



Towards a Feminist and Affective Pedagogy of Vulnerability

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Abstract

This paper gives a theoretical-affective account of my experience of teaching the course “Vulnerability, Gender, and Justice.” Applied to pedagogy, the notion of vulnerability, diffractive methodologies, and rhizomatic thinking can potentially transform traditional ways of reading philosophy, of understanding ourselves, and of understanding how we are situated in practices within molar and molecular lines. This course aimed to activate potential lines of flight that may fly away from normativity.

Keywords

Diffractive reading; vulnerability; rhizome; affects; pedagogy; feminism.

Introduction

There is something amorous –but also something fatal– about all education.

(Deleuze, 1994, p. 23).

This quotation by Gilles Deleuze can be considered as one of my starting points of thinking an affective pedagogy. Deleuze suggests here that learning entails the amorous and fatal dissolving of the body as it re-articulates and re-forms itself with its surroundings. If we want to be able to engage in such an amorous relationship, one has to embrace their relationality, and the possibility of affecting and being affected by others: we are not isolated individuals that have no ties with one another; on the contrary, we are interdependent, relational beings that constantly affect each other. Openness to others is a condition of possibility of this re-articulation and re-formulation of the body, of this amorous and fatal process of learning. I call this openness “vulnerability.” Vulnerability is usually understood as injurability; nonetheless, my understanding of vulnerability draws on Spinozian consideration of individuality that takes into account a constitutive openness and affectability (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Vulnerability, in this sense, is the condition of possibility of being affected.

From my understanding of the world as a monist philosopher influenced by Spinoza (1992; 2002) and Deleuze (1988), and following authors such as Gilson (2014) and Ferrarese (2016, 2017), I argue that human constitutive vulnerability has to do with our affectability. An affect is a fluctuation in a body’s capacity to act, which is created through relations, interactions, and engagements with other bodies. For Deleuze (1988, p. 49), affect is “an increase or decrease of the power of acting, for the body and the mind alike.” All bodies affect each other and engage in, what feminist materialist scholars referred to as constant intra-actions (Barad, 2007; Stark, 2016). An affective pedagogy takes this into account to shape a relational and non-binary perspective on the intertwinement of knowledge and material conditions, teachers and students, physical bodies, and socio-economic relations. In this sense, an “affective pedagogy reminds us that learning is also a politics of materiality and

affectivity, a politics of socio-economic and physical bodies, school spaces and the emotional lives of students and their teachers” (Hickey-Moody & Harrison, 2018: Theoretical Context section, para. 3).

According to Grossberg (1997) affective pedagogy opens possibilities and aims at co-producing open-ended processes that can lead to unimagined and even unimaginable outcomes (Grossberg, 1997, p. 387). The outcomes are not predefined, but the objective is to empower the participants to reconstruct their worldviews. In this sense, it is entangled with diffractive reading (Haraway, 2004; Barad, 2007; van der Tuin, 2011) and rhizomatics (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Both diffractive readings and rhizomatic thinking, as it will be explained below, foster an approach to education and relational co-production of knowledge that is related to openness and to the possibilities of being affected by what we read, with whom we read, where we read, which other texts we are reading or have previously read. The aim of these methodologies is, as we will see, to generate lines of flight –momentary transformations, temporary movements that fly away from normativity– that may result in different theoretical and practical approaches to philosophy in academic settings.

Applied to pedagogy, diffractive reading, vulnerability understood as affectability, and rhizomatics offer ways to conceptualize our collective encounters in the classroom as multiplicities, to account for the relational and material aspects of our work, and to consider our practice in processes of learning-teaching as dynamic, complex, contextualized, situated phenomena. An affective pedagogy of vulnerability reconceptualizes learning as a creative and open-ended process whose outcome is unforeseeable. Openness is a constitutive feature of this pedagogy, and experimentation and creativity are key to this openness: they give rise to unforeseen and productive teaching-learning processes.

An affective pedagogy requires experimenting, letting go of the fantasy of mastery in which the professor in charge of facilitating the learning-teaching process fully controls the outcomes of what happens in the classroom. Experimenting is understood as a way of opening ourselves to the unknown, to the unpredictable. Experimentation fully embraces an affirmative ethics of potentiality (Braidotti, 2009),

and it entails imaginative and creative ways of dealing with inequality and power relations within the classroom. Unexpected outcomes are a catalyst for something new emerging within open-ended processes of becoming. Within this perspective, the classroom is understood from the perspective of relationality and intra-activity: it is an assemblage, a complexity of networks of human and non-human actors where unexpected encounters happen and where difference and multiplicities (such as different backgrounds or different neurodiversities) are celebrated as productive, affirmative, constitutively entangled. Within this perspective, the classroom is understood as a rhizome (Strom & Martin, 2015), an assemblage, or a complexity of relational networks. A pedagogy of vulnerability challenges teachers to render their frames of knowing, feeling, and doing vulnerable; it also challenges students to involve themselves in the process of teaching-learning.

