

INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Israel/Palestine and Campus-Wide Teaching-Learning Events: The Challenges of Affect, The Role of Intellectual Empathy

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Abstract

Drawing on their experience in organizing a panel on the Israel-Hamas conflict in February of 2024 for a campus-wide teaching-learning event, the authors analyze that event as an artifact for understanding the tensions between neutral-aspiring and affect-laden language. They then consider the challenges of affect for discursive forums and the role that a mindful form of affect, intellectual empathy, can play in addressing it. They conclude with observations about the effects of different types of venues on the efficacy of that role and with a renewed commitment to campus-wide teaching-learning events that address Israel/Palestine and similarly difficult topics at their university so that students can incorporate and understand how affect is part of the different approaches they will need to interpret, internalize, and struggle to understand political tragedies as they unfold.

Keywords

Israel/Palestine, Israel-Hamas conflict, campus-wide events, teaching-learning, affect, *The Netanyahu*, intellectual empathy

In considering how to achieve the most effective types of discourse and dialogue about the recent events in Israel and Palestine, the learning context that surrounds campus discussions matters a great deal. More specifically, campus-wide events designed to facilitate conversations within the larger community are more politically charged and create different types of obstacles than classroom discussions. The attempts to adopt neutral language or to provide wider context around the conflict, which may generate opposition and concern in any environment, are more likely to stimulate conflict in campus-wide discussions. The test here lies in navigating between those academics who seek to provide only the historical, sociological, and cultural details necessary to understand the context of the conflict and those activists and activist-scholars deploying an affect-laden discourse who, in addition, seek to motivate change in relation to the conflict. The latter are likely to take issue with the former in any context (as, in the worst case, enablers and, in the best case, tone deaf). However, this test takes on greater urgency if the discussion in question is happening in a larger venue; one that can be more easily politicized and imbued with a greater significance than in a classroom setting.

The authors of this short essay experienced such issues in organizing a panel on the Israel-Hamas conflict in February of 2024. In what follows, we analyze that event as an artifact for understanding the tensions between neutral-aspiring and affect-laden language, before considering the challenges of affect for discursive forums, reading a scene from Joshua Cohen's novel *The Netanyahu's* to illustrate these, and explaining the role that a mindful form of affect, intellectual empathy, can play in addressing them.¹ We then conclude with observations about the effects of different types of venues on the efficacy of that role.

Organizing a Panel on the Israel-Hamas Conflict

On February 19, 2024, Susquehanna University (SU), where we teach, sponsored a panel aimed at all students and faculty, on “Contextualizing the Israel-Hamas Conflict.” Susquehanna University is small undergraduate liberal arts college in rural Central Pennsylvania serving 2,206 undergraduates mostly from the northeast. It combines the pedagogy of the liberal arts with a focus on professional enterprise. The students tend to be career-minded and politically centrist, though there are active student groups devoted to both progressive and conservative political perspectives and

1 Joshua Cohen, *The Netanyahu's: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family* (New York Review of Books, 2021).

activities. There had not been any prior events seeking to generate dialogue between Muslim and Jewish communities, but there have been efforts to represent different political ideologies. The College Republicans brought Ben Shapiro to campus a few years ago with the support of the College Democrats who in turn invited Ed Rendell with the support of both groups. While there was a great deal of trepidation around Shapiro's visit, there ultimately were no protests or demonstrations. The university itself had organized a number of Black Lives Matter solidarity events, again without any altercations. Like many, and perhaps the majority of smaller colleges and universities across the United States, Susquehanna tends toward a far more moderate campus political climate and a culture of "niceness," which can be both a strength and a weakness.

