From Empathetic Understanding to Engaged Witnessing: Encountering Trauma in the Holocaust Classroom

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Abstract. A commitment to empathetic understanding shaped the field of religious studies; although subject to critique, it remains an important teaching practice where students are charged with the task of recognizing, and perhaps even appreciating, a worldview that appears significantly different from their own. However, when the focus of the course is historical trauma there are significant epistemological and ethical reasons empathetic understanding may not be our best pedagogical strategy. Drawing primarily on my experience teaching a general education class “The Holocaust and Its Impact” at California State University, Bakersfield, I advocate replacing empathetic understanding with engaged witnessing as a pedagogical framework and strategy for teaching traumatic knowledge. To make this case, I delineate four qualities of engaged witnessing and demonstrate their use in teaching about the Holocaust.

When trigger warnings migrated from blogosphere to the classroom syllabus, many of us in the trenches of critical pedagogy and feminist classrooms recognized another iteration of the desire for “safe space.”1 If we are, to invoke the words of bell hooks, “teaching to transgress” – educating for purposes of greater human flourishing and freedom – then we need to distinguish between a learning environment that does harm and a learning environment that challenges, provoking both discomfort and the possibility of transformation. One of the many good reasons faculty express concern about trigger warnings is that students and administrators may conflate emotional harm with emotional discomfort, and, thus, shut down educational opportunity. Another important objection relates to the efficacy of trigger warnings: a teacher cannot presume to know what will trigger a harmful emotional response in any particular student, especially in relation to past trauma (Freeman et al. 2014).

Still, questions regarding the responsibility of teachers when engaging obviously traumatic material remain. I teach about the Holocaust. This is where I confront most starkly the tensions between teaching traumatic knowledge and empathetic understanding, a foundational methodology of religious studies that is predicated on a form of identification with the other. One tension revolves around the desire to spare students

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1 I have had the good fortune of multiple conversation partners during the writing of this article. I am grateful to the Religion, Holocaust, and Genocide Group of the American Academy of Religion, the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion for providing spaces – and in the latter two cases, funding – to make those conversations possible. In addition, Brenda Ihssen, Debra Jackson, Patricia O’Connell Killen, Tom Pearson, Ben Zeller, and two anonymous peer reviewers provided thoughtful and critical feedback to earlier drafts of this article.
emotional pain and the conflicting desire to help students understand the experience of another when pain is a critical element of the other’s experience. A second tension revolves around the very ability to know the trauma of another and, thus, accurately understand his or her experience. Teaching about the Holocaust in different contexts and talking with students and educators in various disciplines about these tensions led me to rethink the subject position of the student in the classroom. I now see my role as modeling and teaching strategies to help students become engaged witnesses. In what follows, I set out why I believe empathetic understanding is inadequate for the task of teaching traumatic knowledge and then suggest some pedagogical strategies to assist in the formation of engaged witnesses.

In teaching about the Holocaust, the challenges to empathetic understanding of this historical trauma are well-documented. In an influential essay, Shoshana Felman drew attention to the pedagogical risks of teaching the Holocaust by discussing a crisis of witnessing in her classroom (1992). In Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma, Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert set out to explore teaching and remembrance practices that “remain in relation with loss without being subsumed by it” (2000). Laura Levitt also focused on a classroom’s experience encountering the Holocaust, in this case with the visit of a survivor, and argued that teachers and scholars must consider the multiple impacts of representations of the Holocaust as students bring their own life experiences, including experiences of trauma, to these materials (2004). Hirsch and Kacandes bring together scholars throughout the humanities who focus on the challenges of representation in various genres as well as particular canonical Holocaust texts (2004). Since Felman’s inaugural essay more than twenty years ago, an increasingly nuanced and sophisticated investigation of Holocaust pedagogy has emerged, and a solidifying of best practices is in process. In what follows, I present several epistemological and ethical reasons empathetic understanding may not be our best pedagogical strategy for teaching about historical trauma. In its stead, I suggest we utilize engaged witnessing as a pedagogical framework and strategy for teaching traumatic knowledge. To make this case, I will delineate four qualities of engaged witnessing and demonstrate their use in the general education class I teach at California State University, Bakersfield: “The Holocaust and Its Impact.”

Empathetic Understanding in Religious Studies
A commitment to empathetic understanding shapes teaching practices in many religious studies courses. Empathetic understanding is predicated on the idea that significant knowledge is gained when we can sympathetically imagine ourselves in the position of an other. Although there is a robust tradition of critique, religious studies textbooks, and

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2 The current iteration of this course focuses on four Student Learning Outcomes specific to the Holocaust course content, which are then mapped onto Religious Studies and General Education program outcomes (see full list at http://www.csub.edu/ge/_files/GE_CourseRequirements_SLOs.pdf).

