

On Bodies and Our Own Bodies

Care and Vulnerability When Teaching about Death and Loss

MARÍA FERNANDA OLARTE-SIERRA

On a sunny afternoon of mid-March 2022, I stood in front of a group of six students in what was my first teaching experience at the University of Vienna for a course titled *Violence and (dead) bodies. Experiences from (post)conflict scenarios*. Six women, with eager eyes—the only part of their face that I could see since we still were required to wear face masks due to the COVID-19 pandemic that had hit some 24 months before. We all had gone through the experience of living a pandemic that claimed millions of lives. There we stood, six students and I; seven women with distinct socio-cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, and at varying moments and places in our academic trajectory. For most of us, however, this was the first time in two years to be sitting in a classroom with fellow classmates; that we could sit in a group, at a round table in the presence of others—being together—and not looking at each other on a computer screen.

In this text, I reflect on the full spectrum of learning-teaching and focus on the bodily experience of being in the same room where we (students and teacher) become together and leave transformed. I argue that teaching and learning about death and dying in a violent context requires coming together to expose and share our vulnerabilities. This, because in order to make sense of brutal violence without minimising it or essentialising it, we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable: to acknowledge that we know and understand through and with our bodies. Accepting being vulnerable together enables space for mutual care where we can support each other. Through such vulnerability, we can acknowledge our emotions, recognise our embodiments and reflect on how we each relate to and understand dying a violent death. Together we can explore how, through and with our bodies, we shape the questions we raise about dying in a violent context and also how we grapple with these issues.

Understanding teaching-learning as a bodily experience implies rethinking the format, set-

ting, and methodology of the themes and topics we address. It requires us, as teachers, not only to secure safe spaces where students feel comfortable expressing themselves but also not to take for granted the historical classroom setting (as problematic as traditional forms of learning might be). Additionally, it calls for ensuring the possibility of allowing silence as a form of expression and being present, since emotions are not always easily put into words, for making sense of acts of brutal violence tends to leave some of us speechless. Hence, this is an invitation to rethink the teacher-student binomial in terms of our responsibility to our students to care for them when we address grief and loss (KRYS-TALLI 2021). That is to say, to take care when we open up spaces for mutual learning when considering *topics that break our hearts*, paraphrasing RUTH BEHAR (1996).

Affective teaching and learning with and through the body

For this course, we were set to attend to the (dead) body in contexts of mass violence and war around the world. For seven sessions we would address and discuss both the materiality and the power—symbolic and political—of dead bodies. We would dive deep into the nastiness of violence and the marks that it leaves on bodies and the social fabric of a community. We would tackle how and why not all dead bodies are equal since not all people are equally targeted by crime and violence. Matters of race, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, ideology, religion, and appearance were all elements to be discussed in our class. The body was to be at the centre of our discussions. Constantly present. We had to acknowledge that before a body was a corpse, it was a person. We had to recognize that a “body count” disregards the life and death of real people and serves as an easy escape route to avoid facing the pain, desolation, and fear that violent death im-

plies. Thus, we were set to be uncomfortable for seven sessions while we faced death and dead bodies. That afternoon in March, sitting with those six students, and still being in the healing process of vicarious trauma due to my research on forensic experts' knowledge practices in Colombia, a country with a long and on-going history of violence (OLARTE-SIERRA 2022), I opened the space to dwell with heart-breaking and conceptually challenging discussions of death and dead bodies in the communal presence of in-person very alive students.

As a feminist, I am aware of the role that affect and emotion have in knowledge production (cp. AHMED 2004) and I not only acknowledge this in my research practice (OLARTE-SIERRA 2019), I actively try to transmit it to my students. However, it was not until this course on violence and (dead) bodies that I engaged in practices—inside the classroom—to attend to how we (both individually and as a group) were feeling and how those feelings shaped the discussions we had and the questions we asked in the classroom space. This was particularly tangible in the third session; a session on “gender and death”. The core of the discussion and the readings the students had to prepare were on femicide. The idea was that a student presented the case of gendered bodies of refugees, on the one hand, and on soldiers and casualties in the context of the Ukraine-Russia war that had recently started, on the other. To integrate the pre-class readings and the student's presentation, I had planned to address the challenges of forensic identification of the remains of trans people (especially when skeletal) in the Colombian armed conflict. Then, have a discussion and let the students raise questions or make comments, as we had done in the two previous classes. However, this was not how the class unfolded, it was not as straightforward.

