

Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education: Turning to Hope, Making Sanctuary

Janice Kroegerⁱ

Kent State University, U.S.A.

Orcid <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2415-1220>

and

Iris Bergerⁱⁱ

The University of British Columbia, Canada

Orcid <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9992-1453>

Abstract

As we try to learn ‘to stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth’ (Haraway, 2016), in this volume, we acknowledge grief and despondency, while turning to hope as a speculative gesture that things can be otherwise. Authors in this volume responded to questions such as How might we do early childhood education in the messiness (and tragedies) of this moment? and What would acting from where we are be when hope wrestles with despair? Utilizing post-qualitative, new materialist, anti-carceral, womanist, bell hooksian, post-colonial, and the more-than-human, each manuscript highlights movements, doings and undoings, which reconcile in-justices with childhoods.

Keywords: critical childhood studies, place-based childhoods, womanist/feminist, Anthropocene childhoods, feminist new materialism, post-qualitative methods with children

To figure out how, with each other, we can open up possibilities for what can still be...we can't do that in a negative mood. We can't do that if we do nothing but critique. We need critique; we absolutely need it. But it's not going to open up the sense of what might yet be. It's not going to open up the sense of that which is not yet possible but profoundly needed.

~Donna J. Haraway (in Weigl, 2019)

Where there is hope, there is difficulty

~ Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 2)

I can't forget the looks on faces of people who've lost hope. Be they gay, be they seniors, be they blacks looking for an almost-impossible job, be they Latinos trying to explain their problems and aspirations in a tongue that's foreign to them...

These were strong people, whose faces I knew from the shop, the streets, meetings and people who I never saw before, but I knew. They were strong, but even they needed hope.

~Harvey Milk (1978, p. 4, *The Hope Speech*)



We begin by acknowledging the lake Erie watershed, the stolen lands upon which Janice

Kroeger currently lives and works as the ancestral home of the Lenape, Cayuga, and the Tuscarawas people, as well as many others across time, including the Mingo, Kickapoo, Shawnee, Erie, and on. Iris Berger, acknowledges the land on which her study and work takes place as the unceded (not surrendered) territory of the Musqueam people who have lived in the Fraser River estuary, including much of Vancouver, for thousands of years.

As editors of this collection of the *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal*, a goal of ours was to curate manuscripts that ‘open the possibilities of what can still be’. We envisioned manuscripts with new responses to current worldly issues in the time of Anthropocene, and in the midst of ever increasing (especially since we launched the call) levels of conflict and violence. The geo-politics of late capitalism, including wars, migration, pollution, extreme weather events, and the persistent effects of colonialism, have created a precarious future for childhoods and the ‘earthly communities of life’ (Abram, 2020).

Against and within this milieu, where it feels like any sense of hope is ruptured before it takes shape, we wanted to disrupt a growing sense of speechlessness or paralysis that haunts us in the face of overwhelming system breakdown and an erosion of trust in the future (Klein, 2024). As we try to learn ‘to stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth’ (Haraway, 2016), in this volume, we acknowledge grief and despondency, while turning to *hope* as a speculative gesture that things can be otherwise. Authors in this volume responded to questions such as *How might we do early childhood education in the messiness (and tragedies) of this moment?* and *What would acting from where we are be when hope wrestles with despair?* Each manuscript highlights movements, *doings and undoings*, which reconcile justices with childhoods in its entanglements with the world by collectively (re)thinking, (re)configuring and (re)conceptualizing early childhood education in a time of heavy childhoods - without dragging children through the muck.

Even within rampant consumerism and divisive politics which ultimately shape and contour the practices of educators and opportunities for young children, we were enlivened by how each of the authors is committed to narrating towards the emergence of hope-filled-moments with children and educators. Each author in the volume recognizes the enormity of worldly issues facing early childhood educators, children, and families while carving unique conceptual terrains and pedagogies that make space - a pause to come up for air. Hope in this sense is not naive, but is an active stance, a dynamic, *a doing*... hope is much deeper, “that is over and against the evidence”... “hope is in the mess, in the mire, in the funk, helping to create new evidence” (West, n.d.). Even within the injustices of structural and contributory constraints or the totalizing ways that we encounter post-human concerns, the collection exhibits theoretical perspectives which help readers witness how educators are “making sanctuary” (Akomloafe, 2019a).

As feminist author Ahmed (2017) might say, the collective *willfulness* in this volume engages a *disturbance* in early childhood education because the authors are recognizing the problems by not letting the problems recede. The manuscripts bring diverse hope practices, leading us to conclude that hope is *how* the conceptual and pedagogic come together addressing *a seeing-beyond* the “consequences of neoliberalism” even as rising Authoritarianism creates havoc in ethical and inclusive spaces (Iorio et al., 2018, p. 300.)

