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Scholarship as Gentleness

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The plane jumped and skipped through the snowstorm before it landed hard on the frozen tarmac of the tiny airport in upstate New York. Beyond the dazzling airport flashlights, pitch-black darkness. The cold was cutting to the bone. This was the loneliest winter I had ever seen.

At the airport, Susan Pollock waited for me in a tiny, dinged-up car that did not look like it could brave the snow. The 20-minute drive from the airport to the house where I was staying during my first semester in Binghamton took seemingly forever. The city itself, which had once been a booming industrial hub, was now marked by economic blight, its potholed streets and rundown two-story homes giving it all a rough edge. I promised myself to not extend my stay beyond a year, and to return to Berlin as soon as I could.

Six years later, I picked up the bound hard copy of my 400-plus-page dissertation from the Binghamton University print shop. In the acknowledgments – which should, as Ann Laura Stoler (2009) has pointed out so aptly – be really called "appreciations," I thanked Susan Pollock for making sure I would stick around. As one of my dissertation advisors, she had provided not just intellectual guidance, which contributed much to my professional growth. Susan had also demonstrated a sensitivity "*for the challenges that face an international student, making being away from home often a little easier*" (Starzmann 2011, vii).

Writing for a *Festschrift* is, similar to writing acknowledgements, an exercise in introspection as well as a recognition of how the self is always entangled with others. The collected voices of former students and colleagues are not only testimony to scholarly achievements but also an archive of memories. As I write this text, I revisit moments long gone that have shaped my life in ways more substantial than could ever have been apparent to me at the time. Susan's work has had a long-lasting impact on my academic thinking as well as on my political interests and practices. She, more than anyone, has contributed to my view that our scholarly praxis is political at heart.

As a student and campus activist, I was extremely passionate about political organizing. With a confidence whose source remains somewhat mysterious to me in retrospect, I felt youthfully invincible, ready to question authority figures as well as structures of hierarchy wherever possible. What I did not realize were the risks borne by my political fervor: of potentially excluding those who disagree; muffling the voices of the ones who are not loud enough to compete in a debate; or stifling the political activism of folks unwilling or unable to engage in certain kinds of confrontations. As my teacher and mentor, Susan showed me that being politically fierce can be effective, but that it is sometimes more powerful to be gentle. In a patriarchy culture, in which machismo often gets wrongly translated as political efficacy, it is a powerful act to commit to passivity. I am still learning this art, if you will, of letting go.

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Active passivity

Reflecting on the notion of an "active passivity" in the first section of this paper, I take recourse to philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle's (2018) work on the "power of gentleness." For Dufourmantelle, gentleness is marked by an active passivity. Explaining this philosophical approach, I refer to my dissertation work, which distinctly carries the imprint of Susan's thinking. Using examples of body techniques, I illustrate gentleness as an active passivity, and I connect both concepts to the notion of "flow," which figured in central ways into my study of ancient crafts (Starzmann 2011).

In the second part of this paper, I lay out how gentleness and the practice of an active passivity resonate with some lessons in socialist theory that we can take away from Rosa Luxemburg's work. I decided to make the connection to Rosa Luxemburg after having curated an exhibition about her in early 2019 (**Fig. 1**), commemorating the 100th anniversary of her death (Starzmann 2019). The exhibition, which centered Rosa Luxemburg's prison journals and plant collections (**Fig. 2**), foregrounded her "ethical feminism" (Cornell 2018). Essential to this feminism is the view that socialism can only bring about radical social change if it entails a deep transformation of all our relationships – not just of how we relate to each other but also of how we relate to other (non-human) beings and life forms.

Fig. 2. Pages from Rosa Luxemburg's Herbarium *are spread out on a table during the installation of the exhibition "Rosa Luxemburg: A Thousand More Things" at Goethe-Institut New York in January 2019. Photo: M. Starzmann.*

Fig. 1. A partial view of the exhibition "Rosa Luxemburg: A Thousand More Things" in New York City, which presented, among other objects, excerpts from Rosa Luxemburg's prison journals. Photo: M. Starzmann.

Finally, reflecting on the politics of teaching, I show that Rosa Luxemburg's political principles should apply to the relationship of teacher/student as well. As I elaborate on these ideas, I draw on my experiences as Susan's student as well as on my own work as a teacher. Teaching is not only a fundamentally political act but also an extremely hierarchical one. Teachers hold a tremendous amount of power, so that it is crucial to reflect on the relationships we establish within the classroom. Otherwise put, while teachers may not be able to reject power, they should refuse dominating others. The power we want to rely on as teachers is the "power of gentleness," which is grounded in acts of solidarity.

