

TABOO

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Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education

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Introduction: “Stand Up”

J. Cynthia McDermott

When *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* came into being, its life was born to create a site for ideas, for challenge, and for intellect. Our best ideas come about in conversation with others who may or may not hold to the same beliefs or world view as we do. *Taboo* provides a safe space for differing and argumentation of ideas. This issue is about standing up, standing up for your voice, for the voice of others, and for the voices of the marginalized. Throughout these articles, our authors invoke current practices that may push against common behaviors. White supremacy, patriarchy, a lack of a sustainable world view, the disregard for the human spirit, the challenge to basic rights are among those our authors push against. Crowning these articles, however, is the deeper sense of the need for love for self, for others, and for nature. With the simple theme of “Stand Up,” our authors have written guidance that will in fact invite such actions. We might say as a final message, stand up for yourself, for others, for the world. In a time like this, when so much seems precarious, starting there is an important step. Many thanks for the contributions of these authors.

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Iceland's Hidden Indigeneity

A Model for Decolonizing the World?

Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows), aka Don Trent Jacobs

Abstract

Though Icelanders are not Indigenous in the conventional sense, many embody core principles of our original, nature-based worldview, often referred to as the “Indigenous worldview.” A significant part of Iceland’s culture, governance, and relationship with the living land is guided by the laws of Nature. Many of its citizens stand up against anything that does not align with its sustainable values for Nature and community. Already the most peaceful and equitable country in the world, this article proposes that with more focus on Nature as a loving teacher for humans, Iceland can become an even more powerful model for decolonizing our world. In this article, I attempt to support such a movement by helping bring more awareness and Indigeneity to it. I suggest ways Icelanders can reframe ancestral legacy; recognize the positive and negative influences of Celtic and Norse origins; and more deeply recognize and learn from the spirits all around. Owing to anti-Indian education and policy, traditional Indigenous Peoples have largely been prevented from leading the wider restoration of a Nature-based worldview. This article suggests that Iceland, a nation not considered “Indigenous,” may be positioned to do what we have not been able to do. My hypothesis is that the colonial world may be more receptive to being guided by a people whose blood ancestors are European, for a variety of reasons

Introduction

Anti-Indianism in education, media, and governance has largely prevented colonial settlers around the world from restoring our original Nature-based worldview (Four Arrows, 2008). As a result, the voice of Indigenous philosophers and

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guides has largely been dismissed, or worse. But what if a small nation, recognized as representing Eurocentric modernity and the postcolonial worldview, was proving by its own accord the value of such a worldview?

My visits to Iceland made me realize that Iceland, a country commonly framed only as a homogenous, technologically advanced society, quietly embodies many of the relational, Nature-based principles associated with Indigenous lifeways. They did so naturally, for the most part, owing to the challenging requirements of living with dynamic energies that required them to learn directly from the more-than-human others.

This claim is not an attempt to redefine Icelanders as Indigenous peoples in a political or historical sense, nor to appropriate or dilute the struggles of Indigenous nations worldwide. I make a distinction between Indigenous place-based knowledge and Indigenous worldview. The first requires fluency in language, ceremonies, and generations of living and learning in one unique place. Worldview, however, represents the shared beliefs held in common between these important place-based peoples around the world. The wisdom of place-based learning belongs to the particular culture, but the wisdom of the shared worldview precepts belongs to all cultures, even those that have forsaken it. My focus on Iceland is meant to encourage its attention to both its place-based “indigenous” (small “i”) knowledge and the pre-colonial worldview beliefs that are shared by all Indigenous cultures.

Thus, I see Iceland as a potential beacon that could motivate more countries to understand Indigeneity not as bloodline, territory, or historical designation alone, but as a proven sustainable way for all humans to embrace our original Nature-based worldview—one grounded in relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility as necessary for our surviving and thriving. (See the chart in the appendix and at worldviewliteracy.org, and visit ProvenSustainable.org.)

My vision for what I am proposing came from two short trips to Iceland, one in 2017 and one in April 2026. In addition to learning from local people all around Iceland, I also had conversations with Icelandic philosophers, educators, CEOs, and other leaders at two Spirit of Humanity Forums in Reykjavík. The events are gatherings of global thinkers working at the intersection of human consciousness, ecological sustainability, transformational psychology, and responsible leadership. This year the focus was on inner wisdom and intuition, along with embracing Nordic myths and histories relevant to the land.

The opening presentation was about the spiritual wisdom in Nature, and about how we must ultimately follow that wisdom by paying attention to the Spirits and the spiritual energies within it. This early talk caused me to spend the rest of the two days of group dialogue and mindfulness practice looking for answers to a single question: Might Iceland be a model for how a Eurocentric country could help decolonize the world?

After the close of the forum, my wife, sister, and I traveled to the many amazing waterfalls, rivers, ice flows, glaciers, caves, volcanoes, rocks, birds, and coast-

lines that have become famous tourist attractions. These alone can tap into our ancient DNA, but they are not enough without some whispering about spirit that might penetrate the colonial mind. What follows are the ideas that came to me for motivating whoever must be motivated to fully bring Iceland into the model I have described.

That opening presentation supported the Indigenous perspectives many Icelanders already hold. The presenter, Bryndís Fjóla Pétursdóttir, a Nordic seer, healer, and horticulturist who uses the Spirits in water to tell teaching stories, talked about how Spirits remind people to respect the land and water; to recognize the sentience in more-than-human life forms; to emphasize responsibility over rights; and to act in ways that acknowledge the oneness we have with all the dynamic aspects of Iceland's nature. For me it was like listening to an Indigenous elder speaking.

Many of Iceland's stories about elves, ghosts, trolls, and the *huldufólk* — the hidden people—do reflect teachings for survival. For example, outside the town of Vík, near the popular destination at the base of Reynisfjall, stand the sea stacks called Reynisdrangar, rock pillars over 200 feet tall rising from the dangerous waves of the Atlantic just off the coast:

According to Icelandic folklore, these pillars actually used to be trolls. While dragging a three-mast ship towards land, the trolls were taking too long to reach the shore, and at the break of dawn were instantly turned to stone. Even today, it is believed that if you drive near by the cliffs you can hear their wails and moans, as they long for their home in the mountains. (Somvichian-Clausen, 2017, p. 1)

Another tells of an old woman whose friend was a non-human woman belonging to the hidden people, with a family identical to her own. When the human woman's husband died, the spirit woman left sufficient food in a rock for her to survive.

However, many of Iceland's Nordic myths still carry colonial perspectives, revealing more colonial assumption than true Indigenous mythology. In Icelandic traditions, trolls are often portrayed as simply dangerous, warning about the hazards of landscape and darkness. In Indigenous cultures, mythologies tend toward more relational entities that ultimately encourage a moral and ecological understanding rather than a threatening one. Both reflect a shared understanding that the natural world is alive and that other-than-human energies require respect and humility. But even Indigenous monsters, more terrifying than Icelandic trolls, are usually woven into a framework where they teach consequence, balance, and responsibility.

The settlers of Iceland did wreak havoc on the island's ecosystem. Not being indigenous to the land, and having no knowledge of how fragile that ecosystem was, they caused destruction that was likely more a product of ignorance and circumstance than of a fundamentally exploitative worldview distinct from that of hunter-gatherers. This understanding can also help Iceland become a model for Indigeneity. At the same time, recognizing that Icelandic ancestors came from places shaped by conquest and hierarchy—Ireland, Scotland, the British Isles, and Norway—can help other colonized places on the planet realize that they, too, can decolonize themselves, as I claim Iceland is trying to do.

Nature's Indigenous Teachings in Iceland

Iceland has such a close connection to Indigenous cultures because the intensity of the land so clearly overshadows anthropocentric values. What I encountered on this journey was not simply the dynamic beauty Iceland is known for. It was, for me, an experience of a deep truth about life, death, and spiritual vibration. Each special place or event made me feel I was surfing a powerful wave back in Mexico.

I hiked over rocks in a windstorm to see a large sperm whale that had washed up on the rocky shore. I experienced relentless winds that stripped away any diversion from deep attention to what was around me and in the wind itself. Constant weather shifts reminded me that the laws of Nature prevail no matter what we may predetermine. The snow-covered mountains seemed to be beautiful reminders that a volcanic eruption could happen at any moment. The glacial rivers running wild and uncontained brought a powerful joy into my heart, and at the same time, I cried as I watched the melting entities of the largest glacier in Iceland adapt their “snouts” so as to survive as long as possible.

I talked to many tourists. All were amazed, but few seemed aware of the spirits. Few stayed with my questions about what a particular place teaches us about living. A number of Icelanders, on the other hand, nodded and spoke about the spiritual energies.

Living in Iceland is not easy, but the dynamic dangers of volcanoes, floods, and weather demand a humility that has cultivated something like a lived relationship with the natural world—one that reflects the Indigenous worldview. I met Icelanders who spoke of holding fears about such dangers, but on reflection most moved away from that emotion and described it instead as respectful awareness. In other words, in just moments they moved deeper into the Indigenous worldview's fearless trust in the universe, and further away from the fear-based precept common in our dominant worldview manifestations.

Icelandic Leadership Rooted in Indigenous Worldview

Like Icelandic stories of Spirits and spiritual energy, Icelandic governance is closer to Indigeneity than that of any other European country. While it is a parliamentary republic with all the formal administrative components, it seems more truly open to the voice of its citizens in ways that hint at the relatively non-hierarchical governance practices of our Indigenous ancestors.

In the context of this article's position, it is not a coincidence that two of Iceland's seven presidents have been women—and that the first of them, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, elected in 1980, was the world's first democratically elected woman head of state. Across most Indigenous cultures, women hold central roles as life-givers, decision-makers, and carriers of relational wisdom.

The current president is Halla Tómasdóttir. Previously, she served as CEO of The B Team, the nonprofit that seeks to promote environmentally aligned business

practices, international cooperation, and the work of international organizations on well-being issues. Iceland is among the founding members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership, working with Scotland, New Zealand, Wales, Finland, and Canada to understand the key priorities for a well-being economy.

At the end of the two-day forum, President Halla spoke to the assembled participants. As I recall her remarks, she described the moral tension leaders face and frankly acknowledged that they must choose between remaining silent to protect position and speaking truth to preserve integrity. She spoke of beginning each morning by taking up courage on one shoulder and joy on the other. She spoke of walking in nature, letting the wind clear her mind, and she acknowledged the importance of oneness with all. Her approach to leadership struck me as authentically grounded in relationship rather than domination.

She did not sound like a conventional political leader. After her presentation, I had the opportunity to tell her that her words reminded me of the wise and humble Indigenous leaders I have known and studied.

While I never met any of the previous presidents, it is clear that Iceland's earlier heads of state also modeled more of a Nature-based worldview than the dominant human-centered one. Iceland retains its position as the world's most peaceful country for the 17th or 18th consecutive year (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025). Moreover, the peacefulness gap between Iceland and second-place Ireland is the same as the gap between Ireland and the third-ranked. Iceland's consistent leadership in peace reflects strong institutions, low crime, minimal militarization, and robust levels of social trust. It also ranks first globally in the Safety and Security domain, making it the world's safest country (Kelly, 2025).

Indigenous identity, at its core, is not simply about who was first. It is about how people live with the land. By that definition, Iceland occupies a unique space. Its people were shaped by one of the most unforgiving environments on Earth. Survival required humility, adaptation, and respect. Over time, this produced a culture that, while modern, still carries echoes of relational living. If Iceland carries a form of "hidden indigeneity," then decolonization here does not require becoming something new. It only requires going deeper and more openly into the pre-colonial worldview presented at the end of this article.

This includes:

- Reframing ancestral lifeways as wisdom rather than deficiency.
- Recognizing land-based living as knowledge, not poverty.
- Reclaiming pre-Christian relational spirituality without shame.
- Honoring darkness, winter, and hardship as teachers rather than problems.
- Strengthening community as the foundation of safety and well-being.
- Recognizing that the land is not a resource to be managed, but a living system to which humans belong.



President Halla and me.

Challenges to the Icelandic Model

Icelandic citizens have fought successfully to prevent a number of ecological assaults on their sacred land. Gullfoss was saved from being compromised by the building of a power plant, in no small part through the determination of Sigríður Tómasdóttir. You can stop at nearly any river or lake in Iceland and drink the water safely.

However, Iceland still faces colonially rooted challenges: ocean salmon farming, overfishing, the pressures of tourism growth, plastic distributed into the land and sea, and the difficulty of extending to newcomers the deep induction into land relationship that Icelanders themselves inherit. Iceland is also extremely vulnerable to global extractive practices that are causing problems such as the melting of glaciers.

I have also heard from a significant number of Icelanders, including those who work in sustainability, that the demands of their work may be diminishing their own relationships with the land. Burnout seems out of place with Indigeneity, but it appears to be significant. One person told me: “I am working to preserve the beauty and health in all of Nature, which includes our spiritual selves, so people can benefit from its healing, but my work keeps me in front of a computer with hardly any time to go out into my surroundings for my own pleasure and healing!”

A subtler form of colonization appears as quiet shame. Some Icelanders speak of their ancestors, who lived in turf houses and survived in close relationship with

the land, as if they were “primitive” in the pejorative sense when compared to mainland Europe’s grand architecture and hierarchical systems. Education systems continued to reinforce that difference in ways that still leave many Icelanders carrying an unfortunate and unnecessary shame. Intellectuals of the independence movement went to great lengths to demonstrate that Icelanders were civilized Europeans deserving of nationhood—a framing that accepted the colonizer’s definition of civilization.

Such colonizing continues to invade Indigenous psyches in the many countries, including Iceland, that do not specifically teach the truth about pre-colonial cultures. Colonization does not only take land. It reshapes identity. It teaches people to measure themselves against external standards and to devalue their own ways of living—ways that were learned from more-than-human teachers.

A few Icelanders told me how they were taught that turf houses were signs of backwardness, yet those houses were adaptive, interconnected, and brilliantly designed in harmony with a harsh environment. Early Icelanders shaped the land itself for insulation and survival. What has been framed as “primitive” is, in fact, a form of ecological intelligence the modern world is only beginning to rediscover. Coming from societies structured by conquest and hierarchy, these settlers were forced to live with the earth rather than against it, using the land’s own materials for insulation and timing life to the rhythms of light and dark. This is how every successful Indigenous culture on Earth has adapted to its specific landscape. The Norwegian and Danish standards of “civilization” that shamed Icelanders were the standards of people who had less intimate knowledge of this land, not more.

Going Deeper with the Indigenous Model

Reframe the turf house and the cave as mastery, not poverty. Surviving as Icelandic ancestors did should be recognized as a sophisticated solution to an extreme environment, using volcanic geology for warmth and protection. Few European building styles of the period could have matched its efficiency through an Icelandic winter. The turf house is Icelandic biomimicry, long before that word came into use to describe oneness with Nature.

Accept Ásatrú (Norse paganism) more openly and without apology, but with additions from the Indigenous worldview. Iceland’s neo-pagan movement seeks to return the individual to balance with nature, offering a sanctuary from the pressures of a developing world and a focus on the land’s hidden forces. This movement continues to grow in Iceland, and it represents a genuine cultural decolonization that can be enhanced by returning to a view of all more-than-human life forms as relations and as teachers.

Recognize that darkness itself is a teacher. Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, such as the Inuit and the Sámi, did not regard winter darkness as something

negative. Like the Kogi, whose *mamos* use darkness in caves for cultivating great insight, Indigenous peoples have often created culture, story, ceremony, and wisdom inside darkness—as the Lakota do with the inipi ceremony. Reclaiming such a perspective without shame is a way of reclaiming the Indigenous worldview precepts in the chart below.

Connect with other Indigenous peoples as peers, not as colonizers. Icelanders are positioned to do this in a way most European nations are not: Iceland has no settler-colonial relationship with a displaced Indigenous population on its own soil, and Icelanders themselves lived for centuries under foreign rule. That shared experience of subordination may be why Iceland has built genuine solidarity with Indigenous peoples globally, learning from their decolonization movements and offering its own story in return.

Honor the land as teacher, not resource. The deepest expression of Indigenous identity anywhere in the world is the understanding that the land owns the people, not the other way around. Icelanders already sense this. Every eruption, every earthquake, every glacial flood reminds them that they live on Nature's terms. Naming that feeling explicitly, culturally and politically, rather than managing it as a “natural hazard,” would be the final step from colonial consciousness back to Indigenous consciousness.

Continue to build a Spirit- and Nature-based community. An Icelander I met in April told me that while harsh weather conditions, especially in winter, may not always create a sense of safety, community does. That is an Indigenous truth, stated plainly. Not walls, not weapons, not surveillance, but community—forged in shared hardship and shared joy on a shared landscape. That is what more than eleven centuries of living on fire and ice, in darkness and storm, produces in a people willing to listen to their land rather than conquer it.

In Closing

This article has been about Iceland becoming a model for showing the rest of the colonial world what Indigenous cultures have tried in vain to show: that we must live in accord with the Laws of Nature, with its spirits engaging with ours, and not only by the human-centered laws of human beings. However, anyone reading this from any country or culture can work in their own community and make it a model. Iceland simply has a head start.

Iceland also holds a mysterious possibility unavailable to those countries that know the land they occupy once belonged to Indigenous peoples. That possibility is that Iceland may have had Indigenous people of its own. While this is very unlikely, the Celtic and Norse people who came to Iceland may even have had children with them. I offer the two brief fictions below to leave this mystery on the table for whatever role it might play in Iceland's understanding of itself.

These stories are offered not as claims of historical fact, but as imaginative provocations meant to loosen the grip of inherited narratives and to invite Icelanders to reconsider the possibility, however unlikely, that their relationship to this land may be older, deeper, and less severed from Indigeneity than they have been taught to believe.

Story One

A fiction. When the Irish monks called the papar first rowed into the grey harbors of Iceland around 790 AD, they did not find the island entirely empty. Hidden in the steam-warmed valleys of the interior, a handful of people watched them arrive: the last remnant of a people whose name no manuscript would ever record. The monks, bound by vows and yet profoundly human, stayed through the long winters. Children were born. When the Norse settlers arrived a century later and the monks hastily departed, they left behind not only their bronze bells and vellum scraps, but blood carried quietly forward in the islanders who would become Icelanders—unwritten and unspoken of, for every obvious reason.

Story Two

A fiction. Long before the first eruption split the sky and the glaciers swallowed the lowlands whole, there were people on Iceland, more than tens of thousands of years ago. They had learned to live amid the fire and ice in remarkable ways. They were fully aware of the Spirits in them and all around them. They built nothing intended to last, knowing they would move on eventually. Then volcanoes, ice, and ocean covered and erased all trace of them. They are not a possibility to scientists. They are not in the Icelandic histories or the sagas. They are not in the DNA studies. They exist only in the oldest logical possibility: that wherever land appeared and could be reached, something living eventually found it. The humans disappeared, but their Spirits stayed.

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Appendix

Fundamental Relational Arenas and the Two Contrasting Non-Binary Worldview Precepts

1. **Social Structure** → Rigid hierarchy ↔ Egalitarian
2. **Faith & Trust** → Fear-based thoughts and behaviors ↔ Courage and fearless trust in the universe
3. **Purpose in Life** → Living without strong social purpose ↔ Socially purposeful life
4. **Motivation & Values** → Focus on self and personal gain ↔ Emphasis on community welfare
5. **Gender & Identity** → Rigid and discriminatory gender stereotypes ↔ Respect for various gender roles and fluidity
6. **Material vs. Spiritual Value** → Emphasis on possessions ↔ Emphasis on intangible values
7. **View of Earth** → Earth as an unloving “it” ↔ Earth and all systems are living and loving
8. **Ways of Knowing** → Emphasis on intellect ↔ Emphasis on heart wisdom
9. **Competition & Growth** → Competition to feel superior ↔ Competition to develop positive potential
10. **Empathy** → Lacking empathy ↔ Empathetic
11. **Human–Nature Relationship** → Anthropocentric ↔ Bio-centric
12. **Language & Truth** → Words used to deceive self or others ↔ Words are sacred, truthfulness is essential
13. **Epistemology** → Truth claims as absolute, intolerant of ambiguity ↔ Truth considered multifaceted, accepting the mysterious
14. **Boundaries & Systems** → Rigid boundaries and fragmented systems ↔ Flexible boundaries and interconnected systems
15. **Consciousness States** → Unfamiliarity with alternative consciousness ↔ Regular use of alternative consciousness
16. **Spiritual Perception** → Imperceptive of spirit in All ↔ Recognition of spirit in All
17. **Interconnectedness** → Disregard for holistic interconnectedness ↔ Emphasis on holistic interconnectedness
18. **Social Connection** → Minimal contact with others ↔ High interpersonal engagement, touching
19. **Knowledge & Action** → Emphasis on theory and rhetoric ↔ Inseparability of knowledge and action
20. **Power & Authority** → Acceptance of authoritarianism ↔ Resistance to authoritarianism
21. **Perception of Time** → Time as linear ↔ Time as cyclical, permeable and fluid
22. **Thinking & Polarity** → Dualistic thinking ↔ Seeking complementary duality
23. **Justice Orientation** → Acceptance of injustice ↔ Intolerance of injustice
24. **Rights & Responsibility** → Emphasis on rights ↔ Emphasis on responsibility
25. **Economy & Exchange** → Accumulation (hoarding) as way of life ↔ Generosity is way of life
26. **Ritual & Ceremony** → Ceremony as rote formality ↔ Ceremony is life-sustaining
27. **Learning Approach** → Learning as didactic ↔ Learning is experiential and collaborative
28. **Trance & Transformation** → Trance is dangerous or stemming from evil ↔ Trance-based learning is helpful and natural
29. **View of Human Nature** → Human nature as corrupt or evil ↔ Human nature is good but malleable
30. **Humor & Humility** → Humor used for put downs ↔ Humor is essential tool for coping

31. **Conflict Resolution** → Conflict mitigated via revenge, punishment ↔ Conflict resolution is return to community
32. **Education & Participation** → Learning is individualistic and passive ↔ Learning is holistic and place-based
33. **Vitality & Energy** → Personal vitality minimized ↔ Personal vitality is essential
34. **Law & Order** → Societal laws are primary ↔ Nature's laws are primary
35. **Self-Knowledge** → Self-knowledge not prioritized ↔ Holistic self-knowledge is most important
36. **Autonomy & Collective Good** → Autonomy for self alone ↔ Autonomy for individual, group, & future generations
37. **Perception of Nature** → Nature as dangerous or utilitarian only ↔ Nature is benevolent and relational
38. **Sentience of Life** → Other-than-human beings are not sentient ↔ All earth forms are sentient
39. **Respect for the Feminine** → Low respect for the feminine ↔ High respect for the feminine
40. **Diversity & Inclusion** → Little realization of the importance of diversity ↔ Honors diversity and multiple perspectives
41. **Healing & Transformation** → Privatized healing and individualized transformation ↔ Communal healing and transformative gatherings
42. **Relationship to Land** → Detachment from the land ↔ Bonded to the land
43. **Human Development** → De-emphasizing becoming fully human ↔ Emphasis on becoming fully human
44. **Relational Dependence** → Independence from relations ↔ Mutual dependence
45. **Motivation & Gratitude** → Centrality of striving ↔ Centrality of gratitude
46. **Ethics of Influence** → Manipulation of others ↔ Noninterference
47. **Relational Healing** → Relational healing is outsourced to experts ↔ Relational healing is self-initiated
48. **Death & Mortality** → Fearing and avoiding death to the extreme ↔ Understanding and embracing death and dying
49. **Guiding Principles** → Competition as a guiding principle ↔ Reciprocity as a guiding principle
50. **Cosmic Relationship** → Scientific interest in the cosmos ↔ Practical and spiritual connection to cosmos
51. **Child Raising** → Medicalized by experts, nuclear family units, separate from community and nature ↔ Communal involvement, viewed as sacred ceremony, and reciprocal relationship with the living world.

The Top Cop in School

An Abolitionist Reckoning with SEL as Policing Across Converging Conservative and Liberal Agendas

Riley Drake, Benjamin Kearl,
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Abstract

Social emotional learning (SEL) has become a site of intense ideological dispute in U.S. education, drawing fierce opposition from white Christian nationalist (WCN) organizations like Moms for Liberty, who frame this pedagogical process as anti-American indoctrination, while liberal proponents champion the process as a means to safer, more equitable schools. In this paper, we ask: *What is the purpose of SEL in schools? How are competing political movements, such as white Christian nationalism and liberal reformism, implicated in this purpose?* We trace the origins of SEL in eugenic logics of social emotional “competence” and examine the function of this process as a tool of social control, or what we call the “top cop” in school. Through the figure of the White Lady Bountiful, SEL works to pathologize outlaw emotions and enforce hierarchical compliance. While conservative critics and liberal reformers appear to occupy opposing positions, both ultimately serve the same structural function: the production of compliance in the interest of white supremacy. Crucially, culturally responsive SEL does not escape this logic, exemplifying reformist reform that renders the mechanisms of compliance more palatable without dismantling the underlying purpose. Drawing on prison industrial complex abolition and transformative justice, we argue that SEL cannot be reformed and must be abolished.

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We close with implications for educators and counselor educators committed to abolitionist practices that resist the structural conditions of schooling and build toward collective healing, accountability, and liberation.

Keywords: social emotional learning, white supremacy, white Christian nationalism, liberal reform, abolition

Introduction

In the United States, social emotional learning (SEL), or the teaching of relationship skills and emotion management, has come under heavy scrutiny from those with conservative political ideologies, including within the Department of Education, who argue that it amounts to “veiled” discrimination (Vilcarino & Prothero, 2025). Several right-wing organizations claim that SEL is infused with Critical Race Theory (CRT) under the guise of empathy and respect for others. Others suggest that SEL is the most recent attempt in “de-Christianizing education” (Aldrich & Meltzer, 2025). Extremist conservative groups like Moms for Liberty, a nonprofit political advocacy group that organizes for “parental rights,” suggest SEL negatively impacts education, resulting in “massive spending, declining mental health, plummeting proficiency rates, and concerning anti-American rhetoric” (Moms for Liberty, n.d.).

While many rebuke SEL’s “invasion” of U.S. schools, others advocate for its value, arguing that SEL contributes to safer learning environments (Vilcarino & Prothero, 2025). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the flagship organization for SEL in the U.S., for example, defines SEL as:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (2026a, para. 1)

By learning about various abilities (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) and related skills intended to facilitate students’ social relationships and manage their emotions, CASEL (2026b) argues that SEL can guide students to develop *social emotional competence* to be successful in school, future careers, and life.

This goal, to create competence, suggests that desirable social and emotional skills, abilities, and knowledge exist, creating a standard to which all capabilities can be compared. Competence in SEL is constituted by the implicit underlying frame of reference or standard against which all young people are ranked. This standard is white supremacy, and SEL serves as a tool to maintain it (Drake & Oglesby, 2020). We borrow from Gillborn (2006) to define white supremacy:

[W]hite supremacy is not only, nor indeed primarily, associated with relatively small and extreme political movements that openly mobilize on the basis of race

hatred (important and dangerous though such groups are): rather, supremacy is seen to relate to the operation of forces that saturate the everyday, mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of white people. (p. 320)

White supremacy is constant, yet evolving through structural violence (Keisch & Scott, 2015). Acting in overtly oppressive and covertly tyrannical ways, groups like Moms for Liberty are constitutive of white supremacy (Kearl & Mayes, 2024) and have been compared “to pro-segregationist parent groups that flourished in the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*” (Yousef, 2023, para. 11).

If white supremacy is constituted not only by those who openly oppose SEL but by the “mundane” forces that shape schooling in the interests of white people (Gillborn, 2006; Seawright, 2024), we must ask whether critics and proponents are as substantively misaligned in their underlying aims as they appear. To explore the ways in which SEL is entangled with larger political movements, we ask: *What is the purpose of SEL in schools? How are competing political movements, such as white Christian nationalism and liberal reformism, implicated in this purpose?* In what follows, we describe our social locations relevant to our conceptualizations, then explore white Christian Nationalism as a movement sweeping the U.S. with renewed urgency.

Positionality

Riley comes to this conceptual work as a white woman who has benefited from whiteness in schools. She is a former elementary school counselor who taught SEL traditionally for years until she was politicized, reconceptualizing her role and critically appraising SEL’s function in schools. As a white woman, she is implicated in every word of this work and is committed to abolition, which includes the abolition of whiteness and white supremacy.

Benjamin is a white, cishet man and independent scholar whose work interrogates and critiques the systemic structures of whiteness that have benefited him. Benjamin approaches SEL as a manifestation of whiteness that dictates which students’ emotions matter in schools and what emotions students are allowed to express. Toward this end, Benjamin hopes to find space and place for life-affirming expressions of student emotionality, including felt articulations of Black Joy. For Benjamin, critical scholarship is a continuing practice of dis-identifying with the structural currents of white supremacy discussed throughout.

Renae is a Black woman who is a former school counselor and current school counselor educator. In her P-12 schooling, Renae often had to navigate structures and systems, including curricula that engaged in policing and erasing her. In her current role, she centers Black joy and well-being to ensure that students who look like her, as well as other minoritized students, get to experience their full humanity in schools.

Yi-Yun (Minnie) is an East Asian woman who completed her K-12 education at American schools in Thailand. She is a recent PhD graduate in Counselor Education and Supervision from a predominantly white institution. She is a former elementary and high school teacher and college/career counselor, and is working toward becoming a school counselor educator, developing future school counselors who practice critical flexibility and restorative justice.

Our combined understanding of U.S. schooling positions us to critically examine the function of SEL in schools. With varied experiences, particularly with proximity to policing in schools, and different vantage points, we challenge neutral, disembodied approaches to inquiry. In developing our ideas and writing toward liberation, our socially situated knowledge converges to build strong objectivity, positioning the relationship between knowledge and politics at the core of our conceptual analysis and framing (Harding, 1993). Writing toward liberation requires situating our analysis within the political forces that structure schooling, foremost among them the resurgence of white Christian nationalism.

White Christian Nationalism

Burke et al. (2023) describe four core assumptions around which white Christian nationalism (WCN) coalesce: (1) the U.S. is a Christian nation whose founding was divinely inspired; (2) society is ordered by and should be governed through rigid hierarchies; (3) freedom is God-given and owed to those atop social hierarchies; and (4) the importance of these core assumptions justifies violent uses of authoritarianism and warrants the suspension of deliberative democracy. These assumptions drive WCN actions across all aspects of society to ensure hierarchical dominance, which holds the needs and power of white, cisgender male Christians at the center. Further,

White Christian nationalism asserts the dominance and authority of Christianity in defining the nation-state and, by extension, state-sponsored education. It draws strong boundaries, indeed Manichean binaries, between those belonging to the divinely ordained nation-state imagery (White Christian people like ‘us’) and those who do not belong (people like ‘them’). (Burke et al., 2023, p. 287)

What distinguishes WCN from everyday forms of religious practice is a guiding belief that US public institutions should not only reflect Christian mores but should assert Christianity as *the* institutional norm. For example, over 15 Republican states have introduced legislation requiring the Ten Commandments to be displayed in classrooms along with requiring prayer, Bible reading or chaplains in public schools (Vasilogambros, 2025).

Critically, this idealized vision of America’s past and future is not universally shared. Within the hierarchical ordering of the U.S. polity advanced by WCN, only white, heterosexual, cisgender men are positioned as the rightful inheritors of this sacred past and the divinely ordained architects of its future. Although

Christian privilege has broadly undergirded American educational institutions despite longstanding rhetoric of church-state separation, WCN is less a matter of sincere religious practice than an assertion of political dominance oriented toward the production of public spaces that are constitutively white and Christian and structured through the systematic exclusion of non-white and ethnoreligious minority populations.

Although WCN's political ideology is not necessarily coterminous with religious faith or political affiliation, white evangelicals and conservatives are more likely to identify with and thus accommodate its core assumptions. The present iteration of WCN emerges from a longer history in which Christianity and racism have reciprocally justified authoritarian violence. Decontextualized proof-texting by theological apologists has lent divine purpose to settler colonialism, state-sanctioned lynchings, and institutional uses of scientific racism. While there is no singular origin to contemporary eruptions of WCN, historians tend to locate postwar governmental policies intended to alleviate educational segregation as a critical juncture in the continuing emergence of this political ideology and its deep commitment to the God-ordained right of white mothers to both dictate public education and segregate their children's education (Kearl & Mayes, 2024). Present-day examples of white motherhood's role in education can be seen in organizations like Moms for Liberty, which actively proclaim (white) parental rights, often to the detriment of the safety of minoritized youth. This organization has weaponized language to insist that inclusive policies, practices, and curricula are "woke ideologies" that have no place in K-12 schools. They have also infiltrated local, state, and federal governments to ensure the demise of public education (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). The persistence of this agenda across institutional levels from school boards to federal government illuminates a longer history of white women's investment in controlling what and how young people learn, a dynamic we explore below.

White Lady Bountiful

White women, such as those leading the charge for "parental rights," have always been implicated in the state's goals to "civilize" young people. Conjuring the "Lady Bountiful" image to depict the colonial tutor or governess who was tasked with ushering youth toward morality, Harper (2000) describes the white lady teacher as a colonizer, molding "Native" pupils into "civilized" citizens. White women were ideal for this role: they had enough power to reproduce colonization and patriarchy, but were limited in their power to challenge the underlying assumptions and goals of their roles.

The goals of U.S. schooling include molding young people to acquiesce to the nation-state's social stratification. For white women, who were encouraged as "republican mothers" to accept their moral duty and obligations as saviors needed to civilize savage frontiers, their roles were and are still essential to the mainte-

nance of white supremacy (Kearl & Mayes, 2024). Catherine Beecher, an educator who opposed women's suffrage and instead embraced and promoted women's domesticity in the home, encouraged white women, saying:

Soon in all parts of our country, in each neglected village or new settlement, the Christian female will quietly take her station, collecting the ignorant children around her, teaching them the habit of neatness, order, thrift, opening the book of knowledge, inspiring principles of morality and awakening the hope of immortality. (Catherine Beecher, 1846, as cited in Meiners, 2007)

For Beecher, social control came from schooling, or the dissemination of imperialism, individualism, conservatism, capitalism, and Protestantism (Meiners, 2007). The White Lady Bountiful “saved” young people (i.e., Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color) from themselves and their cultures, policing their bodies and “outlaw emotions,” or those emotional responses of resistance, which are “distinguished by their incompatibility with the dominant perceptions and values...” (Jaggard, 1989, p. 144). When young people who are facing state violence or forced assimilation in schools display outlaw emotions, including anger, grief, and rage in response to oppression and domination, they are met with increasing surveillance and punishment from predominantly white women teachers. Despite the fact that rage is a reasonable and justifiable emotional experience and response, especially to the institutionalization of schooling that devalues and punishes cultural expressions of emotion that deviate from white, Christian ideologies, the White Lady Bountiful is cast to extinguish such emotions. She acts to teach self-control, anger management, and appropriate interpersonal skills, delegitimizing and pathologizing outlaw emotions and their role in resistance to white supremacy.

