

Letting Our Hearts Break: On Facing the “Hidden Wound” of Human Supremacy

Rebecca Martusewicz, Eastern Michigan University, United States

Abstract

*In this paper I argue that education must be defined by our willingness to experience compassion in the face of others' suffering and thus by an ethical imperative, and seek to expose psycho-social processes of shame as dark matters that inferiorize and subjugate those expressing such compassion for the more-than-human world. Beginning with stories from my own life, I examine works of fiction including J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow* (2000), as well as Berry's reflection on his family's legacy of racism in *The Hidden Wound* (2010), to explore the deep cultural wound caused by human supremacy. I further argue the need for claiming deep love and thus heartbreak in the face of suffering as the foundations for a pedagogy of responsibility.*

Résumé

*Dans cet article, j'avance l'argument que l'éducation doit être définie par notre empressement à ressentir de la compassion face à la souffrance des autres, par cet impératif éthique. Ainsi l'éducation doit mettre à la vue les processus psychosociaux de la honte en tant que questions sombres qui infériorisent ceux et celles qui expriment une telle compassion pour un monde plus humain. En commençant avec des histoires tirées de ma propre vie, j'examine des ouvrages de fiction incluant *The Lives of Animals* (1999) par J.M. Coetzee and *Jayber Crow* (2000) de Wendell Berry, ainsi que la réflexion de Wendell Berry sur sa famille et son héritage raciste relaté dans *The Hidden Wound* (2010), ceci afin d'explorer les blessures culturelles causées par l'expression d'une suprématie humaine. Je démontre aussi la nécessité d'assumer une affection profonde, et donc le déchirement devant la souffrance, comme étant le fondement d'une pédagogie de la responsabilité.*

Keywords: compassion, suffering, more-than-human, ethics, shame

For whatever reason, good or bad, I have been unwilling until now to open in myself what I have known all along to be a wound—a historical wound, prepared centuries ago to come alive in me at my birth like a hereditary disease, and to be augmented and deepened by my life. -*The Hidden Wound* (Berry, 2010, p. 3)

And yet, all the good I know is in this, that a man might so love this world that it would break his heart. -*Jayber Crow* (Berry, 2000, p. 254)

Introduction

What would it take to educate in such a way that opens up our capacities to love the world—the whole world—to the point of heartbreak, that is to the point of real embodied distress or agony? What potential does such suffering hold, and what stands in the way of these possibilities? I ask these questions from the conviction that an ethical relationship to the world—to other humans and to the more-than-human members¹ with whom we share this planet—requires that we experience pain in the face of the other's pain, that we suffer as we bear witness to another's unnecessary suffering. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist scholars teach us, such suffering is the basis for the development of compassion that can lead to an active responsibility for the well-being of all the members of our communities. Specifically, I am interested in how teachers and their students can engage in a pedagogy of responsibility where caring and compassion require that we open our hearts, our spirits, our sensual capacities, even our bodies to the suffering being caused across the planet by social and ecological violence. As we work to open our hearts, we expose what Wendell Berry (2010) identifies as a “hidden wound” within our communities and in our collective psyches, if such a “place” or condition could be identified. This “wound” is our ongoing immersion in and conscious, or unconscious, acceptance of the violence of human supremacy² and its discursive allies within “a logic of domination” (Warren, 2004). I draw intentionally on Berry's moving reflection on his family's deeply ingrained silence in the face of institutionalized and interpersonal racism with the recognition that he too sees the unavoidable interconnections between racism and the deep harm Western industrial culture has done and continues to do to the land and its inhabitants in the name of progress and profit.

I will be focusing on the destructive effects of a Eurocentric modernist mindset. I want to recognize and indeed honour at the outset all that I have learned about the need to develop a relationship to and love for one's place from those Peoples and cultures that do not inhabit or at least strongly resist this culture's logic and practices (Esteva & Prakash, 1998, Mander & Tauli-Corpuz 2008, Nelson 2008, Newcomb, 2008). Post-colonial educational theorists are working to bring to light these other ways of knowing and being, and the resistances imbedded in cultural patterns of kinship and relationship with the more-than-human world, as they respond to the very hegemonic logic which I intend to explore (Cajete, 1994, Kulnieks, Longboat, & Young, 2013; Prakash & Esteva, 1998; Tuck, 2009). In this sense our work has much in common.

