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Creating Transformative Spaces in Education: Facing Humanity, Facing Violence

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Article abstract

This paper considers the difficulties that accompany projects in education variously configured around a multicultural or intercultural label, particularly when they are built upon, for example, idealised conceptions of humanity, notions of the common good and dialogue, or ideas of recognition. My premise here is that, while such idealisations may be constructed with the best of intentions, they occlude discussions of how to face the violent realities that can also be part of social interaction. My focus here is on the existential conditions that frame our encounters with other people, and how such existential concerns lead us to confront more openly the violence that can inhere in such encounters. Beginning from this existential position, I argue, actually invites alternative ways of formulating transformative work in education, namely a focus on the present. Secondly, I turn to explore the transformative spaces created by performance artist Marina Abramovic, and how her projects reveal what we are up against existentially when it comes to facing humanity in the here and now, in all its messiness. And, finally, I make the suggestion that an education committed to the existential conditions of facing humanity can be built on a reconceptualization of conversation, as opposed to dialogue. Here I argue that conversation offers the kind of potential for transformation in its open-endedness and anarchic sensibilities.

Creating Transformative Spaces in Education: Facing Humanity, Facing Violence[1]

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Abstract: *This paper considers the difficulties that accompany projects in education variously configured around a multicultural or intercultural label, particularly when they are built upon, for example, idealised conceptions of humanity, notions of the common good and dialogue, or ideas of recognition. My premise here is that, while such idealisations may be constructed with the best of intentions, they occlude discussions of how to face the violent realities that can also be part of social interaction.[2] My focus here is on the existential conditions that frame our encounters with other people, and how such existential concerns lead us to confront more openly the violence that can inhere in such encounters. Beginning from this existential position, I argue, actually invites alternative ways of formulating transformative work in education, namely a focus on the present. Secondly, I turn to explore the transformative spaces created by performance artist Marina Abramovic, and how her projects reveal what we are up against existentially when it comes to facing humanity in the here and now, in all its messiness. And, finally, I make the suggestion that an education committed to the existential conditions of facing humanity can be built on a reconceptualization of conversation, as opposed to dialogue. Here I argue that conversation offers the kind of potential for transformation in its open-endedness and anarchic sensibilities.*

Introduction, or the Avoidance of Shuddering

Existential philosophers have been keen witnesses to the dense and traumatic discomforts that are faced by human subjects in their everyday encounters with the world. The dis-ease they write of concerns the sheer sense of being overwhelmed in facing the extent of our entanglements with others and with the enormity of our task within a world that is seems so "outside" the frames of our own bodies and thoughts. Such encounters with the world accentuate the limits of one's singular existence, and responses to the experiences generated by these encounters of alienation often lead to fear and despair, a kind of shuddering at our plight as beings who are both part of the world and yet who seem to experience the world as separate, as Martin Buber (1923/1958) puts it.

> At times the man, shuddering at the alienation between the *I* and world, comes to reflect that something is to be done…. Thenceforth, if ever the man shudders at the alienation, and the world strikes terror in his heart, he looks up (to right or left, just as it may chance) and sees a picture. There he sees that the *I* is embedded in the world and that there is really no *I* at all—so the world can do nothing to the *I*, and he is put at ease; or he sees that the world is embedded in the *I*, and that there really is no world at all—so the world can do nothing to the *I*, and he is put at ease. Another time, if the man shudders at the alienation, and the *I* strikes terror in his heart, he looks up and sees a picture; which picture he sees does not matter, the empty *I* is stuffed full with the world or the stream of the world flows over it, and he is put at ease.

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[1] A draft of this paper was first presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Moral Education in Montréal, Québec in 2013. I owe many thanks to comments from audience members there and to those from reviewers for this journal.

[2] See the special issue of *Educational Theory*, *65*(4) on various aspects of school violence.

