

Review symposium of

The Witness as Educator: Reading W. G. Sebald, Aimé Césaire, and Walt Whitman

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*This review symposium pivots around a recent book by David T. Hansen: *The Witness as Educator: Reading W.G. Sebald, Aimé Césaire, and Walt Whitman*. State University of New York Press, 2025. ISBN: 9798855803488. It features (1) a brief overview of the volume by the author, (2) commentaries by Rachel Longa, Darryl M. De Marzio, and Megan J. Lavery, and (3) a response by the author.*

Overview of the Book

This review symposium focuses upon a recent book by David T. Hansen: *The Witness as Educator: Reading W.G. Sebald, Aimé Césaire, and Walt Whitman*. Hansen's fundamental claim in the volume is that bearing witness constitutes an ethical orientation in which a person responds and attests to particular phenomena. The latter may be, on the one hand, experiences of trauma in the form of war, genocide, and forced migration. On the other hand, the experiences may pertain not to violence but to beauty and grace in the world. The witness may be foregrounding the splendor of nature as well as the horror of industrialized environmental destruction. In all such cases, Hansen argues, the witness takes the felt form of a summons, a call, a compulsion, a kind of "I must" attend.

Bearing witness can come in many forms. In the book, Hansen refers to the first order witness who has experienced in-person the event or phenomenon in question. The annals of human history, right into the present moment, are saturated with the testimony of first order witnesses, including from former slaves, soldiers who fought and survived war, persons whose ethnic communities have undergone attack, persons who experienced violent natural events and lived to tell the tale, and much more. However, in the face of what can be called presentist and instrumentalizing tendencies in our era, in which so many

meaningful elements of human life—including the past—are reduced to mere means, these annals and the experiences they contain can become easy to overlook and to forget.

Thus, the author refers also in the book to second-order witnesses, persons who did not experience the event or phenomenon first-hand but who have been moved or, as Hansen suggests, summoned in a moral-emotional sense, to bear witness to those who have had to undergo it. Second-order witnesses seek to express what they have seen and heard in prose, poetry, film, painting, or other forms. They aspire to share their witness with those who may not have seen the event or phenomenon, or who may know nothing about it. In brief, the witness attests to particular experiences so that they are not lost from the human scene but rather can inform it, morally speaking, and in the book the author argues that this feature points to the educational potential in studying the work of witnesses. In his concluding chapter, Hansen contends that engaging these works can expand people's moral horizons and deepen their sense of historical consciousness and moral remembrance. This engagement can also propel persons to bear witness themselves to things that matter.

The book centers around the work of what the author argues are three exemplary witnesses: W. G. Sebald (1944–2001), Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), and Walt Whitman (1819–1892). W. G. Sebald, who was German-born and a professor of German literature at the University of East Anglia in Britain in his career, stunned the reading world some years ago with a series of unclassifiable texts that powerfully bear witness to the human costs of the violence of the 19th and 20th centuries. Aimé Césaire, a poet, teacher, and eventual politician in his native Caribbean island of Martinique, evokes a creative black consciousness, which he names *negritude*, in the face of European colonialism and bears witness to this outlook's joyous and painful development in his extraordinary prose poem, *Cabier d'un retour au pays natal* (Journal of a Homecoming). Finally, the 19th century American poet Walt Whitman's witness to American life in his epic poem, *Song of Myself*, alongside his extended testimony about caring for wounded Union soldiers during the American Civil War as recorded in his *Memoranda from the War*, bears witness to a hope deeper than hope for the prospects of democracy.

Hansen has composed the book such that readers do not have to read, in advance, the particular works by the figures that he explores. He provides extended readings of their oeuvre, supplemented with analysis by other scholars, in order to render as plain as possible the substance of their witness. The author underscores the sense in which readers of their work, if they genuinely open themselves to it, become what we might call third-order witnesses—the witness of a witness. As the book unfolds, Hansen touches in passing on other witnesses including the writer and novelist James Baldwin (a self-professed witness to, among other events, the American civil rights movement), the Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich (especially her witness to children's experience of war, and Russian women soldiers' experience in World War II), the art critic and essayist John Berger (his year-long witness of a country doctor in rural England going about his everyday work), Etty Hillesum (a young Dutch woman whose diary written during World War II constitutes a witness to her difficult times), and others.

Commentaries

"The Work of the Witness," by Rachel Longa, Yale University

In *The Witness as Educator*, Hansen reads the work and the lives of Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman with the same love, care, patience, attentiveness, and grace that he attributes to the figures themselves. Indeed, these are some of the central motifs woven throughout the text that bind these three figures to their respective subjects, to each other, and to the myriad spiritual and philosophical traditions through which Hansen reads them.

In what follows I hope to evoke a few more of those traditions and to think about how they might contribute to the already robust and expansive concept of witnessing Hansen has developed. To that end,

I will figure my response in the form of a question, namely: *what kind of work constitutes the preparation, enactment, and sustained practice of bearing witness?*

I see in each of this text's three central chapters a slightly different refraction of response: in the chapter on Sebald, the work of witness emerges as something like the attentive discipline constitutive of rightful trespass; in the chapter on Césaire, it appears more apophatic: the diffusion of the ego and the deconstruction of the will to power; and finally, in Whitman, it is the sustained practice of holding oneself open to house the suffering of others.

Through my focus on the *work* of witnessing, I hope to draw out a few of the concept's implications for *pedagogical* practice—the particular efforts through which we learn and grow—and *domestic* practice—the manifold labours that daily reproduce our very forms of life. Ultimately, I hope my question might serve as an encouragement to think the concept of witnessing into the subtlest motions of human growth, and the smallest corners of human experience.

For Sebald, the response to my question comes in the pursuit of rightful trespass—an endeavour to authentically encounter the experience of others. Hansen describes this endeavour as the precarious navigation of a narrow and uncertain path between two epistemic, and ultimately moral, wrongs.