The four course-specific outcomes are: (1) analyze religious, political, and cultural forces and factors that shaped Nazi ideology (RS: 1A, 1B; GE: TS-1A, TS-1B); (2) define anti-Judaism and antisemitism and discuss their dual role in the development of the Holocaust (RS: 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4C; GE: TS-1A, TS-1B); (3) describe the experiences of different persons in the Holocaust: victims, perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers, and survivors (RS: 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 2C; GE: TS-1A, TS-1B WR-1A, WR-1B, WR-1C, and WR-1D) and (4) recognize implications of the Holocaust for issues relating to human rights, genocide, and politics in the present (RS: 1A, 1B, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A, 4B, 4C, 2A, 2B, 2C; GE: TS-1A, TS-1B).
many of the teachers who bring them to life in the classroom, still regularly extol the virtues of empathetic understanding. We help students cultivate qualities of openness and honesty along with techniques of analysis and synthesis in an effort to understand, as outsiders, how a variety of religious experiences, shaped by history, are made meaningful to insiders. Baldly stated, empathetic understanding asks learners to approach their study with the question—why is this belief (or practice) meaningful for those who are the subject of our study? One answers this question by attempting to place oneself in the shoes of another. I find this a useful strategy, especially in general education classes where students are charged with the task of recognizing, and perhaps even appreciating, a worldview that appears significantly different from their own. For example, in a lower-division general education course on Asian religions, a majority of students in the classroom are disoriented by confrontation with the multiple, colorful, powerful, visible gods and goddesses of Hinduism. The disorientation provides an opportunity for them to recognize their orientation to the world, that they have a worldview that is not universal. Working from a commitment to empathetic understanding, students first recognize their own personal, emotional connections, and then realize that other people coming from other cultural perspectives will also have personal and emotional connections to their cultural constructs of the sacred. Empathetic understanding can help build bridges between particular and universal. Thus, in a course on death and dying, a good portion of the course begins with the fact that the world mortality rate is 100 percent. Death is universal. Students study how different religions create cultural meaning out of the biological fact of death. Ninian Smart argues that this stance is at the core of the phenomenological method as used in religious studies, which is comprised of suspension of belief and use of empathy for “entering into the experiences and intentions of religious participants” in order to “bring out what religious acts mean to the actors” (Smart 2003, 143). For students in religious studies courses, this can also manifest, contrary to what we often tell our students, in a challenge to their theological perspectives, as religious exclusivism is increasingly difficult to maintain when one truly acknowledges the validity of another’s worldview.

Some of the most compelling critiques of empathetic understanding are related to this false assumption of objectivity. In many of my general education classes, I introduce students to one of the classic strategies of phenomenological method in religious studies, helping them identify and then temporarily “bracket” their own worldview (Simmons 2006). Many students find this incredibly helpful in their desire to appreciate others’ religions, and, yet, it is also problematic. Is it really possible to set aside the most basic presuppositions by which one engages issues of ultimate meaning, especially as one is encountering foundational questions? Although the discipline of religious studies and its presence in secular universities still depends on the distinction between teaching religion and teaching about religion, students are often unmoored by their academic explorations, especially as they may enter the classroom expecting spiritual exploration and instead encounter an almost exclusive focus on critical thinking.

3 A few examples sitting on my bookshelf include World Religions Today (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 2012), Studying Religion (Kessler 2008), and Introducing World Religions (Urubshurow 2008).

4 I use the term “bracketing,” and Simmons introduces the term “neutral enthusiasm” as a helpful descriptor of the teacher’s pedagogical stance (2006).
Furthermore, as Trelstad also notes in her survey of critical pedagogy, a turn to individual empathy can mask the dynamics of power that marked the very development of “empathetic understanding” in the field of religious studies as an approach to knowing – and exercising power over – others through colonial, neo-colonial, and post-colonial practices (Trelstad 2008). Nevertheless, used strategically in conjunction with critical pedagogies, empathetic understanding can serve as a strategy to avoid privileging one tradition as the norm against which others are measured. Ninian Smart defends this mode of comparison on three grounds, and I have found this to be mostly true in my own teaching. Comparison through the strategy of empathetic understanding can: counter the “cultural tribalism” present in Western universities; raise “fruitful” questions for people to consider within their own worldviews; and provide a source of insight, especially as religion is mostly ignored in the social sciences (Smart 2003, 145). A full exploration of the benefits and limits of empathetic understanding are beyond the scope of this paper. Here, I want to narrow the focus to a particular type of course. While empathetic understanding serves as an important educational tool, particularly when students are introduced to religions they perceive as “other,” I argue that it is an impoverished pedagogical strategy from which to engage traumatic knowledge. In the section that follows, I set forth ethical and epistemological challenges of empathetic understanding in relation to traumatic knowledge, and consider the pedagogical pitfalls that can result.

