Contemporary debates in social theory around issues of multiculturalism have focused on the demand or struggle for recognition by marginalized or oppressed people, groups, and cultures. The work of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, in particular, have crystallized issues of multiculturalism and justice around the notion of recognition.\(^1\) In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, I challenge what has become a fundamental tenet of this trend in debates over multiculturalism, namely, that the social struggles manifest in critical race theory, queer theory, feminist theory, and various social movements are struggles for recognition.\(^2\) Testimonies from the aftermath of the Holocaust and slavery do not merely articulate a demand to be recognized or to be seen. Rather, they witness to pathos beyond recognition. The victims of oppression, slavery, and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witnesses to horrors beyond recognition. The demand for recognition manifest in testimonies from those othered by dominant culture is transformed by the accompanying demands for retribution and compassion.

If, as I suggest, those othered by dominant culture are seeking not only, or even primarily, recognition but also witnessing to something beyond recognition, then our notions of recognition must be reevaluated. Certainly notions of recognition that throw us back into a Hegelian master-slave relationship do not help us to overcome domination. If recognition is conceived as being conferred on others by the dominant group, then it merely repeats the dynamic of hierarchies, privilege, and domination. Even if oppressed people are making demands for recognition, insofar as those who are dominant are empowered to confer it, we are thrown back into the hierarchy of domination. This is to say that if the operations of recognition require a recognizer and a recognizee then we have done no more than replicate the master-slave, subject-other/object hierarchy in this new form.

Additionally, the need to demand recognition from the dominant culture or group is a symptom of the pathology of oppression. Oppression creates the need and demand for recognition. It is not just that the injustices of oppression create the need for justice. More than this, the pathology of oppression creates the need in the oppressed to be recognized by their oppressor, the very people most likely not to recognize them. The internalization of stereotypes of inferiority and superiority leave the oppressed with the sense that they are lacking something that only their superior dominators have or can give them. The very notion of recognition as it is deployed in various
contemporary theoretical contexts is, then, a symptom of the pathology of oppression itself. Implied in this diagnosis is the conclusion that struggles for recognition and theories that embrace those struggles may indeed presuppose and thereby perpetuate the very hierarchies, domination, and injustice that they attempt to overcome.

The notion of recognition becomes more problematic in models where what is recognized is always only something familiar to the subject. In this case, the subject and what is known to him and his experience are once again privileged. Any real contact with difference or otherness becomes impossible because recognition requires the assimilation of difference into something familiar. When recognition repeats the master-slave or subject-object hierarchy, then it is also bound to assimilate difference back into sameness. The subject recognizes the other only when he can see something familiar in that other; for example, when he can see that the other is a person too. Only when we begin to think of the recognition of what is beyond recognition can we begin to think of the recognition of difference.

Some contemporary theorists seem to think that we can begin to move beyond recognition by focusing on misrecognition. But, it makes sense to talk about misrecognition only if recognition is still the ideal. Misrecognition or the misfire of recognition presuppose an idea of successful recognition. While theories of misrecognition have the advantage of challenging us to be vigilant in exposing the illusion of familiarity or sameness, most of them also propose an antagonistic subject-object/other relationship. Influenced by Lacan’s account of misrecognition in the mirror stage, theorists like Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler propose that identity and one’s sense of oneself as a subject come from abjecting or excluding otherness. Otherness and difference are abjected in order to secure the subject’s always precarious boundaries against the threat of fragmentation. In this type of scenario, we fortify ourselves on the level of individual subjective identity as well as group and national identity by drawing artificial but strict boundaries between ourselves and others. Whatever characteristics we prefer not to associate with ourselves—those characteristics we deem unacceptable, dirty, or improper—we project onto the others. Others and otherness become threats to our very sense of ourselves as subjects. While this neo-Hegelian model is very effective in explaining the existence of war and oppression, if normalized it makes it impossible to imagine peaceful compassionate relations with others across or through differences.

