Schooling on Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation.
Hermeneutics in Real Life project
January 15, 2023
Transcription

Molly Mann: Welcome everyone to this conversation session of the Hermeneutics in Real Life project. I'm Molly Mann and will serve as the moderator of today's session. Thanks so much for taking time out of your weekends to join us. Before we start, I just want to mention that the next conversation session will be on Saturday, March 18th at 2 pm Eastern Daylight Time. The topic will be the future of money, and the session will discuss the relevance of hermeneutics for navigating the world of cryptocurrency. More information and registration are available on the project website, which is www.hinrl.org.

Today we're delighted to have four speakers who will open our discussion on schooling on race, gender, and sexual orientation. Discussion of these topics is proving to be quite challenging in contemporary settings in higher education, both within the classroom and in the university setting more generally. The prior model of the marketplace of ideas where supposed free and unfettered discussion occurs has proved to be insufficient. Some voices have not had a place at the discussion table, some voices have drowned out others, and discussion has been inattentive to microaggressions. This panel seeks to discern both how hermeneutics might aid current discussion of these sensitive topics, and how models of hermeneutics might themselves need to improve in light of these topics.

Each of our panelists will speak for 5 minutes or so, then we'll have some time for the panelists to engage with one another, and then we'll open the discussion up for broader audience participation for the full 90 minutes that we're together. Audience members, please feel free to submit questions or comments in the chat box. You may start typing your questions in the chat anytime, either during today's presentation or after. We're asking if you want to raise a question, please do use the chat box so we can provide a diverse group of questions. And please do remember to mute your computers and cell phones. Please also note that we're recording this session for future viewing on our website.

Without delay, our first to speaker is Lorenzo Simpson, a professor of philosophy at Stony Brook University. Among other works he is the author of *Hermeneutics as Critique: Science, Politics, Race, and Culture.* Lorenzo, over to you.

Lorenzo Simpson: Thank you. Happy to be here. I think that hermeneutics can provide a salutary corrective to what Molly referred to as the marketplace of ideas model, whether that model is regarded as being insufficient because of its inadequacy as an ideal, or because it is inevitably institutionalized in such a way that some ideas will be marginalized. For hermeneutics seeks to uncover the conditions of intelligibility that are always presupposed by meaningful speech, action, and perception. If such enabling conditions are not themselves thematized or highlighted, if they are allowed to operate persistently in the shadows and behind our backs, then prevailing structures of intelligibility become unreflectively and uncritically accepted as givens, as being normative. This has the effect of hegemonically marginalizing or excluding alternative matrices of intelligibility, which effectively as a consequence is a matter of regulating

or policing the marketplace of ideas, even in the absence of explicit institutional limitation. Take but one example, because the requisite semantic resources and conceptual resources for the meaningful use of the expression, sexual harassment, were not in place prior to the late 1960s, there's an important sense in which women before then could not intelligibly claim themselves to be victims of sexual harassment. For the requisite semantic resources for naming that phenomenon simply were not available, and in this case not available even to the women themselves. A hermeneutic perspective is crucial for highlighting the various semantic contexts from which people speak and act, or, as Gadamer might say, for uncovering the questions and concerns to which what they say and do are responses. Failure to acknowledge these interpretive contexts, through either inability or unwillingness, is one of the principal barriers to discussion of the matters that concern us today, namely, issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Moreover, such a failure could in addition constitute a distinctive form of injustice, hermeneutical injustice. This is the injustice of failing to acknowledge the various horizons of intelligibility from which society's stakeholders speak and act when that failure unfairly compromises the agency of a relevant class of those stakeholders. We should shine a light on potentially marginalized horizons both to fully acknowledge the persons who are speaking and acting from them and also and crucially to secure the pedagogical and educational value of enlarging the moral imagination of society as a whole or, to invoke Gadamer again, to fuse horizons. One way to mitigate the distortive effects of power here is to cultivate a willingness to take as an ideal, a regulative ideal, the depiction of the other person in terms which they themselves can acknowledge, to achieve an understanding of the other that is commensurate with their own self-understanding, and especially so when doing this may put one's own interpretive assumptions into question.

The social world is always encountered under a particular description, that is, as an interpretive product. The social world so interpreted functions as a kind of cognitive map of the social space that we inhabit and must navigate. We could think of how this interpretive map comes into play in a variety of ways. One way, to which I've already alluded, is to think of how such a map does or does not reflect distinctive ways in which social groups understand and conceptualize their experience. This will be a function of the availability of interpretive resources for making sense of or for, as I've suggested, naming one social experience. Here, asymmetries of power would operate at the level of language itself to the extent that those in positions of power enjoy the requisite semantic resources for making sense of their social experiences, resources which turn out, in fact, to play a disproportionate role in structuring collective social understandings in general, while the marginalized do not enjoy that. The genealogy of descriptive expressions, such as sexual harassment, police brutality, racial profiling, misgendering, and so on can be understood in terms of their having been forged as a means of resistance to such an hermeneutical hegemony. The struggle to have the descriptive force of such expressions acknowledged can be understood to be a struggle against having one's agency compromised in two distinct but related ways: one, a struggle against the compromise of one's ability to name the wrongs that demand response, and two, against the arbitrary restriction of the capacity to name the ways of being or the self-descriptions that one can own. In other words, it is the hermeneutical struggle to consolidate the semantic resources to name both what one is against and what one is for, that is, what one wants to be.

