Critical Pedagogical Intervention:

Re-Claiming Ethical Space in Early Childhood Education with Care

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"Wishing to be human, I sought for evidence that I was"

(Le Guin, 2019, p. 31)

On Becoming

It has been said the early childhood education (ECE) is in a crisis of imagination and in need of an intervention. It has been said that the self is not an actual place to exist, and that the function of education is subject formation. It has been said that taking care, requires a slowing down, an attending and noticing, a re-thinking, a beginning again --always beginning and beginning again –a perpetual process of beginnings. It has been said that education is violent, it invokes a shuttering, fracturing, and rupturing –as an inevitable state within the process of subject formation (Todd, 2015). It has been said that we are in the age of *man*, the Anthropocene—a geological epoch known for *man's* impact in, and on the world—a time of human exploration, exploitation, colonization, whereby 'natural' materials are resourced, extracted, commodified, contaminated and exploited (Braidotti, 2020). It has been said that the way forward is to de-centre, de-throne, de-value, de-bunk the human –this is this way to reimagine, reinvent, and recreate more livable worlds for the inanimate and animate. It has been said the structures and system that govern, manage, control function to assimilate and conform –making the other into the same. Taylor (2006) states, that according to Levinas, relations take "place in a face-to-face encounter with the other … To encounter the other as a face is to encounter her in her absolute alterity from [the self] faced by her as unthematizable, escaping all… attempts to understand and thus to assimilate her. The face makes it impossible for me to reduce the other to myself, to my ideas of her, to my theories, categories, and knowledge" (p. 1). It has been said that livability is contingent of interdependence, collaboration, and contamination --without these we die (Tsing, 2015).
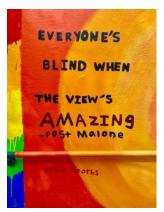
On Questioning

I grapple with particular knowledges, philosophical proclamations and frameworks that purport containment while rebuking the container. Where does one stand? Where is one able stand? What is one able to know, think and do? How is one able to perform, move and make meaning –under constant scrutiny? What identity can possibly emerge under a barrage of tropes that bequeath conformity (albeit a particular image of conformity that masquerades as transformation) to a particular way of being, knowing and thinking. How does one breathe under the constant gaze of critique? How does one arrive at some place otherwise, when the journey is not knowable, accessible, or graspable? How does one navigate the tensions of being asked to move in particular ways, that not only has truck with, but also fantastically exploits and uses (in the name of something otherwise) the logics, systems, and structures that it purports to abhor? I am left wondering; can the end ever really justify the means?

On 'Rug Pulling'

Katy Perry's songs, *Roar* (2013) and Rachel Platten's, *Fight Song* (2015) spoke to me at a very specific time in my life. The lyrics 'I stood for nothing, so I fell for everything' alongside, 'this is my fight song, take back my life song, prove I'm alright song' grounded me and provided a life sustaining mantra that propelled me forward. Today, I understand that these women and their words, reflect how I desired to be in the world at that time. The fact, today that these artists, songs and messages are positioned culturally, racially, and normatively in particular ways of knowing within dominant society is not lost on me. The self I was then has evolved, gained perspectives and knowledges that enable me to reckon with normative and universalized narratives in different ways. However, this is part of my history, and I cannot stand outside of it now, nor attempt to deny and render invisible, un-nameable or irrelevant this part of my identity in the here and now. I share this as part of my history, memory, and story, it is in no way intended to flaunt or essentialize my position of privilege within dominant white society.

As I grapple with my lived experiences, and ways of knowing and being, as a white, CIS gendered female, I am very conscious of all the ways I move through the world with relative ease. And yet, to attempt to hide behind or downplay this position achieve a false sense of humility. The task is to learn how to occupy and move in this body with authenticity and humility and to embrace my passion, desire, and my fierce determination to be the author of my own life. For me, to become an independent, strong, intelligent woman – feels like an accomplishment. But does this mean that in my quest to be seen in these ways, I negate the importance of the collective, or a care ethic that extends beyond the self into meaningful and transformative human and more than human commitments?