Unsurprisingly, after October 7, there were no overt political demonstrations on campus in support of any stance in relation to the conflict. The Director of our Hillel House organized a Zoom discussion with the Parents Family Circle Forum, a grassroots reconciliation group of Palestinians and Israelis who lost loved ones in the conflict, and a talk by a representative of Project Shema, which offers training and support in addressing antisemitism. Both drew less than a dozen students, almost all Jewish, and hardly any faculty. Unlike the turmoil experienced on the campuses of many elite and large public universities, most students on the SU campus were either inactive or communicated to faculty, staff, and administrators a desire to simply learn more about the situation and have an opportunity to ask questions of experts on the region.

For us, the pressing questions in organizing a response concerned what type of event was most appropriate in response to campus-wide requests for more information and who were the best voices to deliver on these requests in that context. One of the glaring drawbacks of the institution is the absence of a Middle East Studies program or any local experts on the conflict who are of Arab descent. SU does have a Jewish & Israel Studies program, although it has not been able to offer many courses in that program in recent years. There were faculty with expertise in Middle East Studies, but they left for positions with larger institutions. In other words, SU lacked precisely the type of expertise that was called for in such an event and there were few, if any, alternatives at other institutions in the area. The few Middle East scholars in the area were reluctant to participate in any public-facing events for fear of backlash on campus or in the broader area.

We also struggled with the content of such an event. How could we fill this void in central Pennsylvania in a way that enabled students to understand the difficult nuances and issues roiling any discussion of the

history and dynamics of the conflict? And should we focus on explaining the histories behind the conflict, unraveling the politics of the region, or presenting the binary narratives that unhelpfully tend to elide the complexity of the groups involved and the perspectives of the political actors caught up in the conflict? Our concerns were less a matter of so-called “even-handedness” (giving airtime to different sides) than it was providing a broad range of information that would help students approach the conflict with sufficient sensitivity and with an appreciation for the political nuances and humanist implications that scholarship requires when analyzing socio-cultural phenomena and engaging highly volatile issues of social and political justice.

Given the relatively slow development of partisan political consciousness about the Israel-Hamas conflict on the SU campus, we had time to view what other institutions were doing. At many institutions, town halls were increasingly devolving into competitive shouting matches with affinity groups often focusing on their distinctive grievances. We noted that Q&A and information sessions had been relatively successful at some colleges and universities and believed this might be the best avenue for students with largely factual questions about the history between Israel and Palestine. However, likely due to the same issues we experienced in finding the right voices, many of these information sessions featured professors from Political Science, History, or Religion speaking to their general knowledges about the conflict and the region rather than speakers with a specific background in Middle East or Islamic Studies (much less expertise in Palestinian history, culture, or politics). The original panel we developed then brought together these types of scholars with a local Imam, one with extensive training in sociology, political science, and religion, who was willing to offer their perspective on the conflict.

As we proceeded in the organization of this event, we found ourselves in a situation the opposite of, but also, on a number of levels, analogous to that of colleagues elsewhere, who struggled with pressures from pro-Zionist groups to temper or “balance” Palestinian voices with Israeli or Zionist ones. We were contacted by a faculty member of Palestinian heritage who had significant concerns about a panel featuring Jewish voices (as some of the faculty panelists were) but none of Arab or Palestinian descent. Moreover, this faculty member wanted to vet and approve all panelists and to forbid any panelists from using certain language, such as calling the situation a conflict (which the faculty member felt incorrectly recognizes Israel as having a legitimate side).

The initial event was postponed as we carried on discussions with the concerned faculty member in hopes of reaching a compromise. Such a

compromise was not reached; partly because we were unwilling effectively to censor some voices on the panel and partly because they did not accept as legitimate the outside expert on Middle East politics who eventually agreed to come to campus (as that individual identified as Muslim and as coming from the Middle East, but not as Arab). In the meantime, the local Imam backed out of the event for fear that they would similarly be accused of falsely representing the Palestinian experience.