Yet another way in which this cognitive map functions is that it informs perceptions of what life trajectories are possible in a given society. These perceptions are ultimately shaped by background beliefs and assumptions about what options are available to a particular individual or group, assumptions about what can plausibly and intelligibly be done by them. This will turn out to be of special significance to a full understanding of racially-indexed social inequality. The map that represents the social world as it appears from the perspective of the relatively privileged will highlight numerous open pathways allowing for a relatively smooth passage from one social location to another. Another such map, representing that world as it appears from the vantage point of the socially disenfranchised, is more likely to depict such pathways as being blocked by numerous obstacles and impediments, by yawning chasms that do not appear in the maps of the privileged and hence that are not acknowledged by them. Persons of privilege, operating in the social space represented by their maps, can move through their lives oblivious to the fact that those clear and open paths that they take for granted at first had to be made clear and made passable and, further, that it wasn't done by them. They are thereby allowed to think that they alone are responsible for their progress through social space and that, in general, any success or the lack thereof individuals enjoy or suffer is solely the responsibility of those individuals. This view is often fashioned into an ideology that takes as this ideal the unaided accomplishment of the individual person. However, since few, if any achievements are won through individual effort alone, that is, without the enabling conditions of a certain degree of material prosperity, educational opportunity. Encouraging and supporting home and school environment, access to social networks, and so on, such an ideology in effect frontloads these enabled conditions as unacknowledged and unremarked givens. To this extent, the social horizon of the privilege is founded on an unacknowledged presupposition that these conditions are satisfied as a matter of course and a correspondingly blissful hermeneutic obliviousness to the fact that they are not satisfied in the case of the less privileged. As a consequence, the hermeneutic situation and consequent choices available to those for whom the givens are not given will remain a mystery, and the conversational encounters with them will misfire. For what will not have been thematized are the contrasting horizons of meaningful and credible social possibilities.

Perhaps nothing puts the contrast between these social horizons into starker relief than a consideration of US race relations from an historical perspective. African-Americans were subjected to a history that gave rise to a picture of the social world that disproportionately made optimal choices appear as unreal possibilities. To cite only a few, among the measures and policies that affected this constriction of the range of meaningful social possibilities were post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws, widespread government-sanctioned expropriation of black-owned property, racially indexed housing restrictions, and restricted access to education, job training, and employment opportunities, all leading to the well-documented wealth disparities currently existing between white and black households and to the ongoing limits to the full social agency on the part of African-Americans.

To understand a person's choices requires that we engage in a hermeneutical investigation, one undertaken under what I refer to as the constraint of narrative representability. That is, we must ask: How do things appear from the first-person perspective itself from which speech and action emerges. Narrative representability refers to an agent's ability to plot a continuous, connected, and credible trajectory in which, simply put, they can

move from their current status to a better, more optimal one. Narrative representability thus refers to the ability to envision how the achievement of a desired end or outcome is a real possibility, not a mere abstract fantasy. It requires the capacity to find reasons for the expectation that one's efforts will pay off. In this case, the hermeneutic lens that is necessary for understanding is also a requisite for the detection of the ongoing injustices, the withholding of the givens, the ongoing injustices, responsible for the social ontologies of the less privileged and for making the case for the critical social interventions and the reparative justice that address them. Any serious conversation about race, I believe, must start here. Thank you.

Molly Mann: Thank you, Lorenzo. Next we have Andreea Ritvoi. Andreea is William S. Dietrich Professor of English and Department Head in the Department of English at Carnegie-Mellon University. She has written on the immigrant experience, an experience which she has traversed herself as someone who immigrated to the United States from Romania. She is also the author, among other works of Paul Ricoeur, Tradition and Innovation in Rhetorical Theory. Over to you, Andrea.

Andreea Ritivoi: Thank you so much, Molly. I'll start by stating that I really want to make just two simple points. Each of them would require a lot more elaboration than I can offer here. But I'm very interested in your comments and suggestions as I continue to reflect on this topic. My feelings about hermeneutics are rather mixed, for again pretty obvious reasons. On the one hand, this is a discipline that is dedicated to recognizing difference and to reconciling differences, and we need that so much now, when difference has become death in our world and it's become violence, and it's become war, and it's become destruction. For that reason, I think one of our few remaining hopes does lie with hermeneutics on an intellectual plane.

But on the other hand, as my students point out and as I'm myself forced to recognize, hermeneutics is also dedicated to a very Western idea of universalization that simply hides a particular kind of canon that is fundamentally a Western civilizational canon. And hermeneutics is, of course, a discipline populated in terms of its practitioners and thinkers very much by one particular kind of person, often a European white male. I think we sometimes bracket the disadvantages of hermeneutics because of the richness of the advantages. And that's what I myself want to do.

So as I reflect on those two very different characteristics of hermeneutics, I very much want to propose that we identify carefully a set of rescuing concepts, concepts that can rescue us, and concepts that we have to rescue ourselves and to remain aware of the fact that these concepts have a particular situatedness in certain identities, and perhaps try to cultivate, as all of you here have been doing in different ways, other identities that can speak up to the relevance of these concepts. That's just in a nutshell what I would like to say today. And then I'll elaborate in a minute.

I also want to note that I was very intrigued and interested in the introductions – the mini bios that were presented – and the flyer for this panel, because I had never been introduced as an immigrant woman who came from Romania to the United States. That's something I say in a variety of settings, but it's never been part of my official bio. At first I was sort of surprised to see it, and to see it for all of us. But then I thought, this is so important, and it's in itself a hermeneutical statement about situated identities.

So if you don't mind, I'll have a few very personal reflections about my situated identity. Especially as a teacher I have to think about the situated identities of my students, and I have to think about, as Lorenzo put it very well, their narrative trajectories and the maps from which they greet me and the ideas that I teach in the classroom. I don't remember exactly what term was used in the in the bio, but obviously the term that's applied many times to me is that of an immigrant, and that's a particular taxonomic decision. I confess that I have all kinds of taxonomic hesitations myself when I think about who I am. Am I an immigrant, am I a Romanian-American? I have now lived more than half of my life – the mature half of my life – here, not in Eastern Europe, so I suppose at some point I'll qualify fully for the hyphenated identity of a Romanian-American. But people ask me all the time if I'm going to go back. So maybe I am just a Romanian who has lived for a long time in America. These taxonomic hesitations have followed me, not only in self-reflection, but also in my research, as Molly kindly noticed in my bio. I resonate deeply with Emily Apter's reflection on the vicissitudes of vocabulary imposed forcefully upon our identities, and I think sometimes hermeneutic taxonomies do a similar kind of imposition, whether they realize it or not. So let me quote from Emily Apter:

> Denomination, itself a category, violence inflicts differential orders of psychic and political suffering on those who move through the world in quest of safe harbor and unconditional hospitality. It leaves in its wake uncorrectable grammars of circumlocution for the other, riven postulations of radical incommensurability in the field of rights and privileges, and the vocabulary of anthropological difference.

