Introduction: Public Narratives of Hope in Im/possible Times

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> Unlike cynicism, hopefulness is hard-earned, makes demands upon us, and can often feel like the most indefensible and lonely place on Earth. Hopefulness is not a neutral position either. It is adversarial. It is the warrior emotion that can lay waste to cynicism.
>
> —Nick Cave (*The Red Hand Files*, Issue #190)

We are living through a time of global oligarchy, despotism, nationalism, and policies of war, displacement, mass starvation, suspicion, grift, graft, disinformation, and planetary destruction, what Sousa and Moss (2024) name the "polycrisis." The scope and scale of these issues feels like an onslaught of inevitability, im/possible to do anything about. What does this have to do with early care and education (ECE)? Everything, for children and ECE classrooms are not separate from the world.

In times like these, it is understandable to retreat into whatever safe haven one can find and as early childhood educators to say, "*I can't control any of that, but I can control what happens in my classroom*." To be clear, sanctuary, respite, and creating joyful early years spaces have never been more crucial; however, we assert that, while certainly daunting, the issues we face are not unassailable and inevitable *if* we recognize the healing potential of collective liberatory action (Hanish, 1969/2009; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Freire, 1997; Martín-Baró, 1996). This special issue's existence is an expression of this belief.

This collection is framed through sociologist and labor activist Marshall Ganz's praxis of Public Narrative—the crafting and sharing of Stories of Self, Us, and Now. In his approach, narratives are foundational to organizing people and mobilizing them to action(s) (Sinnott & Gibbs, 2014). On their most basic level, stories are uniquely (post)human creations. They can entertain, instruct, and connect people across time, places, spaces, and to the world that exists regardless of humans. In the context of activist praxis, Public Narrative is a means of individual values clarification toward shared values and commitments. Even dominant-paradigm research suggests that narratives can meaningfully affect beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Braddock & Dillard, 2015). Therefore, this issue is best viewed as a hopeful public narrative of activism in ECE and so we begin by sharing our (the editors') stories of self to set up our story of us (the editors and contributors), and our story of now (a call to collective action that includes you, the readers). But first, a little more on Public Narrative.

Public Narrative

In Ganz's praxis, Stories of Self begin by reflecting on who one is, including key people and places, how one became involved in activism, and, importantly *why* one became involved (Sinnott & Gibbs, 2014). These reflections will invariably evoke memories of specific events. Transforming these memories for activist purposes involves considering challenges, choices, and outcomes:

- What was the challenge you faced?
- What choice(s) did you make?
- What happened as a result–good, bad, and uncertain?
- What were the lessons? (Sinnott & Gibbs, 2014, p. 42).

Crafting Stories of Us follows the same process but now complicated by individual-to-group dynamics as the narrative expands to incorporate values held within a community or group. This involves considering both *apparent* agreement and disagreement, for, arguably, no group of people is ideologically monolithic, as each person brings plural identities and hybrid ideologies into their praxis (brown, 2017; Sen, 2003). This leads to Stories of Now, the authoring of which parallels the reflections on us and now (challenges, choices, and outcomes) but with a focus on what the collective wants to do, why, how, and to what effects?

- What is the problem the community faces?
- What future do we envision? What are consequences of inaction? What actions do we want to take? What choices are we asking folks to make? (which folks?)
- What do we think will be the results of our actions? How will we document this? How will lessons be used to sustain momentum? (Sinnott & Gibbs, 2014)

These are difficult questions, and this overview is necessarily clean. In reality this praxis is emergent and friction-full, requiring groups to be both planful and fluid, trustful to build trustworthiness, and courageous in the face of internal conflict, big and small (brown, 2017, 2018; hooks, 1989; Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2005). We acknowledge that all of this is easy to talk about and very hard to do. This special issue does not provide simple algorithms for solving these problems but instead offers signs of hope-in-action through the contributors' activism.