**Traumatic Knowledge and the Limits of Empathetic Understanding**

We can trace the etymology of the term “trauma” to the Greek term meaning “wound.” At the turn of the twentieth century, thinkers began to employ the term to describe “the wounding of the mind – what we now call the psyche – brought about by a sudden, unexpected, shattering emotional shock” (Brodzki 2004, 123–124). In the humanities, the work of Cathy Caruth greatly expanded the scope of this concept. In “The Wound and the Voice,” the introduction to her influential text, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she examines the concept of trauma and its implications for re-thinking narrative and history (Caruth 1996). Trauma informs both narrative and history by highlighting the belatedness of knowledge, the role of the witness to an experience that is not fully known, and the links formed between individuals and collectives through traumatic experience. The wound is accompanied by the voice in Caruth’s analysis because trauma is a wound that cries out to be heard. Trauma as an analytic category has since infiltrated the humanities, as scholars and teachers have attended to the epistemological and ethical challenges of learning about and learning from traumatic knowledge, especially from social traumas such as genocides. As courses on the Holocaust have dramatically increased, particularly as sources for ethical education, some teachers have also attended to the potential traumatic impact on students in the classroom. In keeping with this trend, I use the term “traumatic knowledge” to describe subject matter that can “wound the mind” through intentional, sustained attention to understanding acts of extreme violence that violate the integrity of the self.

One set of limits posed by traumatic knowledge relates to the question: How can we know the experience of another, particularly when that experience is marked by trauma,

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5 Walvoord’s research (2008) shows the mismatch of expectations that can add to students’ disorientation.
which differs from everyday experiences by its extreme violation of the self? This extremity threatens to compromise knowledge as a social endeavor. In his essay, “Torture,” from At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplation by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities, Jean Améry describes how his experience of trauma resulted in a break in self-knowledge. He writes:

I don’t know if the person who is beaten by the police loses human dignity. Yet I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something that we will perhaps temporarily call “trust in the world.” . . . the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will spare me – more precisely stated, that he will respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical, being. The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of myself. (Améry 1980, 28)

When the boundaries of the self are violated, trust in both self and world are diminished, and with them the certainties of knowledge, as a basic level of trust underlies our ability to know ourselves or another. Bella Brodzki describes this element of traumatic experience as involving “intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation such that the organism’s protective shield has been broken” (2004, 125). To the extent that the impact of trauma is transmitted to those who study traumatic events, the foundations of knowing are also called into question.6

Studying about torture and other forms of human violence can profoundly disturb us and our students; however, for most of us our encounters with this “useless knowledge” are mediated through the experience of another and dependent on our use of language. Direct knowledge is outside the realm of our personal experience, and counter to our underlying trust in ourselves and the social world we inhabit. As such, it is, on some level, unbelievable. Students confronted with traumatic knowledge, literally reply, “I can’t believe it!” This exclamatory language points to a second epistemological challenge, namely the incommensurability of traumatic experience and language. Charlotte Delbo captures this aspect of trauma in many of her writings including Useless Knowledge, the second part of her trilogy Auschwitz and After. “I’d been thirsty for days and days,” she writes, “thirsty to the point of losing my mind, to the point of being unable to eat since there was no saliva in my mouth, so thirsty I couldn’t speak, because you’re unable to speak when there’s no saliva in your mouth” (Delbo 1995, 142). She describes the risk her friends take to get her water, quench her thirst, save her life. Delbo concludes the chapter simply titled “Thirst” with the following observation: “There are people who say, ‘I’m thirsty.’ They step into a café and order a beer” (1995, 145). The gap between our everyday use of language, and the inability of that same language to capture events of extremity, pose an epistemological challenge that requires careful attention to how we represent trauma, how we place it in linguistic context. Furthermore, representational issues are raised by the belated nature of traumatic experience. Recounting experience in language is often an attempt to make sense of the experience after the event, to master understanding of it, but that mastery is often absent for victims

6 See Caruth’s analysis of Moses and Monotheism in the opening chapter of Unclaimed Experience (1996) for a powerful description of this dynamic.
of trauma (Friedlander 1994). Because of these three gaps to knowledge: its extremity, incommensurability in language, and belated nature – knowledge about trauma is necessarily also about its transmission and representation. The latency inherent in the traumatic experience, the inability for the event to be known in its entirety, means that empathetic understanding must also remain incomplete. An ethical pedagogy grounded in empathy will also acknowledge the epistemological limits of understanding.