In Witnessing: Beyond Recognition, I associate the pathos beyond recognition inherent in struggles for recognition and testimony to atrocity with witnessing in its full and double sense. Rather than extolling the virtues of testimony per se, I am developing a theory of subjectivity modeled on witnessing in its double sense of eye-witness and bearing witnesses to what cannot be seen. Although I use examples of testimony in order to show how the structure of witnessing operates in all subjectivity, I do not reduce subjectivity to testimony. Rather, I develop a model of subjectivity based on the address-response structure of witnessing in its double sense. Moreover, the purpose of my discussion of the therapeutic or transformative effects of witnessing is not to promote public testimonies or the practice of psychoanalysis but rather to demonstrate on the one hand how oppression and victimization undermine subjectivity by attacking the ability for address and response and on the other hand how the structure of address and response is the lynchpin of subjectivity.
There is a tension inherent in the notion of witnessing in the sense of eye-witness to historical facts or accuracy on the one hand, witnessing in the sense of bearing witness to a truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts. It is important to note that witnessing has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious or now political connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or bearing witness. It is this double meaning that makes witnessing such a powerful alternative to recognition in reconceiving subjectivity and thereby ethical relations. The tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness, between historical facts and what we might call psychoanalytic or phenomenological truth, between subject position and subjectivity is the dynamic operator that moves us beyond the melancholic choice between either dead historical facts or traumatic repetition of violence.

Using this double-sided witnessing as a model, I propose that the subject is constituted by virtue of a tension between finite historical contexts that constitute subject position on the one hand and the structure of infinite addressability and response-ability of subjectivity on the other. The tendency on the part of my critics, and perhaps on my own part, to read my notion of subjectivity and identity as reduced to one pole or the other is a symptom of the difficulty in thinking the heterogeneity and otherness inherent in identity and subjectivity. More specifically, the difficulty is how to articulate fluid and mobile relationships within and between subjects and identities in a theoretical language where grammar requires fixing both sameness and difference into discrete units of meaning whose relationships are limited by logical connections ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘not’, etc... The central question is: How can we conceive of the tension between social and historical context with its differential power relations on the one hand and what makes us beings who mean on the other? In Witnessing I addressed this question by negotiating between philosophies of liberation—feminism, race theory, holocaust studies—and phenomenologies of subjectivity.6 Here, I would like to take up this question by focusing on the pivotal distinction between the two senses of witnessing that I develop and the concomitant distinction between subject position and subjectivity. It will be necessary to further delineate the differences between testimony and witnessing and the differences between the phenomenological subject and the psychoanalytic subject. Whereas testimony is usually a spoken or written account of something seen or experienced, here witnessing refers to the structure of subjectivity itself, the very structure that makes testimony possible. Whereas the phenomenological subject can become conscious of its self-consciousness and its motives, desires and fears, which it owns, the psychoanalytic subject is continually an encounter with the otherness of the unconscious, which cannot completely come to consciousness or be owned up to, let alone owned. These differences bear on the history of subject position and the historicity of subjectivity or the distinction between beings and meaning.

Invoking the double meaning of witnessing, in Witnessing I develop a theory of the subject that connects the historically localizable subject position of particular subjects with the infinite response-ability that makes subjectivity possible. By bringing together subject position and the structure of subjectivity as witnessing, I attempt to navigate between the extremes of conceiving of the subject either as the foundation for action apart from social circumstance on the one hand, or as the simple effect of social
context on the other. The notion of witnessing brings together the historical context with the witnessing structure that makes subjectivity an infinite open system of response. As we will see, by so doing, it both politicizes the subject à la subject position and insists on a fundamental ethical obligation at the heart of subjectivity itself.

Any theory of subjectivity must also consider subject position. Subjects, subjectivity and agency always exist only in a political and social context that affects them at the foundation of their constitution. One’s social position and history profoundly influence one’s very sense of oneself as an active agent in the world. Yet, the contradictions and inconsistencies in historical and social circumstances guarantee that we are never completely determined by our subject position. It is possible to develop a sense of agency in spite of, or in resistance to, an oppressive social situation. Subject positions, although mobile, are constituted in our social interactions and our positions within our culture and context. They are determined by history and circumstance. Subject positions are our relations to the finite world of human history – what we might call politics. Subjectivity, on the other hand, is experienced as the sense of agency and response-ability that are constituted in the infinite encounter with otherness, which is fundamentally ethical. And, although subjectivity is logically prior to any possible subject position, in our experience, they are always profoundly interconnected. This is why our experience of our own subjectivity is the result of the productive tension between finite subject position and infinite response-ability of the structure of subjectivity itself.

By subjectivity I mean one’s sense of oneself as an ‘I’, as an agent. By subject position I mean one’s position in society and history as developed through various social relationships. The structure of subjectivity is the structure that makes taking oneself as an agent or a self possible. The structure of subjectivity is what I am calling a witnessing structure that is founded on the possibility of address and response; it is a fundamentally dialogic structure. Subject position, on the other hand, is not the very possibility of one’s sense of oneself as an agent or an ‘I’ per se, but the particular sense of one’s kind of agency, so to speak, that comes through one’s social position and historical context. While distinct, subject position and subjectivity are also intimately related. For example, if you are a black woman within a racist and sexist culture, then your subject position as oppressed could undermine your subjectivity, your sense of yourself as an agent. If you are a white man within a racist and sexist culture, then your subject position as privileged could shore up your subjectivity and promote your sense of yourself as an agent.

