

# WITNESSING AND ORGANIZATION

EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Janet Borgerson

This essay addresses the shared concerns of philosophy and organization studies regarding intersubjectivity and self/other relations. It draws in particular on existential-phenomenological notions of “witnessing.” Witnessing, often conceived in the context of testimony, obviously involves epistemological concerns, such as how we come to know through the experiences and reports of others.<sup>1</sup> The witness in such a role has been described as “author and ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinion, from his biasing embodiment.”<sup>2</sup> However, I shall argue that witnessing as a mode of intersubjectivity does offer understandings that involve questions about how people come to be.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, I want to consider the positive potential of “witnessing” to disrupt intersubjective completeness or closure, particularly as this relates to work in the field of organization.

Trained in philosophy, I arrived in Stockholm, Sweden, a decade ago and began working as a researcher with management and organization scholars. My colleagues were trained in engineering, in project management, or business disciplines more generally. In preliminary conversations, I immediately discerned an unfamiliar meaning in the use of the term “organization,” one that evoked not the expected sense of a static entity or pre-existing structure, but rather a morphing, often insubstantial, constantly produced co-creation—as if organizations were living organisms. Moreover, discussions of iteration, performativity, excess, intersubjectivity, and identity co-creation in organization studies demonstrated potential for philosophical interventions. I found these, and other, somewhat unexpected theoretical openings made me want to raise questions about a possible collaboration between philosophy and organization studies. Of course, historical, as well as idiosyncratic, conditions can be obviously invoked to explain this particular form of organization studies, and alternative approaches do exist;<sup>4</sup> however,

I have found the pragmatic insights of a more philosophical approach to be both inspiring and productive.

Any endeavor claiming the usefulness and relevance of philosophy to the field of organization must consider a basic question, that is, what insights or innovations, if any, does philosophy make possible that other approaches do not. Moreover, what one means by the term philosophy will determine the resources considered available for ensuing investigations. Furthermore, diverse thinkers’ work manifests various, though often related, understandings of intersubjectivity; and one might turn specifically to one or another of these figures to explore particular expressions of intersubjectivity in the field of organization. In this essay, though, I want to suggest that it is continental thought that best offers existential-phenomenological foundations for comprehending intersubjectivity, a basic feature of organization research.

Therefore I will explore the role intersubjectivity has played in organization studies research and consider some innovations in continental thought that push forward alternative models of intersubjectivity. I will begin with an existential phenomenological base for investigating why intersubjectivity matters. I shall then turn to a few selected examples in organization studies, including theoretically informed fieldwork studies, and research that attempts to explicate a conceptual development of organization theory. These examples reveal emergent concerns about restricted identities and closure in organizational settings and, therefore, suggest an opening for witnessing.

## Existential Phenomenology and Intersubjectivity

Phenomenology can be defined as the study of the movement of consciousness through time—including the way things appear to us. What appears is said to be “given” or presented

to the subject, partly in the sense that one finds oneself, as subject, enmeshed in a life-world beyond what might be considered “chosen.”<sup>5</sup> This phenomenology becomes existential through its emphasis upon comprehending human being and human experience in the world, and with it, “problems concerning existence.” Within this perspective, the body as a focus for engagement and intersubjective recognition raises questions about the role various embodied experiences, passions, and even our bodily senses—sometimes mobilized metaphorically, and enacted in actual, remembered, or imagined contexts of past, present, or future—play in moments of subject formation, intersubjectivity, and other interactions; for example, as in the organization research discussed below.

Existential phenomenology has been called “an oriented field,” not only attending to descriptive analyses, but to the “ontological style” demonstrated, for example, in privileging certain organizing concepts or taking certain paths, in investigating possible relations between self and other.<sup>6</sup> Three central themes of contemporary existential phenomenology—the owned body, freedom, and the Other—are especially important for my argument. Therefore I will focus briefly on aspects of these themes that will guide us in the following sections.

The “owned body” emphasizes the concrete particularity of the subject’s position or perspective in the world, the placing of oneself in situation, and does away with “standpointless thinking.” But what possibilities are lost “if man is so completely identified with his insertion into his field of perception, action, and life”?<sup>7</sup> This question leads to the second existential-phenomenological theme, freedom, where freedom is to be understood more as a participation in being than as a nihilation of being.

