

EACH AND EVERYDAY, LOVE US FREE:

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AS A LIVING-LOVING PRAXIS

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Abstract

According to Giroux (2011) we can, through critical pedagogy, engage the world as “an object of critical analysis” and as a place of “hopeful transformation” (p. 14). Giroux’s approach requires building and maintaining spaces where “the complexity of knowledge, culture, values and social issues can be explored in open and critical dialogue” (p. 124). Through these spaces, he argues, we are able to work to understand and disrupt oppressive power dynamics kept in place by systems of domination and control and move toward struggling for a more socially just world.

bell hooks’ (2010) understanding that “love matters and that it brings strength and power” (pp. 166-167) can contribute to our understanding of these spaces. hooks (2000) contends that “great social movements for freedom and justice” promote “a love ethic”, one in which we “utilize all the dimensions of love-care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge-in our everyday lives” (p. 94).

Ascribing to the critical pedagogical view that education should be a “critical practice” (Freire, 2001, p. 30) in which those involved “make ourselves different tomorrow from what we are today” (Shapiro, 2012, p. 50), “transform the world we live in” (hooks, 2010,

p. 188) and employ an understanding of the power and ethic of love as integral to “working for a collective good” (hooks, 2000, p. 214), I argue that we should engage critical pedagogy as living-loving praxis in *all* the places of lives, including the personal and romantic.

Keywords: critical pedagogical praxis, living, loving, relationality and the everyday

Just as Freire believed there could be no teaching without learning, he believed that there could be no education for liberation without love. The “movement of inquiry”, he argued, must be “directed towards humanization—the people’s historical vocation” (Freire, 2015, p. 85). Critical inquiry therefore should engage the here and now, the specific situations in which people are submerged, in which people emerge, in which we/they intervene.

However, little scholarly inquiry about critical pedagogy explores in detail the everyday personal, affective, embodied, relational, living-loving aspects of critical pedagogical praxis. Few critical scholar-activists across disciplinary boundaries have explored the praxis of transformational political love (Berlant, 2011) or revolutionary love in personal relationships. Much of the literature on radical love and critical pedagogy is restricted in focus, exploring only “formal” or “traditional” learning environments, the K-12 or university/college classroom. This exploration is often further limited to the relational context of the troubled but still maintained (and thus reified) roles of “teacher” and “learner” (Hinsdale, 2012; Keith, 2010).

In studying the radical love of critical pedagogy only as it manifests in classrooms, we work against its liberatory aim. As Darder (2002) reminds us, Freire “illuminated our understanding of not only what it means to be a critical educator but what it means to live a critical life”,... and “challenged us to *live and love* in the present—as much personally as politically” (p. 36). So how can we as critical-pedagogue scholars take up inquiry to explore more deeply how we are living and loving critical pedagogy beyond the classroom? What could be made possible through an exploration of the ways critical pedagogy, the practice-oriented social movement that it is, calls its praxioners to interrogate and take constructive action in *all* the places of our lives (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kaplar, 2015)?

LIVING-LOVING CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS AND CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

In a political climate that attacks learning, teaching, loving and living for a more socially just world, critical pedagogue-scholars are called to take risks to keep radical hope (Freire, 2001) alive with

the knowledge that although things can get worse intervention can improve them. We can do this by opening ourselves, our relationships, our lives to inquiry, growing what it means to engage critical pedagogy as an affective-embodied and relational living-loving praxis in the everyday. If as hooks (2010) states, “anytime we are doing the work of love we are doing the work of ending domination” (p. 176), then why not investigate, using critical autoethnographic forms of inquiry, the ways in which the radical love of critical pedagogy is at work in our most intimate relationships, our relationships with friends, family members, partners, lovers and create new modes of action and ways of living.

I understand that this approach is not for everyone and that it has the same level of risk for everyone. There are people who for reasons of safety choose to fragment their public, political interactions/relations from their private, personal interactions/relations with people; people who are at risk of physical, emotional, psychological and sexual violence, job discrimination or unemployment, housing discrimination, insecurity or homelessness, because they belong to one or more marginalized groups. There are also people who do not form and/or do not care to form particular kinds of relationships, for example romantic, sexual, long-term or life partnerships with people.

