The Womanist-Buddhist Consultation as a Reading Community

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In *Breaking the Fall*, the late Robert Detweiler (1932–2008) imagines what a reading community, “a contemporary version of the old storytelling cultures,”¹ might look like. He suggests that in such a community, “The accent on community itself would offer a balance to our excessively privatizing tendencies; the communal interaction could counter our relentless drive to interpret . . . with attitudes of play and Gelasienheit (abandonment, chance, and relaxation); the writing and reading community especially as a liminal entity, could nurture a respect for the incomprehensibility of form and a reverence for mystery.”² This description offers an entry to the work of the Womanist-Buddhist Consultations. To reach a provisional understanding of the meaning of that work, I shall reflect on first what we mean when we say that we want to read something. Second, I turn to a conversation with Robert Detweiler, who was one of my mentors, as a way to address the form of reading that we do and the form of community that we make in the Womanist-Buddhist Consultations. Third, I want to draw on the thought of the consultations themselves, using Emmanuel Levinas’s work on reading and ethics, to examine the capacity the consultations have to hold tensions creatively and to allow multiple meanings to be part of them. Finally, I want to address the goals for the consultations. I am thinking specifically of Melanie Harris’s desire to see the consultations as generating practices that promote peace, compassion, and justice, and Charlie Hallisey’s desire to generate a more complex reading of Buddhist texts in and of themselves.

The Womanist-Buddhist Consultations have met three times between 2009 and 2011. We met at Harvard Divinity School and at Texas Christian University for sessions of four days each, and for an evening at the University of Georgia between the two longer meetings. The Texas Christian meeting included some previous members from the Harvard meeting, and added new ones. The University of Georgia meeting consisted primarily of students who participated in the reading practice.

In the meeting at the University of Georgia, Charles Hallisey looked askance at me when I said that Buddhism offers an entry into peace and compassion; yet Melanie Harris, when she constructed the later session at Texas Christian University, deployed the terms “peace” and “justice” as descriptors for the work of the group. Hallisey’s ironic glance occurred right before we read, at the University of Georgia, a text that contained magic and murder. His glance and the content of that text have prompted
me to think through Harris’s claims and to see how our group achieves both a reading of Buddhism and an ethical practice that generates peace and points to justice.

The instructions that Hallisey gives for the reading process describe a practice of “being and reading together” as we encounter a variety of Buddhist texts. The group’s guide is the bodhisattva Manjushri, who has overseen our work through an image gracing the wall at all our meetings. Manjushri has a sword to cut through obstacles, and holds a book, signifying wisdom. The practice of reading with friends, Hallisey told us, comes from Jewish tradition: we need a friend to help us overcome what we can and to begin to see what we cannot. The work involves three steps:

1. To read passages individually.
2. To read the same passages together in small groups.
3. To gather again as a large group and discuss what we have discovered.

The major goal of reading is to encounter levels of ourselves to which we ordinarily have no access, by examining a text that becomes “generous” to us. Reading together, Hallisey asserts, makes the generosity of the text visible to us.

This process of reading, I would argue, is different from what we usually do when we read and different from what we mean when we tell students to read. Patricia O’Connell Killen, an AAR Teaching Award winner, has delineated some of what we mean when we say to our students: “Read chapter 2 of ‘X’ and come to class prepared.” Among other things, Killen writes, we expect they all will do such things as recognize words, recognize the meaning of the visual layout of a chapter, attempt to summarize the chapter as they read, and entertain ideas, perspectives, and points of view that they have never considered or that they oppose.

This approach to reading is to read as a professional, which is to read alone, at least initially, and to read strategically, toward the production of scholarship, for example. The work of the Womanist-Buddhist Consultation legitimates its professional status by reading in this way. We are reading classical texts, the foundation of our professional lives.

In “The Ethical Practice of Modernity,” John Guillory, using the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), unpacks what professional reading involves. Guillory argues that reading is an ethical practice—a form of work demanding time and resources. Second, professional reading is a disciplinary activity that one masters. It requires vigilance, a detachment from the experience of reading that “gives rise to a certain sustained reflection.” Finally, professional reading is a communal practice, connected to a variety of demands and audiences. The professional reading process is not just passive reception: the reader is an agent in relation to the text.