This notion of opening up to a liberating presence leads to questions of who or what this “presence” might be, and through it to my third theme, the Other. Indeed, the problem of a solipsistic self, cut off from relations of knowing and being with others—and perhaps also linked with marking conditions of intersubjectivity as a threat—played a key role in earlier forms of phenomenological theoriz-

ing and led to a focus on the idea of recognition as a response to this threat.

### Organizing Intersubjectivity

Understandings of relations—between self and other; self and not-self; subject and object—form the foundations of many theoretical realms. Indeed, intersubjectivity, the co-creation of apparent entities and contexts of engagement, informs, often implicitly, research in fields as seemingly diverse as anthropology, science and technology studies, psychology, and consumption studies,<sup>8</sup> not to mention more familiar philosophical fields, such as epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. Understood psychically, physically, or metaphorically, modes of interaction, in whatever theoretical genealogies these might be conceived of as, are often invoked at the core of concepts and models attempting to articulate, analyze, and understand formations and emergences of subjectivity, agency, and organization, at levels of individuality and more broadly.

Importantly, these myriad hypothetical formations not only carry relevant and intersecting assumptions into academic disciplines and methodologies, but also into life practices and policies often seen as disparate and discrete. In other words, theoretical renderings of intersubjective relations articulate arenas of apparent human reflection, choice, and action, wherein the chosen or “discovered” foundations or base assumptions imply and evoke possibilities for comprehending relationships, interactions, and varieties of outcomes in the world. Thus, recent reinterpretations and reflection have mobilized new understandings in existential ontology—as the study of being and relations in the lived experience of contingency, co-creation, and uncertainty.<sup>9</sup>

The founding of subjectivity evokes relationships of power, oppression, or subordination, and the integral “postulation of an ontological unity that conditions and resolves all experiences of difference.”<sup>10</sup> Attending to such concerns, rearticulations—for example in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and Kelly Oliver<sup>11</sup>—attempt to mark moments of epistemic and ontological closure, of misrecognition, but also new emergences, and have moved away from traditional

## WITNESSING AND ORGANIZATION

notions of recognition to focus upon alternative elaborations and conceptions of intersubjectivity, as witnessing, which will be taken up later.

In tracing the genealogy of an existential, embodied, internalized subject, to whom the lived world is given, Butler, for example, has pointed to Hegel's development of parallel perspectives—moving between the often acknowledged externalized physical struggle between Lord and Bondsman and the more “internal,” or psychic, understanding required to explain formation, not only of power and status dynamics, but also the emergence of human subjectivities.<sup>12</sup> In either mode, the Lord and Bondsman struggle suggests a relation of constant desire to dominate the other. Emergence of the subject depends upon these moments of subjection—at what might be seen as the other's expense. Regarding the antagonistic interactions that inform Hegelian-inspired recognition, or subject formation theories, Butler writes, “Hegel offers a configuration of the subject in which subjection becomes a psychic reality, one in which oppression itself is articulated and entrenched through psychic means.”<sup>13</sup> What Butler means by “oppression” here is the essential moment of subjection, at an emergent limit or foreclosing, that occurs at the originary contact with the other. Thus, all subjects-coming-into-being engage the frustrating, yet necessary, encounter at this limit.

If an epistemological, or ontological, model requires an object, or other, that moves one to knowing, or being, then one has a certain dependence upon that other; yet apparently one cannot know, or engage, the other except as “immanent object.”<sup>14</sup> If such dependence incubates resentment or similar attitudes, this affects the relevant relationships. Furthermore, solipsistic scenarios suggest that to the extent that we must rely upon the image, or idea, we have of others, we find that the ability to engage and know them becomes a problem.

Furthermore, the tension remaining between abstract articulations of intersubjectivity and actual being in the world—as relating subject formation and experience in lived human relationships with others—will turn out to emphasize the complexity of philosophical investigations that invoke an existential turn. I want to argue that it is the idea of witnessing

that best offers such an answer to the threat of alienated forms of intersubjectivity. I will turn to this task following an illustration of intersubjectivity in organization studies.