The subject is a dynamic yet stable structure that results from the interaction between two forces, finitude, being and history (which I identify with subject position) at the one pole and infinity, meaning and historicity (which I identify with subjectivity) at the other. As an analogy, consider that Architects and engineers have worked with the principle of tension loaded structures that use the tension as support. A classic example is the Brooklyn bridge. We could say that the subject is a tension loaded structure, but its flexibility makes it more like what architects call a tensile structure. Architect Frei Otto’s description of the difference between the two structures is suggestive: He says, ‘the capacity to transmit forces and moments by tension-loaded materials is found in animate and inanimate nature’ while tensile structures ‘are found more frequently
in animate nature.... Flexible tension-resisting skins and sinews are necessary whenever the supporting system is movable. The stability of tensile structures is the result of opposing forces pulling in two directions, through which a membrane’s double curvature receives its structure and resistance. Subjectivity is analogous to the structure and resistance that result from a membrane or skin being stretched in two directions and held together by tension. Like Frei Otto’s famous architectural design using the tension of two opposing axis of force to support a fabric (which architects refer to as a membrane or a ‘flexible stretched skin’) the subject too is a kind of tensile structure. The two axis of force whose tension supports the subject are subject position and subjectivity.

An example recounted in Dori Laub’s Testimony: Crimes of Witlessing in literature, Psychoanalysis and History illustrates the productive tension between subject position and subjectivity, between eye-witness and historical accuracy and another level of truth, a truth beyond recognition, the truth of witnessing to what cannot be seen. Laub, a psychoanalyst interviewing survivors as part of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, remarks on a tension between historians and psychoanalysts involved in the project. He describes a lively debate that began after the group watched the taped testimony of a woman who was an eyewitness to the Auschwitz uprising in which prisoners set fire to the camp. The woman reported four chimneys going up in flames and exploding, but historians insisted that since there was only one chimney blown up, her testimony was incorrect and should be discredited in its entirety because she proved herself an unreliable witness. One historian suggested that her testimony should be discounted because she ‘ascribes importance to an attempt that, historically, made no difference.’ The psychoanalysts responded that the woman was not testifying to the number of chimneys blown up but to something more ‘radical’ and more ‘crucial’, namely, the seemingly unimaginable occurrence of Jewish resistance at Auschwitz, that is to say, the historical truth of Jewish resistance at Auschwitz. Laub concludes that what the historians could not hear, listening for empirical facts, was the ‘very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination’. The Auschwitz survivor saw something unfamiliar, Jewish resistance, which gave her the courage to resist. She saw something that in one sense did not happen – four chimneys blowing up – but in another made all the difference to what happened. Seeing the impossible – what did not happen – gave her the strength to make what seemed impossible possible, surviving the Holocaust.

From his work with Holocaust survivors, and being a survivor himself, Dori Laub concludes that psychic survival depends on an addressable other, what he calls an ‘inner witness’. The inner witness is produced and sustained by dialogic (and I would add nonlinguistic forms of communicative) interaction with other people. In order to think, talk, act as an agent, the inner witness must be in place. This is to say that we learn to ‘talk to ourselves’ – to think – by talking to others. Our experience is meaningful for us only if we can imagine that it is meaningful for others. And, our sense of what is meaningful, our sense of meaning itself, comes through our relationships with others. Creating or finding meaning for oneself is possible only through the internalization of meaning for others. Over simplifying somewhat, we can say that address and response are possible because the interpersonal dialogue is interiorized.
On my account, subjectivity is the ability to address oneself to others combined with the ability to respond to others. One can only address oneself to oneself, or respond to oneself, if one has first addressed or been addressed by and responded to others. At its core, subjectivity is relational and formed and sustained by addressability (the ability to address others and be addressed by them) and response-ability (the ability to respond to others and oneself). It is the possibility of address that sustains psychic life and the sense of subjective agency. If the possibility of address is undermined or annihilated, then subjectivity is also undermined or annihilated. To conceive of oneself as a subject is to have the ability to address oneself to another, real or imaginary, actual or potential. This address and response structure develops in infancy from birth and sustains psychic and social life. I call this address-response structure witnessing and argue that oppression, domination, enslavement, and torture work to undermine and destroy the ability to respond and thereby undermine and destroy subjectivity. Part of the psychoanalyst’s task in treating survivors is reconstructing the addressability that makes witnessing subjectivity possible.

