

**Lost behind the border:
The “I” and “we” ideologies in child-rearing**

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I welcome displacement as long as the act does not represent perpetual denial of human authenticity. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin, Paulo Freire, and Lev Vygotsky (this magic trinity forever challenges my world) I constructed an authentic human being as an individual both aware of and growing with the consciousness that is social, dialogic, unfinished, transforming and/or maintaining. Displacement that rejects any one of these features is in danger of betraying the essence of human authenticity.

There is another dynamic worth considering in relation to our dialogue on displacement: voluntary choice vs. imposition. Voluntarily displaced consciousness stays open to productive involvement with all the locations of its origins. This consciousness seeks to create a new word in order to return and enrich its original birthplaces. Imposition of displacement, on the other hand, is a birthday of resistant consciousness that, too, may not be entirely unproductive but upon awakening to the yoke of imposed condition sets its budding energy in motion to, perhaps, linger onto displacement turning it into a voluntary choice with the consequences corresponding to the new conceptualization of displacement.

Every day I choose to leave people in order to hold onto them: I choose to go deaf or go blind or critique (thus surrendering the privilege of belonging in like-mindedness), or voluntarily disable in order not to lose that “we” orientation of my self that I wake up for.

I don't know how to be a mother

A biographical interlude

- *Why are mittens warmer than gloves?*
- *In gloves each finger is alone, they don't have each other to keep them company. And your mitten gives them all, except one, a nice warm home where they hold onto each other.*
- *What about that other big finger, doesn't it want to be warm too?*

I am transported into the land of childhood naivete from which I now pick out bits of philosophical wisdom.

As children we often ask questions that later in life it takes us multiple academic degrees to pose again. More so, answering the posed questions may and usually does require a form of courage coupled with oblivion to one's position in the hierarchy of social institutional structures.

During my doctoral work I find out from Mikhail Bakhtin that according to his dialogic conception of a human being, each of us engages both the I-for-myself and the I-for-the-other orientations. This insight felt liberating. In the course of my growing into new subjectivities behind the border, I re-admire (Freire, 1985) each culture's commitment to reinforcing more of one such facet of a human being, in extreme cases to the exclusion of the other. It seems that intolerance for individualism and the reverse fear of homogenizing (often mistakenly equated with dehumanizing) tendencies of the social stems from misunderstanding of the relationship between the I-for-myself and the I-for-the-other as well as each other's primacy in various social locations.

The I-for-myself often appears to define itself in opposition to, not in conjunction with the social I-for-and-with-the other (Freire, 1985, etc.) In my short biographical experience, the age of the enforcement of “we” is over, the new age in my becoming offers a chance and a challenge to voluntarily design my “I” as a “we.” I gladly answer this call, for it presents a sound alternative to the disunited, disenfranchised loneliness of juxtaposed individualism.

My daily experience in the Space that I created for myself begins with silence. It is a primordial silence, already inflected by a growing multitude of voices that I’ll orchestrate to deliver a beautiful piece wrought in harmony. The dearest voices inhabit it: the voice of my grandmother whom I barely knew but respected immeasurably; the voice of my mother, whose daily struggle to utter a final authoritative word and to open the spaces for negotiation was obvious and not at all futile; the voices of my friends who are the parents sometimes lost sometimes clear on their child-rearing goals struggling to make sense of what the appropriate material for the construction of their children’s futures would be. They are the ones who, in a pedagogical relationship with their children, impart the wisdoms of many dominant values while resisting the others.

Most often I feel unqualified to be a mother and the pain from this is greater than it would be if I were temporarily out of sync, because if I simply lacked experience I could fix that gap easily, I am a good learner. The pain is so desperate because I do not see how I can bridge the gap of knowledge and experience with the symbolic tools available to me in the current time and space. I have little experience with postponed dialogues, left unattended, the original voices of my Third Space [1] become vaguer

every day, it takes strenuous and some might think futile mental exercise to summon the voices of my people who for sure could have helped me to become qualified as a mother.

What are those qualifications that I lack? A believer in the kind of freedom that falls back onto authoritative words shared with another in search for its own meaning, I am confused as to the locus of authority that will dialogically implicate my children's freedom.

