Discussing Metaphor as a Pedagogical Practice: Reflections on a Conference Salon

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Abstract

In this paper, we reflect on our process of preparing for a salon presentation at the York Graduate Students in Education *re:* conference. We describe our choice of a salon format to open a critical and interdisciplinary dialogue about the ways we struggle with metaphor as white settlers. We share the content of our salon discussion and explore how metaphor can manifest as an act of transformation in early childhood education. Specifically, we conceptualize our metaphor of early childhood praxis as a Frankensteinian monster, pieced together from mostly psychological theories of child development into a harmonized body of knowledge. As we describe our preparation for the salon, we attend to our inspiration for engaging in aesthetic invitations for dialogue through creative writing, spoken word, mixed media collage, and audio/visual recording. We end with an invitation for continued dialogue on the use of metaphor and its cautions.

Keywords: *Salon, metaphor, early childhood education, Frankenstein's monster, aesthetic representation*

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"This is not a call to disregard metaphor but, instead, a plea to take seriously how metaphors are necessarily illuminating, and are indeed structured by and through, the complex groundedness of black life—as extraliterary-storied-material-metaphoric-interdisciplinary-dynamic-curious-scientifically-creative (feeling). Rather than disregard metaphor, we sit with metaphor." (McKittrick, 2021, p.10)

"Decolonization is not a metaphor." (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3)

The Salon

Over the past year, we have been thinking about the colonial and neoliberal inheritances of early childhood education and curriculum in Ontario, and the ways in which the pandemic has exposed these inheritances, thereby spurring a shift in early learning discourse. We have been part of a growing movement that calls on the Early Childhood Education (ECE) profession to reconceptualize its reliance on psychological theories of child development and its propensity to rigidly define educator/child/more-than-human subjectivities (Bloch et al., 2018; Burman, 2017). As white settlers, we are concerned that this reliance on child development theories creates norms that define the "right child", the "right educator" and "best practices" (Langford, 2007). Given child development's modernist roots that order "difference from the norms of sameness" (Popkewitz, 1999, p.32) it's propensity to define what is "right" enacts violence(s) and excludes students and educators in marginalized communities that do not fit these norms. In particular, we have been working with *How Does Learning Happen?* (*HDLH*), (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) a curriculum document that is currently in place as the official "pedagogical" guide for all early years settings in Ontario. This document pieces together histories of child development theories based on its predecessor *Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT)* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007), with more recent reconceptualist perspectives that approach early

childhood discourse more critically and are often resistant to traditional and dominant psychological theories of child development. We engaged in a close reading of *HDLH*, specifically attending to who was cited in the document. We noticed that the document cites authors from both developmental and reconceptualist perspectives, however, the reconceptualist ideas are often muffled by harmonized and romanticized language that assumes commensurability between developmental and reconceptualist ideas/ideals. As post-secondary instructors who are responsible for training pre-service early childhood educators, we were conscious of the need to think differently about how we use *HDLH* in our teaching of pre-service educators, as well as our pedagogy more generally. We wondered and continue to ask ourselves, what histories and practices do we perpetuate when using this document uncritically, and what can we disrupt? What practices are important to hold on to while engaging with more difficult discussions? In preparation for the salon, we discussed shared moments of resistance that we have participated in with preservice early childhood educators. For example, we used particular novels alongside or as course texts whose metaphors provided openings for a thorough critique of linearity and education. Other examples included facilitating various types of drawing practices alongside writing and discussion to disrupt our universalizing metaphors of children and educators. These experiences inspired us to consider how using these entrances into metaphor as teaching practices and tools alongside curriculum documents might be a way to invite an alternative disposition and understanding of early childhood education. We thought about how this might come into conversation with the conference invitation:

> What does it mean then to re:open from a pandemic, "to build from the ruin" (Ahmed, 2013)? What histories are entangled with our futures, what do we ruin when we build? What risks do we take and what vulnerabilities do we expose? How do we work in situated

ways that do not erase histories or smooth out futures? How do we "ruin what ruins"? (YGSE, 2022)

We were provoked by the conference theme *re:* to think of metaphor as a tool to ruin what ruins. Our choice to create a salon was due to a pressing desire to open a dialogical space to connect in a way that may be different from how we have experienced the online Zoom context over the last two years as students. While we found that Zoom was important for connecting and maintaining our engagement with our studies, fellow students, and the university, we also felt that opportunities for open discussion and dialogue were lacking. We understood the purpose of salons to be public, curated spaces for opening critical dialogue and the exchanging of ideas on a particular topic (Goodman, 1989). As we considered how we might present our ideas and questions to initiate and instigate a discussion, we were compelled to enliven our work through creative writing, mixed media collage, video, sound, and spoken word.