> But a moment comes, and it is near, when the shuddering man looks up and sees both pictures in a flash together. And a deeper shudder seizes him. (pp. 70-72)

Buber's depiction of the anxiety that arises out of the enmeshment of self with world speaks to the kind of transformation that awaits us when the illusions of the very separateness and isolation of our existence fall away. There is no ease, he claims, when one awakens to the implications of one's existence in living in the world. Such implications indeed merely serve to reinforce the idea that "something is to be done," and seem to awaken the inevitable responsibility to do so, whatever this something might be. Alternatively, each of us might convince ourselves that the world cannot affect me, so separate am I from it, or that I cannot affect the world since it is only my existence that really matters. These various responses seem to suffice until one day, as Buber suggests, they don't and I am seized by a deeper shuddering, an experience of having to face my embeddedness in the world without feeling compelled to alter the fact of that embeddedness or to deny it.

This allegory seems an appropriate place, I think, to reflect on the kinds of implications that loom within commitments to multicultural and intercultural education.[3] Such commitments are often framed within a liberal political agenda, where debating questions of the common good, dialogue and recognition take centre stage (e.g., Taylor, 1992; Gutmann, 1999; Nussbaum 1997). But what if we start from a slightly different place? What if we begin not with the liberal political framing of questions of how to live well in what Zygmunt Bauman (1999) has called our "polycultural" societies, but instead with the sheer uneasiness that provokes the questions themselves? That is, what if we start by confronting the difficulties that cause us to shudder, as Buber (1923/1958) puts it, as a ground for the kind of transformation of self that multicultural agendas in education are ultimately built upon? That is, in facing "what is" in the here and now, and in facing the interconnectedness of our lives to others, humans and non-humans alike, could we not start to rethink what it means to live well together without a blueprint of what counts as the "common good," for example, produced *prior to* our actual encounters with others with whom we share the world?

This paper seeks to explore an education responsive to the injustices experienced within pluralistic societies, such as Canada, not by defining what it is we should be building toward in the future, but by outlining a commitment to confronting what is in the present. For me, this means disbanding our idealising tendencies in education (or at least encouraging a healthy suspicion of them)—*as though* education can manufacture appropriate responses to the demands of plurality by willing a certain future into being! Too often, in fact, education is seen to be the obvious bearer of social messages aimed at the improvement of society and political life, not unlike a homing pigeon in this regard. If we want to improve the quality of citizenship, we turn to schools to carry the message; if we want to increase our society's scientific contribution, we turn to schools; if we want to live better across cultural differences, again we turn to schools. But as we all know, schools, unlike most pigeons, do not reach their intended destinations, and they are then given newer, better messages to deliver that also eventually end up going awry. Schools are subject to fluctuations of the winds of political and social change, but frequently act *as if* such change were here to stay. This sets up, to my mind, what Buber identifies above as the ease with which we think the world can do nothing to the I. For in living our dreams of the future, we are not living fully in the present and thus, as he points out, live in an alienated state from our current embeddedness in the world. This means that education operates within a constructed ideal of humanity, defined in relation to the culture and society of which it is part (and whichever notions of the common good, citizenship and

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[3] These terms are complex configurations, both with respect to geography (interculturalism is largely used in continental Europe, multiculturalism in the Anglo-American world) and with respect to what they signify, sometimes reflecting a rather benign acceptance of the world as it is, at other times being part of a rigorous transformative social agenda. Also, there is a focus on interchange and encounter etymologically in "interculturalism" to which this paper perhaps responds more closely, yet the Anglo-American context in which I am writing means that I will hold myself to "multiculturalism" despite these difficulties.

rights are currently on the agenda). The socialising function of education, which is always dependent upon a future-oriented outlook, is, of course, an inevitable and necessary feature of current schooling. And I certainly do not wish to deny the hope and visionary power so necessary to transformative work in education that seeks to alter the conditions which are harmful and constrain the lives of people in the present. However, my question is to what extent is there space left for attending to the complexities of the present instead of defining education *primarily* against the background of an illusory future? Are we not merely setting up children for failure (O'Donnell, 2013), for who can possibly live up to an ideal of humanity that has never been and never will be? What I seek to do here, by emphasising the importance of the here and now for education, is to challenge our reliance upon an idealised sense of humanity and instead explore what might be involved in *facing* humanity. For is not this where the *difficulty* of living with others originates? Is not our tendency to create unrealisable futures precisely an attempt to escape from the shuddering—that is, facing our own implication—in living our life with others?

