Hoping for Love in Early Care and Education On Confronting the Enormity of the Tasks

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It's counterintuitive, but we want to start this article with despair and possibly find hope as we write. Right now, social violence is again spiraling out of control: the Trump administration is surveilling, arresting, injuring, and deporting people, starting wars, and making deep cuts into the already-thin fabric of social safety nets (Anderson et al., 2026). But it's not just this rampant violence that makes us despair, it is also the awareness of history and its repetitions, of the struggles and failures of social movements, and the reality of an early care and education (ECE) system marked by persistent inequities,[1] despite all efforts to transform it. In this article, we ponder how to find hope and a course toward liberation amid the cruelty of power. Our reflections explore the intersection of the political economy of care, social movements and activism, and everyday life in educational settings and families.

This article grew out of the bond of love and sisterhood between the two of us—a friendship which began at an international workshop on feminist perspectives in ECE held in Vienna back in 2017. We come from different generations, continents, and communities, although we could both be described as white, middle-class women. What connects us is our experience working with children and other educators in ECE programs, our decision to transition from direct daily care and teaching to try to change policy and pedagogy, and our passion for social transformation.

Marcy participated in the feminist, civil rights, and anti-war movements of the late 1960s and gained experience organizing the ECE workforce and building collective knowledge and leadership skills among ECE workers. Sabine was born in Austria in 1985, when Marcy was already working on a study to demonstrate the link between low pay and poor-quality care (Whitebook et al., 1990; Whitebook et al., 1998). As a teenager, Sabine witnessed the rise of the far right in Austria while training to become an early educator; she later studied political science in Vienna as a first-generation college student and then participated in the social movements in Spain in the 2010s centered on housing, education, workers' rights, and feminist struggles.

Our journeys have been quite different, but ever since we met, we have relished exchanging thoughts about the world, exploring both our differences and similarities. Over the past few years, each of us has embarked on a journey of in-depth exploration: Sabine delved deeply into feminist psychoanalytic theory and political economy to gain

[1] Inequities are the cornerstone of the ECE system; they have shaped its construction from its very beginning and remain prevalent today. These include: 1) poor pay and working conditions for the primarily female workforce; 2) insufficient funding and the struggle to finance early care and education as a public good; 3) racial discrimination against children, families, educators, and caregivers of color, shaping their experiences; and 4) federal and state policies and funding that prioritize services identified as early education over those considered primarily child care. For more information, see Enduring Inequities on the ECHOES website (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment [CSCCE], 2022). While this article focuses primarily on the early care and education system in the United States, political and social violence in the field of child care is a widespread phenomenon (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2025; Eurofound, 2025).

a better understanding of the underlying structures of childhood and care in our current societies, while Marcy developed a history website called "ECHOES," Early Childhood History, Organizing, Ethos and Strategy to share the untold stories of ECE activism with those seeking to understand and transform the ECE system (CSCCE, 2022).

We have been learning from and alongside each other, sharing our heartbreak over the violence in the world we live in, as well as many laughs and the joys and challenges of being grand/mothers. It's wonderful to see our grand/daughters witnessing each other grow up—even though one is asleep while the other is awake on the other side of the globe—listening to stories and looking at pictures from the other, and even playing together during a brief visit. The bond of our friendship is rooted in what has united us from the very beginning: our commitment to caring for children and other caregivers, as well as our strong desire for a world that learns to love them, too.

In this piece, we draw on the rich tradition of feminist thought and activism, trying to come to terms with the enormity of the task of bending the ECE system towards social justice. Along the way, Audre Lorde—who described herself as "Black lesbian feminist" (2007, p. 110)—inspired us with her unforgettable words: "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (2007, p. 132–133). We contemplate our own experiences and knowledge while engaging deeply with the wisdom and philosophy of women of color to whom we turn for guidance. Despite the invisibilization and exploitation they face, their vital role in community and movement building—and in creating a transformed ECE system for themselves, children, and families—has inspired not only us, but many people—and continues to do so (Williams, 2022).[2]

Our hope here is to discover overlooked paths toward a liberating love within early care and education. "Why love?" you might ask. Because "[l]ove, empathy, and pleasure may be the types of affect necessary to transform ourselves, our communities, our world, our souls: that which is necessary to move us to do our work" (Moore, 2013, n.p.). With this transformative love in mind, we would like to initiate a conversation about how to love caregivers: the ECE workforce and also the mothers and fathers, the grandparents and aunties, the alloparents[3] and othermothers[4] who provide care to young children.