In the consultations, the Womanists in the group do not read as professionals, if that means reading Buddhist texts as scholars of Buddhism do, and the scholars of Buddhism give up some of the authority of the professional scholar by surrendering to the group. Together, we enter a kind of interstitial or liminal space, in which Womanist thought and Buddhism meet over particular concerns. Alice Walker, for example, said in our TCU meeting that both Womanism and Buddhism are about
“self-regard,” about “coming face to face with a form of yourself that you have to let go of.” To let go of these forms is to move to freedom, awakening: a goal Womanists and Buddhist share. We meet, then, in a posture of humility, as beginners, in encounter or/and diaspora, and in a variety of processes and movements. Hallisey expresses this in verbs: “I acknowledge . . . ,” “I resent . . . ,” and “I want to learn from . . . .” The scholars of Buddhism surrender the text, and the Womanists open for them the multivocality of the text, to which the scholars of Buddhism can return refreshed. Like Manjushri’s sword, the presence of the text and of the “other” cut through claims of ownership and of a “right” way to interpret, which might block our seeing. We are, with one another and the text, in the present moment. This leads me to revisit a comment of Robert Detweiler’s.

In 1993, in a meeting of Arts, Literature, and Religion scholars, we were engaged in a similar kind of reading—not across cultures, but within Western culture. At that meeting, Robert Detweiler, commenting on his own work, said, “There is only the moment. . . .” I do not remember, now, exactly of what he was speaking, but I remember that comment, and it has haunted my thinking since. The insight functioned on two levels: the first was a deconstructive one, connected directly to the process and outcomes of reading. In reading, Detweiler was saying, we are engaged in a process of continual dissemination, of being settled then unsettled, of making and losing meaning. And, for Detweiler, this reading happens in temporary communities that gather around a text. The second level was an experiential one. Detweiler, as a young man, had helped to process refugees after World War II. If we think of the images of bombed cities, towns, and villages to which people returned and that they rebuilt, we can see that the postwar/postmodern ushered in the deconstructive moment because of something very real. We have been making sense—or not—out of nonsense since.

That post–World War II, post-Holocaust historical moment has led philosophers and literary critics to rethink what it means to read and to represent and, by extension, to know. Emmanuel Levinas’s work on the “face of the Other” has generated, in the larger academy, a turn to ethics. This is where I think the Womanists and Buddhists meet: in a space beyond hermeneutics, in an ethical space. What Detweiler was pointing to is explained by Elisabeth Lovlie in “Reading Religiously, the Secret à venir in Literature and Religion,” in which she argues that texts are not the bearers of “timeless truths” but of “repeated secrets”: The future of literature, and of literary studies, indeed of the humanities is therefore to come, always ahead of us, always a call from the future. To read is to respond to this call and therefore to be involved in this forthcoming thrust that is always an opening of the instant, that is geared towards a coming of what we don’t know and simultaneously towards every moment, every now.” This “implodes any access to a metaphysical realm of presence,” forcing us to give up “the beyond” and “the outside” as escape and to be in the now, beyond fixed interpretation and accepting of potential unreadability. This statement, made from the standpoint of literary interpretation, sounds very Buddhist to me.

I think this is why Hallisey looked askance at me when I said that we read Buddhism as about peace, compassion, and justice. Absolute renderings of “peace,” “com-
passion,” and “justice” respond to a Western need for totality, clear definitions, and boundaries, and constitute the attraction of Buddhism for some in the West. Upon reflection, I realized that when I made the comment about Buddhism, compassion, and peace, I was making a comment about how Buddhism has been translated by Americans in particular. Buddhism seems to fill a need that we believe we cannot satisfy in Western religious traditions—a need for meditation, for example, although contemplative practices are present in the Western traditions. We essentialize Buddhism by our need, making Buddhism look like us.

Acknowledging this, I, however, do not want to let go of the potential of the ethical, of justice, being a part of our reading of texts. Texts are, themselves, constructed. Tomo Virk utilizes the term “literariness” to point to this reality. Texts, thereby, give us a “special relation to the Other,” enabling us to experience the other in a “paradigmatic model of alterity.” In centering our reading together on texts, therefore, the Womanist-Buddhist Consultation creates a space in which every reader comes to the text with a second naïveté, as Paul Ricoeur would put it. In this space the Buddhism scholars, in giving up authority over the text, accept, along with the Womanists, its “invitation to alterity.” All of us are in the presence/present(ation) of another other: the other who addresses us through the text itself. This paradoxical site is familiar and foreign, domestic and inaccessible, and mine and yours. This generation of the capacity to bear multiple forms of otherness is, for Levinas, the precondition for ethics.

In Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas, Robert Eaglestone presents Denis Donoghue’s two modes of reading: epireading and graphireading. Epireading “is predicated on the desire to hear . . . the absent person.” For an epireader, text is “a window”: “the book the reader holds in his hands is no longer a mute object but the consciousness of another.” Graphireading, in contrast, prioritizes language itself. Graphireading “reads the words and refuses to pass beyond, or create a world behind, them.” Levinas bridges these two modes of reading, as does, I would argue, the reading of the Buddhist-Womanist group. Eaglestone argues that Levinas allows both the ethical commitment to the world that the critical orientation of epireading demands and the acute concentration on the actual language of literary texts required by graphireading. Levinas comes to see text as performative site and amphibology: “a sentence which may be constructed in two distinct senses . . . with two different and simultaneous meanings; the reader moves from epireading through to graphireading and then beyond the opposition of the two.” How does Levinas build this bridge? We might say that he is a Womanist. He refuses to enter an oppositional binary, instead allowing the creative tension of a both/and. Levinas’s philosophy emerges from a situation of crisis, the Holocaust; Womanist thought emerges from the crucible of slavery. The double consciousness that is formed from these traumas opens text—and world—to (at least) a double reading, to “a new . . . way of attending to the ethical in the textual, and [to] the responsibility inherent in reading.”

Amphibology, a dimension of language that cannot be controlled by authority, and doubleness are both cornerstones of Womanist thought, as I practice it. Text is, for Womanists, a site at which to discern counter-memory (what the normative inter-
interpretation overlooks) and to construct epistemologies that are forgotten by and often counter to those of the metanarrative. Womanist thought, like Levinas’s thought, involves an ethic of welcome in which one must be open to and, simultaneously, responsible for the other and her reading. Text, then, as Martha Nussbaum argues: “offers an experience through which our ethical intuitions and moral outlines can be tested, explored and modified.” The text becomes, as Henry James called it, a site of “an experiment in life.” Responsibility—obligation—to the “other” arises as text disrupts, interrupts, and starts a conversation.

The language of obligation may be where Buddhism and Womanist thought will find tension. As I (very little) understand the conversation around Buddhist ethics, its questions center on skillful (karmically positive and meritorious or suitable) means (practices): on whether something is valuable as a means to bring about something good, and on the discipline to carry out those means. This has led some Buddhism scholars to see Buddhist ethics as akin to Aristotelian virtue ethics, which are pragmatic and situated, rather than absolute. Both Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics cultivate, as Martin Adam puts it, “mental states that ‘participate in’ or share the nature of the final good.” Both Buddhist and Womanist ethics might agree that “obligation” means to deploy/display skillful epistemologies through good actions and practices that, then, lead to good ends. These epistemologies shape how we see the “other,” are the thought patterns and fixed habits of mind we bring to the other that condition what we can see, whether and how we recognize—read—inter-subjectivity.

Our reading together, I would argue, is an image of and a practice toward “a good end.” I have been impressed by the generosity of the group in its multiple configurations—including the University of Georgia group, made up of interested students—and the porous nature of its boundaries. At both Harvard and Texas Christian, readers came into and went out of the group, reading with us for a time, then leaving. This enhanced rather than altered the group’s work. Detweiler, in Breaking the Fall, uses the terms Gelassenheit and Geselligkeit for reading communities like ours. Gelassenheit suggests “relaxation, serenity, and nonchalance, a condition of acceptance [that creates] the ability to move gracefully through life’s fortunes and accidents, or to wait out its calamities.” Gelassenheit, suggesting sociability, combined with Geselligkeit, is defined as sociability, but one that implies “a sense of closeness,” makes possible “an expansive understanding of one’s selves through exposure to the possibility of difference.”