Pedagogical Spaces as Transformation

To begin to map out what facing humanity entails I wish to make a distinction here between education as an institutionalised practice of schooling and pedagogy as a practice of transformation.[4] Transformation here signals a change in our mode of becoming, and is about creating opportunities for one's subjectivity to emerge in ways that allow a response to the world that is meaningful. Read in this way, pedagogy as transformation compels us to think about what we do in any number of cultural settings, not only schooling. Pedagogical spaces are created in museums, theatres, and cinemas, as well as through classroom practices of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Viewing these various sites and practices as pedagogical spaces means recognising the kinds of change that are desired within them. That is, encounters are staged in order to provoke some alteration of the subject: how she understands the world, how she understands herself. Such pedagogical spaces can be seen as sites of liminality, or threshold spaces, whereby the self undergoes a process of change occasioned by what lies in-between what one knows and what is utterly strange.

As James Conroy (2004) remarks, "*liminality* may offer the possibility of deliberately displacing our understandings, beliefs and ideals (in short our *cogitationes*) outside the realm of others, or indeed our own, socio-psychological (and numerical) containment in order to view them afresh" (p. 7). Moreover, especially in light of multicultural education as bearing an explicit critique of marginalisation produced by the dominant centre, the liminal space of pedagogical transformation "is to be found between the categories, on the margins, neither at the centre nor on the outside.… Not being directly subject to the control of the centre, the liminal position … holds to account our established conceits about the worthwhile, the good and the right" (p. 8). Thus what pedagogical spaces, as liminal spaces, can do is to be inherently critical of centre-defined notions of what is supposedly best for all. This means that such spaces actually invite self-transformation by exploring how we are implicated in the "established conceits," and indeed illusions, of how we want things to be, as opposed to how things are. The liminality of pedagogical spaces is very much concerned with *actual* encounters in the present instead of with measuring our experiences (of others) against the standard of some idealised view of humanity (Todd, 2014). Thus, speaking of multicultural education in light of liminality means having to be open to the experience of the here and now in ways that challenge the borders of the very categories, concepts, and ideas used to champion multiculturalism itself.

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[4] My distinction here parallels to some degree what Säfström (2011) discusses in terms of separating "education" from "schooling." Education is about the constitution of freedom for a subject, while schooling is an organised form through which education may or may not happen. However, I choose pedagogy here in the context of this discussion in order to emphasise the dynamic quality of transformation I am seeking to articulate.

In this sense, calling for a facing of humanity is no easy task, for it seeks to undo our preconceptions—and the attachments we have to those preconceptions—of what we think is right, just, and good precisely because they are *pre*conceptions—that is, conceptions that are abstractly made, produced, or deduced outside of and prior to our encounters with others. Facing humanity therefore entails an engagement with our own individual illusions as well as with the social and political instantiations of those illusions. It is with this in mind that I turn now to explore the difficulties inherent to this process of facing.

Facing Humanity, or Let the Shuddering Begin

One of the most difficult aspects of facing humanity through our encounters with others, both directly in face-to-face meetings such as in classrooms, and indirectly through outlets such as the media, the arts, poetry or novels, is the enmeshment of ourselves in the world of violence. That is, that violence is a part of the human condition cannot be denied. It might not be part of "nature" or our "genetic make-up," and indeed might be solely induced by cultural or social circumstances, but it is nonetheless part of the *condition* of human social interaction—and indeed a large part of human and other-than-human interaction in the world. Emmanuel Levinas (1974/1998) calls for facing the humanness of violence in order to admit the very possibility of nonviolence into our lives. This is a deliberate inversion of what most of us in liberal societies take to be as a solid axiom—that it is only by nurturing the humanity inherent in nonviolence that so-called "inhuman" violence can be defeated. In proposing this inversion, Levinas insists that the very ethicality of our relations across the radical ontological difference that divides you from me is dependent upon my acknowledgement of the harm I can do to you. As I face you, the vulnerability or your face invites this violence while simultaneously prohibiting it and commanding me to respond non-violently—and this is so, Levinas argues, precisely because of my implication in the responsibility I have for you to *be* other than me. Within the context of multicultural education, this Levinasian understanding of letting the other be—in all her otherness—would seem to be an appropriate ethical position to take if indeed respect for otherness is one of the aims.