The issue begins with Bookser’s article, *Teachers “Committed to a Livable Future”: Cultivating Womanist Anti-Carceral Praxis in Early Care and Education Settings*. The author engages with Anti-carceral Feminism and Womanism, rooted in Black women’s intellectual and theological work as pitted against and within the everyday political and socio-economic struggles of young children and families in schools. Using a Foucauldian analysis of the carceral continuum, Bookser explains how carceral logics (assumptions,

actions, materials anchored in surveillance, exclusion and punishment) are reinforced via educational logics within early care and education. Turning to hope, Bookser proposes nine dispositions that entail the end goal of ensuring that schools are loving, socially relevant, and politically conscious institutions.

Chan and Ritchie's paper, *Social Cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand*, offers policy critique to show how new social cohesion policies mask hegemony and assimilation in practice. Centering intersectionality, interculturality, and decolonisation, Chan and Ritchie feature a robust analysis of how current governmental signifiers are wrought with intentions to eliminate Māori language and identity. Such efforts undermine social cohesion of belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy—central values of the early childhood education policy document. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) emphasizes relationships/Ngā Hononga, belonging/Mana Whenua, and world relations/Te waihanga hononga, which, as Chan and Ritchie argue, can stand as a signifier of critical pedagogies, transforming early childhood settings to sites of hope and sanctuary. Chan and Ritchie's work rekindles trust in (early) education to deliver a counter-colonial praxis, demonstrating how hope can be realized even in the fact(s) of rightwing conservatism.

Menon and Karmiris' (article in this issue) *bell hooksian love: Enacting Power-Sharing as an ECE Praxis of Unlearning*, propose bell hooksian love as a method and praxis to counter neoliberalism, individualism, and standardization. They argue that bell hooksian love can not only mitigate the dismissal of “multiply marginalized” children, but also offer a pathway toward collective healing and radical hope. Theorizing love as a refusal of fear and the capacity to grieve and hold loss with dignity, the authors share vignettes about two encounters (one about relations between teacher and child who is an English language learner and the other about a researcher and a mother who is a refugee) to demonstrate how a practice grounded in bell hooksian love incites counterstorying as resistance to deficit narratives - embracing solidarity and shared humanity instead of competition and pathology.

In *Worldmaking With Children, Place and the More-Than-Human: Making Sanctuary in Complex Times*, Boucher and Malloy Murphy, take the reader on a journey by sharing a long-term, arts-based inquiry project with a kindergarten community on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, in Bendigo, Australia. In this project, local place(s) became sites of experimental and dynamic learning encounters. As children and educators walked through local places, children documented the walks through mapping, drawing, and telling stories - attending to the layered histories of Country, community, and colonization. In this inquiry, worldmaking acted as an ontological and pedagogical process. The authors illustrate with text and images how in the act of walking-with (e.g., place, animals, and materials), children and Place co-created new lines of connections, new understandings, and new relations with their local environments. For Boucher and Malloy Murphy, sanctuary is co-created with children's worlds of hope, generated *with* Place amidst extraction, waste, and a growing climate crisis.

Goddard's *Playful Inquiry as Fugitive Hope: Making Sanctuary in Early Childhood Education in the Anthropocene*, shares a study with/about an educators' collective called *Playing in the Anthropocene Inquiry Group* (PLAi). The paper maintains that the playfulness of the collective inquiry into early childhood pedagogy, became a practice of making sanctuary that supported educators in imagining and living education otherwise. Utilizing post-qualitative methods to analyze the groups' meetings and conversations, Goddard is open to working within the messy and uncertain as the group meetings embrace slowness, lingering in the tensions and failures, and re-turning to being enchanted with “mundane,” everyday practices with young children without the demand for resolutions and mastery.

Situating the baby room as a site of intra-action between humans and more than human bodies, Schofield's *Sanctuary in the Spill: Milk, Melon, Mess and the Micropolitics of Touch*, finds (micro) possibilities for hope and sanctuary in the entanglements of touch and affect in everyday messiness. Working from a post-qualitative, feminist new materialist lens, the paper traces the micropolitics of touch in the infant room with a story of spilled milk occurring during a snack-time encounter with Toby. Diffractively analyzing the encounter, Schofield illuminates how milk, cup, child, educator, gestures, sense, and bodily responses assemble into a micropolitical site - a possibility for (re)thinking and a disturbance in how educators come to know. Schofield ultimately argues that "to stay with the spill" is to refuse the "regulatory, developmental, or interpretive" that are prevalent in early childhood practices and policies, and instead dwell in the micropolitics that animate the complexities of early childhood life.

Clark's *The Already-Whole Child: Reconceptualizing Care and Sanctuary through Childism*, begins with a question: "What would early childhood education look like if young children were recognized as already-whole and fully human beings?" Clark posits that critical childism and care theory have the capacity to unhinge adultist, developmentalist, and neoliberalism in early childhood education. Through a series of vignettes, Clark examines how care is negotiated with/through adultist power, developmental knowledge, and institutional policies to regulate children's bodies, rhythms, and relationships. The paper imagines sanctuary through relational practices rooted in love - arguing for affirming children's humanity as an essential criterion for care.