Brooke's Story of Self

My journey into activism began when I was an undergraduate student in an Early Childhood Studies program in Toronto, Canada. I first became aware of the large disconnect between the pedagogical ideas we studied in classes and the public policy ECE infrastructure (or lack thereof) in an elective course. The course was very much a product of an inspiring professor, Dr. Rachel Langford, who became a mentor and later the supervisor of my Ph.D. studies. Reflecting back, I attribute my interest in activism to my relationship with her and the many other strong feminist leaders who I would connect with in my activism journey.

When I entered the activism space, ECE in Canada was overwhelmingly a market-based, fee-for-service commodity whereby the gendered workforce was a public policy after-thought (sadly, even though we have a national ECE system in Canada today, the workforce is still not a priority). As I was an early childhood educator and a young single mother early in my graduate studies, I became involved with the Association of Early Childhood Educators (ECE) of Ontario (AECEO) – a grassroots organization that centered the voices and experiences of ECEs in public policy and activism work. It was with the AECEO where I had the opportunity to counter dominant narratives of the "good" ECE (aka nice, people-pleasing ladies), connecting with peers and other activists to embrace my inner ECE "rebel" (aka valuable, knowledgeable, assertive humans). I became the one with the megaphone and fluorescent sign standing outside the legislature

demanding the devalued labour of women doing care work garnered much-needed policy attention.

My gateway into ECE activism *scholarship* was largely a result of my role as a Project Coordinator on a research study examining the childcare movement in Canada. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet and interview key Canadian childcare policy entrepreneurs and activists as part of my Ph.D. studies. In an interview, one activist asserted that "activism isn't something we do – it's who we are." As I would come to learn, the reverse is also true: being an activist remains who we are when we are not able to do as much as we would like.

My activism journey took a turn after my youngest child was born: medical error erroneously found me the subject of a child protection investigation. My years advocating with and for children and families and those who cared about, with, and for them was turned on its head as I navigated false accusations of child abuse due to what turned out to be my baby's benign skin condition. While I was intimately familiar with the childcare system in Canada, this was an eye-opening experience for how broken risk-based child protection systems are in Canada and internationally. My activist "hat" therefore turned to bring attention to the deep colonial roots and ongoing supremacy of the Western medical industrial complex inherent in contemporary child "protection" systems in wealthy nations.

This experience affirmed what I had long known: caring about, for and with children and families through affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare – with a well-educated and compensated workforce – is essential to an equitable society. Connecting with other mothers, children and families who had been involved with child protection systems clearly illustrated how access to good care for all is essential to ensuring all children and families have the opportunity to experience not only safety, but well-being.

As my career progressed, I found myself in another province (Nova Scotia) in a leadership position within their professional association. It was at this time that I was connected with Mark and Kate to edit this special issue. I enthusiastically agreed to take on this project as it aligned with my personal and professional values of pursuing and thinking deeply about what is ethically right for educators, children and families–if not always politically palatable. Highlighting the struggles of those bravely navigating and thinking deeply about childcare activism spaces could not be any more aligned with who I am–not only what I do.

Since embarking on this special issue, I went through a relocation case with my own children that resulted in my resigning from my academic position in Nova Scotia as well as my leadership position within the professional association (the latter which ultimately closed its doors shortly after my resignation). With this profound blow my actions and identity as an activist have been severely undermined. Understandably, my energy has had to be focused on my own children and family. While I have not been as consistently active as I would have liked to have been in the ECE policy landscape while working with Mark and Kate to edit this special issue, thinking about and engaging in activism will always remain a key component of who I am.

Kate's Story of Self

I've been growing into activism all my life, based on the values of equality, justice, peace among many other kinds of community values that I was brought up with being raised a Quaker. The problem was that growing up as a girl in Illinois, "Midwest Nice" was deeply ingrained into my identity, and like many other girls, I was taught to be obedient, non-confrontational, not too smart, quiet, and most of all, cooperative and caring. This identity, of course, did not do me any favors as I launched into the world as a young

woman, experiencing the 1980s variety of misogyny and sexism. At the same time, I was terrified of going against the Midwest Nice Norm to stand up for myself or to speak out.