Terms like immigrant or refugee are fundamentally untranslatable, Alter notes, yet our identities get mistranslated all the time by categories and designations we are forced to choose, from bureaucratic documents and forms to simple conversations. “Where are you from?” The dreaded question signaling that we cannot be full natives, that a mispronunciation or unfamiliar conversational prosody gives us a way as foreigner is a daily reminder to some of us that we are, whatever the natives choose to see in us, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, guest workers. Years ago, in a casual conversation with an academic colleague, upon mentioning that I was from Eastern Europe, I found myself entered in the category of refugee. My interlocutor was mainly associating or tokenizing Eastern Europe at the time with the former Yugoslavia at a time of conflict and ethnic cleansing in that region. It mattered little that the application to me was historically implausible. We were almost 20 years after the Yugoslav wars. I learned that stereotypes not only see our identities but do so with a confidence and arrogance disguised as goodwill that can be quite shocking. I do have to wonder to what extent even benign concepts like fusion of horizons do not do a very similar kind of violent work by pulling one horizon entirely into a dominant horizon in power. And here again I want to call Lorenzo's emphasis on power. My teachers and mentors in Romania always prided themselves on their Western philosophical credentials as if they were visa equivalents that would give them access to the West, that is, the civilized and advanced intellectual world. This is hardly surprising, for Eastern Europeans longingly gazing at Western Europe as the center towards toward which one must migrate, if only through ideas to escape one's marginality. And again I embraced hermeneutics as a very young student in college, precisely because it was so different from the kind of pan-Slavic, Russian-controlled, still somewhat Communist-influenced intellectual canon,

doomed to catch up by the very trope of backwardness that has historically been used to describe Eastern Europe in contrast to the West, as Maria Todorova has showed. Young Eastern European scholars, many of us still scholars of the Cold War and children of the Cold War, inadvertently consolidate with our longing and our intellectual choices the myth of a universal or global epistemic culture that is, in fact, the hegemonic culture that has the power to control and dismiss difference. So much of the hermeneutical canon is very much that kind of hegemonic global culture. If I'm honest, I must admit that I left Eastern Europe and began my intellectual life in the United States craving a self-enamored Western identity, because I was hoping it would give me confidence and rescue me from the historic backwardness of my region. To earn this identity amounted to escaping the localizing assumptions others imposed upon me with the exclusionary motives I try, but fail, to ignore. I have the privilege of whiteness and education, and I can speak English. Yet this privilege gives me a rather precarious Western self, not only at odds in some ways with who I am, but also, as I have learned, a precarious cover easily exposed through my accent and probably other things I'm not aware of. The Western identity I chased was never more than one made of books and ideas. As the years went by, I took this identity for granted only to discover, upon being told that I am very Westernized, that this recognition did not sound to me like a compliment. The barely disguised condescension of the native praising me for being Westernized reveal the power dynamic of assimilation. Hannah Arendt was critical of refugees and immigrants who are eager to assimilate in a new country, even as she acknowledged that many immigrants and refugees see assimilation as the price to pay for being accepted in a new country and allowed to start a new life. For the refugees she was writing about, who had escaped Nazi extermination, assimilation was the price for survival. The pressures of assimilation are not just external but also self-imposed. What I learned through my own experiences as a migrant is that assimilation lures us as survival, even when it is on literal survival. For migrants like myself who have the luxury of not fearing that we risk our lives if we don't assimilate, the need to belong remains a potent drive to adjust and strive to resemble those around us rather than continue to stand apart as different. Thank you for indulging me in these personal reflections.

What I would like to do is mindful of the limits of assimilation and mindful of the kind of suspect genealogy of hermeneutics that one could write into a story of migration and forced translation. I would like to one to ask with all of you if we can replace a concept like assimilation with the concept of recognition, which is very much a concept coming from Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, recognition does not involve persons identified referentially. So it wouldn't involve me being described by my name or by where I come from or by where I work, but rather speaking subjects capable of reflection. So that's why I offered the reflection in the first part of my talk, because reflection for Ricoeur means self-awareness as well as awareness of those we are addressing. Consequently, recognition requires an orientation toward another, that is, a perception of another, not as a person defined referentially or ostensibly – I can point at you, and you can point at me – but that's not sufficient as a form of recognition for Ricoeur. Rather, what's required is the relationship between us. After reviewing philosophical perspectives on recognition that are centered on this assumption that recognition is obtained through constant struggling, Ricoeur proposed a heuristic move toward conceptualizing recognition as a state of peace. Years ago I wrote an essay for a volume edited by Scott Davidson, who's here, and I went back to that because I am more than ever drawn to this idea of a state of peace as being the

metaphor for interpretation and for recognition. While admitting that "[e]xperiences of peaceful recognition cannot take the place of a resolution for the perplexities raised by the very concept of a struggle," – and this was a quote from Ricoeur – Ricoeur proposed that we turn to what he calls "days of truce, clear days, what we might call clearings, where the meaning of action emerges from the fog of doubt bearing the mark of 'fitting action.'" I think is a beautiful quote from The Course of Recognition [218]. The paradigmatic situation in which Ricoeur saw recognition function as a state of peace is that of gift-giving. Ricoeur connects the gift to reciprocity: I give to you, and you give to me. What emerges from this relationship of reciprocity is a third term which could be, is, the relation itself, as it gets formed among the social actors. The recognition, then, is not so much of the agent making the initial offering as of the relationship that the offer and the return of the gift shape together. The gift creates a bond between individuals, in Ricoeur's view, because it places them into a relationship in which they agree to recognize each other's presence and identity as intended in a particular way that is very much their own choice. What one gives and then receives back, Ricoeur contends, is ultimately something of oneself. The recognition afforded by the gift is a recognition of relationship as well as of identity. Ricoeur encourages us to think about a process of recognition that focuses on individuals and the relationships they enter. The emphasis on the individual does not dismiss the salience of social identities. It does not assume that social identities are not important, and perhaps even defining of particular individuals based on their ethnicity, race, gender, or sexuality. Rather, refocusing the problem of recognition on individuals allows us to avoid particular analytic pitfalls, such as the lingering essentialism that reifies many distinct features into one collective conglomerate. More importantly, the emphasis on individuals is more situationally sensitive, as it prompts us to look at what happens in a given exchange between the specific actors involved rather than reduce the exchange to previous ones and subsume all of them to a particular logic. I think I'll stop here. There's so much more to be said, for sure, and I look very much forward to your comments. Thank you, Molly.

