

A Relational Ethic of Solidarity?

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At the center of critical pedagogy's ethical description of the student-teacher relationship stands the contested — yet politically and existentially profound — concept, “solidarity.” Paulo Freire made solidarity the defining aspect of a radical educational ethic in the early pages of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he draws the distinction between “false generosity” and “true solidarity.”¹ Bourgeois pedagogy, he argues, pretends to serve the interests of oppressed students while simultaneously defining them as “poor unfortunates” and excluding their knowledge from the curriculum. The teacher who joins oppressed students in “true solidarity,” in contrast, engages students as equals in praxis and pledges to work with the students to transform unjust institutions into institutions that allow all students to seek their own humanization. True solidarity is achieved only as teachers are able to abandon the interests of the oppressor group and commit themselves to a bond of unity with oppressed students. This fundamental vision of a teacher in solidarity with his or her students has ennobled many educators who pursue their craft in hope that they can further the development of a better society. And for many critical educators, a commitment to solidarity with one's students stands as an unquestioned maxim.

Yet, the ontological, ethical, and political objections to Freire's vision of solidarity are daunting. Emmanuel Levinas's thought offers the ethic of solidarity a challenge that is both ontological and ethical, for Levinas contests the existentialist conception of human relationships that undergirds Freire's theorization of solidarity. In Levinas's version of human relationships, I — as a teacher — encounter in the face of the student an infinite and unknowable other, and I would be violating this primordial experience of alterity if I were to represent my relationship with the student as one in which the other and myself are unified. In Levinas's words, “The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery.”² More basic than any posited unity stands the radical difference of the other. In Jacques Derrida's words, the face of the other is encountered “before solidarity” and “without communion.”³ The Freirean teacher — who would cover over this mystery by claiming to have achieved a bond of unity with his or her students — betrays this fundamental existential reality. Were I to claim to be in solidarity with a student, I would disrespect her or him by offering a totalizing denial of the student's unknowable being — an effort to represent as unified what cannot be unified. The positive value that Freire ascribes to solidarity is here reframed as a flight from reality and a willingness to violently reduce the being of the other to meet the teacher's egoistic vision of social change.

Levinas's absolutely fundamental critique of the ethic of solidarity is joined by Elizabeth Ellsworth's political critique which focuses (in part) upon Freire's

assumptions that the teacher can successfully abandon the interests of his or her own groups, know what is good for oppressed students, and work on behalf of them. Ellsworth reports upon her own positionality in a class with subaltern students:

As an Anglo middle-class professor... I could not unproblematically “help” a student of color to find her/his authentic voice as a student of color. I could not unproblematically “affiliate” with the social groups my students represent and interpret their experience to them. In fact, I brought to the classroom privileges and interests that were put at risk in a fundamental ways by the demands and defiances of student voices.⁴

From Ellsworth’s perspective, she can “never know about the experiences, oppressions, and understandings of other participants in the class,” and she could “never participate unproblematically in the collective process of self definition, naming of oppression, and struggles for visibility” pursued by her students.⁵ Critical pedagogy, in Ellsworth’s perspective, is overly optimistic about the possibility that teachers with privilege can shed their interests and fully understand the subaltern knowledges pursued by their students. A teacher acting in accordance with Freire’s conception of solidarity might foist his or her own understandings onto students through the deceptively egalitarian means of normalizing dialogue. Instead of enabling the development of subaltern knowledges, Ellsworth’s reasoning leads us to expect that Freire’s dialogue in solidarity would itself become a new form of cultural colonization or invasion.

Despite these all-but-decisive criticisms of the ethic of solidarity, I will argue for the enduring value of solidarity in critical education. However, I am, in many ways, in agreement with the criticisms stemming from Levinas’s and Ellsworth’s insights; Freire’s version of the ethic of solidarity founders due to its inadequate commitment to receptivity, to taking in those aspects of student perspectives that lie beyond the teacher’s imagination and political vision. Fortunately a more viable version of the ethic of solidarity is enacted in the pedagogies of Myles Horton and the teachers at the Highlander Folk School. For the teachers at Highlander, solidarity with students did not depend upon the students and teachers attaining a shared perspective or identity, and it was not assumed that the teachers knew more than the students. Indeed, the student was an unimpeachable expert, and the teacher’s role was to better enable the unfolding of the students’ perspectives. Horton and his colleagues found their way to an ethic of solidarity that made it possible to build upon the power of collectivity without reducing the students to an egoistic extension of the teacher’s political vision.

