

Considering the Standpoints of Differently Situated Others: Teachers and Arrogant Perception

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Many of us in the Philosophy of Education Society are familiar with the vexing problems associated with teaching about questions of diversity and inclusion as part of teacher education programs. In this context, where “practicality” is the chief area of concern for teacher candidates, philosophical analyses of oppression must be perceived to contribute to the pressing concerns of teaching workloads and classroom management as well as justice. Given the seemingly intractable nature of social relations of oppression in this historical era, determining how teacher candidates can address questions of diversity in ways that they will perceive as making a difference can be an uphill battle.¹

In this paper I hope to establish a base camp from which to climb that hill. I begin by focusing attention on some of the myriad ways teachers committed to diversity must “consider the standpoint of the other.”² With daily agendas that incorporate activities like reading, listening, interpreting, assessing, and caring, considering the standpoint of the other(s) in teachers’ work is vital.

Considering the standpoint of differently situated others is also complicated. Because I agree with Iris Marion Young’s assertion that it is neither possible nor ethically satisfactory to “take the other’s point of view” *per se*, I must, like her, provide an account of what is involved in considering the standpoint of differently situated others (AR, 40). Unlike Young, however, I want to emphasize epistemological rather than ethical dimensions of this task.

The particular set of epistemological questions that I address in this paper come into play as teachers occupy (or animate) subject positions of relative privilege either within the society at large or as a function of the normalizing processes of schools. My aims are strategic rather than comprehensive or definitive. I juxtapose a reading of Young’s analysis of asymmetric reciprocity (within the context of communicative ethics) with a reading of Maria Lugones’s analysis of arrogant and loving perception, “worlds” and “world-traveling.” My goal is to offer teachers a means of re-reading their participation in school purposes and their reception of student performances as resistance.

The paper proceeds in four sections: in the first, I provide a brief summary of Young’s argument for “asymmetrical reciprocity.” An asymmetric consideration, she asserts, aims for a differential, more fragile understanding. She emphasizes its openness to “wonder,” which is to say, its orientation toward communication (learning) that is capable of generating surprise rather than recognition.

Young’s account is useful in several ways: first, her depiction of the inaccessibility of moral postures that address others through a “reversal” of positions casts shadows on the transparency of teachers’ understandings of students’ experiences,

desire, interests, or knowledges. Second, her account of asymmetrical reciprocity expressly identifies the *differential* and *epistemological* work that must be accomplished by differently situated people as they consider the standpoints of particular others.

In Part Two, I present a reading of Lugones's conceptions of "arrogant perception" and "world-traveling." I pay particularly close attention to Lugones's account of what it means to "be at ease" in a "world," adding to her fourfold description, a fifth element that I base on Sue Campbell's enunciation of "social uptake."³

The third section of the paper moves to the level of institutional analysis. The object of study is that body of schooling practices that might be read as positioning teachers in subject positions of institutional arrogant perception. Finally, I anticipate two "practical" ways in which teachers might address notions of arrogant and loving perception: deconstructing their social locations and reorienting themselves with respect to students' resistance.

PART ONE: ASYMMETRICAL RECIPROCITY

Young introduces the contrast between her position and Benhabib's by distinguishing the *occasion* for moral reciprocity, which is to say, the moment when moral respect encourages persons to "take the needs and interests of everyone equally into account," from the *character* of reciprocity — the regard exercised.⁴ For Benhabib, taking the standpoint of the other involves "imaginatively representing to herself...the point of view of all others" (AR, 45). In her words:

The more perspectives we are able to present to ourselves, all the more we are likely to appreciate the possible act-descriptions through which others will identify deeds. Finally, the more we are able to think from the perspectives of others, all the more can we make vivid to ourselves the narrative histories of others.⁵

While agreeing with the reciprocity of moral acknowledgment, Young questions the symmetry and reversibility upon which Benhabib's account rests. She claims that Benhabib's appeal to symmetry is dependent upon the view that people are "similarly shaped." It is a model that, like empathy, seems predicated on being able to recognize oneself in the other.

