No Children Involved: Open Letter to My Fellow Educators

A review of *Equity as Praxis in Early Childhood Education and Care* **by Gabrielle Monique Warren**

Gabrielle Monique Warren is the media director and advocacy officer at Start2Finish Canada, a nonprofit committed to bridging the gaps between the haves and have-nots in Canada. She recently completed her Master of Education at York University with a concentration in early childhood pedagogies. Her MEd major research paper, *Pedagogy of the "Savage" Child*, was inspired by the children she works with, the communities she serves, and the Black radical tradition. Her approach is towards praxis and is rooted in the belief that conviction must lead to tangible action. Email: gwarr97@yorku.ca

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Systematic change begins at the micro, grassroots level; it depends on the emancipation of the mind, followed by a revolution within the heart. This must be attended by struggle, resiliency, and sacrifice as individuals and organizations take action, in solidarity with communities, to centre equity as a sustainable priority for institutional policies and practices and to reflect the needs of vulnerable identities and communities. (Abawi et al., 2021, p. xxi)

Equity as Praxis in Early Childhood Education, edited by Zuhra Abawi, Ardavan Eizadirad, and Rachel Berman (Canadian Scholars, 2021), is a critical resource to early childhood thinkers and practitioners because it makes visible the lives of the Othered in ECE. I use the term Othered to refer to how individuals outside of the dominant ethnoclass are perceived as marginal human beings. This is not to say that they are marginal, but they are perceived that way. In this view, children who are Othered must contort themselves to fit into a model of humanity not designed for them, hence an Othered status. In other words, Othered refers to how white supremacy categorizes populations that it does not recognize as legitimate.

The clear and concise format of *Equity as Praxis* refuses room for ignorance in understanding the landscape of students and educators often unseen in the ECE space. The editors achieved this by including contributors who speak on issues such as low-income racialized children and making space for Indigenous knowledge. This work points toward how Canada's purported universalism is merely a signal toward assimilation. The book is divided into nine chapters and encompasses several themes, including childhood inequity, child developmentalism, the need for a national strategy on children, discourses in education, the ethics of care, feminized care, Indigenous pedagogy, neoliberal childhoods, and anti-Black racism. In this review, I look at the volume thematically as opposed to sequentially. My purpose is to engage with the arguments and propose my thoughts on specific aspects of the work. The intellectual project of Sylvia Wynter has inspired my work by infusing it with an otherwise subjectivity. By looking beyond the world presented to us, Wynter shifts our view of what is possible in our current situation. Throughout this review, I will be weaving in Wynter's (1994) "'No Humans Involved': Open Letter to My Colleagues" to explore the complications of equity and how the same forces it desires to resist can coopt its meaning.

Written in response to the Rodney King beating and the riots that came with it, "No Humans Involved" (Wynter, 1994) argues that education is implicated in the production and reproduction of harm. The abbreviation NHI (No Humans Involved) refers to the one routinely used by officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles about any case involving young Black males belonging to the jobless category of inner-city ghettos. In this piece, Wynter uses the term *inner eyes* to describe the use of NHI. She explains that the cops and lawmakers who acted violently towards Rodney King and the rioters had specific *inner eyes* that affirmed the "Truth" that human beings—within a white

supremacist worldview—are universal and any status outside this worldview's descriptive statement does not exist. A descriptive statement is defined as how humans use language to answer the question of who and what we (as human beings living in the world) are (see Wynter, 2003). The Rodney King case was not isolated but endemic of inequity deeply baked into how we define ourselves as human. *Equity as Praxis*, in a Canadian context, speaks toward how inner eyes can affect how the child is perceived and how education is implicated in reproducing a particular Truth.