### **Connecting to Conversations in Organization Studies**

Issues of identity, subject formation, and intersubjectivity constitute central problems within organization studies, particularly regarding interactions within the dynamics of any organization. Organization researchers Hancock and Tyler, for example, investigate organizational environments dominated by corporate culture; and utilize their “understanding of Hegel's ontology of the subject; that is, the phenomenological process through which subjectivity evolves” to examine “managerial interventions into the process of subjectivization.”<sup>15</sup> They observe that “corporate culturalism's” alienated organizational intersubjectivities require particular modes of dress and behavior, and repetitions in reference to these. By focusing upon the creation of institutionalized embodied subjectivities within the organization environment, they are able to point to the absence of non-colonized bodies capable of intersubjective exchange and growth. In short, they conclude, the body—Hegel's “primary medium through which inter-subjective mutual recognition occurs”<sup>16</sup>—disciplined by organizational management's “corporate culturalism” that cannot support fully human relations, fails to fulfill its role. In this case, a particular model of intersubjectivity suggests that many organizational environments make intersubjective “exchange and growth” impossible.

Fournier, in her ethnographic work with female Italian farmers, has addressed issues of intersubjectivity, particularly with regard to research methodology. She has argued that “‘the post-modern’ celebration of differences and diversity ends up just producing more normalization, for the celebration of differences share[s] the modernist conceptualization of difference as something that has to be made present by being translated, compared, made to count.”<sup>17</sup> Responding to Marilyn Strathern's thesis regarding “separation (as opposed to comparison)” in relation to gender in Melanesia, Fournier concludes that by marking, not

difference, but otherness, “[the Other] remains absent from, indifferent to, the categories of differences we may want to cast upon it to understand or recognize it.”<sup>18</sup> This attitude, which makes room for “a kind of blank,” is apparently to be adopted by researchers, in a kind of desired striving for manageable ignorance. It expresses the desire on the part of the researcher to leave one’s object of study unaltered, uncompromised, and one’s data uncontaminated by cultural myopia and authorial domination. Perhaps it is also intended to leave space for more emergent roles for the farmers to embody.

However, the “blank” of the Other does not in this particular case extend to authorial limitations regarding recognition of subjects, as such, nor regarding epistemological claims about their world and reactions to it. In other words, research that draws upon otherness, rather than difference, still produces publishable data that requires comparative notions demanding more than a “blank.” Nevertheless, such examples, evoking the other as an intersubjectively formed research subject, and an organization’s “corporate culturalism” as context, can serve to highlight my concern with intersubjective identity conflict at the core of organization studies.

Here is another example. In studying the merger of two organizations, Ford and Harding found, among lower-level staff and different management positions, distinctly discrete understandings and conceptions of what these authors call the “organization’s presence.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, and perhaps not surprisingly, they found testimony regarding how relations to organizational space, place, and other factors suggest differing interpretations of material and immaterial organizational existence. In contrast to the assumption that participants’ subjectivities are what make up an organization, they write: “We found no such thing as separate and distinct employees/managers and ‘the organization(s)’, but places and spaces inscribed upon, collapsed into, defined by and constitutive of psyches and bodies.”<sup>20</sup> This shows that dualistic approaches to identities in organizations may distort attempts to understand the everyday practices and engagements of those who make up but also live in the organization. Capturing the lived experience of those in organizations, we may surmise,

demand attitudes and assumptions that do not close down a possible plurality of ways of being and knowing.

Philosophical insights brought to bear upon organization studies have raised concerns that epistemic and ontological closures support a contention that the other’s being can be known completely—who they are, what their purpose is, and how relationships function. To put this another way, various manifestations of intersubjective relations may create—at times implicit—epistemic and ontological closures, or limits, that deny the other status as a human being and erase the possibility of human relationships.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the confusion, at an ontological level, between necessary and contingent identities, traits, or actions brings about a closure of possibility, and on an existential level, creates an oppression that blocks the human project.<sup>22</sup> The concretizing of the contingent categories of meaning and being moves away from alteration, innovation, and uncertainty, creating an illusion of essence or depth. This depth, formed in the wake of closure, tends to reinforce the subjugated status of subordinated ontological categories, often represented as dualisms. However, closure always marks its own presence as closure and, hence, also marks the possibility of a different response.<sup>23</sup>