But I am writing explicitly as a white woman who has experienced the agony of watching other creatures suffer. Thus my focus is somewhat different in that I wish to examine how members of modern industrial cultures learn to internalize and accept the wounds inflicted on us and others, within and as part of the normalization of supremacist discourses. What could it mean to pay attention to the suffering caused by that violence as a matter of necessary

compassion and learned responsibility for the well-being of our communities? In this essay, I explore these questions through three different narrative forms: (a) some of my own memories, (b) Berry's personal narrative in his work *The Hidden Wound* (2010), and (c) the experiences of two fictional characters, Mattie Keith from Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* (2000), and Elizabeth Costello from J.M. Coetzee's novel *The Lives of Animals* (1999). I have chosen this approach in part because I have been haunted by the particular memories that I will share here, experiences of deep pain, the recognition of which completely changed the direction of my scholarship and teaching toward a fuller examination of intersections among social and ecological crises. The other works resonate with these experiences, and help me to make sense of what they mean for those of us in education.

Berry's work, both fiction and non-fiction, cuts a deep and complex analytic path across these crises, critiquing the damaging priorities and hubris of industrial culture while always coming back to the absolute necessity of love—of land, of creatures, of community, of place. His work on the hidden wound of racism provides a powerful way of thinking about the ways supremacist discourses are learned and maintained even while we suffer from them. We see the ways this plays out on the more-than-human world most poignantly in the emotional lives of characters in his novels. J. M. Coetzee's novel appeals to me because of its courage in addressing animal suffering from the perspective of a white middle-aged academic woman. In this novel, written and delivered by Coetzee as a two-part series of lectures, he takes on the dominant debates around "animal rights," focusing in particular on the agony experienced by the main character, Elizabeth Costello. And so, while these stories may seem to make strange companions, I bring them here for the ways these authors take on these difficult questions. Before turning to them, however, I want to take a moment to lay out some basic ideas about the important relationship among suffering, ethics, and education.

On Suffering, Ethics, and Education

Developing a line of thought begun a while back (Martusewicz, 2001), I return in this essay to a definition of education based on the willingness to be in an ethical relationship with the world, that is, a relationship that begins from a willingness to ask questions and make decisions regarding the well-being of self and others. For Buddhist scholars this requires the development of compassion, the experience of pain in the face of another's suffering. This, obviously, is no small task given that we live with all sorts of suffering, some of it caused by "a sense of incompleteness, loss, dissatisfaction or confusion that comes through our histories and with our daily interactions, connections or disconnections with others" (Martusewicz, 2001, p. 102).

What I am interested in here as a matter of ethics and thus education is, rather, the complex relation between cultural, political, economic, and historical

systems and the abuses and exploitations they cause. Even when we make our best efforts to name an act of violence, understand why it happens, and actively work toward ending it, we find ourselves face to face with the uneasy truth that we will never have a final solution; there will be more questions and more possible responses. This is the difficult truth of an ethics that recognizes a gap or a limit space between what we perceive to be the “outside” world and our attempts to say something about it. Because we are of it and in it, we will never capture the world with our words or our ideas. Each idea opens yet another gap and more questions, more attempts to respond to what we believe we understand and that which we have not yet understood. And act we must, especially in the face of the harms and havoc we continue to wreak, often in the name of “knowing” the world.

With these ideas in mind, I am interested in thinking through how hierarchized discourses—specifically, anthropocentrism as it interacts with and supports other forms of centric thinking like androcentrism and racism—are kept in place by socio-linguistic processes (pedagogies) that interfere with our abilities to express horror at the damages and suffering being inflicted on the living world, human and more-than-human, by modern industrial culture. I use the rather broad term “living world” here, because *animal* suffering is all too often the primary focus among liberation activists, critical animal scholars, and some post-humanists. While I am moved powerfully by this important work, I find that focus too narrow, and not necessarily accurate in terms of the actual existential experience that I am trying to address here. Bearing witness to the loss of mountain ranges and forests, the contamination of rivers, lakes, and oceans, the destruction and loss of topsoil ought to be cause for as much heartbreak as the horrendous suffering to animals in Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), to the slaughter of wild horses, to the poaching of elephants, to the starvation of sea creatures, and on and on.