If I subscribe to the ideology that the self is an illusion, a social construct of a perceived self - said person, always and already only in relation to others, materials and the world –can this not cause such a deep fracturing, unsettling and disequilibrium that runs the risk of losing oneself into despair, grasping for meaning and certainty that exposes them to potential exploitation, marginalization, and oppression? If I buy into the notion that the 'I' doesn't exist apart from others, and that the hyper focus on the independent individual human subject is not possible or survivable apart from others, then what? How is the unknowable, and non-existent self to live? How then is it possible to stay with it, slow down and jump to action –to know the right action? At some point does I not have to speak from the I, think from the I and preform from the I? Does the I not have a moral obligation to cultivate an awareness, sensitivity, and responsiveness to creating and sustaining an ethical and humanizing space that begins with

acknowledging how self is positioned? The knowing of who we are, how we got here, what we are responsible for and must account for? If we are not permitted the words/utterances, how can we begin to deconstruct, make meaning, and engage in a dialogic process towards transformative ways of being, knowing and doing that nourish the conditions for creativity, experimentation, and exploration with/in a vibrancy –joie de vivre necessary to re-image a purposive and meaningful life.

"Viewing these various sites and practices as pedagogical spaces means recognising the kinds of change that are desired within them. That is, encounters are staged in order to provoke some alteration of the subject: how she understands the world, how she understands herself. Such pedagogical spaces can be seen as sites of liminality, or threshold spaces, whereby the self undergoes a process of change occasioned by what lies in-between what one knows and what is utterly strange" (Todd, 2015, p. 55).

On Landing

I turn now to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Here, I find a place to touch down, to linger and reflect --a welcomed reprieve from the confusion, uncertainty, and angst of this new space I am dangling. A quick reframe positions *dangling*—apparently—as not such a bad place to be. it is neither falling nor flying but dangling, in the in-between space that make space for possibility, creativity, inventiveness and liberation.

As Freire (1970) says "human beings are not built in silence, but in the word, in work and in action-reflection" (p. 88). Here, the author is referring to dialogic praxis that is active and functions not only as a tool for liberation but also for connection and collaboration –the sharing and exchanging of ideas toward transforming the ways we name ourselves, and the world around us. I discover with/in Freire's (1970) words, a gesturing towards post human theories of diffraction, entanglement, assemblage, and contamination (Haraway, 2016, Malone et. al., 2020; Ting, 2015). That is to say that as humans we are always and already in relation with the world, entangled in complexity and uncertainty, micro and macro units of collaborative assemblage that react, interact, diffract in multiple and divergent encounters—we must, simply see it. Upon seeing it, act responsively, responsibly within a feminist ethic of care.

Therefore, it is not a crisis of imagination, so much as a crisis of care. Engagement in transformative dialogue requires an attentiveness to the other, to our material worlds – and it requires passion and care for, caring about and a responsiveness to each other in the here and now. The task becomes to create the conditions to engage in a dialogic relationship that is concerned for the survival and flourishing of our brethren and comrades in all times and all educational spaces. Freire (1970) says, "Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of profound love for the world and for people" (p.89). A profound love—but also, he goes on to write, with humility, and faith in humankind. This pedagogy is not about de-centering the human per se, but rather seeing the human as implicated in—part of the

problem and part of the solution. Here in lies the crux of the intervention I *profoundly* feel is required to re-claim ethical space in ECE, --it is a space that is graspable and knowable for educators, where their hearts, minds can be liberated into collective and meaningful actions. There is much work to do to rejuvenate and enliven early childhood and its educators –no doubt. However, we must view them as friend and active participates, while co-creating the conditions to be seen and heard, to engage in dialogue and thinking that makes visible the enormity ECE face in their collective responsibility in the nourishment of young children with/in the worlds around us.

> *"The etymology of dialogue does not derive from di, meaning "two," but dia meaning "across" and as such, it suggests not so much engaging in something that is shared, such as a version of the "common good" about which we can then begin to talk, as it does the image of a bridge that spans a gap or difference"* (Todd, 2015, p. 59).

However, as Freire (1970) says "how can [we] dialogue if [we] always project ignorance onto others…how can [we] dialogue if [we] regard [ourselves] apart from others…how can [we] dialogue if [we] consider [ourselves] member[s] of the 'in-group'…how can [we] dialogue if [we] start from the premise that naming the world is the task of the elite…how can [we] dialogue if [we are] closed to—and even offended by—the contribution of others" (p.90). Freire (1970) is promoting is a pedagogy that activates --*through dialogue*. Dialogue as a reciprocal encounter where people, experiences, ideas and possibility come together. In this regard, *the doing* is dialogue, and the dialogue is "an act of creation and re-creation" (p. 89). Recognizing this call to arms, I ask, what is needed here? How can we cultivate the conditions for change that is dialogic, creative, relational, and critically care-full? To my way of thinking, transformation and flourishing cannot emerge from persistent undoing and auditing—such rigorous critique is survivable, only by the fittest. The *heart forward* early childhood educators --I stand with in solidarity --cannot abide nor survive the constant scrutiny.