Moralist, I sure am, yet one must go beyond my moral teaching to appreciate the real concerns and hopes they impart. One of my favorite childhood books was the one that brought peace into the world of a confused and scared by the chaos of infinite possibility child. It was entitled "What is good and what is bad" (Chto takoe xorosho i chto takoe ploxo) by Vladimir Mayakovsky (1987). Consider these lines in the author's translation:

*If the bully's
 hitting hard
one who's only weaker,
I refuse
 to offer him
chance
 to make book thicker.*

*This one screams
 "Away you stay
from
 the shorter fellow!"
This lad looks
 so good to me,
I salute his daring!*

*This one
 crawled in mud
 and glad,
that his shirt is dirty.
People say
 that this one is*

*bad,
and very sloppy.*

Together with Vladimir Mayakovsky, parents would carefully but without unnecessary reservation paint our worlds black and white with colors added in the actual performance of good and bad deeds.

About a month ago, one of my students proudly shared with class a very colorful book entitled “The okay book” by Todd Parr. It pronounced that “It’s okay to be short, to be tall, to be scared, to wear what you like, to eat all the frosting off your birthday cake, to share, to put fish in your hair, . . .” and the book goes on. She read it with confidence that can only stem from belief in the sharedness of experience while I stood horrified, as if I was taken back in a time machine to that child, scared and confused by the language of infinite possibility of mutually canceling messages. Where does one draw the line in a multicultural society? Can one do that? Is everything ok as long as it’s ok with me? Where does the ok power lie? Can the approval come from within a person or is it shared? What’s the role of another human being in my decision making?

Does each person claim who he or she is and everybody believes it? In skeptical unison with Eva Hoffman I repeat that the latter scenario “sounds like a confidence trick to me” (1990).

I know the key reason why my parents had my brother was that they did not want me to grow up self-sufficient dictating my own rules and answering to myself. They brought into my world somebody I had to share everything with, to dialogically negotiate our spaces and our “I’s” and the necessity of such negotiations was brought to light at the break of every day. My own voice became a shadow of the original loud instrument of

self-annunciation: I had to turn the volume down so that I could hear the presence of a fellow human being. I thought it was then that my “I” turned into a “we”, it was not until recently that I realized the significance of this awareness as well as its falsity. I existed as we from the very beginning but there was no hearing it until I was invited to recognize the value of another in my world and my role in connection with that equally important human being.

I miss being interdependent. I miss sharing that is not done to put it on the resume but is as natural as breathing. I miss doing it because I am a certain kind of human being who cannot dwell alone in the prison of her own people-proof world and maintain sanity. And here I am living among people in a people-proof Space, for me to be able to live up to what I believe in I have to live outside of the conditions that represent my beliefs: I have to leave people in order to hold onto them (the promise of holding on means that I have to ignore my desire to belong by signing my agreement with the dominant value of self-sufficiency). Even for the chance to be a “we”, I cannot sign the “document” written in a language that includes by exclusion (excludes the value of selfless fellowship-oriented “I as we” in order to include me as a member of individualistic society).

I am saddened by the ubiquity of the pronoun “I.” My first American professor read my very first scholarly paper populated by “we.” “We believe that under the circumstances the following will hold true . . .” or “We conclude that. . .” - an assumption any Russian scholarly writer makes about the fact that the audience of like-minded scholars is participating in constructing a particular research by reading it and, consequently, needs to be included. It was at times an imposed inclusion, yet I also enjoyed being included in such a way, most frequently it made me want to live up to the

expectation of being a like-minded scholar. Meanwhile, my American professor corrected my “we’s,” and I was heartbroken. How can you not include the people you address in your writing? I don’t even know if I want to be an “I”!

I will do anything for my children not to grow up self-sufficient in their “I”, the lonely “I”, the walkman-wearing “I”, the center of ultimate authority “I”, the “I” that does not look up to the conductor when he checks the tickets. The “I” that can say “I am too busy now can I call you back to talk about your emergency?” The “I” that desperately seeks out a twelve step program in order to be relieved of a persisting heartache while the dear ones are busy exercising their own unfinishedness. The “I” that tells a sneezing person to take a day off instead of offering a handkerchief and a cup of hot tea. And then if I am reprimanded by teachers some of whom work so hard to help my child grow up independent of other I’s, from my Third Space I will emerge and will have something to say and I hope so will my child.

This account was written by a human being who would rather self-efface than say “I” and mean “I.” As a means of resistance to individualism I took Rushdie’s (1982) blueprint and created “an imaginary homeland” where authoritative imposition is valued higher than limitless freedom, because at least it is familiar, because at least it does not draw the line between me and another without whom I find it hard to breathe. I was lucky enough to have developed stereoscopic vision through experiencing “blessings and horrors” (Hoffman, 1990) of both homogeneity and multiplicity at the level that went beyond the visible dichotomy to discover the dialogic interpenetration of both models of social organization. In coming to recognize both, I concluded that neither rigid

homogeneity nor unrestrained multiplicity and “overcelebration of self” (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999) works for me. The “I as we” that my heart advocates for our children who still have a chance not to grow up carrying the burden of deeply monologic consciousnesses, nor being torn apart by mutually exclusive “ok” messages requires more than enforced self-effacement and certainly more than stubborn adherence to individualistic “I.” It requires reconceptualization of our perception of individual within society.

