

## Awakening Perfect Strangers

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I would like to thank Adi Burton for his powerful article, which utilizes ethical and ontological thought to investigate a critical pedagogical issue, namely, the existential stance adopted by some settler teachers, who seek to avoid the pain, difficulty, and ambiguity that is involved in supportively teaching Indigenous students or the history of European colonization.<sup>1</sup> Such teachers insulate themselves from the chasm that divides Native peoples and settlers through their own unresponsiveness—a stance Burton finds to be ethically untenable given Emmanuel Levinas' conception of infinite responsibility for the other. Adi's paper is distinctive in the tradition of educational philosophy in that it spans from ontology to pedagogy, and for that, I am extremely appreciative, and the paper's insights concerning the ethical failings of the perfect stranger are indeed piercing.

We can better understand the damage a perfect stranger stance might produce, by considering the strategies of one teacher, Veronica Garcia, who adopts responsive pedagogical strategies in an effort to heal colonial wounds some of her students bring to her high school classroom. One year, Ms. Garcia noticed that the new students in her class were reluctant to engage with the material, yet she did not pressure them to conform, in the ways of some relationally-disconnected teachers. Rather, she asked them to work through two sets of essays: first, a description of a day in their lives, and second, a description of their elementary and middle-school experiences. She broke both essays into successive tasks where students would be asked to talk to her and to their peers about their ideas, and she insisted that both essays be critical, that they assess, for example, the quality of the education that they had received—what had been good for them, and what had hurt them. Ms. Garcia says the essays allowed her to open pathways of discussion with previously-resistant students, that it allowed her to better understand the pain many had endured in schools

or in their lives, and it allowed her—and the class as a whole—the opportunity to offer each student emotional support, while helping them elevate their skills of reading, writing, and interpreting.<sup>2</sup>

The “perfect stranger” stance described by Burton would prevent a teacher from supporting already-wounded students, because Ms. Garcia experiences a fair amount of pain as she learns about her students’ lives and the miseducation some of them have received. If Ms. Garcia identifies as a settler, she probably also experiences doubt and tension as she questions her right to the ground she walks upon. In the conception of the “perfect stranger” described by Susan Dion, it’s this pain and questioning that settler teachers seek to avoid. By saying that they have no experience with Aboriginal peoples and know little about them, settler teachers attempt to feel their way toward a space in which they can continue to rely upon dominant discourses, which assure settlers of their rightful ownership while effectively rendering Indigenous peoples invisible. In Dion’s words, “Dominant stories that position Aboriginal people as, for example, romanticised, mythical, victimised, or militant Other, enable non-Aboriginal people to position themselves as respectful admirer, moral helper, protector of law and order.”<sup>3</sup> In Burton’s words, “the objective position of the perfect stranger ultimately achieves a distancing of responsibility from the other, allowing the perfect stranger to remain perfect and unchallenged in their knowledge and strange in their distance – all on their own terms.” In short, the perfect stranger stance seeks to secure a fantasized relationality between mythical Natives and teachers, and as Burton insightfully argues, this is indeed a social reality in many educational spaces in settler societies.

When I say that I agree with Adi’s suggestion that the social reality of many educational spaces are partly shaped by the perfect stranger stance, it is because the analysis helps us understand what is possible or impossible in those spaces at a given time. The perfect stranger stance renders the pedagogy enacted by Veronica Garcia impossible and the further wounding of students is entirely possible. Burton says the paper is an “ontological examination of the position of the perfect stranger,” and I agree, but I hasten to add that this is not the ontology of Martin Heidegger, which limits ontological investigation

to what is “always already there.” Ontology, for Heidegger, is universal, and it is first philosophy, so when he discloses “being-with” as one of the fundamental traits of existence, he means always in all contexts.<sup>4</sup> Burton’s examination of the perfect stranger is not intended to be universal, but rather, it is a discussion of the ways some settler teachers feel their way around Indigenous peoples and the painful reminders of genocide. This, I think, is a localized and context-specific conception of ontology, where we would ask, not what is “always already there,” but what are the social realities of this context? What is possible and impossible with these people in this situation? Moreover, Burton drops Heidegger’s claims of offering a first philosophy, for Burton is clear that it’s partly the stories settlers tell about Aboriginal people that render them invisible, so in Heidegger’s lexicon, we are no longer doing ontology but have moved to hermeneutics, or interpretation. Yet, I prefer Burton’s social ontology which suggests the stories told—the so-called “objective” history—play a role in constituting social reality, the parameters of the possible and impossible. Burton’s social ontology, in other words, is context specific and interpreted, but amongst the interpretations are forces that hold us and direct us in the way famously described by James Baldwin: “people who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world.”<sup>5</sup>

For both Baldwin and Levinas, the philosophy of power denies teachers the ability to relate respectfully to others, for as Burton says, this ontology reduces others to things, denying their distinctness, their mysteriousness, and the ways in which the other always brings more than we can contain.<sup>6</sup> Distant from the call of the other, the perfect stranger is free to enact “settler moves to innocence,” which Burton insightfully argues are themselves impossible to realize, because:

goodness is not something that can be achieved. Levinas compares goodness to the metaphysical Desire for the other, which causes us to reach out beyond ourselves to the ever-remote, separate, and utterly unknowable other. The notion of metaphysical desire is a pathway of sorts to infinity; we

reach out toward the other not out of a need for some sort of completion, but out of this Desire for the absolute other. Goodness is much the same; it cannot be satisfied because it is intertwined with the notion of infinity itself. Goodness is never fulfilled, but only deepened.

Innocence is, thus, not an achievable state of being, but a longing for the other that cannot be realized. Given Burton's insightful argument illuminating the ways in which the perfect stranger stance insulates teachers from their students, the question becomes, how do teacher educators invite their students to hear the call of others, and in this case, Indigenous others? Burton quite helpfully points us toward Dion's pedagogy, where students are asked to compare the art and cultural productions of their own lives with the art work and cultural productions of the lives of Indigenous peoples. Dion artfully seeks to awaken students to the possibility of a conversation, which for Burton, involves opening students to the call of the other. In the terms of social ontology, Dion's pedagogy is designed to enlarge that which is possible in educational contexts which bring Indigenous peoples together with settlers. Unlike Levinas, Dion's pedagogy positions teachers and Indigenous youth as historically and politically-placed peoples, for the respective art of Indigenous peoples and settlers will be understood partly by referencing the groups' respective histories and beliefs. In a sense, Burton, Dion, and Garcia are all seeking to connect people across the chasms of colonial spaces, where either teachers or students have set up defense mechanisms to shield themselves from the ravages of symbolic violence. The clarity and power of their respective stances force us to ask the basic ethical and ontological question upon which these analyses and pedagogies are premised: can we expect people to heed the call of the other when they hear it?

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1 Gardner Seawright has convinced me that racial exchanges, along with threat and pain, are often ambiguous. See his forthcoming, *White Humanity and the Everyday Classroom* (unpublished dissertation, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 2018).

2 Ernest Morrell, Rudy Dueñas, Veronica Garcia, and Jorge Lopez, *Critical Media Pedagogy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), 53-57.

3 Susan Dion, "Disrupting Molded Images," *Teaching Education* 18, no. 4 (December 2007), 331.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 149-168.

5 James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt," from David Roediger (ed.), *Black on White* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 321.

6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 75-76.