Ontological symmetry, she says, is also the basis for Benhabib's confidence in the reversibility of moral regard. Her position is premised on a reading of Hegel's logic of the relation to self and other. "To know how to sustain an ongoing human relationship," Benhabib says, "means to know what it means to be an 'I' and a 'me,' to know that I am an 'other' to you and that, likewise, you are an 'I' to yourself and an 'other' to me."⁶ The question of whether reciprocal recognition requires reversibility, however, lies at the crux of Young's counter-position. She argues:

this structure neither describes nor presupposes a reversibility of standpoints. In fact, it precludes such reversibility because it describes how each standpoint is constituted by its internal relations to other standpoints.⁷

Young offers the relation of mother and daughter to illustrate her view that, by virtue of both generation and position, the subject positions are not reversible. Further, she emphasizes the need for taking account of the asymmetry of such

relations of difference in order to address their political impact.⁸ Young concludes that it is the nature of the relationship between one and the other, as well as the fluidly situated subject positions of one and another, that must be considered to achieve the “enlarged thought” of moral regard.

Young’s skepticism about the “reversibility” assumption of communicative ethics is important for teachers to think about. As I shall argue later in this paper, the irreversibility of teacher-student relations means that teachers must beware of relying exclusively on their own experiences of learning and schooling as they consider the standpoint of their students. In the following passage Young cites Melissa Orlie’s observations of the risks of extending to another, a viewpoint that originates with an understanding of oneself:

When one presumes to adopt another’s perspective without reflection on the boundaries of one’s own body and location, more often than not one simply imposes the view from there upon another. Indeed, this is the principle way of bolstering one’s location and demonstrates the effects involved in doing so. In such cases, one’s own view *arrogates* another’s and threatens to violate or do away with it altogether.⁹

In the face of the complexity and the political saturation of asymmetrical reciprocity Young advocates moral humility, which, she says, “starts from the assumption that one cannot see things from the other’s perspective and [must] wait to learn by listening to the other person” (AR, 49).

I believe that Young’s incorporation of the concept of asymmetrical reciprocity to theories of communicative action introduces an epistemological event to the core of moral regard. Though Young does not address this possibility directly, she articulates three postulates in the wake of her assertions regarding asymmetry that support my reading. In a discussion of understanding across difference, she advocates an interpretation of understanding that involves

sometimes getting out of ourselves and learning something new....Communication is sometimes a creative process in which the other person offers a new expression, and I understand it not because I am looking for how it fits with given paradigms but because I am open and suspend my assumptions in order to listen (AR, 53).

In a second discussion, she proposes that questions play a more significant role in analyses of communicative ethics. She writes:

By contrast, a theory of communicative action that gave more attention to the asymmetry of speakers, to the ways in which there are always excesses and resistances despite overlaps in the speakers’ interests and understandings, would attend more to questions as uniquely important communicative acts (AR, 55).

Finally, and as a consequence to the preceding observations, Young suggests that “wonder,” which she describes as “openness to the newness and mystery of the other person,” and which she means also to include “being able to see one’s own position, assumptions, perspective *as strange*, because it has been put in relations to others,” is a necessary concomitant to the mutual identification and sharing that constitute moral communication and respect (AR, 56).¹⁰

I argue that Young’s analysis speaks particularly well to questions of regard for others in teaching contexts. What I hope to describe compellingly throughout the remainder of this paper are the ways people — indeed, teachers — can undermine

their (our) own efforts to consider the viewpoints of differently situated others by neglecting to address the asymmetric elements of their relationships with others. Following Lugones, I refer to this danger as arrogant perception. As a corollary, which I can entertain only briefly in this short presentation, I suggest that, at least frequently, teachers' institutional subject positions *require* this kind of neglect from them, such that they are put in positions of institutional arrogant perception.

PART TWO: ARROGANT PERCEPTION

My interest in Lugones's work on arrogant perception has many points of origin but the one that is most dramatic for the purposes of this paper appears in the midst of her admonition to a group of women, of which I consider myself one. Lugones is writing, I would say, about one spectacularly unsuccessful mode of taking the standpoint of the other. She writes:

I am particularly interested here in those many cases in which White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. All of this *while we are in their midst*.¹⁷

Lugones does not consider White/Anglo women or men to be the only people capable of arrogant perception. She opens her paper with reflections on the manners in which she was taught, as a young woman of a certain class in Argentina, to perceive others arrogantly, including her mother and the servants who worked in her home. She was taught, and we White/Anglo women and men are taught, to "*graft the substance of others onto ourselves*." In other words, arrogant perception involves projecting one's sense of others onto them, usurping their substance. As arrogant perceivers our integrity (or our perceived integrity) does not require regard for the other at all. Lugones writes: "There is no sense of self-loss in them for my own lack of solidity....they rob me of my solidity through indifference, an indifference they can afford and which sometimes seems studied (*PWT*, 165).