In addition to the epistemological challenges, bringing traumatic knowledge front and center into the classroom presents ethical challenges as well, especially if empathetic understanding is employed as a primary pedagogical strategy. One of the most problematic unintended consequences is trivializing the other. When a student is asked to understand through an act of identification, but the gulf between her experience and that which she has not experienced is simply too wide to bridge, then the traumatic nature of the other’s experience may be denied. I offer an example, a true story, albeit an extreme one, to illustrate the point. In a writing composition class offered in conjunction with a general education course on the Holocaust where students were assigned Elie Wiesel’s Night (1982), students considered the promises and pitfalls associated with reading a first-person narrative. In the writing assignment students were asked to “reflect on the extent to which you identify with the characters and experiences related in the story. Then, in a four to five page thesis-driven essay address the following: What does Wiesel’s narrative contribute to our understanding of the Holocaust?” One student responded that she understood Wiesel’s sense of obligation and concomitant anger toward his father while they were in Auschwitz because of her own similar experience. She was given her grandfather’s car to get around in Los Angeles, and, as part of the deal, she had to chauffeur him to his doctor appointments and other errands. So, she could identify with Wiesel’s ambivalence. As the young graduate student who received this paper, I was appalled by the shallowness and complete lack of understanding it expressed. In retrospect, however, I am inclined to read her response more generously. The student was expected, for a grade, to make a leap of identification, and she drew on the closest experience she had at her disposal.

The flip side of trivializing the other is trivializing the self. When a student is asked to understand through an act of identification, the immensity of the traumatic experience may push the student to deny the significance of her own life-experiences. Another extreme example from the classroom will serve to illustrate the ethical problem. One course unit in “Introduction to the Study of Religion” investigates evil as a category for the study of religion. For a few years when I taught that course, I would assign Night (1982) along with the textbook chapter on evil. While students were reading the book, we also watched the powerful documentary The Last Days (1998). In one scene, we see women with shaved heads. A student in the class had recently lost a good friend to cancer, and the bald-headed women evoked memories of her friend’s struggle through chemotherapy. The student was visibly shaken, and eventually broke into tears and exited the classroom. I followed her to the restroom, where she was apologetic for leaving and proceeded to berate herself for feeling bad and leaving when the women during the Holocaust had endured so much worse than she. In this case, the student rejected the validity of her own experience of loss.7

7 On the issue of the immensity of the Holocaust leading to denial of other traumatic life experiences, including domestic violence, see Levitt (2007) and Gubkin (2007).
Another problematic response to the demand for identification is captured by the term redemptive closure. In a collection of essays published under the apt title *Admitting the Holocaust*, Lawrence Langer adamantly protests presentations of the Holocaust that include what he terms a “redemptive” aspect, which, he argues, is any attempt to locate meaning in the Holocaust experience, or to claim positive aspects to the experience (1995). Langer’s relevance for pedagogy is twofold: first, teachers often try to soften the potential traumatic impact of teaching about the Holocaust by placing stories of rescue or spiritual resistance at the end of the course, thus emphasizing Holocaust experiences that can be read as positive; second, the very project of Holocaust education suggests that learning about the Holocaust is a meaningful activity, and can thus easily engage in redemptive practices. Versions of redemptive Holocaust narratives abound and range from theological projects of redemption to aesthetic recuperation to emphasis on the “lessons learned from history,” so that “never again.” Unfortunately, this is a reasonable response to the pedagogical technique of empathetic understanding. If identification is the strategy for learning, then students are expected to imagine themselves in a place where the basic norms of self and society were egregiously violated. One cannot fault their healthy desire not to be there. Redemptive closure moves one out of the traumatic space. Sometimes redemptive narratives are essential for trauma victims’ recovery of self, and it is certainly the right and responsibility of survivors to craft their own narratives. However, we risk speaking for others in ways that can trivialize others’ experiences if we privilege redemptive narratives in the classroom (Alcoff 1996).

Four Strategies to Move from Empathetic Understanding to Engaged Witnessing

Forms of empathetic understanding that depend on identification create epistemological and ethical problems when teaching about trauma. The question, then, is how can students learn about historical trauma in meaningful, non-objectifying ways that do not put the students at increased risk of trauma, while still approaching an understanding that is not superficial in the face of the immense loss engendered by the historical trauma. Dominick LaCapra’s (1999) evocative phrase “empathic unsettlement” provides a useful starting point for rethinking empathetic understanding. LaCapra offers an important intervention into the discourse of empathy with the term “unsettlement,” which describes a response that “manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim” (1999, 699). As we have seen, teaching based on fostering empathy through identification runs the risk of paralyzing the student-turned-witness, or, alternately, replacing ethics and politics with sentimentality. Furthermore, education can be falsely redemptive, especially in the study of historical trauma, and thus foreclose effective response. To become unsettled opens up other possibilities. While this article focuses on teaching the Holocaust, the question of an adequate pedagogical framework for teaching historical trauma applies to other courses in religious studies where oppression, marginalization, and social justice are concerns. The following section offers an alternative pedagogical framework that I have named “engaged witnessing.” Engaged witnessing in the midst of traumatic knowledge includes four distinct qualities, or pedagogical strategies, for engaging historical trauma: studying the historical context; exploring multiple subject positions; including the position of the student; testing the possibilities and limits of representation; and utilizing emotion as a source for knowledge.