Flow

Much of my academic writing as well as my political work is concerned with practice. My dissertation (Starzmann 2011), which is heavily influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) work on practice and *habitus*, analyzes "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998) in the Late Neolithic period. My turn to gentleness is deliberate here, because when I talk of gentleness, I refer to a practice. Gentleness, after all, is not something theoretical or abstract. It is "a verb: we perform acts of gentleness" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 47).

As a practice, gentleness does not have a stable disposition; it reacts to the world around us, thus remaining mutable and free in form. Best compared to a sensation, gentleness can also be described as flow – something that is both intuitive and continuously subject to adjustment. Gentleness can never belong anywhere or embody any one thing. In referencing different forms, it takes various appearances: "*From animality it takes instinct; from childhood, enigma; from prayer, calming; from nature, unpredictability; from light, light*" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 47).

An example, in which Dufourmantelle relates gentleness to the equestrian art, or horseback riding, can illustrate this further. As the rider is mounted on the horse, equipped with a crop and spurs, which he presses into the horse's flanks, he wields great power over the animal. And yet, the horse "*will accommodate the rider only if the latter knows how to gently find the lightness of hand and the movement that will adjust to the stride of the animal*" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 16). The rider cannot master the equestrian art by dominating the animal. Rather, rider and horse enter an agreement – albeit one that is not lasting but that "plays itself anew each time" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 16).

Gentleness does not require control; it relies on "tact" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 21). It makes itself felt through lightness of touch and of thought. Not because it is a form of intelligence or a type of abstract thinking does gentleness take effect, but because it works in sensory ways through the constant adjustment of both body and mind. It does not lead but it allows itself to be led. It is an "active passivity" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 5).

This understanding of "gentleness" closely resembles some of the ideas explored in my dissertation. In my research, I analyze the ways in which Late Neolithic artisans relied on skilled movement when making stone tools in a characteristically expedient, spontaneous manner (Starzmann 2013). I consider skill a form of practice, which requires continuous modification, flexibility, and openness of mind. While at the time not aware of the philosophy of gentleness (Dufourmantelle's book *Power of Gentleness* was only published in 2018), I am here *ex post facto* establishing the link between body techniques and gentleness.

Like gentleness, body techniques are fluid practices that describe a flow of movement (Mauss 1979). As such, they are subject to endless adjustment and fine-tuning. Since they are not rule-bound, body techniques cannot be acquired through formal instruction. The result of a combination of observation, imitation, and gentle guidance, they are attained through immersion in a given society and culture.

This understanding of body techniques is diametrically opposed to traditional European ideas, which speak to the need to control and regulate human bodies. Starting in the 18th century, the prevalent view was (and to a certain degree still is) that physical conditions reflect mental states. In due time, the nation-state set up various institutions of „care" (schools, prisons, hospitals, etc.) tasked with the creation of docile bodies (Foucault 1995). Well into the 20th century, state institutions used punitive measures to physically coerce citizens into obedience. Whether through rollcalls for prisoners or mandatory exercise for students, bodies were considered the raw material onto which culture could be crafted.

They could be instrumentalized through rules and supervision. The key to success in this act of statecraft is, and always will be, the nexus of power/control.

Although body techniques and gentleness are not imparted through formal instruction or coercion, they are not natural or pre-social either, but "can be learned, gained" (Dufourmantelle 2018, xiii). To illustrate this further, I want to revisit a well-known ethnographic case: In Papua New Guinea, young Telefolmin girls learn how to make string bags (*bilums*; **Fig. 3**) not by being formally trained but by following their mothers' examples. Like Dufourmantelle's horseback rider, what these girls strive for is "lightness of hand" by way of continuously adjusting their movement.

Fig. 3. A bilum *bag made of natural plant fibers from Papua New Guinea. Photo: The Bilum Tree.*

When they first start making bags, the girls' movements tend to be clumsy until they develop "the proper feel of looping" (MacKenzie 1991, 102). As their mothers tell them, "*when you've made your first* bilum *it will be cranky but then we'll throw it in the river. The river will carry your wonky* bilum *away, and it will wash away your heavy handedness. Then your hands will be good at making* bilums, *your hands will move easily like running water*" (MacKenzie 1991, 102). The fact that the girls are not forced into following a set repertoire of movements allows them to cultivate a sense of what feels right and, ultimately, to develop "hands that flow" (Ingold 2000, 356; **Fig. 4**).