Molly Mann: Thank you, Andreea. Our third speaker is Scott Davidson, a professor of philosophy at West Virginia University. Scott has extensively written and edited work on Ricoeur, and he is also author of work on intersectional hermeneutics. Scott, over to you.

Scott Davidson: I'm just going to share some Powerpoint slides. I put together a few images that I just want to put out there as a start for discussion. So today's prompt really led me to reflect on how I use hermeneutics in education and think about how it enters into my teaching, oftentimes without me really even mentioning or using the word hermeneutics. Certainly on the topics that we're talking about today – race, gender, sexual orientation – there are legal and political challenges put in place by State legislatures that we're familiar with, but they're also personal and sociocultural challenges, I think, that we face as educators and dialogue on these topics. Sometimes the barriers can just be that we think we already know our way around the topic, or we know enough about it. And so we come with preset ideas and frames of interpretation. Questions, then, are how to bring the far away near and then also how to make the familiar or what we think is familiar strange or new. Oftentimes in his work on translation Ricoeur cites Antoine Berman's phrase – it's a title from one of his books on translation – shelter for the far away. So thinking about hermeneutics and the hermeneutic enterprise as a way of

welcoming in the far away or the unfamiliar. What does the good hermeneut know? I guess what studying hermeneutics has helped me to do is to appreciate subtlety. I think the good hermeneut is someone who has an appreciation or knows subtlety. Ricoeur's hermeneutics enables us to take a distance from the established ideology, beliefs, or practices of a given society, what he calls understanding 1. The good hermeneut is somebody who's able to discern the non-obvious or the hidden meaning that underlies that. This can produce a confrontation not only with our understanding of the subject matter, but also a confrontation with ourselves and with our own understanding of ourselves in our own world.

When I teach philosophy of law, I oftentimes bring in actual exhibits that were entered into evidence in the Brown versus Board of Education case. They were entered into evidence by both the plaintiff and the defendant. So on the left [of the PowerPoint] you have the school – this is in Virginia in one of the cases that was bundled up with Brown -- Moton High School, and on the right you have Farmville High School. The question raised in the case is: are these equal facilities, or unequal? The plaintiff who's arguing for desegregation sees these two pictures as obviously unequal to one another. The defendant makes the argument that these two images are the same. How can you have such disparate interpretations of the same image? The image really brings to bear for students that if you're arguing one side of the case, you have to be prepared to show their difference, and if you're if you're arguing the other side of the case, you have to be prepared to defend their likeness. There's a whole series of photos: This is one of the auditoriums in the two different schools. You see the one on the left, with the folding chairs, the lower ceilings, the smaller stage, and then on the right you have the more familiar fixed seating and a balcony, and so on. Are they equal or unequal? In that case, being a hermeneut involves taking what's given and then trying to show the ideology that underlies a perception of one in one way or another.

In my class this semester, the activity that we're going be doing next week is reading a book called Weird John Brown, which focuses on the conflict of interpretations about the legacy of John Brown. Some have interpreted him as a freedom fighter, a sort of founding father of the idea of equality. Others depict him as a madman. Weird John Brown tells the story of this in ways that for many of us are similar to Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham – is he a prophet or a madman? This is the image of a painting that's in the Kansas State capital. It's a very ideological depiction of John Brown as a madman, by the eyes, the posturing that he has, the wild beard, and so on. Here subtlety involves taking what's given, but then seeing it as an ideological interpretation of the subject matter and bringing people to envision the figure of the subject matter in a in a way that isn't depicted or on the surface.

A third example from some previous work by myself and also with my partner, Maria Davidson, is on Kara Walker. You may be familiar with her "A Subtlety." This is a picture of Kara Walker, in front of "A Subtlety" from 2016, which was an exhibit. This sculpture is made entirely out of sugar, and it's in the Domino sugar factory that was being demolished after the exhibit was over. The subtitle tells you a little bit more about what this all is: "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet Tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant." I developed out of that the notion of the possibility of an intersectional hermeneutics that might be able to correct for some limitations or broaden our understanding of hermeneutics.

Some questions I have in confronting and thinking about Ricoeur's hermeneutics in particular, and some of the ways in which these images and my experience with talking about them with students speak back and question Ricoeur's hermeneutic circle. One question I have is whether Ricoeur's hermeneutics offers the sufficient answer to the conflict of interpretations. Does he give us specific enough or deep enough criteria to really get anywhere with the conflict of interpretation? My sense in reading Ricoeur is that his account of the best interpretation is somewhat unsatisfying. He often goes to other thinkers and their concepts of validity but is sometimes reluctant to offer his own. So I think it would be interesting to talk about how do we talk about different interpretations of a given subject matter and that conflict and how do we guide people and give them tools navigate conflicting information, conflicting images, conflicting interpretations that they may hear or be exposed to.

And another trouble spot I find in Ricoeur's hermeneutics is his reliance on structuralism and his accounting for the phase of explanation in the hermeneutic circle, oftentimes in terms of the structuralist theory of his time. It leads me to wonder and want to probe the question: are there better tools of explanation available now? Is it really essential to his theory that structuralism be there, or could it be substituted by other theoretical frames of explanation? That's where, in particular, I think the notion of intersectional hermeneutics can be fruitful. That intersectionality can be a way to enrich the set of tools that we have to interpret the subject matter that we bring into the hermeneutic lens.

Just on that notion, some more questions maybe that we can probe. Might intersectionality itself or even more broadly critical race theory, could it be considered a hermeneutic? How might the hermeneutic framework help us to illuminate and to talk about the significance of intersectional approaches? And how might it help us to grapple with the social and political controversies in our present times over critical race theory if we situate this within Ricoeur's discussion of the conflict of interpretations? At the same time, when not in relationship to intersectionality, when we bring intersectionality into the fold of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, might that prompt us to take a critical distance from certain concepts that Ricoeur relies on in articulating his hermeneutics. How might the use of intersectionality in hermeneutics mark a new becoming or a new field of possibilities for hermeneutics itself? I look forward to the discussion of this and to see how this resonates with the other presenters. I look forward to some more conversation. Thank you.