I arrived at class shaken. For me, re-reading the literature for that day was challenging. I had to stop a couple of times to take a breath and a walk. The description of the marks that femicide leaves on women's bodies, the level of apathy these crimes often produce in the general public, and my embodied fear as a woman—and so this could happen to me—were elements that made my reading difficult. When entering the classroom, the students were unusually quiet,

only a few were talking and discussing cases of femicide that they were aware of. I opened the session by asking the women how they felt. After a short silence, I rephrased my question, “how did the readings make you feel?” Silence again. After a couple of minutes in silence and elusive glances, I embraced the responsibility of sharing, which is never easy—not for me, anyway. I talked about my need for breaks while reading and that the images described by the authors came so vividly into my head that I could imagine the suffering of the victims, their mangled bodies, and the cries of their mothers and fathers and friends. I mentioned that my working so closely with violence in Colombia had produced a kind of sensitivity that made what I read translate to me physically—to my body. I spoke about how this work has negatively affected my mental health as well. I also said that I find it problematic that some forms of writing about suffering actually revictimize and essentialise victims and risks reducing their entire existence to the suffering they endured and all that revolved around their death and dying. I finished by saying that despite my pain, I believe that we need to address these topics, we must look directly at violence and death, regardless of our urge to look away because the suffering of others in war ridden or mass violence contexts affects us all as fellow human beings. As researchers we can provide the nuance and greater context and considerations of human lives that does not limit people to their experiences of suffering, death or dying.

The motivation for asking and initiating reflection with my students was part of my own process of healing. I knew all too well that violence, albeit distant and through texts and testimony can have a devastating effect on our bodies and minds. After I finished speaking, the students started sharing and we engaged in a session-long conversation in which we not only referred to the literature but also to how speaking of death, bodies, and violence made us feel in general. As each of us spoke, the others listened attentively. I encouraged questions, but highlighted that if any questions came up, they needed to be posed compassionately even if students disagreed with one another. For me, this was a way of ensuring that we kept an analytical body-mind while providing a safe space to care for and respect the group

and each individual. Among the emotions students referred to were despair, fear, anger, and disgust as they found disturbing some of the cases we discussed. As a group, we talked about how we could write about and report issues and topics like these, without traumatising our audiences and revictimizing the victims or avoid addressing these poignant issues. We spoke about how to address victims of violence in ways that do not reproduce the violence but rather effectively communicate our concerns.

From that session onward, we devoted a portion of each session to address how we felt both with the day's topic and the general theme of the course. Addressing our emotions (i. e., how the texts made us feel) allowed us to acknowledge our embodiments. That is, it enabled us to recognize the centrality that our bodies have when we are confronted with any form of knowledge making—whether we are aware of it or not (AHMED 2004; LÓPEZ 2014). Putting forward our embodiments shed light on how we felt with a given session or the course in general. Thus, we were made aware of how our own experiences, emotions, feelings and reactions to death and dead bodies were shifting as a result of participating in the course and discussions in our shared space. We talked about how placing the body of those who died a violent death on centre stage gave the violence we were studying a new nuance, made it tangible, difficult to ignore. This, in turn, required that we search for other words to talk about pain and suffering in ways that convey its matter-of-factness and does not minimize it. We found the value of silence since, on occasion, it was more eloquent than words – for words could not fully express how we felt and what we were thinking. Reflecting on the bodies that suffered the violence and on our own bodies as sites of knowledge production through intellect and affect shaped the experience of our course and our overall relationship to how violence and suffering are referred and documented in academia.

A need for closeness, silence and trust

When I planned this course, I did not anticipate how it would develop. I did foresee that it would be a challenging course for students and for me

due to the topic. I was aware of the need for caution regarding my students' and my own emotional well-being. However, I had never expected it to be so hard and beautiful and inspiring—all at the same time. Also, I did not know what to expect from my students, since this was the first time I had taught at the University of Vienna, and was unfamiliar with the kind of engagement students are willing to have as individuals and as a group. Today, in hindsight, I can say that we were a fortunate bunch of seven women who realised we could trust the silences and the presence of the other six in the safe space of a classroom. We could share parts of our own vulnerabilities and jointly go through a learning experience that shaped us all. For me, as a teacher, I learnt to recognise the silence that fills a classroom as an eloquent and welcomed companion. I grew ever more comfortable allowing students the time to think (and feel) before participating, thus, giving them a chance to fully inhabit our collective silence.