Vulnerability has been one of my topics of interest in the last few years (Cano Abadía, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2021), reading from various sources and focusing on theoretical approaches from different feminist authors such as Judith Butler (2003, 2006, 2009, 2015), Athena Athanasiou (2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2020), Estelle Ferrarese (2016, 2017), Erinn Gilson (2014), or Magdalena Górska (2016). During my research on vulnerability, I have been developing a diffractive reading that results in what we have called “a posthuman vulnerability” (Hernández Domínguez & Cano Abadía, 2021). It is a take on vulnerability that tries to find the points of friction and convergence between different perspectives which see beyond the negative aspect of affectability –as susceptibility to being harmed or suffering from disease. Instead vulnerability is the very condition of possibility of being affected; a constitutive openness that is related to our relationality and exposability. According to this perspective, we are all affected by others– we are not invulnerable, but we are open and susceptible to being affected. The fantasy of invulnerability (Ferrarese, 2016) is a fable that has to be rewritten in terms of non-dualist relationality, affectability, and interdependence.

The course “Vulnerability, Gender, and Justice” originated from a Conference by the same title that I organized that addressed the multilayered dimensions of vulnerability, intertwined with matters of gender and justice. The Conference took place in Graz, Austria on July 17-18, 2019 at the Section of Political Philosophy at the University of Graz. It fostered interdisciplinary perspectives within contemporary feminism that

provided analytical tools to understand vulnerability and precarity, while also exploring the possibilities of agency and critical engagement with social relations and institutions.

After the organization of this Conference, I was given the opportunity to teach a course on the topic. Due to academic knowmadism (Cielemecka & Revelles- Benavente, 2017) and a short post-doc contract, this was a one-time course that took the form of a Proseminar, which in Austria are courses that allow only up to twenty-five students who are expected to participate actively in class. I decided to try an affective approach with this group because of the small number of students, and because of the topic we were discussing –given that we were going to focus theoretically on the topic of vulnerability, we should also try a vulnerable approach to the process of learning and teaching. In order to prepare for this concrete experience, I started to systematize my thoughts on teaching and on being vulnerable together. During the course, I initiated a practice of self-study to reflect on my own practice in intra-action with my students. The practice of self-reflection is ongoing and open-ended, and it has accompanied me until today. I paid close attention to how our affective energy was created and the flows were distributed as our bodies shared a space and collided there. Applied to the teaching of “Vulnerability, Gender, and Justice,” my theoretical framework –in which diffractive reading, vulnerability, and rhizomatics are key elements– enabled stimulating co-learning experiences that challenged traditional conceptions of the teaching of philosophy.

Embracing vulnerability during this learning-teaching process had an affective dimension. It is not only about understanding it theoretically, being aware of its existence and occurrence in our lived experiences. Embracing vulnerability has to do with being ready to embody the messiness of being vulnerable: deeply feeling that being open to others undoes and redoes ourselves –it is an amorous and fatal process. This is related to what Monika Rogowska-Strangret (2017, p. 18) calls the “vulnerability of the self” that requires an unpacking of the self through shared vulnerabilities. It has to do with embracing deep connections and profound relationality that take into account our mutual interdependence. It implies recognizing how we are enmeshed with others in a way that makes us wonder who we are. Where

are the limits of my existence? Where do others start? What is mine? Do I even have something that is “mine” or is it all shared with others? Undoing and redoing oneself in such a way is an ongoing open-ended process. A process that is panic-inducer, anxiety-provoking, daunting, nerve-racking, and also full of wonders.

This paper is divided into three parts that correspond to three aspects related to our openness and relationality and that deal with three different aspects of this affective pedagogy: diffractive reading, vulnerability, and rhizomatic thinking.

Diffractive reading

The scientific term *diffraction* concerns the bending and spreading of waves when they combine or meet an obstacle. Water, light, and sound all exhibit diffraction under the right circumstances. This diffractive spreading and bending have been used as a metaphor for certain innovative feminist methodological approaches. As Karen Barad suggests (2007, p. 73), diffraction is a physical phenomenon that can inspire a new reading strategy.

Donna J. Haraway (2004) was the first author to formulate diffraction for feminist academic purposes, proposing this metaphor as a feminist tool to rethink difference/s beyond binary opposition/s. Inspired by physical optics, Haraway adopted diffraction to shift our understanding of difference/s from oppositional to differential, from static to dynamic, and our ideas of knowledge from reflective judgment to embedded involvement.

Barad (2007, 2014) further explores the creative possibilities of a diffractive methodology. She understands it as a reading strategy that goes beyond the dialectics between schools of thought and allows us to affirm similarities between seemingly opposite schools of thought. For Barad, diffractive reading involves close, attentive, and care-full readings of each other’s work to affect and be affected by each other.