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8 My formative thinking on the position of the witness is especially indebted to the work of Friedlander (1994), LaCapra (2001), Laub (1992), and Young (1988).
Teach Historical Context

To be human is to be shaped by our particular situatedness in history. Of course, this is equally true for the men, women, and children who experienced the Holocaust, as it is for the students who study it. Navigating the precipice between self and other in the midst of the study of past trauma requires studying history. Students deserve some understanding of what they are being asked to bear witness to. For some teachers I may be belaboring the obvious. However, many Holocaust courses taught from outside the discipline of history minimize historical context when emphasizing the emotional devastation caused by the event, or its philosophical and theological challenges. Discussions about issues of ultimate meaning should not be abstracted from their particular circumstances. Historian Paul Salmons echoes this point in an article on teaching history when he poses the question of “whether an emotional experience, when shorn of historical understanding – no matter how powerful, memorable, and engaging, and regardless of whether it takes place at an authentic site, a film or theatre performance, or in the school classroom – can really be said to constitute learning about the Holocaust at all” (2010, 57). If there are “lessons to be learned” about the Holocaust, they must be grounded in an understanding of the historical circumstances that made the Holocaust possible.

History remains a focus throughout “The Holocaust and Its Impact,” and a two-part opening week class activity serves to focus student attention on the topic. Students are required to keep a journal for the class. The journal serves multiple purposes, providing students with space for reading summaries, critical reflections, and emotional responses. One part of the first journal prompt asks them to record what they already know: “How much have you studied? Read? Seen? What comes to mind when you think of the Holocaust: Hitler? Concentration camps? Schindler’s List [Spielberg 1993]? Take some time to write about the images in your head.” At the beginning of the second class session, I draw a blank timeline across the board and ask students to help me fill it in. I now know what to expect, but they are always shocked at their collective lack of knowledge regarding specifics of what happened when. It is especially disconcerting for those who answered the opening journal question: “Why should we study the Holocaust? What brought you to this class?” with a formulaic rendition of George Santayana’s oft mis-quoted observation, “Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it” (1905, 284). I then introduce the term genocide, which places the Holocaust in relation to other traumatic historical events, before turning to a discussion of possible first dates on the timeline. The class then begins the historical narrative with a series of preconditions for the Nazi killing processes, including pre-modern theological anti-Judaism and pre-modern Jewish self-understanding, racial anti-Semitism in the context of the modern nation-state, and the Nazi ideology and politics that created a racist state. The rest of the historical introduction, taking students through to the midterm, focuses on the killing program through ghettos, mobile killing squads, and concentration and death camps. When students prepare a timeline including the dates and significance of key events as part of their midterm exam, they demonstrate their basic understanding of historical context, an important quality of engaged witnessing.

Present Multiple Subject Positions to Analyze Complex Issues

A second important quality of engaged witnessing is attention to multiple subject positions. Focusing on multiple subject positions, in both past and present, provides an important intervention into the problem of over-identification. For example, in the
historical overview, two topics likely to trigger students’ propensity for “redeeming the Holocaust” – and thus bearing false witness – are rescue and resistance. These are also two of the safest and most tempting subject positions with which to identify. Surely, one would rather see oneself as a person who fought back – either for oneself or by helping others – than as a victim, perpetrator, or bystander. In the first version of “The Holocaust and Its Impact” that I taught, my strong commitment to anti-redemptive understandings of the Shoah led me to minimize the importance of rescuers. I was rightly challenged on this by a retired math professor who audited the class. When I acknowledged my mistake, he suggested ending the course with the stories of rescuers, and creating a redemptive narrative arc for the course. I have since decided that the most responsible place in the historical overview for a discussion of rescuers is in our examination of the ghettos, when Jews had more options than in front of the Mobile Killing Units (Einsatzgruppen) or in the concentration camps, even though there exist amazing accounts of rescue from these situations. The same challenges for creating redeeming narratives and comfortable subject identifications appear when studying resistance; the ghetto provided more relative freedom than the concentration camps, although even during well-known acts of resistance, such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the resisters were deliberately choosing how they wished to die. Students are introduced to the scholarly debates and are provided a series of questions to consider: When and where did Jews, and other persecuted groups, resist? What counts as resistance? Is unarmed resistance a possibility? Do the results of resistance matter, or is intention also an important criterion? As students study the particular contexts and factors that most often made armed resistance impossible, they become more able to bear witness to the assault made on the people’s status as human beings. I ask students to occupy the subject position of witness to both the paucity of rescue and resistance and the incredible impact of those rare acts.