I cherish my brilliant compatriot Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) for expressing what I was struggling to put in words: it is the feature of human authenticity to want to author our worlds but that authorship occurs on the threshold between people. A free dialogic word about the world and about oneself is born precisely on that border between consciousnesses. “I” cannot survive without another, nor should the other exclusively author my world and claim ownership of the *product* of such labor that is *me*.

It is not a new thought that human subjectivity derives its powers from a mutually enriching interpenetrating dialogue between “I” and “we.” An authentically dialogic “I” is always a “we” in becoming. Individual becoming juxtaposed to social membership makes little to no sense, for by “dichotomizing individual from social” (Freire & Macedo, 1987) we create a myth of individual self-sufficiency, extended by the myth of self as the locus of ultimate authority, extended by the consequential irresponsibility for one’s acts geared toward becoming but the kind of becoming that treats the social element as more of a bonus rather than a necessity.

Previously voiced by Freire (2000), the relationship between other and self-dehumanization suggests that if we disrespect a basic human need to constantly become,

the need that is predicated on freedom to choose the paths of becoming we negate our own need for freedom: freedom to choose voices as dialogic material of our growing consciousnesses, the freedom to occasionally and voluntarily self-efface in favor of the other, the freedom to resist and/or embrace our multiplicity, and the freedom to be responsible for the choices we make for the purposes of becoming – in other words, the freedom to dialogically self-define embracing and giving back the “crystals of social substance” (Marx, 1867) and be responsible for the consequences to the social fellowship within which and for which self-definition is taking place. Our responsibility before ourselves is, first and foremost, the responsibility before the other, for the other was there when our selves were born, when our selves were experiencing tension with authority, when our selves had to choose one act in favor of the other in order to continue on the path of becoming. Our responsibility viewed in this light makes society essential for freedom and not synonymous with oppression next to which our thesaurus lists imposition, invasion, also see antonym: individual.

I dream that we set out to assist each other as teachers and parents - as human beings in snapping out of the misguided (Baptiste, 2000) or cowardly “ok” attitude inspired by the fear of intrusion into our children’s questionable freedom. Help each other open our eyes for critical and responsible assessment of the message delivered by our value of society-effacing individualism. In my dissertation entitled “Toward a philosophy of the liberating act” I identified a principle of human authenticity which was derived from Mikhail Bakhtin’s reflections on human dialogism and states the following:

To be authentic one must be in a dialogic relationship with everyone pertinent to their existence.

If this message of authentic dialogism is not sent to our children, we are likely to observe and we already do, that we, as parents and teachers begin to be treated as “not pertinent to our children’s existence” and the same will hold true for the kind of space a self-sufficient “I” designates for the other human beings in his or her life.

Eva Hoffman (1990, p.176) illustrates my concern for the gradual erasure of this essential feature of human authenticity very well. In the following paragraph she recounts her conversation with a friend who held the values antithetical to her own

“Giving people something for nothing destroys their individuality,” Lizzy asserts. “You can only have dignity if you are self-sufficient.”

“But why shouldn’t people help each other?” I ask, really at a loss to understand. There’s no common word for “self-sufficiency” in Polish [as there is no word “privacy” in Russian], and it sounds to me like a comfortless condition, a harsh and artificial ideal.

“Because dependence is bad for your character,” Lizzy retorts.

“But we’re dependent on each other!” I say, stating what only seems obvious.

“Don’t you think it is humiliating to be dependent?” Lizzy asks. She’s speaking out of a different sense of the human creature, of where dignity and satisfaction lie, and she’s as flummoxed by this disagreement on basic principles as I.

“No, I don’t. I mean, what if you get into trouble? What if you lose your job? When there’s unemployment, somebody has to lose their job! Do you think that nobody should help you?”

This dialogue is always in my mind and the meaning was re-accentuated once again when I was reflecting on my first semester as a university professor. At the end of the eight-week cycle in Manhattan, I was left with uneasy feeling that, perhaps, my naïve

trust in the basic need of human beings for each other's company, each other's words was undermined. I asked my students whether they know everybody's names. They were ashamed to recognize that, after eight weeks, they knew the names of less than 50% of their classmates. We went around and reintroduced ourselves. We were embarrassed, but also warmed up to each other. Most passionately I dream that they will remember our last class as the time when they had to recognize the relative significance of their own selves to the other, and maybe for the first time questioned the adequacy of the classroom in which most of their nameless interlocutors were imaginary. Who did they talk to when we engaged in discussions? Who did they construct the meaning with? Within what kind of space were their voices emerging and to what end?