SOLIDARITY AND THE POWER OF COLLECTIVITY

The ethic of solidarity has appealed to many educators who believe, like Freire and Horton, that capitalist societies are divided into contesting groups with conflicting interests. In such a context, the educator, with what Lilia Bartolome calls “political clarity,” must determine whose interests he or she seeks to serve and the educational experiences that will best enable students to seek humanization and better the political circumstances of their groups.⁶ The initial decision to serve subaltern students comes as an absolute commitment. Freire’s decision to work on behalf of colonized peoples who seek to throw off the yoke of oppression and

Horton's commitment to working with organizing workers and civil rights activists, once made, were not to be questioned. Both men offer summary assessments that the system is unjust and that the plight of subaltern students must be changed. And this resolute commitment to solidarity with "oppressed" peoples in Freire's texts, or with striking miners or Negro civil rights activists in Horton's texts, finds expression in both political and educational contexts. Freire emphasizes the political aspect of solidarity when he says "true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these 'beings for another.'" The consciousness of oppressed people, reasons Freire, is constituted in their objective institutional relationships in society and cannot be transformed simply via a change in the attitude and knowledge of oppressed peoples. Therefore, true solidarity involves working with students to change those institutional relationships that subordinate them to dominant group members. In Horton's descriptions, the Highlander faculty showed its political solidarity with students who were adult union organizers and political activists by joining their picket lines, by working to provide food for striking workers, or by providing the materials needed to carry out a voter registration drive in a southern U.S. town which had prevented African Americans from voting.

The absolute commitment of solidarity also finds expression in Horton's and Freire's portraits of liberating educational interactions. Both men insist that critical teachers must have complete faith in their students and must scrupulously eliminate any behaviors or statements that would communicate a contrary message to the students. An expression of the teacher's absolute confidence in the students is necessary if subaltern students are to come to trust their own knowledge and their ways of reaching understanding. In Horton's words, "You have to respect their knowledge, which they don't respect, and help them to respect their knowledge."⁸ For Freire, oppressed students can come to respect their own thought processes as they engage in egalitarian dialogue and praxis with other students and the teacher. Freire calls this "speaking with" students, as opposed to "speaking to" them, and he emphasizes that the success or failure of critical pedagogy hinges upon the teacher's ability to enact this egalitarian commitment.⁹

In co-intentional education, the student and teacher have their joint attention trained upon the problem to be understood or the action to be taken. They think with one another, and the back and forth of dialogue allows the student and teacher to build upon one another, to find development of a shared stream of ideas, and to have the previously muted understandings of subaltern students emerge and take flight. Solidarity here refers — in a very specific way — to the ways in which knowledge is an intersubjective creation that emerges amongst people and is lived out in the teacher's commitment to this novel relational experience of coming to know. "The teacher," says Freire, "reexperiences his or her own capacity to know through the similar capacity to know that exists in the learners. To teach...is the form that knowing takes as the teacher searches for the particular way of teaching that will challenge and call forth in students their own act of knowing."¹⁰ It is the sincere and committed existential play of dialogue that brings subaltern knowledges forth, and

it is the teacher's role to initiate this form of intersubjectivity among oppressed groups.

Thus the ethic of solidarity in the pedagogies of Horton and Freire reflects the profound understanding that humans are collective beings, whose abilities to learn and think and act are developed most powerfully when they are positioned within intersubjective spaces that draw out their strengths, bolster their confidence, and call their intelligence to a higher level of attunement. Collectivities devoted to group projects call upon us to perform, and we respond with abilities that otherwise might never emerge. Recall that in Lev Vygotsky's research, the student is his or her most intelligent when performing as a member of a group and least capable when isolated.¹¹ The ethic of solidarity enacted by both Freire and Horton recognizes the power of the collective and posits the quite problematic possibility that collectivities, which bring together people from the oppressor and oppressed groups, might lead to the liberation of students. Freire and Horton hope to turn the knowledge and authority carried by teachers from the oppressor group toward the end of creating intersubjective spaces where counterhegemonic understandings can emerge and grow amidst a sea of disconfirming messages.