Diffraction intends to go beyond the repetition of the same and “does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference

appear” (Haraway, 2004, p. 70). Diffraction focuses on differences and it is related to an ethics of affirmation (Braidotti, 2009) that moves beyond paralyzing criticism and transforms negativity into activity. A number of shifts are necessary: from negative to affirmative, from entropic to generative, from incomprehensible to virtual wanting to be actualized. Diffractive methodologies allow for these shifts to happen, as they are open to new actualizations and generative knowledges. In this sense, it is important to build bridges and develop (theoretical) alliances. As Iris van der Tuin argues (2011, p. 27): “It [diffractive method] allows us to affirm and strengthen links between schools of thought or scholars that only *apparently* work toward the same goal. It is a strategy with which new concepts or traditions, new philosophies, can be engendered.”

Diffraction disrupts the temporality of our trains of thought, transverses disciplines, and can change conceptual meanings in different contexts. When brought to learning-teaching processes, diffractive methodologies are useful to foster conversations between different texts that can belong to different authors and (often opposing) disciplines or schools of thought. This is relevant when designing the syllabus: diffractive methodologies invite us to incorporate differing frames of thought and proposing topics from divergent perspectives. In this sense, it also enables the designer of the syllabus to be more creative and to escape coercive theoretical and disciplinary frameworks that might exclude certain authors because they seemingly do not fit in. The scope of topics and perspectives that can be tackled in class is broadened; and not only synchronically but diachronically as well: diffractive methodologies are concerned with acknowledging the value of past, present, and future contributions to knowledge. They elongate the temporality of theoretical debates and conversations.

Applied to contemporary feminist theory, “diffraction is often employed figuratively, to denote a more critical and difference-attentive mode of consciousness and thought” (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016). Diffracting, rather than reflecting, produces “more promising interference patterns” (Haraway, 1997, p. 16) or, in Barad's words: “patterns of difference that make a difference” (Barad, 2007, p. 72). This opens up new possibilities and takes us to unforeseen scenarios. These interference patterns create

differences that have the potential of disrupting the status quo established in university classrooms. Because of these interferences that disrupt traditional ways of doing, one has to be ready to be open to the unknown, to the chaotic.

Despite the fact of having to pay attention to the relationship of a text with other texts and artefacts (van der Tuin, 2017), often coming from different perspectives, diffractive methodologies do not cause our attention to be spread thin. On the contrary, diffraction invites us to perform care-full readings of the details of texts. This is what I proposed to my students: a course based on diffractive readings on vulnerability and with the aim of encouraging them to become diffractive readers.

In my practice, bridging together different disciplines has been a key element: I was a feminist philosopher trained in post-structuralisms, queer theories, and intersectionality, with an ever-growing research interest in new materialisms and critical posthumanisms for the last decade, teaching at an institution that heavily focuses on analytical philosophy. My background was completely different from the theoretical and practical background that my students were used to seeing in their professors. When planning the syllabus, I had to take this into account: my students were most likely unfamiliar with many of the philosophical traditions and concepts introduced in this course; at the same time, the connections they made often referred to liberal political philosophy. I had to be ready to discuss the concept of vulnerability, for example, taking into consideration John Rawls' concept of the veil of ignorance (Rawls, 1971). This enriched the conversations we had, which went into directions that I would not have been even able to anticipate. Furthermore, it disrupted the usual way in which philosophy was being taught at that institution, and how I was used to teaching feminist theory.

The aim of the discussions during the "Vulnerability, Gender, and Justice" course was to co-create new diffraction patterns in the understanding of our own vulnerability; not only as a philosophical, theoretical exercise but as an affective experience that has an impact on our very understanding of our situatedness in the world through exposing the vulnerability of the self (Rogowska-Strangret, 2017). Through these diffractive readings of vulnerability in the classroom, we could disentangle the complexity of

relationality and affectability. Our situatedness in that classroom was the scenario in which this particular, collective diffractive reading of vulnerability took place.

In the first session, we discussed the syllabus with the thematic topics that we would be working on during the semester. I also explained my situatedness as a post-structuralist scholar in an institution that was heavily oriented towards analytic philosophy and where feminist scholarship was scarcely taught to students. The readings were from authors that do not belong to one discipline or school of thought, and some of the readings are texts with which I do not theoretically agree. Some of the authors belong to the mainstream tradition taught at our institution while others belong to frames of thought completely alien to my students.

The course started with a general presentation of the concept of vulnerability. As a first exercise, the students were invited to brainstorm and co-produce a word cloud with concepts and ideas with which they associate "vulnerability." Many of the concepts referred to weakness (abandoned, alone, danger, discrimination, dispossessed, exposed, helpless, neglect, poverty, precarious, risk, unprotected, weak), while others were linked to resilience and empowerment (connection, feelings, growth, honesty, openness, self-reflection, strength). The readings after this exercise (Ferrarese, 2016; Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016) presented a concept of vulnerability that tries to escape the binarism between vulnerability (associated with nature, passiveness, and femininity) and resistance (associated with the political and social world, action, and masculinity). Instead of reproducing the nature-social circle (Ferrarese, 2016), these authors propose a naturecultural (Haraway, 2003) rendering of vulnerability and that breaks the dualism that has traditionally been established between vulnerability/resistance, weakness/strength, passivity/action.