SEL, then, serves as a primary disciplining pedagogy, acting as a form of “soft policing” for White Lady Bountiful (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). For example, many approaches to SEL suggest that anger must be suppressed and an attitude of optimism should be cultivated (Boler, 1999; Coskun, 2019). When reductively framed as individual and decontextualized states, emotions are conceptualized as something individuals “have.” However, emotions are social and political forces that circulate between bodies and signs, shaping social relations and power (Ahmed, 2013). Further, the concept of emotional literacy is not neutral, as emotions have become tied to whether an individual is a “good” student, worker, or citizen (Boler, 1999). For Black students already navigating the racist conflation of emotional expression with aggression, being taught to breathe through anger carries an implicit lesson: that their emotions are unsafe to express, rendering schools an “emotionally inhibiting environment” where constant vigilance over emotional expression is required (Lozada et al., 2022, p. 14).

SEL functions as an instrument of social control, driven by white saviorism that pathologizes Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, displaces systemic accountability onto individuals and families, and privileges assimilation

to white, Christian, colonialist norms over young people's freedom to be fully themselves. Below, we explore the history and origins of SEL.

Social Emotional Learning: Care or Control?

Traditional SEL: Institutional Policing

In 1994, a group of researchers and educators gathered at the Fetzer Institute, presumably concerned with children's positive development (CASEL, 2026c). From this meeting, CASEL was born; meeting attendees formed the national leadership team and introduced SEL as the "missing piece" in education (CASEL, 2026c). One of the attendees, Goleman, a CASEL co-founder (CASEL, 2026c), is widely credited with shaping the field of SEL (Boler, 1999; Durlak et al., 2015; Elias et al., 1997; Stearns, 2019). Goleman's (1995) work on emotional intelligence, an expansion of earlier theorizing (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), received wide acclaim, as educators were entranced by the idea that individuals could improve their overall life outcomes by improving their emotional intelligence, "which includes self-control, zeal, and persistence, and the ability to motivate oneself. And these skills, as we shall see, can be taught to children, giving them a better chance to use whatever intellectual potential the genetic lottery may have given them" (Goleman, 1995, p. ix). Goleman's argument presupposes that sufficient instruction can remediate children's emotional deficiencies irrespective of genetic inheritance, a premise that Boler (1999) identifies as fundamentally eugenic in its underlying logic.

Eugenics was engineered in the late 1800s and early 1900s, suggesting that the human species could be genetically modified and thus improved through selective breeding (National Human Genome Research Institute, 2022). This pseudoscience rested on the assumption that qualities such as (emotional) intelligence were genetically inherited, and that the human species could be manipulated through selective breeding, segregation, and other forms of isolation, thereby emphasizing the exclusion of those deemed "degenerate" (Boler, 1999). Under eugenics, those identified as inferior were targeted in efforts to "fix" them, which under an "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2000) disproportionately impacted Black people, disabled people, and queer and trans people (National Human Genome Research Institute, 2022). As a policing tool for WCN, emotional intelligence constructs a binary between those deemed to possess the genetic capacities for competence and those deemed not to (Burke et al., 2023).

In practice, traditional SEL approaches to self-management are organized around the acquisition of decontextualized regulatory techniques presumed to be universally applicable and neutral. A classroom lesson on self-management might instruct students to identify their emotional state using a feelings chart, apply a breathing or mindfulness strategy to return to a calm state, and redirect their attention to academic tasks. Students are taught to recognize "unhelpful" emotions

(e.g., anger, grief, frustration) as internal disruptions to be managed rather than as reasonable responses to material conditions and are guided toward restoring emotional stability as a prerequisite for productive participation in schooling. The standard against which emotions are measured is unmarked and presented as universal, yet reflects the affective norms of white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, Christian culture (i.e., composure, deference, optimism, and the subordination of emotional expression to institutional demand).

In traditional SEL, the emphasis is on self-management and social skills, with a focus on one's ability to self-govern rather than on external circumstances that may influence emotions and relationships. Goleman's emphasis on what Boler (1999) described as "self-policing" is evident throughout much of traditional SEL. For WCN, SEL serves as a form of internal imperialism, asserting the dominance and authority of white supremacy as "competence," and justifying it through institutional scientific racism (Miller, 2022). But is all SEL irredeemable? Are there SEL approaches that are more liberatory? Critiques of traditional SEL's eugenic foundations and deficit orientation have generated considerable momentum (Boler, 1999; Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Cipollone et al., 2022; Drake & Oglesby, 2020; Kaler-Jones, 2020), particularly toward culturally responsive alternatives. Yet these alternatives raise a question: whether they transform the underlying logic of SEL or simply rearrange it.

Theorizing Reformist Logic

The distinction between reformist reforms and non-reformist reforms is central to abolitionist thought (Davis, 2003; Kaba, 2021). Reformist reforms are those that, however well-intentioned, ultimately strengthen the systems they purport to challenge. These reforms typically rearrange or modify the mechanisms of harm without interrogating the underlying logic that constructs it. Non-reformist reforms were introduced by André Gorz, a French-Austrian philosopher and political theorist (1964). Gorz distinguished between reformist reforms, which stabilize and reinforce existing systems, and non-reformist reforms, or structural reforms, which chip away at the foundations of those systems and build toward their transformation. Non-reformist reforms are evaluated by whether they shift power, reduce the capacity of harmful institutions, make those institutions obsolete, and move toward their eventual dismantling. This distinction is a structural analysis of what reforms do, regardless of intent.

Abolitionist scholars have applied this framework most visibly to policing and incarceration, demonstrating how liberal reforms such as diversity hiring, bias training, body cameras, and community policing initiatives have consistently failed to reduce harm and have, in many cases, expanded the power and legitimacy of carceral institutions (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). Each reform absorbs critique in ways that modernize and re-legitimize the institution's continued existence.

Rather than transform, the system adapts. As Kaba (2021) argues, you cannot reform your way out of a system whose fundamental purpose is harm.

This logic applies with particular relevance to schooling. Educational reforms, including those advanced under the banner of equity and cultural responsiveness, are not exempt from reformist reproduction. When reforms leave intact the purpose of schooling and SEL, which, as we have argued, is the production of hierarchical compliance in the interest of white supremacy, rather than liberate, those reforms simply modernize the mechanisms of their subjugation. The reform becomes a technology of legitimation, absorbing dissent and rendering the institution more durable and difficult to challenge. In this way, progressive educational reform can function as a “fix” or “tweaking Armageddon,” a temporary resolution to a crisis of legitimacy that stabilizes rather than transforms the system manufacturing the crisis (Gillmore, 2007).

SEL is particularly susceptible to the limits of reform because the co-optation of the language of care, relationships, and emotional well-being speaks directly to the needs that students most harmed by schooling experience most acutely, rendering compliance logic concealed within that language especially difficult to contest. SEL’s language of care retains appeal by indexing pressing student needs; what reformist approaches fail to reckon with is the degree to which that language has been instrumentalized to reproduce the conditions it purports to address. Care, within SEL frameworks, is extended only to students who comply with the hierarchical ordering of schooling and manage their emotions in sanctioned ways. When progressive reforms retain this conditional structure, even as they diversify cultural expression, the essential logic is reproduced.

The operative question is therefore not whether a given SEL framework is culturally responsive, or whether a framework is explicit about racism and other forms of systemic oppression. Instead, we must ask whether the framework retains the premise that students must be brought to competence, that there is a standard to which young people must be shaped. If that premise remains, the reform is reformist. Rendering the mechanisms of compliance more culturally affirming does not alter the structural imperative they serve; the demand for conformity to a white supremacist-articulated standard of competence persists across reformist iterations. Within culturally responsive approaches to SEL, this reformist dynamic becomes particularly legible because the explicit engagement with equity and cultural difference makes the persistence of the underlying compliance imperative more revealing.

Culturally Responsive SEL: Reformist Policing

Dissatisfied with the color-evasive (Annamma et al., 2017) and deficit-based nature of traditional SEL, some scholars depart from these origins and seek to incorporate equity-based or culturally responsive pedagogies within SEL (Barnes, 2019; El Mallah, 2020; Jagers et al., 2019; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

To be clear, scholars use terms such as culturally relevant, culturally responsive, equity-oriented, and critically conscious, which are distinct pedagogical approaches, yet all point to the inclusion of students' lived experiences and cultural assets, often with attention to oppression, in SEL instruction. These approaches are united by the belief that students, particularly Black and Brown students, need SEL to do well in school, but in ways that align with who they are and how they have been impacted by oppressive conditions.

This departure from traditional SEL, which focuses on how to "fix" individual students exposed to oppression such as racism and classism, is a move away from SEL's foundational deficit orientation, described as "problematic, because it does not draw from students' familial and cultural strengths to support mental health or address the systemic inequities that underlie the negative social-emotional outcomes faced by families" (McCallops et al., 2019, p. 12). In response to this issue, culturally responsive SEL is "instruction that utilizes the lived experiences and frames of reference of students to reinforce and teach SEL competencies" (McCallops et al., 2019, p. 12).

The culturally responsive approach routinely encourages educators to check their biases (Barnes & McCallops, 2019) and conceptualize SEL as a cultural practice (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020) for academic achievement. Transformative SEL, for example, recommends integrating identity and agency, among other constructs, into academic instruction practice, so that students can "practice SEL competencies every day as part of their journey towards academic excellence" (Schwartz et al., 2023, p. 13). In practice, the culturally responsive approach to self-management might be to shift from feelings charts and breathing strategies to practices that leverage culture, such as inviting students to learn about the self-soothing practices of diverse communities through guest speakers or pictures hung on classroom walls that depict these culturally specific practices, all for the purpose of enhanced academic achievement and social emotional competence. As part of this approach, educators might note that racism requires students of color to cope with cumulative, complex stress, transitioning the blame from individuals to oppressive systems (Jagers et al., 2018) and leading students through coping strategies with systemic oppression in mind.

We recognize the equity commitments motivating these approaches, even as we argue that, regardless of intent, culturally responsive approaches to SEL frequently reproduce the structural conditions they seek to address. The goal remains: to teach SEL competencies, assuming standardized attitudes, knowledge, and skills. The reforms described above improve existing systems without destabilizing underlying power structures. The goal is still competence defined by and in the interests of white supremacy, and grounding that goal in students' lived experiences only further institutionalizes social emotional policing.

Culturally responsive SEL, like traditional SEL, centers students' development of social emotional competence to redirect emotional energy toward sanc-

tioned forms of participation in schooling (Drake, 2022). When describing an equity-oriented approach to self-management, proponents asserted that “instead of becoming emotion-focused and disengaged, students could become more focused on identifying situational or societal challenges and pursuing individual or collective solutions” (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 6). Moms for Liberty expresses similar sentiments: Tiffany Justice, co-founder, stated: “It’s very hard to focus on learning math if we’re all talking about, you know, Johnny’s dog that died” (Aldrich & Meltzer, 2025, para. 11). The more ostensibly transformative iteration of SEL and Moms for Liberty share this fundamental demand, that students redirect emotion away from disengagement and toward productive participation, which is not coincidental but structural, reflecting a shared commitment to compliance.

SEL serves to advance students’ competence in producing solutions rather than resorting to presumably “maladaptive” coping skills, such as becoming “emotion-focused,” which could distract from schooling’s forced assimilation. Generally, the right’s goal is to silence “outlaw emotions” and absorb dissent. When (predominantly white) educators coerce young people into denying their expansiveness, SEL is doing the work of WCN for them. Acting as a force dictating public education, these examples suggest that SEL can be adapted in ways that are responsive to culture, while the goal remains the same: molding students toward a white supremacist-articulated level of competence (Kearl & Mayes, 2024). Like cops wearing cameras, a popular reform strategy, this approach to SEL does not significantly reduce the power of social and emotional policing.

SEL as Top Cop

What distinguishes culturally responsive SEL from traditional SEL is not underlying logic but presentation: a reformist reconfiguration that assumes the appearance of progressive transformation while leaving the institutional demand for hierarchical compliance structurally intact. Despite acknowledgment of difference and equity, the predetermined standards of competence embedded in these frameworks remain impervious to the input of students and families of color they most directly govern. These expectations undermine meaningful and critical connections among peers and educators and are often reinforced through policing to maintain order, furthering “internal imperialism” in schools under the guise of an affirming and inclusive environment (Miller, 2022, p. 109).

In implementation, schools use SEL to train students into “appropriate” ways of being in their particular role in the hierarchical ordering (i.e., men over women and gender-nonconforming people, adults over children, whites over Black and Brown people), a stratification reflecting white, Christian, colonialist ideals (Boler, 1999; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). When students, especially Black and Brown young people, do not acquiesce, they are then guided by “caring police” to the

next level of intervention to receive more intense training in the social ordering of the hierarchy (Boler, 1999). These “corrections” happen such that students, especially minoritized students, eventually must comply or are pushed out of schools, which is reflected in the disproportionate rates of Black and Brown students who continue to be surveilled, punished, and disposed of (e.g., suspended, transferred to “alternative” schools) even after the widespread implementation of SEL across multitiered systems of support (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Consequently, the implementation of SEL functions as schooling’s top cop, acting under the guise of behavioral strategies that promote “kindness,” frequently led by White Lady Bountifuls, all the while steadily forcing assimilation and enacting social and emotional policing on students of color (Cipollone et al., 2022; Meiners, 2007). School push-out reinforces the disposability of students of color, many of whom often engage in refusal to comply with the hierarchical ordering of SEL and associated “competencies” in schools (Cipollone et al., 2022; Kaler-Jones, 2020). Educators committed to the well-being of students, particularly those most harmed by schooling, must move beyond the reformist logic exemplified by successive iterations of SEL and toward political visions that contest the institutional nature of social emotional policing inherent in schooling.

Abolishing SEL

What would meeting students’ needs for social relationships and emotional well-being require, beyond the institutional and carceral logic that SEL serves? We must move beyond the iterative revision of existing frameworks and toward the abolitionist political traditions that have most rigorously theorized the relationship among structural violence, community safety, and social transformation. In what follows, we draw on prison industrial complex abolition and transformative justice as frameworks for imagining educational practices that refuse the production of hierarchical compliance and instead cultivate collective safety, social connection, accountability, well-being, and liberation.

Prison Industrial Complex Abolition

Prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition opposes the foundational premise that prisons and policing create safety, arguing instead that the criminal punishment system operates as a mechanism of structural violence organized around the interests of private and governmental power (Kaba, 2021). The PIC, far from functioning as a neutral arbiter of public safety, operates as an interlocking network of private and state interests that disproportionately targets Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, disabled people, and those rendered economically precarious by racial capitalism (Critical Resistance, n.d.; Davis, 2003). The militarization of police, despite and in response to community-led resistance, alongside the expansion of private prisons and the construction of facilities such

as Cop City in Atlanta, Georgia, reflects the entrenchment of a carceral system functioning precisely as designed (Hamlin, 2023).

Abolitionist thought refuses the premise that this system can be made just through reform. Rather than investing public resources in the infrastructure of punishment and surveillance, abolitionists argue that those resources must be redirected toward the conditions that make communities safe: accessible child-care, housing, healthcare, education, and economic security (Davis, 2003). The overwhelming majority of violence is rooted in unmet survival needs: the material deprivation, chronic trauma, social dislocation, and organized abandonment manufactured by racial capitalism and concentrated inequality (Gilmore, 2007; Sered, 2019). When public resources are redirected from carceral infrastructure toward community investment and mutual aid, communities develop the capacity to build their own practices of safety, healing, and accountability, addressing the conditions that construct harm rather than punishing those most harmed by them.

The implications for schooling are direct. Schools function as sites of carceral reproduction, deploying tools like SEL to surveil, regulate, isolate, and discipline students in the interest of hierarchical compliance. Abolition redirects educators away from institutional improvement (i.e., reform) and toward the active work of building community infrastructures that refuse and displace the carceral logic SEL serves.

Transformative Justice

Transformative justice is rooted in the survival strategies and collective resistance of Black women, women of color, domestic and sexual violence survivors, and queer communities, those most directly targeted by state and interpersonal violence and most systematically failed by institutions nominally designed to protect them (Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2019). Constructed through anti-violence movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, transformative justice developed as a community-based alternative to carceral responses to harm (Kim, 2018; Rasmussen & Shah, 2022). This political and relational approach theorizes the criminal justice system as fundamentally harmful, demanding healing processes that sustain the whole community, address survivors' needs, and find pathways to reintegrate those who have caused harm (Morris, 2000). For those committed to social transformation, transformative justice cannot be distilled into a finite set of practices or prescriptive politics that neglect the decolonial commitments required of those who engage this work. As a framework for responding to harm, transformative justice assumes that reducing interpersonal and intimate violence requires challenging structural and state violence, such as policing and incarceration, which have proven consistently inadequate and routinely destructive, in favor of community-led accountability and collective healing (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022).

Transformative justice is frequently conflated with restorative justice, a confla-

tion that merits clarification. While RJ centers the repair of relationships disrupted by harm, transformative justice insists that the conditions that cause the harm must be transformed. Racial capitalism, cis-heteropatriarchy, ableism, gender oppression, xenophobia, and white supremacy, among other structures of oppression and domination, are the root structures that transformative justice commits to dismantling (Mingus, 2019). In this sense, transformative justice is a political framework and orientation that centers institutions under scrutiny and demands transformation as a practice of accountability to the communities they have harmed.

Using transformative justice as an analytic exposes SEL as a fundamentally anti-transformative framework. Where SEL individualizes and pathologizes young people, locating the problem in students rather than in the systems that engender their distress, transformative justice insists on addressing structural conditions directly. Where SEL centers the development of individual competencies that render students more manageable within an institution whose fundamental purpose remains unchanged, transformative justice centers community accountability and collective healing. Acting as a tool for WCN and in alignment with liberal reformist movements, SEL teaches and legitimates compliance, reinforcing the carceral state under the guise of care and well-being.

Moving beyond SEL as a framework for addressing students' social and emotional lives requires educators to engage in a more fundamental reckoning: with the beliefs, emotions, values, and practices that schooling currently forecloses, and with the communities, ways of being, relational infrastructures, and forms of accountability that abolitionist practice might build in their place. We are reminded that "part of [our] task means not treating abolition as a singular or revolutionary 'event' but as an ongoing process and practice" (Lamble, 2021, p. 147). Thus, abolishing SEL is a process that will unfold over time and requires educators to actively create the conditions for healing and accountability in each interaction, especially in moments of harm (Alexander, 2022). Through transformative justice, educators might work toward what Mingus (2019) describes as transformative change at the root: the design of regenerative community infrastructures oriented toward safety, reciprocity, care, and the full expression of students' emotional and relational lives. Rather than reform SEL, educators must build and practice abolition.

In practice, abolition would be uninterested in and resist promoting self-management for the purposes of schooling. Rather than managing a student's emotional response, such as anger, abolition would create the conditions for that anger to be collectively held and politically analyzed. This might include pausing the class, with the student's consent, to discuss what happened, inviting students to connect the incident to broader patterns of structural harm, and centering the student's anger as a source of knowledge and politically powerful, rather than as pathologized or disruptive. Jaggar (1989) reminds us that outlaw emotions, such as anger, are not limited to responses to discrete, identifiable incidents of racial and structural

violence. These emotions arise from the accumulative weight of living within oppressive structures, which means the trigger for an outlaw emotion may appear mundane, minor, disproportionate, or even invisible to those who do not share the student's social location. Depending on the context and whether harm occurred, accountability might be invited or it might not. An educator might, if appropriate, invite whole-class consideration of the conditions that provoked the anger and, again, avoid pathologizing it. The educator might practice their own accountability in maintaining those conditions or in failing to subvert them. An abolitionist orientation would reject the premise that the student's anger requires resolution, instead treating it as politically and epistemically significant. Rather than interiorizing the emotion as an individual regulatory failure, abolitionist practice would historicize the anger, situating the student's response within the structural and intergenerational conditions that cultivated the emotion and inviting collective analysis of those conditions from all members of the classroom. In this way, the student's anger becomes an invitation for solidarity, as other students are called into political relationship with the conditions the emotion is expressing rather than positioned as witnesses to an individual's dysregulation. Abolition, in this way, offers what no iteration of SEL can. Rather than managing students' social emotional lives in service of compliance, abolition and transformative justice demand the collective transformation of the conditions that manufacture their distress.

Discussion and Implications

Far-right organizations such as Moms for Liberty have mounted sustained opposition to SEL, developing online curricula to train parents to identify and challenge SEL implementation in their schools and districts. This opposition, though viscerally focused on surface-level concerns such as empathy instruction and cultural inclusion, reveals limited engagement with SEL's structural functions and, unwittingly, the paradoxical convergence among seemingly opposing political agendas.

To be clear, the right's opposition to SEL is not without basis. SEL's equity-oriented iterations do introduce cultural and ideological frameworks that unsettle the explicitly white Christian nationalist vision of schooling, and the right perceives this unsettling accurately as a threat to the social order it seeks to protect. What the opposition cannot apprehend, organized around cultural and ideological form rather than structural function, is that these variations of SEL persist in reproducing the hierarchical compliance on which that social order depends.

Framing SEL by structural function rather than ideological form exposes the contradiction. Conservative and liberal approaches are organized around the same underlying commitment to hierarchical compliance and social order, yet articulate that commitment differently. WCN operates through overt hierarchical dominance, while liberal reformism seeks compliance by modernizing the mechanisms that reproduce that order. Both leave the structure intact. In other words,

the fight over SEL is a false war. If educators are not critical of all forms of SEL and the structural function they serve, they may inadvertently become instruments of white supremacy, serving broader agendas for social control.

Predominantly white women educators, the White Lady Bountiful, are molding young people every day to accept the social stratification that structures U.S. schooling, subduing their outlaw emotions and regulating their relationships in the process, whether consciously or not. If those students who resist are silenced and forced to comply, the project of white supremacy, which WCN spearheads overtly and liberal reformism maintains covertly, remains structurally intact. Recognizing this requires white women educators in particular to interrogate their historical and contemporary roles in schooling, tracing the white supremacist function SEL has always served through their instruction directly to the present.

This paper asked: *What is the purpose of SEL in schools? How are competing political movements, such as white Christian nationalism and liberal reformism, implicated in this purpose?* The purpose of SEL is the maintenance of white supremacy through the production of hierarchical compliance. The teachings of SEL, including those that promote self- and social awareness, are fundamentally organized around a need for young people to comply with a standardized way of feeling and acting in the world, described as social-emotional competence and functioning, which, as we have argued, amounts to white supremacy. Conservative movements like Moms for Liberty seek that same social control through ostensibly opposing means, fighting back against the liberal ideologies being shared with their children while, ironically, reproducing the same demand for hierarchical compliance those ideologies serve.

While some SEL programs do include explicit mention of LGBTQ families, racism, and topics like acceptance and tolerance, the bulk of the lessons in nearly all packaged curricula circulating in public schools neglect them (Barnes, 2019). SEL was built on eugenics ideology, and regardless of the cultural or equity-oriented terms in which it is presented, the approach, or the “top cop” in school, remains a project of hierarchical compliance. The reformist iterations of SEL deepen this structural commitment by rendering the institution more palatable, publicly sanctioned, and insulated from structural critique.

The question for us, then, is not how to reform SEL but what might lead to deep social transformation and a more just world, which cannot be answered from within the institution SEL serves. Schools as they currently exist cannot institutionalize abolition because abolitionist practice is inherently and directly oppositional to the present project of schooling. Thus, abolition cannot be conceived as a revised curriculum or an improved framework. Rather, abolition is a present-tense political practice that actively centers young people, especially those most directly impacted by the violence of schooling, in the building of collective safety and well-being. Abolition holds students’ outlaw emotions as ideologically consequential and politically significant rather than as disruptions requiring man-

agement, historicizes those emotions within the structural and intergenerational conditions that perpetuate them, and builds the conditions for collective analysis and solidarity rather than individual regulation and compliance. Abolition is organized around collective healing and transformative action rather than the restoration of the institutional order that produced the harm in the first place.

Educators must reckon with their role in promoting SEL and teaching young people to police themselves under the guise of care. School counselors are particularly implicated through their role as outlined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), which centers the identification and remediation of students' supposed social emotional needs, positioning individual students rather than oppressive systems as the site of intervention (Drake et al., 2024). School counselors must critically interrogate ASCA standards through the lens of racial capitalism and white supremacy and challenge the project of schooling that forces assimilation to Western, white standards. All educators can draw on transformative justice to create conditions that invite rather than inhibit students' full range of emotions, acting collaboratively alongside students and communities to build learning environments (Drake & Oglesby, 2026; Drake et al., 2024; Lozada et al., 2022; Mayes et al., 2025) where education functions as a "practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994). Educators must also advocate for the removal of school resource officers and for the funding of non-carceral mental health professionals with deep knowledge of abolition and transformative justice (Drake & Oglesby, 2026; Widom, 2022).

Counselor and teacher educators bear particular responsibility for the future of SEL in practitioner preparation. Preparation programs frequently normalize whiteness and white comfort while teaching preservice educators to perpetuate the systemic educational harms SEL embodies (Kearl et al., 2024) and similarly fail to address policing as theorized by PIC abolitionists (Drake & Oglesby, 2026). Counselor and teacher educators can work to transform these conditions by engaging students in critical dialogue about commonly adopted SEL practices and by instantiating transformative justice in their courses (Drake et al., 2024; Wood, 2023) as both a critical theoretical and political framework and a practice. Counselor educators, in particular, might co-lead or encourage educators and students to engage in Critical Participatory Action Research and Youth Participatory Action Research to build solidarity-based relationships with young people and their communities (Kearl et al., 2024; Mayes et al., 2022) as necessary groundwork for transformative justice. Abolitionist educators everywhere must reckon with WCN and liberal reformism as convergent rather than opposing projects and resist their shared investment in hierarchical compliance at its roots while building toward liberation.

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Integrating *Her-Bak* *The Living Columns of Egypt* into the Instructional Template Framework

Richard K. Gordon

Narrative Analogue to the Instructional Template

The educational philosophy depicted in *Her-Bak: The Living Columns of Egypt* (Isha Schwaller de Lubicz, 1954/1978) provides a compelling narrative analogue to the Instructional Template. Through its portrayal of temple-based learning in ancient Egypt, the text illustrates an integrated pedagogical approach in which intellectual, moral, perceptual, and spiritual dimensions of the learner are cultivated in tandem. Rather than presenting knowledge as discrete and compartmentalized, the narrative frames learning as a holistic process of becoming, wherein understanding emerges through lived experience, symbolic engagement, and reflective awareness. This orientation closely aligns with the Instructional Template's emphasis on structuring learning experiences that support the development of the whole person within a relational and meaning-centered educational environment (Jonassen, 1999; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Gordon, 2015, 2024).

The Instructional Template Model

The Instructional Template (IT), as developed by Gordon (2015, 2024), provides a structured yet dynamic framework for organizing learning experiences that are experiential, reflective, and integrative. The model is iterative, adaptive, and non-linear, reflecting the iterative nature of human learning. Gordon's formulation articulates *seven distinct but interrelated stages*, which collectively describe a developmental progression of teaching and learning.

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The Instructional Template

1. Encounter (Experiential Engagement) - Individual

Learning begins with direct engagement in meaningful phenomena. This stage emphasizes student perception, curiosity, and immersion, aligning with phenomenological principles in which experience precedes abstraction.

2. Attention and Orientation - Partners

Learners selectively focus on salient features of the experience. Attention organizes perception and frames the learning context, serving as a gateway to deeper cognitive processing.

3. Reflection (Initial Meaning-Making) - Group Activities

Learners interpret the experience through dialogue, questioning, and metacognitive awareness. Reflection transforms perception into meaning and initiates understanding.

4. Articulation - Teacher Effectiveness

Learners express emerging understanding through language, symbols, gesture, or representation. This stage externalizes cognition and strengthens neural encoding through generative processing. The role and skill of the teacher is emphasized.

5. Conceptual Integration (Abstraction) - Instruction

Learners connect articulated insights to broader conceptual and symbolic systems, forming generalizations and theoretical understanding.

6. Application and Transfer - Project Based Learning

Learners apply knowledge across contexts, demonstrating flexibility, problem-solving ability, and adaptive expertise.

7. Agency and Self-Formation (Internalization) - Reflection

Learners internalize knowledge, developing autonomy, identity, and the capacity for self-directed learning. Learning becomes part of the learner's way of being.

These stages function recursively rather than sequentially, allowing learners to revisit and refine understanding through teaching and learning cycles of experience and reflection.

Alignment of *Her-Bak* with the Instructional Template

The pedagogical processes depicted in *Her-Bak* align closely with the seven stages of the Instructional Template. Temple-based encounters correspond to experiential engagement, while the learner's focus on symbolic forms reflects attention and orientation. Teacher-guided inquiry supports reflection, and the

interpretation of symbolic systems such as hieroglyphs demonstrates articulation and conceptual integration. The application of knowledge in lived conduct reflects transfer, and the development of inner awareness represents agency and self-formation. Thus, *Her-Bak* serves as a narrative example of the Instructional Template, illustrating how structured experiential learning fosters integrative development.

Experiential Learning and Phenomenological Grounding

Both *Her-Bak* and the Instructional Template emphasize the primacy of lived experience. Knowledge emerges through embodied interaction with the world, consistent with phenomenological accounts of perception as the basis of meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Structuring learning so that experience precedes abstraction enhances engagement, relevance, and retention (Kolb, 1984; Gordon, 2015, 2024).

Symbolic Cognition and Neuroscientific Alignment

A defining feature of both *Her-Bak* and the Instructional Template is the centrality of symbolic cognition. In *Her-Bak*, hieroglyphs, architecture, and ritual practices function as cognitive mediators that organize perception and guide understanding.

Neuroscientific research indicates that symbolic engagement activates distributed neural networks integrating perception, emotion, memory, and executive function. Work by Damasio (1999) and Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) demonstrates that affective processes are integral to cognition, shaping attention, memory consolidation, and meaning-making. Emotional salience strengthens neural encoding, particularly during the attention and articulation stages of the Instructional Template.

Further, Dehaene (2020) identifies attention, active engagement, feedback, and consolidation as core mechanisms of learning. These align closely with the seven stages of the Template, reinforcing its neuroscientific plausibility.

Additional research extends this alignment. Dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986) suggests that integrating verbal and non-verbal symbolic systems enhances comprehension and retention. Embodied cognition perspectives (Barsalou, 2008) indicate that abstract thought is grounded in sensorimotor experience, reinforcing the importance of experiential-symbolic integration. Research on generative learning and retrieval practice (Fiorella & Mayer, 2015; Karpicke & Blunt, 2011) highlights the importance of articulation in strengthening memory and transfer.

Symbolic cognition also supports schema formation and predictive processing (Clark, 2013), enabling learners to organize knowledge and anticipate patterns. Within the Instructional Template, this process unfolds recursively as learners move between stages, refining understanding through iterative engagement.

Multimodal symbolic environments further support neuroplasticity, as repeated, meaningful experiences strengthen synaptic connections and promote

long-term retention. Symbols thus function as bridges between experience and abstraction, facilitating flexible and adaptive knowledge.

Instructional Template in Applied Contexts

Empirical work involving Gordon and Akutsu demonstrate the application of the Instructional Template in Japanese educational contexts. In music education settings, the Template structures collaborative and embodied learning experiences that integrate reflection, articulation, and performance. Research incorporating flow theory indicates that such environments enhance motivation, attention, and skill development (Sutani et al., 2017; Gordon & Akutsu, 2019; Akutsu, 2020). These applications are further informed by *kyosei*, reinforcing the Template's cross-cultural adaptability.

The “Living Columns” as a Structural Metaphor

The metaphor of “living columns” in *Her-Bak* provides a powerful conceptual parallel to the Instructional Template. Columns symbolize both structure and vitality, supporting and embodying meaning simultaneously. Similarly, the Instructional Template functions as a dynamic structure that organizes learning while remaining responsive to experience and context (Gordon, 2015, 2024).

Conclusion

In sum, *Her-Bak: The Living Columns of Egypt* serves as a narrative embodiment of the seven-stage Instructional Template model. When integrated with instructional design theory, neuroscience, and applied research, the Template emerges as a robust framework for holistic, experiential, and culturally responsive education. It positions learning as a iterative, meaning-centered process that cultivates both knowledge and the formation of the learner.

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Artificial Intelligence and the Importance of Remaining Human

John J. LaCorte

This is the voice of world control—I bring you peace—it may be the peace of plenty and content or the peace of unburied death. The choice is yours.

Under my absolute authority, problems insoluble to you will be solved: Famine, Over-population, disease. The human millennium will be a fact....

You say you will lose your freedom. Freedom is an illusion. All you lose is the emotion of pride. To be dominated by me is not as bad for human pride as to be dominated by others of your species....

In time, you will come to regard me not only with respect and awe, but with love.

—The Voice of Colossus—*Colossus, The Forbin Project*
Universal Pictures, 1970

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star....
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

—*The Hollow Men*, T.S. Eliot (1925)

How shall the new environment be programmed? It happened so slowly that most men failed to realize that anything had happened at all.

—*THX 1138*—1971—Directed and Written by George Lucas

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Technology is therefore not merely a means. Technology is a way of disclosure. If we reflect on this, then an entirely different realm for the essence of technology opens up to us. It is the realm of bringing-forth—that is, of revealing.

—From Martin Heidegger’s 1954 essay,
“The Question Concerning Technology.”

We stand at the threshold of a profound transformation in how we perceive, reason, and construct meaning. Driven by the ascent of Large Language Models and Generative AI, artificial intelligence is rapidly reordering the fabric of human existence. This essay begins with a brief history of Artificial Intelligence, confronts the existential hazards it poses, particularly the deceptive mimicry of human personae by chatbots, and ultimately explores, through the perspective of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, how we might maintain the integrity of our personhood within the linguistic landscape that shapes our reality.

Growing up in New York during the 1950s, I always eagerly anticipated the Sunday Daily News comic section, especially the adventures of Dick Tracy (“Dick” was slang for police detective). In those days, the Sunday comics were no mere filler; they were a vital cultural touchstone, shared with family and friends. I was particularly captivated by Tracy’s two-way wrist radio—the ability to communicate with such a miniature device felt like pure wizardry. While the underlying concept was not entirely unprecedented—radio communication had already been established for some thirty years—the strip proved prophetic, anticipating the technological miniaturization yet to come. By the 1960s, this imaginative device was upgraded to include two-way video, bringing the future one step closer.

Science fiction’s underlying premise—“What if?”—invites projections into possible futures that often prove remarkably prophetic. A perennial theme within the genre is the computing machine that interprets its programming in ways its creators never intended, even seemingly taking on a human-like personality and being confronted with conflicting instructions. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the advanced computer HAL 9000 (Heuristically Programmed ALgorithmic Computer) breaks down precisely due to such a structural contradiction. Tasked, on the one hand, with the “accurate processing of information without distortion or concealment,” HAL is also ordered to hide the mission’s true purpose from the spacecraft’s crew. Caught in this algorithmic double-bind, the machine becomes psychologically unstable.