However, when I had my own children, things began to change. My husband and I couldn't afford child care, and that's when I defaulted to what my mother had done, caring for neighborhood children, but I took it a step further and opened a business because we needed my income. For nearly a decade, I owned, directed, and taught in my own child care program. I quickly learned just what an enormous endeavor I had embarked upon working long hours for very little pay or respect. I also realized how the name of my program, "Pear Tree Child Care" framed me as a babysitter, a role in our society (and among many in the early childhood field) that is assigned even less respect. So, in year two, I changed my name to "Pear Tree Nursery School" thinking that would garner more respect (I was wrong). I worked incredibly hard and remember thinking that I could do anything if I could work this hard. I also knew that I had two young children to defend and I dearly wanted to make the world a better place for them. This feeling of fierce responsibility made me braver, so I started going to hearings, children in tow, to speak to bureaucrats in city buildings to ask them to maintain funding for things like our accreditation system because our children (and I) depended upon it.

As my children entered public school, I longed to have my own house back since it was completely taken over by my program and decided to close. It was time—my children had grown bigger and the house had gotten smaller. Soon after, in my volunteer work on the board of our local community center, I was appointed Acting Director when the board realized that the current director was no longer able to fulfill her role. I had been eyeing graduate school at UW-Madison and signed up for a class called *Community Organizing* thinking it might help me improve the situation at the community center—except I had no idea what community organizing was despite my Quaker upbringing. There in the class, with about 40 other students, mostly undergrads, our professor, Randy Stoecker, with a long braid down his back, assigned us readings like *Rules for Radicals* by Saul Alinsky (1971), *Progressive Community Organizing* by Loretta Pyles (2014), and many other books and articles about the Civil Rights Movement. When he asked everyone in class who was thinking of becoming a community organizer, just one young woman raised her hand. I was still terrified of the idea of speaking out, but the organizer seeds were planted.

As I embarked on the long journey of graduate school, I began to find my voice and my confidence, though it's still a work in progress. I read about Denmark during my studies and knew I had to see it for myself. I spent a year studying the public family child care system there for my dissertation research, and therefore *knew* that another, better system was possible because I had seen it for myself. But when I completed my doctorate in 2022, writing a comparison of Wisconsin and Danish family child care, it felt a bit like a dead end. It seemed like the leaders in the early childhood field had no interest in hearing about the Danish system, and oftentimes were simply maintaining the status quo, an abysmal reality, cheering for the few crumbs they'd ask for and be thrown, telling providers that they should all really just be more grateful, and to let the "experts" speak on their behalf. It really felt like those in power were gaslighting providers into thinking that *they* were the problem, and that they just needed to work harder, and be better business owners. I finally realized that they were gatekeepers, barring any real change for whatever reason, intentional or not. At this point, I was a bit like dry kindling and just needed a match to light my fire.

This is when I joined our grassroots child care group in Wisconsin called Wisconsin Early Childhood Action Needed (WECAN) and learned by doing with others. I joined meetings, co-organized a rally, joined rallies and hearings at the state capital, and put on a Halloween *Get Out the Vote* activity with a friend. It was a place where we could speak without being silenced, or gatekept, and also where we felt validated in our anger about

the exploitation of our labor, and how our children were paying the price due to lack of access to resources and early educators. When WECAN introduced me to Community Change's subgroup called Child Care Changemakers, I enthusiastically joined in organizer trainings and events. It was amazing to have a space where you could speak your mind with others in the field, even though I was no longer providing care. We began building our grassroots connections to one another across the state and across the country, coming together as 1,300 people for our first convention ever in the summer of 2026. Now we will continue planning actions, even stronger, to create the change we need in our state.

When I was invited to join the editorial team for this special issue of the journal, I was intrigued by what we would do, never having been in an editorial role before. Reflecting on what hope and activism look like in early childhood from a scholarship perspective with a twist (since we decided to accept artistic modalities such as poetry, video, and other forms of media in this issue) with Mark and Brooke has been a privilege, especially as I have gotten to know each of them better. Our conversations have become deeper and more meaningful, and have allowed us a space to discuss dreams, ideas, the future, im/possibilities, as well as a consistent thread of hope even though life responsibilities demand my attention elsewhere with annoying frequency. But like all activists, I keep coming back—it is a lifestyle choice—and one where I find purpose, authenticity, sustenance, and generosity.