THE LIMITATIONS OF FREIRE'S ETHIC OF SOLIDARITY

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the ethic of solidarity is the potential that the teacher will enact a way of teaching that subordinates the students' perspectives to that of the teacher, thus limiting the potential growth of the student, recreating the power hierarchies of the society, and preempting the possibility that subaltern knowledge might be developed. And this totalizing potential is always present in critical education. Both Freire and Horton criticize themselves for allowing their political commitments to prevent them from truly hearing students. Freire says that, on occasion, his wife Elza would tell him that he had dominated educational sessions by imposing an academic way of speaking upon students who did not share his language.¹² Similarly, Horton criticizes his early teaching efforts at Highlander, saying, "we were going to bring democracy to the people, I mean bring to them like a missionary and dump it on them whether they liked it or not."¹³ However, Horton and his colleagues noticed that the students were entirely uninterested in their message, and they decided to reevaluate their pedagogical stances. Both Freire and Horton sought to develop ways to prevent the ethic of solidarity from descending into a totalizing subordination of the student to the critical teacher and his message. However, by discussing Freire's relational ethic in comparison to the thought of Levinas and Ellsworth, I think we can see that he was unsuccessful in developing a nontotalizing conception of solidarity.

For Levinas, respectful human relationships involve welcoming the other from a position of receptivity, with the assumption that we can never know him or her — that he or she will forever remain beyond any description we give.¹⁴ This radical openness is at odds with the temper of the decolonizing historical moment of which Freire was part. Motivated by the politics of Che Guevara and the political phenomenology of Frantz Fanon, Freire defined Brazil as a country divided into oppressors and oppressed, colonizers and colonized; such bold binary categories are

called for in revolutionary contexts, where the interests of groups are starkly opposed and revolutionary theorists seek to galvanize opposition to the colonial order. This revolutionary context and the narrative of liberation motivates and frames the meaning of Freire's ethic of solidarity, which — as a consequence — carries with it the totalizing imperative to bring students around to the revolutionary agenda.

From a Levinasian perspective, Freire's prioritizing of the narrative of revolution amounts to a "return of the Same": instead of listening for the alterity of the student other, the Freirean teacher will see in students — again and again — the mere embodiments of Freirean theory, an oppressed or a liberated student.¹⁵ Thus when Freire expresses frustration with *compensino* students who are "almost submerged in nature" and rely upon magical beliefs, he does not tell us of the students' actual practices and perspectives, that is, the ways they act out and understand their connections to the earth and to their traditions.¹⁶ Rather, we know only that the students' connection to the earth and their culture are impediments to them realizing their role in the revolutionary narrative — that the students will remain objects of history until they adopt a European worldview that privileges the agency of the student in solidarity with other oppressed students.¹⁷ If critical pedagogy can sever the students' umbilical cord with the land and pull them away from their traditions, it can help them along the path to critical consciousness and thus to becoming a subject of history.

The economy of the revolutionary narrative thus predetermines what the critical teacher can hear and see in her engagement with students and likewise guides and frames Freire's ethic of solidarity. The teacher is expected to commit "class suicide" in an effort to create an egalitarian bond with oppressed students.¹⁸ Solidarity can be achieved to the degree to which the teacher is able to join the student in a co-intentional process of praxis, where student and teacher develop an egalitarian give and take en route to explaining the social contradictions facing students; the students and teacher aspire to reach an agreed upon understanding of the contradictions facing students and the actions needed to work toward a more just society. If we think in a Levinasian spirit, we need not have difficulty with the suggestion that student and teacher should be co-intent upon the same social contradictions; rather, questions arise surrounding Freire's belief that a dialogue which is already framed by the political project of revolution is likely to show respect for the knowledge base of students — many of whom would have never considered revolution before the Freirean literacy program began.