Related research has argued that attempts to rid organization of dualisms, whether conceptual or manifested in everyday practice, are misguided; rather, recognizing dualisms, and their productions, aids in criticizing and altering reality and experience.<sup>24</sup> Philosophical discourse, of course, is full of dualisms that support, but also undermine, subordination and hierarchy. Still, marking closure maintains a distinction between the necessary (closed) and the contingent (incomplete), and mobilizes the possibility for change. Thus, in my work with Alf Rehn, we argue that by perceiving the dualistically enacted closures—epistemic, semio-ontological—upon gender in organizational settings, a “general economy of gender” emerges. Drawing upon Georges Bataille, we point out the integral importance of elements that do not fit into a classical model, mobilizing the crucial role of that which cannot be incorporated, and moreover, what must not be conceived of as available for incorporation. Bataille’s idea of a general economy maintains

## WITNESSING AND ORGANIZATION

“heterology”—a reminder of an irreducible remainder and the connection of “irreducible loss and incompleteness to the irreducible multiplicity or heterogeneity of a system or nonsystem that may be under consideration.”<sup>25</sup> Such a general economy of gender presents a scenario within which dualisms find their limit, yet at the same time, never close, provoking notions of incompleteness, excess, and waste. Bataille’s general economy emerges at a limit. Dualisms in a general economy remain marked as sites of potential subordination, but are themselves seen as limits situated in an economy of openness. Carrying the concerns of these examples forward, the following section elaborates general shared concerns of philosophy and organization study, particularly around the notion of witnessing.

### Witnessing

While attempts to reform models of recognition may avoid the more egregious manifestations of domination, recent philosophers, particularly those concerned with colonial dominations, gendered essentialisms, and genealogies of subordinating vision, have attempted to move beyond recognition to witnessing. For example, altering aspects of recognition-based interactions through a notion of witnessing, Kelly Oliver has argued for new ways of interpreting basic notions of friendship, love, and the impact of limitations on human formations. Witnessing, in this sense, provides an alternate model of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, one with the potential to avoid solipsism, damaging subordination, and erasure of the other. Beyond this, models of witnessing often contest varieties of essentializing closure, including what Emmanuel Levinas calls attempts to “thematize” the other. Levinas, as is well-known, emphasizes being-in-relation’s inescapable intersubjectivity, and arguably provides much of the grounding for Oliver’s work.

In turn, Oliver attempts to formulate intersubjectivity as something other than an antagonistic demand for recognition. To put this another way, she works to create the foundations for a kind of “witnessing beyond recognition” that can explicate lived experience, as well as provide a model of subjectivity formation, without assuming struggles for recog-

nition, and their apparently attendant outcomes of subordination. She expresses dissatisfaction with the focus on recognition at the foundation of many critical social theorists’ work, even those who contest and reformulate understandings of this relation. What her discussion implies is that at an intersubjective level, damage done to any individual affects those with whom she interacts. Therefore she argues for an “intersubjective ontology of the ethical relationship,” an understanding that makes responsibility to oneself difficult to separate from responsibilities to others.<sup>26</sup>

The Self recognizes difference at the limit of the Other, and this not-knowing spurs possibilities of relationship. Thus, Oliver inquires into what has been inherent in the process of becoming a subject and how notions that diverge from this understanding may reveal oppression to be unnecessary. That is, perhaps some models of subject formation do not carry further, or enduring, negative consequences for being in the world. Her hope is that, rather than provoking urges to dominate or retreat to subordination, the encounter with the other can be shown to offer an experience of irreducible difference, and furthermore a sense of irreplaceability in the face of difference.<sup>27</sup>

Oliver points out that, in contrast to her interpretative direction, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida “maintain that social oppression and domination are manifestations, or repetitions, of the oppression and domination at the heart of subjectivity itself.”<sup>28</sup> To put this another way, the oppression and domination present and essential in the process of subject formation—seen as “subjection”—informs and infects every relation and interaction thereafter in our lived worlds. While such an understanding may indicate the weaknesses of a genetic fallacy, Oliver takes a different approach. She interrogates the other’s starting position—as implicated in, and subordinated and objectified by the self’s process of becoming-subject—and questions the implications for historical social and global relations, including actual lives lived under oppression and subordinating relations.<sup>29</sup>

Rather than accept an interpretation that leaves the other always dominated by the self’s subjectivating struggles, Oliver intends to alter the dominant model of self and other relations—acknowledging the other’s status as

subject, and giving the other a position from which to speak its own observations and engage its desires. In this case, the historically “othered” gives testimony, a witnessing to “the other’s” own position. The other’s articulation, in other words, provides testimony that in turn is witnessed by other selves or subjects.

