

Ancestral, genealogical, and ideological considerations in understanding childprecarity

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Abstract

Early educators and carers, must hold hope in difficult times, when war, displacement, and other neocolonial forces render childhood precarious. Sovereign authority sets out to rupture genealogical filiations and erase ancestral and historical memory, inducing precarity. The result is a subjectivity severed from history and characterized by melancholy. My work explores the potential of moving children from mere existence or subservience to ethical relationality and agentic possibility in an often unjust world.

Keywords: childhood precarity; agency in childhood; ethical relationality

We live in difficult times and the suffering we witness when children are murdered and families are torn apart is almost unbearable. Today it is the conflict between Israel and Gaza, a war in which the U.S. has hardly been neutral. In the first three weeks of the Israeli-Gaza conflict, in excess of 3,000 children have been killed, of whom the majority are Palestinian children residing in Gaza.ⁱⁱ Today it is also Yemen, another war in which the U.S. has hardly been neutral. UNICEF estimated in 2022 that 11,000 children had died in the war in Yemen.ⁱⁱⁱ Today it is Armenian expulsions from Nagorno-Karabakh. Of the 110 million displaced and refugee persons in the world today, UNHCR estimates that in excess of 40 million are children^{iv}. I could go on... Ukraine... Rwanda... Cambodia... Central and South America... Sudan... Myanmar... the Holocaust... the Nakba... Uighur concentration camps in China... Cultural genocide of Tibetan preschoolers in China... historical incarceration of indigenous children in the U.S., Canada, and Australia in residential schools... overrepresentation of indigenous children in carceral systems today... the slap down of the Indigenous Voice referendum in Australia in October 2023. Has it ever been otherwise? My own writing in relation to historical traumas in Ireland, my country of origin (cf. O'Loughlin, manuscript submitted for publication, a), has earned me both praise and disdain for seeking to name some unnamable truths about the psychic legacy of colonization there.

There are no moral equivalences in all of this. All of us, as humans, inevitably have feelings of rage and indignation when we are close to the terrible pain caused by death, brutality, and displacement. The paranoid-schizoid position is ever ready to knock at our doors and unsettle our composites. Faced with the dilemma of having a discussion with my doctoral research seminar about these matters after the Hamas massacre and after the air assault on Gaza had begun, I decided to share a video with them. The video^v is a Rosh Hashanah address offered by my dear colleague Deborah Britzman of York University in Toronto, in 2021. It is entitled *Senses of loneliness*. In it, Britzman presciently addresses rage, anger, mourning, loss, and reconciliation. It is a profoundly human, hopeful, and containing message about how psychoanalysts and other spiritually minded and ethical people may hold the world at times when rage, paranoia, and a thirst for revenge is on the rampage. Her words are balm in moments in which we must suffer the kind of awfulness the world is once again experiencing. Another effort to thread the needle in a time of impossible binaries and limitless destruction is Judith

Butler's article, *The compass of mourning*, published in October 2023 in the *London Review of Books*.^{vi} Butler articulates the compass of mourning thus:

I ask myself whether we can mourn, without qualification, for the lives lost in Israel as well as those lost in Gaza without getting bogged down in debates about relativism and equivalence. Perhaps the wider compass of mourning serves a more substantial ideal of equality, one that acknowledges the equal grievability of lives, and gives rise to an outrage that these lives should *not* have been lost, that the dead deserved more life and equal recognition for their lives. How can we even imagine a future equality of the living without knowing, as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has documented, that Israeli forces and settlers had killed nearly 3800 Palestinian civilians since 2008 in the West Bank and Gaza even before the current actions began. Where is the world's mourning for them? Hundreds of Palestinian children have died since Israel began its 'revenge' military actions against Hamas, and many more will die in the days and weeks to come.(p. 6-7).

It need not threaten our moral positions to take some time to learn about the history of colonial violence and to examine the language, narratives and frameworks now operating to report and explain – and interpret in advance – what is happening in this region.

For socially committed early years educators and carers, charged with the emotional containment of child, family, and societal suffering, and also seeking to cultivate empathy, optimism, and creativity in children through a form of pedagogy that Paulo Freire (1976) described as education as the practice of freedom, these are heavy times. We must hold the hope in difficult times. I think of the steadiness of Annamarie Tesoriero, trapped in the dark with 17 kindergarteners in an elevator when a truck bomb damaged one of the towers at the World Trade Center in 1993. The New York Times noted:^{vii}

Thank God. I never thought I'd be so happy to see my school," said Annamarie Tesoriero, who had led her 17 youngsters in songs and prayers to keep their spirits up through five hours stuck in a dark elevator, with no hint of when they would be rescued. "We expected the children to behave. We're old-fashioned that way.

My life's work has always been underwritten by concerns for social justice, and I have included references to a few of my most relevant papers below,^{viii} My entry into psychoanalysis has deepened my understanding further. While conventional psychoanalysis can be myopic, and excessively focused on familial and intrapsychic factors, my work has been about articulating a critical social psychoanalysis that seeks to understand how familial, societal and ideological factors serve to constrain the emerging subjectivity of the child. Psychoanalysis has been fruitful in characterizing how early occlusions can impair creativity and relational capacity. An excessive focus on *familialism*, however, has led to less interest in occlusions caused by the infiltration of ideological forces such as colonialism, neoliberalism, neofascism etc., which can limit the capacities of children to become agentic, creative human beings. I explore^{ix} two types of events that expose children to peril. The first refers to a challenge that all infants and children face, namely the complexity of taking in the symbolic system of the world through encounter with the parental Other. This encounter works tolerably well most of the time, but occlusions, foreclosures, and misrecognitions can greatly complicate the construction of subjectivity. In extreme cases, as André Green noted, limitations on a child's capacity may be so straitened that a child may be "forbidden to be".