On the one side lurks “sentimentality, self-consolation, and the sheer power of the ego to slant reality to its own bent” (Hansen, 2025, p. 68). This prospect is the error of subsumption: the “emotional assimilation” of another's experience (p. 68). On the other side, the path of rightful trespass is abutted by “an unself-conscious, rationalistic method of classifying, categorizing, labeling, organizing, sorting, and summing up whose a priori logic provides the inquirer safety from the travails of self-examination” (p. 69). This move is the error of mere enumeration and rationalistic explanation, fueled by an unwillingness to abandon the epistemic security of one's own “schematic framework” (p. 69).

We might read the pursuit of rightful trespass, then, as a kind of navigational work that entails training one's gaze on that which will facilitate the simultaneity of presence and distance: a seeing without grasping.

In the tension between these two dispositions toward the experience of others, I hear echoes of what Sara Ruddick, in her 1980 essay “Maternal Thinking,” refers to as the metaphysical attitude of “holding” (p. 350). In the context of maternal practice, this attitude denotes a purposeful disposition toward the impossible and nonetheless requisite task of preservation in the face of a world over which one has little or no control.

Holding is itself a form of navigation: between woebegone “melancholy” on the one hand and “cheery denial” on the other. Rather than crumbling in the face of powerlessness, maternal practice requires resilient humility; rather than insouciantly denying powerlessness, maternal practice requires cheerful good humour: a “matter-of-fact willingness to continue” nonetheless (Ruddick, 1980, p. 351).

Here we might read Hansen's insights into the realm of the domestic: it seems to me as though the navigational task constitutive of maternal “holding” might require a similar kind of work to that required by the navigational task constitutive of rightful trespass.

Hansen observes that Sebald seeks “‘rightful trespass,’ by attending to the precise details of people's experience and what they say about it” (2025, p. 40). The precision, the attention to detail, is itself a safeguard against both the danger of grasping—of morphing the other's experience into the form of one's own—and the danger of evasion—of failing to really encounter the other's experience at all.

This attentiveness is illustrated for Hansen by “a photograph in *The Emigrants* (p. 171) of a schoolboy bent over his prose, his face so close to the words that they almost touch” (Hansen, 2025, p. 69). This image provides a glimpse of the disciplined practice that constitutes preparation to get underway on the path of rightful trespass. It conjured for me Simone Weil's contention that “as paradoxical as it might seem, a Latin prose or a geometry problem, even though they are done wrong, may be of great service one day, provided we devote the right kind of effort to them” (Weil, 2001, p. 65). Perhaps the effort of Sebald's schoolboy is of precisely the right kind.

Here Hansen's insights spark a set of pedagogical questions: what tools might we use to train ourselves to practice this right kind of effort? Hansen argues that accounts of witness might buttress

otherwise clinical or austere accounts of the kinds of historical events to which Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman bore witness. But I wonder whether the work of rightful trespass is work we ought to pursue in even the most mundane and quotidian contexts?

I'll come back to this, and to Weil, in a moment, but I want to turn now to Aimé Césaire and a slightly different dimension, or at least a different configuration, of the work of witness.

If in Sebald's schoolboy we see the *preparations* to bear witness, Hansen's reading of Césaire might be understood as a depiction of its *enactment* through the "ethical labor of self-criticism" (Hansen, 2025, p. 110). The discipline of attention opens onto the deliberate, apophatic project of stripping away the contents of the ego—of "setting aside [one's] will [to take] on, instead, a posture of receptivity" (p. 95).

In this aspect of the work of witness the gaze, trained outward in the practice of attention, serves as an anchor: a point of stability that facilitates the radical unmooring of the self from within.

In reading Césaire's poem, Hansen traces the motions through which the poet comes to inhabit his role as witness, the crux of which he describes as a "turn of the soul" through which "the poet's 'authentic self-deceptions' give way to an authentic setting aside of his will" (p. 95). This soul turn is mirrored by the image of postural movement: from the crossing of the arms in the "sterile pose of a spectator," to a state of prostration, suffused with alienation and resistance, then finally the upright stance with which it concludes, the poet "finding his feet back on the ground of his island" (p. 104).

In Hansen's emphasis on Césaire's deconstruction of his own will to power—and its embodiment in the corporeal struggle to find his footing—I hear, once again, echoes of Weil. "Our thought," she writes, "should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains" (Weil, 2001, p. 62).

Perhaps this man on the mountain has undertaken the same kind of work as Césaire—the transformative work that ultimately allows his thought to "be empty, waiting, not seeking anything," as Weil puts it, "but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it" (p. 62).

For both Césaire and Weil, the posture of receptivity is inhabited by leaving the will behind. This negation of the will is equally significant in Ruddick's account of maternal practice. She uses the term *fantasy*, which she adopts from Weil and Iris Murdoch, to denote the "enemy of attention": a "self-induced blindness designed to protect the psyche from insight" in which one clings to the self in the spirit of "consolation, domination, anxiety, and aggrandizement" (Ruddick, 1980, p. 358). Fantasy's opposite, and corrective, is the virtue of "attentive love." "Love," Ruddick writes, "the love of children, at any rate, is not only the most intense of attachments; it is also a detachment, a giving up, a letting grow" (p. 358). In maternal practice, as in the work of witness, to inhabit the posture of attentive love is to set aside the will.

Thus, to bring my question back to the domestic: is the ethical labour of self-criticism—the work that allows one to inhabit the role of witness—required in even the most commonplace acts of maternal love? Of love in *all* its myriad forms, great and small?

Is the space left behind in the deconstruction of the will precisely what allows the witness, the mother, the teacher, the human, to become what Hansen describes as a "vehicle for insight and truth" (Hansen, 2025, p. 98)? To become a conduit for love?

If the pursuit of rightful trespass constitutes the path toward the role of witness, and the deconstruction of the will to power enables its realization, then Hansen's reading of Whitman portrays the care of the self as the work that sustains it.

Hansen (2025) quotes the poet:

Agonies are one of my changes of garments;
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels. . . I myself
become the wounded person,
My hurt turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe. (p. 130)

Given the insufficiency of language to convey the whole of human suffering—a theme Hansen deftly carries through this text—Whitman invites the whole of suffering into himself. Here I cannot help but turn once more to Weil, for whom the efforts of Sebald’s schoolboy bent over his prose may “one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need” (Weil, 2001, p. 62).