Ultimately, the concerned faculty member reflected a hardline viewpoint that has been articulated by partisans of both the Israeli and the Palestinian perspectives: that such discussions have potential triggering effects or that even acknowledging a position serves to legitimize a side that should not be recognized. This delegitimization of discourse has bedeviled campuses such as the University of California-Los Angeles, the University of Florida, San Jose State, and of course Harvard and Columbia.² To some hardliners, for example, shouting or shutting down “bad speech” with “good speech” reflects a defense of “free speech,” as a professor at San Jose State asserted in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.³

In the end, we held the panel with three voices: a moderator, an expert on Jewish Studies, and an expert on Middle East Politics. The discussion was strictly limited to an hour and largely covered the history of the conflict; the current political factors shaping the conflict; and the prejudices it has inspired around the world against both Jews and Arabs. The panel acknowledged, in a limited way, the opposition to it by the establishment of “ground rules” that made clear what the panel would and could do (provide some historical and political context), and what it would be unable to do (take an explicit position on the violence on either side). We also restricted attendance to just students and faculty; the public was not invited, no

2 Declan Bradley, “UCLA Is Caught in the Middle of Competing Israeli-Palestinian Grievances,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 22, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/ucla-is-caught-in-the-middle-of-competing-israeli-palestinian-grievances>; Megan Zahneis, “Why Did the U. of Florida Back Away From a Symposium on the War in Gaza at the Last Minute?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 1, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-did-the-u-of-florida-back-away-from-a-seminar-on-the-war-in-gaza-at-the-last-minute>; Kate Hidalgo Bellows, “How 3 Campus Conflicts Over Pro-Israel Speech Spiraled Out of Control,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-3-campus-conflicts-over-pro-israel-speech-spiraled-out-of-control>; Ryan D. Enos, “How Free Speech Failed at Harvard—and How to Rescue It,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-free-speech-failed-at-harvard-and-how-to-rescue-it>.

3 Hidalgo Bellows, “How 3 Campus Conflicts.”

publicity was generated or distributed for the event, and no photographs or recordings of the event were allowed. Students were invited to submit questions ahead of the event, which were incorporated into the discussion. The panel attracted around 100 faculty, students, and staff on campus. The panel received largely positive feedback with a few critiques indicating that those writing us felt the event and the panelists were tone-deaf to events happening on the ground.

Clearly, there are a number of objections one could make to how we handled this event. We should have engaged the wider community earlier in the process of organizing the event to discover if there were any voices that wanted to be involved in the process. We should have known better that the event would generate the concerns that came about and, indeed, had the potential to trigger students and faculty. And we should have cast a wider net, earlier in the process, to find experts that could more credibly speak to both sides of the conflict.

Nevertheless, our goal of helping students grapple with the complexities of the Israel-Hamas conflict was, at least in part, realized, if only because we incorporated our awareness of the program's shortcomings and limitations into the event. More importantly, though, we did not dismiss the affective aspects of the conflict and of trying to discuss it with the students.

The Role of Affect in Discussions about Israel and Palestine

An important aspect of the resulting panel was for the panelists to recognize both their intellectual *and* emotional relationships with the issue, a discussion intentionally incorporated into the opening remarks about each panelist's knowledge of and prior experience with Israel and Palestine. One goal was to help students see how to approach the conflict with what Bernard Avishai calls "a sense of tragedy."⁴ Writing in *The New Yorker* about co-teaching a course on Israel-Palestine with Ezzedine Fishere, his colleague in the Middle East Studies program at Dartmouth University, Avishai's pedagogical goal of presenting "the acolytes of national narratives as inevitably tragic figures, limited by perception, experience, idiosyncrasy, fear, ambition, narcissism—hubris" helpfully illustrates what we feel is a merit to the sort of teaching-learning event we envisioned and, admittedly, only partially pulled off.⁵

4 Bernard Avishai, "Co-Teaching a Class on Israel and Palestine," *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/co-teaching-a-class-on-israel-and-palestine>

5 Avishai, "Co-Teaching a Class on Israel and Palestine."

Rather than dismissing or denying any such connection, recognizing, attending to, and, if possible, incorporating the role of affect is vital to helping students understand the context in which the discussion is taking place.