Molly Mann: Thank you, Scott. We have one more speaker. Last but not least, we have John Arthos, a professor of English at Indiana University, Bloomington. He has written extensively on Ricoeur and Gadamer, and also brings to the panel a perspective as a gay man. Over to you, John.

John Arthos (he/him): I am going to try to get my screen set up here because I have some slides, and I think you can see it now. I'm going to start with a definition. This is a definition that I'm borrowing. Fifteen years or so ago at Denison University, a group of faculty that I was participating with came up with this: "Articulating and performing the righteous transgression of social, political, and cultural norms" was a definition that what we wanted to be broad and flexible, and not just narrowly about gender identity or sexual preference, so that we could sort of queer any theoretical domain. And then also we could be an alliance with other social justice

discourses like the folks that are talking with us today. So I took George's charge to the roundtable, I took two of his prompts, and I modified them a little bit, so that I could change that around, so that I could assess how well I think hermeneutics is leaning into queer identity, and then try to provide a useful theoretical resource from within hermeneutics to do better.

It may be no surprise that I think that we're a bit behind the 8-ball in that regard, but I'm going to say how we might use some of those resources that are not as well known. When I pull out, when I zoom out and look at hermeneutics more broadly understood, it is interesting. I am seeing green shoots. Even a cursory look can show you that there's all kinds of interesting stuff bubbling up now, especially in religious studies. I discovered quite a bit of interesting stuff, also in Middle Eastern studies. I won't go through all of these [slides], but I'm happy to share them. But a lot of interesting stuff is going on in this broader sense of hermeneutics beyond just what we typically think of in terms of Ricoeur or Gadamer. When you go into that narrower focal length, though, it does seem less sanguine, just empirically. If you look at the Lexington Press series, or the Ricoeur journal, or the conferences, the footprint is very light. Some notable exceptions. Michael King is here. About a quarter century ago he wrote this marvelous book, using Gadamer to study a conversation between Mennonites at a 1997 delegate meeting in Lafayette, Indiana – my Indiana – about ratifying the Church's proposed new stance on "acceptable sexual expression." Michael will, I'm sure, speak today about his feelings about hermeneutics being useful today anymore. And then, significantly, Donald Hall wrote a monograph on hermeneutic theory and queer studies – I'm hoping he's able to join us today – which I recommend. So there are interesting things within hermeneutics. I'll plug my own essay. I wrote an essay for a very obscure medieval literature journal on Dante's Comedia, Canto 15. His dearly beloved teacher and mentor Brunetteo Latinia, who got in trouble sleeping around with men. There was this deep ambivalence with Dante, who condemned him to hell. So that's my sense of things, that we are behind the 8-ball. We need to make more progress.

I do want to now say that there are some resource that we have, really some unlikely resources beyond even the sort of the reception controversies that Andreea is talking about: the use of these concepts like fusion of horizons and tradition and prejudice. There are even more trenchant critiques of Gadamer's dialogic philosophy in its political-cultural orientation. But I want to uncover something that's been covered over in his theory that I think would be very, very useful for queering hermeneutics. I really think it's the linchpin of his theory, and he really does describe it as sort of the driving force of hermeneutic understanding and experience, which is the shock of being corrected by the other, of being surprised, of being pulled up short by the culturally, socially, historically other. This is his language that I'm using here on the slide: the shattering and demolition of the familiar, the breaking of the spell of our fore-meanings, and the smooth front of our presuppositions. He uses words like being goaded, stung, prodded, and provoked, unsettled, disturbed, injured, invaded, being pulled up short. Our positions are being called into question, put at risk. And he uses the words confrontation and disruption. It's kind of surprising to think about him from that perspective. That really is how he understands the trigger for any hermeneutic understanding. What is alien to the norm has to be interrupted. He develops this whole lexicon around this idea of interruption. He starts with the tyranny of prejudices. This is all his language. How do we break the spell of our fore-meanings? He says," the fore-meanings that determine my understanding can go entirely unnoticed." As people have mentioned today: "It's impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice, while it is constantly

operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked." "I think we must say that generally we do so in the experience of being pulled up short by" the alterity of another's perspective. "Understanding begins . . . only when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics." "In fact, our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk."

Here's where he becomes less revolutionary. He wants to forestall any kind of revolution by instilling a habit of mind that's receptive to this process of being interrupted. This really is an issue of education for him. Being open to the other is a comportment that you have to cultivate. He's followed by many theorists, who in the wake of 1968 became quite disillusioned with the hope of education. But I do want to emphasize that he's made upsetting the normative expectations that ground our common sense as the basis of hermeneutic experience, which is also the strategic basis of every social movement, rudely interrupting this smooth, unthinking operation of the status quo. He said that we have to accept that interruption as a way of being in the world now.

My argument would be that we can harvest this intrinsic moment of the transgression against norms within hermeneutics for social justice. The problem, though, that we need to confront is that hermeneutic schools of thought like Gadamer's place this moment of interruption in education. People like Bourdieu would see education as the thing that needs to be interrupted. I myself believe as an article of faith in the educational project. But this is also where I see the limitation of Gadamer's approach. He attends the educational side of the equation. Just as necessary is to theorize how a commitment to equality acts in the face of hegemony that is not amenable to education. In that case interruption has to work within a different grammar and logic, no longer a hermeneutic but perhaps a rhetoric. If you put my separate observations about George's two questions together, what I'm concluding is that our current hope of queering hermeneutics lies in its potential. To assess where hermeneutics is right now, this question I'd have to answer, we have a lot of work to do. Thank you.

Molly Mann: Thank you, John. I see some questions popping in. Given the time, we have a little over half an hour left, I think what we might do is open up the floor for conversation among all of us. I think we have some questions in the chat. But if I'm reading your comment, Donald, you're only here for a few minutes, so I may just call on you.