"WORLDS" AND "WORLD-TRAVELING"

To say of some "world" that it is "my world" is to make an evaluation. One may privilege one or more 'worlds' in this way for a variety of reasons: for example, because one experiences oneself as an agent in a fuller sense than one experiences 'oneself' in other "worlds" (*PWT*, 171-72).

My express interest in this piece is to attend to the stunningly elegant philosophical move that Lugones makes by talking about arrogant perception not as the conscious, usurping attitude of the bigot, but as the unconscious, daily-life-constituting frame of reference of a subject so "at ease" with her place in "her world" as literally to ignore, render invisible, stereotype and leave untouched, the others upon whom her perceptions of the world does not depend. Lugones offers numerous references to what she means by "world," though she expressly avoids defining it. A "world" is a place inhabited

by some flesh and blood people....It can also be inhabited by some imaginary people. It may be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants of this "world" met in some other "world" and now have [presence] in this "world" in imagination (*PWT*, 168).

It may be an actual society, a society given a dominant culture's framing of gender, race, or class, or it may be a society given a non-dominant construction. Pressed for

brevity I want to assert a reading of “world” here that situates people in social contexts which they inhabit to a greater or lesser degree. It is important to note Lugones’s insistence that people can and almost inevitably do, inhabit multiple “worlds,” moving in and out of them, moving from one to another, or inhabiting more than one at a time.

My reading of “world” focuses on two characteristics: organization and self-other construction. Lugones writes:

In a “world” some of the inhabitants may not understand or hold the particular construction of them that constructs them in that “world.” So there may be “worlds” that construct me in ways that I do not even understand. Or it may be that I understand the construction, but do not hold it of myself. I may not accept it as an account of myself, a construction of myself. And yet I may be *animating* such a construction (*PWT*, 169).

I do not think it is a huge leap to suggest that Lugones’s sometimes unusual references to the possibilities of self-constructions are framed in unsettling terms because she wants them to unsettle us. Specifically, she wants to unsettle what I would refer to as a hegemonic desire for frames of reference about a common world.

Lugones postulates that people who are positioned outside the mainstream of dominant societies “travel” between these “worlds” as a matter of necessity and survival. She writes extensively of “playfulness,” the attitude she recommends for those who would want to “world-travel” for purposes of developing loving perception. To represent the work and possibility of “world-traveling” I select a passage from Lugones’s study of her efforts to perceive her mother through a loving rather than arrogant perception:

Loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother’s “world,” that I see both of us as we are constructed in her “world,” that I witness her own sense of herself from within her “world.” Only through this traveling to her “world” could I identify with her because only then could I cease to ignore her and to be excluded and separate from her (*PWT*, 166).

With the possibility of loving perception and “world-traveling” established as an aim, then, I want to return to Lugones’s account of what it means to be “at ease in a ‘world’” for it is from within a position of being maximally at ease, that Lugones suggests people might “have no inclination to travel across ‘worlds’ or have no experience of “world-travelling” (*PWT*, 171).

BEING AT EASE

Lugones identifies four ways of being at ease, and posits that the presence of all of them would equate with a maximal way of being at ease. I add a fifth and explain its derivation below:

1. Being a fluent speaker in a “world,” knowing all the norms to be followed, and knowing the words to be spoken. Being a confident speaker.
2. Being normatively happy, agreeing with all the norms, being asked to do just what one wants to do or thinks they ought to do, in the “world” they inhabit.
3. Being humanly bonded, being with those whom one loves and with those who love one.
4. Having a shared daily history (*PWT*, 171).