Oliver, in developing the notion of witnessing, connects to other conversations, metaphors, and possibilities that contest recent theorizing’s reliance upon vision and recognition.<sup>30</sup> She reminds us, for example, that we must acknowledge the invisible, what our eyes cannot witness, and that these aspects are often what attracts us to each other.<sup>31</sup> She turns to “Irigaray’s insistence on a recognition of the role of material elements in vision, perception, thought, and philosophy,”<sup>32</sup> recognizing not an empty abyss between subjects and alienated objects, but air and light in a full interwoven connectedness, altering both vision and recognition in a “continual process of witnessing.”<sup>33</sup> This attraction, this pull towards the difference of the not-self, expresses witnessing that is “beyond recognition.”<sup>34</sup> Moving witnessing away from reliance on overly simple understandings of vision and visual metaphors—particularly through testifying to that which is seen—suggests more complex and dynamic forms of engagement and co-creation.

In the history of Western philosophy, “witnessing” sometimes has been understood as a matter of “being there,” such that being present to something gave one an investment in it, a reason to step in, to make something happen, to care. Santayana discloses this interpretation’s weaknesses by pointing to what he calls a “rhetorical fallacy”: “men cannot live for what they cannot witness.”<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the repetition of “cannot” removes us from a simpler statement: We live for what we witness. Santayana pushes the point further: “What does it matter to you, we may say in debate, what happened before you were born, or what may go on after you are buried? [Yet,] what may go on after their death concerns them deeply, not because they expect to watch the event from hell or heaven, but because they are interested ideally in what that event shall be, although they are never to witness it.”<sup>36</sup> In effect, witnessing may outstretch the range of consideration typically acknowledged.

What does such a reversal suggest about the limitation or potential of witnessing? Perhaps, witnessing occurs without seeing, without evidence or testimony, without a fixed perspective in time. These points are raised to suggest that notions of witnessing may have been unduly circumscribed, and to maintain potential for open investigations. Nevertheless, we might ask what this inherent investment in witnessing consists of. Whereas future non-existence—as a position from which one may lose concern for others—provokes absence and its apparent consequences, something that we feel, know, or have learned about the lived world, about being in the world, may offer a scenario of intervention, of refusing to abandon an intersubjectivity in which we would apparently no longer be playing an active role. And in such a case one might speak of a martyr to intersubjectivity, in the sense that one’s own will becomes (mostly) irrelevant.

Indeed, what Butler calls the “paradox of referentiality”—in the process of subject formation,<sup>37</sup> and then perhaps in the intersubjectivity of witnessing—expresses the necessity for reference to the subject prior to its own existence; and one might suggest, after the subject’s annihilation, materially understood, as well. We will want to keep in mind, then, the sense that recognition and witnessing may contain aspects of “being there” that defy typical notions of a subject’s time frame. In other words, the assumption that we can presuppose what form modes of interaction, or the dynamics of relations, take may be confused or unduly simplified—as for example organization research discussed above has demonstrated.<sup>38</sup>

We can then begin to think of a witness as “one who is there,” not simply to provide testimony of their own or some others’ experience in a set time frame, but as companion or co-being that transcends the necessity of proximity, or vision. We can then also anticipate articulating subject formation via witnessing quite differently than that implied in subject/object dualisms or even versions of intersubjectivity emerging from being in relation to one another.

Witnessing—including notions of responsive co-creation—has been argued, as well, to offer alternative understandings of complex and dynamic interaction.<sup>39</sup> Learning from the

## WITNESSING AND ORGANIZATION

organizing work of technoscience, for example, Donna Haraway has argued that we must be “remapped and reinhabited by new practices of witnessing,”<sup>40</sup> and calls upon the figure of the “modest witness” in moving such a manifesto into play. She casts doubt upon traditional notions of an objective witness, and characterizes the epistemically modest one as “suspicious, implicated, knowing, ignorant, worried, and hopeful.”<sup>41</sup> Modesty here raises issues of deferral; of recognizing that final judgments or completed essences, in fact, invoke constant questioning in the face of fallibility.