Donald Hall: Yes, thank you. Yes, I actually do have to leave in about five minutes. It's great to meet everyone. John, thank you for having me stop by for a few minutes, and thank you for that presentation. I think you've hit many of the points that I think are most relevant today, and even thinking back to when I wrote the Reading Sexualities book back now almost 15 years ago, you know, part of why I found Gadamer in particular so useful is because I found him as a corrective to a lot of the more, I would say, explosive implications of early queer theory. Because Gadamer really is about incrementalism and the incremental change that comes from the, as we always say, either the clash or the meeting of horizons. And a lot of 1990s queer theory really posited, or at least implied, forms of radical rupture that would lead to major destabilizations and radical change and that I found rather overoptimistic and not particularly politically useful. What I found through Gadamer was that the emphasis on slow processes of change necessarily always founded in the prejudices that one brings with one.

That is at the heart of not only political mind, because like Scott I lived in West Virginia for many years. I was the department chair in the English department at WVU for many years, and was lobbying in the State capital in Charleston. What I found is that rather than come in with a rather radical and explosive agenda, you actually meet the other person where the other was in terms of his or her or their presuppositions. That I found particularly useful in the reason, Gadamer, I found not only useful for thinking about queer theory, but in a book that I wrote a few years earlier than that called The Academic Community about what happens in the classroom, and what happens through the education process, as we also encounter our students' presupposition. So I'll leave it at that. But thank you for it. It was enjoyable just listening to all of it.

Molly Mann: Thanks so much, Donald. Just to carry this thread, I wondered if we wanted to go to Michael King's comment [in the chat box.] His comment is a paradox that he's never been able to resolve: "It seems that Gadamer fits more comfortably with those already who are open to openness, but less comfortably with those closed to be open. Any thoughts on this?" I wonder if there are thoughts, John, that you want to share, and if others on the panel also want to weigh in on this one.

John Arthos (he/him): Yes, thank you for that, Michael. The way I'm thinking about that is this distinction that I made about the way he places the emphasis on the shock of being rudely interrupted, which could be taken as a way to address truth to power. The way he understands that is something that has to take place in our education. So, for instance, when I teach public speaking, I use a Gadamerian and a feminist approach to public speaking in cultivating that willingness to be open to the possibility that you are actually wrong rather than teaching students how to persuade each other. But the problem with that is, and maybe this is similar to what you're saying, is that that may not be accomplished in education. There are students we will not reach. There are students who will go on being secure in the in the righteousness of their positions. What happens when those students end up being in government, end up being in charge of the establishment, which is, very much the case? That requires a different type of interruption that Gadamer is, as you say, less comfortable with. So I just agree with you about that. I actually think we need both. We need to try both.

Molly Mann: Thanks, John. Anyone else want to weigh in on this? I wonder if Michael wanted to speak to his question to Lorenzo and Andreea.

Michael Johnson: Thanks first to all the panelists, incredibly thought-provoking presentations, and the resonances across them that are giving rise to thought in that kind of Ricoeurian way. My question is, I was thinking about it in reaction to Andreea's and Lorenzo's presentation, but others could comment on it as well. So Andreea shifts from the language of assimilation, because of the violent force translation, to recognition, which emphasizes a gift of the relation between the speaking subjects. She's conceiving that as a non-ostensive kind of reference, or maybe not even a reference. I'm interested in hearing about the possible intersection of Andreea's conceptualization with Lorenzo's critical hermeneutics around the constraints of narrative representability, which he describes as needing to break open enabling conditions

which limit clear and open paths of real possibility for marginalized horizons. The question is, when I was hearing and thinking about the intersection of these two presentations, I was thinking that they could be complementary, but maybe they're not. I'd be interested in hearing the reactions of each of the presenters, both in terms of how they would think about their own way of thinking about this, but also about the others. And then, if we had time to even talk about, is this pushing in the direction beyond Ricoeur, as Scott was talking about? I will listen to the responses here. Thank you.

Lorenzo Simpson: Yes, if I can jump in. I think that Andreea and I are basically in agreement, as I understand it. What we perhaps disagree about is the interpretation of the expression fusion of horizons. I agree with her about what she calls the violence of denomination and stereotyping. Where I think I would differ is that Gadamer's understanding of the fusion of horizons is not a matter of one horizon colonizing and usurping another. It's rather the matter of there being a reciprocal challenge, a reciprocal questioning, a reciprocal estrangement in a way whereby both of them are in a sense being risked, and both of them can end up being changed and enlarged. So ultimately my view of the future of horizons is not that far from where she expresses her notion of reciprocity. So it is a reciprocal challenge, it is a reciprocal questioning of how things are being framed, and that's how I understand fusion of horizons. That's where I see the difference. But basically I agree with what she said.

Andreea Ritivoi: Yes. And for me, your paper, Lorenzo, and your position is very important insofar as it emphasizes the power differential. And I loved your metaphor of the different maps. We think we inhabit the same world, but we actually move in this world according to very different maps. One map might show very smooth roads, and another map shows all the obstacles. That's also important for me, because it shows that ultimately the relation is not equal. So we emphasize relationality; we emphasize reciprocity. But what I find frustratingly missing from hermeneutics is oftentimes this recognition of who's actually in control. There was a comment about emplotment being based on arrangement. But these plots actually are not necessarily equally available to everyone. I mean there are master narratives about what it means to be an immigrant in a country like the United States, the great nation of immigrants. What's expected of an immigrant, what an immigrant is supposed to be able to achieve once they're here. Those are all pre-existing plots. That's very much the level of mimesis. The three levels of mimesis that Ricoeur talks about would apply quite well here. For me that's an essential point. For the fusion of horizons, it's really interesting, I completely agree that when you go to the theory, when you go to Gadamer and you read the definitions, they're very encouraging and very reassuring. However, dare I say, is there a certain kind of hypocrisy in hermeneutics? Maybe it's completely unintended; I'm sure it's unintended. But this is a field that has been historically very much replicating itself. And you know there is a probably famous essay by Gadamer which is about translation. And I think translation is essential for how we might want to reimagine the fusion of horizons, because translation doesn't let you forget that you're talking about two different worlds, two different idioms, two different languages. But anyway, many of you probably know this essay. It's a study of the Magic Flute, and in it Gadamer is comparing the libretto to poetry. It's a wonderful essay focused on translation and music and poetry. And not once does Gadamer actually acknowledge what is one of the most racist scenes