Such heartbreak, as Berry teaches us, is an indication of a necessary love for the world, a force powerful enough to propel us toward actions to stop the destruction. But, what interferes with such a loving force? What propels us to sublimate our pain and turn away?

On Wounds, Silencing, and Shame

...In a racist society, the candor of a child is therefore extremely threatening.
(Berry, 2010, p. 59)

Recently, three conversations snapped my attention back to this question, pushing me into my own awkward childhood horror, vulnerability, and silence. Over lunch, a friend told me of his daughter, a freshman in high school, who came home to tell him about her pain and disgust at having to dissect a frog in

biology class. He listened and comforted her, but she went back to school with her pain neatly tucked into silence. Best not to make waves so early in her career as a student in this new school. Upon sharing this story with another friend, she told me that she and a group of her female friends tried to “opt out” of these labs when she was in high school, but the school insisted that these were important lessons. Then, in a separate conversation, a graduate student told the class of her constant impulse to apologize for her sensitivity to nature, and her decision nonetheless to dedicate her life to environmental education. Confessing to the class, the student explained: “I feel, in some ways, embarrassed, which is totally at odds with my deep convictions to work on these problems.”

Listening to these stories, I was catapulted back to my own girlhood, and the agony I lived with on an almost daily basis as I witnessed example after example of unnecessary death or abuse of innocent animals, forests, streams, and marshlands: my brothers trapping muskrats to sell their pelts and earn a little spending money; the innocuous appearance of raccoons, possums, dogs, deer and other creatures killed in the road; the local farmers’ sport of shooting woodchucks to rid the holes from their fields; or the transportation departments’ decision to fill in a “swamp” to build a new road. As I tried to articulate my distress at what I saw happening, I was confronted by a general acceptance by those around me that there was no reason to question any of it. I heard: “Don’t be silly.” “You’re too sensitive.” “They’re just animals! Get over it.” But I never got over it. I couldn’t get over it.

I am sure this is not a unique story, and not exclusive to the experience of children, though children may be more open and more vulnerable. A passage in Cora Diamond’s (2008) reading of J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* is revealing. Diamond is describing the main character, Elizabeth Costello:

She is a woman haunted by the horror of what we do to animals. We see her as wounded by this knowledge, this horror, and by the knowledge of how unhaunted others are. The wound marks her and isolates her. (p. 46)

And, I feel Mattie Keith’s horror and pain in Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow* (2000), as she weeps over the loss of her beloved “nest egg,” the forest her father Athie had carefully protected for over 70 years, refusing to harvest the trees for money. Mattie had spent many afternoons throughout her life walking its hills and hollows, letting the birdsong and peepers seep into her. She knows the true value in that stand of trees, what it protects and nurtures. Her husband Troy, deep in debt from his participation in “get big or get out” industrial farming schemes, has decided to sell it off to keep his head above water. But she has remained silent, her inability to speak up isolating her from the very community who may have been able to help. Now from her own deathbed, she cries her love of the forest, and her pain at its destruction, to her friend Jayber.

I understand the depth of this grief. As a girl, I tried to protest that it seemed unfair to think of trees as “things” or to assume that animals didn’t count enough

to live; I tried to argue that each one must have had a worthy enough life by virtue of growing there or simply being born; the “swamp” must be home to a whole lot of living things.... wasn’t it? I lived with a sort of ache of distress and helplessness. Why didn’t others feel this way? In spite of both my parents’ love of the outdoors and the lessons that they taught us about respecting each other and nature, most of my distress just fell on deaf ears, or ears already well-honed to a different set of assumptions.

My words sounded childish, eventually even to me. I began to apologize when I would inadvertently wince or cry out at the sight of some awful death or abuse, or slam on the breaks to avoid being guilty of it. Mostly I just fell silent, tucking away my pain in a dark secret place. By the time I was an adult, living on my own, I had become very adept at avoiding my pain by avoiding as much as possible any conversation, movie, course, or relationship that would require me to bear witness to the suffering in the natural world. Of course, this was not possible. And to the degree that my agony leaked out to others, I felt exposed, small, and even ridiculous. “I’m sorry. I can’t help it. I know it’s stupid but....”