I wonder whether Whitman’s time in the civil war hospitals might represent the apotheosis of the work of witness. Hansen (2025) writes:

When entering a ward for the first time, Whitman would wander slowly through, taking in each man on a cot on both sides of the aisle. He would heed his intuitions and his precognitive emotional and aesthetic stirrings, evidently always operating full bore, and he would find himself approaching a man to ask him how he was faring and if there was anything he might do for him. (p. 136)

To empty oneself out, to conduct such love and to hold such suffering, must require a shoring up. “To sustain himself in his fraught witness,” Hansen writes, “Whitman practiced, if not in so many words, what philosophers have called exercises of the self” (p. 135). Whitman’s habit, Hansen quotes: “when practicable, was to prepare for starting out on one of those daily or nightly tours...by fortifying [himself] with previous rest, the bath, clean clothes, a good meal, and as cheerful an appearance as possible;” to “restore himself” after each tour, Whitman “took walks that lasted hours” (p. 135).

This effort too, then, is the work of witness: to move through the disciplined exercises of fortification that can hold open the space in which to house the suffering of others, even if only for a few hours. I will simply open, here, the question of how to think this work into the pedagogical and domestic: how to think the kinds of quotidian exercises that might sustain the capacity to see and to hold.

Toward the beginning of his chapter on Sebald, Hansen (2025) observes that “...no individual person, or generation, can sustain moral grace in human affairs. It is a perpetual undertaking” (p. 46). As I hope I have demonstrated, or at least intimated, through my questions: Hansen’s development of the concept of witnessing opens onto and resonates within a world of theoretical possibility for thinking this perpetual undertaking, not only in the face of historical tragedy, but in all its myriad dimensions: in mothering and in mysticism, in poetry and pedagogy. Ultimately, *The Witness as Educator* serves as a crucial reminder that we are all called to this very undertaking, and that moral grace itself will only persist if we take it up with patience, attentiveness, love, and care.

“The Affirmation of the World: Hansen and Pieper on Bearing Witness,” by Darryl M. De Marzio, Portsmouth Institute for Faith and Culture

Contemporary man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, or if he listens to teachers, he does so because they are witnesses. (Paul VI, 1975)

In the introduction to the volume of essays I edited (De Marzio, 2021) to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of David Hansen’s now classic text, *The Call to Teach*, I sought to focus on the significance of Hansen’s bringing the language of vocation to bear on the practice of teaching. Starting from the premise that the language we use to describe teaching, whether as researchers, policymakers, students, parents, administrators, or teachers themselves, will ultimately inform and shape our understanding and expectations of teaching (consider the differences of perspective when such varied terms as “job,” “profession,” “art,” “event,” “subversive activity,” or “duty,” are employed to capture the character and nature of teaching), then bringing the language of vocation to bear on teaching allows for certain dynamics to emerge that might otherwise remain unheard within the discourses and debates concerning education more generally and teaching specifically. And, as Hansen convincingly shows with regard to the language of vocation, what is allowed to emerge when we consider the vocational dimension

is the centrality of the person in the role of the teacher—the idea that it is the person inhabiting the role who teaches, and that teachers thrive by understanding who they are and what they esteem, and by cultivating habits of continuous self-reflection and learning.

In bringing the term “vocation” to bear upon teaching, Hansen uses a big and weighty word. My sense, of course, is that in applying the term “witness” to teaching in his most recent book, *The Witness as Educator*, Hansen has accomplished something quite similar (see also Hansen, 2021). What do I mean by a “big and weighty word?” Well, something like a word that is rich and pregnant with meaning, having deep historical and cultural roots, a term that cuts across various and often longstanding domains of human experience. The reason I point out this sense of using a “big and weighty word” is because I am reminded of an argument put forth by another philosopher who had a penchant for reflecting deeply about the relationship between language and human practices, Josef Pieper (1965), who suggests that one of the regrettable features of the modern world is that “we are so allergic to big words” that we are hesitant to speak of them at all (p. 22). Pieper had in mind two big words in particular: “leisure” and “festival,” and maintained that because we understate them, we have lost our capacity to truly be leisurely and festive. Now, of course, by claiming we understate such words is not necessarily the same thing as saying we hesitate to speak the words “leisure” and “festival,” that we are more apt to whisper them under our breath than to say them aloud. Rather, it is to say that when we do use such words, we use them as if they were somehow smaller and less important than they actually are.

In reading Pieper—and here I am thinking of two of his works in particular: *Leisure, The Basis of Culture* and *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*—one cannot come away without feeling the weight of the words “leisure” and “festival” respectively. Furthermore, one cannot help feeling the pangs of embarrassment for having seemingly spent a lifetime understating these words so flippantly. It is as if Pieper’s aims as a thinker and writer is to help others see more clearly, and to feel more intensely, the bigness of words. I believe that *The Witness as Educator* will inevitably have a similar effect upon readers, and for my part, I cannot help but feel the weight of the word “witness,” even in perhaps what would otherwise be mundane contexts. Lately, I seem to be witnessing witness everywhere.

Here is an example. On a recent long car ride, I happened to be listening to a performance by the jazz musician and Hammond B-3 organ virtuoso, Jimmy Smith, from his album, *Root Down*—a live recording of a 1972 concert in Los Angeles. The fifth track on the album is an instrumental rendition of Al Green’s famous song, “Let’s Stay Together,” which was released just a couple of months earlier in late 1971. As Jimmy Smith’s organ sings the first few notes of the melody, there is barely a hint of recognition from the audience until, from some deep corner of the concert venue, a female voice, barely audible at first, rises over the crowd with an exuberant “Yes!!!” I have listened to this album, and the cover of Al Green’s classic song, on countless occasions, but I had never before truly witnessed the witness, nor felt the weight, revealed by that unmistakable affirmation: “Yes!!!”