in it. Opera has a very problematic canon itself, but it it's striking to read it, and to see how he just does not notice it. In many ways he's so infused himself in his own thinking, with the preconceived ideas and the prejudice of his own time, he's not able to escape it. And to some extent neither is Ricoeur and plenty of other examples. So why didn't they learn themselves, these masters, more from the hermeneutical lingo and canon. That's why I mean by the hypocrisy, and I'm sure I'm being hypocritical myself, because I have more questions than answers. My biggest advantage is that I have to be somewhat honest, and at least acknowledge where I am frustrated because I deal with students who raise those questions. I teach students who do not recognize their own horizons in the cultural references, plentiful Western cultural references, in these texts. And they're asking for other references and for theories that are growing out of other references. For me, where I think what I'm trying to do, where I'm going is to enrich the hermeneutical tradition – and thank you, John, for sharing with us some of your sources – I'm very much looking toward translation theory. I've been very much interested in Barbara Cassin's project in the Dictionary of Untranslatables. I'm interested in the concept of untranslatability. That's why I mentioned Emily Apter. There's a lot of hard work ahead of us, because in many ways the theory needs to start from a different set of practical examples and from a different world, a one that's fundamentally non-Western, and that's going to take a long time, I think.

Lorenzo Simpson: Let me just just quickly add, I think we all have to admit that we all, Gadamer and all, we all start from a position of what I would call a transcendental ethnocentrism. We can't avoid it. But the difference is to understand the ethnocentrism as being defeasible being, as being open to being challenged. But we all start from somewhere.

Molly Mann: I think that Brad has a question here. I think that sort of pushes the conversation that Lorenzo and Andreea and are having, and also links up with some of the points that were raised by Scott and John. I don't know if Brad wants to speak to his question.

Brad De Ford: Well, I'm impressed by this whole conversation, and I'm also impressed by how violent our world, at least here in the United States, is becoming, and how violence becomes a way of communicating in itself. What I posted in the chat had to do with Jeremiah, who said, it's biblical, who questions against people crying peace, peace, where there is no peace. I think that's in part what we're saying about Gadamer and Ricoeur. When we look at Ricoeur, taking The Course of Recognition in the direction of peace, when we look at Gadamer, moving away from the impact of his language to something that's more manageable or just we can talk about it. But when we're teaching about the hermeneutical challenges of confronting stereotypes, ethnocentricities, change, it's especially at the level of society, but even at the level of person, I think we need to take into account whether or not we are comfortable with violence, with not just the violence of language but the social violence, the aggression, and the insistence that comes with shifting not only how we view ourselves but also how we view each other. And I think what we in the United States are facing, since somebody mentioned CRT, is exactly that kind of field of conflict. The conflict of interpretations leads to conflict. And how do we, then, in academia address that, deal with that? That's what I'm thinking.

John Arthos (he/him): Can I try that? Thanks for that question. I mean, I think that that is the question for us. It's the perennial and enduring question about when is it appropriate, to use the word that I've been using, to interrupt? There are these different modalities of political speech, and we need this notion of what is appropriate in the given context, in the given moment. And what is that appropriateness, what guides that sense of appropriateness now? I can say that for the default position, I would always try to teach my students the ideal, which is to cultivate openness to the other, cultivate the willingness to take a risk, cultivate the awareness that you are possibly wrong. That would be sort of the ideal that I would try always to go to first. But there are these times when that doesn't work. So the question is, then, how do you know when it's appropriate to use the kind of language that is not filled with solicitousness and recognition, and the kind of ethos that both Ricoeur and Gadamer want us to encourage to use? When is it appropriate to be confrontational? When? That is really the difficult question.

Brad De Ford: Yes, because that moves us from language and concentrating on how we express ourselves in language to action. How do we so act and be willing to act in ways that will result in conflict, that are intended to incite conflict, because of the conflict of interpretations? I think that we fall back when we go from the naivete with which our students come, to what John you're talking about the time of critique, of accepting the other to arrive at another kind, a second naivete. And yet at some point the second naivete remains impotent if it does not result in actions, powerfully expressed actions. And I think there's a danger here, because for one thing whenever we move to political or social action, then we evoke the problem of evil. How do we maintain a kind of second naivete innocence when it comes to acting in ways that confront power and exert power. That’s just where I'm going today.

Andreea Ritivoi: I think that's an essential question, and I appreciate, Brad, your point about moving beyond language. There's a part of me that feels that Ricoeur, just based on his own life-experience would have been potentially resistant to that and would have tried to keep it very much on peace and language. But we have different experiences, of course, and what I see is the importance of material resources and institutional settings. So just to bring it back to education, there's a big difference between encouraging difference and teaching students to acknowledge the possibility that they might be wrong; that we are wrong, on creating a kind of condition of radical dialogue and honesty. If you can do that in an institution that is not trying to coerce you into teaching a certain type of canon, into forbidding you from teaching certain kinds of concepts, and your job is on the line for that, and therefore your livelihood, your earnings. Whenever you are contextualizing with a kind of radical level of detail and concreteness, I think that's when you understand the stakes a lot better, and it just gets a lot more complicated, and the number of brave souls willing to go to battle diminishes.

Brad De Ford: May I just add one more point? We are here on the anniversary of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King. So the answer may be to how to act with power to power is non-violently. Just a suggestion.

Andreea Ritivoi: But he got assassinated.

Brad De Ford: A lot of us got beat up trying to be nonviolent, and that's part of the conflict of interpretations leading to conflict. Are we willing to put ourselves into situations of conflict, and, in a way, suffer the consequences?

Molly Mann: Thank you, Brad. I think, Dan, you had a question for Scott. I wondered if you wanted to speak to that.

Scott Davidson: I saw that Lorenzo had his hand up.

Molly Mann: Oh, sorry I didn't see that. I apologize, Lorenzo. Please go ahead.