We argue that we need to transform both ECE activism and pedagogy in order to repair and heal the relationship with the caregiver. Caregivers should no longer be viewed as the airbag that cushions children in times of crisis, or as a moral compass in a world corrupted by the sadistic pleasures of the powerful, or as the embodiment of an environment that is "good enough" for child development, or as poorly paid instructors preparing children for school; rather, they should be seen as people with desires and needs that both society and children must learn to meet with love. We believe that

[2] In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, childcare facilities and kindergartens were segregated by race almost without exception, which meant that Black children had few educational opportunities and Black women had limited access to training and teaching positions. Local Black Women's Clubs worked to eliminate racial inequalities in access to kindergartens and child care and to create culturally appropriate experiences for Black children, while simultaneously facing additional challenges in securing funding and creating training opportunities for aspiring Black teachers. Their efforts directly helped reduce the isolation and suffering of Black kindergarten teachers, even though their salaries remained lower than those of white teachers, and this inequality persists for many to this day (Whitebook et al., 2022). For further reading on the role of Black educators in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the pursuit of racial and gender justice, see Profiles in ECE leadership (Williams & Whitebook, 2021; Whitebook & Williams, 2021).

[3] "Alloparenting" describes a common form of child rearing practiced in a variety of cultures, where care is provided not only by parents, but also by grandparents, siblings, and other relatives, as well as by unrelated community members such as teachers and neighbors.

[4] "Othermothers" is a term used to describe people who care for children with whom they have neither a legal nor a biological relationship.

teaching and learning to love caregivers must be at the heart of ECE and activism if we seek to achieve real social change.

Examining feminist theory and activism since the 1970s, it becomes apparent that individual "liberation" from care work does not solve the problem of the care economy and its impact on caregivers. As Audre Lorde reminds us: "If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color?" (Lorde 2007, p.112). There is still only one path to individual "emancipation," striving for a well-paid professional position outside the care sector; a path often referred to as "White Feminism." In other words: the pursuit of establishing oneself in a position of social power that allows people to deny their dependence on others—facilitated by institutionalized access to low-paid care work (cleaning services, housekeepers, etc.) and an ECE system based on low-wage labor. Until now, feminist efforts have too often been limited to trying to escape the realm of care and to separate caregiving from femininity, but we have failed—and perhaps we haven't even truly devoted much of our strength and energy to transforming the predominant culture of care. As Audre Lorde puts it so eloquently:

> [I]f there is one thing we can learn from the 60s, it is how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be. For we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves. Through examining the combination of our triumphs and errors, we can examine the dangers of an incomplete vision (Lorde 2007, p. 135).

Early childhood care and education continue to be shaped by ideas, aspirations, and material conditions that serve neither the best interests of young children nor those of the adults entrusted with their well-being. Early educator activists at the end of the 20th century came together to address their poor wages and working conditions and spoke out early on about how their professional preparation failed to address the challenges they encountered working in drastically underfunded programs and the role they could play to address them.

They maintained that in order to better meet the needs of children and families, they required better pay and working conditions to sustain their livelihoods and enable them to afford to stay on the job. By breaking the silence and isolation pervasive in the field about their need for rights, raises, and respect, early educators encountered broad support among other center- and home-based providers, many of whom joined them as activists. These activist teachers knew that without their voices, wages would never be seen as an urgent problem that had to be solved. But they quite often found themselves in opposition to leaders and advocates in ECE who maintained it was unprofessional to speak about teachers' wages and needs and that their focus should be solely on the professionalization of the field and the educational needs of the children entrusted in their care (Whitebook et al., 2024).

Efforts of ECE leaders to move beyond the historical association with devalued care work have backfired, with those who work with very young children too often regarded as targets of reform rather than as sources of wisdom for improving policy and pedagogy (Richardson & Langford, 2023). After decades of so-called professionalization and despite growing attention to the well-being of the ECE workforce, practitioners currently face increased regulation, heightened oversight, and persistent and worsening racial inequalities (Austin et al., 2019; Sloan, 2022).

And the question remains: Why is it inconceivable to offer childcare workers the same wages and working conditions as other skilled workers in the working class? Although pay is higher in some countries due to government investment, most work with young children is paid far below comparable jobs in other industries. In the United States, the childcare workforce finds itself at the lowest wage level of the working class; almost all other occupations (97 percent) earn more than childcare workers (McLean et al., 2024).

The ECE system was built—and continues to function—on the backs of millions of women who earn poverty-level wages. Caring for and teaching young children has always been considered "women's work," an ideology that served to devalue early care and education when it emerged as an educational service in the mid-19th century:

> God seems to have made woman peculiarly suited to guide and develop the infant mind, and it seems…very poor policy to pay a man 20 or 22 dollars a month for teaching children the ABCs, when a female could do the work more successfully at one third of the price (Littleton Massachusetts School Committee Report, 1849, cited in Levin, 2000).

Many of the caregivers who originally worked in the U.S. were enslaved Black women who were forced to care for the children of their white enslavers without pay. Often, they were further exploited as wet nurses, with no control over their bodies or how they wanted to care for their own children (Vogtman, 2017; Siolda & Thorley, 2022). After emancipation, Black women received minimal pay when hired to do domestic work, and even today, racialized early educators are more likely to work as assistant teachers and/or work with infants and toddlers—job roles that are associated with lower wages compared to other positions in the ECE field (Whitebook et al., 2026). In recent decades, rather than leading to a reevaluation of the entire field, efforts to professionalize it have intensified racial stratification, compensation gaps, unequal working conditions, and disparities in educational and professional development opportunities (Whyte & Delaney, 2025).