I believe that what I witnessed on that recording was the *joy* of the witness, but what was the witness witnessing in that Los Angeles concert room in 1972? We certainly must be careful to not equate the joyful response and recognition of a song in a moment’s instance with the rich and complex contours of bearing witness that Hansen explores in the writings of Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman. And yet, one cannot help but think there is something essential about bearing witness that comes through in such an instance of rejoice. What one hears in that “Yes!!!” is more than the simple recognition of a particular song, and it is even more than a declaration of approval at the song being played at a particular place and time. In it, one hears the affirmation of the goodness, not merely of the song, or the musician, but of one’s being in the world in that moment. In rejoicing one affirms the goodness of their existence and the existence of the world.

It is at this point that we might be able to bring together Pieper’s sense of the bigness of the word “festival” with what I take to be Hansen’s sense of the bigness of the word “witness.” Pieper (1965) says that “a festival becomes true festivity only when man affirms the goodness of his existence by offering the response of joy” (p. 29). But to be sure, all affirmations of the goodness of one’s existence and that of the world, all of our “Yesses!!!”, all of our experiences of joy, need not be raucous or cheerful, nor, as

Pieper says, “shallowly optimistic” (p. 27). Joyful can be the solemn funeral, and the consolation offered to a grieving mother, precisely because “grief, sorrow, death, are accepted, and therefore affirmed, as meaningful in spite of everything” (p. 28). It is this capacity for joy in spite of everything, says Pieper, that truly distinguishes the religious “martyr”—that word being derived from the Greek *martis*, which means “to witness”—because at the very moment of his brutal death, the martyr “never utters a word against God’s creation” (p. 27). In other words, the crowning achievement of the martyr is not the price he pays for his beliefs, but it is the radicalness of his assent, not to death, but to the goodness of his existence and the existence of the world.

Hansen (2025) says that the three witnesses he describes in his book do not choose to become witnesses; they instead were summoned, called to bear witness by “the world itself” (p. 8)—and in particular by the often unjust and immoral realities of the world they found themselves in: the crimes of the Nazi party; the crushing realities of colonialism; democracy on the brink of extinction. But as Hansen allows us to see, what motivates these three great writers to bear witness to the world is not an argument—the world need not offer us good reasons to affirm its existence. Bearing witness to the world, it seems to me, is not approval of the world, but affirmation of it. Nor are these writers motivated by a demonstrable need or lack that the world has that compels them to bear witness to it—in this way, bearing witness, again it seems to me, is not a utilitarianism or a pragmatism. Nor is it teleological in the narrow sense of an activity guided tyrannically by ends.

They were motivated to heed this call, Hansen (2025) tells us, “by distinctive, dynamic fusions of wonder and concern” for the world (p. 6). Might we then again, following Pieper (1965), dare to use another big word to describe the root of this wonder and concern, in spite of the “thickets of banality, sentimentality, and unrealistic spiritualization that threaten to smother” (p. 21) its true meaning, which is to say that what is indispensable to bearing witness to the world is *love* for the world? So, in conclusion, and to employ Pieper once again to help frame a question for Hansen, is it true to say that “only the lover bears witness?” (cf. Pieper, 1990).

“Existential Strolling and Accidental Witness,” by Megan J. Lavery, Teachers College, Columbia University

Let me begin by warmly congratulating David T. Hansen on this mature and impressive work of scholarship. *The Witness as Educator: Reading W.G. Sebald, Aimé Césaire, and Walt Whitman* (2025) is at once remarkable and profoundly personal—a book as intellectually rigorous as it is moving. It provides a compelling model of how to fuse the philosophical with the poetical (Hansen, 2025, p. xiv), showing how luminous thought and inspired eloquence can inhabit the same sentence, without either diminishing the other.

Throughout *The Witness as Educator*, Hansen writes with a lucid and quiet authority born of sustained reflection. Though not his final work, it possesses a consummatory quality, bringing to fullness questions that have animated his scholarship and teaching for decades—something he himself acknowledges in the preface. The book stands as the culmination of a long effort to find fitting ways to study teaching and teachers, alongside a sustained engagement with renowned humanists such as Michel de Montaigne and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. At the same time, in his graduate teaching, Hansen has repeatedly returned to writers such as W.G. Sebald, Aimé Césaire, and Walt Whitman. Across both his research and teaching, Hansen has sought to heed what has summoned him. Above all, he has tried to bear witness to what our cultural inheritance reveals about being human, allowing that very attentiveness to shape his understanding of education.

In the final chapter of *Witness as Educator*, Hansen argues for including the testimonies of W.G. Sebald, Aimé Césaire, and Walt Whitman in university and school curricula and for integrating witnessing more broadly into educational practice. Earlier, he introduces “bearing witness” as a term of art (Chapter One) before turning to sustained readings of testimonies by Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman (Chapters Two, Three, and Four)—readings that, for me, are among the most powerful sections of the book. Taken

together, these chapters accomplish two crucial tasks: first, they introduce and reinforce the distinction between first-, second-, and third-order witnessing; second, they establish an exacting standard for what witnessing entails. In doing so, they clarify the educational purpose, pedagogy, and curricular stakes of taking witness seriously. At the same time, these two accomplishments give rise to four questions, which I outline below. Before turning to the questions, however, I first introduce the distinction and the standard.

Hansen distinguishes between first-, second-, and third-order witnesses. A first-order witness is an individual attesting directly to personal experience. A second-order witness lacks the direct experience of the people to whom they are bearing witness, but their distance—combined with some form of proximity—affords them invaluable insights. Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman move in and out of first- and second-order positions. Sebald, a non-Jewish German émigré in Britain, seeks to bear witness to the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust. Césaire, French-educated and returning to Martinique, bears witness to the devastation wrought by colonialism alongside Caribbean renewal. Whitman, for his part, ministers to wounded soldiers amid a violent Civil War that threatens the United States' democratic experiment. The third-order witness is the reader—like ourselves—who receives such testimony as a personal address. Crucially, there can be no third-order witness without the testimonies of first- and second-order witnesses, just as there can be no second-order witness without the testimony of a first-order witness. Each, in turn, bears witness to their own transformation through engagement with the testimony of others or with personal experience.