By the fourth week of class, students are primed to intentionally reflect on their position as engaged witnesses. The challenge of representation is an explicit focus in our study of the Einsatzgruppen that had murdered more than one million Soviet Jews as well as tens of thousands partisans, Roma, and disabled persons by the spring of 1943. Students are introduced to the horrific role of the Einsatzgruppen through an illustrated map created by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to provide an overview of the when, where, and toll of this particular form of mass murder. The assigned readings that follow come from diverse perspectives: past and present, victim and perpetrator, historian and activist. A Nazi report succinctly presents the mass murder: “The Sonderkommando 4a in cooperation with Headquarters and two commandos of Police Regiments executed 33,771 Jews on 29 and 30 September ‘41 in Kiev” (Hochstadt 2004, 110). The execution of almost 34,000 people in two days is summarily presented in a single sentence. Students search for what is missing in this description in their next set of readings. Historian Christopher Browning’s description of a massacre based on court transcripts followed by his analysis of reasons “ordinary men” participated in mass murder provides some insight into the social, political, and psychological motivations of the perpetrators. Students also get a brief glimpse of the humanity of the killers as they recounted the horror they experienced while executing Jewish men, women, and children in courtroom testimony (Browning 1992).

Students’ discussions of their journals on this reading are animated as they sort through the various subject positions: some students come to feel empathy for the killers and wrestle with recognizing their humanity; other students notice that in this situation...
the perpetrators were given a clear choice whether or not to participate – and that the vast majority did; other students draw attention to the fact that the historian is working from court transcripts where the soldiers were facing potentially severe consequences for their actions and thus these are certainly not “objective” sources. And none of this information includes the voices of the victims. Students recognize they are enmeshed in a study with epistemological challenges. At this point, many students are frustrated. They thought they knew about the Holocaust, and what they are discovering is that the more they study, the less they know. Journals provide an important outlet for this frustration and provide a place for students to reflect on their own position in the present.

The final reading on this topic pushes at questions about the subject position of present witnesses to past trauma. In *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Discover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, Father Patrick Desbois describes a compelling need to “understand what happened” and sees it as part of his own family history as his grandfather was “forced to witness” the Holocaust (2008). Eventually, Desbois assembles a team to document the killing of Jews in the Ukraine. As he recounts his journey where he is accompanied by interpreters, transcribers, drivers, a photographer, and a ballistics expert, students are also positioned as witnesses trying to understand. In these readings students navigate multiple representations, with their multiple subject positions and historical complexities, without redemptive closure.

(3) Make Issues of Representation an Explicit Subject of the Course

One reason for the importance of representation as a quality of engaged witnessing follows from the importance of multiple subject positions. The multiple subject positions and their vantage points are captured not only in historical narratives but also bureaucratic reports, courtroom testimony, war-time diaries and letters, and post-war memoirs. A second reason representation matters is that students bring different vantage points into the classroom. In the context of an upper-division general education classroom, students come from a wide array of majors with their distinct disciplinary approaches to knowledge. A deliberate multi-disciplinary approach of the class includes texts not only from history and religious studies but also political science, sociology, theatre, literature, and philosophy. This is important for students to have some ground to speak from, some place of secure knowledge, even as it is challenged throughout the course. Lessons each week include multiple perspectives, and students are likely to briefly discuss the significance of this in class during small-group text analysis activities. A third reason representation is critical for engaged witnessing derives from the specific challenge of representation in the face of trauma, the inability for language to fully express the nature of the wound. Given the numerous epistemological and ethical issues entangled in any attempt to represent historical trauma, “the challenge of representation of the Holocaust” is part of the course description for “The Holocaust and Its Impact.” It is important not to underestimate how the challenge of representation can be disorienting for students. Many are not used to entering class and being asked to think about what they do not know and what they cannot know. Art and literature use image and word to point beyond image and word. Film is an important genre to help students identify issues of representation that might pass them by if the focus were solely written texts.

To return to the example of their study of the Einsatzgruppen: After discussing the written texts, students watch an excerpt from a 2006 documentary about the Holocaust.
in Ukraine. Most of Spell Your Name requires subtitles, so students are confronted with the fact that they are reading and watching in translation. For many students this is frustrating, but it also helps focus attention on non-verbal elements. The documentary weaves together archival footage, survivor testimony filmed by the Shoah Foundation and new interviews with now-elderly witnesses in Ukraine to bear witness to the past. The documentary also places the class in a complicated present: three young Ukrainian students struggle with their own roles as witnesses who transcribe testimonies of local residents; holiday festivities show the persistence of ethnic stereotypes; attempts to memorialize sites of mass murder are blocked. Sifting through these multiple vantage points, students use their journal to think about history and representation, including how the medium of film further complicates how and what they know.