Our commitment to thinking pedagogically with metaphor through mixed media is inspired by a public conversation for the Pedagogist Network of Ontario (PNO) between Dr. Cristina Delgado Vintimilla and Lorenzo Morena (*pedagogisti* trained in the Italian tradition) who discuss how engaging digital aesthetics in education might open other educational possibilities and help to craft research questions that are close to our pedagogical commitments (Pedagogist Network of Ontario, 2020). In stating that "it matters what exposures, technologies, aesthetic conditions and experiences, and commitments that we think with" (Pedagogist Network of Ontario, 2020, para. 4) the PNO invites folks who are interested and working in early childhood education to think about art as a challenge to the status quo, and to think about digital media as an "escape from the rhetoric and status quo" that is granted in early childhood education (Pedagogist Network of Ontario, 2020, para. 5).

Our Concern - A Metaphor of Early Childhood Education as a Salon Discussion

Our proposal for the salon described our line of thinking and concerns about the ways that theory and practice in ECE have been pieced together as a body of knowledge over recent decades. When writing our abstract, we were aware that there may be perspectives on the use of metaphor that we had not yet considered, and that using metaphor was not an innocent endeavor. We were sensitive to metaphor as a subjugating process, and that forming and using metaphors could re-produce harmful norms as identified by such scholars as Eve Tuck (2012) and Katherine McKittrick (2021). We are also new to the theory and practice of using metaphor intentionally as a device for analysis. Therefore, we chose a salon format to engage in interdisciplinary discussion with others to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of using metaphor as an intentional device in interrogating the status quo. We proposed the following:

We offer this salon as a thought experiment that proposes the use of story and metaphor (Ingold, 2011; Lakoff, 1992) as a provocation for disrupting prescriptive practices in education toward fostering educators' critical dispositions and capacities for intellectual engagement. As ECEs we find our profession, in the liminal space of the pandemic, has had its neoliberal and developmental foundations disrupted, hastening the momentum of reconceptualist ideas [1]and the growing need/desire for transformation and a re:working of our pedagogy. Beginning with Cristina Delgado Vintimilla's (2020) description of pedagogy as a "body of knowledge that thinks...is reinvigorated by...and transforms education" (para. 4) we offer our own work-in-process using the metaphor of Mary Shelley's (1818/2004) Frankenstein to (re)story ECE in its current form as a monstrous body (Colebrook, 2014; Taguchi, et al., 2016). Through metaphor

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[1] For more information about the reconceptualist turn in early childhood education see Bloch et al., (2018) and Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence (2005) who speak to the histories, complexities, and tensions of moving from a solely developmental discourse in early childhood education toward a more critical framework.

and story, we think with disrupting conventional conceptual mappings (Lakoff, 1992) and tracing the relational inheritances (Ingold, 2011) in ECE as a harmonized body of knowledge, pieced together from multiple theories, discourses, and curricular approaches that are not necessarily commensurable (Povinelli, 2001). We are mindful of scholars such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) who caution us that the use of metaphor can be damaging and insufficient; Katherine McKittrick (2021) who describes metaphorizing humans as "metaphorically unliving" (p. 10); and Christina Sharpe's (2016) intentionality of connecting metaphor with doing the work of imagining otherwise presents and futures in the "wake" of traumatic histories. We invite education students interested in literacy, critical theory, and the arts to co-create a dialogical space that considers these perspectives while interrogating the role of metaphor in educational transformation.

Putting Together the Metaphor of the Frankenstein Monster

To bring attention to the intense dialogue and tensions we noticed both in early childhood practice and in our dialogues between each other over the past year, we decided to write creative pieces to engage with the metaphor of the Frankensteinian body of knowledge. Specifically, our writing was anchored in previous conversations we had about two active or relational metaphors: *stitching* and *twitching*. We used stitching to conceptualize the practice of piecing together theories into a harmonized body of knowledge in ECE and twitching to attend to the incommensurabilities and violences of these stitched together theories in practice. For example, in *HDLH*, we noticed how quotations by reconceptualist scholars were taken out of context and used to insinuate a certain perspective, as demonstrated in the following:

> Setting out and acting on a strong image of children, families, and educators has a profound impact on what happens in early years settings. (Moss, 2010, as cited in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 6).