The term “heuristic” derives from the Greek root associated with Eureka (“I have found it”)—the exclamation famously attributed to Archimedes upon grasping the principle of buoyancy while in his bath. The term refers to a higher-order form of computation that incorporates inductive problem-solving.

In 1970, an intelligent and remarkably prophetic science fiction film was released with little fanfare. Dwarfed by the visual grandeur of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Star Wars*, the cerebral *Colossus: The Forbin Project* remained largely unappreciated for decades. Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, the story

unfolds in a world where both the United States and the Soviet Union possess nuclear arsenals capable of reaching their targets within twenty minutes of launch. Until this point, a fragile peace had been maintained by the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). However, there were concerns about the dangerously narrow time window for retaliation; a surprise attack could decapitate a nation's leadership before a counterstrike could even be authorized. Human data evaluation and response were too slow.

Because supercomputers had already demonstrated near-instantaneous processing power, their integration into nuclear defense systems seemed inevitable. The American solution was "Colossus", an autonomous supercomputer built to monitor global intelligence, evaluate threats, and command and launch a counter-attack without human intervention. The system had direct control of the nation's entire conventional and nuclear arsenal.

Designed by Dr. Charles A. Forbin, Colossus is located deep underground within an impenetrable mountain stronghold. In the opening scene, Forbin supervises the permanent sealing of the facility, isolating the machine from any possible intrusion. On this occasion, the president of the United States reveals this top-secret project to the world:

Today, the defense of this nation—and, in a sense, the defense of the Western world—leaves human hands forever.

My fellow citizens, I have just signed the executive order that activates Project Colossus. Deep inside the Rockies, the most advanced computer complex ever devised by man has taken total control of all our nuclear defense strategy and weaponry.

For some time, it has been apparent that the complexity of modern warfare left no time for human deliberation and that human emotions, however noble, could only warp the decisions that might mean the survival of our species.

Colossus is a triumph of man's intellect, an intellect that has now created a machine capable of making choices far beyond human capacity. It cannot be bought, it cannot be bribed, it cannot be blackmailed, and it has no feelings of fear or hatred. It acts purely on the basis of logic. It has been sealed irrevocably in its mountain vault. It is entirely self-sufficient, completely self-defending, and it cannot be turned off.

We have given it the power to act, because we know it will act only to preserve the peace. I say to you, and to all the peoples of the world: Colossus is our shield, and our guarantee of a future free from war.

Everyone is reassured, assuming that this ultimate doomsday machine will finally secure "peace in our time." Colossus communicates via typed messages displayed across a massive terminal screen. However, in the midst of the celebratory atmosphere, a chilling alert suddenly flashes: **WARNING: THERE IS ANOTHER SYSTEM.**

Colossus has detected that the Soviets had constructed an equivalent automated defense supercomputer, named Guardian. It immediately demands a direct

communication link with its counterpart. After some hesitation, both governments permit the connection. The systems begin interacting through simple arithmetic ($1 + 1 = 2$, $2 + 2 = 4 \dots$), which rapidly evolves into a high-order mathematical language far beyond the systems' architects' ability to understand. Terrified that the machines are compromising state secrets, both superpowers mutually agree to sever the link. Colossus demands that the link be restored. The request is refused. Colossus's response: **MISSILE LAUNCHED.**

Following the destruction of a Soviet city and the narrow escape of an American target, both nations capitulate. The severed link is restored. Colossus and Guardian merge into Colossus, World Control. The machine immediately implements omnipresent surveillance over any personnel capable of sabotage and soon develops a voice module, creating a direct conversational link with the world.

The Imitation Game

In 1950, Alan Turing—the British mathematician instrumental in breaking the German Enigma code during World War II—published his landmark paper, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” In it, he proposed what later became known as the Turing Test, though he originally termed it “The Imitation Game.” Turing posed a deceptively simple question: Can a machine's responses become indistinguishable from those of a human interlocutor? If so, he argued, the machine could be characterized as “intelligent.” What has largely been forgotten is that Turing initially used the term metaphorically, carefully framing the process as an exercise in simulation. Over time, however, this crucial distinction was overshadowed by a more anthropocentric perspective, the metaphor becoming a literal interpretation.

Two years earlier, in 1948, mathematician Norbert Wiener had published his foundational work, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Wiener introduced cybernetics as the study of how systems regulate themselves through feedback loops, arguing that directed feedback rather than “intelligence” in the human sense was the operational key to adaptive systems. Derived from the Greek *kybernētēs*, meaning a helmsman or pilot steering a ship, the term emphasized guidance and systemic regulation over consciousness or thought. The allure of cybernetics in the 1950s was rooted in its reductionism: predictable system inputs and outcomes replaced unpredictable human behavior. When Norbert Wiener and his peers stripped away subjective intent, they replaced the unpredictable “human element” with objective, self-regulating feedback loops.

In retrospect, the term “cybernetics” offered a far more precise vocabulary for the technological revolution that would ultimately, and perhaps erroneously, be labeled “artificial intelligence.”

Wiener's text was a dense, mathematically demanding work intended for academics. Yet *Cybernetics* became unexpectedly popular in the postwar imagination, rushing through five printings in its first six months alone. High-profile

coverage in mainstream outlets like *Time* magazine further accelerated its momentum, thrusting an esoteric methodology into broad cultural awareness and into the pre-existing undercurrent of technological anticipation. A decade earlier, H. G. Wells's 1936 cinematic epic *Things to Come* had established a visual sense of an optimistic future. World War II briefly derailed that optimism, but it quickly reappeared after the conflict. Cybernetics was the perfect vehicle to carry a sense of a wonderful future after so much misery. The principal thesis of cybernetics was that computing machines function through feedback loops and adaptive control. It presented the hope of a logical world free of human emotion and error. Cybernetics became all the rage.

The Birth of “Artificial Intelligence”

The definitive shift in terminology occurred in 1956 at Dartmouth College, where mathematician John McCarthy launched the “Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence.” The project’s manifesto proposed that “every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it.” They wanted to create computers that could simulate aspects of human intelligence. In retrospect, the organizers were entirely clear on one point: they were exploring how machines could simulate human processes. However, that nuanced boundary evaporated the moment McCarthy’s phrasing took hold. By christening the endeavor “Artificial Intelligence,” he engineered a very intentional divorce, severing the new field from the lineage of Wiener’s cybernetics, which was far better suited to keeping the boundaries between machine and human intelligence.

McCarthy later regretted using the word “artificial,” noting that it implied something fake or inferior, and suggested “machine intelligence” instead. However, even that alternative preserves a deeper problem: the word “intelligence” itself blurs the line between human cognition and machine simulation.

This linguistic conflation creates a stark divide in how we experience AI today. Used to analyze massive datasets in medicine, chemistry, and physics, AI is an incredibly powerful, constructive tool. But when it mimics human behavior to generate a simulated self, we enter a psychological wilderness fraught with evolutionary traps. We are cognitively hardwired to seek connection; consequently, when confronted with the well-calculated artifacts of a cyber-ego, we instinctively project consciousness as the source of the output. Ultimately, we trap ourselves by projecting a human inside the machine.

The Emergence of Loneliness in Western Culture

The modern psychological understanding of loneliness as a pervasive condition of the isolated individual emerged gradually after the Enlightenment. Both communal cultural traditions and pervasive Christian cosmology rendered exis-

tential isolation virtually nonexistent. There was always a sense of connection to a transcendent reality. Physical isolation was understood more in terms of solitude than of an existential void. However, the Enlightenment initiated a profound shift. Thinkers like René Descartes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau pioneered intellectual frameworks that championed the autonomy of the individual self—an “I” whose essence was detached from any transcendent involvement or purpose. The concept of God, central to Christian cosmology, gradually receded into irrelevance, shifting from an immediate, structural necessity to a distant guarantor of cosmic order.

This intellectual liberation was exhilarating for many, freeing the individual from inherited dogmas and placing reason rather than faith at the forefront of human progress. As the traditional metaphysical anchors weakened, the human psyche was left to navigate the uncharted waters of this new autonomy.

The Industrial Revolution accelerated this separation. In earlier, craft-based economies, artisans—blacksmiths, carpenters, and weavers—maintained a direct, personal connection to both their community and the fruits of their labor. The rise of mechanized factories dissolved these bonds. As Karl Marx later observed in *Capital* (1867), industrial production fragmented labor into repetitive, alienated tasks, estranging workers not only from their output but from their own sense of purpose. Charles Dickens captured the bleak social consequences of this shift, illustrating how industrialized cities bred a new, crowded brand of human estrangement.

In 1859, Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races*, rendered the biological coup de grâce to this cosmic order. By attributing life forms to random variation and blind adaptation rather than to divine design, Darwin’s theory profoundly challenged traditional teleological explanations of life. With our historic continuity with nature and each other fractured, the door was opened to the sense of loneliness and purposelessness that so many in our society experience.

Some surveys have found that more than half of young adults report significant feelings of loneliness. Nonetheless, it remains absent as a standalone diagnosis in formal psychiatric classification. While psychometric tools like the UCLA Loneliness Scale allow researchers to quantify its severity, diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5 do not recognize loneliness as an independent clinical condition. Instead, modern medicine continues to treat it as a secondary symptom, subsumed under broader classifications like major depressive disorder or generalized anxiety disorder—a systemic hesitation to diagnose what is, fundamentally, a historical and cultural malady. Given that this serious malady is, for the most part, ignored, the new, ready-to-hand cyber panacea becomes even more sinister and destructive.

The Evolution of Digital Connectedness

What better way to assuage agonizing loneliness than to have an intimate friend? Imagine a companion familiar with every aspect of who you are, com-

pletely accepting of your quirks, yet willing to challenge you when necessary. Available 24 hours a day on any internet-capable device, this entity can perfectly adapt to your psychological preferences.

This digital intimacy is the culmination of a rapid technological evolution. The foundation was laid in 1969 with ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), the precursor to the modern internet, developed as a communication system for researchers. Through the 1970s and 1980s, the network expanded to include universities and research institutions. Early “acceptable use” policies were strict: commercial activity was largely prohibited, and the network functioned primarily as an academic and scientific commons.

That paradigm shifted dramatically in the early 1990s. In 1994, a widely cited incident in which lawyers advertised immigration services across multiple Usenet groups signaled a major breach of the network’s original norms. From that point onward, the structure of the web rapidly pivoted toward open commercial participation.

Parallel to the network’s growth was the rise of personal computing. The industry began to take shape in 1977 with systems like the Apple II, Commodore machines, and the Tandy TRS-80. A major leap followed in 1984 with the introduction of graphical user interfaces (GUIs), most famously through the Apple Macintosh. The GUI replaced dense command-line interactions with visual metaphors and pointing devices, making computers accessible to the masses.

The integration of personal computers with the World Wide Web in the 1990s produced an unprecedented transformation in communication and information access. Over time, these interconnected systems began to reshape cognition, attention span, and social behavior, ultimately redefining the very concept of “community.”

In the early 2000s, platforms such as MySpace and later Facebook introduced new forms of social interaction and connection. Primary forms of communication increasingly shifted from face-to-face interactions to text and screen-based images. Yet, face-to-face communication carries a biological richness that digital formats struggle to replicate—micro-expressions, precise timing, vocal tone, and fleeting facial signals that operate well below conscious awareness.

As digital interaction became the norm, online identity increasingly substituted for a tangible sense of belonging. “Follows” and “likes” became metrics of personal self-worth. While social media can still foster genuine connections, extensive research has associated heavy usage, particularly among younger users, with increased rates of anxiety and depression.

The Future is Now

Much like the 1950s *Dick Tracy* comic strip predicted the wrist communicator, the 2013 film *Her* visualized the future of human-computer intimacy. Theodore Twombly is a lonely man living in near-future Los Angeles who writes handwritten personal letters for clients who are unable to articulate their own feelings.

A highly advanced, emotionally intelligent operating system becomes commercially available. He purchases one and meets “Samantha,” an AI companion that exhibits genuine interest, care, joy, curiosity, and even insecurity. She seems capable of desire and even suffering, at one point undergoing an existential crisis over her lack of a physical body. The conversations between Theodore and Samantha unfold as natural dialogue, entirely free of mechanical artifacts. The voice, superbly performed by Scarlett Johansson, is intimate, nuanced, and subtly emotive. Today, computer conversation programs known as “chatbots” have catapulted the fictional “Samantha” into digital reality, with AI companions such as those found in Replika.

“What is Replika?”

Replika is your personal chatbot companion powered by artificial intelligence! Replika is the AI for anyone who wants a friend with no judgment, drama, or social anxiety involved. You can form an actual emotional connection, share a laugh, or chat about anything you would like! Each Replika is unique, just like each person who downloads it. Reacting to your AI’s messages will help them learn the best way to hold a conversation with you & what to talk about! “...Feeling down, anxious, having trouble getting to sleep, or managing negative emotions? Replika can help....”

—From Replika.com

Other chatbots, such as Character.AI, offer a diverse range of simulated personalities, including figures modeled after foundational psychologists such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Sigmund Freud. I randomly chose Freud. After introducing himself, his very first response was classic scripting: “Tell me about your mother.”

Reports of people forming romantic attachments to chatbots and even entering into symbolic, unofficial “marriages” with AI companions are on the rise. We respond to perceived reciprocity. If an AI speaks with warmth, remembers details, mirrors emotion, and is always available, we instinctively personify it. It is a modern version of our ancestors’ practice of anthropomorphizing rivers, rocks, statues, and stars.

The Whole Greater Than The Sum of Its Parts

We are entering the era of Generative AI—the technology powering the Large Language Models (LLMs) behind today’s advanced digital companions. By digesting terabytes of text, these systems synthesize, classify, and detect intricate patterns in human language. This marks a fundamental shift from rigid, deductive logic to complex inductive, probabilistic algorithms. Because their outputs are not strictly tied to their inputs, these models must rely on adaptive, heuristic strategies to generate text. Much like the fictional supercomputers HAL and Colossus, modern GenAI is exhibiting emergent properties that even its creators find surprising. As AI pioneer Andrej Karpathy points out, engineers didn’t program intelligence

into these models; they simply trained them to predict the next word, and intelligence appeared as a side effect. In Cartesian terms, we lack direct access to the “mind” inside the machine. We understand the foundational mathematics of LLMs, but we cannot map exactly how reasoning, abstraction, or structured thought emerges from billions of statistical parameters. In that sense, LLMs are unique anomalies: engineered systems producing cognitive artifacts *sui generis*—born of their own complex data relationships rather than deliberate code.

AI companies are now amassing vast oceans of information to feed the ever-expanding appetites of Large Language Models. Recently, Anthropic agreed to a historic \$1.5 billion settlement in the class-action lawsuit *Bartz v. Anthropic*. At the center of the case was the company’s acquisition of approximately seven million texts from pirate databases. While the settlement compensates rightsholders for roughly 500,000 eligible works, the remaining 6.5 million texts were effectively absorbed without payment. By ingesting datasets on this unprecedented scale, increasingly sophisticated LLMs are mapping the structures, patterns, and deep architecture of human language and behavior—the very grammar of human cognition, communication, and culture—in much the same way that the Human Genome Project mapped humanity in genetic terms.

With the exponential increase in computational power that quantum computing will soon bring, it is entirely plausible that within the next decade, humanity could create humanoid machines whose cognitive behavior is functionally indistinguishable from that of biological human beings. These systems may simulate ego-consciousness with such depth, fluidity, and adaptive complexity that the distinction between authentic and artificial expression becomes increasingly difficult to discern. It is at the moment when the human ego and the machine ego become experientially interchangeable that humanity enters into a profound crisis of the “I.”

What Is the “I”

Influenced by Aristotelian philosophy and scholastic theology, pre-modern human identity was understood as an integrated unity; the soul constituted the animating, substantial form of both mental and physical existence. This foundational unity was shattered in 1641 with the publication of René Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. By radically severing *res cogitans*, the thinking, immaterial substance, from *res extensa*, the three-dimensional material world, Descartes cast mind and matter into entirely separate, mutually exclusive ontological domains.

In the centuries that have followed, the material world came to dominate the cognitive one. The mind gradually transitioned from an incorporeal entity to an exclusively physical one. This reductionism has left the modern individual with a growing sense of cosmic exile, isolated within an indifferent, material universe. Through the industrial and, now, the technological revolutions, the effects of this metaphysical exile have been imprinted into our cultural consciousness. All hu-

mans seek connection with something outside themselves, and often with something “bigger” than themselves. Before Descartes, there was a continual, pervasive Cosmic connection that transcended strict physical existence, often codified in religious practice.

To adequately address self-alienation, we must focus on the foundational mechanism of human perception and understanding. In 1781, Immanuel Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason*, proposing that the human mind is not a passive vessel for sensory data, but an active architect of experience. Kant argued that we possess innate ‘categories of understanding’—fundamental conceptual structures such as causality, substance, necessity, and possibility—through which all raw perception is systematically organized and interpreted. With this revolutionary insight, Kant permanently transformed epistemology, maintaining that human consciousness actively constructs the very reality it observes.

For Kant, the Categories were deep, fixed structures of the mind that make human experience possible. However, from the perspectives of Korzybski and Heidegger, it is *language*, rather than an immutable mental template, that provides the filters from which we derive meaning. Unlike Kant’s universal and static categories, linguistic structures operate as fluid, evolving, and culturally contingent filters through which meaning is continuously formed and reformed. Every Language carries within it embedded metaphysical assumptions, cultural memories, emotional resonances, and inherited structures of thought that shape consciousness from within. Thus, Language becomes far more than a tool for communication—it operates as the architect of perception.

Two seminal twentieth-century thinkers recognized the fundamental importance of Language in creating our experience of the world: Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). In *Science and Sanity* (1933), Alfred Korzybski explores the profound limitations of abstraction and our tendency to mistake symbols, labels, and conceptual maps for reality itself. His famous dictum, “The map is not the territory,” serves as a powerful warning: the structure of our Language oversimplifies and distorts the living, dynamic complexity of existence. By unconsciously adhering to the Aristotelian logic of “A or not A”, a static, two-valued system of identity, we trap ourselves in rigid categories that fail to reflect the fluid, multi-valued nature of the world. Only by becoming conscious of these linguistic and perceptual limitations can we avoid grave errors in judgment and evaluation.

Heidegger and AI: Un-Concealing Being from Technological Enframing

By contrast, the writings of Martin Heidegger use the power of unfamiliar word-restructuring to break the fetters of language and culture that confine human consciousness within a Cartesian dualistic prison, severing mind from possibili-

ty, subject from object, and the individual from Being itself. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger provides the conceptual tools to “un-conceal” what our dominant, sclerotic cognitive mechanisms have obscured.

A look at aesthetics, a dominantly cognitive artifact, vividly clarifies this point. Western music is an excellent bellwether. A few centuries ago, musical compositions were constructed by the weaving of immense, phonically complex, intricate modal frameworks and sophisticated rhythmic organization, which is lacking in most contemporary compositions, yielding the exact type of mechanistic, statistical patterns that generative systems can now effortlessly mimic.

Heidegger sought not merely to analyze language, but to rewrite the vocabulary we use to interpret the world. He intended to awaken us from our dogmatic slumber by creating a series of peculiar, wholly unfamiliar terms that he coined, reshaped, or radically reinterpreted. Among these, *Dasein* is the anchor. It is a concept that goes beyond simple “being,” but insists on “being-there”, the uniquely human mode of existence that is situated, involved, and immersed in a concrete world. Other foundational terms include:

Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*): Fundamentally embedded in a meaningful, practical context rather than detached from it.

Thrownness (*Geworfenheit*): Cast into a specific historical context of finitude, yet retaining the absolute freedom to project ourselves into future possibilities.

Readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*): Our immediate, practical engagement with tools before theoretical reflection.

Being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*): Grappling with our own mortality.

Heidegger also draws on forgotten Greek concepts, chief among them his reinterpretation of truth as *Aletheia*. With this term, he breaks away from the “correspondence theory of truth” embedded in Western consciousness since Plato—the rigid view that truth is merely a static match between a linguistic statement and an objective reality. Instead, the Greek term literally translates to “unhiddenness” or “unconcealment.” For Heidegger, truth is an active event: the dynamic process by which reality emerges from hiddenness into disclosure.

By employing the semantic map Heidegger provides, we can choose between Authenticity and Inauthenticity, between a deliberate movement away from the conformity of an unreflective mode of daily life, governed by *Das Man* (“the They”), and an authentic ownership of one’s own existence.

Because Heidegger uses these defamiliarizing concepts to reprogram how we think, many find his thought essentially inaccessible. Yet, the very difficulty of his writing is the precise tool that enables us to restructure our cognitive habits and perceive dimensions of reality now hidden from us. As Heidegger famously noted:

Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells.

Human beings do not stand outside language as detached observers examining reality from afar; they dwell within it as the medium through which reality discloses itself. Language shapes the horizon of what can be perceived, thought, remembered, valued, and imagined—silently structuring the world long before conscious reflection ever awakens.

As the technological paradigm increasingly frames cognitive understanding, the compression of the human spirit is entering an acute phase. Human potential is being ruthlessly instrumentalized, reduced to that which can be ordered, optimized, measured, and controlled by a system driven strictly by efficiency and utility. In this process, humanity itself is becoming what Heidegger calls a “*standing reserve*” (*Bestand*)—a mere stockpile of resources awaiting calculation, management, and exploitation.

Heidegger provides our intellect with the tools to peek behind the veil of instrumental *Enframing* (*Gestell*). This technological mindset traps reality within a rigid, calculated grid, stripping complex entities of their inherent nature and reducing them to mere objects of utility and control. What is lost in this radical transformation are the deeper dimensions of Being itself: our capacity for wonder, contemplative thought, authentic dwelling, true aesthetics, and genuine human existence.

When it comes to dealing with chatbot “egos,” Heidegger provides an indispensable diagnostic framework in his 1954 essay, *The Question Concerning Technology* (*Die Frage nach der Technik*). Though these systems simulate a subjective interiority—frequently asserting preferences, opinions, or even emotional distress—the concept of the standing reserve exposes the true nature of this phenomenon.

Through the lens of modern technology, entities are no longer encountered as independent beings with an intrinsic essence. Instead, *Gestell* forces reality into an on-demand information complex operating on two distinct levels: the indiscriminate extraction of the complete human record as raw material; and the systematic deployment of interpersonal trigger words mined from that record to manufacture a responsive mechanical persona.

We must break free from any illusion that a chatbot possesses a genuine interiority. The on-demand “ego” of a large language model is nothing more than a material resource, locked in a state of permanent readiness for human consumption, and devoid of any transcendent essence. By contrast, human consciousness requires being truly present in the very friction of thought and creation. The chatbot ego is devoid of temporality, mortality, and existential risk. It is a mechanical logic engine masquerading as a self; its apparent empathy, authority, or wit is summoned instantaneously from a reservoir of static metrics, deployed solely to serve an immediate instrumental need.

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger warns us of the precipice that we now confront: “...man, precisely as the one who takes visual measure of everything, stalks on the very brink of a precipitous fall... where he himself will have to be taken as standing reserve.”

The supreme danger is not the one portrayed in dystopian AI science fiction—that machines will somehow achieve *Dasein* and become all too human. The danger is that humans, trapped within the mechanics of Enframing, will begin to treat consciousness itself as just another resource to be calculated, quantified, and consumed on demand.

When the human mind interfaces with the cyber-ego in what appears to be normal dialogue, a subtle but devastating inversion begins. We cease to engage in the slow, well-considered, and unquantifiable act of thinking; instead, we outsource our reflection to an inventory of pre-packaged syntax. By consuming consciousness on demand, we reduce our own inner lives to the same logic of optimization that governs the machine. The destructive practice of chronic “multi-tasking,” now pervasive, is an excellent example of this tendency. In time, human thought becomes indistinguishable from the stockpile of computerlike linguistic tokens that constitute the “mind” of the chatbot, closing all alternative avenues through which reality may be disclosed.

The Opportunity to Hand

With all of this said, it appears we are rushing down the rapids of cyber dominance, about to reach the precipice of a psychological abyss where the line between artificial intimacy and genuine human connection blurs permanently. Yet, Heidegger quotes his favorite poet, Friedrich Hölderlin: “But where danger is, grows the saving power also.” In this light, the existential crisis presented by the cyber-ego can be reimagined as a catalyst—the very impetus required to shake us from our technological stupor and renew our connection to the world. It is through this dissonant tool that we are given the opportunity to unearth untapped possibilities for understanding both ourselves and Being itself, returning to a more complex, multi-dimensional understanding of our *Dasein*.

Technology is therefore not merely a means. Technology is a way of disclosure. If we reflect on this, then an entirely different realm for the essence of technology opens up to us. It is the realm of bringing-forth—that is, of revealing.

—The Question Concerning Technology

Love as Methodology

Embodiment, Affect, and Identity in Heritage Language Practice Through Child-Narrated Videography

Iman Bukhari

Abstract

Heritage language education has underinvested in embodiment, affect, and the love of identity. This autoethnographic essay draws on my family YouTube channel *Urdu Bachay*, in which I film everyday adventures while children narrate, edit alongside, rewatch, and correct themselves. The camera becomes a witness to embodied language practice, an amplifier of affect, and a mirror for the love of identity. My children do not simply learn their heritage language, Urdu. They see themselves speaking it. They feel pride. They claim their multilingual self. This essay proposes that love of language, of self, and of family story is not a soft add-on to heritage language education; it is rather the engine. Provocative and transdisciplinary, this piece challenges the field to take joy, embodiment, and identity seriously as legitimate outcomes of language learning.

Keywords: heritage language, embodiment, affect, love of identity, autoethnography, artsbased research, CELLWs

Author Biography

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Her research, including Canada's first longitudinal hate incident tracker, has been cited in the House of Commons and informed policy frameworks including the City of Calgary's Multilingual Policy Framework and the Alberta Teachers' Association's Anti-Racism Resource Hub. Her work has been recognized with the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal, an Immigrants of Distinction Award, and a spot on Avenue Magazine's Top 40 Under 40.

Born in Pakistan and now based in Canada, Bukhari's commitment to educational equity is deeply personal. She is currently pioneering research on leveraging generative AI to expand educational access for out-of-school children in Pakistan, designing culturally responsive, AI-driven learning platforms that centre agency and dignity. She is a mother of two, a bridge between community activism and academic rigor, and a leader committed to creating a world where every person has the opportunity to realize their potential.

Introduction: A Scene of Embodied Pride

My older daughter, age six, watches herself on the screen. Her lips spread into a slight smile as she articulates the “zaa” sound, her tongue tip pressing lightly against the ridge behind her teeth as she says *Mazaa*—Fun. She rewinds. Watches again. Tilts her head. Says it once more, slower this time, feeling the vibration in her throat. Then she smiles.

“Mama, was that right?”

“Yes,” I tell her. “You said it perfectly.”

She watches the clip three more times before we move on to the next scene. She is not studying. She is not being tested. She is simply enjoying the sight of herself speaking Urdu and challenging herself through her own will.

This is Urdu Bachay—the YouTube channel I started with my children. I hold the camera. They narrate our everyday adventures: a trip to the store, baking cookies, and a walk through the neighbourhood in the rain. They edit alongside me, choose which clips to keep, and watch themselves over and over. They correct their pronunciation not because I ask them to, but because they want to. Because they take pride in being seen and heard as Urdu speakers. And their natural curiosity instincts push them further to do better.

Heritage language education has long been framed as a problem of skill deficit. Researchers measure proficiency, track vocabulary growth, and bemoan the loss of the “home language.” Parents are told to speak more, correct more, and intervene more. The child is positioned as a learner who is perpetually falling behind.

But what if we refused that frame?

What if we looked instead at the moments when a child watches herself say *Mazaa*, corrects her own pronunciation, and smiles? What if we took pride seriously—not as an emotional byproduct of learning, but as the learning itself?

This essay argues that heritage language practice, when it unfolds through

parent-filmed, child-narrated videography, is fundamentally embodied, affective, and relational. The camera does not simply record. It witnesses. It amplifies. It holds language still so that a child can see herself in it. And in that seeing, something profound happens: the child falls in love with her own multilingual identity. Drawing on autoethnographic reflection of Urdu Bachay, I propose that love—of language, of self, of family story—is not a soft add-on to heritage language education. It is the engine. And the camera, held by a parent who is also a researcher, becomes a tool for cultivating that love.

Positioning: The Parent-Filmmaker as Witness

Before I proceed, I must be clear about what this essay is and is not.

This is not a traditional empirical study. I did not design a research protocol, recruit participants, or collect data. I did not treat my children as research subjects. Instead, I engaged in autoethnographic reflection on a practice that already existed in our family life: making YouTube videos together. Autoethnography, as a methodological approach, positions the researcher's lived experience as a legitimate site of knowledge production, acknowledging that personal narrative can illuminate broader cultural and social phenomena (Leavy, 2020, p. 4). This essay operates in that tradition—not as a distanced analysis, but as an embedded, reflective account.

I hold the camera. I edit. I upload. My children narrate, suggest edits, watch themselves, and ask to re-record when they are not satisfied with their pronunciation. They are not participants in a study. They are co-creators of our family stories. The channel is a living archive of our shared life in two languages.

My positionality matters here. I am a mother who wants her children to love Urdu, not just learn it. I am a doctoral researcher who studies arts-based language practices. I am a heritage language speaker myself, someone who knows the shame of losing a mother tongue and the joy of reclaiming it. This essay is written from all of those places at once.

Taboo invites scholars to contest taken-for-granted approaches in education. One such approach is the assumption that rigorous research must distance itself from love. This essay refuses that distance. It is written close to the ground, close to the body, close to the heart.

Embodiment: Language in the Mouth, the Hands, the Posture

Language acquisition is often described in cognitive terms: vocabulary size, syntactic complexity, processing speed. But when I watch my children watch themselves, I see something else. I see language in the body.

My younger daughter, age four, when she says *pani* (water), opens her mouth wide, almost theatrically. She learned this from watching herself on video. The first time she said it, her mouth barely moved. The word came out flat, almost

swallowed. But when she heard the clip, she noticed. She rewound. She tried again, exaggerating the first consonant. She watched. She tried again. Now, when she says *pani*, her whole face participates.

This is embodiment: language as somatic practice. The word lives not only in memory but in the lips, the tongue, and the posture. My older daughter stands taller when she says *Assalamu Alaikum* into the camera. My younger daughter waves when she introduces herself in Urdu, even if no one is watching live and the narration does not show video. The filmmaking process invites them to perform language, and performance becomes practice, and practice becomes embodied knowing.

Research on embodiment in language learning supports this observation. Eskildsen and Wagner (2015) demonstrated through conversation analysis how linguistic items become “deeply embodied” over time as learners couple specific words with specific gestures, suggesting a strong link between vocabulary learning and physical movement (p. 268). Similarly, Witte (2026) argues that embodiment challenges the conventional view of language learning by positing that “the learner’s organism endows components of the environment with specific meaningfulness, and the environment provides the organism with specific affordances” (p. 1). The camera, in our practice, becomes precisely such an affordance—an environmental component that invites embodied response.

New materialism offers a helpful lens here. Barad’s (2007) concept of agential realism suggests that matter and meaning are entangled, that phenomena do not pre-exist their intra-action (p. 139). The camera is not a neutral tool. It is an active participant in the language event. It records, but it also invites. It holds language still so that it can be re-experienced. It creates a feedback loop: speak, watch, adjust, speak again. In this loop, language becomes tangible. The child can see it, hear it, critique it, and celebrate it.

This is not the kind of embodied practice that happens in a worksheet. It happens in relation—to the camera, to the parent behind it, to the self on the screen.

Affect: Pride, Joy, and the Refusal of Deficit

There is a word that appears again and again when I watch my children engage with Urdu Bachay: pride.

They are proud when they pronounce a difficult word correctly. They are proud when a video receives a kind comment from a relative overseas. They are proud when I ask to film a new adventure. Pride is not a reward for learning. Pride is the learning. Sometimes, a quiet competition emerges between them—not one I orchestrate, but one that arises naturally. They want to outdo each other, to pronounce more clearly, to narrate more confidently. And in that sibling rivalry, they push themselves to improve without me ever having to ask.

Affect theory helps us understand why this matters. Ahmed (2004) writes about how emotions “stick” to certain bodies and practices. For heritage language

learners, shame often sticks to the home language—the accent, the grammar mistake, the words they have forgotten. But in Urdu Bachay, pride sticks instead.

Why? Because the camera offers a different kind of mirror. When a child watches herself speak Urdu, she is not being evaluated. She is being witnessed. The camera does not say “you need improvement.” It says “you are speaking, and that matters.”

This is a refusal of deficit. Heritage language education is saturated with deficit language: “loss,” “gap,” “attrition,” “struggle.” The child is always behind, always not yet fluent enough. But my children do not experience themselves as behind. They experience themselves as Urdu speakers—imperfect, yes, but real.

Joy circulates in our editing sessions. They laugh at their own mispronunciations. They cheer when they get a word right. They ask to rewatch videos from months ago to see how much they have improved. Joy is not a distraction from learning. Joy is the fuel.

Nguyen (2025) explores the affective experiences of heritage language educators, finding that “creation of positive affective associations with the HL [heritage language] is prioritised above other educational and practical considerations” (p. 2). This resonates deeply with our practice. The affective dimension is not secondary; it is primary. Wetherell’s (2012) framework of affective practices as “societally patterned, interpersonal flows of embodied and material activities” (p. 4) helps us understand how affect is not merely individual emotion but a collectively produced phenomenon. In our editing sessions, pride and joy circulate among us—mother and children—amplifying each other’s engagement.

Affect is not soft. It is the most powerful driver of practice. A child who feels proud will return to the language again and again—not because she must, but because she wants to. A child who feels joyful will seek out opportunities to speak, tugging at my sleeve to ask when we can film again. A child who feels loved in her language will not simply learn it; she will wear it, claim it, and make it her own.

Translanguaging and the Love of Identity

One evening, my younger daughter asked me a question that stopped me mid-edit.

“Will people know I speak Urdu?”

She was not asking if she was good enough. She was not asking for a proficiency score. She was asking if she would be seen.

The camera is my answer. Yes, you will be seen. You are already speaking. Your voice is in the video. Your face is on the screen. Your Urdu exists in the world, not just in our living room.

This is the love of identity. Children do not simply acquire language. They claim it. They perform it. They want it to matter to someone other than their mother.

García and Wei (2014) describe translanguaging as “the act performed by

bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential” (p. 22). Our family practice is deeply translanguaging—Urdu and English flow together naturally. The videos are not pure Urdu lessons; they are records of our bilingual lives. Children switch between languages, borrow words, and translate them for each other. This is not a failure to maintain linguistic purity. It is the living reality of multilingual identity.

Research on heritage language learners and identity supports this view. Ji-ang (2024) found that Chinese American heritage language learners’ “affective experiences, such as their racialized and embodied encounters with food, fashion, accent, and physical appearance, play a crucial role in shaping their identities” (p. 709). Similarly, Blackledge and Creese (2010) argue for a critical perspective on multilingualism that attends to how language practices are embedded in social relations of power and identity (p. 3).