During this same period, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported on a couple of courses about Israel and Palestine at Johns Hopkins and Emory University that employed scholarly debate and conflict mediation to bracket or temper student emotions and foreground civil discourse.⁶ But affect, as the scholarly study of it points out, always informs supposedly objective critical productions and explanations. Our students inevitably bring their own socially constructed and personally mediated affective lives into classrooms and auditoriums, which the instructors of these courses would no doubt acknowledge. Attending to the role of affect, however, means taking seriously the social import of emotions in enabling the articulation and recognition of political situations and arrangements. It means allowing affect a place in the discourse as a prod toward greater student self-examination and self-awareness.

We would both agree and disagree with Benjamin Schreier about the role of affect in fomenting how we talk about October 7 and the Israel-Palestine conflict. In his article, “On Identification: Theses on Liberal Discourses about Zionism and Israel Since October 7,” Schreier writes in Thesis Three that “a de-politicized retreat into affect is toxic to intelligent analysis,” and that “when we allow affective responses to set the terms for responding to history we risk engaging in a deceptive nihilism Once we decide to perform a scene of encounter on the stage of identity, it becomes intractable.”⁷ These strike us as unassailable points and a perceptive way of understanding how *unexamined and unacknowledged* affect can and did make the act of engaging in discourse itself a target of opposition on our campus and on others.

But if we commit to examining affect as part of a teaching-learning event then, as Sianne Ngai argues in her book, *Ugly Feelings*, emotions can be approached “as unusually knotted or condensed ‘interpretations of

6 Beth McMurtrie, “Debating Israel’s Future, One Week at a Time,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 30, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/debating-israels-future-one-week-at-a-time>; “Letters: How One Course Is Trying to Foster Civil Discourse,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/how-one-course-is-trying-to-foster-civil-discourse>.

7 Benjamin Schreier, “On Identification: Theses on Liberal Discourses about Zionism and Israel Since October 7,” *Jadaliyya*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45691>.

predicaments’—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner.”⁸ Affect, in other words, can help reveal, and enable us to work through, our struggle to make sense of and come to terms with the overdetermined meanings of politics, aesthetics, and history.

Our disagreement with Schreier centers on his assertion that the Israel-Palestine conflict “perpetuates itself through heartbreak and the presumption of a sphere of human life invulnerable to politics and critical thinking,” and that centering the suffering and grief of one side (for Schreier it’s Israeli/Jewish suffering) displaces and devalues the suffering of the other side.⁹ His take on a particular way that Palestinian suffering is often decentered and marginalized is unquestionably accurate, but the subjective assembly of suffering and tragedy is and remains deeply imbricated with the political despite presumptions to the contrary. The question for educators is how to activate and make visible for students the political and the socio-historical that are conjoined in such heartbreak. As Avishai points out, suffering and tragedy also have political valence as a mode of solidarity or as a prod to further discussion or to the promotion and valuing of humanistic discourse as essential to the liberal arts and a democratic public sphere.¹⁰

Affect, Intellectual Empathy, and Joshua Cohen’s *The Netanyahus*

What would that sort of teaching-learning have looked like at our campus-wide event? Perhaps a version was evident in the remarks an Egyptian student made when he spoke with us after the event. He told us about the anger he had long felt about the conflict, unremarkable to him given the history he had learned, but that he appreciated our event had acknowledged such anger, and the heartbreak, on both sides, and he went on to engage us in further discussion about some of the points the panelists had raised. Pedagogically, what we believe we heard went something like this: I can trust you with my emotions and so I can trust you with my political perspective. I’m not going to change my mind, but I am going to listen to you. How to build on that affective opening through other campus events and in the classroom, thereby advancing the sort of knowledge building empathy

8 Sianne Ngai, “From *Ugly Feelings*,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed., ed. Vincent Leitch, et al. (W.W. Norton & Co., 2018), 2642.