Policy initiatives in the early 2000s shifted their focus to quality rating policies aimed at improving programs and teachers, rather than addressing the underlying issues in the ECE system that were causing low quality and earnings. By 2010, quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) were in place in nearly every U.S. state, and they absorbed the majority of state funding and attention. Consultants, coaches, raters, evaluators, and trainers were hired, typically at higher pay rates than educators and caregivers, and sometimes at the expense of children as their teachers left their classroom for these higher paying jobs. Center and family child care workers frequently reported that their experience, skills, and wisdom were not valued in the rating process. Although research has shown that pay and working conditions impact quality, standards rarely rated a program based on these factors.

When we consider the undervalued status of ECE professionals in general and the hierarchies within the sector, it becomes very clear that financial and social devaluation is directly linked to the amount of care work involved in a particular job description. Despite the critical importance of their work in all settings, workers' pay varies depending on whether they work in a private home, school, or child care center; the ages of the children they care for; and the availability of public funding for their setting. Even within the same program or community, those who work with infants and toddlers are considered caregivers who perform unskilled work. This difference in income stems partly from program funding and sponsorship. Compared to services for children age three to five, services for infants and toddlers are even more likely to rely on parent fees and much less likely to receive public funding. Approximately 15 percent of centers serving infants and toddlers report public funding as their primary source of revenue, compared to 50 percent of centers that serve only preschoolers (Whitebook et al., 2026).

Profit margins in the ECE sector are very low, yet this has not prevented private equity firms from entering or continuing to operate in the field, even though it is already heavily exploited. The main ways to generate profits in ECE are to increase staff-to-child ratios or to cut wages and raise fees. A particularly aggressive form of profit-driven intervention in ECE involves private equity firms that acquire facilities, restructure them through cost-cutting, asset sales, or price hikes, and then resell them to other investors after a few years. The quality of care for the children and the well-being of the care staff are their least concern compared to investor profits (Stienon, 2026). Private equity firms remain committed to exploring new revenue streams within the ECE sector, whether by running facilities for children with disabilities, managing subsidies, or collecting data for states, counties, and other public agencies that work with service users and providers (O'Brien, 2026).

Care understood as wage labor and as a commodity is only one dimension of care; the bulk of necessary care work in modern societies remains largely invisible and unpaid. Care work is so vital to humanity, yet it demands so much time and energy that capitalist societies must render it invisible and devalue it—because otherwise there would be no profit left, as most of the resources would have to be reinvested directly back into the care work needed by every society. In other words, a genuine transformation toward social justice would require societies to bear the actual costs of care, fundamentally changing the economy and culture of care not only through fair wages for paid care services, but also through compensation for care that until now has been rendered entirely invisible (Soiland, 2016).

Such a fundamental restructuring of the care sector was unthinkable for most of recent history—not only for those who benefit from or depend on care services, but also for those advocating for their transformation, as the implications of such a profound change seemed too far-reaching. Consequently, societies that are unwilling to bear the full cost of the labor required may not only render the necessity and provision of care and care work invisible, but may assign them to ideologically defined genders or groups expected to bear the responsibility for care, or may even celebrate care workers as indispensable laborers in the hope that this strategy will suffice,[5] since their absence would have devastating consequences and lead to an escalation of suffering.

At this historical moment, there is good reason to hope that social movements are bold enough to envision a better future; at the Community Change Convention in August 2026, Dorian Warren, co-president of Community Change Action said: "The childcare system in this country is not broken. It was built this way on purpose. It was built on the stolen labor of Black women — forced, under slavery, to rock somebody else's baby while somebody sold their own. (...). But here is what I know: what was designed can be redesigned. What was built can be rebuilt. What was constructed can be reconstructed by us" (as cited in Community Change Action, 2026).

The scope of this task—the restructuring of early care and education—is determined by the political economy of care: although some segments of the ECE workforce are visible and compensated, they remain embedded in a care sector that is largely unpaid and often rendered invisible, a sector that also includes mothers, grandmothers, and other unpaid caregivers. Despite decades of so-called professionalization of ECE—which could also be described as an attempt to elevate the status of the profession by rebranding it as education alone rather than education *and* care—the economics of early care and

[5] ECE programs and workers were expected to meet the urgent needs of parents and children during the 1918 flu pandemic and the COVID-19 pandemic and were celebrated as vitally important. As the initial spread of the respective pandemics subsided, however, early educators lost financial and other support, even though their services remained critically needed for adults and children who were still recovering or coping with the loss of spouses and parents or the lingering effects of serious illness (Adejumo & Whitebook, 2026).

education remain closely tied to the vast portion of the economic iceberg of care that remains hidden. Attempts to "professionalize" a fraction of the ECE sector do not solve the problem of the care economy and its impact on caregivers.