We were also a fortunate bunch, because we could have this learning experience while sharing the same physical space. We could be together and make eye contact or direct a smile (albeit behind a face mask) or talk to a classmate in close proximity to one another or share a coffee break. We could hear and feel others' laughter and silence as well as our own resonating in the classroom and not through speakers on our computers. Having put the body centre-stage while addressing life and death in violent contexts required us to acknowledge our own bodies. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of our own vulnerability and the Russian war on Ukraine did not let us forget the fragility of life. This course and our being and becoming together was a gentle reminder that life is lived moment by moment. It allowed us—through our losses, fears and expectations—to understand that loss helps to tune inquiry and calibrate responses, which “can inform the ‘mmm’, the sound of empathy” (KRYSTALLI 2021: 43). That this course and how it occurred reminded us of the power of care and support in whatever form they may take, which for us was a classroom on the 4th floor at the New Institute Building (NIG) of the University of Vienna in the summer semester of 2022.

Final remarks

Following BEHAR's (1996) insight about vulnerable writing, I see that opening a space to be vulnerable together brought about predicaments that I had not anticipated as a teacher (i. e., thick silences, students' discomfort with some topics and forms of writing present in the reading material for the course, and the open acknowledgement of fear and pain). However, this enriched our theoretical discussions and allowed us to nurture the complexity that knowing with and through the body brings. BEHAR says: "this anthropology [of pain and suffering] isn't for the soft-hearted" (1996: 24), and we, together, found our own strengths through vulnerability while we cared for each other by supporting one another in the shared space of a classroom, respecting each other's rhythms, voices, laughter, questions, and silences.

To close this text, I turn once again to KRYS-TALLI's words when she says: "feminism is not merely about a series of terrible stories of [...] violence, but also a register of care and a vocabulary of joy" (2021: 43). Care clearly materialised in the classroom in the forms I have shared above. Joy, however, was more elusive. Yet, joy was there as a river that ran deep throughout the course. As a final assignment, I asked each student to write a reflection on what they had learnt in our course and what they took away for future experiences (whether academic or not). The stu-

dents mentioned the course dynamics, the centrality we gave to the body, the space we opened for connection, to address our emotions and our embodiments; and the safety to speak and be heard. I interpret all these as a form of joy. The kind of joy that wholesome experiences of learning and being together produce. The joy of acknowledging our commitments, expectations, questions (not always answered), and the possibility of being together, supporting one another. The joy of knowing oneself cared for while also caring for others.

References

- AHMED, SARA 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- BEHAR, RUTH 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- KRYSTALLI, ROXANI 2021. Of loss and light: teaching in the time of grief. *Journal of Narrative Politics* 8, 1: 41–44.
- LÓPEZ, HELENA 2014. Emociones, Afectividad, Feminismo. In GARCÍA ANDRADE, ADRIANA & SABIDO RAMOS, OLGA (eds) *Cuerpo y afectividad en la sociedad contemporánea. Algunas rutas del amor y la experiencia sensible en las ciencias sociales*. Ciudad de México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana: 257–276.
- OLARTE-SIERRA, MARÍA FERNANDA 2019. Of flesh and bone: emotional and affective ethnography of forensic anthropology practices amidst an armed conflict. *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 2, 1: 77–93.
- OLARTE-SIERRA, MARÍA FERNANDA 2022. (Un)Doing the Colombian armed conflict: forensic knowledge, contradicting bodies, unsettling stories. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* 30, 3: 19–37.



MARÍA FERNANDA OLARTE-SIERRA is a medical anthropologist and an anthropologist of science with a focus on ethnographic research. She addresses interactions of health, technology, and the body in highly bio-medicalized and technological contexts in Latin America. She recently finished a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at the University of Amsterdam with a project that addresses the role of judicial and humanitarian forensic knowledge in co-producing collective accounts of violence in Colombia. Currently, she is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Vienna, in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology in the group of Medical Anthropology and Global Health, where she works on the search for forcibly disappeared persons conducted by people who are living in exile as practices of collective care and sites of reconciliation in war-ridden contexts in Latin America.

University of Vienna
 Medical Anthropology & Global Health|Institute for Cultural and Social Anthropology
 Neues Institutsgebäude (NIG). Universitätsstraße 7 1010 Vienna, Austria
 mafe.olarte-sierra@univie.ac.at