(4) Incorporate Emotions as a Source of Knowledge

Their journal prompt about film also asks them to reflect on the fourth quality of engaged witnessing by paying particular attention to their emotional responses. An observation about the nature of Holocaust films introduces their journal questions for the week: “Holocaust films oscillate between the power to lead to better understanding and promote empathy, on the one hand, and the danger of creating numbness, disinterest, and loss of empathy on the other” (Lubin 2004, 221). The prompt continues: “What kinds of emotional responses did these films provoke? Think back to the particular moments that generated responses for you. What was happening on the screen? Did these films promote empathetic understanding, or create numbness/disinterest?” Whether to include knowledge from emotion – and how to do so ethically – is an ongoing area of debate in Holocaust pedagogy. Engaged witnessing recognizes emotion as an important and fragile source of knowledge and provides structured opportunities for analysis of affect without exploiting students’ emotional vulnerability. Many educators have moved away from deliberately utilizing emotionally distressing material to introduce students to the horrors of genocide. The “shock and awe” approach is increasingly less popular as more teachers understand the impediments posed by traumatic knowledge. In their “Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust,” the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reminds educators that “graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the objective of the lesson.” One Holocaust educator compares the shock and awe approach to waking up your young child in the middle of the night to share your worst nightmare. While there may be good intentions to help students enter into the class with a sense of what is at stake, this approach is more likely to shut down than open up possibilities for learning. Nevertheless, I do not ask students to claim the position of “objective” historians who leave their emotions at the entrance to the classroom. Students need spaces in the class to acknowledge the emotional impact of their learning.

Affective analysis, attending to emotion as a legitimate source of knowledge, promotes empathetic unsettlement in the classroom. This opens up space to mourn, and, ultimately, to engage as an ethical witness with the traumatic knowledge brought by the Holocaust. In teaching about the Holocaust, mourning can occur through attention to the singularity of what was lost – not only six million Jews, eleven million victims, but also

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9 I am grateful for the collegial friendship of Holocaust Educators Skip Aldrich and Bill Younglove who have helped me think through these issues and conduct workshops for Social Science and Language Arts teachers in Kern County.
the story of each one of those individuals. Singularity in the midst of genocide opens space for what Jill Petersen Adams names “irreconcilable mourning . . . an ongoing historical-ethical attention to the dead other as fully other” (2011). By creating space for explicit attention to students’ own emotional reactions, they are invited to empathize without blurring the boundaries between self and other. To speak out of one’s own experience means acknowledging, attending to, and analyzing the cognitive and affective aspects of one’s own engagement with traumatic knowledge. Mourning in Adams’s argument is not a gesture toward closure but a mode of being in relation to the Shoah. This subject position helps teachers and their students navigate the potentially problematic dynamic. As educators, we should resist redemptive closure, but on the other hand, we want to avoid traumatizing future generations who are willing to bear witness, leaving them without false hope but paralyzed by an extremity that cannot be worked through.

An Example of Engaged Witnessing: Researching the Children of the Lodz Ghetto

Students come into our classrooms with different knowledge bases, temperaments, maturity levels, and relevant life experiences. Engaged witnessing takes seriously both the life experiences that students bring into the classroom and the risks posed by sustained attention to traumatic knowledge. In the first major assignment for “The Holocaust and Its Impact,” students utilize the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to research the fate of children of the Lodz ghetto (http://www.ushmm.org/online/lodzchildren/). Museum staff members provide amazing technical support for this ambitious project, which is both historical and memorial. The assignment is introduced after students learn about the role of the ghettos in the Nazi project. Students then learn more specifically about the Lodz ghetto through a series of introductory videos, which include detailed historical information they can access as they explore the USHMM archive as well as “how to” videos as they encounter the challenges of conducting research.

The assignment, which focuses on “13,000 children who signed an album of hand-drawn New Year’s greetings presented to Jewish Council chairman Chaim Rumkowski in September 1941,” has two components. First, they must spend a minimum of four hours on the Children of Lodz Ghetto Research Project site and keep a record of their activity. This includes what they did on the site as well as their thoughts and feelings about their work. The combination of historical research and reflection is critical. The first entry from Jaime’s research log is fairly typical:

Friday 1/28: 10:50–11:52pm
Started phase one. Picked name from the student list. Picked the name Jakub Goldberg in the database Lodz Ghetto Database (vol.1–4 and 5). I received twenty-two names. Only three turned out to be right according to the age, and the school they went to: Went to school 13B, those children would be born between 1926 and 1931. Two of my boys were born in 1928 and one was born in 1929. The rest of the dates in the database did not match.

10 The assignment said, “Each entry should include the date and time, a description of what you did while on the site, and a short reflection on the process. In other words, describe what you did and your thoughts about what you were (or weren’t) able to discover.”
One of my children stuck out, the Jakub that was born in 1929, under his name he was categorized as a “schueler.” The other two did not. Felt a little lost on this first day, so I logged out from here, didn’t even turn in the name. I was blown away by all the children on the list. The loss of one child is tragic, but hundreds of thousands.