In the introduction, Abawi, Eizadirad, and Berman (2021) assert, "This textbook seeks to challenge and disrupt developmentalist discourses that frame young children as oblivious, unaware, and incapable of navigating the complexities of multi-faceted identities" (p. xvii). Additionally, they offer "a critique of the various short-comings in the field of ECEC" (p. xvii) while celebrating the strength of those who think and do liberatory work in the field. In Wynterian terms, *Equity as Praxis* desires to untether from the status-orienting principle that ties students and educators into strict binaries of being. Gould (1993, as cited in Wynter, 2003) defines the status-orienting principle as classification systems that direct our thinking and order our behaviour. In the case of the Rodney King riots, by classifying Rodney King and the rioters as NHI, these public officials would have given the police of LA the green light to deal with the group's members the way they pleased. These members were perceived as jobless young Black men of inner-city ghettos. Foucault (1981, as cited in Wynter, 2003) traces the processes by which our present disciplines came to be put in place at the end of the 18th century by European thinkers to be central representations by which the human would come to perceive and know itself as if it were a pure organism in complete continuity with organic life (Wynter, 1994, 2003). This claim to organic continuity can also be perceived as a claim of the dominant ethnoclass as universal. *Equity as Praxis* refuses this universality in its contents, speaking toward the need for ECEC to "stir the very foundation of the field of early childhood studies" (p. xi).

Supraculturalism in early childhood education

In Chapter 1, "State of Emergency: Mapping Inequities in Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada," Eizadirad and Abawi (2021) explain the inequities in the ECEC space. They cite the lack of a national ECE policy program, lack of investment by the federal government, difficulty retaining qualified ECE educators due to lack of investment, high fees for parents, long waiting lists, and unregulated childcare centres as evidence of this lack of investment. By discussing how neoliberalism and marketization have affected the ECEC space, they interrogate how intersectionalities of oppression and inequities cause the asymmetric application of harm for students and educators. In raising awareness of the power dynamics within Canada, they assert the state of emergency that exists in the space and propose how we might move forward in our present situation. Overall, their arguments illustrate how a universalized, neutral understanding of what child care looks like in Canada is harmful to those on the margins. This chapter illuminates how supracultural accounts of Canadian child care are inherently inequitable and proposes that refusing this supraculturalism can create substantial change.

Supraculturalism is the mechanism that allows universality to function and classify (Wynter, 1994). Asmarom Legesse (1973, as cited in Wynter, 1994) points out that our present knowledge organization is premised on the *technocultural fallacy*. This term derives from the failure of anthropology to distinguish the purposive aspects of human behaviour and the unconscious structure in human culture from the unconscious empirical processes that link man directly to animal societies and the ecosystem. Human beings are unconscious of their descriptive statements; thus, they believe that their reality is the only valid reality. This belief becomes harmful when it is overrepresented. In other words, when one believes that how they experience the world is the only way, a rigidity forms that is harmful to those who do not attend to the written and unwritten presumptions of their world experience. This is the technocultural fallacy Legesse speaks of. Wynter (1994) builds on this fallacy by

asserting the second fallacy of supraculturalism. When the fallacy becomes institutionalized within the schema of politics and, in our case, education, it proliferates more significant harm than individual encounters. In many chapters throughout the book (e.g., Chapters 2 and 8) there is explicit argumentation toward how supracultural understandings of human beings mediate ECEC relations. The question in these discussions is how we might understand how we have been affected by these understandings and how we might shift away from this effect. In other words, while we are in an emergency, a call toward an otherwise future must not add on to the current order but altogether refuse it. This volume works toward, in various ways, articulating that an equity tied to white supremacist, capitalist, settler-colonial, patriarchal, neoliberal values is not equity at all.

In Chapters 2 and 8, there is an explicit discussion of how supraculturalism operates in Canadian ECE spaces. From Alana Butler's discussion of the barriers low-income, racialized students and families face to Maria Karmiris's conversation on the violence of child developmentalism, there is an emphasis on how the belief that one kind of child exists in Canada inflicts harm on Othered students. When one assumes that the average Canadian child is white and middle class, programs and funding needed by marginalized children are deprioritized because they are considered unnecessary. This assumption flattens the reality of childhood in Canada (see UNICEF, n.d.) and removes accountability of those in power to change asymmetric applications of ECE. Like those who saw the Rodney King rioters with inner eyes, a supracultural ECE space projects a specific Truth that is marred by historical and political bias.