And so this wound, this haunting pain which should have developed into a passionate ability to protect what I love, instead allowed a much more pernicious cultural wound—the rationalization of violence hidden behind a veil of assumed human superiority (Evernden, 1993; Jensen, 2004). I could not speak coherently against the violence I witnessed almost daily as a child because I grew to believe—I was taught—that I was somehow wrong, or crazy, to see such violence as something to be questioned. If I identified with the suffering of animals I was “off” somehow, too sensitive, and hyper-emotional. I learned to question my own pain, seeing it as a sign that there was something wrong with my priorities. I even diverted it into more “appropriate” or acceptable activities. I went to graduate school to study the relationship between education, schooling, and social justice. Looking back, I see that even there I was being “subjected to a powerful disciplinary pedagogy” (Bartky, 1996, p. 225) that taught me to focus on humans, and to internalize a sense of shame at my agonizing love for animals and the living world.

Analyzing this process specifically in relation to gender domination, Sandra Lee Bartky (1996) argues that shame “is the distressed apprehension of the self as inadequate or diminished. It requires, if not an actual audience before whom my deficiencies are paraded, then an internalized audience with the capacity to judge me, hence internalized standards of judgment” (p. 227). Of course, this process is not exclusive to the subjugation of women. Rather, I want to examine it as produced through a weave of centric discourses whose primary function is to define “the rational human” as a superior being, as the standard by which all “others” will be judged. Shaming begins here as a primary means of shutting down the possibility of challenging the violence of a society defined by centric thinking, or more properly, founded on human supremacism.

Looking at Bartky’s definition, I see that I was learning (as were my friend’s daughter, my graduate student, and others who have told similar stories) that

our sensitivity to more-than-human Others identified us as both different from the human norm and clearly identified by an inferior femininity, flawed by emotionality. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello (if we could imagine her as more than a fictional character) was no doubt also struggling within this complex discursive and subjective weave, even as she spoke against it. An Australian novelist of some repute, she is invited to give a series of lectures at her son's university, where much to the surprise of many in her audience, she decides to address cruelty to animals. She is disparaged: her daughter-in-law dismisses her arguments and her vegetarian convictions as childish and sentimental, the ranting of a pseudo-philosopher and a threat to the stability of the household. Her son is embarrassed by her lectures and cannot help but see her as a confused old woman. In the end, her pain in the face of isolation leads her to cry out: "Calm down I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 69).

Earlier in the visit over dinner, one of the professors makes the claim that what differentiates humans from animals, is in fact the ability to shame and be shamed, a part of philosophy as old as Genesis. Thus, to be human, in this argument, is to be naked in the face of "original sin." The human ability to feel Adam's shame thus distinguishes us from those other creatures who do not participate in such a system of judgment. But, what do we assume here? As I will discuss a little further on, both Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello and philosopher Jacques Derrida help us to turn that argument and its logic on its head.

As Bartky points out, shaming leads to the internalization of a system of judgment so powerful that eventually no outside audience is needed to indicate that such an emotional response, for example, is a sign of deficiency. Once internalized, we do not need the actual voices of others; self-shaming becomes the ongoing mechanism of silence. This is not limited to women either. One does not have to go far to imagine, or hear stories of, what men experience if caught in such agonizing emotionality for the more-than-human world. Studies of masculinity teach us plenty about "men's contradictory experiences" of power and pain (Kaufman, 1994). To be emotional is to be identified with the inferior feminine.

Such apprehension within the inferiorized subject leads to "cringing withdrawal from others and cringing within...the necessity for hiding and concealment. All are typical responses to threat" (Bartky, 1996, p. 228). Learning to apologize for one's perceived deficits is a means of delaying or deflecting another round of demeaning comments; but more, it stifles the development of a counternarrative that could interrupt the violence of any supremacist discourse.