If, as my writing partner John Randolph LeBlanc and I have suggested, justice is not a finished Form, in the Platonic sense, but a practice, then achieving justice calls us to imagination—to imagine right action, right relationship, and right community, and to go on imagining them. The work of the Buddhist-Womanist group imagines justice, practicing skillful means that are both part of behavior, as well as intention, and that lead to good ends. As such, it might reveal that no Buddhism or Womanism is the “real,” “authentic,” or “pure” Buddhism or Womanism. Rather, as one member of our group put it, both reflect the ways that those who had to “make do” with, to use what they encountered, adapted those things in hybrid, creole, and improvisational ways. That is to say, neither is a true “-ism,” in practice; both are ever-changing
modes of being and knowing, emerging from particular historical “situated-nesses,” which meet and change in our globalized world.

Detweiler argues that our quest for the correct interpretation is usually “aggressive and confrontational, if not outright belligerent.” This reflects our often violent world. Text, he suggests, does not demand this: it does not demand anything; we demand something from it. He envisions multiple possible ways to enter text, describing “a religious reading . . . one that finds a group of persons engaged in gestures of friendship across the erotic space of the text [and] that draws them out of their privacy and its stress on meaning and power.” Such communitas would undercut the desire to make my private meaning the meaning, instead letting us revel in the surplus of the text. The excess might push me over the borders of my categories into chaos or, worse for a critic, into silence, or it might open the world in a new way.

Scripture—for the Womanist-Buddhist group, Buddhist texts—can become liminal text through which those in communitas “find themselves learning anew what religious reading is.” More important, such reading can form community among individuals who would not otherwise imagine themselves as community: “they discover themselves as communitas.” Detweiler sees such reading communities as akin to archaic storytelling communities. He does not spell this out, but I think he makes this link because the reading community, like the oral community, narrates itself into the text, changing both self and text.

The Buddhist-Womanist reading practice is based on Talmudic chavruta practice, in which “together you break your heads on the texts.” Rabbi Julian Sinclair writes that “The life without scholarly companionship is unbearable,” and Sinclair asserts that truth poignantly expressed in the stories about Honi the Circle-maker, who slept for seventy years and woke a stranger in a strange world: “Either chavruta or mituta, ‘either friendship or death’ (Tannit 23a),” indicating that the friendship is as important as what is studied. Like Honi, within the Womanist-Buddhist Consultation, we are all out of place, in one way or another. In that sense, Melanie Harris is right when she says that the group seeks peace, compassion, and justice. The communitas modeled by the Womanist-Buddhist reading group is one way of imagining justice—of imagining another way of being and doing that is not violent and that leads to and demonstrates/practices friendship.

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) is, of course, my unspoken interlocutor. In “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida, whose influence I can see in Detweiler’s work and who, of course, was influenced deeply by Levinas, argues that there are things that we take “on faith,” without immediately subjecting them to reason. Reading is the example that Derrida uses to move us toward the recognition that we take the testimony of the witness “on faith.” When we read, Derrida argues, we acquiesce to a notion of a “we.” We engage in a moment of halting, of restraint and respect. Text and story, in this sense, are erotic. Eros draws us, to use Plato’s Symposium, a text that Levinas’s Totality and Infinity ponders deeply, and improves/impels us toward greater forms of virtue, beyond our initial, often selfish, desires, beyond our limits. The text, therefore, holds open a “space” between the unmarked (which is das Heilige, the holy, for Derrida) and the marked (our reasoned speaking of experience in expression of belief). This
space of reading is one of testimony and witness. In the space of the group, we halt and testify or witness. For Detweiler, speaking with Levinas and Derrida, the point of reading and of speaking is a point of peace, compassion, and justice: a site at which I can no longer think or speak my own story without thinking and speaking yours. We return, thereby, to what links all of us: the base term *religio*, which is both to bind and to harvest and, for Derrida, is truth: “the sworn faith, the given word . . . and the response.”

I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!
Dr. Seuss

I can read in red. I can read in blue.
I can read in pickle color too.
I can read in bed, and in purple, and in brown.
I can read in a circle and upside down.

I can read with my left eye.
I can read with my right.
I can read Mississippi with my eyes shut tight. [. . .]

There are so many things you can learn about, but
You'll miss the best things if you keep your eyes shut.
The more that you read, the more things you will know.
The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.