The second step was an invitation to think about vulnerability as a shared condition that stems from our (human) embodiment, our relationality, and our openness. This was accompanied by an explanation of a Spinozian understanding of the process of individuation, which is an affective process of inter-dependency. Readings from Judith Butler (2003, 2012) and Elodie Boubilil (2018) were presented at this stage. Many of the concepts that appeared on the students' word-cloud (e.g. poverty, discrimination, neglect) were related to precarity (Butler, 2009), understood as a differential

distribution of vulnerability along certain axes of power, privilege, and oppression (related to gender, ability, class, geopolitical issues, sexuality, etc.). To delve into this aspect of vulnerability, we read together Butler (2009) and the collective work of Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (2014). The last part of the course was dedicated to critically assess what to do with vulnerability. From legal theory, Martha Fineman (2008, 2010) advocates a responsive state that protects our constitutive vulnerability and criticizes the shortcomings of liberal theories of justice. From a critical posthumanist perspective, Rosi Braidotti (2009) approaches the concept of vulnerability with scepticism and puts forward an ethics of affirmation, while Athena Athanasiou (2016a) responds to her proposition by affirming the power of mourning to articulate political resistance.

Vulnerability

Feminist philosophers have conceptualized vulnerability as a constitutive feature of our human condition whilst acknowledging its differential distribution. Butler (2006) proposes to differentiate between ontological vulnerability –precariousness,– and socially and culturally produced vulnerability –precarity. Precariousness is an ontological shared state of humanity, a condition of susceptibility to being harmed. This theoretical formulation is a consequence of her Spinozian stance on the relationality of subjects (Butler, 2015): we are all interdependent, thus, we are affected by others, and we affect others; thus, affectability –understood as unqualified interdependence when considering a global community (Dotson & Whyte, 2013, p. 55)– is a crucial part of vulnerability. We are vulnerable to others: we are open to others. Precarity, on the other hand, is the “politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations (...) to greater violence” (Butler, 2009, p. 28). With this distinction, Butler shows that vulnerability is systematically increased and geopolitically distributed according to differing socioeconomic conditions that should be addressed in order to understand the precarization of certain (gendered, sexualized, racialized) populations. On the one hand, vulnerability is universally shared, it is an ontological feature of our existence. Vulnerability, understood as

affectability, relationality, and interdependency, is inevitable. On the other hand, highlighting the importance of concrete conditions of precarity, vulnerability is understood as pertaining to the lived, situated body. In this sense, it is understood that the lived body experiences its vulnerability through its exposure to others and the world.

For Butler (2009, p. 33), “the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition.” Vulnerability is not thus reducible to injurability; rather, it is a response to exteriority, an affectability that precisely animates responsiveness to the world. Our own survivability depends on our relationality. In this sense, it is crucial to develop a conception of ourselves that focuses on recognising how we are bound up with others.

Elodie Boubilil (2018, p. 183) defines vulnerability as follows: “A multifaceted concept depicting our relational and embodied nature (ontological vulnerability) and our necessarily situated and unpredictable existence (situational vulnerabilities).” For her, as for Gilson, vulnerability describes the very structure of subjectivity, its “transcendental condition, pointing to an openness and plasticity that makes possible transformation” (Gilson, 2014, p. 10). Vulnerability is always relational –it always presupposes openness and exposure to the world and to others. This relationality, this openness, structures the subject's experience of the world. That being so, vulnerability is not only susceptibility to being affected; it is also a capacity to be sensitive to the world and others. Vulnerability is a mutual experience: one is always vulnerable to others, vulnerable before somebody else.

We are thus open to being affected through this interdependence and responsiveness to others. We are vulnerable to being changed through our interactions and intra-actions with others, to undergo a process of re-making through our engagements with others. We are not only vulnerable to one another but also institutions and economic, social, and cultural relations. For Butler, the starting point for morality is not the self-transparent, invulnerable self; rather, it is a subject that is always constitutively entangled with others. The acceptance of vulnerability as constitutive fosters modesty, generosity, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness (Butler, 2003: 54-56), virtues that work against ethical violence that results from complete self-coherence and

fictions of invulnerability that do not consider our constitutive relationships with others.

When applied to pedagogy, this conception of vulnerability, understood as relationality and affectability, challenges teachers to be open to being affected (emotionally, intellectually, physically, all intertwined) by the intra-actions with what surrounds them in the classroom. It challenges students to escape the traditional conception of students as passive beings and to be actively involved in the processes of teaching-learning. This is not an easy task: it entails inhabiting positions that are not traditional, and this self-estrangement can cause discomfort. In this sense, embracing vulnerability in pedagogical settings in higher education entails acts of collective courage. Furthermore, it requires to be aware of precarity and differential distribution of vulnerability; for this, it is necessary to contextualize the self and knowledges in societal structures and power relations. In this sense, a pedagogy of vulnerability is in debt with Haraway's concept of situated knowledges, which raises awareness that the particular and embodied perspectives of the knower are always present in knowledge despite it being presented as objective (Haraway, 1988). Accepting vulnerability, relationality, interdependence, affectability comes with a commitment to being open to others and our surroundings. It invites us to open ourselves to share with others.