While pain and horror remain, one also recognizes as we see with both Elizabeth Costello and Mattie, that others do not seem to share it. "How is it possible to live in the face of it [the abuse and torture of animals]? And in the face of the fact that for nearly everyone, it is as nothing, as the mere accepted

background of life?” (Diamond, 2008, p. 47). One way is this: as a specific form of isolation grows—a spiritual isolation, if you will—one learns to turn away to protect oneself from public degradation and from the horrible reminder that others (who may also be caught in the same processes) seem not to—or have learned not to—care. We experience this in isolation as we internalize an individual inferiority.

Addressing this problematic “turning away,” Dallas Rising (2013) writes, “To me, the act of turning away and pretending not to see is just as offensive as the violence itself. . . . It is clear that the animals’ expressions are not enough to stop the viciousness of humankind against them” (Kindle location, 226). While I readily understand Rising’s grief and anger, I see the process of avoidance as much more complicated than the appearance of individual callousness or the simple acceptance of a myth of superiority. It is, rather, a result of a complex discursive and psychological process, a matter of being taught that such grief is a mark of something deeply abnormal connected to one’s inferior nature, a disability to discipline one’s emotion with a “rational” understanding of one’s place in a hierarchy of being. Suffering for animals, trees, or a marsh is thus identified with a whole series of analogous inferiorized terms within a hierarchized binary value system: culture/nature, man/woman, reason/emotion, mind/body. As members of this culture we internalize a hierarchy of “being” based on these terms, and are schooled to take our places accordingly. As Val Plumwood (2002) and other ecofeminist (Adams, 2010; Cuomo, 1998; Gaard, 1993; Warren, 2004) and posthumanist philosophers (Diamond, 2008; Haraway, 2008; Wolfe, 2003, 2010) have argued, such is the questionable basis of a “rational” humanism that claims the right to identify those who are not human (or white, or male, or modern) as inferior, and hence exploitable. Plumwood challenges us to ask ourselves what it means to be rational if the result is suffering and mass death. Starting there I ask, what might it mean to recognize our own suffering as we witness violence experienced by another as *necessary* to its interruption and remediation? And what comes to block such an experience? How are we shamed into defining such suffering as a mark of inferiority, rather than the foundation of an ethical response?

If within this dualistic system we learn that such care marks us as inferior, we may be cut off from the confidence to ask such questions, a reaction that at heart violates our moral sensibility and stifles our active compassion for those outside the rationalist hegemony. Mattie Keith cries to Jayber, but she does not act to stop her husband. She has not acted to save the soil or the animals either for all these years, though we know that she is deeply wounded by her husband’s practices. And this leads us to a sort of “double-edged” shame, one experienced as we turn our back on the violence we know exists, while looking over our shoulders into the eyes and heart of the more-than-human world. Elizabeth Costello’s double shame, and I would argue mine too, is experienced as she recognizes in horror her own implication in the betrayal of animals and the maintenance of human supremacist patterns and assumptions.

As Bartky (1996) argues, “such violation of a cherished moral principle is likely to be taken by anyone without satanic ambitions as the sign of some shameful weakness in the personality” (p. 229), thus exacerbating the problem, and ultimately reinforcing the supremacist position. Shamed, we turn our heads, feeling sick to our stomachs; silent, we avoid engaging in active advocacy for those most vulnerable.

And yet there is something else there too, in that recognition that some deep principle is being violated. A powerful love resonates, and demeaned as it may be, offers the hope that we might return to our responsibility. Inadequate as I felt, I never lost what I knew as a child, that the more-than-human world deserved better from us, better from me, and that our own humanity was being harmed as long as we continued to believe and behave otherwise. In pain, and dying in hospital, Mattie finally turns to Jayber as solace against her long isolation. And Elizabeth cries out: “I just cannot stay silent!”

Returning to Love: A Pedagogy of Responsibility within the Pernicious Wounds of Modern Industrial Culture

In *The Hidden Wound*, Berry (2010) reflects on his childhood within the racist legacy of the south, weaving a complex tale of love and silence as he shares with us his experiences of friendship, respect, and tenderness in his relationship with Nick and Aunt Georgie, a black couple that lived and worked on his fathers’ farm. Berry writes:

I have written about Nick and Aunt Georgie in order to reexamine and to clarify what I know to be a great moral resource, a part of the vital and formative legacy of my childhood. The memory of them has been one of the persistent forces in the growth of my mind. If I have struggled against the racism that I have found in myself, it has been largely because I have remembered my old sense of allegiance to them. (p. 61)

We learn from Berry in this humble and intimate reflection that, in spite of the deeply troubling if often subtle or contradictory messages of white supremacy learned in his family and carried into adulthood, the deep love for these two African American elders developed as a child remained as an important source of moral strength.