However, those of us who see ourselves as critical pedagogues-scholars/praxioners, could benefit from critically considering the ways we do and do not take up critical pedagogy in our relational lives outside of the classroom and the whys and hows of that. As a person who inhabits multiple dominant positionalities, race, class background/ties, and citizenship status to name a few, I recognize that I and others positioned similarly have more of an option to avoid critical pedagogy as a relational praxis outside of spaces recognized as educational. We are often encouraged and rewarded to not take up critical pedagogy as a relational praxis in our intimate “social” spaces, particularly with other similarly positioned people. This cannot simply be viewed as only an indication of our “individual” power and privilege, it must also be understood as part of the contextual and relational nature of systems and structures of power and privilege.

In this paper I look at the personal, affective, embodied, relational parts of the journey I have been on to take up critical pedagogy as a praxis. Uniting thinking and emotion (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993), I bring my mind, body and spirit to this project. Through autoethnography I share and engage some of the most significant stories of my journey of shifting away from education, loving and living as a practice of domination and towards education, loving and living as a practice of liberation (Freire, 2015), while understanding that as an interrelated being/interactant¹ (Burkitt, 2016) this journey has never only been my own.

This journey has not, nor is it, a linear process. It more closely resembles Bruner's "spiral curriculum" whereby "learning activities" have a "cyclical nature to them" with the central element of "returning to" (Walker & Soltis, 1997, p. 46). The spiral life curriculum of my relations and the experiences that unfolded with/in and with/out them called me to repeatedly "come back" to critical pedagogical praxis way of living and loving myself and others, including partners and lovers—a call I sometimes tried to answer and embody and, at other times, tried to ignore or repress.

Throughout the paper I distinguish between narrative and critical analysis by italicizing the narrative in order to investigate the unique contributions of the affective-embodied, relational aspects of the journey alongside the usually privileged intellectual aspects (Rendón, 2009). While these aspects of the journey are separated in this structure, in life they intertwine and are experienced together. Each narrative section begins with a quote from Freire that speaks to the more "personal" and relational dimensions involved in engaging in critical pedagogical praxis. These quotes serve as moonlight for the reader, illuminating but not dictating a path into each narrative they may use to guide them in uncovering the ways each story embodies critical pedagogical theory and practice. I include some detailed analysis of certain experiences within the narrative and analysis sections in an effort to provide some clear, practical examples of the ways I have, in relations with others, taken up, and at other times, abandoned critical pedagogy as a living-loving praxis. My hope is that both these more explicitly explored examples and the complex,

poetic and experiential knowledge components in the narratives open up multiple ways to be and move with what I share here rather than provide a narrow, prescriptive way through.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: A LOVE STORY

CRITICAL LOVE

“The struggle for hope is permanent, and it becomes intensified when one realizes it is not a solitary struggle” (Freire, 2016, p. 59).

I was in South Africa with a lover, Mantis. Our unofficial relationship was a connecting across difference in many ways. They identified at the time as a black South African queer womxn**. I identified at the time as a white cisgender queer femme woman***. While we had similar class and educational backgrounds in the context of our respective countries****, as an American citizen, with an American passport, traveling internationally as a graduate student with funding, I had access to privilege in ways they did not. To make matters more complex, I was in South Africa embarking on a transnational, feminist, ethnographic research project for my Master’s, studying the use of poetry as an activist tool by LGBTQ South Africans and met them at a women’s poetry group gathering while doing my research.*

Our coming together as a noncouple couple, our love affair that changed the course of my life, happened in the days that blurred together after we met. Almost seamlessly the intellectual engagement about poetry, feminism, queer theory and social justice turned into

* Mantis and I both now use they/them pronouns so singular they will be used at times throughout this article.

** Womxn is a term created to broaden the scope of womanhood. It is used to include “womxn-of-color”, trans-womxn and other womxn identified groups previously excluded from white cisgender liberal “womyn born womyn only” feminists (Key, 2017).

*** Now I identify as queer with regard to my gender as well as my sexuality, identifying as genderqueer/nonbinary femme and no longer as cisgender woman. Mantis now also identifies as nonbinary/genderqueer.

**** We are both from what would be considered in our respective countries upper class/upper-middle class families and both have obtained college degrees.

friendship, which turned into something sexual and then, at least for me, into something more. We spent every spare moment we had together.