In the discourse surrounding the professionalization of early care and education, care is only rarely mentioned; it is thus rendered invisible and taken for granted at best, and at worst, caring relationships are even deemed obsolete and eliminated altogether. The emphasis on ECE as an essential component of human capital development went hand in hand with efforts to establish standardized procedures for assessing child development and promoting school readiness (Moss, 2018). Although children still depend on others to meet their physical and emotional needs, the professionalized childcare practitioner is no longer envisioned as someone who nurtures and loves children. It is not surprising that there have recently been increased calls to connect professionalization with care and love (Murphy, 2022). However, the affirmation of loving care as an integral part of ECE pedagogy must also call into question the sacrifice of caregivers if it is not to revert to maternalistic notions of child care.

The Enormity of the Tasks

> They've made a commitment, our students in early childhood education, to society by nurturing the next generation. We need to make a commitment as a society to them (Juan Salgado in Harill, 2026).

With few exceptions, the exploitation of people who provide care work is tacitly accepted everywhere—even by those who fight for a more socially just system. If we are honest with ourselves, many of those who care about the wellbeing of children (and other people in need)—including many caregivers themselves—find the consequences of them no longer serving as a reliable lifeline in today's violent and unsupportive world unthinkable. The mere thought that caregivers might give up sacrificing themselves and/or being sacrificed for the wellbeing of others cannot be entertained without panic and public outcry: "What about the children?"

Our fear of a world in which this kind of (self-)sacrifice no longer exists has led us into a vicious cycle: by accepting the sacrifice of caregivers as the foundation of society, we accept a social system that considers it acceptable to exploit and devalue certain people to ensure the prosperity of others. And on an even deeper level, this sacrifice of the people who care for us in the first moments, months, and years of our lives leads to a subjectivity and culture that is incapable of relating to others without resorting to violence—that is, of satisfying one's own needs through the exploitation of others (Hattinger-Allende, 2023). If our earliest relationships are marked by society's disregard for the desires and needs of the very people whose care and affection are essential to our lives, how are we ever supposed to learn to love and respect others? In this way, the fantasy of safe havens of care is inextricably linked to social violence. The societal sacrifice of the caregiver sanctions and may even engender other forms of sacrifice and violence (Ramazani, 2003; Huston, 1985).[6]

Caregivers are being pressured to take on almost all responsibility for the vulnerability of people in a society where there are insufficient resources for care and where the people who do this work enjoy neither respect nor rights. Isn't it already implied in the terms "caregiver" and "care recipient" that no reciprocity is to be expected: the giver gives, and

[6] In his study of fascist leaders in interwar Germany, Klaus Theweleit demonstrated that their political actions, discourse, and unconscious desires were rooted in the sacrifice of the female body—the imagination of a masculine "body armor" that shielded them from everything feminine and maternal—from vulnerability, care, and intersubjectivity—while at the same time projecting the image of the selfless nurse as the lifeline of the heroic soldier (Theweleit, 1987; see also the foreword by Barbara Ehrenreich).

the recipient receives. It seems that caregivers—much like Santa Claus in our imaginations—have an infinite number of gifts to give. Aren't they magical?

What's more, care work is never finished. And in Western societies, it is also poorly supported culturally—that is, there are not many traditions or public rituals that accompany the work of caregiving. Caregivers are, most often, hidden figures whose work has to do with bodily functions, liquids, and needs that are not meant to be exposed to the public. As Jacqueline Rose describes so elegantly:

> The radical care and visceral mess of child-rearing must neither degrade nor stain the upstanding citizen. The shameful debris of the human body, familiar to any mother, must not enter the domain of public life and spill onto the streets (Rose, 2018, p. 46).

Instead of celebrating human connection and care, cultures in the Global North (with some exceptions)[7] seem to be dominated by a sense of shame regarding our bodies, our bodily needs, and our dependence on one another. While it has long been a burning desire of humanity to escape our corporeal selves, we remain unable to shed our bodies. (Fortunately, one might add.) Historically, the care of humanity's unwieldy flesh has been the charge of colonized and working-class women (McClintock, 1995). Despite all endeavors to counteract the violent beginnings of the modern world, the longstanding division between mind and body persists: education is celebrated, while care is devalued. The educated mind still perceives itself as autonomous, which makes the invisibilized work of care the prerequisite for education.

The denial of the fact that one cannot get through life without the care of others makes it difficult to foster more collective—or even public—forms of mutual care. The caregiver is ultimately left alone to grapple with what it means to be human. Care deals with everything that is difficult: from entering the world (naked and completely dependent on others), to leaving it (hopefully with someone by our side), and everything that happens to our bodies and souls in between. These are all experiences we cannot and do not wish to go through on our own. Caregivers have to deal with all these difficult situations and emotions, but who takes care of the emotional needs of the caregivers?