Students struggled with the research, and gained an appreciation for the difficulty of knowing about the past. Many of them also became invested in the child or children they chose to research.

In addition to the short reflections within the research log, students completed a brief reflection on the experience, which addressed three questions: “(1) What do you know about the Lodz ghetto, and the children who lived there, that you did not know at the beginning of this project? (2) What did you learn from the primary sources and what significant facts remain unknown? (3) To what extent was this project ‘a fitting memorial to the young lives cut so tragically short?’ ” This task of engaged witnessing provided an opportunity for students to integrate their cognitive and affective learning and to reflect on their roles as students and researchers. Jaime, the student who found himself overwhelmed by the reality of thirteen thousand children, concluded his reflection with an observation on the extent of his learning:

Before I took this class and participated in this project, I literally knew very little about Jewish ghettos, and even less about the children who lived in them. This project opened my eyes to the fact that there is more to the Holocaust than Auschwitz and Hitler. Usually, at least in my experience, those two names overshadowed everything else. Even though I had many shortcomings as a researcher, I am proud to have been a part of this project.

Clearly, Jaime expanded his historical knowledge and awareness of multiple perspectives, including his own as a researcher. He strove to be objective in the sense articulated by LaCapra: “Objectivity requires checks and resistances to full identification, and this is one important function of meticulous research, contextualization, and the attempt to be as attentive as possible to the voices of others whose alterity is recognized” (2001, 40). Jaime’s reflection acknowledges the present in terms of its limits (one cannot redeem the past) and its possibilities (one can learn and act for the wellbeing of the present and future). When students like Jaime become engaged witnesses, they eschew redemptive narratives, but do not “shut down” because they are active in mourning work, a memorial activity of honoring the past in the present.

Kristen entered the class with more background knowledge about the Holocaust because of a semester-long unit on it in her high school English class. Still she described herself as “not at all prepared to handle this research project.” Kristen writes:

I knew about the Lodz ghetto, but that knowledge has morphed from the conceptual to the pseudo-experiential; these children are no longer numbers or statistics, they have become living people for me. This project is a “fitting memorial to the lives cut so tragically short,” because it requires people not only to remember them, but to care about what happened to them.
LaCapra concludes his discussion of objectivity by clarifying its relation to empathy: “Empathy in this sense is a form of virtual, not vicarious, experience . . . in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own” (2001, 40). The contrast for Kristen between “The Holocaust and Its Impact” and her high school experience, which drew on strategies of identification and redemptive narratives, spurred this future teacher to write a senior thesis critiquing those standard teaching practices. The Lodz Ghetto project was her first opportunity to truly think of her own experience in relation to – but radically other than – the traumatic experience she was studying. The term “pseudo-experiential” in her reflection speaks to the fact that for Kristen, like many students, a form of empathetic learning that does not demand identification, and integrates emotion into objectivity, may be rewarding but is also deeply unsettling.

Jaime’s and Kristen’s candor in expressing their feelings of being “overwhelmed” and “not at all prepared” bring us back full circle to the notion of “safe space” and the responsibilities of teachers in a learning environment suffused with traumatic knowledge. Clearly, a mere trigger warning on the syllabus is insufficient. While we cannot – and should not – guarantee a utopian safe space, pedagogical strategies for engaged witnessing offer a framework for a learning environment that acknowledges the risks of learning about traumatic knowledge and empowers students to enter into partnership with teachers to form a community of engaged witnesses. Teaching for the engaged witness requires intentional focus on historical context, multiple subject positions, and issues of representation. The fourth essential component is space to express and analyze emotion as a source of knowledge. I have drawn on “The Holocaust and Its Impact” to develop the argument for engaged witnessing because this is the class where I have felt most acutely the tensions between subject matter I teach and methodologies I learned as central to religious studies. However, I also find these strategies relevant when teaching religious studies classes that focus on gender and sexuality as they intersect with diverse facets of identity. Other classrooms where teaching for diversity is a goal often include encounters with present oppression and legacies of trauma. For example, conversations in this journal (Hill 2009, Harris 2009, Martinez-Vázquez 2009, Teel 2014, Scheid and Vasko 2014) explored how antiracist, womanist, and critical pedagogies inform effective strategies for “engaging students where they are, acknowledging the reality of oppression, and dealing with resistance” (Hill 2009, 3). Inspired by those conversations and informed by scholarship in Holocaust and trauma studies, I offer the concept of “engaged witness” as both a verb and a noun – describing what we might do in the classroom and pointing toward what we strive to become.

Bibliography


11 See also Kaja Silverman’s (1996) discussion of heteropathic identification.
From Empathetic Understanding to Engaged Witnessing


Gubkin