In Chapter 2, "Low-Income Racialized Children and Access to Quality ECEC in Ontario," Butler (2021) discusses and identifies barriers that low-income, racialized students and families face when they attempt to access high-quality ECEC programs. The barriers emphasized are financial, spatial, and cultural. Further, there is a stress on how a colour-blind understanding of the ECEC system negatively affects students by assuming that the system, as is, is sufficient. Butler emphasizes that "without universal access to affordable early childhood education and care [marginalized] families will continue to face barriers" (p. 35). Butler explores strategies that educators and policymakers can use, including increasing public investment in early learning and care, adding strong antiharassment and antidiscrimination policies to workplace policies, and adopting am antiracist approach to early childhood education curricula.

Supraculturalism allows the inner eyes to justify its Truth, and the "colour line" operates to solidify that Truth fully. Wynter (2003) reasons that the colour line is a status-orienting principle based on differential degrees of evolutionary selectness—this includes differences between classes, sexes, sexualities, rich and poor, and the developing versus the developed world. The dominant ethnoclass defines these lines in symbolic life / symbolic death terms. Symbolic life is the caucasoid physiognomy, or "the name of what is good" naturally selected by evolution. Symbolic death is the negroid physiognomy, or "the name of what is evil" deselected by evolution. The works of W. E. B. Dubois (1903, as cited in Wynter, 1994) and Elsa Goveia (1972, as cited in Wynter, 1994) emphasize how race functions to systematically predetermine the sharply unequal redistribution of the collectively produced global resources and, therefore, the correlation of the racial ranking rule with the rich/poor rule. This phenomenon is also known as structural racism. Before the civil rights movement in the United States, the institutionally secured white/Black segregation served to absolutize eugenic/dysgenic terms. In the Canadian context, residential schools, the Indian pass, and segregation played this role. Just as we spoke in previous paragraphs about inner eyes, the colour line adds to how the inner eyes operate in the world. Race creates a status differential that recursively serves to verify the Truth of the divinely ordered hegemony. That unsaid divinely ordered hegemony is that Black and Indigenous people are symbolic death, white people (including those who are white adjacent) are symbolic life, and all other racialized folks are on a spectrum in between.

Refusing dominant narratives in early childhood education

Four chapters of *Equity as Praxis* in particular refuse the dominant ethnoclass's hegemony through their equity-focused theorizations of the role of the educator, child, and education at large. By speaking toward discourses surrounding the child, Indigenous pedagogy, the importance of the relational, and antiracism practice, respectively, the chapters' authors Nidhi Menon, Maya-Rose Simon, Maria Karmiris, and Kerry-Ann Escayg actively refuse the ways in which the status-orienting principle of the colour line is produced and reproduced in education by orienting the reader toward how one may deny the Truth of the dominant ethnoclass's inner eyes. These authors also assert that genres of the human outside of whiteness do not only exist but are thriving despite the violence inflicted on them. Their conversations are praxis by acknowledging the current situation and proposing movements toward an otherwise future.

In Chapter 3, "Troubling Dominant Discourses and Stories that Shape Our Understanding of the Child Refugee," Menon (2021) argues that certain stories, which present one version of Truth, can become dominant. By understanding agency and vulnerability in the lives of refugee children, Menon argues that there is a revelation in denying supracultural understandings of the refugee child. Deficit discourses are potent, and understanding their damage is crucial in rethinking how researchers position the child. The "hidden cost" of not rethinking these discourses is maintaining the status-orienting principles that cause harm. Menon is clear about the importance of the educator's role in producing and reproducing education, writing that "education is a political practice, and when educators adopt certain pedagogical positions, they make a political statement" (p. 57). Menon proposes the pedagogy of discomfort to respond to a refusal of deficit discourse in early childhood educational thought and practice.