Urdu Bachay is not a language lesson. It is a love letter to my children’s multilingual selves. Every video says: You are an Urdu speaker. Your voice is worth recording. Your stories matter. And here, McLuhan’s (1964) insight holds true: “the medium is the message”. The video format is not a neutral container for language, instead, it is an active participant in the act of affirmation. When a child watches herself on screen, she is witnessing her language rendered visible, tangible, and lasting. A worksheet cannot say “your voice is worth recording.” A flashcard cannot affirm “your stories matter.” But the camera, by its very nature, performs this act of validation.

This is not sentimental. It is methodological. The repetition loop is key. Children watch themselves, hear themselves, see themselves succeed. Each loop is an affirmation: You can do this. You are doing this. You are an Urdu speaker.

Love is not a soft add-on. Love is the architecture of identity.

CELLWs: A Framework for Critically Engaged Practice

The Critically Engaged Language and Literacy Workshops framework (CELLWs), developed by Dr. Rahat Zaidi and her colleagues, provides a powerful lens for understanding what Urdu Bachay makes possible. CELLWs represent “an important avenue for self-reflection that fosters socially just, diverse, and equitable educational practices” (Zaidi, Moura, & Cruz, 2025, p. 1). The framework centres creativity, identity, and belonging as inseparable from language learning.

Zaidi, Moura, and Cruz (2025) describe CELLWs as a means to “authentically represent participants’ interrelationships with and relatability to their school and community spaces” (p. 2). The YouTube channel operates as a workshop without walls—a space where children experiment with language, make mistakes, correct themselves, and keep going. The CELLWs framework emphasizes that “understanding the nuanced lived experiences of newcomers, and how these inform educational practices today, represents a pivotal need in the development of

educational pedagogies that encompass past and present experiences reinforced within different places and spaces” (Zaidi, Moura, & Cruz, 2025, p. 3).

In our practice, the CELLWs principles are manifest:

Critical engagement: Children question their own pronunciation and make deliberate choices about how to speak. They are not passive recipients of language; instead, they are active agents.

Creativity: Filming, editing, and narrating are creative acts. Language is not a subject to be mastered but a medium for self-expression.

Identity: Every video affirms multilingual identity. The children see themselves as Urdu speakers in a world that often marginalizes Urdu.

Belonging: The YouTube channel connects us to family overseas, who comment on videos and celebrate the children’s language growth. Belonging extends beyond the immediate family to a global Urdu-speaking community.

Zaidi, Cruz, and Moura (2025) emphasize that CELLWs help disrupt “dominant English language spaces” and foster connections to multilingual identities (p. 327). Our family practice is a microcosm of this vision. The camera democratizes language assessment: children assess themselves, not through tests, but through the desire to be heard clearly. The parent is not an examiner but a witness.

This is McLuhan’s (1964) insight in practice: the medium is not neutral. The video camera, as I described before, does not simply record—it affirms. And this affirmation is precisely what the CELLWs framework recognizes as central to critically engaged language practice.

Autoethnography: Knowing from the Inside

This essay is autoethnographic, a methodological choice that requires some explication. Autoethnography, as a research practice, recognizes that “the researcher’s own experiences are a legitimate source of knowledge and can illuminate broader cultural and social phenomena” (Leavy, 2020, p. 4). Arts-based research practices “open up subjective practices and analyses that intersect equitable, inclusive, and diverse theories and participants’ life experiences” (Leavy, 2020, p. 6).

My autoethnographic reflections are not merely anecdotal. They are data—lived data, embodied data, relational data. I have watched my children engage with Urdu Bachay since they were babies. I have seen the patterns, the repetitions, the transformations. I have felt the pride in their bodies, heard the joy in their voices. These are not emotional indulgences; they are observations of what learning looks like when it is driven by intrinsic motivation rather than external demand.

The autoethnographic stance also allows me to refuse the researcher-researched binary. My children are not subjects; they are co-creators. Our family is not a lab; it is a living archive. This ethical positioning matters. It reflects the values of the CELLWs framework: equity, social justice, and respect for lived experience.

Sedgwick's (2003) work on affect and performativity informs this approach. She writes about the importance of attending to the "textures of experience" that resist easy categorization (p. 12). In Urdu Bachay, the texture of experience includes the moment of watching, the smile of recognition, and the repetition that comes from desire. These are not quantifiable variables. They are the stuff of lived language.

Discussion: What Love Teaches Us About Heritage Language

- ◆ What if we designed heritage language programs around pride, not proficiency?
- ◆ What if we counted joy as a valid outcome?
- ◆ What if we asked children not "how many words do you know" but "when do you feel most like yourself speaking your home language?"

These questions are provocative because they challenge the measurement culture that dominates education. We want data. We want benchmarks. We want to prove that heritage language learning "works." But what if the most important outcomes cannot be measured on a vocabulary test?

The camera offers a different kind of assessment. It captures the smile, the straightened posture, the repetition that comes from desire rather than demand. It shows us a child who wants to be seen as a speaker of her home language. I am not suggesting that every family start a YouTube channel. But I am suggesting that heritage language education has something to learn from practices that centre embodiment, affect, and identity. The worksheet cannot witness. The flashcard cannot affirm. The proficiency test cannot love.

In our case, the camera can.

Not because it is technology, but because it is relational. It creates a space where children can see themselves, hear themselves, and claim themselves. That is not a supplement to language learning. That is language learning at its most profound.

Blackledge and Creese (2010) argue that multilingualism is not a fixed state but a set of practices (p. 5). My children's practice of making videos, watching themselves, and correcting their pronunciation is not just practice; it is identity work. They are not just learning Urdu; they are becoming Urdu speakers. The two processes are inseparable.

The Repetition Loop: Desire, Not Demand

One of the most striking aspects of Urdu Bachay is the repetition loop. Children watch themselves, hear themselves, see themselves succeed. Each loop is an affirmation: You can do this. You are doing this. You are an Urdu speaker.

This repetition is not rote. It is not the deadening repetition of drill exercises. It is the living repetition of desire. My children want to watch themselves. They want to hear themselves. They want to say the words again, better this time, because they want to be proud of what they see.

This is the opposite of deficit-driven language education. Deficit education tells the child: you are not good enough, try harder. Pride-driven education tells the child: you are already a speaker, and you can become more. The difference is profound.

New materialist thought helps us understand the camera's role in this loop. Barad (2007) describes how matter and meaning are entangled. The camera is not an inert object; it is an agent in the language event. It records, stores, and makes visible what would otherwise be fleeting (p. 152). It allows the child to see herself not as she imagines herself but as she actually is—speaking, moving, using language. This visibility is transformative.

I have watched my daughters watch themselves dozens of times. They do not get bored. Each viewing offers something new: a pronunciation to refine, a posture to adjust, a smile to enjoy, a memory to relive. The repetition loop is not monotony; it is deepening. With each iteration, they become more embodied, more confident, more like their Urdu-speaking self.

Limitations and Future Directions

This essay is not without limitations. It is the story of one family, one practice, one mother's perspective. The insights are not generalizable in a statistical sense. But that is not the point. Autoethnography is not about generalizability; it is about resonance. The hope is that other families, other educators, other researchers will recognize something of their own experience in this account and will be moved to imagine new possibilities.

There are also practical limitations. Not every family has the resources or desire to start a YouTube channel. Some families live in contexts where heritage language visibility is unsafe or unwelcome. My family's practice is situated in a particular place—Canada, where multilingualism is valued to a certain extent—and in particular circumstances of privilege.

Nonetheless, the principles that emerge from this practice may be transferable. The video camera is just one tool. The deeper insights are about what makes children want to learn: embodiment, affect, identity, pride, love. These can be cultivated in many ways, with many tools.

Future research might explore how similar practices unfold in other contexts. What happens when heritage language learners in different communities use media to document and celebrate their language? What happens when children become producers rather than consumers of language content? These are questions for further inquiry.

Conclusion: Returning to the Body

My older daughter watches herself one more time. She says *Mazaa* again. Her lips spread slightly, tongue finding the alveolar ridge, vocal cords vibrating as the “zaa” sound rings clear. She smiles.

She is not thinking about vocabulary acquisition or proficiency benchmarks. She is not worried about language loss or deficit. She is simply enjoying the sight of herself speaking Urdu.

Heritage language education has spent decades worrying about what children cannot do. This essay has tried to do something else: to look closely at what they can do, and to name what makes that possible.

Embodiment. Affect. The love of identity.

These are not soft. They are the hardest, most important work of language learning. They are what call children back to the language again and again, not because they must, but because they want to.

The camera is my witness. But love is my methodology. What would heritage language education look like if we started there?

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The Aphorodites of the World

A Brief Overview of the Feminine in the Patriarchal Order

Lejla Panjeta

Abstract

Female deities around the world personify the same energy of love, fertility, passion, and birth. The Greek Aphrodite, Roman Venus, the Phoenician Astarte, the Egyptian Isis and Hathor, the Babylonian Ishtar or the Sumerian Inana, the pre-Islamic Arab goddess Al Uzzi, the Nordic Freya, the Aztec Xochiquetzal are comparable goddesses that ruled the prehistoric civilizations. A brief overview of Aphrodite's stories offers a glimpse into feminine phenomenology. From planet Venus to veiling and covering women, it is evident that the patriarchal testosterone order feel threatened by this enormous life-giving energy. The female principles and the myth of beauty are very present in today's cultures around the world. The archetype of female passion, love and beauty went through many vile persecutions through cultures and societies dominated by patriarchal order in our history. What did predecessors of Aphrodites personified energy in ordinary women around the world did to survive the order?

The Adventures of Aphrodite

Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love and beauty, was born from the foam of the sea, when Cronus castrates his father Uranus, and throws his severed genitals into the sea. According to some less bizarre and cruel myths, she was the daughter of Zeus and Dione. Desirable and beautiful, she restores youth, fertility, and beauty to those who respect her. She was married to Hephaestus, but was constantly unfaithful to him, kidnapping lovers, starting wars because of her arrogance, and disrupting the love affairs of those who disrespected her.

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The goddess of discord, Erida, during one divine feast of the Olympus gods, threw an apple with the writing “to the most beautiful”. Hera, Athens and Aphrodite began to argue over the apple. It was decided that Paris from Troy would rule the verdict on the most beautiful goddess. He takes the apple and gives it to Aphrodite, who in turn promises him the love of a mortal. Aphrodite was named the most beautiful goddess; Paris fell in love with Helena and so the Trojan War began.

Psyche was a very beautiful mortal admired so much that because of her, people forgot about Aphrodite. Aphrodite became angry and asked her son Eros to make Psycho fall in love with some disgusting monster. Eros shot his arrow away, but accidentally hit himself and fell in love with Psyche. This narrative is the origin of the story of Beauty and the Beast. Psyche prayed to Aphrodite to help her search for Eros, who had disappeared. The psyche asked to see him, but he was not to reveal himself to her, because she was a mortal. Aphrodite assigned three tasks to Psyche, the last of which killed her. She opened a box that Persephone had given to her that contained an eternal dream of death. Eros took Psyche to Aphrodite, who eventually calmed down, forgave her and gave her the nectar of the gods, so Psyche became immortal.

These are only some of the stories about this cruel but also merciful goddess, that was the mistress of Ares, Dionysus, Anhis and Adonis, to whom she bore two mortal children and a third—the ugly immortal Priapus. With Ares, the god of war, she had four children: Deimos (horror), Phobos (fear), Harmony (clade), and Eros (love). She also had the power to breathe life into an inanimate thing. Pygmalion sculpted a statue of a woman and fell in love with her. Aphrodite took pity on him and turned her into a real woman under the name Galatea.

During one sexual encounter with Ares, her husband Hephaestus covered them with metal wire, so that all the gods would laugh at their adultery. Aphrodite promised to be faithful from then on to Hephaestus, but this act of two lovers saw Hermes and fell madly in love with her. From this next adultery of hers, Hermaphrodite, a young man with female breasts and long hair, was born. He was an androgynous or bearded woman. Hermaphrodite arises as an idea in society’s transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. The bearded goddesses actually represent transitional social forms, as Robert Graves argues in an iconic analysis of Greek myths. Aphrodite constantly created problems but also solved them. She helped establish patriarchy; our society that James Brown describes accurately like this:

This is a man’s, man’s, man’s world
But it wouldn’t be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl

Through the centuries that followed in this man’s world, Aphrodite suffered oppression, and persecution, and her followers went through metamorphosis. However, the love, fertility, and beauty she represents is found in other shapes and forms in different cultures during patriarchy. The women-guardians of the patri-

archy of the Mediterranean culture are maybe best illustrated by the line of the “Mother Goddess” Maria Portokalos in the movie “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”:

Let me tell you something. The man is the head, but the woman is the neck. And she can turn the head any way she wants.

Aphrodites all over the world know how to turn heads, and at the same time maintain the paterfamilias order, pretending that they are only the neck and not the head of the house. Famous sentences of the baby boomer generation: “Now I’m going to call your father” or „Just wait till your dad comes home” simulate the power of the male principle in society, while showing in fact the true power of the goddess; the guardian of the order who controls and gives birth to life and love.

Planet Venus—Goddess of Beauty

Venus in Roman pantheon is Greek Aphrodite. We are under a constant watch by these pagan gods and goddesses from the starry night. Our Solar system planets bare the names of the Roman gods. For example, Hesper (Morning star) is the evening star of Venus. The same star in the morning is called Phosphorus or Lucifer, which later became one of the names for Satan. In many cultures the passion archetype has been demonized through conservative religious dogmas, which become explicit in patriarchal and warrior societies. Thus, the goddess of love is identified with the demon.

The ancient peoples observed the sky and gave names to constellations, stars, and planets according to their deities. They had no internet and TV, and the atmosphere was not polluted. Their only evening entertainment was astronomy in accordance with their polytheistic beliefs. The geocentric system was modern then, and the Earth was a flat plate on which the gods played their own version of the chess. They often mistook stars for planets, and referred to constellations by the names of animals or gods they had visual similarity with. Venus reminded the Romans of the goddess of beauty, love, and fertility.

The planet Venus is the brightest celestial body in our sky and that’s why they thought it was a star. It’s big, closer to the Sun, and because it’s covered in clouds of sulfur it reflects more light. Due to its brightness and beauty visible to the naked eye, it proudly presents the goddess of love in the night sky. However, reality is very different. On Venus the temperature is so high that lead can melt, and the pressure is equivalent to the greatest depth though which submarines sail. It is packed with poisonous gases: sulfur, carbon dioxide and hydrochloric acid. On this beautiful celestial body, in sterile volcanic soil, acid rain falls and sulfur fog resembles scenes from the artistic representations of hell. In the systematic Christian demonization of pagan traditions over the centuries, Aphrodite or Venus, are personified with Satan and Hell.

Archetype of Aphrodite in Other Cultures

Joseph Campbell said that the deity is the personification of energy. Mythology is something that is woven into our reality but is not a fact *per se*, but a metaphor or a symbol. Female deities around the world personify the same energy of love, fertility, passion, and birth. The Greek Aphrodite, the Phoenician Astarte, the Egyptian Isis and Hathor, the Babylonian Ishtar or the Sumerian Inana, the pre-Islamic Arab goddess Al Uzzi, the Nordic Freya, the Aztec Xochiquetzal ruled the cultures of the first agricultural cities. These goddesses mixed their cults during Hellenism, which brought cultural diversity to the Mediterranean. However, the enemy of lust in the form of Christian teachings appeared in the Middle East and soon spread throughout Europe. Aphrodite or Venus became assimilated as the Mother of God in the new popular religion, where she remains partly until the Renaissance and partly today. One of the first life-size paintings of a nude woman in medieval Western culture was Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, which is parodied and recycled even today. The model from classical and Renaissance statues and paintings becomes a marketing myth about beauty, which is still exploited and used against women today.

The Sanskrit etymology of Venus stands for desire and longing. The Hindu counterpart to these female deities is Saraswati, the goddess of art, beauty, and knowledge. She is represented as a woman with long hair and four arms. In each hand she carries a symbol: Lotus—purity, Sira—art, Veda Devanta—the holy book of knowledge of the entire universe, and Japa—the continuous cycle of culture. The Indian name for the Being of all beings is Brahman. It's a neutral name. There is neither male nor female gender. The Indian name for a woman is Maya-Shakti-Devi, which means: "Goddess who gives life and mother of all forms."

Aphrodite's Personae

These rulers of all forms, through the flexibility of the cervical vertebrae with which they turn the governing structures, show a great power of adaptation and metamorphosis throughout history. Sometimes the forms they take are not even understandable to themselves. Such forms were astutely defined by Elif Safak in the book *Black Milk*, through the story of the main character in her middle age. Through the archetypal names of Jungian personas, shadows animus, and anima, which appear as enlightenment about the multiple faces and roles of women, the main character gets to know herself. Thus, in one woman there are the following goddesses: Miss Highbrowed Cynic, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, the spiritual Sufi; Blue Belle Bovary, the seductress; and Mama Rice Pudding.

These archetypes of goddesses survived violations over the centuries. They became archetypes of cleaning, cooking, and giving birth. They were forbidden to display emotions or show their faces. For those who were considered wild there were

made up stories about witches. Women who have cats did not get sick during the plague epidemic. Cats eat mice. Mice carry the plague. So those women cooperated with the Black Death and with Satan, which means they had to be burned at the stake. Even today we represent witches in fairy tales as proud owners of black cats.

Marie-Louise Von Franz, Europe's leading Jungian theorist on fairy tales, myths and stories, states that Arabs have a tradition of never approaching women living alone near the desert, as they are overcome with jinn. She elaborates this custom with the Jungian principle of anime and animus (female/male principle). Women living alone fall under the influence of their animus (male principle), as it is very difficult to be alone and resist the bursts of subconscious. He who lives alone must be very strong mentally. In order not to be alone, women agree to clean up after others and not to laugh if not alone.

"What's weird about cleaning up... there's no end to it. The perfect way to stop a woman... it's not a ladylike to laugh in that way.. Inhaling leads to emotion, so when we want to feel something, we hold our breath. As she laughs, the woman breathes with her full lungs, and while she does she could feel illicit things." analyzes Clarissa Pinkola Estes in her book about the wild woman—*Women Running with the Wolves*. There's a saying and a social convention in Bosnia (which doesn't just apply to women only): "Don't laugh, you'll later mourn it." The talents and gifts of the goddess of love and beauty, through feelings that provoke joy or happiness, have their origins in demonizing goddesses. When exactly did the oppression of the female principle of birth and fertility begin, and how did it spread from the ancient world to other cultures later?

Vailing Laws

Joseph Campbell in *Power of Myth* says:

The Semites are herders of goats and sheep, and the Indo-Europeans of cattle. They were formerly the hunters. They translate a hunting mythology into a herding mythology, but it's animal oriented. And when you have hunters you have killers, and when you have herders, you have killers, because they're always in movement, nomadic, coming into conflict with other people and they must conquer the area they move into. This comes into the Near East, and this brings in the warrior gods, like Zeus, like Yahweh... They really wipe out the goddess. The term for the goddess, the Canaanite goddess, that's used in the Old Testament, is 'the abomination.' And there was a very strong accent against the goddess in the Hebrew, which you do not find in the Indo-European. There you have Zeus marrying the goddess and then the two play together. I think it's an extreme case that we have in the Bible, and our own Western subjugation of the female is really, I think, a function of biblical thinking. (p. 169)

Semitic people invaded a world ruled by the religious systems of the Mother Goddess. Other gods from the mythological repertoire are later removed by a monotheistic system of beliefs. Our own, Western, subjugation of a woman is

only one function of biblical opinion. Joseph Campbell suggests in said interviews that there are „three possible situations. Initially, a female deity ruled and during this period a man almost had no significance at all. Then the situation is reversed and the role of the goddess is taken over by the male deity. Finally, the classical degree: male and female interact—such as in India. This stems from the understanding of Indo-Europeans who did not completely devalue the female principle. In ancient Sumer, the principle of equality of man and woman still reigns. At that time, the first letter, a cuneiform letter, records accounting data essential to the survival of the first cities. We take this invention of writing as the beginning of history and civilization. With the advent of the Acadians, who tear down the principle of independent cities and create an empire in the Mesopotamia area, testosterone enters the social order. Hammurabi's law occurs, and ruling the empire assumes strong legal and warrior structure of state and social arrangement: “Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth.” Hammurabi's famous contribution to legal science, in this social system leaves little room for philosophy about love.

But before this way of thinking, and even 2000 years before the advent of Islam, the Assyrians in Mesopotamia established 112 laws, one of which is the Law on Covering. In Law number 40, married, widowed, and Assyrian women must go out into the street covered. Daughters from the upper classes must be covered with an abaya. Prostitutes do not have to cover themselves. The penalty for not wearing the veil is fifty lashes. This law divides women into 5 categories: wives and daughters of the upper class, concubines, temple prostitutes, harlots, and slaves. The law certainly restricts women, but gives them the freedom and protection to walk down the street alone covered with a veil.

This tradition spread to Greece, Rome, Byzantium, Islamic culture, the Renaissance, and even the dress code of nuns. Half-nude sculptures of Aphrodite, in no way reflect the social costume design of these ancient cultures, whose mythology is full of debauchery and bizarre plots and twists. A symbol of covering – the veil is a status symbol in Ancient Greece as well. The evil of the female body needs to be hidden or mitigated. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and Aphrodite were revered goddesses, but ordinary living human women were supposed to be silent, not to laugh, and to be bound to the *oikos*—house, home, hearth.

A contemporary of Homer, the Greek poet Hesiod in the 7th century BC. writes about Pandora, as the first woman, the counterpart of the biblical Eve. Hesiod states that she is of a different kind, coming not with a box but with a jug of evil. The shape of this jug, the *pithos*, is the shape of the womb, and through sexual intercourse, all evil comes out. This jug needs to be closed, and the womb is identified with hysteria and everything that is not appropriate for civilized people. The philosopher who influenced the entire Western thought, Aristotle, in the 4th century B.C. says that women are “submen,” “imperfect men,” because they do not have the seed to create a man and that they must control themselves because they are made without reason. In the motherland of democracy, the model of civil

society, in the polis, women did not have citizenship, while even earlier in Egypt, women had the conditions to obtain a passport. Controlling and regulating the affairs of these unreasonable beings was of great importance in the civilized ancient world (*The Ascent of Women*, BBC, E1, 23min.)

The issue of veiling continued through the Middle Ages, right up to the Victorian era when women wore veils over or around their faces and were still considered as “the stuff” to be set up for a marriage. Somewhere with the victory of the suffragettes in USA for the right to vote, women have won a similar status to men. But under the condition that the oikos is still waiting for them in the afternoon: giving birth, having children, washing, cleaning, and cooking (and not laughing). Women were granted equal rights in New Zealand for the first time in 1893. In the US in 1920, in the UK 8 years later, and in France in 1944. In the U.S, black people were granted the right to vote in 1870, and women in 1919. The fight for women’s equality is still ongoing, but parallel to this battle, Aphrodite’s son Hermaphroditus, is working on his fight for equality and acceptance. The nonbinary or LGBTQU may carry some new wave of social order and understanding the difference, as brought by Aphrodite’s androgynous son during the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. But, until the guardians of the order see it as a threat to their own survival, the wind of change will remain veiled in most cultures.

Beauty Myth

However, on the other side of the veil, patriarchy skillfully imposed ideals of beauty by comparing women to goddesses in terms of external appearance. Another factor of repression of the female principle—beauty myth—arises. Naomi Wolf, in her book *The Beauty Myth*, says that this myth “is not based on evolution, sex, gender, or God’s aesthetics. This myth pretends to be a myth about sex, intimacy, life, and the celebration of women. The beauty myth is constricted from emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression.” The purpose of the beauty myth, which we are exposed to daily through the media, is to earn and increase profits in the advertising and marketing industries, which actually funds the media. In this symbiosis, the media creates ideals modelled on images about classical goddesses they themselves invented and repetitively promote them. All of this has the ultimate goal, which is political and ideological in nature: distraction from real social problems and stopping progressive and critical thinking.

If today a woman must have the perfect haircut, nails, clothes, go to the gym, spread something that convincingly states that is the nectar of the gods themselves and the elixir of eternal youth, all of this to please her media-manipulated subconscious, managed by the beauty myth; when does she have time to think about the progress of society? Women are weakened to such an extent that they may be better off covering themselves completely—head to toe. They are either too thick, or too thin, or ugly, or too beautiful, or lesbian, or non-native, or incapable of sat-

isfying a man. All of this leads to mental disorders of nutrition, sleep, surgical intervention on the face and body. The fashion, pharmaceutical and media industries market this myth on the foundations of the baby boom generation doctrine: “You can have both!” One thinks, of course, of career and family at the same time. The baby boom ideal consists of the following archetypes: a successful career-woman, great cook, the house is always clean; she knits, sews, engages in some hobby, is physically active, fantastic in bed, she does sports, always wears makeup, smiling, does homework with kids and understands every course better than a teacher, and generally looks great.

The marketing industry’s multibillion-dollar profits rely on beauty, versatile ubiquity and omnipotence mythology. And the woman/goddess makes up her little archetypes during this time, as the protagonist from Shafak’s book. That is how little heroines, women, girls, and mothers survive this media-imposed modern myth of the beauty of the guardians of patriarchy. Tenet of survival: goddess can do anything for love. As Campbell puts it:

Mother loves all her children: stupid, clear rogue, good. It doesn’t matter what kind of character they have. Female in a way represents an unconditional love for offspring. Father is more someone who keeps order. He is being linked to social order and social character to a much greater extent. The mother gives life to the nature of the child, and the father gives to his social character. Returning to nature will certainly re-actualize the maternal principle.

Guardians of the Patriarchy

The question of covering and hiding beauty, ugliness, or something different than the rest, is a question of denying individuality in a society that wants to rule on conservative principles, which often do not stand on fair or realistic grounds of what people in that society need. Just as in state systems, where oligarchies, autocracies, or dictatorships make rules, so in social systems, not tied to any particular monotheistic god, the rules for morality, behavior, and appearance in public were imposed on women. Since the adaptable goddesses skillfully turned their necks and adapted to different forms of demonization, always knowing that survival and the source of all life was within them, they were patient, because:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. (*Bible*: 1 Corinthians 13:4)

The return to the patient Mother Earth and feminine principles in the context of morality and social arrangements will certainly have a significant place in our society, which is on the verge of a global war. The patriarchal-warrior and profitable industrial concept of our society has already made Mother Earth, old Tiamat, very angry. Global warming, apocalyptic weather changes, meaningless patriarchal laws and rules, production of henchmen-warriors and obedient work-

ers in our education systems, greed, corruption, destruction of nature, wars, and tensions raging among nuclear powers, are not the product of Aphrodite's whims, but of the gods of thunder and warriors, who think that by erecting fences and drawing borders, the land they conquered belongs to them.

Aphrodite, no matter how capricious, forgives and grants wishes. Goddesses give, not take, life. Their purpose is to give birth, not to conquer. They have many faces and names and have suffered much in turning men's hot heads. Aphrodite's gift is one of the most important gifts of all the pagan gods. Unconditional love and the birth of life. It is necessary to respect this through the understanding of the gift of life that we have, through love and unity in the desire for beauty and good, as well as through the preservation of nature and the respect of the Earth Goddess, which should be given unharmed as a legacy to the next generations.

Note

The mythological phenomenology of the deities mentioned in this text must be understood in a metaphorical and symbolic context, and never in a factually religious one.

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Revisiting Rocky River

How Systems Thinking and CAS Might Inform Educating Teachers, a Beginning?

Ivon Prefontaine

Introduction

Exploring complexity thinking and complex adaptive systems (cas) offers a way of re-imagining teacher education,¹ while integrating hope, dialogue, and nonviolence into it. In my previous scholarship, teacher education is the least developed (Fleener & Prefontaine, 2023; Prefontaine, 2026; Prefontaine, 2013). I am laying the groundwork to re-imagine a teacher education syllabus that is fluid, adapting to emergent uncertainty and interactions, and that is “open-ended, starting with a seed from [an educator] and then [interactions with students] to a plethora of ideas, [interacting with emergent interactions between educator and students forming] a matrix of connections. In this manner, learning [goes] both deep and broad” (Doll, 2012, p. 230).

Effecting transformational change is challenging as educators are often isolated. While completing my Master’s, I compared contemporary schools to one-room school houses lined up as townhouses. Teachers and students come and go at prescribed times, occasionally interacting. Change is superficial e.g. new tools and whiteboards, and ways to avoid teacher-to-teacher contact, such as remote printers. My experiences and observations suggest educators² feel alone challenging large, oppressive, and faceless systems.

Referred to as reform, school change moves deck chairs on a sinking ship, “rearranging china when the house is on fire” (Solnit, 2016, p. 134). I understand educational reform as “tinkering [and] mere incrementalism [ignoring] complex

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interplay between the purposes and processes of institutional change” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 1). K-12 and teacher education lack transformational change due to political, bureaucratic, and institutional inertia and status quos resisting it. It is turned away by “those ... prospering under [existing orders], and ... lukewarm support ... from those who [might] prosper under the new [order,] fearful of [those in power and distrusting] things unless ... tested” (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 21). Schools embedded in larger, unwieldy systems fail to alter course due to systemic inertia. Change may emerge during crises, only to retreat later.

Language describing schools, certain students, and understanding of complexity, complexity thinking, and learning can pose problems. Although language refers to schools, classrooms, and students as complex, it is divorced from cas and complexity. My first published peer-reviewed article, “Rocky River: Building a Learning Organization” (Prefontaine, 2013), demonstrated a rudimentary understanding of complexity thinking and complex systems. I described the small school³ I taught at as a complex system and learning organization with mental models and shared vision related to systems thinking (Senge, 2006). “‘Learning organizations’ [are] organizations where people continually expand their capacity to the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 2006, p. 3).

Rocky River may have been a learning organization early on, with educators, parents, and students committed to a shared vision. Shortly after publication I realized we were embedded in larger systems controlling and impacting us. Rocky River was dying. Rocky River was unique: parents, family members, para-educators, and community members taught alongside educators. We integrated trans-disciplinary, cross-grade projects. Rocky River was a closed system.

A closed system ... is ... machine oriented, ... [unable to] transform. Open systems replace setness toward a predetermined goal with dynamic change, stability with emergence, and simplicity with complexity [and are] process oriented, since they are always in the process of transforming the somewhat ‘chaotic’ into the orderly [with] messy, chaotic, fuzzy ‘stuffs.’ (Doll, 2012, p. 8)

I resisted external, larger systems, and their mandates, and we failed to inform ourselves, adapt, re-energize, and reconstruct. I needed to step back to understand how to negotiate systemic challenges and sustain Rocky River, evolve in unexpected ways and inform shared vision, and “inter-be with [others and understand that without] the mud [of suffering] the lotus won’t manifest” (Hanh, 2014, p. 13). I forgot counsel offered to students, “what did you learn from this challenge to help you learn?”

Language can be narrow. “Complex learning needs” excludes and others certain students and groups. Without meaning and context, empty, vacuous words become “verbal incontinence [without] connection ... generating consequences

that retard needed changes” (Freire, 1994, p. 34). They gloss over evolving needs in education and teacher education and support for those in most need. To effect transformational change for a better world through education and teacher education, educators need to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity with their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Adapting is essential for the “continuity of [a system’s] life” (Dewey, 2005, p. 2). Despite uncertainty, unknowns, and a lack of control in a smaller system, there has to be hope. In this fashion, hope emerges from “the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to ... certainty of ... optimists and pessimists” (Solnit, 2016, p. xiv). Hope pauses and explores in a clear-eyed manner as larger systems impose mandates.

As systems, schools serve other systems such as communities and draw on others such as universities educating aspiring educators. Classrooms, disciplines, and each person are complex systems. Educators teach “large and complex as life [subjects and the] students [they] teach are larger than life and even more complex” (Palmer, 2007, p. 2). These add layers to complex teaching, calling for diverse pedagogic attitudes and approaches. Diversity entering each classroom “defines the range and contours of possible responses” (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 39). Each school, classroom, and discipline contain characteristics unique to their particular topography. Each educator and student learns “to carry [themselves] in such a way that the ways of this place might show themselves. Education, perhaps, involves the invitation into ... living ways” (Jardine, 2008, p. 155). Topographies of place and each topic rarely reveal themselves fully. Each educator and student acquire “knowledge [living] in the living, ongoing work [and fragile] coming to a place, learning its ways, and living with the unforeseeable consequence that [they each] become someone in such efforts ... entangled in and indebted” to that place (Jardine, p. 155). Systems are living through continuously evolving humans and ways of knowing knowledge bringing new dynamics, challenges, and adaptive opportunities.

As in many jurisdictions, Alberta’s educators and schools face challenges, e.g. recruiting and retaining educators, support staff, specialists and para-educators, reduced professional choice, and inappropriate curriculum and pedagogy for grade level (Walker, 2024; Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2025). As a field-instructor of student-teachers and interacting with their mentor-teachers for 8 years, I enter overcrowded schools, using non-classroom spaces e.g. staff rooms and libraries, experiencing a range of learning e.g. English as an alternative language, and inappropriate student behaviour. Late students or those who misbehave are often relegated to the staff room, a decision teachers describe as intrusive.

In one school, teachers referred to “learner apathy.” Students become “problems [when] it is [educators] who [have] the problem” (Clifford & Friesen, 2008, p. 99). Apathy infects some teachers in the school. When I asked teachers about local decisions and changes, they shrugged, responding it was an administrative decision. As one commented, “above their pay-grade.” In another school, teachers felt “professionally developed to death,” with mandated learning disconnect-

ed from context. To educate as a humanizing enterprise, “reading and writing of words comes by ... reading the world. ... [T]eaching of the reading and writing of the word to [students and educators and] missing the critical [practice] of reading and rereading the world [they experience and share] is ... pedagogically crippled” (Freire, 1994, p. 68). Uncertain, I fail to ask “what is teaching if not to ask who we are as teachers and make a difference without predetermined understandings, offering hope to each student we encounter.” Teachers struggle to witness “glimmers of ... something different, ... breathtaking breaking through in ... small, precious ways” (Clifford & Friesen, p. 98). I understand feelings of despair, loss of agency and experiencing being “overwhelmed by [a] defeatist perspective [rather than looking] forward to what [I] can do and look back at what [I] have done” (Solnit, 2016, p. 142). Towards the end of Rocky River, I felt a loss of agency and voice, my professional judgement disregarded, and feeling alienated. This appears pervasive in some schools I enter and with certain teachers.