In Western cultural heritage, the figure of the mother symbolizes unconditional love and care, appearing as something natural and devoid of deeper cultural significance. We will use the term "Maternal" to emphasize that this cultural figure cannot be reduced to biological motherhood, but rather represents a social position, a concept, a symbolic role, and a function that in a certain sense, touches all caregivers with its ideological symbolism. Therefore, Maternal refers to the gift of care and not to a specific gender or kinship relationship—rather, it refers to a place in the dominant discourse and economy. It refers to the entire care sector and the ideologies that contribute to rendering the gift of care invisible and devaluing it (Guenther, 2006). As Jaqueline Rose writes so powerfully about the figure of the mother:

> [M]otherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it

[7] Since the beginning of the violent colonization of the Americas, Indigenous peoples have sought to preserve and pass on their ways of relating to the natural world, community, and care to the next generation—despite the history of dispossession and forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples, which continues to shape inequities in the U.S. ECE system today. In California alone, Indigenous peoples possessed a rich cultural diversity, speaking more than 100 languages with some 300 dialects. Children were often raised and taught not only by their families, but also by the community, and they continue to be cherished in Indigenous societies because they carry the beliefs and traditions of their community. History and cultural traditions are passed down by elders through storytelling and practical skills (Whitebook et al., 2025).

> means to be fully human. It is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which it becomes her task—unrealizable of course—of mothers to repair. (...) What are we doing—what aspects of our social arrangements and of our inner lives, what forms of historic injustice, do we turn our backs on, above all, what are we doing to mothers—when we expect them to carry the burden of everything that is hardest to contemplate about our society and ourselves? (...) Unless we recognize what we are asking mothers to perform in the world—and for the world—we will continue to tear both the world and mothers to pieces (Rose, 2018, p. 1-2).

To change the system, we must first acknowledge that the exploitation of childcare workers is deeply rooted in the very foundations of Western culture. For it is precisely this cultural construct of the Maternal that justifies care work as a low-paid service. However, it seems insufficient to consider only the economic aspect of this sacrifice—this social relationship with the Maternal is also linked to racist hatred and misogyny. It is therefore important to examine the psychological side of it, although this matter is rather disturbing. After all, the economic interests in keeping caregivers invisible and exploiting them appear more objective and less cruel than the assumption that there may be other darker reasons for dehumanizing the people who take care of everything that is most human. Jacqueline Rose examines Western society's sadistic impulses toward the Maternal, which we can posit are directed toward all caregivers:

> [W]e should never underestimate the sadism that mothers can provoke. (...) The message, spoken and unspoken, is clear: we will not take care of you, or allow you to take care of yourself, because part of us wants you out of here, or dead. (...) The mothers of the Western world are at once punished for being mothers and instructed to love without reservation. The hate, we could say, is perfectly proportionate to the love, the intensity of the demand matches the deluded expectation, the variation a cover for reproach. (...) [w]hen the world turns ugly, when it cannot bear to confront its own cruelty, the punishing of mothers darkens and intensifies (Rose, 2018, p. 25-26, 97-98, 188).

Are we prepared to consider the possibility that sadistic pleasure may be at play here, and that our societies want caregivers to suffer, want for them to be rendered invisible, exploited, and powerless? Could we also consider the possibility that early care and education—even in its most utopian aspirations—unconsciously fuels this desire? Indeed, even the pedagogies and politics of liberation often enough fail to release caregivers from the demands placed on them to care for people in need—or more precisely, to embody compassion and comfort for everyone at all times (except, of course, for the caregivers themselves).

We do not have a solution to this problem, because we, too, do not want to abandon the ethics of care and refuse to imagine a world without caring love. At the same time, we recognize that the profound social change required to end the exploitation of caregivers cannot be achieved overnight. What we would like to present here is an initial idea—still very rough and evolving—for a pedagogy of liberation that focuses on working toward a different relationship with the gift of care and the Maternal. A society that seeks to encounter (m)others rather than exploit them. One that does not view caregivers as people who can and should give endlessly, but rather as human beings who also deserve love and care.

Captive Maternals: Community, Activism, and Care

> Who loves her anyway? I do. We all must. Our love must be a conscientious practice (Odozor, 2022, p. 254).

"What does it mean to love in disposability zones? And what does it mean when the children, the youth, tell you that you betrayed them, because you submitted?" asks Joy James, a political philosopher, who devoted much of her theoretical work to sharing and illuminating the struggle for Black liberation in the United States. "So what's the plan?" she continues. "It's untenable. But we keep loving. That's inevitable. But under these conditions the mutations are going to be fierce. Because we cannot deliver. Survival is not sufficient anymore" (Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Miguel de Allende [UUFSMA], 2022, 29:19).

Through the analytical concept of the "Captive Maternal," James is able to capture many dimensions of the lived experiences of Black caregivers and activists who serve communities through various forms of care, experiencing exploitation and degradation, yet also rebelling and building communities of resistance. In her rich exploration of agency within the interconnectedness of the care sector, activism, and the political sphere, James demonstrates how the Captive Maternal can be "identified by their/our *function* in service, caretaking, sacrifice, and resistance to dishonor and disposability" (James, 2023a, n.p.).