### Toward Witnessing in Organizations

Let us ask at this point, how Fournier’s call for otherness, not difference, in organization studies resounds in relation to witnessing. Clearly, Oliver shares something of Fournier’s concern. A basic underlying notion of the self’s reliance on the other for identity formation glimmers at the foundation of intersubjectivities. Specifically, the continued existence of the other as different should be necessary for meaningful intersubjectivity.<sup>42</sup> This stringent requirement is often left behind in analyses that perceive unequal power relations and the privilege of the self to create the other in the self’s desired—self-same—manner.<sup>43</sup> However, witnessing does not imply the othering of difference.

Such an insight suggests the possibility of the Other remaining absolutely other. For example, Levinas argues that this is demanded by ethics, the foundational mode of intersubjectivity, a relation of responsibility for the Other in what Levinas calls the “curvature of intersubjective space.”<sup>44</sup> Derrida, too, assents to these notions, stating that, if alterity remains, then questions are not about individualized entities, but have to do with the relation between them. However, he notes that if designations of alterity were meant for purposes of subordination, then they must be disputed. While Derrida does not undermine considerations of alternatives to subordinating dialectics, he has argued compellingly that Levinas becomes politically conservative—in ways that echo Fournier’s notions—in his insistence on the possibility of innocence in the face of the other, implying, for example, the possibil-

ity of recognition without struggle, exclusion, or foreclosure.

Hancock and Tyler’s approach to intersubjectivity, too, suggests that organizations serve as contexts for repetitions of whatever is demanded, apparently creating and controlling subjectivities, relations, and identities. They have argued that alienated repetitions of behaviors and activities in corporate culture infect intersubjectivity and the potential for mutual recognition. Furthermore, they explicate the damage incurred through intersubjective processes required by organizational “corporate culturalism.” However, from this perspective human selves as performative bodies in an organizational environment seem to exist prior to engagement. Of course, the performative’s role—constructing what it purports to be, creating a referent it appears to represent—is to deliver the organized subject; and a vision of embodied intersubjectivity in everyday organization life, even if it begins with an engaging subject, has much to recommend it, particularly as the contribution of interactive human surfaces—for example, clothed and disciplined bodies as part of organization—often has been disregarded. Nevertheless, guided by a notion of witnessing, we may note that management organization’s disciplinary demands create a context not only for reproduction and repetition, but also for processes of iteration that offer the potential production of difference. Indeed, witnessing would require recognition of the draw of difference, even as intersubjectivity co-creates difference. Moreover, witnessing to incompleteness may leave behind notions of testifying to the present and the seen.

Philosophers, we see, have considered witnessing as a potential model to lend philosophical clarity to intersubjectivity, and sociality, or self-other relationships, in the world beyond more unifying essentialisms—in the sense that a unified ontology reduces everything to sameness. In such understandings, the other is not conceptualized as dominated, erased, or in other ways finally appropriated, or thematized, in relation to the self; or for that matter in relation to the organization. Witnessing engages co-creatively, unfettered by a sedimented self-interest, and in turn, co-illuminates that which otherwise would be utterly hidden or absent.

Yet, it has also been noted that the study of human beings should not be undertaken with a focus solely upon that of which a subject is capable. Thus, the epistemology of the so-called “capable subject,” or the way such a subject comes to know, will not lead to understandings of “our own being actual.”<sup>45</sup> There is a question, therefore, whether we can understand the human, including human intersubjectivity, by understanding how humans do things. Such concerns warn that positing intersubjective engagement, including witnessing, as something the capable subject does may lead to misconceptions that then inform broader understandings—for example, in existential phenomenology, or organization studies. Alternatively, we can consider witnessing as a mode of givenness in and through which subjectivity appears. For everything “given”—including the self and the other—such a perspective will suggest, we should inquire into the mode of givenness.

As my discussions here have suggested, the ability of self or subject to engage the other is limited by its own position in the “given” world. Therefore it seems that any talk of intersubjectivity, including those versions of witnessing that enact dualistic intersubjective relations in the most basic of human situations, constantly must engage the danger of epistemic and ontological closures. This concern increases when organizational contexts, or visual representations, produce engagements infused with “corporate culturalist” or other forms of dominating “common sense.”<sup>46</sup> However, in many cases, dualisms—including present/absent, visible/invisible—are productive and explode into incompleteness. Witnessing given in a context of incompleteness,

of infinitely deferred agreement upon knowing and being, may thus offer opportunities to accept the vastness of the self, the other, and the organization, and moreover, that which escapes even these.