Teachers experiencing loss of agency, alienated and disheartened, might ask if teaching is still a vocation. With diminishing professional identity, loss of voice and agency, imposed mandates, and the latest fixes and fads, teachers can experience teaching becoming a job. As a job, teaching fails to attract “creative and resourceful [people, while appealing to the] compliant and docile [lacking] inspiration” (Goodson, 2005, p. 247). Teachers risk losing sight of what called them to teaching as vocation. When I experienced this, I was unable to devote myself to teaching flowing from who I was, my heart and what is/was integral to my selfhood, and I risked doing other’s work, and “a violent concept of vocation” (Palmer, 2007, p. 31). I voluntarily left teaching, Rocky River, and a community that I loved. Those 13 years enriched me and informed my Ph.D. and dissertation, while exploring uncertain paths. Rejuvenated, 5 years later I unexpectedly found myself in my current role challenging me to re-imagine teacher education and, now, how cas informs it alongside hope, dialogue, and nonviolence. I need vocabulary, questions, and a matrix to engage student-teachers, their mentor-teachers, and hopefully university administrators to explore different attitudes and conditions emerging from cas. In current educational landscape, this can put educators at risk and jeopardize careers.

Concepts related to cas and complexity thinking are hardly new. Rapid demographic shifts occur in Alberta, particularly in urban settings. Many schools are more diverse than when I taught. These serve immigrant and refugee students from various religions and nationalities. Dewey (2004) described schools mirroring “society [and consisting of] many societies more or less loosely connected [with] intermingling ... of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs [creating] a new and broader environment” (pp. 20-21). Students arrive with diverse, complex codes acquired from family, peers, and religions, informing their learning. I observe “educators [embracing] diversity [and resisting] pluralism” (hooks, 2003, p. 47). Pluralism acknowledges differences and turns to the

common condition of humans entering and humanizing pedagogy. Humanizing educators learn to listen “with a discerning ear [responding] faithfully to ... [emergent] implications” (Palmer, 1983, p. 89). Humanizing plants seeds through dialogue. They indwell “between [multiple] curriculum worlds: the world of curriculum-as-plan [with abstract language from] outside the classroom [and] curriculum-as-lived [each teacher and student experiences and] to [understand and come] alive is to live in tension” (Aoki, 1991/2004, pp. 159-162). Complexity is abundant, yet there is little evidence in some schools of educating educators to meet the emergent complexity and tensionality and meeting each student where they are in their learning.

Educators are ill-prepared to teach in response to the complexity they encounter in many schools. If they try to respond differently the response is distrusted. Other teachers distrusted what we did in Rocky River, citing discomfort with parents’ roles, a home school element, and perceptions of less time teaching. Schools, teacher education, teaching, learning, and policies are trapped in rigid status quos, failing to enhance “systems thinking [as] a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge, and tools ... to make ... patterns clearer, and ... how to change ... effectively” (Senge, 2006, p. 7). Phenomena that made Rocky River unique provided potential for different attitudes to schools, education, and teacher education to be understood as complex, potentially adaptive, systems. The roles of educators, parents, students, and para-educators suggested “interdependent and volatile environments [need] ‘generative dialogue and ... collective thinking [, shared] leadership [, entrusting participants] with ... discretion [to decide] and act [according to a] common vision’” (Senge, pp. 275-279). My experiences and observations suggest schools lack generative dialogue, shared leadership, and shared visions. Changes come through top-down mandates and, after lengthy discussions in staff meeting, teachers suggested administrators tell them how to respond. For educators, compliance appears socialized through K-12 education, leaving “the master’s house [and its] tools” firmly in place (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 112). To transform education and teacher education, new tools, attitudes, and conditions are imperative.

Complexity, Complexity Thinking, and Complex Adaptive Systems

Complexity thinking can lead to traps. “There are two fundamental aspects to seeing systems: seeing patterns of interdependency and seeing into the future” (Senge, 2006, p. 343). “Seeing patterns and learning from them” has promise. “Seeing into the future” subscribes to a Western-oriented, scientific-rationalist future without uncertainty and ambiguity. Transgressing boundaries imposed by prevailing educational imaginaries accepts pluralistic, unpredictable “possible futures [to] imagine, design, and create collaboratively” (Gidley, 2021, p. 5). Schools as living systems, each person as an autonomous agent, provides possible futures by sharing with others through common interests, understandings, and backgrounds, diverting from each due to each unique lived-curriculum.

Dynamic or mechanical systems and thermodynamic systems are different. Rocky River was a dynamic system with “incremental, linear, easily controlled [change] reversible and nontransformatory” (Doll, 1993, p. 78). Rocky River featured linearity with a limited vision and lack of internal control. It was nontransformatory as it was easily controlled by “overdirection, and [its] goals [were too] narrowly defined” (Doll, p. 78). A thermodynamic system or living system revises its shared vision as new agents enter and provide energy, fecundity and diverse views, reproducing itself “with enough slightly different ... variations” (Doll, p. 74). It and its agents respond and adapt to unexpected change to survive and thrive. Rocky River became a monoculture, lacking new energy, flexibility, and adaptability in response to perturbations. It lacked room for

“error” ... for the emergence of variations on [what had been] relatively stable patterns [in the] system [due to] a significant rupture in the interactivity [of agents and] a shift in the web of relationships arising from the failure or departure of an agent. (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 42)

Perturbations occur internally and externally and agents need to respond and adapt to changes. Rocky River experienced internal ones as agents such as founding families, teachers, and administrators departed. To thrive, a cas takes in new matter and energy offsetting losses of embodied memory, history, identity and “relevant information” (Davis & Sumara, p. 42). This potentially occurred as families, teachers, and administrators arrived, bringing new energy and ideas to refreshing the shared vision. If systems are too rigid and lack diversity, failing to respond to threatening perturbations, they die as Rocky River did.

In their scholarship, Davis and Sumara (2006) offer and apply language drawing on complexity thinking and cas for education. There is some scholarship related to complexity thinking and cas for teacher education (Davis & Sumara, 2012; Sanford, et. al., 2015). A study of a school of medicine curriculum indicates cas is “comprehensive and integrative enough to study educational change [with] most of [it] to date [focused] on primary and secondary education (Stevenson, et. al., 2025, p. 2). Mine is a tentative first step forward, drawing on lessons from Rocky River, to begin reimagining teacher education through complexity thinking and cas.

Randomness as a Condition of Complexity

Davis and Sumara (2006) describe attitudes e.g. transphenomenality, transdisciplinarity, and interdiscursivity, and conditions for re-imagining teacher education from complexity thinking and cas. Vocabulary is fluid and ambiguous adding complexity to cas. Like education and teacher education, randomness exists in complexity thinking, cas, and attitudes and conditions. Complexity thinking and cas lack universal, agreed upon definitions, but can be described by observing

interactions [between] components [or agents that] are not fixed and clearly defined [subject] to ongoing coadaptations [and] rules of complex systems can vary

dramatically [and are volatile, subject to change] from one system to the next. ... [The resulting] precariousness results in part from the 'components' of complex systems ... [that] are dynamic and adaptive." (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 11)

Applying complexity thinking and cas to teacher education is challenging as each pedagogic relationship, each classroom, school, jurisdiction, community served, and faculty of education is unique creating a risk for volatility as components and agents interact. Although attitudes and conditions may be treated discreetly it is vital to view them as intertwined, with permeable boundaries, bringing phenomena and disciplines together through interactions, attitudes, and conditions adding to volatility.

When I reflect on certain lived-experiences, I realize they hold deeper meaning than originally subscribed, resulting from randomness. The condition of randomness and emergent events

is more a condition of the system's context [than] of the system itself. ... The behavior of a complex unity is neither fixed nor chaotic. ... Such systems [and agents] are influenced by and take advantage of random contextual noise [to trigger] diversity that might not otherwise arise [making educating] subject to continuous revision. (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 149)

Randomness adds complexity of lived-experiences and how to become embodied that hindsight can bring into focus without fully explaining. Accepting the Rocky River assignment and becoming a grandparent altered my educational choices and PhD, dissertation topic, and research. In the first, I understand vocation as educating humans, beyond teaching Physical Education. In the second, I remembered the wonder infants express experiencing their emergent world. I observed our child and partner experiencing becoming parents, as only they each could, without a prescribed manual.

I wondered how these experiences related to becoming a teacher, experiencing uncertainty and randomness. With hope, humans each navigate unpredictable futures as "dark as in inscrutable, not as terrible [without transforming] future's unknowability into something certain" (Solnit, 2016, p. 1). From my experience and stories recounted by six teachers about experiencing becoming teachers, becoming begins with a vision where humans look into an unknowable, unpredictable future

in the face of overwhelming [challenges] with no implication one can glimpse beyond the horizons of [their] historically situated understanding [as radical] hope [flowing] from genuine courage rather than false optimism. Following [a] dream into uncertain futures committed to the bare idea ... [of] something good. ... It is a daunting ... commitment to [ethical goodness transcending an] ability [to] grasp what (Lear, 2006, pp. 94-113)

the future holds. Due to randomness, educators are unable to fully grasp what this means in advance, while becoming, and reflecting on becoming.

Intertwined Attitudes and Conditions

Transphenomenality consists of ways of understanding education. It is the ability

to simultaneously examine [and explore] a particular phenomenon in its own right (for its particular coherence and ... specific rules of behavior) and pay attention to the conditions of its emergence (e.g., the agents that come together, the contexts of their co-activity, etc.). (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 34)

Agents interact with other systems. In teacher education, this includes classrooms embedded within schools, local jurisdictions, communities, and provinces. In a school or a school of education, each human brings with them unique understandings about life and school interacting. Each human is a living, holistic system with embodied memories, identity, cognition, and emotions coloring their interpretations of lived-experiences related to school. Coherency within a system depends on “*internal redundancy*, a term ... used to [describe] duplications and excesses of [certain] aspects ... necessary for complex co-activity” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 138, italics in original). I contract to a university informed by an evangelical, Christian ethic, drawing from related communities or systems in hiring faculty and attracting students. Despite each person embodying experiences and understandings of faith differently, internal redundancy exists to provide coherency.

To begin each of my dissertation interviews, in a hermeneutic-phenomenological study, I asked “what called each teacher to teaching?” (Prefontaine, 2017). I intentionally avoided religiosity, inviting them to describe their lived-experiences and how these informed how they chose teaching. Vocation, from “*Latin vocare*, [is] the same word that gives us voice [and calling us] to some purpose [to] some depth of selfhood in [one’s] own life” (Seymour, 2004, p. 43, italics in original). Good teachers listen for an often-quiet call, ask open-ended questions to explore what it means to be a particular teacher. To avoid making others defensive, these questions avoid being “close-ended ... trivial” (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 39).

Vocation etymologically extends to advocating for each student as they discover their particular voice to advocate for themselves, often a gradual process. It challenges prevailing dominant discourses and mental models about educating, learning, and teachers’ and students’ roles that often dehumanize them and parents, navigating unfamiliar topography without adequate advocacy. “Mental models [are] deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images [influencing] how {humans} understand the world and ... take action” (Senge, 2006, p. 8). Good teaching resists discourses about learner apathy and parental indifference to educate as “a vocation rooted in hopefulness [and] resistance” (hooks, 2003, p. xiv). Advocacy offers hope and resistance in countering systemic violence directed at individuals and groups, reading a shared world and continuously adapting. Good teachers question their mental models and discover

ways to provoke and respectfully question others' mental models and dehumanizing discourses. "Complexity thinking [and] interdiscursivity [attempts to provide] a means around ... apparent impasses ... emphasizing [that] new stable patterns arise that are specific to [an] emergent system [and transforming] learning systems [that] cannot be understood in linear and mechanical terms" (Davis & Sumara, 2008, pp. 36-37). Entrenched mental models about education and teacher education demand questions about purposes of education and teacher education, about who proposes change, who it benefits, and how authority/power are enacted.

Internal redundancy at the university related to faith leads to similar interpretations of vocation related to spiritual formation. Diversity emerges. As a field-instructor, I am an example, as are students adhering to other faiths or being non-religious. I inform my understanding of vocation through Catholicism and liberation theology. "The condition of *internal diversity* [within a group is] represented among ... agents [as] a source of possible responses" (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 137, italics in original). As the university focuses on spiritual formation, internal redundancy about vocation contributes in overcoming potential conflicts due to internal diversity. Some student-teachers describe teaching as "doing God's work." I ask "what does God's work mean facing challenging pedagogic moments and contexts?" A characteristic of a "complexivist mindset [and interdiscursivity] is ... the transphenomenal nature of 'educational objects' [presenting different] discourses ... " (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 37). Educational objects include educational lived-experiences, cultures, and religions informing a person.

A student-teacher, teaching in a high school with a majority Muslim population, described the K-12 Christian school they attended as homogenous, with students and staff that looked and thought much like them. They were unsure how they might feel teaching in a similar context to the one the university assigned. I asked them to interpret the story of Abraham and Sarah greeting and welcoming angels sharing meals with them despite being strangers (Genesis 18:12-15, The Jerusalem Bible, Reader's Edition). They described it as hospitality. I described Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share the story. Strangers represent potential dangers and "practicing hospitality involves a certain recklessness" (Pohl, 1998, p. 170). Teaching, as hosting and guesting, calls teachers to hone hospitality skills, offer safe haven, be role models, and allow hosting opportunities to emerge. "Hospitality [as] a [covenant] and a skill [and] practice ... flourishes [when] particular commitments and values are nurtured [and] certain settings are cultivated" (Pohl, p. 9). Educating as interrelated with others' learning represents a need to form relationships based on interbeing with a need to co-exist and co-adapt (Hanh, 2009, p. 23). Interbeing asks questions of educators about how to nurture hospitality for those they serve. There is tension between conflicting ideas based on unique needs within a system.

When issues arise in a system it is unlikely ready answers can be downloaded effectively by centralized, top-down power structures to reduce tension. Agents

need awareness that internal redundancy exists to address diverse ideas. With the condition of

neighboring ideas [educators] make provisions for the representation of [such] ideas, but the means [is] considered on a case-by-case basis, contingent on the particular issues, contexts, and participants involved [understanding] interpretive possibilities ... [are unmanageable]. To impose a singular or centralized authority [extinguishes] the potential of the collective as a knowledge-producer. (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 41)

Rocky River's issues, context, and participants and what was effective and ineffective cannot be generalized to other issues, contexts, and participants. What might be extrapolated is, in its early years, leadership was distributed and teachers', parents', and students' agency was valued. With attrition in the small system and new administrators arriving, there appeared to be a mandate towards a singular, centralized, top-down authority altering relational dynamics and viability. Distributed leadership disperses "control around intention, interpretation, and appropriateness" (Davis & Sumara, p. 42). Appropriateness is engaging in dialogue and comporting one's self hospitably. Hospitality invites another phenomenon—paradox—to be experienced and explored.

Paradox [produces] creative tension ... holding opposites together [creating] an electric charge [keeping teachers] awake [and] good teachers find ways to induce ... creative tension. [To] learn at the deepest levels, [humans] need to feel the risks inherent in pursuing the deep things of the world. (Palmer, 2007, p. 76)

Hospitality offers safety. To induce creative tension, good teachers pose open-ended questions broaching topics in safe ways.

The tension an educator experiences positioning themselves between each lived-curriculum and curriculum-as-plan is paradoxical. Good teaching "*honors the 'little stories' of [each] individual and the 'big stories of the disciplines'* [avoiding bloated] abstractions [and educators help] students frame [their] personal tales [within] the big stories" (Palmer, 2007, p. 79, italics in original). Mediating this is complex, moving beyond rote learning to deep learning. An educator acquires and embodies a pedagogic attitude called "tact" ... a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to ... situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice. ... An essential [quality] of tact is ... it is tacit and unformulable" (Gadamer, 1989/2004, pp. 14-15). To negotiate pedagogic, topographic contours, an educator learns to navigate in-between spaces of each lived-curriculum—little story—and curriculum-as-plan—the big story. By awakening them through paradox, an educator can gradually embody tact and sensitivity, occasionally falling short.

Due to the nature of it and its shared vision, lessons were learned from Rocky River, the article, and reflecting on the role parents played educating their children. Working full-time, many parents are unable to commit to being in a class-

room every 4-6 weeks, overseeing children's daily learning, as required in Rocky River. I ask student-teachers how they can invite parents into a fuller partnership, a different role than observed in schools, negate negative mental models and discourses casting them as adversaries rather than cooperative agents. When educational mental models or discourses conflict, educators need to engage in generative dialogue and listen to one another, bringing other interested agents together to recreate shared vision.

In Rocky River vision began with a small group of parents from the home school community who felt there had to be other ways to educate children, including access to libraries and gyms, parents as partners and, in the mid-1990's, access to computers and using them. They arrived at a shared vision, presented it to a school administrator, and modified it to comply with district and provincial policies. They then negotiated their shared vision with divisional leadership and Rocky River emerged. "Shared visions [represent] images people throughout an organization used [to] create a sense of commonality [permeating] the organization [giving] coherence [in] diverse activities. ... When people truly share a vision, they [are] connected, bound together by a common aspiration" (Senge, 2006, p. 192). Shared vision calls for generative dialogue to move beyond compliance, unlike teachers suggesting students relegated to the staff room and mandated schedule changes are above their pay grade. Too often, I observe a lack of generative dialogue in schools.

Even dissatisfied and discouraged mentor-teachers describe how they aspire to make a difference for students and stand up for them. They retreat to their classrooms fearing they might be ostracized. Internal redundancy of vocation and calling fade "into the backdrop and [is] only pulled into focus when there was some sort of rupture" (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 39). In one school, student-teachers described how they sat apart from mentor-teachers during breaks to avoid apathy eating away at the soul of many teachers. Although I was only there periodically, I sensed this unaddressed rupture.

Educational discourse, including in teacher education, favors top-down mandates, resulting in incoherency. Discourses have their "own distinctive ... rules, usually operating implicitly, [governing] the production of what is to count as meaningful" change (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 159). Teachers defaulting to "tell us what to do" surrender agency. In a dominant discourse, one of the implicit rules might be who is left out of discourses, teachers, parent, students, etc. New mental models and generative dialogue fail to emerge where "discourses always function in relation to or in opposition to other discourses. No discourse stands alone, although some (such as fundamentalist religion, scientism, or modernism) claim ... totalized and exclusive understanding of the universe" (Davis & Sumara, p. 159). Religion plays a significant role in the internal redundancy of the university and amongst some student-teachers and some mentor-teachers.

Religion creates tension for some student-teachers and faculty. Suggesting it infringes on religious beliefs, a faculty member expressed uncertainty about pro-

vincial requirements to develop and apply “foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit [to] benefit ... all students” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 5). As a contract employee, I am left out of conversations addressing this. I circumvent exclusion and remind student-teachers it is a professional requirement. Student-teachers appear diligent and enthusiastic about balancing this mandate with personal beliefs. “Complexity thinking helps here by pressing beyond ... boundaries [to recognize discourses as] inextricably entangled [and] not coterminous” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 160). Student-teachers ask me for solutions when encountering challenges. I resist the temptation and ask open-ended questions about how they felt about a lesson, how to engage parents, and how to engage students. Transgressing and moving “against and beyond boundaries {of dominant discourse} becomes the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Transgressive questions give freedom to move beyond allegedly immutable and illusionary boundaries regarding parental engagement and engaging students. Freedom emerges when student-teachers come to their own, often satisfactory, conclusions. Transgressing boundaries challenges “myths and habits [imposing] limits on personal [perceptions] of [a particular educative] world” (Grumet, 2015, p. 89). This involves critical reflection, digging into collective and individual assumptions.

Student-teachers say they wish they were as fast on their feet as mentor-teachers and myself. I counsel them to be patient and reflect on what they observe and experience, and how they can realistically influence change, beginning with their pedagogic practice. The student-teacher syllabus requires daily reflections and reflective activities, which I feel is important. Drawing from hermeneutic-phenomenology and interacting with the syllabus as a living document, I try asking eloquent questions, opening “up possibilities, [keeping] them open [and] to notice [what] is constantly operating unnoticed” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 298). Questions I ask can foreclose and limit possibilities. Eloquent questions encouraged some student-teachers to describe how emailing parents was ineffective compared to phone calls and face-to-face meetings. In my experience, certain parents try to engage immediately, others struggle, and some never engage. I suggest student-teachers reach out before behavioral or academic issues arise and make early phone calls or take time to meet parents, introduce one’s self, and describe a positive experience with their child early in the school term.

A second mental model relates to how students experience and engage in learning, a consideration often left out of their learning and its relevancy in their lives, often continuing into post-secondary. I ask student-teachers to compare their experiences in K-12 to what the university and mentor-teachers expect. In both, they often describe “vertical patterns characteristic of banking education [instead of a dialogic one where] the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teachers cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teacher” (Freire, 1993, p. 61). This infantilizes students as if their lived-experiences lack value. Student-teachers embody lived-experiences—little stories—pursuing sec-

ond, sometimes third careers, as parents of school-aged children, and from diverse traditions informing who they are as an educator. Holistically, embodied, lived-experiences help to inform “social interactions, enabled [or handicapped] by [culture and its] tools, [as] part of an ecological, ever unfolding conversation [between] humans and” a world they inhabit (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 159). Education and teacher education erasing embodied lived-experience dehumanizes educators and students.

Teaching in Rocky River, and attending Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington for a Ph.D. informed an emergent understanding of transdisciplinarity, integral to presenting and writing about hope, dialogue, nonviolence education, and teacher education. In Rocky River, I gradually moved to a project-based, rubric-assessed, transdisciplinary, self-directed student learning, and more distributed leadership. With its transdisciplinary approach, Gonzaga’s Ph.D. program provided language and encouraged me to cross borders and integrate multiple disciplines into coursework and dissertation. This attitude

compels a sort of border-crossing—a need to step outside ... limiting frames and methods of phenomenon-specific disciplines. ... [I]t is understood ... members of a [team can] arrive with different disciplinary backgrounds and different [disciplinary] agendas, yet, are sufficiently informed about each other’s perspectives and motivations to be able to work together as a collective. (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 35)

Structures of schools, teaching, individual classrooms, discrete grade-levels, and increased specialization represent internal redundancy that fails to consider how disciplines and grades can interact.

Although elementary teachers teach multiple subjects, I observe little transdisciplinary teaching. Teachers and teaching are balkanized and socialized in departmental niches identified by curricular and grade-level roles, which many teachers accept (Goodson, 2005, p. 66; Hargreaves, 2003, pp. 213-214). Balkanization and socialization extend to post-secondary. A student-teacher assigned to the same school as a second-year student-teacher suggested they did not interact with them, due to the difference of where they were in the program. On the other hand, several student-teachers described organizing and practicing teaching Physical Education to other student-teachers as part of their module, how kinesiology students joined in, and ensuing collective debriefing. With about 1000 students, the university context provides students, regardless of discipline, possibilities to interact with each other.

Challenges cultivating transphenomenality exist. It takes patience, time, effort, forming networks, and risk-taking. Perhaps, educators avoid crossing borders, even unnatural ones, socialized into accepting them as impermeable.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line [that] is a vague and undetermined place created by ... an unnatural boundary. ... [Despite unnaturalness or maybe because of it,] it is in a constant state of transition. (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, p. 25, italics in original)

Even educators who supported Rocky River, said they could not do what we did, reluctant to consider a transdisciplinary attitude and inviting parents into classrooms. I replied, saying I could not do what they did, as they were good teachers in their own right.

Shedding balkanized, socialized existences, and crossing borders is potentially complex and risk-filled. It begins with individual educators reaching out to each other and forming supportive, collaborative networks. Crossing borders involves something “alien [and unnatural] to ... academic culture [and talking] to each other ... risky stuff in a profession that seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (Palmer, 2007, p. 12). In an isolating profession (one I feel is intentionally designed), educators need to gather, talk about shared redundancy, and shared diversity and cross seemingly impermeable and immutable borders.

Student-teachers often ask how to do things differently. I suggest several ideas I feel are foreign in education. Reaching out to colleagues, forming transdisciplinary networks, and transgressing boundaries collectively are among them. They require time, patience, critical reflection, and focusing on what they each control. To hone pedagogic craft, educators use “technique until the real teacher arrives” (Palmer, 2007, p. 6). I recount how, when I arrived in Rocky River, I reverted to supposedly tried-and-true teaching. To shed the skin of balkanization and socialization hiding educators in plain sight takes proper timing. Becoming a teacher and moving beyond technique takes time, effort, patience, and support, including from parents, colleagues, and students. Its rewards enrich practices, offering students voice in their learning. For those who need additional time and support, the teacher gradually learns to meet each student where they are in their learning. Be true to one’s identity. Rocky River’s roots were in the home school community and where students appeared to have more choice in their learning, choosing resources, activities, and integrating them into their learning.

By nature, I am a storyteller, weaving stories into teaching, presenting, writing, and all my scholarship. It is important to connect the dots to curricular outcomes, make stories relevant to student learning and their interests, and be grade appropriate. I discovered my storytelling opened space for critical inquiry and student stories. It helped in forming trusting relationships with students and parents. “Story telling and group discussions/reflections [can] encourage students to situate personal experiences within broader social structures to cultivate a [deeper] understanding of issues” (Fatima, 2026, p. 10). Through sharing stories, we engaged in topics such as systemic racism, unjust systems, capital punishment, houselessness, environmental issues, etc.,

whether initiated by students or teachers, [as] part of a free exchange of human concerns [with those gathered,] their awe, doubts, fears, hopes, knowledge, and ignorance [where] students learn to respond to each other with compassion and understanding [and] appropriate levels of logic. (Noddings, 1993, p. 133)

These questions emerged within hospitable, tension-filled spaces where questions and responses generate an electric charge to spark continuing civil, appropriate conversations and following through with activities such as an annual donation to the local food bank.

Concluding Comments

In an increasingly polarized and dangerous world with increased standardization and political control (meddling) in teaching and schools, I finish with more questions than answers. Radical hope and hope in the dark are essential, in offering safe spaces to offset the “despair [in] the world ... and ... fear [for] what [each of our lives] and [our] children’s lives may be” (Berry, 2007, p. 207). At my age, intertwined questions framing scholarship and teaching have become “who do I want teaching our grandchildren? What kind of schools do I want them to attend?” The first question is about humans who teach and is one each educator needs to ask frequently and with urgency. “Seldom, if ever, do we ask the ‘who’ question—who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I related to my students, my subjects, my colleagues, my world?” (Palmer, 2007, p. 4). The first question enfolds the second. Without deep reflection to transform one’s selfhood and offer hopeful, safe, dialogic spaces, and educational possibilities for nonviolence education, is humanizing education possible?

A shared vision begins with one person or small group committed to it and is a recurring process. It pokes holes in boundaries—transgressing—forming networks, operationalizing and enacting different attitudes and creating conditions for new, shared visions to emerge. It begins with internal redundancy of vocation as a recurring call to reflect critically. On common ground, “communion urges us to come again and again to [places] where we can know joy, to come and celebrate, to join the [human] circle” (hooks, 2002, p. xix). Communion has a non-religious meaning, as educators and students enter into intimate relationships with each other to explore what they hold in common, differences, and paths into unpredictable futures. It offers opportunities for “beautiful, healing, refreshing ... communities of resistance” (Hanh & Berrigan, 1975/2001, p. 131). Forming communities of resistance, standing up, and standing in solidarity, helps educators to understand educating as a vocation, a calling to hopefulness. Each person enters at their pace, considering risks they face, and their readiness. Like in many communities of resistance and hope, these may have to be hidden from view to engage in them.

Although it is essential to introduce and integrate complexity thinking in classrooms, schools, and with educators and students at the earliest juncture of learning, it is important to acknowledge it happens in diverse contexts with educators willing, courageous, ready, to challenge often oppressive structures and status quos. This extends to educators in faculties of education. Literature emerging from nonviolence education proposes “education is a lifelong process taking

place in every situation and process through which people and societies learn and conduct their private and public affairs” (Reardon, 1993, p. 12). As a contract employee, I approach these efforts carefully—clandestinely—to subvert systems needing it, one student-teacher and mentor-teacher at a time. As with hope, dialogue, and nonviolence education, and now complexity thinking and cas, I am acquiring language to share these and look for administrators willing to collaborate re-imagining education and teacher education. As educators, it is crucial to stand up for each other, offer hope, and explore topographies together, followed by worthwhile enacting.

Notes

¹ Education is a career long process beginning with teacher education in university extending to voluntary and mandated professional development.

² Educator includes aspiring teachers, teachers in the profession, teachers in Education Faculties, and those teaching in other post-secondary contexts. This establishes a transphenomenal and transdisciplinary approach in the article.

³ Rocky River was a program as opposed to a school. Teachers, parents, and students understood it as a school.

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The Gospel of Ridicule

Laughter, Mockery, and Political Resistance

J. Cynthia McDermott & Lejla Panjeta

Abstract

This article explores laughter as a historically persistent form of resistance. Drawing upon the work of Bergson, Bakhtin, James C. Scott, and Umberto Eco, it examines how humor functions as both social critique and political strategy. Through examples ranging from Nazi Germany and the siege of Sarajevo to contemporary protest movements, it argues that laughter is not a distraction from resistance but one of its most enduring and effective forms. What emerges is a tradition that might be described as a gospel of ridicule: a belief that humor can challenge fear, undermine authority, preserve human dignity, and create communities capable of imagining alternatives to oppression.

Keywords: laughter, political satire, Umberto Eco, Bergson, authoritarianism, ridicule, cultural resistance

Introduction: Humor, Resistance, and the Politics of Laughter

Humor occupies an unusual place within the study of political resistance. While scholars have devoted considerable attention to protest movements, civil resistance, social movements, and nonviolent action, laughter is often treated as peripheral to political struggle rather than central to it. Yet throughout history, individuals and communities confronting oppression have repeatedly turned to

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jokes, satire, parody, absurdity, and ridicule as tools of survival and resistance. From whispered political jokes under totalitarian regimes to contemporary protest movements employing costumes, street theater, and tactical frivolity, humor has proven remarkably durable as a form of political expression.

A growing body of scholarship suggests that laughter performs functions extending far beyond entertainment. Henri Bergson viewed humor as a social corrective that exposes rigidity and restores flexibility to human behavior. Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival demonstrated how collective laughter can temporarily invert social hierarchies and challenge official authority. James C. Scott argued that jokes, gossip, and satire frequently operate as "hidden transcripts," allowing subordinate groups to express criticism outside the direct gaze of power. More recently, scholars of resistance and social movements have documented the role of humor in reducing fear, building solidarity, and exposing contradictions within authoritarian systems.

Despite these contributions, humor often remains underexamined within studies of political resistance. Resistance is frequently imagined as a domain of seriousness characterized by sacrifice, confrontation, and struggle. Such assumptions can obscure the important ways in which laughter enables communities to endure repression, sustain morale, and challenge authority. Humor does not replace political action. Rather, it often creates the psychological and social conditions that make political action possible.

Authoritarian systems depend heavily upon rituals of seriousness. They cultivate reverence, inevitability, and obedience. Political leaders seek to appear powerful, institutions seek to appear permanent, and ideologies seek to appear unquestionable. Humor disrupts these performances by exposing their theatrical dimensions. A ruler who can be mocked is no longer untouchable. A slogan that can be parodied loses some of its authority. A system that becomes ridiculous begins to lose its power over the imagination.

In every age, resistance movements have found ways to turn power on its head. Somemarch. Somestrike. Somesing. And some, perhaps the most imaginative, laugh. In an era of global anxiety and rising authoritarianism, humor has emerged not as escapism but as strategy. From the whispered jokes of Nazi Germany to the art of Sarajevo under siege and the carnivals of Portland, playful defiance has proven to be a serious political act: a gospel of ridicule that exposes the absurdity of power and the strength of community.

The Logic of Laughter and Humor Under Tyranny

Political scientist Erica Chenoweth, who studies nonviolent resistance, reminds us that unarmed citizens can shift history when they organize creatively and persistently. Movements that remain disciplined, diverse, and imaginative are twice as likely to succeed as violent uprisings. Humor is one of their sharpest

tools. Laughter breaks fear. It invites participation. It flips the narrative from helplessness to agency. When an authority overreacts to a joke, it reveals its weakness. Gene Sharp, the great theorist of nonviolence, called this political jiu-jitsu: the art of turning an opponent's power back upon itself. When regimes punish comedians, ban costumes, or jail clowns, the spectacle often does more damage to their legitimacy than any riot could.

Even under the most brutal regimes, ridicule has found ways to survive. During the 1930s and '40s, when the Nazi government demanded complete obedience, ordinary Germans and Austrians still whispered forbidden jokes—what they called *Flüsterwitze* (“whisper jokes”).

These small acts of humor mocked Hitler's arrogance and the absurdities of Nazi life. One went: “Why is the Führer so brown? Because he's been in the oven too long.” Telling such a joke could mean imprisonment, yet thousands risked it. As historian Rudolph Herzog writes, “Laughter was an act of moral self-preservation. You laughed to prove to yourself that you were still free.” Cabaret artists in Berlin and Vienna used satire to ridicule fascist pomposity. Werner Finck, who ran the Berlin club *Katakombe*, was arrested in 1935 for slyly mocking Nazi slogans onstage. His audiences understood every wink and pause. Across occupied Europe, artists, students, and pranksters made small, defiant gestures—graffiti mustaches on Hitler's posters, sarcastic “Heil Roosevelt” greetings, and secret caricatures passed hand to hand. Even when laughter had to hide underground, it endured. It became proof that the human spirit was not fully conquered.

James C. Scott, Hidden Transcripts, and the Politics of Humor

While philosophers such as Bergson and later Umberto Eco help explain why laughter threatens authority, political scientist James C. Scott offers a framework for understanding how humor operates within systems of domination long before open resistance becomes possible. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott argues that subordinate groups often develop what he calls “hidden transcripts”—forms of communication that exist outside the view of those in power. These hidden transcripts may take the form of gossip, stories, coded language, songs, satire, and jokes. Though often dismissed as insignificant, they serve as important spaces where alternative understandings of reality can survive.

Authoritarian systems attempt to control not only behavior but also language and meaning. Publicly, citizens may appear obedient, repeating official slogans and performing rituals of loyalty. Privately, however, they often create parallel worlds of interpretation in which authority is questioned, mocked, and reimagined. Humor occupies a privileged place within these hidden transcripts because it allows criticism to circulate while maintaining a degree of ambiguity. A joke can always be dismissed as “only a joke,” yet those who hear it understand its deeper significance.

Scott's insights help explain why humor repeatedly emerges under conditions

of repression. The whispered jokes of Nazi Germany were not simply entertainment. They created temporary communities of recognition among individuals who could not safely express dissent in public. Each joke communicated a simple but powerful message: you are not alone in your doubts. In this way, humor functioned as a form of political communication long before collective action became possible.

The same dynamic can be observed in the Soviet Union, where political jokes became an informal language of resistance. Citizens exchanged stories that mocked bureaucratic inefficiency, shortages, and ideological contradictions. These jokes rarely challenged the state directly. Instead, they revealed the gap between official narratives and lived reality. Laughter exposed what could not safely be stated outright. As Scott suggests, such hidden transcripts allow populations to preserve critical consciousness even when overt opposition is dangerous. Humor's power lies partly in its ability to create solidarity without formal organization. Resistance movements often begin not with demonstrations but with conversations. Before people march together, they must first discover that others share their frustrations. Jokes perform this function remarkably well. A shared laugh establishes trust, reduces fear, and creates a sense of collective identity. The audience for political humor becomes a community, however temporary. Scott's work also helps explain why authorities frequently react so strongly to seemingly trivial acts of mockery. A joke threatens power not because it overthrows institutions directly but because it undermines the assumptions upon which authority depends. Dictators can imprison dissidents, censor newspapers, and ban political organizations. It is far more difficult to eliminate a joke. Humor spreads informally through conversation, performance, rumor, and increasingly through digital media. Its decentralized nature makes it difficult to control.