Verbally and nonverbally our relationship was critically pedagogical. Critical pedagogy was present in our talks about the ways we were situated beings in our love affair, transnational solidarity and the legacy of white western ethnographers having romantic relationships with people they met while doing their work. It was present in the questions we asked each other and ourselves out loud in the presence of each other, the problems we posed to one another, about the world, social injustice and our place(s) among it all over tea in their apartment, lunch in a cafe, bars playing pool and having beers and in bed before we fell asleep. It was present while we watched and critiqued Trevor Noah, engaged with Staceyann Chin's book or Zanele Muholi's art or listened and danced to Lauren Hill and dialogue about the politics of voice and representation, "success" in media, and intra-group hierarchies. It was present in our discussions of pride parades and LGBTQ nonprofits in our respective countries, how things with radical roots can become mainstreamed, hetero and cis normative, white, corporatized, depoliticized on the large scale and yet still, revolutionary relations and ways of moving within and among them remain. It was present in our sharing and discussing the poetry we both had written and the related talks we had about how to imagine what is possible. It was present in the way we moved and touched or did not move or touch in public space, thinking of the ways, for example, my whiteness and American accent could bring more attention to their black queerness that could compound their risk of experiencing violence** in certain public spaces.*

* Following in the tradition of Black feminist Audre Lorde, western is intentionally not capitalized for anti-imperialist purposes.

** Often in the form of sexist and homophobic street harassment from black South Africa men in languages that I did not speak, Southern Sotho for example, or in the form of being ignored, stared at or otherwise discriminated against by white South African people (men and women) due to sexualized and homophobic racism.

Together we examined and interrogated the historical and contextual nature of these dynamics and worked to disrupt them, not only those power dynamics that existed between/among us but also those that existed in our other relations, with friends, family and strangers. We saw ourselves as capable of producing new ways of being in relation. We were doing what critical pedagogy should do, providing ourselves with other ways to imagine rather than supporting the status quo.

When we were in it, it was all so messy, so much bigger than us, our place(s) in our world(s), shaped by white imperialist capitalist (hetero)patriarchy (hooks, 2003). Yet we were living in it with each other everyday, critical in our dialogue and in the simplest of our loving gestures. We spoke “with” each other “authentically” and listened “connectedly” we were open “to approaching and being approached, to questioning and being questioned, to agreeing and disagreeing” (Freire, 2001, p. 119).

Even in our relationship across lines of difference, she and I were also reaching for and trying to hold each other in things we similarly experienced. We had two lived experiences that were similar. We met each other at a time in our lives where we were both grieving, mourning two losses. We had both, fairly recently, experienced the death of a close friend and a break-up. We were both still raw, still reeling, still in the thick of the bleeding ache, the heavy-emptiness of it all.

One morning, sitting in bed with them in their studio apartment tucked in the corner of a high rise in the arts district of Johannesburg, we smoked their cigarettes and took turns holding each other’s pain. Wrapped in the cold, crisp, early morning winter light, I had come to a place in my connection with Mantis where the deepest vulnerability was an inevitability, where I was falling in love. I felt I had to tell them what I had been taught about myself. I handed over the words for them to examine. The words my white, American, nonheterosexual ex had said about me, to me, shortly after I had landed a continent away. They should not have come as a surprise to me, the words she dug out of her pain to give to me again. And yet somehow they did. I read them on my computer in an email. Words she had said before. Each time I read them, they weighed more: Too much. Too intense. Too difficult.

I have been handed these words again and again, like an un-

welcome gift from a relative who doesn't like you or even know you. Something that they hope will put you back on the right path. A version of this has been launched at me from the lips of my sibling, my teachers, my peers, my friends, my lovers. Sometimes a version of it "I'm a lot" or "I'm the most" comes from my own mouth before it can be given to me. A disclaimer. A deflection. A way of making light of what feels so heavy. I imagine the look in my eyes, cynical laughter and then a steady pulsing pain, pushing the edges of my pupils out even wider. Taking them in, waiting for what they will say. I feel every inch of my body hums with nervousness but I know what I'm doing. I'm searching to see if, when it comes to co-creating a committed critical love, I will be left alone.

CRITICALLY THINKING TO LOVE THE WORLD

Critical thinking has become a buzzword in K-12 public schools and the workforce. But being critical, while valued in some academic departments, gets a bad reputation. While the work of criticism can be, when constructive, enhancing and illuminating to our understanding of the world, subject or text, it is often seen as negative and unconstructive. As hooks (2010) reminds us, "this is especially the case when working with issues of race, gender and sexuality" as this critical work "requires the interrogation and even the dismantling of previously held assumptions" (p. 137).