Mark's Story of Self

I am no activist. I'm not the one with a megaphone, banging the drum, leading a chant, or carrying a clever sign during the march. Or maybe I am because I find myself continually speaking up (despite my inclination towards silence), joining with others, and getting into trouble (admittedly minor). My upbringing was implicitly guided by the Japanese dictum, *the nail that sticks up gets hammered down*, but the world's fundamental unfairnesses have compelled me to *stick up* now and again.

My approach-avoidance with activists and activism began during a meeting of "get out the vote" volunteers. I was a preppy-looking college student and was, by decades, the youngest person in a room filled with folks who looked the part of *real* activists: loose-fitting clothing of open-weave, natural fiber fabric, sandals, hair in ponytails or long and free-flowing… I listened as these experienced activists threw out ideas.

One person said, "We need to shame minorities into voting." There was a beat of silence, then the conversation moved on.

As the only *minority* in the space, although not the kind he meant, I sat, stunned, not hearing anything else that was said. At the end of the meeting, I hurried out as soon as there was an opening to the door.

The next day I left a voicemail message for the meeting organizer, who called me back. *Why didn't anyone say anything?* I asked. *I didn't know what to do*, was their response. After some empathetic words, we hung up. I never went back.

Fast forward several years to when I was teaching preschool in a public school. I do not recall how this came to be, but I can picture sitting in the speech pathologist's office (closet) with someone from the City Interfaith Project (CIP) who explained that they were a community organizer doing "*one-on-ones*" with people in the neighborhood and in the schools to learn, "*what your interests are."* Confused, I wondered if this was evangelizing, but answered, "*the children and their families* (duh)." They said CIP was committed to the community *"for the long-term*." I asked but did not get a clear answer about why.

However, over the course of this conversation it became clearer to me that it was evangelizing, just not the kind I feared. If I was interested in the families, what did I really know about them, their community, and their relationship with *us* (the schools)?

As I became involved, I learned that CIP followed the Industrial Areas Foundation approach, grounded in Alinsky's confrontational labor organizing in the U.S.'s Upper Midwest region (Alinsky, 1971; Sen, 2003). I went to workshops and trainings of trainers, where I practiced Assets Based Community Development (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993) and the Institute for Cultural Affairs' Technology of Participation (Umpleby et al., 2004), but I never felt like a real activist.

As colleagues and I from the school district began holding community meetings with families, it became clearer that they were deeply interested in their children's education but also felt unwelcome, usually not because of anything overt but, rather, because the schools were *ours* and not *theirs* (I had not yet heard of Guadalupe Valdés, 1996; Annette Lareau, 2011; or Paul Gorski, 2008). The demographic and, therefore, cultural and linguistic mismatches between the school district's overwhelmingly white governing board, administration, faculty (but not staff—the preschool was not part of the faculty), and the people who lived in the surrounding neighborhoods was stark. And so, our work began to focus on what I now know to be community-centric family engagement, rather than the more common school-centric perspective (Grant & Potter, 2011).

However, after two years, CIP's funding ended and they left. I say this without blame, because I also left for happenstance positions in the governor's office, department of education, and academia. Of the many lessons learned from people I have known and mistakes I have made (and continue to make), none are more important than to never over-promise, do what you say you are going to do, and commit to being reflexive (interrogating how my assumptions and social reflexes impact others).

The Story of "Us"

We came together as an editorial team when Beth Blue Swadener connected us. Beth is one of the founding leaders of Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) and has spent her career growing the numbers of activist scholars (Nagasawa et al., 2022). Familiar with each of our work, Beth reached out asking if we might be interested in working on a special issue on ECE activism to coincide with the 2026 RECE conference in Aotearoa New Zealand. This connection acted as a proverbial passing of the RECE torch—a key act of sustaining the movement. As our stories show, each of us brings different perspectives and experiences to this work.