This distinction between first-, second-, and third-order witnesses is central to elucidating the distinctive scope and methodological approach of Hansen's scholarly project. Substantively, he frames the book as a study of Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman *as witnesses*. Methodologically, he reads their testimonies as a third-order witness. In this way, the distinction highlights the educative potential of first- and second-order testimony: it can transform readers into third-order witnesses, shaping their vision by immersing them in the orientation of the witness. Exposure to such testimony—creation of us as third-order witnesses—in turn, can enhance our capacity for first- and second-order witnessing.

Hansen also employs this distinction to advance a developmental claim, which I revisit toward the end of this review. While children make potent first-order witnesses—capable of being deeply marked by what they see and hear—they lack the maturity and life experience required for second and third-order witnessing (Hansen, 2025, Footnote 6, pp. 202–203). He includes his own childhood self in this reflection, recalling that although he was “highly absorbed” when listening to his father and his friends recount their wartime experiences, he was not yet equipped to grasp their full meaning or potential long-term effect on his consciousness (p. 203).

The second major accomplishment is Hansen's exacting standard for what qualifies as bearing witness. Witnessing is not a dispassionately intellectual exercise; it does not primarily operate through argument. Rather, it engages the whole “feeling” self, dispelling the illusions of a purely rationalist approach to life (Hansen, 2025, p. 10). A witness heeds—and is accountable to—a summons that demands personal reckoning. As such, the witness seeks a moral truth that can only be discerned through ethical self-cultivation, involving a deepening attentiveness to others and to the world (Hansen, 2025, pp. 5–6). Hansen describes the witness's development as *kairotic* rather than merely chronological: testimony, he writes, emerges “from a standpoint of transition rather than of a fixed identity” (Hansen, 2025, p. 24). Motivated by wonder *and* concern, witnesses confront—often painfully—the limits of language in seeking to express the humanity and suffering they have encountered. We get a vivid sense of just how exacting the standard is in the metaphors that Hansen employs to describe his three travelers:

Sebald's narrator bears the marks of a moral pilgrim searching for a resolution in what he sees as a blighted world. Césaire's narrator embarks on an inner and outer moral odyssey as he works his way, as witness, “back home” to his community and to the self he most longs to be. Whitman's narrator-witness is a wanderer, a nomad, yet wherever he goes—both literally and

metaphorically—he remains deeply rooted in his love and hope for democracy. (Hansen, 2025, p. 16)

Anticipating the remoteness of these examples, Hansen asks, “Do Second-Order Witnesses Constitute an Elite?” (p. 169) and answers by calling them, in Benjamin Babrer’s words, “an aristocracy of everyone”—figures who elevate our moral vision and inspire us to cultivate ourselves in response (p. 170). Hansen illustrates how their testimonies enable us, as third-order witnesses, to survey and reflect upon the most appalling acts of human violence, disarming our baser selves in the process.

I wonder, though: who are these extraordinary “journeymen”? Must the standard for bearing witness be so exacting that we are left to admire these second-order witnesses while feeling a vast distance between them and ourselves? How, moreover, do we distinguish between aesthetic and moral standards when they are so seamlessly intertwined in Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman? How might Hansen trace a continuity between the forms of witnessing enacted by these exemplary travelers and the witnessing practiced within philosophy or embedded in everyday life? In what follows, I address each of these questions in turn, beginning with the possibility of philosophical witness.

Hansen emphasizes that witnesses do not offer arguments or theories (Hansen, 2025, p. xiv), which raises a question about the possibility of philosophical witness. He characterizes his own approach as “a fusion of the philosophical and poetical,” signaling that, while it remains “argumentatively grounded,” it also seeks to acknowledge the “truths of human experience that cannot be rendered in argumentative or propositional form” (Hansen, 2025, p. xiv). Such a stance might be read as leaving little room for the exercise of philosophical witness. Yet, Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope: Ethics in a Time of Cultural Devastation* (2006) could be construed as the testimony of a second- and third-order witness who is philosophically attuned to the conceptual dimensions of experience. I would also highlight Annette Baier, particularly her final publication, *Reflections on How We Live* (2010), which contains several confessional essays on embodiment, aging, and friendship. While some reviewers, including John Kekes (2011) and Michael Slote (2011), have expressed puzzlement over these autobiographical essays, Hansen’s account allows us to interpret them as a philosopher’s attempt to make sense of how the final stage of life shapes and conceptually inflects experience.¹ Even if Hansen might resist the notion of a philosophical witness, it seems plausible that he would agree that his new book opens the door to alternative forms of philosophical engagement.

Whether Baier’s mature reflections on embodiment, aging, and friendship constitute a form of philosophical witness brings us back to the broader question of witnessing embedded in everyday life. Might first-order witnessing be naturally embedded in the ways we picture ourselves and others and in the stories we tell? Can we be called to heed the most “concrete” of everyday preoccupations and acts—tending a garden, feeding a child, or sitting with an elderly parent? Can a summons arise from the accidents, contingency, and sheer muddle of ordinary life? Might innumerable acts of witness shape even our simplest decisions? If bearing witness enabled W. G. Sebald, Aimé Césaire, and Walt Whitman to act appropriately in impossible circumstances, what might comparable acts of goodness look like in everyday life? Could it be as simple as offering a well-chosen compliment, knowing when to remain silent, or letting a loved one go with grace? In short, what place is there in Hansen’s vision for “garden variety” witnessing? Might we be summoned by experiences that lack such historical weight—through friendship, love, and

¹ Sophie Grace Chappell stands out as something of an exception. In her review, she draws attention to the confessional essays, emphasizing their personal and phenomenological character. While she appreciates Baier’s anti-theoretical style, Chappell points out some risks, noting “the risk of falling into shapeless, self-indulgent, stream-of-consciousness opinionating, unanchored by the discipline of, for example, a philosophical system” (Chappell, 2012, p. 503). Acknowledging that Baier does not avoid such dangers, Chappell concludes with a cautionary reminder: “if you are going to do moral phenomenology, remember to keep it complicated” (Chappell, 2012, p. 506). In a similar vein, Hansen might accept the possibility of a philosophical witness, but nonetheless judge Baier to fall short of its demands.

loss? If Rachel Wahl is right, as she remarks in her Foreword to the book (2025), that Hansen centers the call to attend to our lives—“to the texture of the moments that do not announce their grandeur but arrive and pass away in seeming banality”—what does witnessing look like when grave injustices are not the concern?