9 Schreier, “On Identification.”

10 Avishai, “Co-Teaching a Class on Israel and Palestine.”

between speaker and respondent that such an opening connotes, is where we are currently focusing institutional attention.

One avenue through which we plan to pursue this is by creating a professional and civic writing major (funded with a Mellon grant supporting the investigation, designing, and sharing of pedagogical applications that clearly and deliberately foster democratic ethos and culture) to develop courses that help instructors and students manage civic dialogue and difficult conversations.¹¹ That research has been consequential, and here suggests a helpful proof-text with which to think about next steps. For the hurdles such management may face, especially regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict and discourse about Zionism, is well-illustrated in a scene from Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus*.

The novel imagines Ben-Zion (as it is written in the book) Netanyahu—father of Benjamin Netanyahu, (in)famous revisionist historian of the Spanish Inquisition, and Zionist Revisionist who believed in a maximalist Israeli state occupying both sides of the Jordan River—visiting a small liberal arts college in 1959 for a job interview during a period when he was, in real life, in search of an academic home in Israel or the United States. The story is based on an anecdote by the literary critic Harold Bloom about hosting Ben-Zion for a campus visit to Cornell University. In the novel, Cohen's protagonist-host is Ruben Blum, American Jew, the first at the college and an American economic historian, though “*not* an historian of the Jews.”¹² Ruben finds himself the middleman between Ben-Zion and his colleagues in the history department and, during the lecture, a target of Ben-Zion's invective against American democracy as ultimately offering no protection for “marginal identities,” thus by implication critiquing and denouncing Ruben's embodiment of what is now described, conventionally and stereotypically, as the “mainstreaming” of American Jews and their social, cultural, and economic success story in America.¹³

Tracking the affective registers that Cohen describes throughout the lecture reveals not only the matrix of the political and socio-historical animating the novel's satire. It also dramatizes the difficulty of engaging the process of “intellectual empathy”—a process illustrated by Avishai's and Fishere's course with its spotlight on tragedy—that is necessary for civil and

11 Betsy Verhoeven, project director, “Engaging Democratic Ethos: Innovative Rhetorical Education for a Participatory Society,” (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2024 Higher Learning Open Call: Cultures of U.S. Democracy, Susquehanna University, December 2024).

12 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 2.

13 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 210.

open-minded construction of knowledge and, by extension, for discussion in the public sphere. As Maureen Linker defines it, intellectual empathy,

[I]s empathy with an emphasis on the integration of moral, emotive, and cognitive capacities. In the case of intellectual empathy these capacities would be focused on interpretation and judgments regarding a speaker's credibility and reliability. The intellectually empathic hearer would be particularly attuned to rhetorical contexts involving social difference and take a speaker's report in such a context to assess the consistency and coherence of their own beliefs and feelings before making an interpretive judgment.¹⁴

Of course, the novel's characters do nothing of the sort. Yet this is why the lecture scene functions as a kind of heuristic for readers, particularly apt for a campus novel, on how to read for such empathy.

At the start of the lecture, Ben-Zion "expressed a hint of regret" that the lecture was open to the public, a familiar perspective to us that reflects a common concern in the academy that outside or large audiences may foment misunderstanding of a talk or speech.¹⁵ Ben-Zion continues with what sounds like "an apology twinged with contempt," a warning that what is to follow will be, in many ways, purposefully incendiary and divisive.¹⁶ Cohen has Ruben note that "Ingratiation was a strain on him" as Ben-Zion reviews the history of Jewish expulsions in Medieval Europe and the Inquisitions in Spain and Portugal of conversos, Jewish converts to Christianity.¹⁷ For Ben-Zion in both Cohen's fiction and in his real-world scholarship, these Inquisitions provided the evidence for his theorizing a perennial, trans-historical Western Jew hatred based on an immutable racial categorization whose inevitable result was to be a "history of Holocausts," as he called it.¹⁸ It also called forth a Jewish awareness of the existential need for Jews to take refuge in an ethnostate of their own predicated on defensively exclusionist terms.