If you read with your eyes shut, you're likely to find
That the place where you're going is far, far behind.
So, that's why I tell you to keep your eyes wide,
Keep them wide open . . . at least on one side!

NOTES
2. Ibid., ix, xiv.
3. These instructions are from my notes from “Compassion and Justice Consultation,” 28 April–1 May 2010, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas. Used with permission.
4. Patricia O’Connell Killen, handout. Used with permission of the author. The list includes being able to recognize words; recognize when we do not know a word; realize that it is the reader’s responsibility to find out the meaning of words and terms that he or she does not understand; recognize the meaning of the visual layout of a chapter—e.g., headings and subheadings—and that they are related, i.e., that the material under a heading or subheading relates to the heading or subheading; attempt to summarize the passage as we read; formulate questions about what we have read as we are reading; formulate questions and prejudgments about the material not yet read; clarify ambiguities and difficult points as they arise in the reading process; make predictions by drawing and testing inferences based on the text as well as our general knowledge about the world; recognize the structure of an argument; recognize better and poorer logic in argumentation; perceive the agenda of an author; understand metaphorical and literal levels of meaning; construct meaning from the text; consider the kind of text being
read and implications for constructing meaning from it; discriminate between what is in the text and what we are bringing to the text; have some sense of what the place of this text is in the larger context of the course or field of study; and approach the text using methodologically appropriate procedures as those are defined by disciplines.

5. John Guillory, “The Ethical Practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading,” in The Turn to Ethics, ed. by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkovitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 29–46. Lay reading, in contrast, is a form of leisure, has different and less stringent conventions, can be done for fun without detachment, and, usually, is done alone and in informal settings.

6. Ibid., 32.
7. Ibid., 29–46.
8. “Compassion and Justice Consultation” notes, used with permission.

10. Sharon E. Greene, “An Interview with Robert Detweiler,” in In Good Company: Essays in Honor of Robert Detweiler, ed. by David Jasper and Mark Ledbetter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 434. Detweiler comments that he “listened over a number of years literally to thousands of war-and-suffering stories told by the many kinds of survivors.” He concludes, “These had a profound effect on me; in some ways I have never recovered from them. They are part of my identity.”


12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 283.


15. Ibid., 303.
17. Ibid., 3–4: Paul Ricoeur, for example, is an epireader, while Jacques Derrida is a graphireader, since “deconstructive criticism is graphireading, suspicious of a nostalgia for a person within a text.”

18. Ibid., 7, 140.

19. Eaglestone argues—correctly, I think—that Levinas’s work is an attempt to reshape philosophy after the Holocaust. One of the two dedications of Levinas’s second major work, Otherwise than Being, is to “the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism.” Adrian Peperzak writes that “anti-Semitism became for Levinas the equivalent of antihumanism and that to be a Jew is identical with being human. If there is a Judaism at the heart of Levinas’s thought, it is a ‘Judaism’ which is not limited to the Jewish people, but to all peoples.” (Quoted in Eaglestone, 6.) He continues: “The Holocaust was not simply a Jewish problem, and not an event in Jewish history alone. The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization, and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason, it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture. It as at this level that Levinas’s thought relates to the Holocaust, and, in its challenge to our ‘society, civilization and culture . . . can make us tremble” (Quoted in Eaglestone, 7).

20. Ibid., 7.
22. Ibid., 92.
23. Ibid., 138.
25. Ibid., 63.
26. Ibid.
27. Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall*, 35.
28. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 34–35.
33. See Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall*, 56.
34. Ibid., 39–41.
35. Ibid., 57, 61.
36. Ibid., 61. Emphasis mine.
38. Honi the Circle Maker was renowned for his piety in the period of the Second Temple (first century b.c.e.). He was said to have performed good deeds by using extraordinary powers of prayer or by performing miracles. According to legend, Honi slept for seventy years and on awakening prayed for death, rather than to live in a strange world.
40. Ibid., 96.
41. Greene, “An Interview,” 434. Detweiler says to Greene that when narratives become entwined, one cannot think one’s story without thinking the story of the other. “In this context,” he continues, “I’ve learned how story is erotic in the deepest and fullest sense.”
43. Ibid., 67.
44. Ibid.