For over a year we met regularly to share our understandings of social problems, our visions of hopeful futures, what we hoped the issue's contributors would share, and what would be the results of all of this. We explored Public Narrative questions, albeit only implicitly at first. A shared goal was to ensure that traditional academic discourse did not overwhelm the stories, experiences, and *praxis* of those directly working with children and families and/or taking positions on important policy issues in ECE. Our conversations also revealed that we had never defined activism.

Activism, Advocacy, Resistance… What're the differences, do they matter?

In our experiences of advocacy and activist spaces, we have taken part in explorations of "shared language" that descend into enervating circular debates about *correct* words that undermine becoming an *us* by making uniformity the goal, rather than unifying around shared goals, despite differences and disagreement (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2005). Towards the latter, the contributors to this special issue—as well as the peer reviewers—were dialogic partners who challenged us to grapple with our implicit definitions of activism, advocacy, resistance, and hope. What did we actually think these meant?

After a year's worth of conversation, we are not going to provide operating definitions. While this might seem like an evasion, it is because we found the nuances of these concepts deepened as we reviewed abstracts, raised questions to contributors, reviewed initial manuscripts, read reviewers' comments, read resubmissions, and so on. Rather than parsing the words, the collective contributors to this special issue: authors, reviewers, and editors, arrive at a *sense* that however someone identifies themselves, following Ganz, what is more important is what they choose to do in the face of the challenges they face. Whatever distinctions might be made between resistance, advocacy, and activism, they are bound together by taking the risk of acting on/in the world to turn "dreams from utopias into… proposals for what could be that are not only desirable, but also viable and achievable" (Sousa & Moss, 2024, p. 253). One conclusion we draw from the polyglossic (multivocal) dialogue that generated this special issue on activism is that there is no single way to be activist, but activism necessarily involves taking time for critical co-*reflexion* and dialogue to avoid "action for action's sake" (brown, 2017; Freire, 1997, p. 69; Kaba, 2021: Tuck. 2009). Now, what about hope?

Hope(lessness) and Hope(fulness) in Im/possible Times

Similarly, all involved in creating this special issue led us to consider the differences between hope, optimism, dreaming, faith… Once again, rather than identifying one *right* animating feeling, what matters more is how one is moved from anger to reflexive action (Sousa & Moss, 2024). However, as editors it is our responsibility to shape this collection. To do this we opted for hope, following prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba's (2021) assertion that hope is not an amorphous feeling. It is, instead, a discipline involving vision, faith, intentionality, sweat, and the courage to risk failure by putting ideas to the test—always in relationship with others (even ones you do not always like).

This last element may be the most difficult, but it is essential to stave off the hope(lessness) of inevitable descent into a Hobbesian all-against-all created by the polycrisis. Hope(fulness) does not deny the realities of what is happening in this world, nor does it deny that these can feel im/possible, but hope(fulness) seeks the possible. It is also mindful that damage-centeredness, in seeking to document and educate about wrongs, can paradoxically exacerbate damage instead of contributing to reparations (Tuck, 2009). Hope(fulness) focuses on how to move, collectively, towards the world *we* want. This visionary relationality is the key strand that unites this special issue.

Organization of the Issue: Hopefulness in Possible Times

This issue is organized into three sections: The Personal is Political is Historical, Activism For and By the Adults in Children's Lives, and Intergenerational Activism. Each of the first group of articles delves into histories, as a part of intersectional feminist-liberationist praxis (Hanish, 1969/2009; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Sen, 2003). The second grouping builds upon the first and celebrates activism that benefits the adults in children's lives. This is necessary, as there is a strong maternalist tendency in many societies to position (mostly woman-identified) early childhood educators as subservient to children's needs. The final section speaks to the possibilities of joint action between adults of all ages and children of all ages.