The difficulties of facing human violence, however, are well illustrated by a number of performance pieces of Belgrade-born artist Marina Abramovic. Known as an artist who pushes at the borders of self-inflicted harm, in one performance in 1974 entitled *Rhythm 0* (Figure 1) she departed from previous practice and simply "[did] nothing." She stood in the Neapolitan gallery space, fully clothed, with only a table in the room that had seventy-two objects arrayed on its surface. The piece revolved around the idea that she would not move for six hours, from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m., no matter what happened. Amongst the objects on the table were a flower, feather boa, knife, razor, and loaded pistol. She writes, "The idea was how far you can be vulnerable and how far the public can go and do things with you, on your own body" (Abramovic et al., 2009 p. 30). A group of "outsiders," not part of the Naples art community, also attended but it is not entirely clear from the different accounts that exist of what transpired whether this group was in fact responsible for what ensued. In the first few hours, gallery-goers were relatively peaceful. McEvilley (2010) notes that this soon turned into slightly more exploratory forms of touch and then proceeded to the removal of her shirt. This quickly led into her clothes being cut off with razors, with people writing on her body, pouring water over her head, and sticking rose thorns in her stomach. Mary Richards (2010) notes that "as time passed, and the boundaries of her subjectivity remained unguarded, more challenging and harmful possibilities occurred to members of the audience" (p. 89). The escalation of violence, according to Abramovic herself, happened quickly. Members of the public began to cut her, drinking blood from her neck, while others wiped her tears away, and "various sexual assaults were carried out on her body" (McEvilley, p. 38). At one point someone put the loaded gun in her hand, placing her finger on the trigger, and put it to her head. Another person tore it away and

a ruckus broke out between what appeared to be two factions that had emerged in the gallery: those wanting to protect Abramovic and those who were willing to push the borders further.

Figure 1: *Rhythm 0*, 1974 (Negri, 2013)

Abramovic et al. (2009) continue to describe what happened:

> After six hours, at 2 in the morning, I stopped, because this was exactly my decision: six hours. I started walking to the public and everybody run [*sic*] away and never actually confronted with me. The experience I drew from this piece was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed. (p. 30).

One of the key aspects of the performance, according to her biographer James Westcott (2010), was her apparent vacant stance as she stared into the distance for the entire 6 hours. In his view, "eye contact would have reminded them [the public] of Abramovic's humanness and the responsibilities that follow" (p. 76). Indeed, to some extent this is borne out in the total non-engagement of the public as the performance ended. Not only does this piece reveal the sadistic heights some people can reach under certain conditions, but it reveals complex layers of vulnerability and humility, the capacity for violence in the face of such vulnerability, and especially the inability to face the capacity for that violence. This piece should not be read as a cautionary tale of what happens when one shows one's vulnerability (don't be vulnerable, or else!); rather it reveals the complete unwillingness to face the rawness of violence as "human." As a pedagogical space, what Abramovic's "experiment" shows is that the transformation of the self as a responsible subject can only come about by recognizing the dark sides of humanity as a beginning for creating change.

This does not mean, however, that "accepting" violence as human means agreeing with it or condoning it. Indeed, from a Levinasian position, there can never be any ethical justification of violence (despite the myriad political or social justifications for violence that seem to exist in the meat industry, or in Michael Ignatieff's defence of some forms of torture for certain terrorists). As Homi Bhabha has put it, "[v]iolence and nonviolence exist in an intimate yet antagonistic relationship. The moral claims and efficacy of nonviolence depend on the real and impending threat of violence" (Ireland, 2013). Yet it is only by accepting its existence as human that we can cease to "other" those who commit it. That is, if we are going to adopt an ethical position whereby the facing of humanity can lead to a nonviolent response to injustices, we simply cannot defend an idealised humanity that necessarily draws lines between who

counts as human and who does not.[5] This is precisely why the task of facing humanity is so difficult, because as Abramovic shows, we would rather not have to face our implication in the enmeshment with the world that this entails. We would rather not shudder.