Fig. 4. With "hands that flow," a Papua New Guinean woman loops and twists plant fibers into a bilum *bag. Photo: The Bilum Tree.*

Relationship

Gentleness is not just a form of practice, however; it also expresses a relationship. This relationship does more than simply define our location *vis-à-vis* one another. It marks a responsibility we have "as human beings toward the world around us" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 13). The principle of this relationship, according to Dufourmantelle (2018, 14), is "tenderness."

This view resonates with some of the ideas developed by Rosa Luxemburg, especially in her letters from prison. During her lifetime, Rosa Luxemburg spent a total of more than three years incarcerated for various "political offenses." Between 1905 and 1918, she was held in prisons in Warsaw (in 1905) as well as in Berlin (1915–16), Wronke (near Poznan) (1916–17), and Breslau (1917–18). In her letters, she engaged central political questions regarding socialism and the revolution. As she did so, she touched upon the most intimate aspects of human relationship, which makes her letters both valuable in an autobiographic sense and deeply personal (see Adler et al. 2011). By reflecting on her relationship to the

world, Rosa Luxemburg paid special attention not only to how she related to other humans but also to the natural world, in particular plants and animals. Her approach to politics, as to the world generally, was one of care and consideration.

And yet, for Rosa Luxemburg, the natural world also contained "so much cruelty that I suffer greatly" (cited in Nettl 2019, 666). This sentiment seems to foreshadow the havoc wrecked on Gaia by ruthless capitalism – especially in times of rapid climate change, the unfettered growth of extractive industries, the depletion of resources, and the exploitation and exclusion of entire classes of people. In the midst of World War One, Rosa Luxemburg found herself in a universe that must have felt similarly doomed.

Although she detested and abhorred violence, whether against human beings or animals, Rosa Luxemburg was surrounded by it in a world of political upheaval and turmoil. While a prisoner in Wronke, she witnessed the beating of two buffaloes: The animals were pulling a wagon filled with sacks of old army clothes, which had been sent to the prison for mending. When the animals, underfed and exhausted, were unable to pull the wagon over the threshold of the prison gate, a soldier started brutally flailing and whipping them. As their hide began to crack, one of the animals started bleeding. Rosa Luxemburg (2011, 457), who had witnessed the scene, found in the animal's expression that "*of a child that has been punished and doesn't know why or what for, doesn't know how to get away from this torment and raw violence.*"

In her letters, Rosa Luxemburg relentlessly examines the role all of us will need to play in the transformation toward a socialist society. If the goal was to "live beyond relations of exploitation" (Cornell 2018, 7), each and every one of us will have to change in fundamental ways, "*from the ego-driven creatures we have become under capitalism to the human beings who could live together in respect*" (Cornell 2018, 8). This transformation concerns our work life, our family relations, and our romantic relationships, as well as how we relate to non-human beings, including animals and plants.

In a letter sent to her friend and lover Hans ("Hänschen") Diefenbach, Rosa Luxemburg (2004, 378) relays the "rather hard time" she had in prison. To cope, she had come up with a basic rule for life: "*To be kind and good is the main thing! Plainly and simply, to be good – that resolves and unites everything and is better than all cleverness and insistence on 'being right'*" (Luxemburg 2004, 378). Her goodness, which goes beyond the Kantian imperative to do good, cannot be translated directly into Dufourmantelle's gentleness; yet, her willingness to not insist on being right is a form of letting go – an active passivity.

Diametrically opposed to the soldier's violence, which is absolute and dominates in absolute ways, Rosa Luxemburg's gentleness is relational. This does not mean that gentleness is free of power. Always contained within it is the possibility of manipulation and, hence, the potential of violence. Mahatma Ghandi's political work, for instance, was organized around gentleness, yet it caused plenty of rage in others; it was his lack of violence that invoked a violent response (Dufourmantelle 2018, 47).

Then, although gentleness's ultimate truth lies in the refusal of violence, there is no innocence in gentleness. Rosa Luxemburg recognized as much when she pointed out that nature, in which she found so much beauty and softness, did not offer a refuge. Rather, violence was always already contained within nature's soul.

Being aware of, having witnessed, or even having experienced violence while not succumbing to it is gentleness. Out of the rejection of "*any notion of the dominion of humans over other forms of being, including animals*" (Cornell 2018, 9) arises a new morality. This morality is

grounded in a gentleness aware of its potential to fail; a gentleness that succeeds precisely because it knows of its insufficiency. Judging from Rosa Luxemburg's letters, life often felt tenuous to her, fragile, always predicated as it is on death. Gentleness is the delicate place where this fragility surfaces: *"An animal's belly. The throbbing of a vein that surfaces from under the skin. Very aged skin like a translucent pebble"* (Dufourmantelle 2018, 23). A place of lightness and softness; a tender place; always at risk. Extremely vulnerable, each of these places seems to at once ask to be violated and to refuse such violation.