It is not just the work that gets a bad reputation, those of us who do it get it, too. Critical scholars, teachers and public intellectuals, those of us who engage in socio-cultural and political criticism, are cast as callous and ruthless. We are seen as "hostile people", as unsettling and unnerving, our political dissent viewed as personal discontent. Rather than being viewed as people who seek to "intervene, recreate, and to transform" (Freire, 2001, pp. 66-67) an oppressive world with others, we are viewed as reactionary, paranoid, destroyers of a benign status quo. In my relationships with teachers and classmates in schools, with my sibling, friends and partners in and outside of schools, I was frequently told that by being critical, by raising questions about views positioned as "normal" or "true" and by offering up dissenting perspectives about such views, I was "being difficult", "causing

trouble”, “keeping the class from real learning”, “ruining the fun” and that I needed to “cut it out”.

Those who take up a critical orientation understand ourselves as being filled with critical “epistemological curiosity”. We move through our place(s) in the world with a “love of life”, an “openness to what is new” and a “disposition to welcome change” (Freire, 2001, pp. 66-67). While there is a difference between critique that works to “expand consciousness” and possibility, and “harsh criticism” that only works to attack or trash, the distinction between the two often goes unrecognized in mainstream United States culture.

SCHOOL THE CRITICAL OUT OF THE CHILD

“They consider a happy life that in which one lives by adapting to a world without anger, without protests, and without dreams of transformation” (Freire, 2016, p. 9).

I did not feel this way as a child. I was barefoot and brave in my backyard. I came into the world as most children do, “organically predisposed to be critical thinkers” (hooks, 2010, p. 7). I had the characteristics and orientations Freire (2001) links to critical thinkers: a “love of life”, an “openness to what is new” and a “disposition to welcome change” (pp. 66-67). I was filled with curiosity. I wondered to myself and aloud about my and others place(s) in the world, why things were the way they were and what else was possible. I was questing through questioning, through imaginative thinking and play. I was wide open to possibility, to being with others on the edge of what was known.

I could be this way because white, economic and educational privilege afforded me the access to places and resources to develop these skills (so long as they were depoliticized). These skills, removed from a social responsibility to others, would help make me a successful student and secure my place in the status quo. I attended a private day school, I had nannies who cared for and played with me while my parents were working, and extra-curricular opportunities including dance, team sports and horseback riding.

But while access to education and race privilege had meant upward economic mobility for my parents, they viewed thinking

and learning as linked to social responsibility and thus a political act. Between my Dad having grown up under fascist dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco in Spain and my Mom's coming of age in the 60s, identifying with anti-war, anti-racist and feminist thought, I was taught that critical thinking, learning and acting in relationship with others were politically connected practices that could move the world towards social justice for all rather than socially advantage a few.

This upbringing informed my seeing myself as a public intellectual in the way Giroux (2011) defines it, someone with "the capacity to think, produce ideas, be self-critical, and connect knowledge to forms of self- and social development" (p. 174). However, while this orientation was welcomed in my home by my parents and with certain adults and peers, it was not well received by many. In and outside of school I was often met with resistance while trying to engage in critical dialogue with others.

My schooling towards conformity and compliance began in the classrooms, hallways and social spaces of my adolescence. I was taught and learned quickly that only some were deserving of respect because of how they think, learn and are seen in the world, and others were not. It was in these places where I learned that thinking critically was dangerous, and for some more than others. I witnessed the bodies of my peers of color be punished by teachers, coaches and the parents of other kids for exhibiting the same excitement, passion or frustration that I had expressed and was not punished for. They were labeled distracting, disruptive, dangerous, "bad" for the good of the classroom, for the good of the team or game, for the safety of others. I witnessed openly gay white classmates reprimanded for kissing their significant others in the hallways while school and community social events blatantly centered and reproduced white middle-class heterosexuality.

I remember taking up projects, talking with peers and adults in what I viewed to be deep, thoughtful and socially important ways, and receiving the message that the ideas I brought to conversations, class discussions or presented in my papers and projects were "off". They and I were "not what they expected", "not what they were looking

for”, “not what they wanted”, “not right”. When it came to school and grades I remember my father saying to me, “figure out exactly what the teacher wants and give them that”. “You have to play the game, and play it so well they cannot deny you. Get to college so you can do what you want to do”. When it came to my peers, after being bullied repeatedly, the message I received was to, “not let it get to me” and “stay away from them”, “you will be out of there before you know it”.