Assuming that care workers have their hands constantly full with an un-assumable task that is never complete, it is only logical that they "have limited energy, time, and means—and their own health issues" (James 2023b, p. 221). But there is another layer to it, because the same could be said about activism. Activism for social justice is a never-ending task that is usually performed without pay or for little money and does not improve the position of individual activists within the societies in which we live; in fact, the opposite is usually the case—at least during the struggle or when a movement fails. Being an activist often means endangering yourself. Needless to say, the experiences of sacrifice and isolation among activists vary depending on the economic, cultural, and political context in which they occur as well as on the global situation**.** Joy James reminds us that the time and energy of the Captive Maternal is not only consumed by the care economy, but also by the demands of social activism to ensure the survival of their community:

> Even in resistance for freedom, differentiated time is tied to captivity. Captive Maternals organize mourners and protestors against police or vigilante violence that disproportionately kills sons and disproportionately often requires female kin to mount public campaigns in memory and honor of the slain and in search for justice. The time and trauma of mothers, aunts, sisters, and daughters fill public political advocacy and private domestic duties (...). Entering the public realm of protest requires leaving to some extent the private realm of reproductive or domestic labor. Who will now pick up kids after school, get dinner on the table, oversee homework, and help family manage grief? Surrogate maternals, many times younger or older women, such that teenage daughters or grandmothers might be utilized to fill the void more than their masculine counterparts (James, 2016, p. 280).

In addition—and now we are approaching the heart of the matter—modern politics is founded upon the invisibility of care. The political game can only be played outside the care economy. Sitting at the table where decisions are made is only possible by accepting the cultural norm of acting as if you are independent while relying heavily on the care work performed by others who are rendered invisible and exploited. Even progressive political figures will have to assume this contradiction. There is barely time in the day

left for assuming care if you want to be part of all the conversations and decisions made at the table. You cannot sit at this table—at least not in the way it is built right now—and assume care work or organizing and caring for resisting communities at the same time (Whitebook 1997).

Social movements are deeply enmeshed in this difficult relationship between care and the political, even if they are sustained by dreams of social justice. Because activism—as care for community and social justice—is not only bound to liberation and connection, but also to sacrifice. For much too long, social movements have been perpetuating the trope of sacrificing oneself for a greater good or a community-to-come. We can observe that even social movements tend to build community without fundamentally changing the relationship to care, to our bodies, and to the fact that we are born dependent and reliant on (m)others and the natural world, which means that often enough, we create communities in order to defend ourselves from social violence while we re-create the way community is built: on the backs of invisibilized caregivers. Without realizing it, we often work hard to change society toward social justice, while simultaneously replicating the deeply rooted origins of social violence: sacrifice (Hattinger-Allende, 2023). It is becoming increasingly clear that self-sacrificing care for others and/or social transformation will not set us free, even if it supposedly serves a higher purpose.

If we want people to organize for better ECE systems—or even for better working conditions—without questioning the logic of sacrifice at the heart of Western societies, what are we actually asking caregivers to do? To sacrifice themselves for the children or a few dollars more, while everything else remains the same? And even more problematic: What are we asking caregivers to do in the name of "liberating pedagogies" if these pedagogies are not intended to liberate them, as well? The question remains: "How might we disturb social interdependence so that we open up possibilities to challenge the political status of the early years workforce and the workplace resistance to new voices and views round practice?" (Gallagher & Stobbs, 2023, p. 8).

In the case of the Captive Maternals, there is—for everyone in this position—a decision to be made: either try to find a way beyond the care economy, which simultaneously means submitting to the rules of capitalist colonial patriarchy, or at least take on one of two (im)possible tasks. First, caring for people in a society that clings to the illusion that it does not need care and, therefore, renders you invisible, exploits you, and disregards you. Second, caring for this same society as an activist, trying to force it to embrace its humanity, without being in a position of power and without any protection. That said, as of now, there doesn't seem to be a third option. Or is there? How could we get society to acknowledge and honor caregivers? How do we need to transform the pedagogy and systems of early care and education? How do we need to change the way we struggle for social justice in order to liberate the Captive Maternal?

On the Possibility of Love Without Sacrifice

> …so that you will love me well enough so that we will know exactly where is the love: that it is here, between us, and growing stronger and growing stronger (Jordan, 2002, p. 274).

The pioneering Black feminist bell hooks wrote that we can clearly distinguish between love and abuse "[w]hen we understand love as a will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth" (hooks, 2001, p. 6). Such a definition of love assumes that love is based on reciprocity, is tied to self-love, and involves desires that go beyond the affection between two people. In her analysis of modern society and the violence that pervades it, bell hooks leaves no doubt: "Awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination" (hooks, 2001, p. 87).

With this definition of love in mind, we must once again acknowledge that the needs and desires of caregivers and their spiritual growth are rarely taken into account in early care and education—apart from the notion that serving others is equivalent to spiritual fulfillment. The concept of motherhood—the idea of a natural gift or instinct possessed by women—clearly shaped early care and education in its early days, with educators such as Friedrich Froebel envisioning the ideal teacher as a maternal figure modeled after the Virgin Mary (Hattinger-Allende, 2024). Clearly captivated by the notion that it is the duty and ability of the Maternal to bring a sense of warmth and calm to the world, Froebel wrote: "Therefore, how dead is everything here, how cold, at most how screaming and noisy!—But is the mother not here?!" (Froebel 1826: 80, translated by SHA). Perhaps even more troubling than the notion of pure maternal love—or at least just as distressing—is the view that caregivers of young children should not only be trained to create a safe environment for children's development, but also to embody it, thus transforming themselves into that safe environment (Schmidt, 2021, 2025).

