Hymena remains pissy when she returns though we make some progress in afterschool.

At this juncture, my story runs parallel with the economics professor and the student that Cammarano describes. Later in this entry, I complain about Hymena's struggles reading—"graft[ing]" Hymena's reading ability onto my desire to be the teacher who goes above and beyond making adequate yearly progress.<sup>2</sup> I perceive Hymena through the lens of the orderly, peaceful, successful classroom that I believe will reflect me back as a good teacher. Hymena frequently and tearfully laments, "I miss Carol." Grafting my needs onto Hymena's actions, I do not see a child in pain missing a beloved teacher and the security she brought. I see only what her pain might be saying about my inadequacy.

Cammarano emphasizes the cruelty that occurs when those with power perceive the student as broken. Each of her stories features a student who the teacher and society at large often misperceived. That Hymena is a child, a student, and Afro-Latina means that while we both are hurting, it is my world that dominates and my vision that Hymena is pressured to conform to. Therefore, if justice is to be found, it is I who must travel. Shifting my gaze does not undo other societal injustices Hymena faces. It does though make school a more hospitable home in an unjust world.

Here my story takes a radically different turn from those Cammarano shares. In the same journal entry, I write:

Alison tells me that I am intense and intellectual and good with the lesson planning and the management

and all of that but I need to work on the nurturing and I am torn between agreeing to the point and thinking screw the nurturing . . . Alison tells me that Carol was great at nurturing . . . Hannah [college friend and a teacher] tells me to throw that word out and to think about it as being caring or patient or some other word and that I can handle more though I don't want to nurture Hymena because I don't really trust her right now.

Using the metaphors of home and traveler, Cammarano argues that as teachers we both rely on the sense of safety that the routines and familiarity of home provides and also the ability to inquire and face with attention the new that the traveler embodies. How does this work when traveling to another's world can be so fundamentally jarring? Where does that "trust" come from that enables us to move towards the student?

A key from Lugones is that when she speaks of travel, she has pilgrimages in mind.<sup>3</sup> Pilgrimages are journeys to cherished places—beloved even when we have never physically been there. They are journeys of love. Alison tells me that I must journey to my students in love, noting that the important difference between me and Carol was "nurturing." A claim affirmed by Hannah. A few weeks prior Hymena had in fact identified this issue:

I let Hymena stay after school with me and she tells me she wants to be like me when she grows up because I teach well and I know a lot and I'm smart. As we do the message together, Hymena tells me that Carol used to say "love" and I say that I didn't because I didn't know them when I was starting the message and I don't use the word love lightly and she says that "we know each other very well now" and I ask if I should start writing "love" and

she says yes and so I do but I don't quite love them yet.

A second facet of a pilgrimage is that it tends to be an arduous, even treacherous journey. Despite valuing this journey to loving my students, I note, "I don't want to nurture Hymena because I don't really trust her right now" and though I do write "love" in the message, I find it physically challenging to do so because "I don't love them yet."

Third, a pilgrimage often follows a path paved by those who came before and tends to be done in the company of those with a shared commitment. Cammarano's paper lives between two footnotes. She opens:

This paper is dedicated to my friends in the Summer 2020 Reading Group with whom I read María Lugones and many others. Reading with them is one thing that helped me get through the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

She then closes, "I am grateful to participants in the 2020 NEPES session for their comments, and especially Ybing Queck for pointing out the aspects of reciprocity of care." The fruits of Cammarano's paper are the outcome of a journey traveled with others.

In my journal, I see a young teacher being held (up) in the loving gaze of those who have followed a similar journey. Christine regularly and generously opened her classroom door with a smile to host my students. Alison recognizes my world, noting the strengths I bring to the classroom. She carefully notes that the key is not for me to become Carol but to find my own way to nurture. Hannah affirms but re-words Alison's critique, offering language that helps me digest. Finally, there is Carol—my classroom bears the mark of her prior dwelling with traces of the ways she attended to the children with love. Though I sometimes bristle, she has set a bar I seek to rise to.

This ethos, that affirmed the individual, was neither happen-

stance nor the result of good hiring. In monthly pilgrimages to teach with care, we gathered as staff around a colleague's questions, drawing on descriptions to collaboratively find caring ways to respond to children and work.<sup>5</sup> And so ensconced in such a community, my story ends with loving perception. After expressing that I could not trust Hymena, I write how the next day I:

manage to sit her down and discuss the day before saying I sent her to Alison not as punishment but because she needed a break from me and she agrees and then [I] tell her all the things I like about her trying to convince her that her worth is not based on academic performance as Alison worries and I agree, Hymena feels. Hymena cannot come up with anything good to say about herself and I try to be specific and then I ask her for a good day and she is bright and engaged and charming all day and damn, it's a lot of work maintaining her emotionally.

In a move that becomes common throughout the journals—I recast our conflict. No longer framing Hymena as a problem needing to be removed, I became the issue that she needed a break from. I then fix on Hymena a loving gaze that, in sharing Hymena's unique and special attributes, mimics the one that Alison and Hannah had fixed on me. Just as I found a way forward after my colleagues looked upon me unbroken, Hymena "is bright and engaged and charming all day."

When Hymena asked me to sign the morning message with "love" and Alison suggested I "nurture," I didn't feel safe enough. With the support of her and others, I began a path to nurturing. The following year, from the first day of school, I signed love. Though I no longer write a morning message, I feel love walking into each new classroom. Responding to Cammarano's query, what would it take you to see me

unbroken? It would take classrooms where unconditional welcome is offered in love, schools where colleagues travel as pilgrims to see each person as unbroken. If we are to have justice, particularly justice for students of color like Hymena, we need schools that help teachers be at home while traveling to their students' worlds.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to Hymena, Hannah Dickinson, Carol Fitzgerald, Alison Hazut, and Christine Sparks. It is dedicated to the Philosophy Fellowship, 2020 Summer Reading Group, and most importantly Cristina Cammarano. Hymena is a pseudonym. All other names have been used with permission.

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1 Cristina Cammarano, "What Would it Take You to See Me Unbroken? Insights from María Lugones on Cultivating Loving Perception in Teaching," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (same issue).

2 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. Feminist Constructions (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 79.

3 Gratitude to Cecilia Espinosa and Stephane Barile for having us reflect on this word in the Philosophy Fellowship and to my fellow participants for insights that drew me to notice this word I otherwise glossed over.

4 Cristina Cammarano, *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (same issue).

5 Cara E. Furman and Cecelia Traugh, *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice: Cultivating Practical Wisdom to Create Democratic Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2021).