5. Being in a position to count on, or have the resources to secure, others' "uptake" of one's emotional expression.

I borrow the idea of social uptake from Canadian feminist philosopher Sue Campbell. Campbell builds upon Marilyn Frye's discussion of anger to develop a wide-ranging account of uptake as a factor in emotional expression:

Frye relates the story of a woman who snapped at a gas station attendant who was monkeying with a carburetor the woman had gone to some trouble to adjust: "He became very agitated and yelled at her, calling her a crazy bitch....He changed the subject — from the matter of his actions and the carburetor to the matter of her character and sanity. He did not give her anger uptake."¹²

Campbell's nuanced account of the political ramifications of recognizing the strategic value of refusing to offer social uptake deserves more attention than I can offer it here. Citing her conclusion, however, introduces questions of the materiality of social uptake to the current discussion of being at ease in a "world." Campbell claims:

We require a theory of affect that has a strong focus on the communicative nature of emotional encounters, one that does not regard the failures and achievements of expression as independent of an interpretive requirement. We further require a theory that has something to say about how resources for securing uptake can be unequally distributed so as to reinforce existing patterns of oppression, and how particular emotive criticisms can also serve this political goal.¹³

Though being at ease in a "world" is not a prerequisite for assessing a "world" as "my world," it is a state associated with resistance to "world-traveling," and it is this resistance about which I am concerned on behalf of teachers.

In the passage with which I opened this section, Lugones's indictment of the actions of white/Anglo women who perceived women of color arrogantly ends with the statement "*while we are in their midst*." Lugones highlighted that passage in her original presentation of the observation. For my purposes in this paper, it is the most critical link in the chain of argument. Arrogant perception is not always a matter of bigotry against those from another world. Indeed, part of what it means to inhabit a "world" is that we adopt frames of reference within which people in certain social locations are invisible, *even while they are in our midst*.

This problem quite likely confronts most of us. Teachers are certainly located within social positions of privilege by virtue of their class, gender, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, as are members of many professions. What teachers bear uniquely, however, is an institutional location and consequent subject position that, I shall argue in the next section of this paper, frequently, if not always, requires them to "take others into consideration" via arrogant perception. Institutional arrogant perception separates teachers from recognizing occasions when "world-traveling" would be possible, let alone helpful or ethically preferred.

PART THREE: INSTITUTIONAL ARROGANT PERCEPTION

I will now sketch an outline of the connections between institutional arrogant perception and the work of Young and Lugones. Young's account describes a set of epistemological tasks associated with attending to others. These included: approaching another with humility and wonder, being prepared for open-ended questioning, and adopting an active form of listening that sets aside one's own frame

of reference, at least temporarily. Endorsing the ethical import of these tasks would permit a naming of the direct harms of bigotry such as that which Lugones describes.

Beyond this, however, the picture of how teachers might be involved gets murky. Schools, and the teachers in them, are commonly expected not only to uphold human rights but to be pivotal agents in the broadening of social capacity — the capacities of the people in democratic societies — to also uphold human rights. Young and Lugones provide compatible frameworks for showing that teachers are not only being asked to do the impossible, they are being set up for failure.

My concern for institutional arrogant perception stems can be expressed in a series of three postulates:

1) *Schools operate as “worlds” in Lugones’s sense of the term; they are places of safety and “social uptake” for some and places of risk, indifference, assimilation, and invisibility for others.* Teachers are often people who either have always been “at ease” in schools, or who have come to a place of comfort there.¹⁴ For them, schools are places of safety, comfort, competence, and “being at ease”: teachers are usually people who are fluent speakers in that “world,” who know the norms and the words used. They are frequently normatively happy in school “worlds,” agreeing with the norms of that “world,” sensing that they are being asked to do just what they believe they ought to be asked to do. As a function of their locations and demographics, historically, teachers are usually people who occupy subject positions “at ease” in school “worlds.”

2) *Schools operate with assumptions of reversibility, symmetry, substitutability, and teleology in principle as well as de facto.* Despite decades of rhetorical allegiance to “child-centered learning” I suggest that schools operate with strong normative profiles framing expectations on every level. I have in mind expectations like: compulsory school attendance; assessment practices based on assumptions about what is “normal” achievement, normal behaviour, or normal definitions of success; and expectations having to do with compliance — with order, rules, authority, or status. Consequently, students and teachers, administrators, parents, legislators and news media representatives alike presume that school success is available to all students in basically the same way.

3) *Schools, and the teachers in them, rarely have the time, the freedom of expression, or the normative authority to consider the viewpoints of others with a focus on questioning, active listening where one’s frame of reference is suspended, listening with a desire for newness or wonder.* Consequently, teachers must battle to find the room, the right, or even the arena to develop the epistemological skills that would enable them to approach students, their parents, and one another, in ways that do not “graft the substance of most others” to the service of school purposes. Seldom do teachers have the capacity to open themselves to “world-traveling,” such that they might learn who their students are when they are in the “worlds” they would call their own.