Such a love, if nurtured again and invited powerfully enough, can rise up to cut through degradation. Indeed, Berry’s thought helps us to grapple with the coexistence of both a “psychological commonplace” that “we are likely to become what we have been *prepared* to become” (p. 58), and that this may prove oddly contradictory since we also learn early what it feels like to love and learn from the Other, even as we are implicated in a system of violence and hatred. Berry (2002) teaches us that as members of this culture “we are divided between exploitation and nurture...a division not only between persons, but within persons” (p. 39). Such is the source of both the wound deep within us and its healing, of hatred and love. In the words of Berry’s character, Jayber Crow:

Hate succeeds. The world gives plentiful scope and means to hatred, which always finds its justifications and fulfills itself perfectly in time by destruction of the things in time. ... But love sooner or later, forces us out of time. It does not accept that limit. Of all that we feel and do, all the virtues and all the sins, love alone, crowds us at last over the edge of the world. ... Maybe to have it in your heart all your life in this world, even while it fails, is to succeed. Maybe that is enough. (Berry, 2000, p. 249)

In the academic world, even in education, we are not taught to speak of love, except perhaps when we read the poets, or talk with very young children. But even then, love is relegated to the feminine, the soft, the unserious, the pseudo-philosophical. It is the inferior underside of reason, science, the measurable or “assessable.” Writing this here, writing of love, I feel a niggling sense of risk, even among you, my eco-sensitive readers! And yet, like Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello (and perhaps Coetzee himself, since he uses Elizabeth to offer these lectures), I cannot stay silent about what hurts me, or what awes me.

Returning again to Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello worries about our academic propensity to argue over what constitutes ethics or morality as a matter of “reason.” In response to a statement that her vegetarianism is an honorable indication of a certain moral position, she says, “No, I don’t think so. It comes out of a desire to save my soul ... I’m wearing leather shoes. I am carrying a leather handbag. I wouldn’t have overmuch respect if I were you” (p. 43). In her distress over this double edged subjective problem, she is well aware of a line of thinking that attempts to use philosophical discussions of ethics to impose a hegemonic logic upon this vast differentiating world (even among those who would argue for animal “rights”), and she wants no part of it. She makes clear that the very use of the language of philosophy separates us from and poses abstractions that have led us to such damaging fallacies. Here we see Coetzee using Elizabeth’s presentations and conversations to challenge the assumption that we will solve this problem within a Eurocentric philosophical paradigm that privileges “reason” and so “human.” This is Derrida’s discovery too, as he teaches us to think carefully about how the historical creation and use of an all-encompassing metaphor, “the animal,” reduces the magnificent multiplicity of species to a singular object of our ever-developing commodification and abuse (Derrida, Mallett, & Wills, 2008).

Here Derrida and Coetzee join other posthumanist writers in the challenge to the age-old definition of humans as “not animals,” which defines our specious right to decide whether they should live or die, based on our ability to reason. As Elizabeth says, “if the last common ground that I have with him [the professor she is debating] is reason, and if reason is what sets me apart from the veal calf, then thank you but no thank you. I’ll talk to someone else” (p. 67). I share Elizabeth’s point, but there is also a danger of falling into the trap of simply locating one’s position within the other side of the binary—exclusively within one’s bodily experience, within the pain inflicted by the wound of supremacism—and thus leaving the dualism ultimately unchallenged.

I am inviting recognition that a truly ethical relation to the world requires our bodily responses to it, an erotic connected relation that embraces and inspires critical *thought* of and action toward what ought to be, even though we may never reach it in any final sense. There is no cause, as Plumwood (2002) argues, to disconnect thought from our compassionate, embodied responses to suffering. What would it mean to welcome eros as the connective force that inspires a desire to respond ethically, to recognize eros as an invitation to education?