Levinasian concerns about the critical educator's openness to student others are compounded by the powerful questions Ellsworth raises concerning the possibility that a privileged teacher could join oppressed students in solidarity. Freire's confidence in the political clarity (and assumed virtue) of the critical educator is — from Ellsworth's perspective — completely unfounded, for the educator has her or his own drive to power that receives expression in the will to dialogue with the oppressed.¹⁹ Educators must recognize that students and teachers all bring partial, interested, and potentially oppressive identities and ideas to the classroom

exchange.²⁰ The strategies of Freirean dialogue — where the perspectives of students and teacher merge into a single stream of consideration and aspects of the students' views can be disconfirmed via the teacher's logic — appears, from Ellsworth's perspective, to be a highly controlling exchange in which the understandings of many subaltern students would not be able to emerge.²¹ In her seminar on racism at the University of Wisconsin, Ellsworth does not allow herself to think that she has a pedagogical method which will allow the students' understandings to emerge. She has no confidence that she is free of racism or that she is on the same side as her students or even that she understands the knowledge her students bring to the course; students of color in the class commonly viewed her as a representative of the dominant group who voiced perspectives and represented interests at odds with theirs.²² Had Ellsworth entered the class expecting solidarity from the students, they may have responded with a variety of strategies of pretense, resistance, and circumvention, for despite any liberatory intentions Ellsworth brought to the educational exchange, the students understood her to be a white teacher with the power in the classroom, who continued to enjoy privileges that she would lose if a more egalitarian world were ever to emerge.

Teachers who believe they can become unified with their students in solidarity, despite the historic chasms created by colonial histories of genocide, enslavement, and stolen lands can reach such an optimistic conclusion by substituting abstract and ahistorical metaphors of “critical consciousness,” “liberation,” and “love” for the concrete dynamics that transpire amongst themselves and their students. Ellsworth complains that critical educators “consistently strip” educational discussions “of historical context and political position.”²³ Perhaps Ellsworth is better understood as a treasonous agent of white supremacy — a dominant group member who cannot reconcile her ethics with her own privilege, but she could not simply be transported out of her group's historic privilege and into the movement of people who are fighting for justice. Freire's ethic of solidarity might, in polarized contexts, serve as a form of willed ignorance and symbolic redemption — allowing the educator to magically transcend their oppressor status and join with the forces of good. As Gustavo Esteva, Dana Stuchul, and Madhu Prakash suggest, the love pledged by the educator for his or her students may serve primarily to convince the teacher of his or her own good will and blind him or her to their specific interests in “liberating the oppressed.”²⁴

In opposition to Freire's will to be bonded with students, Ellsworth — in consonance with Levinas — argues for a pedagogy based in the assumption that differences always separate students and teachers, and that respectful student-teacher relationships involve a willingness to work with those differences.

HORTON'S ASYMMETRICAL SOLIDARITY

Even though Horton and the teachers at Highlander did not view educational spaces through the poststructural lens employed by Ellsworth, they were able to develop an approach to solidarity that showed a profound commitment to drawing out the distinctive perspectives of individual students, despite the operations of hierarchical power relationships. Acting on a Levinasian belief in the asymmetry of

ethical relationships,²⁵ Horton and the teachers of Highlander adopted a one-way ethic of solidarity, where the teachers supported the students in their educational and political paths without expecting that the students were bonded with the teachers or owed the teachers anything in return. Instead of insisting upon a pedagogy which merged the thought of the student and teacher or attempting to bring the student around to the teacher's conception of critical consciousness, the Highlander teachers prioritized the perspective of the student by creating contexts which encouraged assembled students and teachers to rally behind the thought and planned action of each community activist. Thus the ethic of solidarity enacted by Horton and the Highlander faculty did not subordinate the student's educational trajectory to the teacher's revolutionary narrative.

The Highlander faculty sought to create intersubjective spaces which might call out the insights of students and enable them to develop solidarity with one another by enacting a Levinasian form of welcoming. Since local activists who came to educational events at Highlander were often suspicious of the teachers — of their class standing, their whiteness, or their academic background — the teachers would make a superogatory effort to help the students feel at home and comfortable. Horton repeatedly emphasized the importance of drawing students out and listening closely to their perspectives, and this stance of receptivity — by itself — disrupted many students' suspicions.²⁶ By violating then current expectations of how middle-class people treat working-class people and white people treat African Americans, Horton and other teachers sought to convince the students that the school operated in accordance with a democratic ethos regardless of social norms or laws.²⁷ Indeed, the educators sought to make the social relationships of the school a utopian glimpse of a just world in which people were loyal to one another while respecting their unique perspectives. This powerful intersubjective space was sought not through preplanned educational methods, but through the informal abilities of the participants. Horton said the teachers provided an "informal residential setting where [students] can relax and be encouraged to start thinking and talking among themselves. Out of this kind of interchange among peers — people who understood and are not intimidated by each other — we found a lot of learning would come."²⁸ The pedagogy, in keeping with Sharon Todd's argument for an "implied ethics," would arise out of the informal, on-the-spot decisions made by the students and teachers.²⁹