Francis Kilvert's Diary offers one such example. Robert Francis Kilvert (1840–1879), a parson on the Welsh border, kept a diary from 1865 until his death; of twenty-two notebooks, only three survive. He “spent his days walking all over his territory, [sometimes 20 miles a day] visiting everyone, noticing everything (people, animals, birds, flowers) and describing it all in simple humble extremely readable detail” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 485). Kilvert's diary attests to life's goodness and beauty, exemplifies an attentive love of people and nature, and appears to be motivated by wonder and concern—key elements of bearing witness. Yet, it offers little sense of being called to a task or struggling with the limits of language—the other elements of witnessing (Hansen, 2025, p. xiv). Perhaps Kilvert's summons emerged gradually, as he sought to record his impressionistic observations, or perhaps he simply sought to bear witness to his community—its residents, landscape, seasons, and events. If Sebald is a moral pilgrim, Césaire is on a moral odyssey, and Whitman a nomadic wanderer, Kilvert's existential path may be better described as a stroll: local, unhurried, and always returning home. Does such strolling involve a personal reckoning? Perhaps not dramatic struggle, yet it may still count as ethical self-cultivation. In Kilvert's case, it involved living decently—“getting things right” within the social and geographical life of his parish: conducting christenings, weddings, and funerals with genuine interest; listening to stories and jokes; attending dinners and picnic parties; respecting parishioners' privacy while offering blankets, medicine, or food as needed. Here, decency emerges as a form of ethical truth-seeking. It appears diffuse because its values are diffuse, in contrast to the concentrated moral crises presented by war, colonialism, or genocide.²

My third question concerns whether good first-order testimony inherently involves an imagined—or at least an awareness of—second-order witness. The thought is that though we experience people or events directly, we may have to envision or invoke others' second-order testimonies to gain a fuller understanding. In this sense, perhaps no first-order witness is complete without multiple—real and imagined—second-order perspectives. A striking feature of Etty Hillsum's diary is her imaginative invocation of the second-order perspective she cannot herself occupy. If so, then children may lack not only second- and third-order capacities but even first-order witnessing, since they cannot yet invoke the broader view.

This brings me to my fourth and final question, which concerns Hansen's perspective on bearing witness in childhood. Should we distrust children's first-order witnessing because they lack the capacity to be second or third-order witnesses? If so, are adults obliged to bear second-order witness on their behalf? Perhaps, this responsibility is what defines adulthood itself. Is this what Jean-Jacques Rousseau meant when he claimed that “childhood is unknown” (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 33)? If aging qualifies us for second- and third-order witnessing, does maturity carry a duty to bear witness to our own and others' childhoods?³ If so, this obligation is more modest and general than the historical witness borne by Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman. What might second- and third-order witnessing of childhood teach us about ourselves and our own histories?

These four questions are vital because, as Hansen cites Rainer Maria Rilke (Hansen, 2025, p. 153), without speaking and bearing witness, what we might experience—a full life, local neighborhoods, childhood, and the alterity of others—risks vanishing.

² For scholarship on decency as a moral notion, see Mathias Risse (2000) and A. T. Nuyen (2002).

³ Examples include Annie Dillard (1987) and Richard Wollheim (2006).

Response: “Everyday Experience, Love, and the Witness”

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My sincere thanks to Rachel Longa, Darryl M. De Marzio, and Megan J. Lavery for taking the time to read my book with such obvious care and to compose, in an equally careful manner, such thought-provoking commentaries. The occasion that gave rise to this symposium—an author-meets-critics colloquium at Teachers College, Columbia University, held on February 26, 2026—made it possible for me to *hear* their remarks for the first time. The present review symposium provides an opportunity for me to *attend* to their thinking, for which I am most grateful.

Alongside individual gems of insight that I lack the space to address, I discern several lines of questioning and wonder that run across all three commentaries. I will address each in turn: (1) how applicable bearing witness as an ethical and moral undertaking is to everyday life rather than solely to large-scale trauma, and (2) the possible place of love in the act of bearing witness. By “moral,” I denote how persons actually regard and treat others. By “ethical,” I mean how a person endeavours to cultivate themselves to become more morally attuned and responsive to others and the world.

Longa and Lavery spotlight the first theme. Longa wonders how witnessing might shed light on moral and ethical aspects of everyday pedagogical practice and everyday domestic life. Can the concept help us grasp how humans learn in formative ways that emerge from daily modes of engagement? Can the idea illuminate how the otherwise routine and ordinary labours of daily life render human forms of life continuous, rather than having to be rewon wholesale again and again? In sum, Longa asks: Is it possible to connect bearing witness with what she calls “the subtlest motions of human growth” and “the smallest corners of human experience?” I believe the answer is “yes.”

A first point: As numerous poets and philosophers have made plain, there is nothing “ordinary” about the everyday doings of fellow human beings—if, that is, one has eyes to see and ears to listen for meanings that can pulsate through them. The humming of a grandmother hovering over a pie she is preparing, the absorbed face of a young gardener as he prunes his plants for the first time, the veteran cabdriver at the redlight gazing pensively at people making their way along the sidewalk, and so much more—all of this can speak volumes about *what it is to be a human being in the world*. Humans naturally consider “big events” to be “extraordinary,” but that is only because they tend to take everything else for granted. What would the world be like if everyone took nothing for granted? I take this question to press home the issue about the place of bearing witness in everyday as contrasted with traumatic human affairs. I hear Longa asking whether the ethical work of bearing witness resembles the ethical work of not taking life’s passing moments for granted.