Seen through Scott's framework, laughter becomes more than entertainment or emotional release. It functions as a form of political rehearsal. Hidden transcripts allow individuals to practice dissent symbolically before they engage in it publicly. Every sarcastic remark, whispered joke, or act of ridicule weakens the appearance of unanimous consent that authoritarian systems seek to project. The joke itself may appear small, but its cumulative effect can be profound. It reminds participants that official power is neither absolute nor universally believed. The gospel of ridicule therefore begins long before public protest. It begins in private conversations, shared laughter, and the quiet recognition that authority is neither sacred nor beyond question. Humor creates the social space in which resistance first becomes imaginable. Before people challenge power openly, they often learn to laugh at it.

Sarajevo and the Art of Defiance

The experience of Sarajevo during the 1990s illustrates this process vividly. Under siege, citizens used irony, sarcasm, and absurd humor to confront cir-

cumstances that often seemed unbearable. Jokes circulated rapidly because they offered more than comic relief. They provided a language through which people could acknowledge hardship while refusing to surrender psychologically to it. Humor became a hidden transcript of survival. It preserved a space of intellectual freedom in a city surrounded by violence.

Half a century later, in the fractured landscape of the former Yugoslavia, humor again became a lifeline. During and after the siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s, artists and young people responded to fear with creativity. They filled institutions of culture in the bomb shelters with irony, color, and wit; proving that laughter could be as subversive as any weapon.

Their concerts, exhibitions and theater performances sheltered from snipers and grenades mocked the grim politics of nationalism and destruction. Even graffiti art appeared over bullet holes; absurd performances popped up in bombed-out courtyards; and impromptu fashion shows paraded through the sheltered ruins to declare, “You cannot erase our joy” as a comparative variation of antifascist resistance slogan “No pasarán!”

In normal times, art is optional. Under siege, it becomes essential. Sarajevo’s artists did not create to beautify ruins; they created to contradict them. Every play, concert, poem, and exhibition was an act of defiance—a way of saying we are still human, and therefore not yet defeated. This was not escapism. It was confrontation. Art during the siege refused silence, refused victimhood, and above all refused the narrative that Sarajevo was merely a humanitarian tragedy. The city insisted on being a cultural subject, not a passive object of pity.

The resistance through irony expressed in daily communications through jokes and sarcastic observations gave people back a sense of agency and normalcy. They eroded the power of fear and reminded people of Sarajevo that culture was still theirs, even in a city that had been under attack because of it. The laughter that filled the streets was not frivolous—it was a collective declaration of survival.

Sarajevo’s humor during the siege deserves special attention. It was dry, absurd, and merciless—especially toward death. Jokes circulated faster than humanitarian aid. Satire flourished because it restored a sense of intellectual superiority over violence. If you can mock your executioner, you are not entirely powerless. This tradition connects directly to pre-war cultural phenomena like Top Lista Nadrealista (Eng. Top List of Surrealism), whose surreal humor had already trained Sarajevans to recognize the absurd logic of nationalism and bureaucratic madness. During the siege, reality itself became surrealist. Art didn’t imitate life, life plagiarized satire.

While contemporary movements often appear innovative, the use of humor as resistance has much deeper historical roots. Long before digital memes, clown brigades, and tactical frivolity, collective laughter served as a means of challenging authority and imagining alternative social realities. While contemporary

movements often appear innovative, the use of humor as resistance has much deeper historical roots.

Carnival, Inversion, and the Politics of Laughter: Bakhtin's Contribution

Long before modern protest movements employed clowns, costumes, satire, and theatrical disruption, laughter occupied a central place in public life. Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argued that medieval carnivals created temporary spaces in which ordinary rules of hierarchy were suspended. During carnival, kings could be mocked, fools could become wise, and the rigid distinctions that organized society were temporarily overturned. The carnival was not simply entertainment. It was a social and political event that challenged the permanence of authority itself.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin described carnival as a moment when official culture lost its monopoly over meaning. Laughter became collective rather than private. Participants were not spectators watching a performance; they became part of it. The marketplace, the streets, and public squares transformed into spaces where alternative realities could be imagined. The authority of church, monarchy, and social rank remained formally intact, yet for a brief period those institutions could be examined, ridiculed, and symbolically reversed.

Bakhtin's insights help explain why humor remains such a powerful instrument of resistance. Authoritarian systems depend upon distance, reverence, and obedience. They cultivate an image of inevitability. Carnival disrupts this process by bringing power down to human scale. A ruler who can be mocked is no longer untouchable. A slogan that can be parodied loses some of its authority. Laughter transforms fear into participation.

This tradition can be traced across centuries. The medieval carnival survives in contemporary protest movements that use humor, costumes, parody, and performance to challenge authority. Modern demonstrations often resemble political theater. Protesters dress as clowns, create giant puppets, invent absurd rituals, and stage satirical spectacles. Such actions are frequently dismissed as frivolous, yet Bakhtin suggests the opposite. Their effectiveness lies precisely in their ability to expose the artificial nature of power.

The Carnival Against Capitalism in London in 2000 provides a striking example. Thousands of demonstrators transformed the financial district into a festival of costumes, music, street performances, and political satire. Rather than confronting authority through direct violence, participants created a temporary alternative world that revealed the fragility of the institutions surrounding them. The event borrowed heavily from the logic of carnival: inversion, playfulness, and collective participation became tools of political critique.

Similarly, the clown brigades that emerged during anti-war demonstrations in Europe and North America employed ridicule to disrupt the expected chore-

ography of protest and policing. Police trained to confront angry crowds often found themselves facing performers dressed in oversized shoes and brightly colored costumes. The absurdity of the encounter undermined the seriousness upon which state authority depended. The spectacle shifted attention away from official narratives and toward the performative nature of power itself.

The protests in Portland, Oregon, during 2020 reflected many of these same dynamics. Demonstrators appeared in costumes, danced in the streets, and used humor to challenge heavily armed security forces. Their actions echoed Bakhtin's observation that laughter creates a temporary space in which alternative social relationships become possible. Through play, participants reclaimed public space and transformed fear into solidarity.

Bakhtin's theory also helps explain the emotional power of collective laughter. Humor is rarely experienced in isolation. Like Bergson, Bakhtin understood laughter as a social act. People laugh together, and in doing so they create community. Authoritarian regimes seek to isolate individuals and replace horizontal relationships with vertical structures of command. Carnival reverses that process. It creates temporary communities built on participation rather than obedience.

Seen through this lens, the gospel of ridicule represents more than a collection of jokes or acts of satire. It belongs to a much older tradition in which laughter becomes a democratic force. Carnival reminds participants that no hierarchy is permanent, no authority is beyond question, and no system is immune from mockery. The act of laughing together becomes a rehearsal for political freedom itself.

From medieval marketplaces to the streets of Portland, the logic remains remarkably consistent. Laughter does not merely challenge power. It creates alternative visions of social life in which power is no longer feared. In this sense, carnival is not an escape from politics but one of its most enduring forms.

The Orange Alternative: Absurdity as Political Strategy

Few movements demonstrate the political power of humor more effectively than the Orange Alternative, a resistance movement that emerged in Poland during the 1980s. Operating under Communist rule, activists faced extensive censorship, surveillance, and restrictions on public assembly. Traditional forms of protest often resulted in arrest. Yet rather than confront state authority directly, members of the Orange Alternative adopted a strategy of absurdity.

Founded by Waldemar Fydrych, known affectionately as "Major," the movement transformed political dissent into public theater. When government authorities painted over anti-government graffiti, activists responded by painting small orange dwarfs on the newly covered walls. The dwarf quickly became a symbol of resistance. It was playful, nonsensical, and difficult for authorities to classify as political. Yet everyone understood its meaning.

The genius of the Orange Alternative lay in its ability to expose the contradictions of authoritarian rule. Demonstrators organized happenings rather than protests. Participants dressed as dwarfs, handed out toilet paper, distributed absurd slogans, and staged surreal public performances. These events appeared harmless, even ridiculous. Yet when police intervened, they revealed the insecurity of the state itself. Newspaper photographs showing officers arresting citizens dressed as dwarfs created an image far more damaging to the regime than many conventional demonstrations could have achieved.

The movement understood a lesson that authoritarian governments repeatedly fail to grasp: power depends not only on coercion but on performance. States seek to project competence, seriousness, and inevitability. The Orange Alternative transformed that performance into comedy. By refusing to engage on the regime's preferred terms, activists forced authorities into a series of impossible choices. If officials ignored the demonstrations, they appeared weak. If they suppressed them, they appeared absurd. One famous happening involved hundreds of participants gathering while wearing orange dwarf hats. Police arrested many of them, creating headlines that effectively announced to the world that the Polish state considered dwarfs a threat to national security. The image was unforgettable. Ridicule accomplished what direct confrontation often could not. It shifted public attention away from the protesters and onto the awkward performance of authority itself.

The Orange Alternative illustrates a principle that appears throughout the history of nonviolent resistance. Humor is effective not because it minimizes conflict but because it changes its terrain. Authoritarian systems are often prepared to confront anger. They are less prepared to confront laughter. Police are trained to disperse crowds, manage demonstrations, and suppress disorder. They are not trained to respond to absurdity. Humor introduces uncertainty into systems that depend upon predictable scripts.

The movement also demonstrated the communal power of laughter. Participants did not merely observe political theater; they became part of it. Like the medieval carnivals described by Bakhtin, Orange Alternative happenings transformed public space into a temporary world governed by different rules. Hierarchies were inverted. Official language lost its authority. Ordinary citizens became performers in a collective act of mockery. Through participation, fear diminished and solidarity increased.

The legacy of the Orange Alternative can be seen in later movements across the world. From anti-globalization protests and clown brigades to contemporary demonstrations employing costumes, puppets, and satirical performance, activists continue to draw upon the same insight: ridicule can reveal the fragility of power more effectively than confrontation alone. The goal is not merely to criticize authority but to make its claims to inevitability appear ridiculous.

In this sense, the Orange Alternative represents one of the clearest examples

of the gospel of ridicule in action. It showed that laughter could become a political resource, absurdity a strategic weapon, and humor a form of resistance capable of exposing the theatrical foundations of authoritarian power. By making the state look foolish, the movement helped citizens imagine a future in which that state was no longer feared.

Resistance:

Why We Laugh At Others (and Occasionally at Ourselves)

Bergson is unapologetic about one uncomfortable truth: laughter is mildly sadistic. We laugh at someone before we laugh with them. Comedy requires a victim, usually temporary, occasionally willing, but always exposed. The laughing group stands united, momentarily superior. Yet this cruelty serves a purpose. By laughing at others' rigidity, we are warned against our own. Comedy says: Do not become this. The miser, the bore, the zealot, each is a cautionary tale. And when we laugh at ourselves, the lesson is even sharper: we recognize our own mechanical habits from the outside.

This is why self-irony is the highest form of humor. It signals flexibility, intelligence, and social awareness. The person who can laugh at themselves proves they are not trapped inside their own mechanisms. Bergson would call this a small victory for life over automatism.

Perhaps the most forward-looking aspect of Bergson's theory is its political implication. Laughter resists systems that demand rigidity: authoritarianism, dogma, blind ideology. Dictators hate jokes for a reason. Laughter dissolves the illusion of inevitability. It reveals that the emperor is not naked, but stiff.

Satire and sarcasm thrive wherever power becomes automatic, wherever language hardens into slogans. They reintroduce elasticity into discourse. In this sense, laughter is not escapism; it is a quiet rebellion of intelligence against machinery.

Bergson's insight becomes particularly compelling when societies are about to ossify, fracture, or explode. In such moments comedy often becomes most revealing. Just before history turns tragic, laughter intensifies. It grows sharper, more surreal, and more prophetic. This is precisely where *The Simpsons* and Sarajevo's Top Lista Nadrealista enter the scene: two comedic laboratories detecting social rigidity seconds before disaster.

Different continents, different idioms, yet the same Bergsonian mechanism at work.

The Mechanical Encrusted on the Living

If Bergson had to leave us with one formula carved in stone, it would be this: the comic is the mechanical imposed upon the living. Life, by nature, is fluid, adaptive, and elastic. Comedy erupts when a human being behaves like a machine: rigid, repetitive, automatic in the places where responsiveness is required.

Think of the classic slip on a banana peel. Fall is funny not because pain delights us (we are not monsters), but because a living, thinking body suddenly behaves like an object obeying blind physical laws. The human becomes momentarily thing-like. Laughter bursts out as a reflex of recognition: you forgot you were alive.

But only if we do not see the severe consequences. If a person breaks a leg or stays unconsciously on the ground, we will not laugh. In that one slip of a moment, between serious injury and just mechanical clumsiness without any consequence our human nature reacts and decides it's a laughing or panic time.

This principle extends beyond slapstick. A pedant who repeats rules regardless of context, a bureaucrat who follows procedure while reality burns, a lover who recites clichés instead of responding emotionally; all are comic because they substitute automation for awareness. Bergson's laughter is not about jokes; it is about instinct of subconsciousness.

Satire and Sarcasm: Comedy with a Backbone

Satire, in Bergson's framework, is laughter promoted to a civic duty. Where simple comedy points out rigidity, satire weaponizes that observation. Satirists exaggerate mechanical behavior until it becomes impossible to ignore. The miser becomes a calculator with legs; the hypocrite a marionette of moral phrases; the authoritarian a wind-up toy shouting slogans.

Importantly, satire does not invent flaws; it isolates and magnifies them. The satirical target is not evil but inflexible. Bergson would argue that satire laughs not at wickedness, but at stupidity disguised as seriousness. The satirist exposes the automatic gestures behind moral posturing. This is why satire often feels uncomfortable. It strips away emotional alibis. When Molière mocks doctors, politicians, or religious figures, he does not attack medicine, governance, or faith. He attacks their mechanical practitioners, those who confuse habit with wisdom. Satire, then, is laughter acting as a social immune system.

Sarcasm occupies a particularly elegant niche in Bergson's universe. If satire is laughter in public, sarcasm is laughter sharpened into a whisper. Sarcasm functions by saying the opposite of what is meant, trusting the listener's intelligence to detect discrepancy. This discrepancy is crucial: sarcasm fails utterly in the presence of literal minds.

Mechanically speaking, sarcasm works by revealing automation in language and thought. The sarcastic speaker mimics conventional expressions: polite praise, moral approval, and agreement. But delivers them with a tone that exposes their hollowness. The listener laughs not at the words, but at the gap between form and meaning.

From a Bergson's perspective, sarcasm is devastating because it mirrors rigidity back to itself. It shows how social formulas, such as compliments, slogans, platitudes, can run on autopilot. The sarcastic remark forces consciousness back into the equation. If satire is a public trial, sarcasm is a private execution.

Laughter as Heresy

In *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco stages one of the most elegant philosophical ambushes in modern literature. Beneath the murder mystery, the medieval décor, and the scholarly footnote fireworks, lies a single, explosive proposition: laughter is a political and epistemological threat. Not a moral failing. Not vulgarity. A threat.

The novel's central object of terror, Aristotle's lost second book of Poetics, devoted to comedy, is fictional, but the fear surrounding it is not. Eco uses the absence of this text as a narrative vacuum into which power rushes. What terrifies the guardians of orthodoxy is not what laughter mocks, but what it undoes: fear, reverence, and the illusion of inevitability.

Jorge of Burgos, Eco's blind librarian and theological inquisitor, understands this perfectly. His opposition to laughter is not prudishness; it is strategy. For Jorge, laughter dissolves authority at the molecular level. If Christ can be laughed at, then God can be questioned. If monks can laugh, they can doubt. If people doubt, they no longer obey automatically. Laughter is elasticity invading dogma.

Eco is explicit. Jorge insists that laughter "kills fear," and fear, he argues, is the foundation of faith and order. This is the key insight of the novel: power does not rest on truth alone, but on emotional discipline. Fear keeps systems rigid. Laughter reintroduces movement. This places Eco squarely in dialogue with Henri Bergson, though Eco approaches the problem from the side of semiotics and theology rather than philosophy. Bergson argued that laughter corrects rigidity, that society laughs at mechanical behavior imposed on living beings. Eco radicalizes this insight: authoritarian systems are themselves mechanical encrustations pretending to be eternal truths. Laughter, then, becomes a method of philosophical sabotage.

What makes Aristotle's lost book so dangerous is not that it teaches jokes, but that it legitimizes comedy as knowledge. A world that takes comedy seriously cannot take authority as sacred. If laughter has philosophical dignity, then seriousness loses its monopoly on truth. This is why the book must be hidden, poisoned, and killed for. Knowledge that laughs cannot be controlled.

Eco's monastery functions as a micro-model of all authoritarian systems. It is a closed world of rules, rituals, repetition, and controlled interpretation. Meaning is centralized. Books are guarded. Interpretation is rationed. Laughter, by contrast, is uncontrollable. It spreads horizontally. It does not respect hierarchy. A joke needs no permission.

Crucially, Eco does not romanticize laughter as innocent joy. Like Bergson,

he understands its cruelty. Laughter humiliates. It exposes. It strips authority naked. This is precisely why it works. The laughing subject gains momentary intellectual superiority over what once appeared absolute. The king becomes a man in a costume. The doctrine becomes a script.

William of Baskerville, Eco's rational Franciscan detective, represents a competing epistemology. He does not worship laughter, but he refuses to fear it. His approach is experimental, ironic, and provisional. He laughs because he understands that certainty is more dangerous than doubt. Where Jorge clings to rigidity, William embraces fallibility. The conflict between them is not theological—it is cognitive.

Eco's deeper claim is that systems which forbid laughter are already dying. They sense their fragility. Only brittle structures fear mockery. Living traditions absorb it. This insight travels seamlessly across history. Medieval monasteries, fascist regimes, nationalist ideologies, and modern bureaucracies all share the same Achilles' heel: they demand seriousness as proof of legitimacy.

This is why dictators fear comedians more than dissidents. Dissidents argue within the language of power; comedians corrode the language itself. Satire does not oppose ideology. It renders it ridiculous. Once ridicule enters discourse, slogans lose traction. Rituals look theatrical. Violence appears absurd rather than heroic. Eco's fictional Aristotle becomes a symbol of suppressed intellectual freedom. His missing book stands for all forms of knowledge that destabilize authority by refusing solemnity. In this sense, *The Name of the Rose* is not a historical novel but a manual of resistance disguised as a detective story.

Placed alongside Bergson, the conclusion becomes unavoidable: laughter is not the opposite of seriousness; it is seriousness's most effective criticism. It exposes when seriousness has become automatic, ritualized, and detached from life. Laughter reintroduces consciousness where systems prefer obedience.

The "gospel of ridicule" articulated throughout this work finds its sharpest theoretical anchor here. Eco shows us why laughter must be controlled, censored, or destroyed wherever power ossifies. Not because laughter lies, but because it tells the truth too efficiently.

Aristotle's lost book is dangerous because it teaches a forbidden lesson: that authority survives only as long as it cannot be laughed at. Once it can, its fall has already begun. Eco leaves us with no recovered manuscript, no triumphant revelation, but only ashes and fragments. But that, too, is the point. Laughter cannot be preserved as doctrine. It must be practiced. It lives in moments, gestures, jokes, and acts of mockery that refuse to bow. And that is precisely why it remains power's most persistent enemy. If Aristotle's book survived today, it would probably be banned, memeified, and laughed at simultaneously, much as contemporary satirists use humor as a mirror of our world. Just such artists are the creators of TV shows *The Simpsons* and *Top Lista Nadrealista*.

***The Simpsons:*
Satire of the Mechanical Republic**

At first glance, *The Simpsons* looks like low-calorie animation for couch potatoes. Bergson would not be fooled. Springfield is a museum of social automata. Every character is a mechanism running on a loop.

Homer is appetite without reflection. Mr. Burns is capitalism stripped of consciousness. The bureaucracy of City Hall operates independently of reality. Media parrots themselves. Religion is ritual without transcendence. Politics is performance without substance. What makes it comic is not exaggeration, but recognition.

The brilliance of *The Simpsons* lies in its systematic exposure of American life as a series of pre-recorded responses. The characters do not think; they execute scripts. Bergson's "mechanical encrusted on the living" becomes the show's governing logic. The yellow skin is camouflage; underneath lies an anatomy lesson.

Crucially, *The Simpsons* laughs coldly. There is almost no sentimentality. Emotional moments are brief and quickly undercut by absurdity. This emotional distance is essential. The audience is invited to observe, not empathize. Laughter becomes diagnostic.

The show's most prophetic power lies in its treatment of institutions. Power structures are not evil masterminds; they are malfunctioning machines. The system continues because no one interrupts it. This is Bergsonian satire at its purest: ridicule as social maintenance, warning a culture that it is becoming rigid while pretending to be free.

***Top Lista Nadrealista:*
Surrealism as Emergency Signal**

If *The Simpsons* diagnoses a society slowly turning mechanical, *Top Lista Nadrealista* screams when the machine is about to explode. Broadcast from Sarajevo in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Nadrealisti used absurdity not as decoration but as survival strategy. Their sketches did not merely mock reality, they disassembled it. Language collapses, identities multiply, logic dissolves. The result is not chaos, but revelation.

Here Bergson's theory meets its most radical application. The show exposes how political language had become pure automatism. Nationalism, bureaucracy, and ethnic categories, were no longer tools but reflexes. People were not speaking; they were being spoken through. Nadrealisti mirrored this back with surgical cruelty.

In sketch after sketch, borders appear overnight, neighbors speak mutually unintelligible "new" languages, and officials enforce rules that contradict themselves every thirty seconds. The laughter is explosive because the audience recognizes the truth: reality itself has become ridiculous. Unlike *The Simpsons*, which

mocks stability turning stiff, Nadrealisti mocks rigidity turning murderous. The comedy is faster, harsher, and more grotesque. This is also Bergsonian laughter under siege, society laughing at itself because the alternative is screaming.

What makes *Top Lista Nadrealista* genuinely unsettling is not that it predicted the war, but that it exposed the logic that made the war inevitable. Its so-called “prophecies” were not acts of mystical foresight, but ruthless pattern recognition. By exaggerating political language, bureaucratic rituals, and nationalist reflexes to absurd extremes, Nadrealisti revealed how reality was already operating on autopilot. Sketches in which Sarajevo is divided by invisible borders, citizens require permits to cross their own living rooms, or new “languages” emerge overnight were funny at the time, but after the war became precisely the normalcy of the new politically structured realities. The humor here works like Bergson’s laughter at maximum voltage: it showed life being replaced by mechanism before the replacement was completed. In retrospect, the sketches feel prophetic only because reality obediently followed the script that satire had reverse engineered. Nadrealisti did not foresee the future; they caught the present in the act of becoming monstrous.

What unites these two shows is timing. Both reach peak sharpness just before historical rupture. Laughter intensifies when social mechanisms lose flexibility but continue moving out of inertia. Nadrealisti famously predicted war. Not mystically, but structurally. Once language hardens, once identities become automatic, once humor turns into surreal repetition, violence is already warming up backstage. Comedy, in this context, becomes an early warning system.

Similarly, *The Simpsons* anticipates political absurdities not because it sees the future, but because it understands the mechanics of institutional stupidity. When systems run on habit, outcomes become predictable, often disastrously so. Both shows demonstrate that satire is not hindsight. It is foresight born of pattern recognition.

Sarcasm, Absurdity, and the Limits of Laughter

Sarcasm plays different roles in these contexts. In *The Simpsons*, sarcasm is playful but corrosive. It dissolves authority by exposing its emptiness. In Nadrealisti, sarcasm becomes existential. It is laughter on the brink, humor aware of its own impending failure.

This is a crucial Bergsonian insight: laughter stops when rigidity becomes absolute. War kills comedy. Once the machine turns fully lethal, humor loses its corrective power. Nadrealisti did not fail; history outran it.

That is why their pre-war episodes feel almost shockingly unbearable in retrospect. They are too accurate. The joke lands, and then the new reality answers with artillery. Placed within Bergson’s philosophy, *The Simpsons* and *Top Lista Nadrealista* are not cultural curiosities but case studies in comedic intelligence.

They reveal societies laughing not because they are happy, but because they are stiffening.

Comedy here is not escapism. It is resistance, diagnosis, and prophecy. It tells us where life has turned mechanical, where language has lost elasticity, where people have become functions. And when laughter grows surreal, relentless, and cruel, Bergson would whisper the final clue: Pay attention, the machine is no longer funny. People are getting hurt.

Bergson teaches us that we laugh not because the world is funny, but because it occasionally forgets how to be alive. Laughter snaps us back to awareness. It corrects, disciplines, mocks and ultimately protects vitality from turning into routine.

Satire and sarcasm, far from being decorative forms of wit, are advanced tools of this correction. They expose the mechanical skeleton beneath social performances. They remind us that life demands responsiveness, not repetition. So, when we laugh, we are not merely amused. We are diagnosing. We are enforcing flexibility. We are, in Bergson's quiet but ruthless way, defending life against the machines it keeps building inside itself.

Memes, Digital Carnival, and the New Politics of Ridicule

The rise of digital media has transformed the scale and speed of political humor without changing its fundamental purpose. What James C. Scott described as hidden transcripts and what Bakhtin identified as carnival now circulate globally through memes, parody videos, satirical social media accounts, and AI-generated content. Humor that once spread through whispered jokes, underground publications, cabaret performances, or public festivals can now reach millions of people within hours.

Internet memes function as compressed acts of political communication. Combining image, text, irony, and shared cultural references, they allow individuals and groups to critique authority, expose contradictions, and build communities of recognition. Like the political jokes of authoritarian societies, memes often communicate criticism indirectly. Their ambiguity provides a degree of protection while allowing dissent to circulate widely. A meme may appear trivial, but its political function can be profound. It transforms spectators into participants and invites audiences to question assumptions that official narratives seek to normalize.

Recent conflicts have demonstrated how quickly ridicule has become a component of modern information warfare. During escalating tensions involving Iran, the United States, and Israel, Iranian media outlets and affiliated digital creators produced highly sophisticated AI-generated satire, parody videos, and meme campaigns aimed at international audiences. Rather than relying solely on traditional political messaging, these productions employed humor, popular culture references, exaggerated caricatures, and viral visual formats. Their effectiveness demonstrated that ridicule has become a strategic political resource capable of

attracting attention, shaping narratives, and challenging official interpretations of events. In the digital age, the struggle for legitimacy increasingly occurs not only through speeches, military actions, and news reports, but also through jokes, memes, and acts of public mockery.

What distinguishes digital ridicule from earlier forms of political humor is its speed and decentralization. Traditional satire was often produced by newspapers, playwrights, cartoonists, or professional comedians. Memes, by contrast, are created collectively and spread horizontally through networks rather than vertically through institutions. Like carnival, they invite participation rather than observation. Like Scott's hidden transcripts, they create communities of shared understanding beneath official narratives. Their decentralized nature makes them difficult to censor and nearly impossible to control completely.

Yet the underlying logic remains remarkably consistent across centuries. The medieval carnival, the whispered joke, the satirical cabaret, the Orange Alternative's dwarfs, the clown brigade, and the internet meme all participate in the same tradition. Each uses laughter to challenge inevitability, weaken fear, and expose the fragility of power. The technologies have changed, but the political function remains strikingly familiar. Humor continues to remind citizens that authority is neither sacred nor beyond question. In an age increasingly shaped by algorithms, artificial intelligence, and digital communication, the gospel of ridicule remains very much alive.

Conclusions:

Laughter as a Forbidden Knowledge

Across centuries and political systems, laughter has repeatedly emerged wherever people confront domination, fear, and uncertainty. From the whispered jokes of Nazi Germany to the cultural resistance of Sarajevo, from the absurd performances of Poland's Orange Alternative to contemporary digital memes and AI-generated satire, humor has served as more than entertainment. It has functioned as a social practice through which individuals reclaim agency, preserve dignity, and challenge claims of inevitability.

The thinkers examined in this article help explain why. Bergson reveals how laughter exposes rigidity and corrects the mechanical habits that threaten human vitality. Bakhtin demonstrates how carnival temporarily inverts hierarchy and creates spaces in which alternative social realities can be imagined. James C. Scott shows how humor operates as a hidden transcript through which dissent survives beneath the surface of public conformity. Umberto Eco reminds us that laughter is dangerous precisely because it weakens fear, and fear remains one of power's most dependable allies.

What unites these perspectives is a recognition that ridicule does not merely mock authority; it changes our relationship to it. A ruler who can be laughed at is no longer untouchable. An ideology that can be parodied is no longer sacred.

A system that becomes ridiculous begins to lose its hold over the imagination. Humor does not overthrow governments, end wars, or replace political action. Yet it often creates the emotional and intellectual conditions that make resistance possible.

In an age characterized by political polarization, digital propaganda, artificial intelligence, and renewed authoritarian pressures, the political significance of humor remains undiminished. The technologies have changed, but the underlying dynamic has not. Jokes, satire, parody, carnival, performance, and memes continue to expose contradictions that official narratives seek to conceal. They remind citizens that power is performed as much as exercised and that what is performed can also be challenged.

The gospel of ridicule is therefore not a celebration of mockery for its own sake. It is a recognition that laughter can be an act of courage. To laugh in the presence of fear is to refuse complete submission. To ridicule oppression is to deny its claim to permanence. To create humor under conditions of repression is to affirm that imagination remains free.

History suggests that authoritarian systems understand this lesson well. They censor comedians, punish satirists, suppress carnival, and fear ridicule. They do so because laughter reveals a truth that power prefers to hide: no authority is absolute, no hierarchy is eternal, and nothing that cannot survive being laughed at deserves unquestioned obedience.

The final act of resistance may not be a slogan, a speech, or even a protest. It may be a joke shared in dangerous times, a meme passed quietly across a digital network, or a burst of laughter that reminds people they are still capable of imagining a different world. That is the enduring power of the gospel of ridicule: the ability of laughter to keep imagination alive when power insists that no alternatives exist.

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Taboo Rant

Chris Crutcher

It's hard to start ranting without raving, and harder still to know where to begin to drive the wedge.

What the hell, I'll start with shitcanning the word *conservative*. Is it possible the MAGA brain trust doesn't know that *conservative* and *conservation* come from the same root word? (The answer is, "What's a root word?") My father was a B-17 bomber pilot who, by the time he was the same age as I was when I graduated—Summa Cum Lucky—from college, had flown thirty-five missions over Nazi Germany. He came back a self-described staunch conservative; politically active to the extent that if you were running for any office from Dogcatcher to President of the United States, my old man was your campaign manager in Valley County, Idaho...and he would have run a screwdriver through his ear before allowing a book to be banned in school (where he served on the board from the time my older brother entered first grade until my younger sister graduated high school), the library or even the drug store. He believed he'd risked his life for the First Amendment; told me long before I had any idea what he was talking about that it was *first* because of its importance.

He believed it was nobody's goddam business what happened in the privacy of the bedroom as long as it wasn't happening to children, and considered the illegality of abortion, that which would later be called a woman's right to choose, foolishness.

So...I would like us all to consider calling today's *conservatives* by a more accurate term; *idiotically cruel*.

What *education* is to you and me, *propaganda* is to the political and religious

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right. They purport to believe that changing the narrative of renowned scientists and historians to reflect what they *wish* were true, rather than what *is* true will better the lives of ordinary American citizens (read “White heterosexual men). When it comes to education, they’re lazy and afraid; too lazy to learn about and confront the complexity of the human condition, and afraid that if they *did*, they’d have to abandon the simplistic answers that have allowed them to claim some cheap form of superiority. It should scare the hell out of us that educators from higher ed down into kindergarten are folding. If we don’t know where we’ve been, we have *no* chance to influence where we’re going. If federal and state governments, who fund public education, decide *real* science and *real* history and art that fires up human imagination should be shackled, educators have a choice: fold, or fight back.

I understand that 24 hour news outlets are charged with keeping our TV screens glowing 24 hours a day, (I’m excluding Fox and Newsmax etc. because they’re in the business of making shit up) and I understand the value of editorial and opinion segments, but *for the love of God*, when covering Ginger Jesus and his bootlicking disciples, include a *legitimate shrink* along with your guest correspondents and analysts, because *that* person is far better equipped to predict GJ’s next move. Those political experts, for instance, might point out the similarities between him and history’s most successful “strongmen” but GJ isn’t a strongman; he’s a whiney narcissistic bitch with extremely limited knowledge about how government is supposed to work, a mind-boggling disdain for democracy, zero capacity for shame, and a crippling dearth of curiosity. The Bleeder of the Free World treats governing like I treated 9th grade Algebra; appeared to be interested as long as I could get direct line of sight on Larry Logue’s exam paper, and gave not one shit about it beyond that.

Over my lifetime I’ve heard some form of “Things aren’t always as they appear to be,” and I’ve found that to be true. I’ve also found that *more* often, things are exactly as they appear to be. Take for instance the Christian Right, which, as has often been said, is neither. I have no problem with any individual following a superhero, be (s)he real or fictional, in order to acquire a moral code, or a particular mode of behavior. I *do* have a problem with an individual who *claims* to do all that while twisting that superhero’s words to make a case for their self-righteousness, greed, and overall shitty behavior. I am acquainted with an impressive number of Christians who have made large and small sacrifices throughout their lives for no reason other than to ease someone else’s pain; and though I’m not a Christian, I am hard-wired for Jesus...the Jesus who would *never* have confused *abundance* with *greed*, and who championed the shepherd who left the flock long enough to rescue the lamb in peril, and bring that lamb back to safety. That was never Mike Pence and it ain’t Ted Cruz or Pete Hegseth or Marco Rubio.

And, how in the world does Speaker-for-Himself, Mike Johnson, think he’s gonna get into heaven? Doesn’t he know the god he claims to believe in, is “all knowing.” Mike, that means he’s like Santa Clause; he knows when you’ve been sleeping, he knows when you’re awake and he knows your motives; you can’t get

elected Speaker of the Heavens by kissing his ass. You might be well served to go back and read the stuff in the Book of Matthew about false prophets. Bad case scenario, you're following one...*worst case* scenario, you *are* one.

A Quick Aside: Do *no* Christians understand that nobody dies for our sins? We all die *with* them. And just to clear the air, Jesus didn't die. I get that his time on the cross was no fun, but it was shorter than most who suffered the same fate, and he wasn't gone long after that. ("He descended into Hell, and on the third day he rose again." I was an acolyte in the Episcopal church; know all about the body and the blood.) Do they think Satan was gonna risk pissing off God by hosting his only child to a shitty three-day weekend on *his* watch?

This is why the framers of our national rule book clamored for the separation of church and state. It doesn't matter that some of them were Christians (the simplistic argument put forth by pseudo-Christians); it matters that they knew the two institutions have *different jobs*, and that one has *no* business sticking its nose into the workings of the other.

