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## Forward to Special Issue: A Time for Feminist Witnessing

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## **A Time for Feminist Witnessing**

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This special issue grew out of ideas that were presented, and played with, at the Organization for the Study of Language Communication and Gender's (OSCLG) 44th annual conference, held in October 2021, so we start this introduction in that place. The two of us served as program planners for the conference, our second time planning OSCLG's conference in a pandemic, no less. In designing the first conference, we felt assured, focused, and excited about the possibilities.

After one Zoom-based conference and as planning dates for 2021 approached, we were back and bewildered. We were at a loss for what was going to happen next, both in our country and in our organization. News of the new vaccine suggested that there might be a possibility of a new normal and a return to our shared space. But we wondered if we as a collective would ever fully return. As feminist scholars, we witnessed a nation in continual strife, a nation negotiating new levels of uncertainty, instability, and exhaustion. We recognize that we were at the moment of identifying and understanding both of these past years, as well as paying attention to what is on the horizon. Where we were located, we knew that we needed to attend to the losses that had already transpired, the moments of victory and joy, both large and small, that still shown through, and more importantly, think critically about how this witnessing might be engaged in our research and our teaching.

We wanted to start this conversation by thinking more about what it means to *witness* in a time like this. We acknowledge the material consequences for witnessing all that is arriving daily in the news, in our neighborhoods, and in our homes, either via Zoom or in our own family interactions have taken and will continue to take a different toll on us as we come from different social locations. As academics, particularly feminist academics, we are called to witness not only in our research, our essays, and our arguments. But additionally, we are called to witness the many ways that our students, and academia at large, are engaging in and negotiating new struggles, as well as the possibilities that exist in the classroom and beyond, through feminist and intersectional witnessing.

In the special issue, we are excited to see the conversation on witnessing continue. With the thoughtful guidance of Rachel E. Silverman, this special issue brings forth a range of scholars who first invited new ideas of witnessing at our conference and have only further refined these contributions. In this issue, you will see thoughtful responses that speak to the ways that our teaching must continue to witness. And more practically, scholars also offer us a variety of insightful and unique ways that our classroom may become a space for both cultivating the climate space and moment needed for reflexive response and witnessing with our students.

In the first teaching activity, Catalina Hernández-Cabal invites us to walk with them as they articulate an arts-based activity for our classrooms, highlighting the work of Maria Lugones through shared walks. Walking from the first idea into the theater, Ben Long, Noah Long, and Laura Grace Godwin attend to the ways in which feminist pedagogy can inform performance and practices within the theater as they focus on challenging past texts that were previously considered normative. Alisha Menzies invites us to engage in feminist critiques with our students through the frequently consumed texts of reality television dating shows, and through this focus on intersectional identity, we consider how media has us witness romance. With a background in autotheory, Desirée D. Rowe illustrates the Word on the Street assignment, which uses arts-based methods to help our students better engage with theory through their experiences instead

of more colonialist practices. Finally, Alana Nicastro and Patricia Geist-Martin articulate a feminist pedagogy of inclusion as a method for creating a classroom that offers a possibility for witnessing engaged voices. These teaching ideas each offer the praxis to our feminist practices of witnessing in the classroom.

Beyond the application of feminist witnessing, additional scholars wrap up this special issue through critique and critical commentaries that reflect back on our classroom spaces. Turning to our shared space of Zoom university, Kristin Comeforo offers the many ways in which our Zoom classrooms afford us the opportunities and space to mirror common feminist pedagogies and utilize intersectional ways of knowing. In the second essay in this section, Kristen Hungerford explores the opportunities provided to feminist educators and their students through invitational pedagogy to move us further to a space of mutual understanding. In witnessing the changes over the past decades, Gigi McNamara offers an argument for witnessing as feminist empowerment in the feminist media studies classroom while employing contested texts. Finally, Sarah Parsloe and Elizabeth Smith close the section of commentaries with an attention to the possibility of further ableist injury as academy moves to return to the classroom as “normal,” and instead offers possibilities for further inclusion as we witness student struggles.

It is our hope that, as feminist scholars and pedagogues, we can continue to make space for witnessing, both in our classrooms and in our research. We look forward to the continued conversations, instructional innovation, and movement in the academy as we continue these discussions and witness the possibilities beyond these pages.