If one’s subject position is the socio-historical position in which one finds oneself, and one’s subjectivity is the structure of witnessing as infinite response-ability, then the inner witness is where subject position and subjectivity meet. If the inner witness is on the one hand the ability to address oneself or to be self-reflective that is ‘learned’ through addressing and being addressed by others, and it is also ‘learned’ in a particular historical and social situation, then it is going to be both a prerequisite for a sense of agency per se and a governing factor in the particularities of and restrictions on that sense of agency. We internalize our relationships with others, which empowers us with a sense of our own agency but can also leave us with a sense of the limitations of our own agency if we are in marginal or oppressed social positions or power relations.

As Laub’s example points up, psychoanalysis attends to the address-ability and response-ability pole of witnessing, while history attends to the pole of the eye-witness. The double meaning of witness can help to theorize the Holocaust survivor’s testimony and witnessing to the Jewish uprising at Auschwitz. As an eyewitness, she testifies (incorrectly) to the events of that particular day when prisoners blew up a chimney. In addition, however, she bears witness to something that in itself cannot be seen, the conditions of possibility of Jewish resistance and survival. As an eyewitness she occupies a particular historical position in a concrete context that constitutes her actuality as well as her possibilities. She was a Jew in the midst of deadly anti-Semitism. She was a prisoner in a concentration camp. She was a woman in the mid-Twentieth Century. Her position as a subject is related to the particularities of her historical and social circumstance. In order to evaluate her testimony as an eyewitness, it is crucial to consider her socio-historical subject-position and not just the ‘accuracy’ of her testimony. Indeed, the ‘accuracy’ of her testimony has everything to do with her subject position. It is, in fact, her subject position that makes historians particularly interested in her testimony as a Holocaust survivor. Her testimony is unique because she was an eyewitness; she was there. But, it is not just because she was there, but why and how she was there that makes her testimony unique. The testimony of another eye-witness to the same event – a Nazi guard at the camp, or a someone outside the camp who noticed flames in the air – would have a very different meaning, even if he
also claimed to see four chimneys blowing up. Perhaps within the context of the Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, surrounded by mostly male professors, the fact that this witness was a woman makes a difference to how she speaks and how she is heard. Only by considering her subject-position can we learn something about the "truth" of history even from the 'inaccuracies' of her testimony. In this regard, the facts of history cannot disclose the significance or meaning of historical context. Moreover, insofar as she is also bearing witness to what cannot be seen – agency and resistance – she testifies to the process of witnessing itself.

Consider the recent controversy over the accuracy of Rigoberta Menchu's testimony to the atrocities of the Guatemalan army's cruelty, which also points to the distinction between historical accuracy and another level of meaning and truth, the truth of suffering that cannot be reduced to historical facts. Although undeniably powerful in their impact, the empirical facts of the Holocaust, or of the atrocities of the civil war in Guatemala, are dead not only to the truth of suffering but also to the responsibility that the process of witnessing presupposes. The process of witnessing, always in tension with eyewitness testimony, complicates the notion of historical truth and moves us beyond any easy dichotomy between history and psychoanalysis. This is not to say that we can or should discount historical accuracy or historical truth, on the contrary. We need both poles of witnessing. But, we need to critically analyze the meaning of history and context. Our inaccuracies and false beliefs also have meaning that can reveal something true about our desires and fears. This truth is not always liberatory, it is not always the truth of suffering, but may be the truth of hatred and discrimination or even what I call in Witnessing false witnessing. We need to investigate the conditions of possibility of meaning, whether it is the meaning of historical facts or of subjective testimony, with its inaccuracies and falsehoods.