14 Maureen Linker, "Do Squirrels Eat Hamburgers? Intellectual Empathy as a Remedy for Residual Prejudice," *Informal Logic* 31, no. 2 (2011): 110–138, 124. For a related analysis of empathy as crucial for reconciliation and conflict resolution, see Björn Krondorfer, *Unsettling Empathy: Working with Groups in Conflict* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020).

15 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 204.

16 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 204.

17 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 204, 205.

18 Douglas Martin, "Benzion Netanyahu, Hawkish Scholar, Dies at 102," *The New York Times*. April 30, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/01/world/middleeast/benzion-netanyahu-dies-at-102.html>.

Ben-Zion's argument about the racialization of the Inquisition, however, soon pivots, as Ruben says, into "the wrath of the veteran propagandist"¹⁹ as he traces the legacy of the Inquisition to "Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the Arab Ummah" and then, in a "strident" though also, in Ruben's later reflective view, "poignant" pitch to the audience, asserts "that the only way out of gentile history was through Zion."²⁰ At Ben-Zion's pivot, the "Seminarians and dazed Koreans shifted in their seats," and Ruben's wife Edith starts tearing the lecture program "into strips as if in mourning," and Ben-Zion's wife Tzilla "appeared to drowse."²¹ These responses make clear that empathy with Ben-Zion's points is already sorely wanting among the audience, even from his wife. But also, from a teacherly perspective, that readers should take careful note of the affective drama being played out here and perhaps reflect on it too. This is intimated by Ruben's own re-viewing of Ben-Zion's pitch through a more empathetic but still critical lens (intellectual empathy does not require abandoning judgement or the calling out of oppression or hatred), as the product of a devoutly felt, secularized religious revivalism.²² In contrast, Ben-Zion himself is described as devolving into "fanaticism" as he predicts the devolution of the American post-war empire into its inevitable "tribal constituencies," which would leave the Jews vulnerable to yet the next Inquisition.²³ Ruben feels the weight of Ben-Zion's argument on him, that America "is nothing" and that American Jews like him are doomed, an observation that enables Ruben to recognize, for both comic effect and readerly empathy, the widening gulf between him and Ben-Zion as well as the corrosive political and socio-historical matrix into which he has been thrust.²⁴

19 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 209.

20 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 210.

21 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 209.

22 As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it, in a different context: "Just in terms of bridging gaps and everything, I have a basic level of respect that I accord to everybody. I want to say what I have to say. I don't want to shrink back from it. But I do think on a basic level, there's a respect that has to be had for people with whom I disagree. / At the same time, I recognize that part of my audience—and I would say an important part of my audience—is people who have never enjoyed that respect. People who, in fact, are subjects of the kind of hate that Charlie Kirk was harvesting. / And I can't ever a) contribute to making them feel like they've been abandoned, and b) I can't ever stand by and watch somebody do that and in the name of unity or whatever, act like that's not happening. Because there are real consequences" (Ezra Klein, "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Bridging Gaps vs. Drawing Lines," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/28/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-ta-nehisi-coates.html>).

23 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 210, 211.

24 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 212.

At the end of the lecture the applause is described as “light, deferential, and relieved.”²⁵ More significantly, in its wake it unleashes a clutch of “ugly” and disturbing feelings among the novel’s characters—resentment, anxiety, boredom, disillusionment, envy, and “animatedness” (Ngai’s term for an affective ventriloquism that stereotypes Blacks in literature, but here extended as a similar kind of speaking for and stereotyping of Jews).²⁶ These are the predictable results of Ben-Zion’s unempathetic discursive performance and the utter lack of preparedness among the audience who, embedded in the novel’s historical moment, view such a discursive assault as bad manners at best, and anti-Christian, or an antisemitic stereotype proved true, at worst.