Self-infused visions of the other based on understandings of complete knowledge or completed being, and other epistemic and ontological closures, disrupt the potential for true witnessing. In other words, an open, conceivably transparent, self that does not interfere with its own potential for knowing and being—and, further, the potential for relations beyond self-imposed boundaries and self-defensive vision—may take the form of a witness, allowing more diverse relations. Intersubjectivity based upon such a model implies alternative subject formations at the most foundational level. Hence, exploring the potential of witnessing offers opportunities for insight into the processes by which fully intersubjective relations may alter the common one-sided, self-centered perspectives at work in the world.

Philosophy and organization studies share concerns regarding our conceptions of intersubjectivity, subject formation, and identity co-creation. In organization contexts, what becomes visible or remains hidden may depend greatly on dynamic understandings of interaction and co-creation at the heart of intersubjectivity. Witnessing, addressing a basic problem in existential phenomenology, offers productive new avenues for inquiry and understanding in the field of organization. Moreover, witnessing opens lines of organizational thought toward ethics, politics, and dynamic systems.

## ENDNOTES

1. See Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1998), particularly chapter 5.
2. Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness: Second Millennium. FemaleMan Meets OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24.
3. For a broader discussion of the idea of witnessing, see Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005); Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Anne-Marie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994). For work on the “disinterested witness” that explores intersections of Advaita Vedanta and “Western” phenomenologies, see Bina Gupta, *The Disinterested Witness: A Fragment of Advaita Vedanta Phenomenology* (Evanston, North-western University Press, 1998); “Advaita Vedanta and Husserl’s Phenomenology,” *Husserl Studies* 20 (2004): 119–34.

## WITNESSING AND ORGANIZATION



4. See, for example, Damian O'Doherty, "Organization: Recovering Philosophy," in Campbell Jones and René ten Bos, eds., *Philosophy and Organization* (London: Routledge, 2007): 21–38.
5. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "What Is Phenomenology," trans. John Bannan, in Jerry H. Gill, ed., *Philosophy Today*, volume 3 (London: Macmillan, 1970): 15–36.
6. See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).
7. *Ibid.*, 210.
8. See, for example, Janet L. Borgerson, "Judith Butler: On Organizing Subjectivities," *Sociological Review* 53 (2005): 63–79; Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler, "Managing Subjectivity and the Dialectic of Self-consciousness: Hegel and Organization Theory," *Organization* 8:4 (2001): 565–85; Janet L. Borgerson, "Materiality, Agency, and the Constitution of Consuming Subjects: Insights for Consumer Research," *Advances in Consumer Research* 32 (2005): 439–43; Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Berg, 1987); Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Gerald Zaltman, *How Consumers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2003).
9. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). See also, Lois McNay, *Against Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).
10. *Ibid.*, ix.
11. Jacques Derrida, "'A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text': Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," trans. Rachel Bowlby in Michael P. Clark, ed., *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 180–207; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985); *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Oliver, *Witnessing*; and a more recent articulation in Kelly Oliver, "Witnessing and Testimony," *Parallax* 10 (2004): 79–88. Haraway has argued for the notion of a "modest witness" rejecting the invisible self in favor of a witness that fully acknowledges life context in *Modest Witness*. See, as well, Ian Almond, "Doing Violence upon God: Nonviolent Alterities and Their Medieval Precedents," *The Harvard Theological Review* 93 (1999): 325–47.
12. Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 195.
13. *Ibid.*, ix.
14. For discussion in recent Islamic Philosophy see Mehdi Hairi Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); also Oliver Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).
15. Phillip Hancock and Melissa Tyler, "Managing Subjectivity and the Dialectic of Self-Consciousness: Hegel and Organization Theory," *Organization* 8:4 (2001): 570.
16. *Ibid.*, 575.
17. Valerie Fournier, "Keeping the Veil of Otherness: Practicing Disconnection" in Barbara Czarniawska and Heater Höpfl, eds., *Casting the Other: The Production and Maintenance of Inequalities in Work Organizations* (London: Routledge, 2002), 81. See also, Edward Wray-Bliss, "Research Subjects/Research Subjections: The Politics and Ethics of Critical Research," *Organization* 10:2 (2003): 307–25.
18. Fournier, "Keeping the Veil," 81.
19. Jackie Ford and Nancy Harding, "We Went Looking for an Organization but Could Find Only the Metaphysics of Its Presence," *Sociology* 38:4 (2004): 815–30. Cf., Robert Chia, "Decision: A Deconstructive Analysis," *Journal of Management Studies* 31:6 (1994): 781–806. See also, Wray-Bliss, "Research Subjects/Research Subjections."
20. Ford and Harding, "We Went Looking for an Organization," 828.
21. Janet Borgerson, "Feminist Ethical ontology: Contesting 'the The Bare Givenness of Intersubjectivity,'" *Feminist Theory* 2 (2001): 173–87.
22. L. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 145–47.
23. Janet Borgerson, "Managing Desire: Heretical Transformation in Pasolini's Medea," *Consumption, Markets & Culture* 5 (2002): 55–62.
24. See Janet Borgerson and Alf Rehn, "General Economy and Productive Dualisms," *Gender, Work and Organization* 11:4 (2004): 455–74. See also, Maria Calás and Linda Smircich, "Re-writing Gender into Organizational Theorizing: Directions from Feminist Perspectives," in Michael Reed and Michael Hughs, eds., *Rethinking Organization: New Directions in Organization Theory and Analysis* (London: Sage, 1992), 227–53; Roland Munro, "Double-crossing the Landscapes of Philosophy: Conjoining the Transparency of 'Things' with the Veil of Language," in Campbell Jones and René ten Bos, eds., *Philosophy and Organization* (London: Routledge, 2007): 184–200; Michael Reed, "In Praise of Duality and Dualism: Rethinking Agency and Structure in