Whether to violent events or instances of quiet beauty, bearing witness of any sort, it seems to me, requires a steady, ever-attuned attentiveness to the smallest of details. This form of discipline, which seems to come naturally to some persons young and old, can be seen in the three witnesses I take up on the book: Sebald’s marvellously crafted, pointillist detail in bringing into form his witness to others’ lives; Césaire’s rich, at times voluptuous verbal painting of pastoral scenes and human interactions; and Whitman’s rolling verbal trains of detail about Americans of all stripes and persuasions. Their acute micro-attentiveness does not pave the way to their witness—it *is* their witness. Bearing witness lives in the details.

However, I argue in the book that witnessing encompasses far more than just noting things. It embodies responding to them. To make this case, I deploy the powerful English verb *to heed*. To heed means to respect and to take to heart that which has called out for attention. Heeding opens the way to a deeper involvement with human affairs, concerns, and aspirations. The verb may sound too “heavy” to pertain to teachers, parents, friends, social workers, airline attendants, and nurses in their everyday interaction with others. But at certain moments all these persons, if they care about doing well, will find themselves heeding a child, a client, a friend, in a rich aesthetic and moral sense. Moreover, a person on

a walk through the woods or down city streets, on a swim in a sea or lake, sitting on a bench in a public park, may discover themselves heeding every aspect of the world encompassing them.

Are these persons bearing witness? Or are other concepts more suitable to characterize their admirable doings? In a similar vein to Longa, Lavery addresses this very question, wondering whether first-order witnessing is “naturally embedded” in the stories humans tell to one another, in how humans picture themselves, and in the ongoing ways they attend to others and the world. (She also raises interesting questions about children’s capacity to bear witness which, given space limitations, I will let float in the present consideration of everyday witnessing). I am not sure it is phenomenologically the case that persons feel a *summons* or an “I must”—as did Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman—as they attend to everyday affairs of work, play, and life writ large. I see a difference between the witness *summoned* by suffering and/or by beauty, and the human being *invited* to respond by the world as it appears and discloses itself to them. It is as if the world extends its hand at such moments, saying: ‘Welcome to this astounding cornucopia of gestures, voices, simple and complex doings. They merit your attention. Your attention will render them vivid rather than merely fleeting.’ Darryl De Marzio might add: “Please do accept the invitation. It will lead you to suffering, but also to joy. It is the very source of joy.”

The distinction between a summons and an invitation conjures further differences such as the fact that persons may be best understood, in acting upon the “invitation,” to be responding aesthetically, in a rich, broad sense of that term, rather than responding morally—a point that raises the question whether bearing witness entails a moral component (I believe it does, as I touch on below). However, I appreciate how Lavery and Longa, in their respective ways, put on the table numerous family resemblances between the likes of, say, W. G. Sebald, Robert Francis Kilvert, and the “maternal thinker” Longa portrays who retains “a purposeful disposition” in everyday life despite how puny their efforts may seem in the face of large-scale injustices and traumas. With respect to Sebald and Kilvert, both writers attend closely to whatever comes their way; both try to get things right, echoing here Sebald’s distinction between wrongful and rightful trespass into the lives of others (an issue that accompanies every witness); they also try to do so *decently*, as Lavery avers—with abiding, quiet respect, we might say—when occasions arise to characterize that to which they have attended. These qualities point, in turn, to ongoing ethical self-cultivation, however informal or non-self-conscious such a process might be.

Regardless of whether the conceptual diptych of summons and invitation holds, it is valuable to retain the clear edges around the concept of bearing witness, at least as I’ve come to comprehend it. For one thing, vernacular uses of the term saturate the airwaves: the witness in court, at a wedding, “eyewitness” news, and so forth. For another thing, uses of the term are ubiquitous in which other terms could be substituted without loss of meaning (for example, observing, noticing, perceiving, respecting, caring, esteeming). As I note in the book, the vast majority of uses of the term in scholarship do not come with a conceptualization of it—unlike in the commentaries in this review symposium, in which the authors provide just that. My gesture here is not to police uses of the term, but simply to point out that it can be valuable for many theoretical and practical purposes not to conflate bearing witness with other moral endeavours. We have a splendid array of moral concepts that can often serve much more appropriately than bearing witness in a particular situation or inquiry. At the end of the day, De Marzio hits the mark is suggesting that witnessing can be viewed as a “weighty word” with a long history rooted in the *martyr*, the ancient Greek term for the witness who may suffer in the name of their summons. I note his emphasis on what it means to *feel* this weight. Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman show why this weight is real and how, at particular moments, each found it paralyzing. (Some witness-poets and writers find the sheer beauty they see as paralyzing, too, as they vainly search for a way to express their vision; Longa’s reference to the “apophatic” is timely here).

Alongside the commentators’ valuable questions about everyday witnessing, Lavery wonders about the possibility of what she calls a “philosophical witness” as seen, she suggests, in works by the philosophers Jonathan Lear and Annette Baier. I will need to read Baier’s fascinating-sounding book, but I would strongly agree that Lear’s brilliant *Radical Hope* constitutes an utterly absorbing second-order witness. I have taught this volume in courses on bearing witness. I have been struck since my first reading

of Lear's achievement by a sentence that appears in his Acknowledgements. He refers to a haunting remark he first came upon twenty years ago by Plenty Coups, the remarkable chief of the Crow nation as it transitioned (forcibly) from a nomadic to an agricultural way of life on the 19th Century American plains. Plenty Coups stated: "After this [their removal to a reservation], nothing happened." Lear writes: "It is only with the passage of time that I recognize that those words lodged within me and never left. This book was motivated in significant part as an attempt to figure out why these words have mattered" (p. 180). Lear adds that what I would call his summons, his "I must," embodies gratitude for what the Chief's profound and adroit care for his people has taught him about the moral life when under pressure—and I would insert that, as I read him, Lear *loved* Plenty Coups (more on the topic of love below). Moreover, like Sebald, Césaire, and Whitman, Lear enacts a key criterion of bearing witness as I have come to understand it: a commitment to take all the time necessary—years, in their cases—to come to a reckoning as best they can with their summonses.