The Personal is Political is Historical

Our collection opens with Rawinia Mihaka's "A Heartfelt Kōrero" (narrative), which was a speech given at the 50th Anniversary of Pioneers, an early years organization in Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on experiences as an early childhood kaiako Māori (Māori teacher) and life-lessons from journeying in te ao Māori (the Māori world), Rawinia "walk[s] backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past" (Mihaka, this issue). And in doing so, finds acceptance and inspiration from this whakapapa (genealogy). While this kōrero is a call to action to honor Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), its message transcends Aotearoa New Zealand, reminding us to ground activism in kotahitanga (unity) and whānaungatanga (relationships) with people, places

and things. In the context of this special issue, Rawinia sounds a call to which the other contributors respond.

However, sustaining the inspiration Rawinia engenders is not without dangers, evocatively captured by Brooke Richardson's two-part poem "The Cracks." Brooke pensively speaks of the promise and pains of patching together new stories from narrative fragments. She reminds us that even though we had no active part in writing dominant narratives, far from monolithic and unassailable, they are filled with *small* fissures to be noticed, sutured, or exploited as points of weakness in dominance. Brooke reminds us that beautiful things can grow, and are growing, in the ruins–even if we cannot actively perceive them in the moment.

Sabine Hattinger-Allende and Marcy Whitebook begin "Hoping for Love in Early Care and Education: On Confronting the Enormity of the Tasks" in a similar place to where "The Cracks" leaves us, reflecting the *small* conversations Brooke refers to in her poem. Sabine and Marcy weave their relationship's history with ECE's in search of hope. Importantly, their search leads us to philosopher Joy James's (2023) concept of the "captive maternal," which refers to how women, specifically Black women, simultaneously accommodate and resist being positioned as disposable and only valuable through acts of caring, service, and sacrifice. Sabine and Marcy ask, "What can be done to stop the world from demanding this sacrifice?" (this issue). Their answer is to learn to love, really love, caregivers–and not just for their labors with children but also in their collective action for their own dignity.

Activism By and For the Adults in Children's Lives

The ways captive maternalist assumptions subtly appear in activist spaces highlight the importance of the RECE movement's efforts to analyze ECE through the lenses of critical theory and how this praxis gets transmitted intergenerationally (Peters et al., 2024). Emese Ilyes and Cris An's "Worlds Within Worlds: Dialogues of Resistance Through Time and SEEK" exemplifies the fertility of intergenerational dialogue across time and spaces. They contextualize their narratives within memories of Emese's mother's activist pedagogy in Ceaușescu's Romania; remembrances of the City University of New York's Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) program's founding by Audre Lorde and many others; and the intertwined marketing of *artificial* intelligence's inevitability and higher education's repression of activists supporting Palestinian lives and sovereignty.

Nidhi Menon takes up the topic of institutional suppression of activism in "Radical Love and Hope: Reimagining Early Childhood Policy and Activism from the Margins." Grounded in feminist, critical autoethnographic methodologies, this piece draws of Nidhi's experiences leading an Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario CARE Collective to illustrate how educators are concurrently excluded from the processes of developing policies to which they are subjected and regulated in ways that make resistance, advocacy, and activism risky. Nidhi's analysis importantly reframes educators perceived political silence, from indifference into "an outcome of precarity and structural constraint" (Menon, this issue). Following bell hooks's (2001) theorization of love as an ethical and political practice, Nidhi argues that love-based collectives are spaces where members can help each other develop political literacy, voice, and agency.

While not explicitly drawing on hooks's (2001) notion of love, in "Amid Crisis, Toward Justice: The People's Early Childhood Coalition and Policy Resistance in New York City," Maria Mavrides Calderon, Lacey Peters, Helen Frazier, Diandra Verwayne, and Sheila Szklanny share the story of the People's Early Childhood Coalition of New York City (PECNYC), most certainly a care-based collective. This grassroots coalition of educators, parents, and social workers came together in response to a dramatic devaluing of ECE that followed the transition to a new mayoral administration. Maria and her

colleagues consider PECNYC in relation to four principles inspired by brown's (2017) emergent strategy: 1) love, care, teaching, and learning; 2) decentralized power structure; 3) adaptive, non-linear responses to changing conditions; and 4) collectively naming the society the coalition is moving towards.