My insistence on considering subject position and socio-historical context in any discussion of subjectivity is meant as a corrective to both phenomenological and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity that do not attend to history. While phenomenology and psychoanalytic theory have been instructive in formulating a theory of subjectivity as intersubjectivity, traditionally they have neglected subject position and thereby sacrificed not only social, political and historical relevance but also its truth, not to mention its accuracy. My insistence on subjectivity as responsability, on the other hand, is meant as a corrective to political theories that begin with a subject essentially either isolated from, or opposed to, objects including other people. My engagement with psychoanalysis in particular is meant to move behind the scenes of the subject-object relation to what makes it possible, which I elaborate as the structure of address and response through which subjectivity and objectivity emerge. In a primary sense, the address-response structure must be formed or at least figured before the subject-object distinction is possible. Subjects distinguish themselves from the world and others by virtue of responsive relations with other people. Recognition too depends on responsibility between infants and their environments and care-takers. For example, recent studies in psychology by Nicholas Meltzoff and Keith Moore show that infants are responsive to facial and manual gestures from birth, prior to recognition of objects. Following this work, Shaun Gallagher and Meltzoff conclude that ‘recent studies of newborn imitation suggest that an experiential connection between self and others exists right from birth’ that ‘is already an experience of pre-verbal communication in the language of gesture and action’.
At the most fundamental level, this relationality or responsivity is neither intellectual nor perceptual but operates through unconscious processes of transference. This means that in a strict sense, our primary relations are neither subjective nor intersubjective but prior to, and prerequisites for, either. This brings us to an ontological level on which subjectivity is essentially relational and dependent, always formed through a primordial ‘we’. From this primordial we, follows an ethics of response-ability that entails an ethical obligation to our founding possibility, which is responsivity. Reformulating Eva Kittay’s analysis of relations of dependency, we could say that a subject who ‘refuses to support this bond absolves itself from its most fundamental obligation – its obligation to its founding possibility’. In terms of my analysis, this fundamental obligation is to respond to others in ways that open up rather than close off their response. This Levinasian move gives us an ethics even more radical than Sartre’s insistence on our responsibility for our emotions. We are not only responsible for our own feelings and actions but also for others. As Levinas says ‘communication would be impossible if it should have to begin in the ego, a free subject, to whom every other would be only a limitation that invited war, domination, precaution and information. To communicate is indeed to open oneself, but the openness is not complete if it is on the watch for recognition. It is complete not in the opening to the spectacle of or the recognition of the other, but in becoming a responsibility for him’. With Levinas, we are also responsible for the other’s response; which entails at least taking responsibility for the effects of our actions and emotions on others as indicated in their responses. This principle couldn’t be more relevant today as we try to understand anti-American sentiment throughout the world. Of course this does not mean that others are not or should not be held responsible for their own actions. Rather, this hyperbolic ethics, as we might call it following Derrida, puts the burden of responsibility primarily on the subject, who is by virtue of her relations to others. And, it is this indebtedness to others and otherness that grounds a hyperbolic ethics of difference.

As I argue elsewhere, however, that this Levinasian or Derridian hyperbolic ethics is not radical enough without accounting for the unconscious. We can articulate an ethics and/or a politics of otherness or difference only by accounting for the unconscious. In order to make responsibility radical enough, which is to say ethical enough, we need a notion of the unconscious, which makes us responsible even for motives, desires and fears unknown to us. The fundamental imperative of hyperbolic ethics is that we should never be content with ourselves. It is an imperative to be self-critical especially with our responses to others, most especially because there are those others whom we may not even recognize. We can never stop interrogating our notions of justice, democracy, and freedom, which means that we can never stop asking ourselves why we do what we do, why we value what we value, why we desire what we desire, why we fear what we fear. Yet, without engaging the unconscious our self-interrogation will never be vigilant enough. Only by postulating the existence of the unconscious will we be humble enough to continue to question our own motives, fears, and desires.

Only the notion of the unconscious gives us an ethics of responsibility without sovereignty and ownership. We are responsible for what we cannot and do not control, for our unconscious fears and desires and their affective representations. In
addition, we are responsible for the effects of those fears, desires and affects on others. As Levinas says, we are responsible for the other’s response. This means, for example, that if the United States is resented and hated throughout the world, we must ask why and take responsibility for the actions that cause that resentment and hatred. This impossible responsibility entails the imperative to question ourselves and constantly engage in self-critical hermeneutics. And, it is this critical interpretation that also gives meaning to our lives and allows for the sublimation of bodily drives and affects.10

Responsible ethics and politics requires that we account for the unconscious. Without doing so we risk self-righteously adhering to deadly principles in the name of freedom and justice. We risk taking the defensive posture of isolationism and individualism that protects itself by attacking others, becoming absolutely unforgiving in its attempts to silence others and cut off their ability to respond. Individualism is based on the denial of the fundamental ethical relationality and response-ability that is subjectivity. It adopts a defensive unforgiving unresponsive posture that denies, even fears the singularity that is the unconscious. It maintains control by denying the existence of the unconscious or unconscious motives, desires and fears. Yet, only by acknowledging our unconscious fears, phobias, and desires, can we hope to be self-reflective enough to contemplate an ethical response to others. Perhaps by acknowledging the death drive within ourselves, we can begin to prevent killing and find third way between murder and suicide.

Notes


2 These insights about the discourse of multiculturalism are indebted to comments by Cynthia Willett. In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) I argue that Charles Taylor and Maria Lugones present such models.

3 Some examples of theorists of misrecognition with whom I engage in *Witnessing* are Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan.


5 *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001).


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