However, not all shuddering only embodies this seeming one-sided violence. Indeed, Levinas (and, as we will see shortly, Abramovic as well) actually sees vulnerability *as ushering in* the possibilities for non-violent forms of communication, which is not to say that such non-violence generates a completely blissful experience, rather that such forms of non-violence are predicated precisely upon the possibility of violence. This works in two ways.

First, when, for instance, I encounter another person, that other is vulnerable because she is dependent upon me for a response. In this sense, my response to her automatically harms her or not since I am already in relation with her. For instance, take the issue of the hijab in schools, upon which I've done a number of analyses in the context of Europe, and to some extent in Québec. Girls come to school wearing head coverings, which is often either seen to be *prima facie* an affront to what so-called secular schools stand for (as has been the issue going back to the 1994 case of Émilie Ouimet in Québec, and in various institutions in France), or it is seen to be a demonstration of the right to religious expression, which raises liberal political questions of tolerance, accommodation, and the common good. What I am instead suggesting is that there might be another way of addressing a self's encounter with difference that speaks more about the perceived vulnerability of the other in the encounter, which heightens the potentiality for violence, harm, and prejudice. Reframing encounters across culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds is not simply a political or legal problem, but constitutes an experience that is ripe for questioning and curiosity in a way that implicates the self in the relation. Instead of asking these girls "Why do you wear hijab?", the question becomes, "How am 'I' enmeshed in your world and how might I respond in a way that takes your vulnerability into account?"

The second way in which violence and non-violence are intertwined has to do with the ways in which the other always poses a challenge to my sense of self. That is, another person, simply through her existence, and her way of encountering me, actually causes me discomfort within myself. Such discomfort, as Levinas claims, is not "bad"; indeed it is necessary if we are to awaken to the possibility of transforming ourselves, if we are to become "subjects" at all. By addressing me, the other causes me to question myself, compelling me to face my own vulnerability. The other asks me to respond, not literally by saying "respond to me," but by the force of address. For example, how often do we avoid the eyes of homeless women and men in order to avoid this very call of address? For as soon as we admit of their presence, their very existence in the world, we are called upon to respond. And here, too, we can respond in both violent and non-violent ways, that is, ways that are experienced by the other as violent or not— for it is not up to the one who responds to decide which responses are "non-violent" or harmless, as if intentionality were all that mattered, but the one who receives our response.

An excellent illustration of engaging in these types of spaces of shuddering where the encounter itself provokes vulnerability is a more recent piece by Abramovic, entitled *The Artist is Present*, which she performed at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010 during her retrospective. As a total counterpoint to the earlier piece above, here she sat at a table, gazing into the eyes of persons who chose to sit across from her. Within these moments of encounter, which lasted from seconds to several minutes, she sat silently with the participants forming a silent communicative exchange. Testimonials from participants revealed that in coming face to face with someone whose vulnerability was so rawly displayed as their own vulnerability was called forth by Abramovic's penetrating gaze and sheer presence, they had revelatory experiences, experiences of shuddering, experiences of enmeshment and encounter.

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[5] For a fuller discussion of the elements of facing humanity, please see Todd (2009).

Figure 2: *The Artist is Present*, 2010 (Harris, 2012)

Although one could interpret this performance as merely a commentary on the force of vision, seeing, and the "gaze" (as the reader will recall, Abramovic's gaze at the end of *Rhythm 0* provoked the audience into denial), I think it speaks volumes about the existential conditions of violence, non-violence, and vulnerability, and how they come together not only in extreme encounters, but how these are always already there in our being together in the present. There is a certain now-ness about this performance that mimics our everyday encounters, with friends, lovers and strangers. With respect to education, such pedagogical spaces of transformation would allow for the existential dimensions of facing humanity to emerge, as opposed to telling students how to behave, how to perform, how to be, based on an ideal that is, of necessity, always abstracted from the "real" lives we live. I turn now to discuss how creating such spaces in education might better reflect the existential concerns I am raising here and might actually create opportunities of accepting and living with our "shuddering," or indeed of learning to shudder.

Creating Pedagogical Spaces From Dialogue to Conversation, or Learning to Shudder

I would like to suggest that one way of rethinking how it is we can better face humanity—and face the violence that accompanies it—is to reinvoke a notion of conversation as distinct from the more common appeals to dialogue that multicultural projects make.