Implied in this concept of safe environments is that the emotions, needs, and traumas of the caregivers ought not to distress the child. As the prominent psychologist Donald Winnicott put it: "It seems that whatever is in this space that comes from someone else is persecutory material, and the baby has no means of rejecting it" (Winnicott, 2005, p. 96). We should ask ourselves why these theories of care and education do not want children to perceive the emotions of their caregivers, learn to deal with their desires and traumas, but instead want caregivers to wash themselves clean of all that—which is, of course, an impossible endeavor. Even when violence against the caregiver is mentioned, the focus of pedagogical discourse is usually the impact on the child's attachment and development (Stern et al., 2021). Why do Western societies not assume that caregivers are individuals in their own right and imagine a relationship of reciprocity? Why should caregivers learn to become an environment for someone else when they are people who would need to be encountered?

We can ask ourselves what we need to change in the way we build community so that we no longer feel the need to transform people into safe environments. Why is there a need for a maternal safe space for children in the first place? Is social violence such an integral part of culture that it is almost impossible to grow up without someone sacrificing themselves to become the safe haven of one's childhood? And if we take this idea further, we must ask ourselves, what kind of safe haven can this actually be if the Maternal is exploited, rendered invisible, and sacrificed? Although social violence is not exclusively linked to the Global North, this form of exclusive care provided by attachment to a maternal caregiver—who, at the same time, should not be perceived by the child as another person—seems to be quite specific to Western cultures (Mezzenzana, 2020, 2023).

How could we redesign early care and education so that caregivers are no longer required to be or become the environment for child development, but are instead acknowledged as people with needs and desires that the child can and also should learn to encounter? Isn't that a truly terrible scenario, that the child does not grow up in connection with another human being, but alone within its caregiver—as an environment that ideally should have no desires for itself? Isn't it really sad that the child is not allowed to experience the otherness of its caregiver and therefore does not even receive a boundary for its own desires, but above all is denied the greatest gift of all: human company (Irigaray, 1981, 1996).

Although "care"—after a long period of suppression in the context of neoliberal professionalization programs—is slowly finding its way back into curricula, love still rarely seems to be regarded as something we need to promote in early care and education. What we would like to discuss is not the question of whether love is appropriate for professional educators or whether there is such a thing as "professional love," since there

are already inspiring debates on these topics (Recchia et al., 2018; Page, 2018; White & Gradovski, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2020; Stewart-MacKenzie, 2021); instead, we want to engage in a conversation about love as a form of resistance against dominant pedagogies in ECE and share our take on it.

While profit-oriented child care has already turned care into a commodity, love—whether for another person or for an idea, a profession, or a belief—cannot be so easily exploited for financial gain (Taggart, 2022). Many caregivers resist rules that prohibit them from forming loving bonds with children and showing them physical affection—such as hugging them or letting them sit on their lap (Morris, 2020). While loving bonds and attachment between children and caregivers seem to be the driving force behind these caring acts of rebellion, it is also a love for an ethic of care, for community and connectedness that fuels resistance to the profit- and human-capital-oriented ECE system: "early childhood teachers are in love with the professional ideal of human flourishing and this love is revealed precisely when it is threatened" (Taggart, 2022, p. 5).

From such a perspective, care[8] is not merely the fulfillment of basic survival needs. Rather, it is the practice of human connection, intimately intertwined with emotional bonds and sensory experiences, encompassing both touching others and being touched by them—which can be understood both literally as physical contact and also as an emotional, spiritual, or intellectual communion (Irigaray, 2024). Touching requires a sense of mutuality and respect for the desires of everyone involved; otherwise, it will be felt as violence. Caring for young children involves intimate and intense sensorial experiences for both the child and the caregiver (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018).[9]

For a long time, the spaces of ECE have been considered a place of rebellion and resistance, as well as liberation and healing. But the focus has been mainly on teaching children to love themselves and/or their marginalized and colonized communities. Early educators have been called upon to act as agents of social change by teaching children about democracy, children's rights, and even feminism, anti-racism, and pro-Black love. All of these aspirations for social justice are beautiful in themselves. Yet, all too often, these pedagogies of liberation fail to consider the liberation of the caregivers themselves. And shouldn't early educators stop sacrificing themselves for goals that have only a partial connection—or none at all—to their own liberation? Shouldn't their activism and pedagogy be focused on teaching children, their families, and communities how to love the Captive Maternal?

Why not teach children how to love the people who care for them? After all, can children really learn to love in any other way? If children don't learn to love their caregivers in reciprocity, they learn something else: to invisibilize and exploit their labor. So, they will not actually learn to love, they will learn to take advantage of the caregiver's devotion—and if they are born into the role of a Captive Maternal, they will learn that love means sacrifice. We need to explore liberatory pedagogies that focus on the art of listening to and caring for caregivers and on the reciprocity of love. Such an educational approach aims to teach ourselves, our communities, and our children that love exists *between* people and is not a one-sided affair—that love cannot flourish if it flows in only one direction.