Jennifer Caldwell provides an intimate account of this collective action in "The Garden and the Furnace: Parenting, Activism, and the Politics of Children" blending creative nonfiction with socio-political reflection to consider the meanings and responsibilities of parenthood within the polycrisis. Jennifer's participation in activism to replace a condemned playground with a community garden is a "[reclamation] of public space for collective belonging while reimagining child-centered spaces as social and environmental justice" (Caldwell, this issue). Weaving vignettes and dialogues, the essay mirrors the episodic and indeterminate realities of "parenting as a radical act of hope" (Caldwell, this issue).

The last essay in this section, "Active Hope as Pedagogical Activism: The Courage of Attuning to Multidimensional Temporalities" by Lucia Stacchiotti and Olivera Kamenarac analyzes the constraining function of "clock time" in ECE spaces, arguing that "hidden curricula" of time are focused towards particular political-economic objectives (Jackson, 1968). It is clock time's ubiquity which hides the ways it organizes all aspects of people's lives, with ECE playing a role in preparing docile and productive workers. While resisting those forces may feel daunting, Lucia and Olivera argue that local, relational, and ethical acts can disrupt the *naturalness* of "accelerated temporal regimes," replacing these with "'gift economies' of shared time (Kimmerer, 2024 in Stacchiotti & Kamenarac, this issue). Lucia and Olivera's shift towards classrooms as intergenerational spaces turns our attention to this special issue's final articles on intergenerational activist praxis.

Intergenerational Activism

In "Joy as Resistance: A Decade of Black Lives Matter Activism with Young Children," Jennifer Bradley writes of the transformation of the Philly's Children's March (PCM) for Love and Justice into the Philly Children's Movement. Originally PCM was organized as a family-oriented, multi-generational march in support of Eric Garner, who in 2014 was choked to death by a New York City Police Officer who was never charged with a crime. Building on the march, PCM's activities grew to include child-led actions, working in schools, providing curricular materials, and linking with broader activism in Philadelphia, PA, USA. Entering its second decade, leadership of PCM is being transferred to the next generation, who were mentored into this role through their participation as younger people.

This collection is closed out by "We'll Sing a Song Together: Joyful Music-Making as a Humanizing Force in Early Childhood Spaces," in which Anne-Marie Akin connects her work with young children, parents, and teachers with the role music has always played in activist movements, particularly the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Writing from Chicago, IL, USA, amidst the U.S. government's racially-targeted deployment of the National Guard, Border Patrol, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Anne-Marie considers the ways live music can be a "compact intervention that promotes humanism, well-being, personal agency, and stronger community bonds" (Akin, this issue).

Our Story of Now

This special issue represents a collaborative reauthoring of the dominating narrative of destruction, hopelessness, and polycrisis (all real things) in favor of electing for hope, optimism, dreaming, faith, resistance, joy, advocacy, and activist solidarity. For us, the journey of facilitating this special issue reflects Antonio Machado's (1912/1988) oft-quoted poem, "Caminante No Hay Camino," a portion of which reads, Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar/ Traveler, there is no road. You make your path as

you walk. However, rather than creating a new path, co-constructing this special issue helped us realize that we are walking paths created by others (see Mihaka this issue) and which have become obscured by forgetfulness, postmodern hyper-individualism, late-stage capitalism, and their corollaries: alienation and hope(lessness).

However, the contributors show us ways of combatting this malaise, of transforming anger, frustration, and despair into actions by dreaming, creating care collectives that inspire what Beth Swadener calls "insurgent optimism," and celebrating co-conspiratorial works (personal communication, September 11, 2026). Returning to questions for authoring public narratives:

- What are the issues I care about?
- As I try to do something about this issue, what have been my challenges, choices, and the outcomes of these?
- Who are my people and what do we want?
- Who holds the resources needed to address these interests? What do they want?
- What is our theory of change? (changes we want to see, why, who, how, and when; Sinnott & Gibbs, 2014)

We end with some final thoughts drawn from our respective experiences in relational and activist realities: friction, *failure*, and radical openness.