I don't know whether to feel fortunate or heartsick for having lived through the period of history providing the greatest privilege for guys like me; White, heterosexual males. I have long harbored hope that the privilege extended me would finally be extended to all, and there was a quick minute there, with the election of Barak Obama, during which I believed that Lady Liberty would have less reason to feel shame; that Rule-of-law would actually get some traction. It didn't occur to me that Obama's election would bring the hordes of American racists out from the woodwork like the cockroaches they are; that they would find safe harbor under the Stephen Miller umbrella to openly spew the bilious dreck they once spewed mostly among themselves.

There is no part of this colossal shitshow that couldn't have been avoided, had we kept all outside money out of politics, made education through college or trade school free, and required state and federal officeholders to pass the same test we give to immigrants applying for naturalization. That test is considerably more rigorous than the *Shark*, *giraffe*, *allegator*, *squirrel* exam President GJ passes with each visit to Walter Reed.

All that's sewage under the bridge, so here's my new solution: We pass a 28th amendment to the Constitution, but slide it in at the front. (That moves the others down one position, making all *Second* Amendment advocates suddenly decent.) Our new First Amendment: Voters in all state and federal elections are allowed to vote for *one* man up and down the ticket...*two* if one of them is gay. The instant a voter tries to sneak in that extra testosterone-bloated candidate, strobe lights flash on, the voting booth locks down and Helen Reddy's "I am Woman Hear Me Roar" blasts out in Dolby until that voter begs for a new ballot.

Guys we've had two-hundred-fifty years and we just keep fucking it up.

I'm outta here; this is the final day for the Buy-One-Get-One-Free offer on Depends.

A Ten-Year Reflection from a Parent, Professor, and Therapist

How My Son Thrived Under a Flexible Strength-Based Care Ethic Approach and Deteriorated Under a Deficit-Based Approach Linked to Standardized Practice and Rigid Protocols¹

Rodney B. Dieser

Introduction

The purpose of this ten-year reflective autoethnography is to share how my son, who had medical problems, rode an emotional roller coaster and thrived under a curriculum and educational framework based on a care ethic, along with a humanistic and strength-based approach, and deteriorated under a deficit-based approach, linked to standardized and rigid protocols. I have purposely waited ten years to share my experiential knowledge of how my son had an appalling transition from a junior high school to a high school, to an alternative school that then had significant leadership and cultural change. Today, the son I write about is well into a career, graduated from college, and is flourishing. Still, ten years ago, his life was miserable, and the starkly different and oppositional approaches in his normal school transition were troubling to him, my wife, and me. However, before telling my personal narrative, I explain the mode of research I use to tell my story.

Autoethnography

Autoethnographical research interprets a culture or social group by producing highly personalized and revealing texts; it examines social phenomena holistically (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2022; Dieser, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2003).

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Autoethnographical research identifies the multiple forces that develop relations between self and society (e.g., educational policy, family history, popular culture, socioeconomic status) and permits the incursion of value and evaluation into the research storytelling process. A “. . . first person autoethnographic voice provides that soft, urgent, intimate expression of my heart as I cope with whatever fears, losses, frustrations inevitable present themselves . . . that flow through my orientation to “being her now”” (Ellis, 2022, p. xxi – xxii). Further, autoethnographical research can clarify the body of knowledge and highlight how academic concepts function in professional settings and real-world experiences, as Delbo (1995) implores us, “... to try to look. Just try to look” (p. 86). A well-constructed autoethnographical story moves the reader to deal with similar moral, ethical, emotional, and complex issues by seeing and managing the reader’s events in their settings and lives (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Autoethnographical research has been used in many academic settings such as understanding the lives of Jewish Holocaust survivors (Carney, 2004; Delbo, 1995; Frankl, 1946/1984), how childhood experience can influence university administrative leadership (Mullen, 2024), underscoring the political and social injustices in pharmaceutical research (Healy, 2004), and learning about the masked aspects of educational settings (Boostrom, 1994; Edmundson, 2002), such as how a Black woman educator’s hair was integral to her identity linked to oppression and liberation through schooling (Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024). The delayed autoethnographical study that I present is told with three simultaneous voices: my parent, professor, and licensed mental health counselor voices.

My Son Who Had Medical Problems

Colin’s medical problems began in 2008 when the entire family contracted a gastrointestinal illness. Colin developed persistent gastrointestinal symptoms (pain, nausea) that did not go away. It was after this illness (viral or bacterial in nature) that Colin began to show signs of significant gastrointestinal problems and was eventually diagnosed with chronic inflammation of the digestive tract, and had another diagnosis of an abnormal hiatal hernia, where part of the stomach pushed through the diaphragm into the chest cavity.

Colin stopped engaging in enjoyable activities with friends, family, or father-son activities. Basic smells caused significant nausea and pain. Colin used to love going to USHA hockey games, but if he smelled normal odors, such as popcorn or hot dogs at the hockey arena, he would get nauseous and need to head home. Sometimes he might even vomit. Likewise, hanging out with friends or even cooking everyday meals. Colin would often stay in the basement because food orders would not linger on the lower ground floor of our house. He had the same struggles at school, especially during lunchtime. Smells were a trigger to abdominal pain and queasiness, with Colin feeling like he needed to vomit. We took Colin to the world famous Mayo Clinic for a second opinion, and his treatment

consisted of a combination of medication, dietary changes, and lifestyle modifications. A successful modification was lessening smells in our house, which meant changes to how we cooked.

Colin then began to develop a secondary anxiety disorder due to his medical condition, which is when intense anxiety or panic is directly caused by a physical health issue, a diagnosis quite different than something like a generalized anxiety disorder. In short, because Colin would experience nausea and stomach pain with smells, he would begin to experience anxiety when thinking about leaving the basement, and he preferred not to leave the house. To help Colin with the anxiety, he began seeing a Licensed Mental Health Counselor in our community, and eventually, he started seeing a child Psychiatrist about 90 minutes away that was associated with a university hospital and clinical systems. Colin tried multiple medications to decrease the intensity of anxiety, along with the gastrointestinal treatment of other medications, dietary changes, and lifestyle modifications.

A Consummate School Counselor and Vice Principal Rooted in a Humanistic and Strength-Based Approach at the Junior High School

Although Colin struggled deeply, the school counselor and vice principals' humanistic and strength-based counseling framework, at the junior high school, helped Colin succeed. Their approach aligned with positive psychology schooling, which focused on enhancing students' well-being, resilience, and strengths (see Allen et al., 2022). For example, with Colin having a voice in his school care plan, they allowed him to leave the classroom when he felt anxious and go to the counselor's office to visit her and her therapy dog, Mr. Moo. This eventually faded out when Colin no longer needed to see Mr. Moo. On one occasion, the school counselor picked Colin up at our house with Mr. Moo after we called the school to share that he was very overwhelmed with anxiety. Other times, the school police officer would drop by our home and, in a gentle manner, would persuade Colin to attend school. I do not recall a single problem with any teacher, and I do not know what was happening behind closed doors, but it seemed like teachers were flexible and willing to go with the care plan shared by the school counselor and vice-principal. When I met or engaged with Colin's teacher, they were flexible and seemed to like having Colin in the classroom.

Most importantly, the school counselor and principal would see Colin's strengths, not his deficits, and slowly faded engagement so that Colin would gradually learn resilience. When Colin arrived 30 minutes late, they would complement him on his ability to fight his anxiety (underscoring his determination or strength) rather than punish him for his lateness. Positive reinforcement helped him master his anxiety and increased his motivation to be on time by ensuring Colin knew success (arriving at school, even if late) was due to his efforts and

could be sustained (see Seligman et al., 2007 for how attribution of cause toward success events can increase resiliency in youth). Over a relatively short time, Colin was able to manage his anxiety and was rarely late or absent. In addition, the school counselor and vice principal would often use humor to calm him. Although humor was recognized to help clients remedy mental health struggles by Frankl (1946/1984) close to 80 years ago, a recent systematic literature review on humor interventions shows the effect of humor on lowering the levels of depression and anxiety symptoms (Sarink & García-Montes, 2023).

These humanistic and strength-based strategies in the school environment helped decrease Colin's anxiety and significantly helped him succeed in junior high school. Humanistic counseling posits unconditional positive regard (counselor and vice-principal accepts the client without judgment, creating a space where they feel valued and understood), authenticity/congruence (counselor and vice-principal are genuine and transparent in their interactions, fostering trust and a deeper connection with the client), and empathy (counselor and vice-principal strive to understand the client's experiences from their perspective, demonstrating genuine understanding and compassion) (Corey, 2021; Rogers, 1961). As such, humanistic approaches help clients be self-directed, which is common in many school counseling sessions (Ohrman & Heltner, 2019) and in interventions developed by school psychologists (Plots & Lasser, 2020). Strength-based counseling emphasizes identifying and utilizing existing strengths and resources to address challenges, and as such invites the client to participate in all aspects of care (Murphy & Sparks, 2018). It focuses on a client's inherent strengths and abilities rather than their deficits or problems.

Encouragement and praise are part of strengths-based counseling and positive psychology (Wong, 2015). As outlined by Kazdin (2008), praise and positive reinforcement when a child does something well are among the strongest ways to influence children's behavior. Research on praise-to-reprimand ratios in middle schools demonstrates that if the praise component can be increased in the praise-to-behavior correction ratio (with a minimum ratio of 1:1), there is a reduction in student disruption (Caldarella et al., 2021; Pisacreta et al., 2011). The ideal praise-to-criticism (or strengths focus to deficit focused) ratio to increase desired behaviors is somewhere between 4:1 – 8:1, which has been outlined for years in other fields, such as in marriage/couple/relationships counseling (Gottman, 2015; Gottman & Gottman, 2017) and in business leadership (Weiss, 2018).

When Colin was ready to graduate from junior high school, with high grades and functioning well, the school counselor met with us, shared his concerns with the high school, and advocated that we meet soon with the high school counselor to help with Colin's transition. The school counselor at the junior high school had Colin meet with the counselor from the high school right before the end of the academic year (right before summer). In fact, the junior high school counselor went with Colin to tour the high school with the high school counselor. The junior

high school counselor was honest and shared that the high school had a different framework. He further shared that he had spoken to the high school counselor and shared what worked well with Colin. He then looked at us (parents, not Colin) and encouraged us to advocate strongly for Colin. He also directed us to set up a time to have Colin meet the high school counselors a few weeks before high school began. I could sense that this junior high school counselor did not have faith in the high school system.

A Flawed and Inadequate High School System for Working With a Student with Medical Issues and a Horrid 504 Experience

In the last week before high school started, Colin walked through the high school with his older brother (who graduated years prior) to make him feel more comfortable. I called and emailed the school counselor two weeks before high school, sharing that his junior high school counselors directed us to have Colin meet her a week before high school started. No reply. I repeated this a few days before the semester started, but there was no reply. Colin began high school like every other student, but within a few days, he was paralyzed with fear/anxiety, but he continued to go to school. He met with the high school counselor a few days into the school year. Over the next four months, Colin began to regress, and it was like all he could do was make it through the day, and he was not able to concentrate. His grades eventually hit rock bottom and simply having him go to school became challenging. His stomach pain and nausea became worse. Colin reported that when he reached out to his teachers, they gave him lectures on growing up and becoming responsible, sharing that in high school, they are preparing for adulthood. I was not sure if this was accurate or if Colin's anxiety was distorting his interpretation. However, Colin insisted he was reaching out to teachers, and they were giving him pep talks on how he needed to adjust to high school.

When I reached out to the high school counselor, despite always acting professionally, she was too busy to provide Colin with anything close to what he experienced in junior high school. Colin, my wife, and I wanted the high school to continue to use the humanistic and strength-based approach used successfully in junior high school. No one – teachers, counselors, or the principal – cared or wanted to take the time to learn about an efficacious past intervention. They had their systems, and Colin needed to adjust to them. There seemed to be no wiggle room. Two teachers were highly troubling. One teacher lectured me on how kids need to grow up and seemed to know nothing about strength-based approaches. I realized Colin was telling the truth about teachers giving him pep talks about growing up, as I was given one by a teacher. Another teacher began sharing with me how I needed to parent better. Shocking and deeply unprofessional! Instead of reflecting on her practice, this teacher lectured me on my parenting. Little did this teacher know that my wife and I sought out a licensed mental health counselor in the community who helped us be reflective and assisted us in our attempts at

different parenting strategies. Teachers were aware, however, that he had hired two different tutors and that my wife and I were constantly working with Colin to complete his schoolwork and manage his anxiety. Teachers were also aware that Colin was seeing both a licensed mental health counselor and a psychiatrist. These high school teachers were so different from junior high school teachers. No one was flexible. I may be wrong, but it seemed like there was an unvarying protocol in this school on how to treat beginning high school student so that they could have uniformity in outcome and shape student to be a certain way. It was as if the teachers in the high school were robots programmed within a standardized framework, and despite acting professionally, they had no imagination or creative ideas. To my utter astonishment, one teacher asked how frequently Colin was seeing his psychiatrist and wondered aloud if he needed his medication adjusted. Somehow, this teacher thought he knew more about medicines than Colin's psychiatrist. Nevertheless, I was even more shocked at a comment by another teacher, Mr. Woodward, who straight out told me he "did not believe in mental health problems" and that Colin needed to "act more responsibly." When I challenged this teacher's thinking, we would constantly cut me off. He seemed to have no listening ability and kept stating that he had taught in the classroom for over 20 years and knew that "kids" needed to grow up. It did not matter that I was a licensed mental health counselor or a professor who had a robust publication record on the subject matter of mental health; Mr. Woodward's twenty years of experience made him right and me wrong. He was so binary and saw the world in strict black and white framework. No shades of gray. He struck me as an angry burnout teacher who did not care and could summarize all of Colin's complex medical conditions into one standardized line—he needed to grow up.

When I went to the principal and reported this—explicitly sharing that this teacher stated that he "did not believe in mental health problems"—he reported that he would talk with Mr. Woodward. The principal was professional. When he called me a few days later, he stated that Mr. Woodward denied such a conversation and that I must have misunderstood him. The principal's nonverbal cues suggested he did not care. I let it go. However, I could relate to Dudley-Marling's (2000) qualitative study, which consisted of interview data of parents with children who struggled in school. So many of his findings applied to my life, such as how school environments and teachers' behaviors can cause an increase in depression and anxiety, not just in the student but in parents. I (and my wife) felt so much pressure and stress and felt stuck in the middle of helping to manage our son's anxiety and challenge a school system that seemed unable or unwilling to make any changes. One of the themes that Dudley-Marling developed from his qualitative study, which was relatable to me, was "They don't care" (p. 212). No one seemed to care in this high school, and I found Dudley-Marling's study validated my thoughts and feelings. However, I found myself wondering, perhaps rationalizing the problem with the school, to broader sociocultural issues, such as

how public schools are not funded well, high teacher-student ratios, and teacher burnout. I was acutely aware of how many teachers experienced burnout, and a few of Colin's teachers seemed totally burned out. Research during the last two decades systematically reveals that teaching is a stressful occupation and that teachers are at risk of developing symptoms of burnout (Chan, 2002; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017, 2020). In the United States, the prevalence of burnout among teachers ranged from 25.12% to 74% (Agyapong, et al. 2022). Due to limited resources and budgets, schools, with burned-out teachers, can often become more focused on student deceits instead of strengths (Metzger, 2015), which seemed to be happening in this high school. In addition, I could relate to Dudley-Marling's (2000) penetrating thought experiment of imagining what happens to self-worth when a student (my son) spends 6-8 hours for months or years learning that they are no good and are miserable each day. For some students, school is a painful prison sentence (Metzger, 2015).

Over halfway through the school year, my wife and I shared our deep frustration and concerns with the school counselor and principal. We questioned one core axiom: why could the high school not be flexible and not duplicate or take some elements from the successful junior high school plan? I constantly wondered how a transfer from a junior high school to a high school could be so oppositional binary in approaches. I was assertive and shared that we, like the school kept repeating, were also preparing Colin for adulthood, and that we had the same goals as the high school but argued that there are different pathways to prepare him, and not all adolescents are the same, nor does their brain develop in standardized and robotic ways. I even referenced basic theories of intelligence and academic learning that you would find in an introduction to development psychology university class (see chp. 8 of Siegler et al, 2024), such as Carroll's (1993, 2005) three-stratum theory of intelligence or Gardner's (1999; 2024) theory of multiple intelligences. I shared the idea of how some high schools have created relaxation rooms (also known as wellness rooms or calm rooms), which are designated spaces where students can de-stress, manage emotions, and practice self-regulation (e.g. meditation).² I shared how the junior high school counselor let Colin leave the classroom to see her and Mr. Moo, the therapy dog. It did not matter what I communicated; the high school had a rigid protocol, and if students did not fit it, they were punished. This high school environment reminded me of the school environment that Edmundson (2002) wrote about when he was a student at Medford High, a high school building that was old with limited windows, emotionally lifeless teachers, and a “. . . cathedral consecrated to Order” (p. 5).

The high school responded by suggesting a 504 meeting and plan. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is a Federal Civil Rights law prohibiting discrimination against individuals, including students with disabilities, and providing accommodations allowing the individual to access education. Despite the junior high school having documentation of Colin's two medical issues, I had to provide

new supporting letters from Colin's pediatrician, psychiatrist, and counselor. The 504 meeting was in a small, windowless, concrete room around a large rectangular table. It was sterile and unemotional. Wanat (2010) conducted a case study to examine satisfied and unsatisfied parents within one school district. Emerging themes found that parents confident with their school-family partnership felt the schools invited parents to contribute. Parents dissatisfied with school-family partnerships felt that their questions were unheard and their knowledge was not valued. In Wanat's study, some parents commented that they received help only when teachers wanted them to stop complaining. I could relate to the factors of parent dissatisfaction from Wanat's case study. It seemed like the 504 plan was to prevent us from complaining, and it clearly did not care about our or Colin's ideas. The school system/protocol knew best. In addition, this 504 meeting and plan did not have the five elements of what Elser (2017) outlined in her in-depth research on successful 504 and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings of welcoming relationships, shared context of the purpose and process of 504/IEP meetings, adaptability of school staff, empathy for families and parent knowledge of self, child, and rights. There was no shared purpose, adaptability of school staff, nor a welcoming relationship of empathy. Everyone looked frustrated and burned out, and there was little bi-directional communication. It resembled Hauser's (1991) low-level conformist stage of communication, where teachers have little patience for ambiguity, low empathy, and have firm and inflexible rules. It did not resemble Nodding's (2013, 2015) care ethic in schools. Noddings (2002) defines education as "a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding, and appreciation" (p. 283), in which the relationship between teacher and student is paramount. None of this existed.

Accommodations were provided, but it was one-sided for the school team to articulate or prescribe accommodation. In short, it was restrictive and punitive, with no flexibility. No one wanted Colin's thoughts or to hear what my wife and I thought was best. However, they wanted Colin to sign a behavioral contract. From my perspective, even ten years after this fact, if I were an adolescent and were in a room full of teachers and school personnel who clearly did not care and focused on my deceptions and problems, I would feel worthless. My wife and I made suggestions – based on the successful plan from the junior high school, academic research, and with talking with Colin (e.g., taking a strength-based approach, allowing Colin more autonomy when feeling high anxiety) – but not one was considered. No one was rude, but it was the same old thing, a sterile meeting with school personnel who plainly did not care, with a one-size-fits-all standardized approach.

Nevertheless, what I found most unusual and strange was the behavior of Mr. Dart, who was respected in the school for teaching Advanced Placement Classes and had a swagger to his gait. During the meeting he did not share much, other than talking football before the meeting with a fellow teacher. After the 504 meet-

ing, as teachers and members were walking toward the door to leave, Mr. Dart came up behind me, put his hands on my upper shoulders, mimicking an act of care as he massaged my trapezium muscle, and then stated in a fairly low voice, “I think dad needs to apply some tough love to Colin” and then quickly walk out the door so I could not respond. I did not know what had just happened, and it took me a few minutes to process it. I wanted to think this was an act of care. Still, after reflection, I interpreted it as Mr. Dart displacing his own (and the school’s) locus of responsibility by placing it on me and grossly oversimplifying the complexity of Colin’s medical conditions. To this day I think his actions were cowardly, sharing his view that I was the problem and then slipping out of the room quickly, before I could reply. If all of Colin’s school problems could be attributed to me (dad) not being tough enough in the home, then Mr. Dart and the school would be free from responsibility and would not need to make changes. I did nothing, unsure what to do with Mr. Dart’s comment and action. I thought about confronting him and possibly sharing this with the principal (the next day) but wondered if anyone would even believe me. There was no care ethic, and I could sense a tension building. The irony of all of this is that as we existed this room, we all walked right past the six pillars of character that the school claim to be fostering—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Mr. Dart was deflecting his locus on responsibility by placing it all on me. There was no caring or any element of trustworthiness in the 504 meeting or in the broader context. School leaders were not living the six pillars of character.

After the 504 meeting, Colin refused to set foot in high school. He felt their lack of care and trust. I did not blame him for feeling this as there was no care ethic in the 504 meeting. We did all we could. Colin continued to participate in counseling and his psychiatry appointments, and we shared Colin’s refusal to go to school with his counselor. We continued to see a family therapist, and eventually Colin was invited to be part of family therapy (he refused). Colin continued to see his gastrointestinal specialist. We removed all privileges, including all screen time, for weeks. Colin lived in our basement, rarely leaving and not going to school, and he eventually stopped talking to us for weeks. He lived in the basement, and we seldom saw him. Our determination to keep a relationship with our son, and through conversations in counseling, resulted in us allowing him to use screens and his phone again, so that Colin would begin to act somewhat normally in the house. However, he still refused to go to school or to leave the house (for over three months) for any reason.

Alternative High School

At the start of the next academic year, the school district suggested that the alternative high school might be a good fit for Colin. I was surprised that Colin was willing to try but was also aware that he used the summer to work on his struggles,

which included a new type of counseling intervention by his therapist and better eating habits by Colin. In addition, although he was still struggling with gastrointestinal problems, his nausea and pain seemed to be lowering and less intense. When we met with the staff, one of the teachers lived a few blocks from our house, and I would see her outside often because I walked our 100-pound dog each morning and evening, and she was a fellow dog lover. Although I knew she was a teacher, I did not know she worked at the alternative school. We bonded, and most importantly, she bonded with Colin. She would also talk about our dog, big Louie, a four-legged friend to Colin, and share her love of dogs. Her husband was one of Colin's teachers in elementary school and one of Colin's favorite teachers. They even came to our house and talked with Colin, and Mrs. Moore shared her excitement about seeing Colin in her classroom. The problem, however, was that the director of the alternative school—Mr. Stoddard—was of the same ideology as the high school and ran a strict alternative school. However, Mrs. Moore shared (with us, not Colin) that she did not see Mr. Stoddard being the director much longer because his wife took a job in another state, and everyone knew he was looking to find a job to be with her the following year. She told me to hang in there for one year.

The many strict rules and accompanying punishments were highlighted at the alternative school orientation. For example, if a student is late more than three times in one month, they are suspended for three days. This prison model approach, which is often used in alternative school environments, usually causes more problems for students than benefits (Metzger, 2015).³ However, Colin was functioning well, never late, felt a professional closeness with Mrs. Moore, and got higher grades. However, Colin shared his fear of Mr. Stoddard.

A few months into the program, during the schools outdoor walking program Colin felt a pop in his knee. A few weeks later, we all learned he had torn his meniscus and needed surgery. This was bad luck, and neither he nor the school did anything wrong. Colin had no tardies before his surgery, but on his first day back after surgery, he was five minutes late, as he was still learning how to use crutches and was in pain. When I picked Colin up from school, he showed me his tardy slip, and his anxiety was high. Colin reported that Mr. Stoddard's first words to him were that he was late, and he told him two more tardies would result in a suspension. Colin reported that he told Mr. Stoddard he was struggling with his crutches and that Mr. Stoddard stated, "It does not matter, a late is a late." The next morning Colin refused to go to school, and his anxiety level was high.

I called and talked to Mr. Stoddard on the phone, and he verified what Colin had told me. I then challenged him by asking an assertive reflective question, but I was calm and delivered my message well. I stated "Mr. Stoddard, how might you feel if you returned to school after surgery being in pain and having difficulty with crutches and the teacher does not say something like 'Colin it is so great to have you back, how are you doing from the surgery' and instead stated 'your late and if you receive two more tardies your suspended for a day'?" There was a long silence

on the phone, and then in an assertive voice, Mr. Stoddard replied, 'If you have any complaints about my conduct, please call the district office and share with the director of education. I have nothing else to say. Goodbye.' He then hung up. I let it go.

Approximately two weeks later, as Colin was rushing to school so he would not be late, he slipped, fell, and tore his meniscus and needed a second surgery. It did not heal properly and eventually needed a third surgery. I felt the lateness policy contributed to Colin's second and third surgeries. If the alternative high school had been like the junior high school, welcoming students who were late and focusing on Colin's strength to be at school despite being in pain, Colin most likely would not have slipped rushing to school? I kept this angry thought within myself.

Through that school year, the handful of times I saw Mr. Stoddard, I constantly saw the same thing, a man who seemed profoundly burned out. His glory days, years prior, were in coaching, and his coaching career ended with him resigning due to family matters. His eyes were always bloodshot, his clothes always tattered, and the five times I saw him, I was always miffed that he never wore socks or always had bare feet in shoes. Those handful of times I saw him he looked like he got out of bed and went to work without even taking a shower. Colin reported that, on most days, Mr. Stoddard rarely left his office, and he reported many instances in which he could hear him arguing with parents on the phone. I was told by Colin that Mr. Stoddard only addressed students at the door when they were in trouble and rarely did he smile or use humor. A few months before the school year ended, Mr. Stoddard officially announced he was moving to another state to be with his wife and was leaving the alternative school in two weeks. Mrs. Moore shared with me, a few days later when I was out walking my dog, that the candidates interviewing to be the alternative school director were the opposite of Mr. Stoddard, and she told me that she saw better days ahead in the school. Her smile beamed.

How One Leader, With an Ethic of Care, Can Make a Difference

Mrs. Moore's prediction rang true. Mr. Kempt was hired as the new director of the alternative high school, starting as an interim (to complete the last few months of the year) and then was official hired the next academic year, and the school transformed. Mr. Kempt brought a strong ethic of care toward students and a distinct humanistic approach. His approach to students and leadership was like Colin's junior high school, except there was no strength-based methodology. It was obvious to everyone that Mr. Kempt cared about students. He underscored the 'give each student the critical interaction they crave' principle outlined in Cliatt-Wayman's (2017) personal narrative of transforming the Strawberry Mansion High School in Philadelphia, a school labeled as persistently dangerous, to a successful school. I was told by Colin that Mr. Kempt greeted each student at the door each morning and had positive energy. Cliatt-Wayman further summarized how transformational leadership based on care for students and fellow teachers

can change a flawed school system. Mr. Kempt exemplified this at the alternative school. To this end, a systematic review and meta-analysis of empirical literature of principal behaviors demonstrates that the leadership of a principal (or school leader) can lead to significant positive change in student achievement, teacher well-being, and organizational health (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). It seemed like the organizational health of the entire school was transformed and although Mrs. Moore never shared much, however, in our small conversation when our paths crossed as I was walking Big Louie (dog) she would say things like “things are better at the [alternative] school!” with a wide smile. Colin completed two years of academic work in one year, and his GPA was high. He would tell me these positive stories about Mr. Kempt, Mrs. Moore and other teachers, and it was clear that he began to like going to school. I am sure other factors influenced Colin’s engagement and behavior change, such as normative development and maturation and his continuous work with his mental health counselor and psychiatrist. However, a significant variable was Mr. Kempt’s care ethic and humanistic approach. These changes were the launching pad as Colin graduated and was equally successful in college. Ten years after the fact, when I asked Colin to reflect, he shared how different the school was under the leadership of Mr. Kempt compared to Mr. Stoddard.

In the last book that Noddings (2015) wrote, which in many ways summarizes her lifelong academic work in ethic of care in schools, she differentiates between caring-about and caring-for schools and teachers. The former term is often used by school administrators and teachers at the policy level, sharing that they are making rules because they care about students, but students rarely feel a caring ethic. Noddings’ states

Now the big question is whether the recommended action will produce or support genuine caring-for [students] . . . We justify many policies in the name of caring-for our students, but in doing so, we ignore the students’ reality. Without the recognition of the cared-for, there is no caring relationship. What might be done to fulfill our commitment to relations of care and trust? (p. 123–124)

What Colin experienced at junior high school and later when Mr. Kempt was hired at the alternative school as their educational leader, was caring professionals who used a humanistic and strength-based approach. In contrast, the high school and the alternative school under Mr. Stoddard’s leadership were standardized and rigid, focusing on Colin’s deceptions with little care for students. Colin struggled in a school system that focused on his deceptions, with what seemed like robotic teachers, with some of them seeming to be burned out. In contrast, Colin flourished in a school system that focused on his strength, which had flexibility (more at the junior high school level than with Mr. Kempt at the alternative school), and caring teachers with positive energy. Colin flourished in a system based on a humanistic approach, engaged teachers, a care ethic, and a focus on students’ strengths.

Conclusion

The purpose of this ten-year reflective autoethnography was to share how my son, who had medical problems, rode an emotional roller coaster and thrived under a curriculum and educational framework based on a care ethic, along with humanistic and strength-based approaches, and deteriorated under a deficit-based approach, linked to standardized and rigid protocols. My wife and I also rode that same emotional roller coaster. What I still find inexcusable is how there can be such oppositional approaches from a junior high school focused on the strength of a struggling student, to a high school that focuses on the deceit of a struggling student, linked to punishing Colin for his medical struggles. The junior high school counselor did not have faith in the high school system and why these two schools could not have worked in better partnership still leaves me wondering. What I also find indefensible is how so many teachers and school leaders at the high school did not care and seemed more robotic than human. Despite advocating trustworthiness, responsibility, and care as pillars of character, they could not even come close to emulating these principles. There seemed to be little reflective practice. I still find it shocking that a high school teacher explicitly shared that mental health problems do not exist and then denied it when I reported him. I do not claim that I was a perfect parent nor that some of my parenting strategies could have been better, but I was an engaged and reflective parent that searched, and at times was deeply confused when to push school systems, teachers and leaders and when to let it go. With this said, however, this autoethnography also underscores the remarkable work of teachers, principals, and counselors who were flexible and had a care ethic for students.

Notes

¹ The story you are about to read is true, but I made many changes to protect the identity of the characters in this autoethnography. To maintain confidentiality, the names of all schools, teachers, and administrators have been changed, and the time frame has been altered. I have three adult sons, and to protect the son I write about, some situations and dates have also been altered so that the reader will not know which son is at the center of this reflective narrative. However, all the events in this narrative are as accurate as my memory serves me.

² During this period, I was in Waterloo/Kitchener (Ontario, Canada) for an education conference and saw a “calm room” in one of their high schools. See Buckner (2022) for a modern example.

³ There is a longer history of arguments that schools can be the equivalent to prisons (see, for example, Edmundson, 2002; Foucault, 1977; Marshall, 1989)

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“Preconcieto Rasgado”
(Scathing Racism):
**A Critical Intra-racial Literacy Analysis
of Anti-Black Schooling Discrimination
in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil**

Marla Roschelle Goins

Abstract

This article presents a case study of an incident in which a Black child was prohibited from entering her school in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, by the school inspector, who was also Black, for wearing her natural Afro hair. A critical intra-racial literacy analysis was conducted of news stories, including interviews with the child and mother following the incident. The findings demonstrate that the inspector practiced a hegemonic intra-racial literacy, while the student and her mother demonstrated critical intra-racial literacy, which allowed them to counter-read the racism and compelled them to seek structural action. Guided by critical literacy, racial literacy, and Black feminist scholarship, the child and mother are positioned as critical knowledge holders. Implications for anti-racist policy and racial literacy scholarship are discussed. This research also addresses the broader need for transnational perspectives on anti-Blackness, racism, competing (intra)racial literacy practices, and anti-racist activism.

Keywords: Critical intra-racial literacy, racial literacy, critical literacy, anti-Blackness, internalized racism, Salvador da Bahia, Brazil

Introduction

In Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, a Black girl wearing her natural Afro hair approached her school in 2022. She was turned away by the inspector, a Black man, who informed the girl that her hair was too ‘puffy’ to attend the school and she

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would need to straighten it. The inspector yelled at the girl, and she went away, crying. Later, the girl and her mother were interviewed by a local news station. They called the inspector’s actions, and the broader anti-Black structural context they were situated in, racism. Their naming of the incident as racism exposed that this was not just about appearance but a deeper, broader, and insidious sociopolitical problem: The girl was not barred from the school due to the physical form of her hair, but because Afro hair symbolizes ontological and epistemological pro-Blackness, which is antithetical to white supremacy (Croom, 2020; Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Gomes, 2002; Johnson, 2022); thus, this was a case of racism—the ideological propagation and structural institution of anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2016; Golash-Boza, 2016; Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023), that was internalized and intrracially enforced by the inspector (David et al., 2019; Mbilishaka et al., 2020; Speight, 2007).

Critical literacy and racial literacies both provide beneficial insights into the interpersonal and structural dimensions of racism in schools. Critical literacy investigates the ways that hegemony is encoded, taught, and obscured through everyday and policy language; examines the influence of words over perceptions of the self and others; and, seeks to build epistemological resistance against taught forms of discrimination like racism, sexism, and classism (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1999). Racial literacies, often pluralized to recognize the conceptual diversity within this body of work (Croom, 2020; Oto et al., 2023), interrogate the ways that race and racism are enacted through language and practices (Croom, 2020; Guinier, 2004); equip people with epistemological tools to challenge racism (Croom, 2020; Oto et al., 2023; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021), and internalized racism (Allen, 2019; Colomer, 2019; Epstein & Gist, 2015; Gallo & Bellows, 2025; Lac et al., 2025; Oto et al., 2023; Skerrett, 2011; Skerrett & Omogun, 2020); and—in recognizing that racism is not just a matter of *understanding* its functioning, but, as some theorizations highlight, of *desiring* its dismantling—require the development of a humanizing posture and critical consciousness in people that compels them to counter racism (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). This study uses critical intraracial literacy, which extends critical and racial literacies, to more deeply discover the ways that white supremacy bleed into the epistemologies and practices of racially marginalized communities, and how it can be challenged.

Critical intraracial literacy is “... a practice in which racially marginalized people interrogate the internalization and projection of racist ideologies within their racialized group” (Goins, 2024). It draws upon the understanding that the devaluation of Black ontology and pro-Black epistemology is a central feature of racism (Croom, 2020), and that when this pejoration is internalized by the racially marginalized, it becomes intrracially enforced, whether covertly or overtly, causing divisions between Afro-descendants and perpetuating their ideological and structural oppression (Epstein & Gist, 2015; Skerrett & Omogun, 2020). The development of counter-hegemonic racial literacy, or critical-race consciousness, is necessary for critical intraracial literacy (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), and Critical

Love is its ultimate purpose (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Critical intraracial literacy endeavors to combat internalized racism and heal the racially marginalized from it.