Teaching and learning, then, are not simply teaching and learning; rather, both processes intra-act in an open-ended way. In this sense, we can talk about co-learning and processes of learning-teaching. Adopting an intra-active attitude towards co-learning requires practicing critical self-dialogue with our own practices and systems of thought, questioning our assumptions and preconceived ideas, values, and normalized behaviors. Through this process, I discovered that teaching constantly requires un-learning and re-learning. Processes of learning-teaching are dialogical, relational processes that enhance and value the insights and knowledges of all involved. It fosters participatory engagement that has the potential to be empowering.

Receiving and providing ongoing and nurturing feedback becomes an integral part of relational processes of learning-teaching that must be built on continuously negotiated, shared norms. Giving and receiving honest feedback also means accepting that we do not know certain things, or that we can all be wrong –including

people in a position of authority who are supposed to be the cognoscenti. In the classroom, this translates into an open invitation to share our emotions and thoughts openly, without fear of retaliation (e.g., a student that has constructive criticism about the contents of the course should be able to voice their concerns). This contributes to building a climate of trust and practice of self-reflection. By inviting this shift in the conceptualization of our vulnerability, and understanding it as constitutive and relational, we can learn, teach, research, and live differently in a more intra-connected way.

One way of trying to implement this intra-connection in the classroom was opening up ongoing feedback loops, which included me receiving feedback from my students as well: the feedback was not hierarchical or uni-directional. In November, we had a long checking-in session. I asked course participants to write down their 1) anxieties 2) accomplishments to be able to determine how they were doing. I did the same. I told them that they could share if they wanted but 1) it was not mandatory 2) it could be with a partner, it did not have to be with the whole group 3) if they wanted to vent, first they needed to ask their partner if it was all right, if their partner was able and willing to share concerns. During this session, some of them gave me feedback on how they perceived their performance in the seminar. I also asked them for feedback on my corrections and comments to their weekly tasks. One student told me that she thought it was sometimes too short and that she wanted longer comments from me. I welcomed this criticism as a way of being confronted with the practice of co-learning. It challenged my way of doing things thus far and it allowed me to reconsider some of my choices concerning the correction of written tasks.

This is what I wrote as answers to the questions listed above, which I shared out loud with the group afterward:

1) My anxieties: I am worried that you [my students] will not like how I planned this course. I feel vulnerable by sharing with you this right now. I worry that you will think that I am trying to overdo it and that you will think that trying to have this openness in the classroom is weird or unnecessary. I am also concerned about what my co-workers and bosses will think: I am in a precarious position, my continuation at this institution is not assured; I

fear they will think I am not a good fit; at the same time, I am actively trying not to fit in, and to create some change, even if taking very small steps.

2) I am very proud of this course, and I am proud of all of you and the work we are doing together. This is not another course like the others to me: I took the conscious decision of trying to do something different here, and you are helping me incredibly to reflect on my own practice.

From this shared self-reflection exercise, I understood that this process of un-learning and re-learning together made me uncomfortable; it made all of us uncomfortable. Personally, there was some uneasiness stemming from my situatedness as a young, female academic: I felt pressure to perform in a certain way –e.g., serious, authoritative– to be taken seriously, but I chose to perform otherwise. I felt I was putting myself in a risky position by consciously not reproducing the cultural atmosphere and theoretical interests of my workplace. Collectively, we felt that we had to do something odd, something unusual; it was not something radically alienating, it was something different enough that made us feel that a line of flight was being created. Some of my students told me after the course that they wanted to leave after the presentation on the first day because the course was not what they were expecting; nonetheless, they chose to stay out of curiosity; they chose to stay with the trouble. We all chose to stay with the discomfort. We navigated it. We embraced our constitutive vulnerability, embraced the unpredictable, let go of expected outcomes, let go of fictions of mastery. We got anxious, we relaxed, we got anxious again; we enjoyed, established relationships, discovered affinities, looked at each other's eyes, laughed together, questioned each other, dared to speak up, dared to sit back and listen, learnt how to occupy less space, were aware of ways in which we were not taking care of each other, were proud of ourselves, enjoyed being together in that temporary, vulnerable rhizome.

Mid-semester, in December 2019, I presented a more elaborated version of the theoretical framework or the affective pedagogy of vulnerability –a draft of this text– and asked my students for feedback. That day, our following collective discussion about an affective, diffractive, rhizomatic pedagogy of vulnerability was long and interesting. I even received feedback about these topics and our co-learning

experiences via email from students that could not attend that session. I also received some criticism about things that could be changed –e.g. elaborating more my written feedback on the tasks that they handed over or some changes in deadlines– and we came up together with solutions through agreements, negotiations, and discussions.