As we try to compose a concluding paragraph before this issue is published, we feel a sense of urgency while humbly accepting the idea that we cannot "fix" the world (Akomloafe, 2020). Holding on to the assumption that we can "save" the world, entails perpetuating "the myth of complete repair, the very storyline of colonial progress" (Akomloafe, 2019b, n.p.). We are staying with the teachers and researchers in their everyday lives to think beyond the walls and wars, finding the cracks - "disrupting the exclusivity of human agency" - witnessing an opening into a world that is livable with and for our children, ourselves, and our multi-species kin (Haraway, 2008). We are inspired by the authors to embrace practices that make space for "making sanctuary."

We offer that the work curated in the collection acts as the "political sublime in the face of tyranny" (West, 2011, p. 357), which has the potential to outlast the rhetorical and physical violence created by rising authoritarianism (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2025). Because teaching is mediated by human thought and "curriculum inevitably reflects the beliefs and values of its curators" (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2025, p. 47), we posit that learning with and doing otherwise, like the stories shared in this collection, propels us to willfully act out hope, concluding, "hope will never be silent" (Milk, 1978).

References

- Abram, D. (2020). In the ground of our unknowing. *Emergence Magazine*, 7. <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/in-the-ground-of-our-unknowing/>
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press. ISBN-100822363194
- Akomloafe, B. (2019a, March 15). *Making Sanctuary: Hope, Companionship, Race and Emergence in the Anthropocene*. Keynote Speech, 'Seeking Connections Across Generations' for Spiritual Directors International at the Seattle Marriott Bellevue. <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/making-sanctuary-hope-companionship-race-and-emergence-in-the-anthropocene>
- Akomloafe, B. (2019b, June, 14). *We won't save the world*. <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/we-wont-save-the-world>
- Akomloafe, B. (2020, November 13). *What I Mean By Postactivism*. Blog post. <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/what-i-mean-by-postactivism>

- Haraway, J. Donna (2008). *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, J. Donna (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373780>
- Haraway, J. D. (2019, December 7) (interviewed by Moira Weigel). A Giant Bumptious Litter: Donna Haraway on Truth. *Logic Magazine*, 8, <https://logicmag.io/nature/a-giant-bumptious-litter/>
- Iorio, J. M., Parnell, W. Quintero, E. P. & Hamm, C. (2018). Early Childhood Teacher Educator as Public Intellectual. in *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education and Care—A Reader: Critical Questions, New Imaginaries & Social Activism*. In Bloch, Marianne, N. Swadener, Beth Blue, & Gaile Cannella (Editors). pp. 299-312.
- Klein, N. (2024). *Doppelganger: A trip into the mirror world*. Random House.
- Michael-Luna, S. C., & Castner, D. J. (2025). Rising Authoritarian Practice in Early Childhood Curriculum: A Case Study. *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, 25(1), 44–55. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.kent.edu/10.1177/15327086241271898>
- Milk, H. (1978). Commentary: *The Harvey Milk Speech*. (1978). Accessed on March 9th, 2026, at <https://terpconnect.umd.edu/~jklumpp/ARD/MilkSpeech.pdf>
- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Te Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early childhood curriculum*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/early-childhood/teaching-and-learning/te-whariki/>
- Weigel, M. (2019, June 20). Feminist cyborg scholar Donna Haraway: ‘The disorder of our era isn’t necessary.’ *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/donna-haraway-interview-cyborg-manifesto-post-truth>
- West, Cornell (n.d.). Hope and Optimism: Love and Loss. *Master Class*. <https://www.masterclass.com/classes/cornel-west-teaches-philosophy/chapters/hope-and-optimism-love-and-loss>
- West, C., & Ehrenberg, J. (2011). Left Matters: An Interview with Cornel West. *New Political Science*, 33(3), 357–369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2011.592023>

ⁱ Dr. Janice Kroeger is a Professor of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum, at Kent State University, U.S.A. She has been a laboratory school teacher, a researcher, faculty member and advocate for multiply positioned and minoritized children including refugee, African-American, and LGBTQI+ students and their families since the mid-90s. Kroeger positions her research at the cusp of advocacy and social change, noting the ways in which families and children adapt and grow within identities under scrutiny. Her most recent work applies multi-method and arts-based advocacy among LGBTQI+ stakeholders to build solidarity and belonging among those who support, protect, and provide sanctuary to gender-diverse children below the age of 12. Correspondence can be found at jkroegel@kent.edu.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Iris Berger is an Associate Professor of Teaching, Faculty of Education, at The University of British Columbia, Canada. She has been involved in the field of early childhood education as a teacher, researcher, community organizer, policy consultant, and university instructor since the mid 1990s. Iris is committed to reconceptualizing early childhood education as an ongoing political and pedagogical project that keeps the realm of early education tethered and relevant to worldly matters. Her research interests combine a reimagining of leadership in early childhood education with place based, sustainability focused practices with young children. Correspondence can be found at iris.berger@ubc.ca