The bottom line epistemologically is that teachers’ institutional “worlds” do not permit them to embody playfulness in Lugones’s sense, or wonder, in Young’s sense. Opportunities for teachers to “world-travel” are pushed virtually beyond the pale.

PART FOUR: LOVING PERCEPTION, DECONSTRUCTION, AND RESPONSES TO RESISTANCE

Lugones suggests that the alternative to the arrogant eye is the loving eye, “the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination” (*PWT*, 165-66). This view seems to me to be entirely consistent with the recommendations Young has made regarding questioning, active listening and wonder. Lugones’s account comes with the epistemological bonus of having suggestions to make about the organization of “worlds” that will help us identify at least some of the pitfalls by which errors of arrogance are propagated. Teachers, who would operate with loving perception as opposed to arrogant perception can start, I suggest, with reading their own situations — the subject positions they animate as a function of their social locations and histories as well as those they animate through the auspices of their identification with schools — through processes of collaborative inquiry with and through the eyes of their students. This type of reading would be akin to deconstruction. The narratives teachers speak of themselves, to themselves, can be read through the narratives students offer, in order to highlight evidence of privilege. Where teachers are competent and comfortable, where they have shared daily histories, where their normative beliefs parallel the dominant norms of their communities, they can ask themselves to notice the boundaries of those “worlds.” Noticing the demographics of a teacher preparation classroom and considering the questions “who is here,” and “who is not here,” for example, might be one such starting point.

Another starting point is offered by Frye in her piece “On Being White.” Describing an encounter with a Black woman in attendance at a talk she’d given on the subject of anti-racism, Frye describes the woman’s “exploding with rage” in response to the narrative Frye had offered regarding her work with a group of white women engaged in unlearning their racism. Frye writes:

She seemed to be enraged by our making decisions, by our acting, by our doing anything. It seemed like doing nothing would be racist and whatever we did would be racist just because we did it.... It seemed that what our critic was saying must be right’ but what she was saying didn’t seem to make any sense.

She seemed crazy to me.
That stopped me.¹⁵

I suggest that Frye’s work was altered in ways that opened the possibility of “world-travelling” to her in the moment that she allowed herself to read the resistance of her critic — the anger of her critic — with surprise, wonder, a suspicion of her capacity to name another “crazy,” and a readiness to learn from newness. Resistance is one of the ways others encourage us to step away from our arrogant perceptions. People resist having the substance of their lives grafted to the being and purposes of arrogation. One of the places teachers might start, then, practically, would be to key on the moments when students’ resistance seems not to make sense. It might also be a place for philosophers to try it.

1. I am indebted to my colleagues at OISE/UT, especially John Portelli, for their willingness to review draft versions of this paper.

2. Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect," in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 40. This article will be cited as *AR* in the text for all subsequent references.
3. It should be noted that it is Marilyn Frye who blazed the trail for both Lugones and Campbell with her accounts of arrogance and anger. See, for example, Marilyn Frye, "In and out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love," and "A Note on Anger" in Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg NY: The Crossing Press, 1983).
4. These terms describe my reading of her account rather than a rhetorical move Young makes.
5. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York, Routledge, 1991), 137, cited in Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity," 40.
6. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 52, cited in Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity," 46.
7. *Ibid.*
8. See also Martha Minow's analysis of the dilemma of difference in Martha Minow, *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
9. Melissa Orlie, "Thoughtless Assertion and Political Deliberation," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 684-95, cited in Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity," 45.
10. My emphasis. Unlike Young, Elizabeth Ellsworth favors an account that rejects understanding as impossible and, politically suspect. See Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1997).
11. Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," in *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, ed. Jeffner Allen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 165. This article will be cited as *PWT* in the text for all subsequent references.
12. Sue Campbell, "Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expression," *Hypatia* 9 (Summer, 1994): 3. Campbell cites Marilyn Frye, "A Note on Anger," 89.
13. Campbell, "Being Dismissed," 3.
14. Without backing off from this statement, because I think teachers occupy relatively privileged positions in school "worlds" even as they might occupy differentially marginalized positions *qua* "teachers," I want to draw attention to the significance of differences within the subject position "teacher" because of the ways differently situated teachers are received by their colleagues, students, supervisors or parents, and because of the ways they take up different postures with respect to questions of oppression generally.
15. Marilyn Frye, "On Being White," in Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 112.