Out of these unplanned social engagements, Horton and the Highlander faculty did hope students would build a shared sense of solidarity, and the structure of their educational sessions encouraged the entire group to band behind each individual student. Each activist's predicament and plans would receive the attention from the full group at several points in the workshop, and, in the end, the individual was expected to describe to the group the exact action she or he intended to take once they returned home.³⁰ The student's thought was thus developed and emboldened through the give and take of group discussion, and the decision that emerged from those sessions then gained the power and the serious imperative that arose out of the group's wisdom and commitment. With the students taking the lead, the Highlander faculty provided whatever support the students might need to carry out their political

actions, whether this be in the form of printing and distributing leaflets, joining ongoing civil disobedience, or bailing protestors out of jail. With solidarity being called for by the situation, it appears as though many students did indeed develop a strong commitment to other activists and to the teachers at Highlander. For instance, when the Highlander School's property was confiscated by the State of Tennessee and the faculty was placed on trial, hundreds of former students came to testify in support of the school without being asked.³¹

The solidarity so basic to the Highlander educational program was paired with a profound individualism. The group focused on buttressing each student's understanding of their political situation, but that person's individual judgment was the final authority. Each student — Horton felt — knew the most about his or her own communities and the situations he or she faced.³² So students and faculty were guided to assume that each activist was the expert concerning his or her own community and the political actions being considered. If other students showed insufficient respect for a student's idiosyncratic statement, the faculty would warn against censoring one another and return to drawing out the student's perspectives. The respect given each student's word was paired with the responsibility to act on one's beliefs. Throughout the processes of teaching and political action, Horton continually insisted that the students did the brunt of the work, whether it was the analysis of their situations or the organizing in their communities. He dogmatically refused to make decisions for students, and he backed out of any organizational responsibilities he had assumed as quickly as possible. His hope was for people to control their own lives, and he was aware that he was a potentially paternalistic force that operated against this objective.

Highlander pedagogies were thus designed to avoid any subordination of the individual activist to the larger vision of revolution or the specific perspectives of the teacher. Rather, this was a form of solidarity that sought to line the revolution up behind the individual and the injustices that were structuring his or her specific community. A sense of unity came from a shared vision of a possible world that they had only glimpsed at Highlander Folk School.

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 27 and 31–2.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 75–6.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 90.

4. Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, eds. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 101.

5. Ibid.

6. Lilia Bartolome, "Beyond the Methods Fetish," in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, eds. Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 412–3.

7. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 31.

8. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road By Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 55.

9. Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road By Walking*, 63–4.
10. Paulo Freire, “Letter to North American Teachers,” in *Freire for the Classroom*, ed. Ira Shor (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1987), 213.
11. Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 84–90.
12. Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road By Walking*, 65.
13. *Ibid.*, 43. Frank Adams reports that Horton struggled to keep his own commitments in check in educational exchanges. See *Unearthing Seeds of Fire* (Winston-Salem: John Blair Publisher, 1975), 35–6.
14. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.
15. *Ibid.*, 43.
16. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 43.
17. Enrique Dussel contrasts the Marxist languages used by Zapatista leaders with the languages that are rooted in Indigenous traditions in *Beyond Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 167–8.
18. Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 27–8.
19. Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 105.
20. Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?” 114.
21. Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions*, 95.
22. Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?” 101–3.
23. *Ibid.*, 101.
24. Gustavo Esteva, Dana Stuchul, and Madhu Prakash, “From a Pedagogy for Liberation to Liberation From Pedagogy,” in *Rethinking Freire*, eds. C.A. Bowers and Frederique Apffel-Marglin (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 17–8.
25. Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1997), 208.
26. Myles Horton, *The Myles Horton Reader* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 154.
27. Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 176.
28. Horton, *Myles Horton Reader*, 177.
29. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003), 14.
30. Horton, *Myles Horton Reader*, 119–20.
31. *Ibid.*, 201.
32. Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 23–4.