We can think of our embodied experiences as arising from within what Gregory Bateson (1972) referred to as an Ecology of Mind, a vast differentiating set of relations that is productive of all creation and creativity, including, but certainly not exclusively, human meaning and thought. As a “difference that makes a difference,” this connective experience—eros—comes to us as an ache in our chest or a ripple of awe that catches in our throats, sends shivers down the spine, or makes us weep. Eros is that indication that the world in all its differentiating and generative power is touching us, and that we are in the world, and of it (Griffin 1995; Martusewicz, 2005, 2013). If we cut ourselves off from such an embodied recognition, if we imagine ourselves separate and superior, we wound the world and ourselves as part of it. Intelligence itself, far from an exclusive human endeavor and never disembodied (though modern humanism imagines it could be), is created within the multitude of relationships that make up the living world; as we humans work to make sense of what we witness and experience, we embody the differences that come to us as communicating events. And, our bodies respond, sometimes with agony. If we are not cut off from our hearts, we may respond to such a message with compassion, and act to protect and care for that living community that has given birth to us.

Compassion, though it may be buried under layers of modernist denial, resonates in fundamentally erotic ways, that is, in deeply embodied ways that have the power to connect and re-connect us to the world. As Terry Tempest Williams puts it, “Erotic is what those deep relations are and can be that engage the whole body—our heart, our mind, our spirit, our flesh. It is that moment of being exquisitely present” (Williams, 2002, p. 311).

When I ask my students, struggling to imagine what their communities *ought* to look like, to write from their hearts, they are often stopped short.

“What does that mean, write from the heart? You mean, write how I feel?”

“Yes!” I say back, “Let your heart dictate what you believe the world ought to be like, what you imagine it could be like. What moves you till you want to cry? What breaks your heart? Let yourself feel that deep in your body. And then imagine its solution.”

Part of what I’m calling for here is a kind of pedagogical relationship that moves to dissolve the boundaries between mind and body, human and animal, reason and emotion, that recognizes our embodied connection to each other, the earth, her creatures, and the greater cosmos. This means that we must help our students and each other to recognize the terrible fallacy of these self-interested

value hierarchies that rationalize as somehow inevitable the terror unleashed on those defined as lesser beings. How did we come to create these systems of domination, and how do they work? A pedagogy of responsibility asks that we begin to see how our own subjectivities are made within that violent history of thought and practice, at the same time that we retain the ability to speak and act against it, to see and embrace our connection to others, human and more-than-human. Teacher educators are responsible for addressing these issues with future teachers, for what does education mean if not our willingness to engage in ethical and responsible ways of being in the world (Edmundson & Martusewicz, 2013)?

Two tasks loom large in this enactment of responsibility: (a) to create interdisciplinary curricula and practices that trace and challenge the ways our culture has constructed a cruel belief system that naturalizes domination and terror, and (b) to actively work to examine and challenge those beliefs and practices that perpetuate violence by developing our students' embodied ethical sensibilities. Practically speaking, this means that teachers will need to speak from open hearts, to create questions and activities that insist that their students learn to think through these issues, to see the damages done and to willingly act to counter them. It also means recognizing that such a process will cause despair, and that students will need to draw strength from the alliances built in such classroom relationships. This means building strong classroom communities, where students and teachers alike can listen to each other's stories, console each other, and imagine other possibilities together.

Open discussions that ask students to use critical concepts carefully to analyze these damaging systems of thought, as well as to study and propose different ways of being in the world, will help to break the silence and interrupt the shaming process that many may have experienced already. In this sense, the forms of pedagogy that I'm calling for have much in common with feminist pedagogies, where students are asked to examine the structurally embedded wrongs that have been done, not as a matter of guilt or further shame, but as a way to heal and transform. Teachers will need to learn ways of helping students interrogate the conflicts and wounds that they have experienced. Some of this will require helping students to cope with and understand the pain that arises, while working to develop the compassion necessary to help others. This process is about love, which can only be built through strong relationships to each other and the wider living community. Asking students to experience more fully their relationships to a larger living world will help them to develop a different sense of self, one built upon an embodied sense of care and responsibility. Derrick Jensen (n.d.) puts it this way:

If listening to the wind and the trees and the frogs helps me find myself—if wind and trees and frogs give me strength—fighting to protect them completes both the circle and me. In giving back to them, in protecting them from this culture and working to stop this culture from killing them, I am made whole. For it truly is in giving to

our communities—including especially our more-than-human communities—that finally fills the void made by this culture that takes and takes and takes, the void this culture can never fill. (Jensen, unpublished manuscript)

That which Jensen refers to here Indigenous peoples have known and defined as a certain sense of the sacred for many centuries—that our community’s well-being, as well as our own personal well-being, depends on connecting to, learning about, and protecting those places and creatures that support the living relationships we depend upon. Place-based knowledge is ancient knowledge. It is about love and the heart, compassion and care. And it requires that we not turn away when we witness another being harmed. This is what a pedagogy of responsibility demands.

Such a pedagogy develops students’ abilities to define themselves differently in relation to others, and thus to respond to the problems that they see in their own communities. How do they see this logic of domination operating and where can they act to interrupt it? This work is a matter of love that, when engaged, can develop care of self and place that begins from a deep cultural analysis and leads to responsible action to “develop the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate communities” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xvi). This is an approach that is, as David Gruenewald and Greg Smith have argued, both decolonizing and democratic. Teachers who are enacting a pedagogy of responsibility focus on the ways that communities torn apart by violence can be rebuilt by asserting what Berry calls “leadership from the bottom.” Recognizing that “we rest in the grace of the world,” we learn that to “be free is to live for that sacredness and against the desecration of those places” (Berry & Moyers, 2013).

Conclusion

When we let our hearts break, we allow the full weight and tragedy of desecration to come to our bodies. We open ourselves to the sacred invitation to take responsibility for the places where we dwell and the other creatures who share those places. And we learn too, to respond to the harms being done both at home and in the larger social, economic, and political systems creating them. That is the way to education as a willingness to do what it takes to care for each other and the places that nurture us, to pose the questions, to search for what would protect life, to cherish the vast unknowable that is life around us. To engage a pedagogy of responsibility is to ask each other to think carefully about the situatedness of our lives, and what it might mean to work toward knowing enough to care for the living communities we are engaged with. It means learning with whom we are sharing a land base, and listening carefully to the wisdom of those who can tell us about that place and its members—human and more-than-human. It means asking with an open heart what the land, its creatures, and its people—all of us—need from each other, and what it might mean to live

in respectful co-existence. Dominant western institutions have put much of that wisdom out of reach as Indigenous peoples have been pushed off tribal lands, and that is a tragedy that we may never recover from. However, there are those who still protect important knowledge, and if we are humble enough we may ask for their help; if we are willing to listen with open hearts, we can also begin to learn from the more-than-human world itself. Or at the very least we can stop assuming that humans know better than other creatures how to live, or that our lives matter more. To conclude, here is Berry once more:

Care allows creatures [and people] to escape our explanations into their actual presence and their essential mystery. In taking care of fellow creatures, we acknowledge they are not ours. We acknowledge that they belong to an order and a harmony of which we are ourselves a part. To answer to the perpetual crisis of our presence in this abounding and dangerous world, we have only the perpetual obligation to care. (Berry, 1995, p. 77)

Notes

- ¹ I use “more-than-human,” a concept introduced by David Abram in his work *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), to refer to the multiplicity of species inhabiting the Earth, and the complex relationships they have with one another and the rest of the planet. The concept “more” here refers to vastness of quantity rather than quality or value. The reader will notice that I use this concept along with “living world” in an attempt to avoid a hierarchized binary in the term “non-human.”
- ² I use human supremacy throughout this essay along with the more conventional philosophical term “anthropocentrism” because it evokes a more direct sense of the violence within the belief that humans are superior to all other creatures, and because it links so directly with “white supremacy” and “male supremacy.” All three concepts function together as interrelated discursive categories and practices that lead to violence.

Notes on Contributor

Rebecca Martusewicz is with the College of Education at Eastern Michigan University. She teaches courses on ecojustice, teaching for social and ecological justice, ecofeminism, gender and education, and sociology of education.

Contact: rmartusew@emich.edu

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