On Friction

The history of mainstream organizing (not as oxymoronic as it might seem) is rooted in whiteness and patriarchy, albeit working class (Sen, 2003). When thinking about care collectives as a response to this past, there is a risky tendency to conflate love and relationships with niceness. Today's movement building must "walk backwards into the future" (Mihaka, this issue). Doing this necessarily raises the issue of how non-acknowledged minoritized histories show up interpersonally and in diverse groups through punishment of others' missteps and intolerance towards differences of strategy based upon false senses of "perfect moral ground" (brown, 2018, para. 9; Lorde, 2007; Sen, 2003).

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005) asks, "Can any cause for common justice emerge across these differences? To ask this question well, we must move beyond the common-sense assumption that solidarity means homogeneity. Differences invigorate social mobilizations" (p. 245). She adds that, "collaborative objects are formed through friction between different positionalities and interests" (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2005, p. 246). That definitely has been the case with this special issue.

On *Failure*

A more challenging dimension of Anna Tsing's hopeful take on friction is how one, and one's people, handle inevitable failures. In a commencement address at Spelman College, politician and civil rights leader Stacy Abrams—something of an expert in persisting in the face of losses—told the graduates, "There are those who think that when you don't win, those things you try for, that your failure defines you. It is not failure that defines you, it is your response to failure that tells you who you are" (Abrams, 2022, lines 188-190). This is where the reflexion involved in developing public narratives supports "emergent strategy," the fluid approach necessary to adapt to dominant structures' slipperiness (brown, 2017). As Audre Lorde (2007) taught,

> …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. (p. 135)

The complexity and gravity of this work demand compassionate, reflexive evaluation to tell [us] who [we] are and what to do next.

Radical Openness

We end with bell hooks's (1989) idea of radical openness, which speaks to the dangers of essentializing and fixing others into caricatures, eliminating any possibility of disagreeing deeply on some things and finding harmony around others. She describes this stance as, "...a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance" (hooks, 1989, p. 19). This collection represents globally scattered communities of resistance and is an invitation to pluralize public narratives of hope in im/possible times by seeing these initiatives as connected efforts and joining with them: What are your stories of self, stories of us, and stories of now?

Epilogue (Toolbox)

Some readers may be thinking, *"Fine, but how do I do this?"* The good news is that others have walked these paths before us, and tremendous resistance resources are readily available. This is not an exhaustive list but does include some of our favorites.

Alliance for Justice (check out the advocacy playbooks and evaluation resources): https://afj.org/

Creative Community Organizing: A Guide for Rabble-Rousers, Activists & Quiet Lovers of Justice: https://sikahn.com/

Community Change Action (direct action and resources, including the initiative Kate mentioned: Childcare Changemakers): https://www.communitychangeaction.org/

Community Toolbox (resources): https://ctb.ku.edu/en

Holding Change: The way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation & Emergent Strategy: https://adriennemareebrown.net/

How We Get Free: Black Feminism and The Combahee River Collective: https://www.keeangataylor.com/books.html

Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care: https://mariamekaba.com/

Local to Global Justice (annual forum at Arizona State University that began as a teach in): https://www.localtoglobal.org/

Love in a F*cked-Up World: How to Build Relationships, Hook Up, and Raise Hell Together: https://www.deanspade.net/

Narrative Arts (resources): https://narrativearts.org/article/public-narrative/

School for Workers: https://schoolforworkers.wisc.edu/

The Highlander Institute: https://beta.highlandercenter.org/

Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (student advocacy toolkit): https://childcareontario.org/wp-content/uploads/The_Student_Advocacy_Toolkit_-_April_2022.pdf

People's Action (grassroots organizing, learning, and resources): https://peoplesaction.org/

Results: https://www.results.org

Progressive Community Organizing: A Critical Approach for a Globalizing World: https://www.headheartbiztherapy.com/podcast/210-loretta-pyles-radical-self-care-and-rewilding-in-everyday-practice

The Commons Social Change Library (resources): https://commonslibrary.org/

The Understory Toolkit: https://organizingmythoughts.org/the-understory-toolkit/?ref=organizingmythoughts-newsletter

Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict: https://www.ericachenoweth.com/research/wcrw

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