So I walked the fine line, in my schooling and the social world, between conformity and quiet authenticity, trying to go unnoticed. I learned to do as many of us who are privileged with regard to race and social class can and are instructed to do: to know and perform “normalcy”, to respect and reproduce hierarchies, to secure my place in them, climbing them like a ladder (Khan, 2011, p. 14) when and where I could. I learned to “become somebody” who could get through and hide the somebody that was not welcome. I learned to fear my thinking mind and the questions that came with it, burying them alongside the other, unwelcome critical parts of me in a place no one could see or reach, not even me. I became a good student of the hidden curriculum of schooling, aware but largely silent about and compliant with its “racism, class oppression, or gender discrimination”.... I outwardly respected “professionalism, objectivity, or unaccountable authority” in schooling, another cog that kept the wheels of the “institutional and ideological mechanisms” turning (Giroux, 2011, p. 124). What I did not realize then was that, by participating in/ taking up relations in school in these ways, I not only kept opening an account in the banking system of education, I was investing in the bank itself.*

It was not until my junior year of college that my critical living-loving praxis resurfaced. While taking advanced courses in Women’s and Gender Studies I was exposed to aspects of critical theory, queer theory, black, women of color and anti-racist feminisms. I applied for admission into a Women’s Studies graduate program. I slowly became politicized, beginning my involvement in social justice oriented student

* namely my sexuality and my gender non-conformity

groups. I spoke more openly about wanting to learn, love and live for a different world. My ex and I came out to our families and close friends. We began to live openly in what we believed to be a life partnership. I was out about my politics and my sexuality for the first time.

But rather than connecting me in deeper ways to those I loved, being publicly critical of the world with the desire to change it, espousing a public pedagogy that embodied a “politics of educated hope” (Giroux, 2011, p. 170), led me into isolation. The rejection I had once felt with adults and peers in my adolescent years I began experiencing with my brother, my girlfriend and some of my close friends. They did not want to engage in the critical exchange of ideas. They would say, “you’re always critiquing and ruining everything”, “just stop” and “turn school mode off”.

The grief and loss that I experienced reached an all-time high when I received news that I had gotten into the graduate program I most wanted. My girlfriend was dismissive. She not only resented my “obsession” with learning and my desire for her to join me on the journey of critical thinking and being in the world, she also saw me as abandoning her. In her eyes I was selfish, choosing to further my education away from her and our friends, after we had just lost our dear friend to cancer. We fought often. I started to worry that I could not be both critical in the world and loved. Despite officially breaking up prior to my move to San Diego, our relationship continued through much of my first year.

At first I struggled to engage in critical pedagogy in the classrooms and community of my program. I read people defensively, expecting that they would reject my questions, my critiques, my analysis and, ultimately, me. After some time in a culture where questioning and dissent were welcome, particularly with regard to exposing the hidden curriculum of social institutions and relations, I became less afraid to take up critical pedagogy. More conscious of my place in systems of injustice I began to look at my life and shift my ways of being, relating and moving, to become more in alignment with who and how I wanted to be in the world with others. I took up critical pedagogy in classrooms as a student and teacher, in spaces of public education and social justice organizing. I was learning that at the heart of being

critical is “a concern for the future”, a strong commitment to hope and “the capacity for imagination and re-creation” (Shapiro, 2012, p. 42). I was engaged with others in the co-creation of a collective expanded consciousness.

But each time I would bring this new way of being to my ex, I came up lost and alone. She did not feel called to work with the new ways of seeing and being in the world the way I did. The further I traveled on my journey towards critical consciousness, the further I was from her.

CROSSING BRIDGES TO CONSCIOUSNESS: LOSING AND FINDING SELF, OTHERS, AND WORLD(S)

Crossing “the bridge”, the “boundary between the world you’ve just left and the one ahead”, choosing consciousness over unconsciousness, we lose and leave behind as well as gain (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 557). This transformation of worldview, of self, can feel like “a threat of annihilation” (Boler, 2004, p. 118). In facing our investments in the status quo and trying to deconstruct and dismantle them there is pain and loss. We cannot look away; we have to face “up to our investments” in the “social stratification” of power (Boler, 2004, p. 199). We have to move beyond ourselves, to risk our comfort for the sake of others’ freedom, to move into ambiguity and uncertainty of trying to consider the paths of action we can choose to create and live in a different world.