The etymology of dialogue does not derive from *di*, meaning "two," but *dia* meaning "across" and as such, it suggests not so much engaging in something that is shared, such as a version of the "common good" about which we can then begin to talk, as it does the image of a bridge that spans a gap or difference. Yet dialogue has come to be construed within liberal political parameters of decision-making (see Habermas and others) as being the process through which we come to consensus and build solutions that serve the interests of the majority. Although much has been claimed about its significance in constituting and maintaining deliberative democratic societies that recognize diversity, there are, in my view, some serious drawbacks, not only of a political nature, but also in how it has been imported into education. I worry that the kinds of discussion that go on in classrooms are being asked to model themselves on parliamentary political processes, which are designed for particular purposes. Classrooms, as anyone who has ever been a teacher in public schools would know, are far more and far less than these models of democracy allow. They are not spaces of deliberative debate. Instead, they are places that are highly emotive, raw, and affectively charged. And particularly when we are considering diversity work in

schools, communication built on "democratic," dialogical models is often divorced from emotions and affect of students' lived experiences. Whilst purchasing some distance from one's emotions is not such a bad thing, the issue remains of how to create liminal spaces where we are facing humanity, in all its difficult manifestations, without simply smoothing over the tensions and conflicts that arise through an appeal to a deliberative dialogical stance. For if we are to invite an openness into our encounters with others, where youth are allowed to be vulnerable, and where the possibilities of violence and non-violence arise, then it seems to me that such a model of dialogue is not tenable.

I would like to suggest that one way of rethinking how it is we can better face humanity is to reinvoke a notion of conversation. There is a long tradition of "conversation" within education, stemming from Michael Oakeshott (1962) and continued on more recently through Hanan Alexander's (2015) work. On this view, conversation is a form of engagement with tradition and a way of bridging the past with the present. Oakeshott paints a picture of conversation that picks up on its multifaceted nature in depicting a form of interlocution that is not about "truth" or proof or debate, but one that is loose and meandering, with no definite argument or purpose. He sees this as a model for promoting a "conversation of mankind," a conversation through which we conserve tradition and history. and positions education as "an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation" (p. 198). Whilst there is much to be gleaned from this view of conversation as an engagement with the legacies that continue to shape our world, my focus here lies instead on the actual practice of speaking and listening to and with others in ways that do not require formal initiation, but that reflect our everyday embeddedness in the world.

Conversation comes from the Latin *conversatio*, or the "act of living with," which is related to the past participle *conversari* as "to live with, keep company with." However, literally, it means "to turn about with," thus suggesting that conversation invites a form of conversion, or change; a way of "turning about with" someone, or some idea. Conversation gestures toward a transformation of self (of our thought, understandings and ways of being) through our capacity to live "with," through our capacity to face our interlocutor, to encounter her, to engage her. Conversation rarely has a specified aim, as dialogue does; it instead invites each partner into a space where ideas are introduced, sometimes passionately defended, and spin off each other. It might not be the case that something is "decided," and it definitely might be the case that the talk wanders, takes detours, and gets embroidered with the loose threads of life.

As Levinas (1969) has written, a conversation is a relation with the Other. "[I]t is ... an ethical relation; [and] inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching" (p. 51). That is, a conversation invites us to learn from the other as an ethical gesture of responsibility.

In this sense it acts as a practice of engagement, unlike dialogue, which can act as a teleological practice that always has one eye on a future outcome. Conversation, on this view, is instead a practice eminently concerned not with rules of legitimacy or pre-manufactured goals, but with the kind of attention to the present in which that conversation takes place. Thus, I am not advocating a kind of "presentism" as if past traditions and visions of the future do not matter at all; rather I am promoting the idea that we create spaces of transformation only from our commitment to what is going on, here and now, with our students, with their lives, and with themselves. My point here is that it is not by refining our abstract political goals that we will create more justice in the world—multicultural and otherwise—but by encountering actual persons who compel each one of us to learn to shudder—and to learn to live with that existential shuddering responsively. In short, it is about ethically taking into account the real and not imagined others for whom justice ultimately matters.

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