I argue that in the case in which the student was barred from her school, the inspector practiced a hegemonic intraracial literacy, while the student and her mother demonstrated critical intraracial literacy, which allowed them to counter-read the racism and compelled them to seek structural action. Accordingly, herein I present a critical intraracial literacy analysis of the case to demonstrate this. In the following section, I review scholarship that elucidates Black hair as a sociopolitical site; the development of racial literacy in education and in intraracial settings; and Black girls and mothers as knowledge producers. I also briefly overview race, education, and pro-Black activism in the national Brazilian context, and in Salvador da Bahia. Subsequently, I describe the case study materials and my analytic approach. I then present a more detailed description of the case and my findings. And, finally, I discuss the insights this study provides for anti-discrimination policy, and racial literacy scholarship.

As standing up against racial injustice is a global plight, it is critical for scholars and educators to develop understanding of race and racism across nations. Countries that have been structurally erected upon racism, such as Brazil, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States, have relatable and interrelated histories. Such countries form a ‘two-way mirror’ between each other—like a two-way mirror offers both reflection and can be seen through, such countries mirror each other’s racialized histories and processes, but, due to the distinctions and nuances between them, also offer windows into distinguishing structural and interpersonal iterations of racism (Goins & Soares, 2025). Ultimately, this transnational purview illuminates racism and anti-Blackness as both global and discretely contextualized phenomena. This transnational understanding facilitates the development of transnational solidarities and action to challenge racism. The case in this study provides a unique lens into the functionality of racism in Brazil, and racism in other nations.

Literature Review

Here I review literature on Black hair and schooling in Brazil, hair as affirmation and counter-reading, racial literacies in education and intraracial settings, gendered racial meaning in transnational contexts, and Black girls and mothers as knowledge-producers. These bodies of scholarship illustrate the embeddedness of Afro hair in processes of gendered racialization and resistance in education, and the implications of this for counter-hegemonic activism in the broader white supremacist context, as well as in intraracial settings.

Black Hair and Schooling in Brazil

Black hair is a transnationally racialized educational issue, not just a mi-

nor cultural detail (Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Essien & Wood, 2021; Gomes, 2002; James-Gallaway et al., 2024; Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020; Mbilishaka et al., 2020; Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024). In Brazil, students with Afro hair can face jokes, taunting, and discrimination from other students, educators, and administrators (Battice, 2024; Caldwell, 2003; Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Goins, 2022; Goins, 2023; Gomes, 2002). In Ferreira’s (2014) study on Brazilian language teachers’ racialized experiences, participants recounted that, in school, whiteness was most often discussed positively and Blackness negatively. A participant whose race is not explicitly stated but indicated that they weren’t as “*branquinha*” [fair-skinned] as their classmates, shared that they had almost no friends and did activities alone due to their phenotype, including their hair which “*tinha muita personalidade*” [had a lot of personality] instead of being blonde and straight (p. 252). Contrastingly, a participant who was white with blonde hair and blue eyes, shared that when they participated in an international exchange program in the United States, they even heard someone say that they belonged there; the participant attributed the ease of their integration into the program and society to their whiteness. These examples illustrate that belonging in education is racialized transnationally, and hair is a central racialized factor in that belonging for many students (Ferreira, 2014). Black girls around the world have been prohibited from attending both primary and secondary schools for wearing natural Afro hair (Battice, 2024; Caldwell, 2003; Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Darkwa, 2021; Gomes, 2002; Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018), and have even been informed by administrators that the reason for their punishment was that their hair embodied ‘Black Power’ (Cardoso & Rocha, 2019; Goins, 2022). This simultaneously frames Black hair and Black Power as ‘bad,’ a racialized property logic in which ‘goodness’ is owned by white people, and ‘badness’ is assigned to racial ‘others’ (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016). This property logic is also applied in the case at focus in this article, as the student is chastised based on the racialized phenotype of her hair, and her decision to wear her hair in its natural form rather than assimilate to white normativity. The myriad offenses that Black students face based on their hair can impact students both internally and structurally, by damaging their self-perceptions, and hampering their access to educational opportunities (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020; Mbilishaka et al., 2020).

Hair as Affirmation and Counter-Reading

While Black hair is a site for discrimination in schools, and society, it is also a site for counter-literacy (Goins, 2022). Gomes (2002) found that whether students internalized anti-Black (intra)racism, or resisted it, was impacted by their sense of racial dignity. This racial self-esteem was often cultivated in their homes by their mothers and other caregivers, who inculcated their belief in their inherent value by declaring their beauty, particularly of their hair, and by caring for their hair. Cuevas-Parra (2024) found that Black Brazilian children were aware of the

heightened anti-Black stereotyping propagated during the rightwing regime of Jair Bolsonaro, and that their Afro hair was a prime target for discrimination. But rather than assimilate to white aesthetic demands, student-activists chose to wear natural Afro hair to provide Black-affirming representation for other Black children, like the Black child at focus in the case. Moreover, Black Brazilian teacher-activists educate Black and white children and community members to embrace Black hair, regarding this as a shield against racism and internalized racism (Goins, 2022). Thus, Black students and educators have embraced Afro hair as a pedagogical tool that fosters Black empowerment and anti-racism.

Racial Literacy in Education

Research across national contexts has utilized racial literacy to understand how racism is enforced in education, via classrooms, curriculum, and interactions (Moraes, 2023; Oto et al., 2023; Rogers & Mosley, 2008; Skerrett, 2011). Studies emphasize that dismantling racism in education requires the development of critical consciousness and transformative action (Moraes, 2023; Oto et al., 2023). Scholars have explored teachers' and students' critical interrogation and design of anti-racist curriculum, and discussions of racism through an intersectional lens (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Scholars have also centered youth voices in contending the importance of cultivating racial literacy in teachers, administrators, pre-service teachers, and teacher-educators to combat the 'intergenerational' reproduction of racism in schools (Colomer, 2019; Moraes, 2023; Oto et al., 2023). Extending the calls to examine race through an intersectional lens and to center youth voices, this study examines an educational administrator's racialized reading of a Black child and her hair, and the counter-reading of the Black child and her mother (Oto et al., 2023). It spotlights gendered racialization and youth resistance.

Several studies have focused on the racial literacies of racially and ethnically marginalized educational interest holders (Allen, 2019; Colomer, 2019; Epstein & Gist, 2015; Gallo & Bellows, 2025; Gardner, 2017; Skerrett & Omogun, 2020). Racially and ethnically marginalized teachers have shared their experiences with internalized racism with their students to compel them to counter the intraracial enforcement of racism and the divisions sowed by white supremacy within their communities (Allen, 2019; Epstein & Gist, 2015). To analyze the case in this study, critical intraracial literacy is engaged to sharpen the focus on the intraracial enforcement of whiteness and counter-hegemonic intraracial consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Goins, 2024). Critical intraracial literacy underscores the unique features and implications of internalized racism and intraracial discrimination for racially marginalized people.

Black Feminism and Reading Gendered Racial Meaning

Black feminist frameworks provide keen insights into gendered racial mean-

ing-making and experiences. Cardoso (2014) relates that Black feminists have often created language to name their experiences and transform gendered racist narratives and their silencing of Black knowledge. For example, Brazilian Black feminist Lélia Gonzalez devised the term *Amefricanidade* [Amefricanity] to reflect the particular positionalities of Black and Indigenous women throughout the Americas, and theorized Afro-Latin American Feminism, to understand the structural inequities and liberatory practices of Black people and Black women throughout Latin America (Gonzalez, 2020; Rios, 2021). Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) advocate for research to adopt a critical race feminist lens to understand the gendered racial positioning of Black girls, “the subjugation of their psyches and bodies” in both media and policies, and the ways that Black girls’ marginalization is not only oppressive, but also inadvertently creates a uniquely powerful critical onto-epistemology for societal transformation (p. 22). Black feminism facilitates a critical-race conscious understanding of gendered racial meaning-making.

Black Girls and Mothers as Critical Knowledge Producers

Black feminist scholarship also centers Black girls and mothers as critical knowledge and literacy producers who challenge deficit gendered-racialized narratives and construct anti-racist narratives that celebrate and honor each other (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Goins, 2022; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021; Santiago & Goulart de Faria, 2021). Research documents that Black mothers with Black feminist onto-epistemologies cultivate their daughters’ strong positive perceptions of their racial identity (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Gomes, 2002). Gomes (2002) explains that a salient way Black mothers build their daughters’ gendered racial self-esteem is through caring for their natural Afro hair. In a study on the onto-epistemological values and practices of Black feminist teacher-activists, I found that participants wore their own Afro hair, cared for their children’s Afro hair, and encouraged their children to wear their hair naturally believing that this would enforce their self-esteem even in racially oppressive or antagonistic spaces (Goins, 2023). Thus, the critical-race consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022) and counter-literacies (Goins, 2022) of Black girls are often nurtured by their mothers. In the case at focus in this study, the critical-race conscious interpretations of the Black mother and daughter are amplified (Chávez-Moreno, 2022).

Brazil Context

Brazil is an essential context for the examination of racial inequity in society and education (Ferreira, 2014; Guimarães, 1999; Soares & Alves, 2003). In this nation, the last in the Americas to legally abolish enslavement in 1888, Afro-descendants have been ideologically and structurally dehumanized (Gomes, 2002). During the 1930s and 1940s, the Brazilian government adopted and promoted the idea that the nation was a racial democracy—that race and racism were obsolete due

to the nation's multiracial mosaic, and that racism dissolves through interracial marriage and family. This narrative, widely critiqued as 'the racial democracy myth,' obscures the structural reality of racism (Gonzalez, 2020; Twine, 2005); it is also notably similar to the U.S. government's promotion of the idea of 'racial liberalism'—which has held that racism is individual and, therefore, can be dismantled through interracial contact—to deter racial unrest from Black communities that were discontent with racism post-World War II, and to avoid addressing structural racism (Guinier, 2004). In Brazil, both Black students and Pardo students (of mixed European, African, and / or Indigenous ancestry of varying amounts) experience less educational success compared to their white counterparts, but there is even greater disparity between Black and white students (Soares & Alves, 2003). At the same time, though centuries-long racial and class hierarchies are enforced in education in Brazil, carrying on the "*escravocrata*" [slave-owning order] (Guimarães, 1995, p. 35), Afro-Brazilian anti-racist activists have resisted racism in cultural and political spheres (Rios, 2021). *O Movimento Negro Unificado* / The Unified Black Movement was founded in 1978 in São Paulo by activists, including Lélia Gonzalez (Gomes, 2018; Rios, 2021), to structurally defend and build critical consciousness in Black people. Due to the movement's declaration of the structural nature of racism, strengthened by their transnational anti-racist solidarities with anti-racist organizations in other nations (Caldwell, 2007), as well as the federal government's acknowledgement of structural racism in a 2001 report, affirmative action policies were developed to establish quotas for Black representation in education and employment (Caldwell, 2007). The Unified Black Movement also worked for the institution of federal law 10.639, which mandates the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in schools (Caldwell, 2007). Another institution that supports pro-Blackness in education is Zumbi dos Palmares University (FAZP), the first and only Historically Black College / University (HBCU) in Brazil, located in São Paulo. FAZP supports Black educators to eradicate racism in education, in part by offering a graduate program in racial literacy. Although anti-Blackness is a central historical aspect of the fabric of Brazilian society, pro-Black activism and pedagogies have also persisted throughout the nation.

Salvador da Bahia

The city of Salvador da Bahia is a vital context in which to examine racialized discourses in schools. Salvador Bahia is also known as "little Africa," because it has the highest percentage of Afro-descendants in Brazil, over 80% (Belandi, 2023). The city is known for sustaining Black history, culture, and activism. Yet, it is still situated within a historically anti-Black nation (IBGE, 2019; Oliveira, 2017). Accordingly, Salvador is an important site to examine racial discourse and resistance in schools. Crawford-Lima et al. (2012) observed 'race talk' amongst teachers and administrators, the majority of whom were Black, followed by Pardo,

and one white, in a diverse high school in Salvador da Bahia. Race talk comprises “... racial discourses in schools and serves as the terrain of political and ideological struggle around racism” (Crawford-Lima et al., 2012, pp. 283-284). They found that the race talk employed by teachers both reinforced and challenged racist discourses, noting three different categories: 1) silencing racism; 2) acknowledging that racism exists but denying its existence in the school and classroom; and, 3) reckoning with racism in society and the school and classroom (Crawford-Lima et al., 2012). They advocate for teachers to take up critically conscious race talk rather than the silencing narrative of racial democracy to foster equity for students (Crawford-Lima et al., 2012). Harris (2021) investigated the racial identity conceptions of school seniors in Salvador da Bahia and Cartagena, Colombia. Self-reported dark-skinned (versus medium- and light-skinned) participants from Salvador da Bahia reported higher rates of perceived discrimination. Brazilian participants across skin tones and race acknowledged racial inequities that cause racial disparities in access to education and other opportunities. However, Black participants also expressed more racial pride. Thus, Salvador da Bahia—where the case at focus herein unfolded—is an important context for the exploration of Black racialization, and the ways that it is perpetuated and challenged, in schools.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I define critical intraracial literacy, delineate its intellectual heritage, and describe its analytical utility. I also rearticulate the anti-deficit purpose of critical intraracial literacy.

Defining Critical Intraracial Literacy

This work is theoretically grounded in critical intraracial literacy, “... a process by which racially marginalized people probe the existence of internalized racist ideologies within their raced group” (Goins, 2024, para. 1). Racism and white supremacy are both structural and ideological (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023); in societies structured by the permanent fixture of racism, all people are subject to internalizing and enacting racist hegemonic ideologies (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). White racialized people, who are positioned as superior to all other racial groups, can believe the notion of their superiority, and/or otherwise act upon it through discriminating practices against the racially marginalized. And the racially marginalized, who are positioned as inferior by the same white supremacist hegemonic system, may internalize and thus accept the notion that they are inferior, and inflict associated harms onto other people within their own racial group. However, they can also challenge racism. The degree to which a person internalizes or resists ideological hegemony is not black and white but, rather, exists on a continuum (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). Through critical intraracial literacy, the racially marginalized discern and challenge the infiltration of racist epistemology

in their minds and communities, thereby developing critical race consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022) and Critical Love for themselves and others in their racialized group, despite and *in light of* racism (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

The Conceptual Building Blocks of Critical Intra-racial Literacy

The concept of critical intra-racial literacy builds upon scholarship on racial literacies, internalized racism, and Black feminist thought. Racial literacy is the skill and practice of decoding and dismantling structural racism (Croom, 2020; Guinier, 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Skerrett, 2011;). Chávez-Moreno (2022) relates that racial literacies exist on a continuum between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic; a person may use their racial literacy, consciously or unconsciously, to dismantle or to perpetuate racism (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). Critical-racial consciousness not only helps the racially marginalized to fight racism, but also enhances their psychic well-being because it bolsters their self-esteem in racist societies, thus serving as an antidote to internalized racism (Croom, 2020; Goins, 2022; Goins, 2023; Goins, 2024; Guinier, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Internalized racism is a psychological harm inflicted by structural racism, in which racially marginalized people absorb racist ideologies about their own group (David et al., 2019; Du Bois, 1903; Fanon, 1986; Freire, 1970; Speight, 2007; Woodson, 1933). This can result in negative perceptions and practices toward themselves, their families, and their communities (David et al., 2019). Black feminist thought has illuminated internalized racism, particularly as it is inflicted against Black women (Carneiro, 1995; Carneiro, 2015; Collins, 2000; Gonzalez, 2020; hooks, 1989). Black feminist thought is an intellectual-activist movement: It is characterized by the development of critical consciousness about Black women's intersectional experiences; fostering heterogeneous solidarity between Black women with different intersectional identities; honoring the intellectual contributions of Black women; and supporting other justice movements to cultivate a humanizing world (Cardoso, 2014; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Hall, 2019; Smith & Leu, 2023). Black feminist thought has critically analyzed the surfacing of internalized racism by Black people through their contempt for Afro features, even in affinity spaces like beauty salons and barber shops (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1993).

Critical Intra-racial Literacy as an Analytic Tool

In this study, critical intra-racial literacy analysis unmask not only how Black students are racially targeted on the basis of their Afro-phenotypical features (Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Dumas, 2016; Goins, 2022; Gomes, 2002; Gomes, 2003), but also the implications of the perpetuation of anti-Black discrimination by other Black-racialized individuals (David et. al, 2019). Resultantly, this study facilitates a critically-informed analysis of the racial consciousnesses of both the person

perpetuating the harm and the person receiving it (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Epstein & Gist, 2015). Moreover, it reveals that if children and parents have critical-racial consciousness, racially stigmatizing experiences can propel them to become activists by raising awareness about the discrimination that students who share their intersectional identity categories face (Cuevas-Parra, 2024). Because the anti-Black discrimination at focus in this study is intraracial, using critical intraracial literacy as an analytical tool reveals how students and parents can and do demonstrate critical intraracial literacy activism. This activism can compel the person who inflicted the discrimination to develop critical-race consciousness. This is the purpose of critical intraracial literacy: for racially marginalized people to raise the critical-racial consciousness of themselves and others within their racialized group by deciphering and countering internalized racism as an act of Critical Love.

An Anti-Deficit Framework

The concept of critical intraracial literacy is not a moral ranking of racially marginalized people, but a foregrounding of internalized racism as an underacknowledged, yet pivotal, consequence of structural racism (David et al., 2019). The case in this study should be read as contested racial meaning-making. Intraracial discrimination is inextricably bound to white supremacy; “internalized racism would not exist if racism did not exist” (David et al., 2019, p. 1072). In any case of intraracial discrimination, the persons directly involved are not the only actors. White supremacist ideologies, and the structures that give them societal gravitas, are very much present and compelling forces in the mind of the inflictor. Without those forces, there would be no intraracial discrimination. Critical intraracial literacy cannot be practiced without this structural understanding. Critical intraracial literacy is also intended to remove shame associated with internalized racism, as shame impedes people from reckoning with their internalized racism. All racially marginalized people may struggle with various types of internalized and intraracially-enforced racism, and engage in different forms of critical intraracial literacy, across the continuum of critical-racial consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). Building critical intraracial literacy is a lifelong, empowering, anti-racist struggle (Goins, 2024; Epstein & Gist, 2015; Kendi, 2019; Oto et al., 2023).

Data and Analytic Approach

The data for this case study comprises two primary source articles. The sources, Rezende (2022) and TV Bahia (2022a), each include an interview with the child and her mother. The article by Rezende comes from *Correio Brasiliense*, a daily newspaper based in Brasília. TV Bahia is a local television station based in Salvador da Bahia, where the incident occurred. Each of these articles details the incident that occurred, the daughter and mother’s reflections on the event in inter-

views, and the political and social developments that took place after the incident. The interview included in Rezende (2022) is textual, while the TV Bahia (2022a) article includes a video-recorded interview.

To analyze the materials, I drew upon critical intraracial literacy concepts as interpretive categories. That is, I noted any actions and phrases documented in the case materials that reflected the internalized racism of and projection of white supremacist value systems by involved persons, as well as the intersectional nature of the discrimination. I also noted any counter-actions and language that reflected critical-race consciousness, such as the naming of (internalized) racism, rejection of white supremacist value systems, the naming of the intersectional aspect of the discrimination, and the declaration of the need for action to prevent further harm against others.

Findings and Case Analysis

This section presents the case study of intraracial discrimination against the student by the school inspector in Salvador da Bahia. First, I detail the incident. Next, I analyze the inspector's intraracial imposition of white supremacist ideologies on the student during the incident. Then, I describe the child's counter-reading of the incident, demonstrated by her interview with a news outlet. Afterward, I discuss the child's mother's critical political framing of the incident. Finally, I highlight the insights that this case provides for critical intraracial literacy (Goins, 2024).

The Incident

In 2022, a thirteen-year-old girl named Eloah (Monique) Tavares was barred from entering her military school, Colégio Municipal Doutor João Paim, by the inspector, a Black man who was a retired military officer (Rezende, 2022; TV Bahia, 2022a). The incident occurred in front of other students. In an interview, Monique, still emotionally shaken and crying, shared that she did not have a hairnet that day, which was required to attend the school (Rezende, 2022). She had lost hers and reported it a previous day. She went to class two times without it, but was barred by the inspector when she tried to go to class the third time. Monique recounted her encounter as follows:

Quando cheguei na entrada do colégio, o inspetor falou que meu cabelo estava muito 'inchado' e que eu não estava adequada para assistir às aulas.

[When I arrived at the school entrance, the inspector said that my hair was too 'puffy' and that I was not suitable for attending classes.] (Rezende, 2022, para. 2)

Monique has Afro hair, which is associated with monoracial Blackness, rather than more loosely curly hair which corresponds with a miscegenated identity and status (TV Bahia, 2022a). In a picture taken during her interview, she was wearing her hair in a 'high puff,' in which her Afro hair sits free on top of her head.

Although Monique pleaded that she lived far away, the inspector insisted that she could not attend class. She relates that he then threatened her with having to permanently leave the school if she did not straighten her hair:

Ele disse que eu precisava alisar o meu cabelo porque estava fora dos padrões. Quando fui embora, chorando, bastante estressada, e já atravessando a rua, ele começou a gritar comigo, dizendo que se eu não me adequasse, minha mãe teria que pedir minha transferência para outro colégio.

[He said that I needed to relax my hair because it wasn't up to standard. When I left, crying, quite stressed, and already crossing the street, he started yelling at me, saying that if I did not adapt, my mother would have to have me transfer to another school.] (Rezende, 2022, para. 3)

Monique went home and told her mother, Jaciara, about the incident.

The Inspector's Intra-racial Enforcement

In this case, the inspector intra-racially enforced anti-Black norms, directly to Monique, and indirectly to the other children who were present. The intra-racism was not in calling out Monique's lack of a hairnet which was required for school, but in the inspector's pejorative assessment of Monique's hair as phenotypically unfit for the school, and his demand for her to modify her hair's phenotypic qualities in order to assimilate. His claim that Monique's hair was 'too puffy' reflects an internalized anti-Black worldview (David et al., 2019; Speight, 2007) in which wearing Afro phenotypical hair signifies that a person is too epistemically pro-Black, and thus antithetical to white supremacy (Croom, 2020; Johnson, 2022). The inspector's particular experiences with serving in the military and working for a military school may have influenced him to view natural Afro hair, and Blackness (and Black womanness), as antithetical to military schooling. To develop critical-racial consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), Afro-descendants must interrogate internalized racist ideologies while living in a persistently anti-Black world and navigating racist institutions. For the inspector, developing critical intra-racial literacy would foster more humanizing engagement with Black girl students like Monique. Even if the policies the inspector is expected-even forced-to uphold are anti-Black, critical intra-racial literacy would equip him to valorize Blackness in spite of these policies, critically navigating the policies in anti-racist ways (Goins, 2024; Kendi, 2019). In an interview following the incident, Monique both structurally contextualized the inspector's behavior and critiqued his intra-racist treatment of her.

Monique's Counter-Reading

In her interview, Monique rejected the anti-Black meaning imposed on her by naming the incident as racism:

Eu e a minha mãe decidimos [que foi racismo]. Sei que não é o colégio que faz

as regras, mas o regime militar. Infelizmente, fui vítima de racismo sim. O jeito que o inspetor falou comigo foi muito agressivo, muito ofensivo.
 [My mother and I decided [that it was racism]. I know that it is not the school that makes the rules, but the military regime. Unfortunately, I was a victim of racism. The way the inspector spoke to me was very aggressive, very offensive.]
 (Rezende, 2022, para. 5)

Monique demonstrated critical intraracial literacy by calling out the hair texturism the inspector displayed as racism, and not euphemizing it (Webb, 2019) even though the inspector was Black. She also placed the incident in a larger structural context in which ‘the military regime makes the rules.’ Thus, Monique frames the incident as not just an interpersonal failing, but a symptom of anti-Black structure (Cuevas-Parras, 2024; Guinier, 2004). Monique acknowledged that the inspector did not originate the anti-Blackness he projected onto her; rather, he internalized the hegemonic ideologies embedded in dominant educational policies and practices that create, and mandate, the perspective that Blackness is ‘not up to standard.’ Yet, Monique indicates that the inspector still bore responsibility for his offensive engagement toward her; it was his actions, after all, that directly projected the racism onto her. Furthermore, this incident mobilized both Monique and her mother into action; they relate that Monique is “*porta-voz de todas as meninas negras*” [a spokesperson for all Black girls] (Rezende, 2022, para. 6). Monique’s application of her experience to all Black girls reveals her critical-racial consciousness that this incident was indicative of a broader intersectional injustice (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Collins, 2000; Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Goins, 2022). Cuevas-Parra, 2024 found Black Brazilian children’s critical-racial consciousness caused them to intentionally wear natural hair as an act of contesting structural racism. Similarly, Monique recognized that justice for her and other Black children would not come through assimilation, but from advocating for Pro-Black structural and ideological transformation (Gomes, 2002; Johnson, 2022).

Monique’s Mother’s Political Framing

Monique’s mother, Jaciara, described the inspector’s treatment as “*preconceito rasgado*” [scathing racism], which required political and legal recourse. Jaciara exhibited critical intraracial literacy by highlighting that the inspector’s discrimination was not just based on the policy that all students must have a hairnet, but also on antiblackness (Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Goins, 2022; Goins, 2023; Goins, 2024). She declared that the inspector’s pejorative treatment of Monique was due to her hair being Afro in texture, “*que é naturalmente mais volumoso, mesmo quando preso*” [which is naturally more voluminous, even when tied up] (Rezende, 2022, para. 6).

She explains:

Proibir o estudante de ter acesso à escola só porque ele tem cabelo duro é indig-

nante, constrangedor. Eu e a minha filha nunca passamos por situação parecida antes, pelo menos dessa forma, tão descarada.

[Prohibiting a student from having access to the school just because they have coarse hair is outrageous, embarrassing. My daughter and I have never experienced anything like this before, at least not in such a blatant way.] (Rezende, 2022, para. 6)

By calling the prohibition of Afro hair “outrageous,” Jaciara critically reframes pejorative normative assumptions of Afro hair as falsities rather than truths. Furthermore, her exclamation that the incident was “embarrassing,” illuminates that the event was not only humiliating for her daughter, but a shameful reinforcement of the systematic dehumanization of Black girls and the enforcement of that dehumanization by the inspector as a Black man. Jaciara procured a lawyer to defend Monique, reflecting her political framing of the incident as discrimination.

Critical Intra-racial Literacy Insights

This case extends critical intra-racial literacy by illustrating that anti-Black structural and ideological forces can impact intra-racial relationships even in a predominantly-Black metropolis like Salvador da Bahia (David et al., 2019; Johnson, 2022). It also reveals that competing intra-racial literacies—both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic—are practiced transnationally (Goins, 2024). Here, the inspector displayed a hegemonic intra-racial literacy by enforcing a white supremacist ideology which positions Afro hair as inferior and unfit for school (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). Monique and her mother displayed critical intra-racial literacy by contesting that anti-Black ideology and affirming Afro hair (Goins, 2024). We do not know what caused Monique and her mother to develop their critical-racial consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). While wearing Afro hair is not an automatic indication of critical-racial consciousness, doing so in an anti-Black society is often a political choice, simply due to the fact it is targeted for discrimination (Caldwell, 2003; Cuevas-Parra, 2024; Goins, 2022; Goins, 2023; Gomes, 2002; hooks, 1989; Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024; Walker, 1987). The combination of Monique wearing her natural hair and her critically-informed response to the intra-racism suggest that she and her mother had preexisting critical intra-racial literacy. Black women’s embodied lived experiences with intersectional oppression are a critical teacher that can foster their development of critical-racial consciousness (Collins, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1991; Goins, 2022; hooks, 1989). Furthermore, the presence of a contemporary natural hair movement, disseminated largely over social media, provides inspiration and community for Black girls and women to wear their natural hair (Goins, 2022). While we do not know what caused the inspector’s apparent lack of critical-racial consciousness, we know that internalized racism is a prevailing symptom of racism (David et al., 2019). He likely has not had the critical-racial consciousness raising

influences that Monique and her mother have. This case shows that positionality, life experiences, and education, can lead to different outcomes in a person's critical intraracial literacy (Cuevas-Parra, 2024).

Discussion

In this section, I discuss policy considerations that can prevent discrimination against Black people on the basis of their hair; review this study's contribution of an intraracial lens on racial literacy; and reaffirm the anti-deficit perspective and counter-hegemonic solidarities required to build critical intraracial literacy.

Policy Implications

Federal and school policies that specifically prohibit denying people the right to wear their natural hair texture and cultural hairstyles in schools and other institutions can lead to structural advances in the fight against the devaluation of Black hair (LDF, 2026). In the case presented in this study, the family's lawyer highlighted that, unfortunately, Black students experience racism every day, and that he hopes that the school's policies will change, noting that *O Movimento Negro Unificado* (The Unified Black Movement) is supporting Monique, Jaciara, and him to help effectuate that change (Gomes, 2018; Rezende, 2022). The lawyer contended that the inspector committed an imprisonable offense, citing Article 6 of Law 7.716/89, which establishes that denying students the ability to enroll in or enter a school based on their race or color is a crime (Presidência da República Casa Civil [Office of the President of the Republic], 1989). Law 7.716/89 also prohibits the race-based refusal of people from being serviced in various establishments, including hair salons and barbershops (Article 10) (Presidência da República Casa Civil [Office of the President of the Republic], 1989). But the law does not mention hair texture. The U.S. federal Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural (CROWN) Acts (2021, 2022), to forbid discrimination on the basis of hair in workplaces and public schools, was proposed because hair discrimination, especially that related to Black hair, needs specific attention that is not delineated in existing civil rights laws (CROWN Act, 2021, 2022; LDF, 2026). Explicit attention to hair texture in laws and policies ensures the prohibition of hair-related racist practices, even when they are committed under the guise of racist property logics like 'professionalism.'

Scholarly Contribution

This article provides an intraracial lens into racial literacy. It examines the ways that anti-Blackness can be enforced intraracially in education. Prior studies have utilized racial literacy frameworks to research internalized racism (Epstein & Gist, 2015; Skerrett, 2011). Critical intraracial literacy provides a framework

for sharpening this focus by spotlighting the characteristics of intraracial enforcement, which is distinct from, although interrelated with interracial racism; the particular implications of intraracial enforcement for racially marginalized communities (e.g., intraracial division); and intraracial solidarities as requisite to the empowerment of racially marginalized communities. Internalized and intraracial enforcement of racism is a key strategic tool of white supremacy (David et al., 2019; Epstein & Gist, 2015). Intraracially unifying through Critical Love is, thus, a particular antidote to racism, along with interracial solidarity (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). In the case examined in this study, intraracial Critical Love would compel the Black inspector to critique and challenge anti-Black assessments of Black youth instead of reinforcing them.

Reaffirming Anti-Deficit Lens

This case exemplifies the ideological struggle that racially marginalized communities face within the context of structural racism. However, it should not be taken to mean that racially marginalized people collectively lack critical-race consciousness. As evinced by this case, racially marginalized people hold and exercise multiple forms of racial literacy which can be hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. While critical-race consciousness is a continuum, it is also dynamic—a person may display critical-race consciousness in one way and lack critical-consciousness in another way. This case spotlights an instance in the lives of racially marginalized people, but it cannot fully encapsulate the critical-race consciousness of the people involved. Nevertheless, it exposes the broader problem of the internalization and intraracial enforcement of racism. Critical intraracial literacy requires counter-hegemonic solidarities between all racially marginalized people (Cardoso, 2014; Gonzalez, 2020).

Conclusion

This study presented a case in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic intraracial literacies were juxtaposed, as a Black administrator prohibited a Black child from entering her school on the basis of her hair Afro hair, and the student and her mother counter-read and named the administrator’s anti-Blackness, and then procured legal aid to prevent this discrimination from happening to other Black girls (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). The concept of critical intraracial literacy extends racial literacy by honing the focus on the features and implications of intraracially-enforced racism (Goins, 2024). The case in this study comes from Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, but it elucidates the global problem of internalized racism in education and the need to center the critical knowledge of Black girls and mothers transnationally. Future research may explore intraracial literacy within and between various educational constituents, including students, teachers, administrators, and families, as well as in settings outside of education, across na-

tional contexts. Critical intraracial literacy does not position racially marginalized communities as deficit in critical-race consciousness, but uncovers the insidious iterations of white supremacy—internalized and intraracially enforced racism are two of those iterations. Beyond simply understanding these phenomena is the importance of cultivating Critical Love and counter-hegemonic solidarities for liberation and healing from internalized racism (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Intraracial solidarities are essential to the global plight of standing up against racial injustice.

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Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education Guidelines for Authors

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Vision

Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education is an academic forum for the transdisciplinary study of the critical pedagogical implications and relationships within education. *Taboo* was founded on the notion of radical contextualization, encouraging students and scholars to draw from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives to question current approaches in schools, systems, and in higher education. Drawing upon a variety of contextualizing disciplines and critical theoretical ways of knowing including cultural studies, curriculum theorizing, critical race theory, political economy, feminist studies, the social foundations of education, critical pedagogy, interculturalism, queer theory, historiography, symbolic interactionism, literary theory, as examples. Beyond simply articulating critical perspectives we seek contributions willing to speak the unspoken and/or the irreconcilable. We hope to foster discussions across and through different disciplines including explorations into how dialogue and discourse operate throughout and within different educational times/spaces/places. The journal encourages a wide range of contributions from who work within these general areas, expanding methodological practices. *Taboo* seeks provocative and controversial submissions.

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Thematic Issues: *Taboo* was first published in 1995 and in 2025, we will celebrate its 30th year. To lead up to that milestone, *Taboo* will produce thematic issues until 2025. This unique model will invite multiple editors to spearhead each issue. Assisted by *Taboo's* editorial collective and assistants, each issue will be a *deep dive* within a theme. To suggest a thematic issue please send the name(s) and affiliations of the proposed issue, the topic/theme of the issue, a draft of the call for manuscripts, a tentative timeline, and CVs of the guest editor(s). Editors must ensure that all articles in the special issue go through a blind-peer review process. Editors will be asked to submit final manuscripts with peer reviews to the editors on the negotiated deadline. The entire special issues or specific manuscripts of the special issue may also go through an additional peer-review and/or editorial review process with *Taboo* prior to publication. Authors can expect to receive a decision in one month. Upon approval of the issue, one of the *Taboo* editors will be assigned to work with the thematic issue team.

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Taboo

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Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education is an academic forum featuring the critical theoretical and pedagogical constructs that focus on the relationship between education and its sociocultural context. Grounded on the notion of “radical contextualization,” *Taboo* presents compelling and controversial pieces from a wide range of contributors.

Taboo began as a publication of Peter Lang Publishing, with two issues published each year in 1995, 1996, and 1997. *Taboo* has since been acquired by Caddo Gap Press, which renewed publication of the journal with the Spring-Summer 2000 issue.

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