- Organizational Analysis," *Organization Studies* 18 (1997): 21–42. Cf. also Nicholas Beech and George Cairns, "Coping with Change: The Contribution of Postdichotomous Ontologies," *Human Relations* 54:10 (2001): 1303–24; David Knights, "Organization Theory in the Age of Deconstruction: Dualism, Gender, and Postmodernism Revisited," *Organization Studies* 18 (1997): 1–19.
25. Arkady Plotnitsky, *Complementarity: Anti-Epistemology After Bohr and Derrida* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 29.
  26. Kelly Oliver, *Womanizing Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 194. See as well, Nancy Fraser and Alex Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (London: Verso, 2003); Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Witnessing the Inhuman: Agamben or Merleau-Ponty," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107 (2008): 165–86.
  27. See Janet L. Borgerson, "Living Proof: Reflections on Irreplaceability," *C. L. R. James Journal* 14 (2008): 269–83; and Lewis Gordon, "Irreplaceability: An Existential Phenomenological Reflection," *Listening: A Journal of Religion and Culture* 3 (2003): 190–202.
  28. Oliver, *Witnessing*, 4.
  29. See also Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995); Janet L. Borgerson, "Feminist Ethical Ontology: Contesting the 'Bare Givenness of Inter-subjectivity,'" *Feminist Theory* 2 (2001): 173–89.
  30. Kelly Oliver, *Subjectivity Without Subjects* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). See also Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998).
  31. Oliver, *Witnessing*, 210.
  32. Ibid.
  33. Oliver, *Witnessing*, 223.
  34. Ibid.
  35. Georges Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 54.
  36. Ibid.
  37. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4.
  38. N. Katherine Hayles, "Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environments," *Configurations* 10 (2002): 297–320.
  39. Whereas recent writing in Islamic Studies has offered a flurry of comment on the phenomenon of *shahid* as witness or martyr, a shared understanding of witnessing, evoking interaction and intersubjectivity, often goes unaddressed.
  40. Haraway, *Modest Witness*, 269.
  41. Ibid., 3.
  42. For example, Merleau-Ponty, "What is Phenomenology," 23–24.
  43. Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 145.
  44. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 291.
  45. Simon Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2007), 9.
  46. See Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder, "Ethical Issues in Global Marketing: Avoiding Bad Faith in Visual Representation," *European Journal of Marketing* 36:5/6 (2002): 570–94.

University of Exeter Business School, Exeter EX4 4PU, United Kingdom