Choosing the path of critical consciousness often means that we not only lose a place of belonging within ourselves but also lose our home in the world and with others. In crossing you “overturn all your relationships” you “leave behind lover, parent, friend, who, not wanting to disturb the *status quo* nor lose you, try to keep you from changing” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 557). Taking up a critical consciousness, a critically pedagogical orientation to the world, in our world(s) with others, for those of us who are more dominantly positioned can mean leaving more people behind us when we step onto the bridge than those we find on the other side of the bridge, at least initially. But we do find people. Sometimes it is on the bridge that we find them. Sometimes it is through them that we find the bridge.

I have been so fortunate to have found, over and over, “remnants of a community—people on a similar quest and path” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 557). I continue to find those who have come before me, those who are coming behind me, and those who have crossed and are continuing to cross along with me. Building what Bettez (2011) refers to as critical community, “interconnected, porously bordered, shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening and critical question posing, assist each other in critically thinking through issues of power, oppression, and privilege” (p. 10) I began to develop an understanding of critical pedagogy as affective-embodied and relational praxis, as a way of living and loving others and the world in the pursuit of collective liberation. It is through communities that social justice efforts and those that take them up are sustained.

This is not to say the void is filled. This does not mean that those lost parts of ourselves, the relationships, the old stories of us and our social world are dead to us, buried under the bridge and crossed-over. They stay with us. They mark us. The shiftings, the crossings, and the transformations continue. The losing and the gaining, the births and deaths of and around critical consciousness do not end.

FROM CRITICAL CLOSURE TO LOVING US FREE

“I cannot make myself alone, nor can I do things alone. I make myself with others, and with others, I can do things” (Freire, 2016, p. 34).

In the days before I left for South Africa, my ex and I were once again romantically involved. We were trying to love each other into being other people and I was making a mess of it. The day before I was to leave I met with an out trans white American woman who had made transnational LGBTQ solidarity activism the focus of her professional work. She talked with me about my project and affirmed that it was possible to take up transnational anti-racist feminist solidarity LGBTQ liberation work as a scholar-teacher-community member if that was what I wanted. When I shared this conversation with my ex, she got quiet and I knew why. What I wanted to be a part of was, again, too much. Why didn't I want to work a normal job in the U.S.? It was our

last interaction before I would fly out. The tension was thick between us.

I spent the majority of my fourteen-hour flight to South Africa sleeping or crying. Sleeping to avoid the crying and crying because I was awake to the beginning of our ending. During my first few days in Johannesburg I was still trying to connect with contributors for my research. While waiting to hear back from them, I spent my days exploring the city on my own and reading. My ex and I wrote emails to each other often. Our words were superficial.

One day, when I was trying to be optimistic, I told her that when sitting in the park reading I imagined what it would be like if we lived here together. The words came, fast and hard. “How can you ask me to do that? Why can’t you have a life here?” Behind the words she was saying was that I could not be the partner she wanted me to be, someone who could, for the most part, live with her in the world as it is and be ok with and conform to that world. She could not love me away from that world. She could not live and be in love with me beyond that world. She could not move, in love with me.

I went to the gathering of poets and met Mantis and fell in love with them shortly after that email exchange. I shared the story of me, written by my ex and so many others, with Mantis only a few days after because I needed them to know. I needed to know if I was unlovable, if I really could not have what it felt like we were having. I told Mantis because while we were so different, we were both critically conscious, social justice oriented people. I knew that I could count on Mantis to push the story of me and my too-muchness around, with possibility, radical openness and love. I watched them in silence move the thoughts and words around. Then Mantis spread the bright orange clouds of their critical analysis across the Joburg sky. In what I can only describe as an act of critical, radical love they said to me, “I’m not saying I could be with you. But she wants a part of you, the part of you that matters most to you, to die. And that is not a love for you.”