With these ongoing feedback loops, I had to remain open to others and welcome potential lines of flight –even those which I would not anticipate or appreciate. I had to try to control less the outcomes, to be more flexible to welcome the idea that the seminar was going to change in intra-action with the students and that we had to design together transitional responses to our environment. I had to open myself up to the random, the unpredictable. The syllabus had to be more dispersed, more dynamic. We all had to –chose to, in a way– be more responsive to each other, navigating between molarity and molecularity and allowing ourselves to share our vulnerability.

The embodied experience in processes of learning-teaching is fundamental, especially when discussing vulnerability and trying to implement a vulnerable approach to pedagogy. The classroom is an assemblage of the forces and bodies that intra-act in a confined space during a co-learning session; forces and bodies that are vulnerable to each other. How the bodies are situated in the assemblage matters: if bodies are allowed to move, if they effectively move, how they move, the relationships that are established between them, how they attract or repel each other. The physical pre-established setting of the classroom had a semi-circle of tables and then some other tables on the left side of the classroom, as the room was not big enough to fit all the tables into a circle. I noticed that an extra effort had to be done to include those who often sat on the side of the semi-circle. For instance, the attendance sheet that was circulating the classroom sometimes got stuck in the semi-circle and did not reach those tables on the side. I asked them to please take care of each other and make sure they were communicating and double-checking if everybody had access to the attendance sheet. That did not always happen. That made me reflect on how important the position of the tables was. That configuration immediately created a soft us-versus-them dynamics in which some people were considered as the outsiders, as an appendix to the unity of the semi-circle. It was very interesting to explore how to navigate these dynamics and take this as an opportunity to work on

how to create relations of care in environments and settings that do not provide the perfect conditions. We did the extra work, together, to share and take care of each other.

Rhizomatic thinking: lines of flight to share and care in academia

Inspired by Katie Strom and Adrian Martin's work (Strom & Martin, 2015; Strom et al., 2018), rhizomatics is another key element of the conceptual development of this pedagogy of vulnerability. A rhizome is, as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), a way of mapping relational and networked thought processes. In this sense, "the rhizome is any network of things brought into contact with one another, functioning as an assemblage machine for new affects, new concepts, new bodies, new thoughts; the rhizomatic network is a mapping of the forces that move and/or immobilize bodies" (Colman, 2005b, p. 233).

Rhizomatic thinking has to do with open-ended configurations and random and unexpected relations. All the parts of a rhizome are interconnected and engage in complex intra-actions. That being so, a rhizome has no center, no hierarchy, no unique entry point. When applied to thinking and writing, rhizomatics does not try to assimilate systems of thought but is rather attentive to open-ended and constant conceptual transformations. As a relational network, it allows forces and desires to flow throughout it.

The decentered rhizome is opposed to arborescent and hierarchical thought, and it allows conceptualizing an ontologically different theory: all bodies are only possible to be thought in their polymorphous inter-dependence and intra-relation; in their affective, relational movements with other bodies. This ontologically different theory is neomaterialist, monist, and relational, and is useful to understand education phenomena as complex and multiplistic. As Strom and Martin (2015) suggest, any situation involving multiple elements that connect and intra-act in some way, resulting in social activity, can be understood as a rhizome. For instance, the classroom can be understood as an assemblage of multiple human and non-human elements connected to produce teaching-learning experiences. Understanding a classroom as rhizome works against the usual conception of students as passive, receiving beings, and

teachers as active, communicative beings who possess knowledge and transmit it. It works against the hierarchization of educational settings. In this sense, it was linked in my practice with being vulnerable together and thinking/reading diffractively. I was, of course, in charge of the course and that put me in a position of power that is inherent to the highly formalised and hierarchically structured context of academia; nonetheless, my attitude of openness went beyond merely listening to the students' feedback by considering their inputs as valuable knowledge and contributions.

The rhizome opens up the possibility of the reassessment of any form of hierarchical thought or activity and entails a challenge to the status quo of common-sense thought (Deleuze, 1994, p. 129–168). In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze presents common sense as one of the foundations of the dogmatic image of thought that dominates the philosophical tradition. According to the dogmatic image of thought, everybody makes sense of things the same way and there is no room for thinking differently. Snir explains that for Deleuze dogmatism characterizes philosophy from its very beginning and that “it not only uncritically accepts certain views as true; it does so while assuming it trains students for critical thinking, but in fact only legitimizes a pattern of thinking saturated by these very assumptions” (Snir, 2017, p. 301).

Perpetuating common sense, which takes the form of rational humanism, is morally questionable. Common sense is not rhizomatic –it is arborescent thought. This arborescence fosters too simplistic frames of thought that reproduce themselves. These simplistic frameworks present themselves as neutral and universal, but they are immersed in western, white, Christian, heterosexual, male-centered, and otherwise biased frames of thought. Rhizomatics intends to challenge this alleged universalism of good and common sense by fostering multilayered, complex, relational networks in which all the elements are entwined and engaging in multiple intra-actions. Thinking rhizomatically offers a way to think about the world in more complex terms. The rhizome serves as a model to try to shift dogmatic ways of thinking from trying to create and disseminate totalizing systems of thought to frameworks that are contextual, multilayered, complex, and susceptible to change.