In Chapter 7, "Making Space for Indigenous Knowledge in an Urban Child-Care Centre," Simon (2021) examines the importance of culturally appropriate early childhood education in Indigenous communities and emphasizes that Indigenous knowledge separated from the larger curriculum cannot be deemed as successful in mainstream education. This knowledge must be infused to be respected. On the one hand, Indigenous curriculum is vital for Indigenous students to learn about the forces that shape them, the history of their people, their values, and their language; without it, they will never know themselves or their potential as human beings (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, as cited by Simon, 2021, p. 130). On the other hand, Indigenous knowledge is important for all children to grasp. Simon speaks about land-based pedagogy, which fosters a greater connection to the land, reexamining the idea of land and reconstructing old pedagogies that center around the land for all those who engage. Amid our current planetary crises and rampant violence against Indigenous people, this knowledge is needed now more than ever.

Similarly, in Chapter 8, "Failure and Loss as a Methodological, Relational, and Ethical Necessity in Teaching and Learning in Early Years," Karmiris (2021) examines the limits of the hegemonic practice and discourse of child developmentalism in ECE. By confronting how this discourse fails both children and educators, Karmiris asks us, "How might we seek to generate distinctly different networks of support by foregrounding our interdependence with and amid diverse representations and embodiments of human experiences?" (p. 156). Karmiris looks toward reconceptualist scholarship and postfoundational theories to transform the relationships between teaching and learning. The aim is to propose an alternative to the dehumanization that child developmentalism inflicts on the child.

In Chapter 9, "Reflect, Enact, and Transform: A Preliminary Anti-Racism Guide to Early Childhood Educators," Escayg (2021) contextualizes antiracist teaching practices by speaking about anti-Black racism in Canada, saying, "Anti-racism is a life-long journey requiring sustained commitment and a tenacity to endure despite persecution

(both professional and personal)" (p. 170). This discussion is vital because it develops self-reflection to deter the harm that racism has inflicted since Canada's inception. Escayg challenges the neutrality of the ECEC space by recognizing the intersections between who the teacher is and their pedagogy. To refuse the hegemony of the dominant ethnoclass (and its violence) requires taking an active stance against what McKittrick (2015) terms "the axis."

Against the "axis": care theory and challenging the status quo

The axis is Katherine McKittrick's (2015) interpretation of Wynter's project that argues how our present political spectrum forecloses the potential of a new science of being human. In early childhood education (as with education in general), the narrative around childhood is produced in a self-referencing system underwritten by normative and biocentric conceptions of being human. This narrative is included in how those who think and enact early childhood see themselves, children, and childhood. In other words, the status-orienting principle creates an axis that mediates any theorizations or Truths about the world. McKittrick (2015) explains the axis as follows:

> A Cartesian axis is formed with vertical/biocentric/top-down (Man/native/nigger/nigger woman) and horizontal political (left-right-center) coordinates. These social and political classifications offer limited options, with particular communities barely moving at all. These coordinate options function to reify us/them, margin/center, right/left, right/wrong, human/Other categories. Wynter brings into focus how particular intellectual and emancipator projects, while promising to radically unsettle the axis, pivot their definition of liberation to Man as white heterosexual breadwinner and measuring stick of human normalcy or Man as human. Man stays the anchor and origin of this axis and thus produces a closed system sliding up/down left/right. (p. 152)

As early childhood educators dedicated to equity, the question that must be asked is how we might move away entirely from the structures we have inherited. In many ways, this is a questioning of who we are in this space. The emergency of this moment is that maintaining the current structures denies the very personhood of the students we work with. This movement is not a passive suggestion but a deep understanding that students will not thrive without ECEC's transformation.