Solidarity

If the power of gentleness is predicated on fragility, being gentle implies that we understand others *"in their insufficiency, their precariousness, their immaturity, their stupidity"* (Dufourmantelle 2018, 15). Where admission of weakness or insufficiency puts us at risk of inviting violence, gentleness arises from the refusal "to add to suffering, to exclusion, to cruelty" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 15).

This refusal does not require us to forgive human faults or flaws; it asks us to embrace them. A form of empathy. As gentleness touches the realm where social experiences diverge and where misunderstanding or disappointment is possible, we create "space for a sensitive humanity" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 15). As we accept weakness and the potential for disappointment, gentleness is not merely about understanding the other's insufficiency, but also one's own. I, too, am insufficient, precarious, immature, and stupid. In this sense, gentleness functions as an "active solidarity irrespective of circumstances" (Dufourmantelle 2018, 30).

Active solidarity, and gentleness more generally, are relevant to the context of teaching and learning in so many ways. By embracing weakness, we also embrace the notion of failure, which is essential to learning. For Rosa Luxemburg, the idea of "succeeding by failing" was central to her understanding of revolution as a learning process, in which *"each failure becomes the occasion for self-examination and self-criticism"* (Michaelis 2011, 208). As we understand our own insufficiency, we can adjust, improve, and learn more deeply.

This applies not only to revolutionary socialism with its "radically future-oriented politics" (Michaelis 2011, 204), but to learning processes in general. I think of writing my dissertation, which often led to exasperation and the feeling that I would not be able to complete the project. That I did not give up, was in no minor part due to Susan's encouragement. In the moments "when one contends with the possibility that all hope is lost" (Michaelis 2011, 205), she helped me overcome the experience of "failure" by revealing to me that the extent of my dedication was not so much a commitment to success as to the process of research and writing itself.

The ability for self-examination and self-criticism is crucial not just to learning but to teaching as well. The richest experiences I had as a student were in the context of classes that empowered me "to critically reflect on *how* we know *what* we know" (Easy et al. 2016, 24). This entails that the teacher is willing to relinquish control over knowledge claims. Rather than holding up knowledge as sacred, abstract, and objective, beholden only to an inner circle of a select few, it means admitting to the fact that all knowledge is constructed and partial. Such an act engages power by making visible the very "frameworks that govern the production of [...] knowledge" (Easy et al. 2016, 29).

Finally, a self-reflexive approach to teaching also requires us to acknowledge existing silences, absences, and *Leerstellen* (blank spaces). This applies to both established, authoritative research archives as well as

to one's own knowledge base. I remember well how deeply impressed I was when, in an advanced seminar, Susan admitted to not being certain of a historical detail. She would have to look this up, she told the classroom full of graduate students, and would get back to us in our next session. From this admission to one's own insufficiency I took away the insight that knowledge can in fact never be comprehensive or complete.

Dance

If teaching is to be an active solidarity, it requires teachers to develop a proper "feel" for the students who are in their care. By this – a "feel" – I do not mean a feeling or a mood, a *Stimmung*. Gentleness is not sentimental; it is compassionate.

What I insinuate is an approach to teaching that collapses the theory/practice divide. Like gentleness, teaching is a form of both practice (or action) and thought. Paolo Freire (2014, 27) points this out when he argues that in teaching speech – and, by extension, thought – is practice. This is mirrored in gentleness, where intelligence – like speech – is sensory – like practice.

Here we have come full circle: What we take from gentleness, we find in body techniques, and we encounter it in teaching/learning as well. My first clumsy attempts at studying body techniques left me wrestling with a theoretical concept that is deeply based in practice and experience. I could not grasp it by way of my intellect alone.

Think of dance, Susan suggested then. Like dance, body techniques are a form of flow. Our feet and body (are in) touch (with) their surroundings, ever so lightly, without asserting one's full weight, without the need for force or coercion. This is also about "the power of human bodies in shared movement" (Mills 2019). Dancing, as much as teaching, is a form of accompaniment (Lynd 2012), a potential to bring light and solidarity to us through joint action.

To this day, I carry the example of dance around with me. I remind myself of it when I think of the art of letting go; of being gentle rather than fierce; of admitting to vulnerability, whether in my professional life, my personal relationships, or my engagement with the natural world. I think of my life as a flow, the same way that dance and scholarship are forms of flow. As Susan has taught me, all these practices require mutual engagement; a sensitivity for other's (as well as our own) fears and weaknesses; and continuous, gentle adjustment of the temporary agreements we enter with each other, anew every day.

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