Rhizomatics also allows us to think about affective transformation within the classroom. Affect is the capacity of a body to act when it is embedded in a particular

multiplicity; it is the motor of being. Affects are pre-personal, prior to conscious thought, and are multiple forces between (Deleuze, 1988). Affective forces flow rhizomatically:

Deleuze's apparatus for describing affective change is the "rhizome". Deleuze viewed every operation in the world as the affective exchange of rhizomatically-produced intensities that create bodies: systems, economies, machines and thoughts. Each and every body is propelled and perpetuated by innumerable levels of the affective forces of desire and its resonating materialisations. (Colman, 2005b, p. 234).

In rhizomes, there are molar and molecular lines. Molar lines are macro-level forces that reinforce normalized movements and frames of thought. Molarity is limiting and constraining, as molar lines are too rigid, too coercive, too fixed, and inflexible. In this sense, they create striated space, as they create barriers to creativity or non-conformity (Strom & Martin, 2015). Molarity recaptures and redirects lines of flight – understood as temporary breaks from the norm – to return them to normative frameworks of thought.

Molar lines are too present in the traditional way of teaching philosophy. Normalized educational processes are "too regular, petrified... the most skeletal and least interesting" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 83). In the particular case of institutionalized philosophy, the philosophical canon is too rigid both in content and form. The content is colonial and racist (Harding, 1992; Davis, 2017, Van Norden, 2019), Western-centered (Young, 2015), and androcentric (Flax, 1983; Griffiths & Whitford, 1988; Landau, 2006). The way in which philosophy is taught is also too fixed, based on the repetition of inherited ideas (Unger, 2014; Guess, 2014). Academic institutions seem to have ignored Deleuze & Guattari's (1994) consideration of the discipline as a framework that aims at the creation of new concepts with which to understand and re-frame the world.

Nonetheless, educational settings deal not only with molarity but with molecular lines as well, as the actual micropolitical work is done in everyday situations. Molecular lines are, contrary to molar lines, supple and flexible. They are adaptable, malleable, and intervene at micropolitical levels. Their movement and level of actuation differ

from molarity, but that does not mean that molecular lines necessarily go against molar norms.

Rhizomes, moving often unpredictably within molecular and molar lines, have the potentiality of opening lines of flight. This deviation from normativity can be distressing:

As earth-bound creatures, taking flight is always terrifying for the first time. It is as if we are changing our natures, relying on navigating a set of unknowns to hold us up and prevent us from plummeting to our demise. Taking flight requires that we become creative actors, constantly changing and being open to working with different, unfamiliar factors and complex multiplicities. (Bayley, 2018: 7).

Molecular micro-actuations can move in two directions: on the one hand, they can reinforce the work of molarity and reproduce normalized patterns and frameworks; on the other hand, they can create lines of flight that potentially escape from rigid norms and create something new. Lines of flight are not necessarily positive. Nonetheless, they are deviations from the norm and, as such, they have the potential to transform the status quo if they are repeated over time. Pedagogical environments that allow molecular transformative actions to happen create lines of flight that deviate from molarity and have the potential of modifying educational institutions. These molecular actions, potentially transformative, require thinking with different concepts, reading different texts, daring to fly away from institutional rigidity and let go of the idea of achieving planned outcomes. A proseminar is supposed to foster the active participation of students; therefore, it provides an environment in which potentially transformative lines of flight could be open. The syllabus provided a certain structure; nonetheless, the syllabus itself was open for discussion and the teaching methodology based on shared vulnerabilities (Rogowska-Strangret, 2017) and diffractive readings generated the possibility of lines of flight. Conceiving the classroom as a rhizome in which there are molar and molecular lines intra-acting, less hierarchical interactions were allowed. In the molecularity of our teaching-learning experience, there were constant and ongoing feedback loops that eased the institutional hierarchy. It would be naive to argue that hierarchical interactions were

eliminated or disturbed; nonetheless, I believe that the divisive lines were at least blurred through sharing and caring, discussions and agreements.

After we discussed the theoretical framework that would accompany our analysis of the concept of vulnerability during the semester, I proposed a distribution of workload, which we discussed together to come up with an agreement and commit to a way of working. I would propose weekly readings; for each reading, I prepared guiding questions and encouraged them to propose any other questions or comments they had about the texts. Each week, they would have to read the text and answer in writing to the guiding questions. These guiding questions were used in class to facilitate discussions; students could also hand them in and I would comment on them so that they would receive ongoing feedback from me. Despite having guiding questions available, students were encouraged to search for lines of flight and to become diffractive readers by connecting the texts with their own experiences or different readings, artwork, novels, tv series, etc. This approach was inspired/informed by van der Tuin's idea of a diffractive reader:

Diffractive readers do not care about canonical renderings of texts or of artefacts because they zoom in on how texts, artefacts and human subjects interpellate or affect each other. Instead of submissively following a (counter-) canon, diffractive readers ask how texts, artefacts and humans may inform each other as a result of their preconscious or sub-subjective entanglement (van der Tuin, 2018, p. 101).