In Chapter 4, "Equity Enacted: Possibilities for Difference in ECEC through a Critical Ethics of Care Approach," Alana Powell, Lisa Johnston, and Rachel Langford (2021) suggest that equal rights are not sufficient for equity to exist and put forward the necessity of shifting our conceptual understanding of what equity is. They draw upon ethics of care to propose that equity is enacted in relation to others in the early childhood space. As Gilligan (1982 as cited in Powell et al., 2021) asserts, a foundational aspect of an ethics of care is its feminist ethics. Initially focused on girls and women, it essentializes "feminine" traits; however, Gilligan (2011, as cited in Powell et al., 2021) considers that it goes beyond the "feminine" and rests in the human. Overall, there is a discussion about care as an ongoing and relational process. The authors propose possibilities for professional preparation programs and how to enact equity through an ethics of care approach.

In Chapter 5, "Planning Time for Equity: A (Re)Examination of a Study of ECEs' Perspectives on Planning Time in Southern Ontario," Lisa Johnston (2021) discusses the entanglements of working conditions, gender, and neoliberalism in the context of equity of praxis. Johnson's position as an ECEC educator during the "professionalization" of the field provides insight into how equity is essential in providing educators with the time and space to do their work well. Johnston describes the tenets of critical qualitative inquiry and how it differs from other qualitative methods. In particular, the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism has been instrumental in critically interrogating larger discourses. Johnson asserts that by engaging in reconceptualist

literature, one may acquire a critical awareness to "notice" the dominant developmentalist and neoliberal discourses in early childhood education spaces. This awareness is crucial as educators are being burdened with more expectations but less support to deliver these expectations. Johnson argues that these expectations are the result of neoliberal conceptions of time.

In Chapter 6, "Using Femme Theory to Foster a Feminine-Inclusive ECE and Care Practice," Adam Davies and Rhea Ashley Hoskin (2021) examine how the devaluation of femininity is symptomatic of femmephobic societal values and assert that this femmephobia is why ECEC work is undervalued in our society. They argue that feminine qualities are highly valued and should not be undermined by the market's drive for masculinization. This masculinization is defined by its ability to "better" ECEC, emphasizing evaluation and productivity. By applying care ethics and femme theory, they assert that the field can become liberated from forces that do not value women's work in the ECEC space.

In reading these chapters, I was challenged by care ethics and femme theory as a foundational piece for equity. While I believe these theories as examined in these chapters can be useful, I was not entirely convinced they are liberated from the "axis" as put forward by McKittrick (2015). I fear that an educator who uses these concepts without understanding how the weaponization of white femininity (see Miller & Lensmire, 2020), the depoliticization of feminism (see hooks, 2015), and the neoliberalization of the ECE space (see Vintimilla, 2014) profoundly affect the application of said "care" and of who gets to be "feminine" will become blind to students and educators outside of the dominant ethnoclass's descriptive statement. Regardless of good intentions, liberation cannot mean inclusion but a complete dismantling of the system. In our current neoliberal situation, "care" is weaponized to form neoliberal subjects. For students deemed symbolically dead by the axis, this leads to the death of self (see Fanon, 2007). Tiffany Lethabo King (2020) speaks on the posture of suspicion that scholars committed to the politics of Black abolitionist work and to decolonization often must assume because of how inner eyes operate. In encountering care ethics and femme theory in relation to equity, I adopt this wariness.

Conclusion: Gesturing toward an otherwise future

Wynter (2003) argues that our learning systems conserve the status-orienting principle by producing and reproducing white supremacist, capitalist, settler-colonial, patriarchal, and neoliberal values. Legesse (1973, as cited in Wynter, 1994) posits that all mainstream scholars function as grammarians of our order. In other words, educators are well versed in the techniques of ordering a select body of facts within a framework that is entirely consistent with the system of values of the society with which they belong. A liberatory educator refuses this order by rejecting the system of values embraced by the dominant ethnoclass. In other words, to be free of the symbolic life/death categories, educators must move away from the axis. *Equity as Praxis* provides insights into refusing the conservation of the status quo. By calling on educators to rethink their position in the early childhood education space and the world, they put forward an otherwise vision of what a Canadian early childhood education can be.

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