[8] "Care can feel good; but it can also feel terrible. It can do good; it can be oppressive," writes the renowned scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa in the introduction to her book, *Matters of Care* (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 1). She argues that care is ambivalent and that reclaiming it requires resisting romanticized, idealized portrayals; instead, she probes its contradictions and complexities.

[9] Care is an "art of touch" informed by dominant and marginalized sensory cultures (Thompson 2022). European imperial discourse ranked the senses in racialized and gendered ways, elevating the distal over the proximal (Classen 2012). Contemporary education reproduces this hierarchy, privileging sight and hearing while neglecting touch, smell, and taste—thereby contributing to the invisibility of care.

Re-envisioning ECE pedagogy requires a fundamental shift, recognizing the workforce as leaders who should shape and drive the pedagogical discourse. Historically, ECE pedagogy has been constructed for the workforce to implement, leaving little room for their knowledge, lived experiences, and creative contributions. This structural exclusion has rendered their voices invisible and left their needs, desires, and challenges largely unaddressed. Caregivers, tasked with the responsibility of caring for others, often lack the time, space, and resources to express their thoughts and experiences in academic, political, or artistic forms. Their creativity is often absorbed by their caregiving work, while caregiving is recognized neither as an art form nor as a political act. Consequently, the voices of caregivers rarely find their way into the public or professional spheres that shape the dominant pedagogical discourse. To ensure that the voices of caregivers are heard, it is therefore necessary to reshape the public and political sphere so that care is no longer a prerequisite for politics, but rather an integral part of it.

Angie Allen, a former ECE teacher and now Work Environment and Compensation Coordinator at EQuIPD (Education, Quality Improvement & Professional Development), notes the absence of the ECE workforce on Worthy Wage Day in 2026 at the Kids Over Corporations protest*:*"[M]ost early childhood educators won't be there. Not because they don't care. Not because the issues don't matter to them, but because they can't leave their classrooms. (...) [E]arly educators are still working without what they need, still unable to be at the rally, still waiting for the rest of us to build a system that doesn't leave them behind" (Allen, 2026).

If we think about how the Captive Maternal must sacrifice herself not only by caring for others, but also by fighting for social justice and building communities of resistance, then we must ask: what can be done to stop the world from demanding her sacrifice? We need to ask ourselves what we need to learn and teach if we want to transform love and society—starting where we have the power to do so: in the spaces of ECE, in the social movements, and in the communities we sustain.

In this precarious historical moment—marked by rising authoritarianism in the U.S. and around the world—social movements advocating for the empowerment of Captive Maternals are gaining strength. In the United States, the invisibility and exploitation of caregivers are receiving attention from policymakers at the state and federal levels, electoral candidates, parents, and providers across the country. Amid awareness of current struggles against dehumanization and violence**,** communities are being called upon to act with compassion and support their caregivers who are threatened by government policies, for example most recently due to violent immigration deportation (Young, 2026). Decades of local and state organizing around cost, access, and pay have coalesced into a national campaign for universal, publicly funded child care grounded in racial and gender justice, affordable for all families, and living wages for providers.

In August 2026, roughly 1,400 providers, parents, and allied activists convened for the first national child care convention, hosted by *Community Change Action*[10] with support from organizations in the *Child Care for Every Family Network.*[11] The convention focused on building a powerful, parent- and provider-led movement ahead of the November 2026 U.S. midterm elections. Organizers designed the convening to recognize attendees as activist leaders, build practical skills, and reduce participation barriers. To avoid burdening family resources, travel, housing, and food were fully covered—

[10] *Community Change*—formerly the Center for Community Change—is a national U.S. organization founded in 1968 after the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Grounded in the civil rights and anti-poverty movements, it builds grassroots power by training activists, developing leaders, and confronting systemic racism and poverty (Community Change, n.d.).

[11] *The Child Care for Every Family Network* is a long-term organizing platform that unites more than 1,500 organizations, families, and child care providers (Child Care for Every Family, n.d.).

supports long rare in early-childhood organizing. Many discussions at the convention highlighted how caregiving is too often framed as an individual problem rather than a systemic failure, and how the collective power of providers, parents, and communities is essential to achieve universal child care.

This convention is a reminder that there are real grounds for hope. It is not only a time of despair but also a moment of possibility that is opening as people mobilize and organize again. The goal must be to empower people, especially caregivers who are having a hard time making ends meet and to pursue educational approaches and policy initiatives that view the becoming and blooming of caregivers as equally important as the becoming and blooming of children. Transformative love in ECE must begin as a practice of repair—acknowledging the violent distribution of labor that has historically silenced caregivers, particularly those from marginalized communities.

We must ask ourselves the following question: If we have thus far placed upon the Captive Maternal everything that humanity finds difficult to face, embrace, and endure—what, then, must we teach ourselves, our communities, and our children so that we can free her from this sole responsibility and, instead, finally learn to love?

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