Readers, however, who encounter this scene prepared to read for intellectual empathy may discover for themselves why the lack of such empathy is both instructive in this particular case and inimical in general to campus-wide events and public debates. The feelings stirred up by Ben-Zion’s lecture destabilize not only Ruben’s academic and ethnic détente with his colleagues and college, but also the narrative of American Jewish success lampooned in the novel, the Zionist supersessionism of Jewish history that Ben-Zion articulates, and the didactic purpose of the campus novel, teaching how teachers rarely learn anything socially improving from their misadventures in academia. This is the satire employing affect to undermine faith in any too easy history, identity, or learning. It is, as well, a warning about the consequences of not accounting for affect as always already implicated in a college’s pedagogical frameworks and educational mission. Not attending to or training students for intellectual empathy, in both small and large group situations, will certainly undermine these frameworks and missions, a key insight and takeaway for educators who hope to manage contentious issues constructively and successfully.

The Implications of the Venue

Briefly, we want to acknowledge that our appeal to intellectual empathy is obviously more complicated in practice than in theory, especially given the implications of the venue and circumstances under which we planned this event. Our emphasis on the possibilities that academia offers for understanding this conflict, and other such events, is perhaps better placed in a traditional classroom environment, as witnessed in Avishai’s and Fishere’s

25 Cohen, *The Netanyahu*, 211.

26 Ngai, “From *Ugly Feelings*,” 2645.

course, where the participants can be more readily expected to engage in affect-laden dialogues from a more theoretical perspective or within the context of a broader learning framework employed in the class. In contrast, a campus-wide panel, open to the entire community, has greater visibility and symbolic importance for communicating the values of the campus. Such an event thus becomes more political, regardless of the intentions of the event's organizers, and invites the possibilities of protest and other types of political engagement that can make intellectual empathy difficult if not impossible to sustain. In other words, such a venue inevitably opens the possibility for affect to take a larger and more uncontrolled role than in a classroom environment.

Indeed, as we progressed in the planning of the event, it became necessary to allocate space for protesters; establish protocol for how to respond if the event was interrupted; and create security protocol to ensure the safety of all present. While the instructor may choose to warn students about triggering discussions in a classroom environment, there are rarely, if ever, any such precautions taken for campus-wide panels, a reflection of the nature of the event.

We advocated from the start for a centered approach to the issue that allowed us to examine the social, political, cultural, and economic realities that have brought Israel and Palestine to this place. While we do not agree the event was tone-deaf in regard to the realities experienced on the ground in Israel and Gaza, we believe our initial expectation that we could stage a classically "academic" discussion did not fit as well with the chosen venue. That realization may be obvious to others, but one that can be lost as organizers seek to develop educational opportunities that respond to student requests for more information about the conflict, balance the concerns of different constituencies on campus, and still incorporate a commitment to intellectual empathy.

Conclusions

Ultimately, we would not advocate for abandoning the larger venue and the organization of an event designed to reach the entire community. Not only were there enough students from across the campus looking for more information, but the event was consistent with the institutional mission to promote broader dialogues and to engage difficult conversations. Nor would we abandon our support for an objective effort to analyze the conditions leading to the conflict, which is to say one that is contextualized by the examined experiences and acknowledged sympathies of the scholarly voices

involved in the panel and sensitive to the emotions that students bring into the discourse. We would simply dedicate more time to, first, our preparation for the event and, second, to finding ways to better accommodate a range of diverse voices on campus, whether by modifying the event to allow for additional scholarly perspectives and/or planning additional events in connection with it that also intersected with current university initiatives to promote a democratic ethos and culture—to inculcate an attentiveness to reciprocity, the practice of intellectual empathy/thoughtful deliberation, and a respect for difference—among students, throughout our campus environment, and into the surrounding community.²⁷ Both would provide opportunities for students not only to hear from different voices, but also to experience different approaches to how one interprets, internalizes, and struggles to understand political tragedies as they unfold.

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27 Verhoeven, "Engaging Democratic Ethos."

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