To what end did we live together, approved or disapproved of each other's words for eight weeks? There is little new in the knowledge that we live together for a purpose. Identification of this purpose is instrumental in gaining insight into the locus of authority that decides what words constituting paradigms for subsequent acts will be condoned or rejected by a group of consciousnesses. It decides the degree to which the minds will open in order to break down the individual boundaries to welcome another person in.

If, on the one hand, the purpose of our getting together is paradoxically the survival of an individual, then all the words that support such a purpose will be automatically approved. Then another person may turn out to merely represent a dialogizing background against which one constructs the notion of self, at best, or a voiceless or, reversely, oppressive social environment at worst. In this scenario, answerability before oneself is valued higher than social responsibility.

If, on the other hand, the purpose is the survival of that particular gathering of people, each of whom is hardly more valuable than the other, then all the words that hold the promise for an individual survival whose ultimate goal is the survival of fellowship will live as well. Bringing fellowship to the center does not ensure denial of the individual unfinishedness, the latter is often constructed within the atmosphere of belief in the corresponding value of the other with individual survival highly dependent on the survival of the other. Many may argue that this account is reflective of the philosophy of a multicultural society. I beg to disagree at least in one instance: The dominant ideology of the multicultural society I inhabit has an individual at its center, an individual who frequently seeks the other for reassurance of his or her uniqueness and maybe even superiority. The other is rarely sought after for the purposes of giving up individual freedom in favor of co-authored world with the rules of authorship so conceived “handicapping” individual freedom in favor of the kind that cannot be indulged without the other person. Authority in such a society is located and constantly recreated between the people and it is utilized for the people, and so is freedom.

As a pedagogue living in the field of bilingual and multicultural education I engage my students, to the extent possible, in creating the spaces in which the submerged voices are likely to emerge (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999). I also keep in mind that the next step after my students and myself are able to speak our voices will be to turn the volume down so that the silence reigns, the silence that is impregnated with budding meaning and cognizance of the other’s active presence, the presence that cannot be denied in the act of my speaking my voice, as postulated by Freire (2000). For we co-exist to co-create co-authored meaning in which “co” would stand for “connectivity,”

“cooperation,” “community,” “collaboration.” And I pray that we stop using these words in a sloganized manner, as tokens of our already blessed existence as socially-oriented individuals. I propose to view collaboration not as a classroom management technique for better learning utilized excessively by today’s teachers myself included, but as a path to being more authentically human not only by exercising our unfinishedness through engaging our intelligently curious attitudes but also by co-authoring the world in which there is little room for self-sufficiency.

Today, my students collaborate not simply in groups but in, what we call, “families” and the essential reason for renaming our social clusters was to put fellowship at the center, to bring responsibility for each other’s becoming to the front of our pedagogical process whose goal is dialogic and directed (Shor & Freire, 1987) meaning-making for social purposes.

Concluding remarks

Look at your hands again. Consider the power of a thumb: it distinguishes us as human beings, yet it is quite useless by itself. The utilitarian worth of a thumb would be undermined were we not to recognize its dependence on the fellowship of the rest of the hand.

The *rule of a thumb* is thus

An individual must be defined not in juxtaposition to the other but in collaborative connection with, through and for the other.

Ask not what the social environment can do for my uniqueness but what I, in my unrepeatability, can contribute to the growth of my fellow men's unfinished, aspiring, transforming consciousnesses. And if I do not get to hear my voice resounding loudly at all times and bringing my personal needs to the center of our fellowship as a default way of being in the world, we may be better for it. The airtime is allocated for us not for me as separate from us.

It is life apprenticed into and implicated by fellowship that is worth living. By fellowship I do not mean a gathering of people whose hearts and minds are focused on themselves, but rather those who make themselves available to another human being with occasional self-evaluation for another's sake. According to Vygotsky, one cannot escape society's influence on individual becoming, thus one cannot escape his or her social nature. It is active orientation toward another, "I as we" that must be explicitly taught to our children. Let us learn to postpone ourselves!

1 See Homi Bhabha's (1994) treatment of the "Third Space" as both the assigned location for marginal individuals and a productive space from which new, yet unspoken words issue, the words that can potentially liberate a submerged voice from its assigned silence.

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