I find guiding questions useful for several reasons. Often, some of the students had not previously read much philosophy. The guiding questions have the benefit of helping them to focus on the information that is going to be specifically tackled in the next sessions. Also, guiding questions help facilitate group dynamics during the session in which the text is analyzed. We usually started the session with my suggestion to work in pairs or small groups to discuss their answers to the guiding questions. They came to class with their short-written task, and they used the originally proposed text and their work on it to create conversations and discussions about it. During these group discussions, the figure of the teacher with authority is somehow blurred and disappears from the podium. I did not participate in any group,

but I wandered around; I would eavesdrop and take notes to address certain issues I felt were interesting for them during the following collective discussion. They knew they could ask me anything also during these small group discussions, but they often kept absorbed in their own conversations. Conversations were lively –they always seemed to have something to talk about. Students intra-acted, formed relations, found affinities, generated lines of flight that diverged from traditional philosophical praxis in higher education. They created emotional and intellectual clusters of interest. They opened up. It is easier to speak up when working in pairs of very small groups than to talk in public, to the general group; so, in this sense, it fostered participation and facilitated the engagement of people in every session.

Special attention was provided to the specific molecularity of the classroom to understand micro encounters and differences. Working in pairs was encouraged, but not mandatory. They could decide if they did not want to pair up that day or ever. People have different needs, and we have to take into account and respect their boundaries. Many group activities are very invasive and difficult to perform for neurodivergent or neurodiverse people (Rentenbach, Prislovsky, & Gabriel, 2017). I myself find it very hard to talk when there is a lot of noise around, especially when there are different conversations in different languages in the same room, and I cannot focus. Difference is not considered here as the inclusion of diversity, or paternalistic adaptation of “normal” work to “atypical” people: difference is considered as a constitutive multiplicity of the classroom, and practice is shaped in the intra-action of *all* the elements that are involved.

Another pursued line of flight was to generate different classroom dynamics when it came to mental health, sharing and caring for each other, and creating a space where our shared vulnerabilities mattered. In order to do so, I shared my own experience with anxiety and how it affects me privately and professionally, and a well-being statement was included in the syllabus and read together during the first session of the course. By doing so, it was made explicit since the beginning that our well-being was a priority

during the semester. Making it explicit already made a difference, it became to matter. This is the content of the wellness statement:¹

- Working until exhaustion is NOT a badge of honor; it shows that you are out of balance.
- You are given a free pass to skip ONE weekly writing assignment. This "wildcard" allows you to assess your workload and make good choices on priorities.
- You can respond and share your progress on wellness in class. Please, feel free to share (if you think you are overworked, if you are proud of how you are managing your schedule, etc.). Using five minutes of class time for this purpose will help you focus on prioritizing a more balanced practice of work, and we will hold each other accountable.
- We will incorporate movement breaks into the sessions so you are free to respond to your needs and regain your focus.
- Please share with me your ideas and feelings so that I can improve. Integrating wellness into the classroom is a cultural shift and we are all navigating uncharted waters, so it might feel weird. Stay with the weird. Let's do this together.

Every session started with a round in which we could share, if desired, how we were feeling and what was on our mind/body. I usually started the round and shared something about my state of mind that day; at the beginning their sharing was slow but soon that round became a moment in which they would share thoughts, joys, fears, or expectations. We introduced similar rounds to talk about our impressions of the texts and our general affective response to the readings. This allowed us to co-create a shared vulnerability in the classroom. By sharing, we realized how we were affected by what others said, by the texts, and how we could affect others as well. Our relationality and intra-activity mattered there.

Concluding remarks

Processes of teaching-learning are something amorous and fatal, something that exposes our constitutive vulnerability and inter-dependency by inviting us to share and care for each other. Explicitly sharing our vulnerabilities unveils our exposability, affectability, relationality. We get done, undone, and re-done by this openness, as our

¹ Based on a wellness statement shared by Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve on her twitter account. It can be found here: <https://twitter.com/nvancleve/status/1168955364982841344?lang=en>

bodies get re-articulated in affective movements with other bodies. We become other with others.

The aim of this course was to activate potential lines of flight that may result in different theoretical-practical approaches to philosophy in academic settings; lines of flight that could help understand the classroom as multiplicities of affective intra-actions. Diffractive reading, vulnerability understood as affectability, and rhizomatics can potentially transform our way of reading, of understanding ourselves, and of understanding how we are situated in practices within molar and molecular lines.

The results of this experimental proseminar might be modest, generating –if any– tiny variations regarding the philosophical canon. Also, these tiny variations could not be sustained in time, or replicated, or generated again, or generated in any other way, as it was, unfortunately, a one-time course. Nonetheless, any variation has the potentiality of generating something new and it for sure made me embrace this amorous and fatal process of teaching-learning paying closer attention to the affective flows that are generated in a classroom.

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