In the context of the dominance of child development theories in Ontario, this sentence, though attributed to Peter Moss, a critical scholar of ECE, says very little and can easily be interpreted through a normative, developmental perspective. It does not take up his call to move away from prescribed practices of who the child is. The word "strong" in this quotation replaces Moss' (2010) ideation of the "rich child" as delineative and complex (p.1). While we agreed on the importance of examining our images of children, families, and educators, we were suspicious of the way the term *impact* somehow 'smoothed out' or simplified the complex work of an early childhood educator. We were reminded by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) that metaphors personify. They become actors in their own right, often neglecting the stories that they are made of. They often serve as stitches for the incommensurable. Resultantly, twitches, or moments when theories and practices are in conflict, are inevitable, and may even be necessary. For example, students in pre-service field practice are expected to reflect the diversity of children and families when planning and implementing curriculum. However, because this is often seen as an add-on to developmentalism and therefore prioritizes developmental norms as curriculum, pre-service educators' attempts to engage with concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion do not necessarily speak to a larger commitment to anti-racist pedagogy. Rather, the developmental frameworks students are expected to adhere to undermine their attempts to address diversity in their curriculum planning, resulting in simplified, appropriative activities. We see these moments of twitching as failures of the *HDLH* document and of developmentalism more broadly (Land & Frankowski, 2022).

We each took to creative writing in preparation for the salon and to follow these deeper conversations as we thought about the metaphor of the **body** in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* next to ECE as a **body** of knowledge. We shared the following with each other:

***Body of knowledge* by Lisa Johnston**

What body of knowledge is Early Childhood Education?

What legs does it stand on?

What heart beats in its chest?

What constitutes the blood in its veins?

Whose hands move at the end of whose arms?

Whose breath animates?

What timbre of voice speaks so that we recognize this body?

What sites for the senses does it wear? What hair?

How teeth? How tongue? How eyes? The same? Where nose? And what brain?

What histories of thinking and doing have made a body of knowledge we know as early childhood education? What patriarchies? What child studies? What psychologies?

What good intentions? What hidden agendas? What colonialisms?

Who took them all from graves, from charnel houses?

Who stitched them all together into a monstrous body of knowledge?

***How do I picture the monstrous body of work that is ECE?* by Alicja Frankowski**

A Frankenstenian body of knowledge is moving for us. It sometimes comes into our consciousness as it twitches, indicating to us the chaos that is the rhetoric of childhood and education. Frankenstein - A thing? A human? Personified anomaly? - is a trickster often playing on our political heart strings. The stitches on its body, wounds, are reminders of severed stories carefully

sewn over and calloused as we are swept up by the status quo. We need to develop, we need to smother complexity - so we can all get along? Who's invited to getting along? On whose scars? These are the parts of the Frankensteinian body that twitch as we attempt to smooth over phrases, metaphors, personifications into western harmony. We have pieced together many bodies of knowledge and called it ECE practice. Our mandate is harmony and belonging as we gloss over violence with passive construction. Only when we acknowledge ECE as a Frankensteinian body can we see it for its raw and beautiful chaos. Only then can we recover the blisters and scars that have been sewn over. We need to be weary of knowledge snatchers in education.

As we put our two pieces of writing together, we noticed differences in our recollection of the body. While Lisa wrote in poetry and played with words, moving them around and reshaping them, Alicja created a prose piece that attempted to story how the metaphor moves. Reading our written pieces out loud conjured images of what this monster might look like and inspired us to create our own visual representation of it by using collage. Starting with the head, we immediately thought of Jean Piaget (1952), to acknowledge that the thinking behind the operation of ECE is heavily led by developmentalism, making other ways of knowing impossible. Googly eyes glued to the monster's head added a sense of absurdity as we imagined our own experiences as educators being pulled in many directions at once, symbolizing the twitches or the incommensurabilities between child development theory and our lived practice. One teddy bear arm, the right, and one superhero arm, the left, personified the qualities of a good ECE as being both responsive yet firm in interactions with children. The apron with pockets full of puppets, known as a story apron, speaks to the role of the educator as an entertainer/teacher while hinting at the underlying discourse of the gendered nature of the work. The legs, taken from a toy soldier, helped us imagine early childhood educators' groundedness in discipline and surveillance.