The second type of precarity refers to children who experience misrecognition at the hands of sovereign authorities. A child may be placed in what Giorgio Agamben calls a “state of exception” by virtue of their identity as a child who is indigenous, a refugee, orphaned by war or genocide, trafficked for child or sexual labor, a member of a caste, class, sexual, ethnic, racial, religious, or other out-group, or through growing up in a repressive or colonized society. Or, indeed, a child may grow up with parents or ancestors who have suffered such circumstances and may experience intergenerational sequelae of familial or collective suffering. As Leonor Arfuch (2020) noted, the “radical disparity of the gaze” ensures that “the other does not attain the status of the human” (p. 112). I am seeking to understand the melancholic sequelae of malignant familial and societal events and to ponder how we might enable a child to nurture a capacity for imagining self as agentic and creative or even as deserving of the right to exist.

Dispossession: Effects of severance of genealogical filiations and social links

It is hard to miss precarity writ large in the lives of children. One need only think of those children hovering between life and death as they seek to make the perilous ocean journey from Turkey or Libya to Greece. There is the searing image of a migrant toddler, face down on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey, and an equally harrowing image of a father and daughter drowned in the Rio Grande. Anthropologists and political scientists have characterized such outcast persons as disposable, as rubbish, as vermin, as living in a state of exception or bare life or social death. In *Dispossession*, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou focus particularly on “processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers” (2013, p. 1). Both in the colonial order and in the contemporary neoliberal social order, they note, subjectivity for the privileged is brought about by desubjectifying their Others, “rendering them usable, employable, but then eventually into waste matter” (p. 27) through systems that normalize privilege for some and sanction precarity for others. Sovereign authority sets out to rupture genealogical filiations and erase ancestral and historical memory to produce paralyzing self-abasement and ideological interpellation. The result is a subjectivity severed from history and characterized by melancholy.

In *Colonial trauma*, Karima Lazali (2021), explores the effects of a brutal colonial history as well as continuing suffering under a fundamentalist Islamic regime on subjectivity of contemporary Algerians. Lazali illustrates the catastrophic effects of such occlusions, describing the emotional constriction and foreclosed imagination manifested by her indigenous Algerian patients. The core of the wound to subjectivity, Lazali notes, is a lack of a sense of belonging that is rooted in a severance from genealogical histories. Subjected to totalizing ideology, language erasure, religious fundamentalism, and political authoritarianism, Algerians have internalized amnesia and a sense of absoluteness that chokes their capacity for meaning. Lazali notes the appalling levels of sexual abuse, murder, and dismemberment of children in contemporary Algeria, suggesting that it is a ghastly reenactment of the disappearances engineered by the French colonial sovereign, and a terrifying signifier of the peril for children in a world suffused with violence and trauma:

The state of recovered bodies—decapitated, savagely hacked to pieces after suffering sexual abuse, according to the press—indeed provokes horror. The living are thrust into a state of shock at this display of butchery. All the more so given the fact that these are children, which is to say vulnerable, fragile beings at the mercy of adults, who, regardless of their relation to the child, are supposed to look after them... It was common to name children according to their gender *Baba* (father) or *Yemma* (mother). This placed them right away in the place of ancestors to be loved or feared. In the popular beliefs that people subjectivities,

the child, this “father of Man” (Freud) was a sacred figure. So what happened to make the child assume for many the position of a worthless object, condemned to the worse [sic]outbursts of hate, violence, and destruction? (p. 204)

Agentic social engagement calls for an impulse toward mutuality, toward “becoming-with-one-another” and “beside ourselves” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 71) that allows us to absorb new alterities and expand our subjective possibilities. As Butler and Athanasiou note, what is at issue here is “the vexed thematics of agency” (p. 14): Can the apparatus of recognition and normalization ever be disorganized so that individuals might experience a “performative proclamation of a self that has been undone and redone”? (p. 65) Or, as they also suggest, can we ever overcome “the cunning of recognition” (p. 75)? This is, of course, a pedagogical question, immortalized, as Butler and Athanasiou note, in Fanon’s plea: “O, my body, make of me always a man who questions” (quoted on p. 80). Can we, then, imagine pedagogical systems or a therapeutic milieu that will enable children to begin to give an account of themselves (cf., Butler, 2001), in ways that will allow them to begin to deconstruct the systems of recognizability embedded in the familial, cultural, and political matrices within which they are embedded, and indeed from which they are constituted? The potential of moving children from mere existence or subservience to ethical relationality and agentic possibility suggests that we should pursue this question with some urgency.

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ⁱⁱ Save the Children: <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2023-press-releases/gaza--3-195-children-killed-in-three-weeks>

ⁱⁱⁱ UNICEF: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131622>

^{iv} UNHCR: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

^v <https://vimeo.com/617127022>

^{vi} <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n20/judith-butler/the-compass-of-mourning>

^{vii} <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/02/27/nyregion/explosion-twin-towers-children-for-17-kindergartners-5-hours-elevator.html>

^{viii} See my University profile page: <https://www.adelphi.edu/faculty/profiles/profile.php?PID=0064>, and my website, michaeloloughlinphd.com, for further detail.

^{ix} This discussion mainly draws on O'Loughlin (2023), O'Loughlin & de Assis (2021), and O'Loughlin (manuscript submitted for publication, b).