Lorenzo Simpson: What came to my mind in light of Brad's question, it came to my mind at the end of John's presentation when he talked about some of the impediments to interruption, some of which would require more than education, John said, and he mentioned rhetoric. And from the same point of issues, say, of race, and, I suppose, also sexual identity, one of the major impediments to such discussions is a certain kind of identity construction. For example, the identity construction of the white nationalist is an identity construction which, it seems to me, makes it very difficult for such a person to engage in a hermeneutic dialogue. And then the question is, what do you do in in that case? It seems to me that's one of the hard cases. Or identity construction of hetero-normativity talking about sexuality, whatever. That's the issue that seems to be difficult to deal with, with dialogue alone, I suppose, to get back to Brad's question. That to me is a big problem. I want to hear John say more about that. How would rhetoric help us here in the way that Bildung culture education wouldn't.

John Arthos (he/him): I guess I'm thinking of rhetoric more politically in terms of the battle of the contest, the contest. But then this circles back around to what Brad was saying. At what point is that move back into the realm of violence? I don't think there's an easy answer to this question. But what I'm saying is precisely that there isn't an obvious answer to this question. So the kind of interruptions that we're talking about when we're engaged in social movement action is what Brad is talking about, I think, sometimes those are, even when they're nonviolent, sometimes those are like work stoppages. There's a very tricky boundary line between what we think about as violent. I'm not suggesting that I have an answer, but the receptive posture of hermeneutics, we wait for things to happen to us, that's not going to help us. We need to be the person who is doing the interrupting in those specific situations.

Scott Davidson: I'll just add to that. Maybe there's a way of distinguish here and thinking about conflict of interpretations by distinguishing conflict as violence and conflict as resistance. Just as authentic engagement with the text speaks back or against our interpretations, and we can play that role of being a source of resistance to conflicts of interpretations or easy interpretations as they arise in the classroom, and sort of destabilizing people's go-to lanes of how they would interpret some event in history, or some image. If you anticipate where they're likely to land, you can destabilize those landing pads. When they don't have those resting points, that opens up spaces for engagement where you can have actual progress in dialogue or a deeper

interpretation. That's what I try to do, anyway, and framing out, presenting some image, anticipating where the discussion will go, and then trying to build a second level of perplexity. After they settle, opening up a new layer of questions that they might not have anticipated. And that that's forming a resistance, that's challenging settled ideas, and it can be uncomfortable, and it can make you unpopular as an instructor, but I think that's the price you pay for real learning.

Molly Mann: Thanks, Scott. There's a question on structural domination and language. Please go ahead.

Meili Steele: This is for Lorenzo, but it's a general question. I think on this question of race issues there's a division in the public sphere that started, one could say, after the Civil War or right from the beginning, in which the hegemonic public sphere spoke one way, and then Douglass and other people started to speak another way. That kind of structural division has continued to the present. I think that hermeneutics has to get at in some way the layering of this structural domination which is about the languages that have become hegemonic. I mean the narratives of the Civil War, for example, the Lost Cause, Birth of a Nation. It's one of the things that makes the issue of critical race theory difficult to understand, since the hegemonic public sphere sort of exhausts the white mind, there's no place for an alternative language to get in. You could see it in, let's say, Obama's race speech, where these structures are weighing him down, silencing him constantly throughout the whole speech. He's basically following Earl Warren's instructions: don't accuse anybody. Anyway, I just throw that out there, and you know black writers of course thematize this: Ellison, Coates. Coates says police violence is not something that the police do. I'm not interested in reform. The whole country is behind this, because that's the dominant language, and they can't see it.

Lorenzo Simpson: I agree with all that. And one of the things that the black public sphere has been trying to do is to push back against that hegemony. That's when we have understanding the genealogy of these alternative descriptions.

Meili Steele: Does the language of hermeneutics address the question of domination, because it's not really a dialogue. You can see what happens in a dialogue on critical race theory. It immediately shatters. There has to be a thematization of the conflicting languages in order for the dialogue to begin. I take that in a way what Invisible Man does is it looks at the structures of racial conversation in the United States and holds them up to us. What's cool about it begins with the internalization of the hegemonic discourse by a black man, so that he has to escape from exactly what he's asking the audience to escape from.

Lorenzo Simpson: Yes. I guess my view is that hermeneutics represents the ideal of getting beyond that, but it doesn't give us the requisite wherewithal to do it. The point is that what the black public sphere is articulating is a way of focusing the experience of a group of people in such a way that it hasn't been focused before. And if that's what it's doing, then it's meeting one of the hermeneutic desirata depicting the other in a way that the other would recognize, or

that's commensurate with the terms that the other would use for itself. So from that high perspective it's contributing to the hermeneutic project. Yes, that's the way I see it.

Meili Steele: Yes, it just seems that every time that structure is challenged, I mean, look at the response to Reverend Wright. First of all, white people were surprised, like black people have been saying that for a very long time. And then Obama has to sort of back pedal the whole way through it. But why are they surprised? How have they been tuning this out for so many years? That, sort of this fracture in the public discourses just some, it's not that hermeneutics couldn't overcome it, but it's not the quite the same thing as just a conversation.

Scott Davidson: I think that that's what Ricoeur's trying to work through in his discussions of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas. That's his way of processing that conflict and seeing the intersection of hermeneutics and these questions of power and domination.

Meili Steele: But Ricoeur's take doesn't well for me the sort of ideology. I'll back up and say the Habermas solution to domination depends on that sort of universalizing normative strategy, whereas the strategies that someone a writer like Ellison would use is to confront those languages with another normative language which was not universalism. It's the unmasking language of a literary writer, or it could be done by a journalist. It could be done by anybody. To resort to undistorted communication as the corrective to the distorted communication presumes that you can just go there, whereas, in fact, it requires incredible invention to be able to thematize what's going on rather than going to some universalizing norm. The normativity has to come from an alternative language rather than a universal concept. I guess that's where I'm going.

Scott Davidson: Maybe the arc of hermeneutics needs to bend towards justice.

Molly Mann: I think we could go into this conversation for hours into the night. So really good discussion, where we're at time for today's session, and so we do need to bring it to a close. I do want to thank Lorenzo, Andreea, Scott and John, and thank the audience for your active engagement with this important conversation. We will have a transcript and recording of today's conversation in the coming days on our website. As a reminder the next conversation session will be on Saturday, March 18th, at 2 pm Eastern Daylight Time on the future of money. More information is again available on the project website, and registration should now be available. Thanks again, everybody.