Mantis was right. I could not restrict the too-muchness of my “human practice, tastes and forms of expression” in my loving (Shapiro, 2012, p. 49). Doing so would perpetuate the legitimacy of

systems of power and privilege in our culture and my place in them. In openly talking about wanting love and imagining a way of loving in our relationships and living in our lives that does “the work of ending domination” (hooks, 2010, p. 176) we were beginning our own search for love, for critical pedagogy as an affective-embodied and relational living-loving praxis although we were not taking it up as a couple.

I wish I could say that after South Africa I did not try to get back together with my ex again, but I did. More than once. Not right away but I did try again. Crossing bridges is hard. Sometimes we are almost across and we panic and turn around. In the end it was my ex who rejected me for the final time. But when she did somehow a peace came over me. I spent some months mourning her and us but was finally able to begin letting go. I remembered what I had had with Mantis, even if only for a moment, and began to have radical hope in a different love the same way I was able to have radical hope in a different world.

So, when my now spouse, my forever-love, my white queer and trans life-comrade in liberation and I started talking, I was able to co-create with him, a relation that invited us to bring critical pedagogy into our loving and living. In some of the first messages we exchanged I said to him,

I have been too much for people... My politics are central to who I am. It isn't a 9-5. It is how I want to live my life and build my partnership and family. I want to write and teach and learn and be active in changing the world... and that might be too much for you.

He replied, “None of that is scary at all. I told you, the one thing I have been missing from all recent relationships is the intellectual, political, active, passionate and deep sense of connection.”

Two years and a month after that conversation I committed to sharing a life, a critical pedagogical praxis with him. In our ceremony in front of friends and family, I spoke this vow, to him: “Know that I am with you completely, that I see all and honor all of you and that I will, each and everyday, love us free.”

After six years together we continue to love “us”, ourselves and others, free. We do this by taking up critical pedagogy as a living-loving praxis that involves working together to be collectively critically conscious and reflexive of our relation(s) to oppressive power as anti-racist white folks in a white supremacist society, as anti-capitalist working class folks who come from families with generational wealth in a capitalist society and as a queer and trans married couple now read by many as a straight married couple in a heterosexist society. We ask each other questions such as how can we disrupt racism, classism, heterosexism, cissexism, and sexism, within and beyond our relationship. How can we challenge and change what it means to be and move as a white, married couple (interacted with by many as if we were a heterosexual couple) with the class backgrounds and ties we have? We dialogue in critical ways about where and how we work, how, where, on what and with whom we spend, save and share money, how we distribute housework and daily life chores and how we are in relationship with each other’s families, friends, co-workers and strangers. We critically consider the interactions we take up with each other and others at work, in schools, in home spaces, at the grocery store, a bar or a restaurant and at marches, community events and direct actions.

As these questions suggest, we not only support each other in questioning and posing problems about how to disrupt the power dynamics present in the everyday relations we are entangled in, together and (a)part, but we also support each other in imagining and trying to bring to life more socially just solutions with/in our relation and in our relations with others. In one-to-one interactions as well as within the groups and communities that we are a part of and/or have access to we work interdependently to speak, move and interact with others in ways that trouble everyday assumptions and patterns of relating- across lines of sameness and difference.*

While the shape and dynamics of the praxis taken up by us is different from mine and Mantis’ due to our many shared socio-

* I use (a)part here because as relationally entangled beings even when we are alone we are not alone- we are always thinking of, carrying and acting with others.

*historical positionalities, at the heart of it is the same aim of challenging ourselves to become “more than we are now”, to constantly question what it is we have “become” within “existing institutional and social formations” so that we can, together, “give some thought to what it might mean to transform existing relations of subordination and oppression” (Giroux, 2011, p. 73) and work in our relations towards that transformation, towards collective liberation.**

UNFINISHED EVER-AFTERS: CONCLUSIONS, SIGNIFICANCE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INQUIRY

In *Pedagogy of the Heart* Ana Maria Araújo Freire’s (2016) writes of her late husband Paulo,

It is a pleasure to know myself as sharing with him not only the joy of the good husband-wife relationship, but also the satisfaction of living and sharing political-pedagogical concerns which, my own previously, have become more and more *ours* in recent years. (p. 61)

Like Araújo Freire (2016), I see the political-pedagogical concerns I hold dear as more ours than mine—and not only with, but thankfully with, Grey. However, having embarked on this auto-ethnographic project and taken up writing as a form of inquiry, I have come to see that the political-pedagogical concerns I hold dear, those that I shared with Mantis but did not share with my ex, those that I share now with Grey, were never merely my own. I understand that one reading of the journey I share here is that the “choice” to bring critical pedagogy into my life as a loving and living praxis was not really a choice. From