On Healing

Healing, as the ethical space between a decentred and centred human; as a form of resistance that disrupts binary positioning of a self-centred/serving, individual at one end and the idealism of post-human intellects at the other. Healing pedagogies, "that concentrate more of our efforts on inviting people to be with each other in our full humanity…[e]xisting in dialogue with… [a space where] imaginative exploration is central to the work of education" (Keenan, 2021, p. 553). Dialogue, that is not only "full of beauty and wonder" but that is also necessary "in our work toward greater survival" (Keenan, 2021, p. 553). Healing pedagogies that are responsive and reciprocal; that are situated in "the idea of an ethics of care as an ethics of encounter…committed to the long-term maintenance, nourishing, and hard work of sustaining…relationship. This ethic of care is dependent, then, on being attentive and having certain understandings of and sensitivities to children's and teacher's day-to-day realties" (Arndt & Tesar, 2019, p. 39). Attending to the individual early childhood educator matters --in fact, educators liberation, autonomy and agency is the heart of this matter. If there is to be an intervention in early childhood education, it is within, as Freire (1970) says, *communion,* and within *unshakable solidarity* – people acting together, for, with and about the people and the world in and around us. And to be clear, I see a real and tangible need to heal our nations early childhood educators. Predominately, lower to middle-class working women, working so other women can work. Embodied subjects who harbour profound feelings of inadequacies, illegitimacy, and anti-intellectualism. Silenced, marginalized and invisible- even to themselves.

"It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (Haraway, 2016, p.12)

On Moving Forward

Embracing a critical pedagogy within a feminist ethic of care in the everyday, ordinary, and mundane moments in early childhood education, is the way forward. Through a slow, thoughtful, care-full and intuitive processes we can begin the hard work of dismantling systems and structure (not individuals) of colonialist and capitalist regimes that purport particular discourses and truths that privilege particular bodies, knowledges and practices over others. Regime of power, that function to control, manipulate and manage bodies, providing essentialized narratives, of what it means to be a rational, and natural women, and/or caregiver, and mother—overt scripts that dictate how we do gender and perform inherent gender roles in ECE for educators and children alike (Ailwood, 2003; Bernstein, 2011; Blaise, 2003; Keenan, 2021).

Early childhood education "need[s] to begin to imagine new kinds of pedagogies" that responds in ways that recognizes "uneven inheritances of increasingly uncertain ecological futures" (Nxumalo & ross, 2019, p. 520). Critical pedagogies offering, "new perspectives… that aim to explore assumptions

about identities, diversity, and learning. This in turn sustains a teaching agenda that centers on equity and social justice, rather than just an individual child's developmental progress" (Blaise, 2005, p. 3). "In promoting and 'considering a feminist ethics of care inserts gender issues into [our] understandings of ethics…and implies a concern with all elements of marginalization, subjugation, power relations and exclusionary behaviours that move beyond male domination…and traditional patriarchal orientations and structures, to concerns for other forms of difference and othernesses" (Arndt & Tesar, 2019, p. 42). Yes, this take academic and scholarly rigor; it also requires being with, in relationship, in solidarity and intra-action and reflection. If we want to promote other ways of being, we need to create the conditions for an ethical space where educator can begin to think differently and divergently, to flirt with "bending and breaking the rules…standing out" (Keenan & Lil Miss Hot Mess, 2020, p. 77) –with being 'outstanding" (Shalaby, 2017) creating space for "strategic defiance" and "rather than suppressing dissent" (Keenan & Lil Miss Hot Mess, 2020, p. 77) encourage questioning, provoking and interrogating in the name of liberating the minds and imaginations of our tiny humans alongside, and with early childhood educators.

It seems to me that creating an ethical space in early childhood education is the intervention. Its work it to cultivate a critical pedagogy that provokes in transformative ways, with/in a feminist ethic of care, a pedagogy that is luminary, and isn't afraid to unveil dominant discourses, practices and theories inherent in early childhood education, but that attends to the individual, and individual needs within our collective worlds, that answers the questions --for what and in the name of what-- and does not leave its subjects floundering, guessing, and unmoored.

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