In sum, there is a difference between the standard that James Baldwin, Svetlana Alexievich, and Jonathan Lear enact and the everyday careful attending in which so many persons spontaneously as well as devotedly engage. With regards to the former, these writers' witnesses remain incomplete until shared as widely as possible with others. I contend in the book that this commitment to speak publicly constitutes, in their eyes, a moral obligation. As Baldwin puts it, they must "get the word out" (Barron, 1964, 20:35). Meanwhile, everyday experiences of *quiet witnessing*—shall we call it that?—remain valuable even if kept in the heart and mind alone, or even if kept entirely between the teacher and the student, the parent and the child, the forest walker and the forest. As Longa surmises, such activity can have significant educational consequences as humans perceive the glow of meaning everyday doings can harbour if eyes are open to it. I hope my remarks here do not "de-dignify" such everyday, loving attentiveness. It is a case of difference, of matters of degree and to an extent of kind. But it is emphatically not a reflection of a moral hierarchy, for the human world would be a harsh, shriveled landscape without both orientations.

Speaking of love, let me turn now to the second strand of reflection I discern across the three commentaries. De Marzio gets the ball rolling with his resounding question: *Can only the lover bear witness?* His response is clear and provocative. Bearing witness, in a nutshell, is in his view a ringing "yes" to life, an affirmation that is not an approval, *per se*, but a radical acceptance of life's very being despite the suffering and pain it can bring. The three witnesses I feature in the book offer ample testimony in support of De Marzio's perspective. The sheer act of bearing witness, understood as a response to a summons, embodies an urgent yes: *This scene, this event, this happening, this person, is worth knowing about and remembering.* And more: *I shall let my witness, as I tell of it, infuse my most fundamental orientation toward the world, and may it affect others similarly.* A striking moment in Césaire's epic poem of return, *Journal of a Homecoming*, is when he has made the ethical turn from aggrieved spectator to dedicated witness of his people. He writes that he will now accept the challenges in bearing witness. He will accept the humbleness inherent in the role, and accept the incompleteness that may mark the result: "I accept . . . I accept . . . entirely, without reserve . . . I accept. I accept . . . I accept, all that I accept . . ." (Stanzas 133, 149). In De Marzio's terms, Césaire's acceptance, his yes, has all the features of an affirmation.

Is this "yes" a synonym with love? Put differently, is love the pinnacle or supreme concept that issues from the interaction of the other core concepts that characterize bearing witness? The latter include patience, heeding, caring about getting things as right as possible, and wanting to do justice to the summons that has taken one out of oneself. (I suggest in the book that the self-as-witness occupies a transitional space that allows for un-predetermined and spontaneous response to what they are witnessing). Does love form the circumference of all this? Or, is love better located in witnessing's pulsing center? Or, is love in fact a prerequisite for bearing witness?

My sense from the lengthy study of bearing witness I have undertaken thus far is that the witness *arrives* at love or, at any rate, at an experience or form of love that might have family resemblances to other loves in their lives but is not identical. "The love of the witness" is not identical with the love of the parent, the love of the art connoisseur, the love of one's lover, or the love of laughter. But it is *love* all the same—"attentive love," to recall Longa's reference to Ruddick's outlook. Both Whitman and Césaire end

up singing the word, declaiming their love overtly even as they do not romanticize it in light of their acute awareness—and experience—of pain and suffering. In contrast, Sebald rarely so much as mentions the term. And yet, in some respects he could be described as the most loving of all. It is true that in noting his reticence to disclose himself directly, his anguish (and outrage) at contemporary tendencies in society, and his melancholy pilgrimages through past events, a reader can detect what Susan Sontag (2000) called “a writer in mourning.” Having read interviews with Sebald, and having sat enthralled in a hall, on an October evening many years ago, listening to his deep, self-deprecating voice—alongside his low-key and convivial sense of humour—I suspect he would take the question of love seriously but, respectfully, would say little about it. I think here of the epigram Hans-Georg Gadamer (1985) selected for his intellectual autobiography, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*: “*De nobis ipsis silemus*”—about the self it is better to be silent.

However, in Sebald’s chiseled, artful sentences, in his affecting, profoundly sympathetic characterizations of fellow human beings, in his wondrously detailed, scrupulous ways of describing entities in the world as big as a train station and as small as a moth, I detect a form of love that this witness *enacts* but which would slip through his fingers in the instant of trying to name it. Sebald’s love does not seek itself; he does not need to name it. Perhaps it constitutes a quiet love that parallels what Shari Goldberg (2013) calls the “quiet testimony” that everyday gestures and acts issue to those attentive enough to pay heed.

A final remark returns us to bearing witness and education. Many readers of the works I focus upon in the book, including many of the students who have taken my courses, at first find reading them difficult. They are not easy to interpret. They do not offer direct guidance. They offer no clear-cut arguments. Their authors seem preoccupied, attuned not to the reader’s needs but to the summons with which they must come to a reckoning. Some students respond with a mixture of frustration and bewilderment: Why all these details? What is the author getting at? Where are they taking us? Why not *explain* yourself, witness-writer! In these responses, readers may not realize how the frenetic speed of contemporary life is coercing such a response out of them by bracketing, or sundering, their capacity for patient, ungrasping attention. However, if readers of a witness learn to heed—and “to hold,” as Longa interprets Sara Ruddick’s vitalizing trope—what is before them, they may find themselves transforming from spectators to witnesses of the witness and of the events and things in the world to which the witness has attested. According to testimony from readers including students I have taught, there is no going back once they have made this turn. The encounter will stay with them as an ever-present moral and ethical experience.

My response here to Rachel Longa, Darryl M. De Marzio, and Megan J. Laverty is necessarily abbreviated given space limitations. I want to thank them again for their scholarly generosity in taking the time to read and to comment on my book. They have provoked me to venture into new territory concerning the theme of bearing witness, and I look forward to continuing the adventure.

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