* It is important to add that this praxis isn’t always easy or pretty. Grey and I sometimes unconsciously give it up or backslide into noncritical modes of engaging with each other and others. We at others times do so more consciously, to survive certain moments and interactions at work, with strangers, friends and during certain immediate and extended family interactions. At other times, ego, a product largely of imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-hetero-patriarchal individualism, gets in the way of our willingness to openly and lovingly receive each other’s and other’s critical feedback/questions. Critical pedagogy as a living/loving praxis means that it, like living and loving, is fraught with tensions and complexities

reading the narratives it could be concluded that it is less about my agency and more about Mantis and Grey's receptivity to engaging in practices of critical consciousness where my ex was not.

Just as my understanding of the praxis of critical pedagogy is becoming more complex and nuanced, so is my understanding of agency. I employ Burkitt's (2016) definition of agency as "the wider sense of action that produces an effect on the world and on others, rather than in the narrow sense of reflexive choice in situations where people could have acted otherwise"... appearing "only among people in their relational contexts" (p. 332), agency, is always relationally constituted. As an interactant in interrelation I may "choose and formulate plans and intentions" but it is always in "interdependence with others, never standing before all the manifold relations as an isolated autonomous individual" (Burkitt, 2016, p. 336). My actions and choices are not formed by mental reflection alone but also by internal conversations and external considerations instilled with emotion of significant relationships. As a relationally embedded being, my taking up of critical pedagogy as a living and loving praxis was and is always "active and passive, powerful and yet vulnerable to various degrees, acting on others and being acted on by others" (Burkitt, 2016, p. 336).

Perhaps this article can prompt more discussion around relationality and critical pedagogy, as well as critical consciousness and action more broadly, and the importance of taking seriously how relations constitute agency and reflexivity. In relation with Mantis and now with Grey, questioning, dissent, multiple and complex voices and critical engagement with the hidden curricula of the "everyday", with "common-sense" assumptions are invited. In an effort to disrupt that which is oppressive and bring about a more socially just world we work to unveil, disrupt and challenge the "rules", the "moves", the board/blueprint of the game and house *together*. Relations with my ex and some teachers and peers in public k-12 schools were not critically pedagogical not merely because I was constrained but because of the dynamics between me and my ex, teachers and students. The relations and their contexts constituted limited agency for us as interactants and our relation. Inside these non-critically pedagogical relation,

the options seem reduced—it is either play the game/play house or don't—when really, what I hope I have illuminated, it can be much more complex.

It is for this reason that inquiry that stops parsing out our examination of the radical love politic of critical pedagogy from personal relations, that, instead, takes up an exploration of the fluid, deep, and expansive reach of critical pedagogy, all of the ways that we do and do not take it up as an affective-embodied, relational and lived praxis in all of the spaces in our lives has the potential to open up new possibilities. Such inquiry can serve to guide us in bringing our critical pedagogical praxis and our social justice work to new places with/in varying relations and make more space for a hopeful critical pedagogical discourse that is “not that of someone intending to liberate others” but rather of people inviting each other “to liberate themselves together” (Freire, 2016, p. 38). Critical auto-ethnographic scholarly inquiry about lived critical pedagogical praxis can contribute to the creation and agencement of mind/body/spiritful, relational criticalness, expanding the ways in which we take up critical pedagogy as a living-loving praxis in all the places that we move in the world with others. Additionally, taking up collaborative/relational critical auto-ethnographic inquiry and writing, a project of inquiry embedded in relation and in conversation rather than individual reflection and writing, could further this work. Such projects could bring to the fore more nuanced and complex relational dynamics not reflected in this article.

I hope what I have started here takes critical pedagogical praxis, the problems posed within it, the solutions imagined through it and the attempts made to bring those solutions to life because of it, into many newly configured and beautifully humanly complex and messy directions. As Freire (2016) tells us, “the truth is that the future is created by us, through transformation of the present” and “no one can do this alone” (p. 39). I believe that through taking up critical pedagogy as a living, loving, relational praxis and engaging in inquiry about such a praxis we can continue to make more possible dynamic ways of being and moving in the world together for social justice and collective liberation.

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