Figure 1

Frankensteinian Early Childhood Educator

Note. Mixed Media Collage (Frankowski & Johnston, 2022) and Audio-Visual Recording https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/710498065

As we pieced these images together, we wondered what it might do to show what stitching them together looks like. We decided to film our active stitching of the body parts into a whole as an embodied enactment of the metaphor itself. While Alicja stitched together pieces of the body parts, Lisa filmed the process. As we reviewed the recording, we noticed a coarse sound made by the needle forcing its way through the paper. Amplifying this sound in the recording added to the discomfort we already felt and experienced from the violence caused by stitching together incommensurable theories and practices. This experimentation with sound became an important element for our thinking with metaphor as a way to enliven the monstrous body.

Adding slowed down and distorted sound clips of children's voices helped us to situate the monstrous body (of knowledge) within the classroom, not in a way that replicates the classroom, but in a way that invites viewers to actively wonder about the unquestioned realities of early education. Next, we read and recorded our pieces of creative writing as narration over the video, bringing together spoken word and the audio-visual representation of the monstrous body. The eerie reality that we created in the video had a visceral effect on us as viewers that made us ask, "What am I looking at?" This opened a space to see our experiences from an otherwise perspective and opened new possibilities for how we could construct the monster differently: what might we

replace? What could we modify? What would it do? What could replace Piaget's head? Stitches, both literally and metaphorically, reminded us that this particular image and what it represents, is mutable.

Encounters with Salon

We opened our salon by introducing the concept of metaphor through Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) description of personification: personification "…allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with non-human entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics and activities" (p. 33). We then shared the metaphor that we had been working with as a personification of theory in early childhood education through screening our video and narrating our writing aloud in real time. After screening our video, we led a discussion with the following questions, asking the audience to choose and move between them:

- *What possibilities are there for metaphor in pedagogical transformation?*

- *What are the tensions in drawing on metaphor?*

- *Who is metaphor for? Can metaphor contribute to more equitable and just futures? How? Whose futures?*

- *When and how do we notice metaphor?*

- *Everything is metaphor but when is it disrupting?*

- *We notice metaphor within language but how can we notice it outside of language? How is it connected to aesthetics?*

- *How does shifting our language shift our conceptual metaphors? Telling a different story?*

- *What metaphorical possibilities can we interrogate in a time of re:?*

We were hoping that through dialogue we could come into conversation with others in a generative way. Our main concern about engaging in metaphor was informed by the pressing call

in scholarship to consider how metaphor enacts violence (McKittrick, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In taking up McKittrick's (2021) and Tuck and Yang's (2012) caution about using metaphor from Black and Indigenous perspectives, we wanted to create a space to think critically about its uses and violences. We wanted to engage attendees with the question of how metaphor relates to decolonizing theories. While we were not offered a technocratic solution to whether metaphor can be anti-colonial, our attendees used their aesthetic knowledges to question how aesthetics is in dialogue metaphorically with language. Is it possible to use colonial language in a disruptive way? Attendees in the salon shared examples of engaging with metaphor through drawing, writing, theatre, linguistics, and collaging, which in our perspective illustrated how metaphor can be used as an interpretive or embodied practice for alternative understanding. Perhaps this might offer a radical hopefulness as we stay in question. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe the usefulness of metaphor in that it "not only gives us a very specific way of thinking about [something] but also a way of acting towards it" (p.34). Metaphor isn't innocent. It demands more thinking of us as we grapple with what and how we witness. Our image/text compilation gave us an opportunity to see how metaphor is used in various formats from our audience. The salon in relation to our question of teaching pre-service educators helped us to imagine other styles of post-secondary pedagogy that motivated us to use other forms of enacting language, for example, through drawing or performance. It also cautioned us that playing with metaphor is a careful practice that we might need to slow down with as we offer it to students.

We speculate that in presenting our "doing" of metaphor through sharing our monster video, we provoked an underlying discussion about the ways in which we are always in the act of making metaphors and why the process of metaphor-making matters. As we continue to encounter and create metaphors, we would like to address an important sensitivity to the responsibility we

all have in conveying educational messages. While we do not have or want a prescriptive answer for what this might look like, we invite readers to connect with us to continue the dialogue: how have you used metaphors in your pedagogical work? What metaphors have you noticed that might need to be further 'teased out' or developed? Where might we need to attend to stitches and twitches, and might this help us to attend to the call of *re:* in "ruining what ruins"? In a world of fractured languages and metaphors, we want to re-iterate *re:'s* call about which pieces we want to hold on to in a time of uncertainty.

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