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(RE)COLLECTING AND (RE)TURNING TO OURSELVES: CREATIVE FEMINIST AND QUEER PRAXES WITH MIGRANTS IN ADULT LEARNING

Nelesi Rodrigues, Katherine E. Entigar
and Natalia Balyasnikova

(RE)COLLECTING AND (RE)TURNING TO OURSELVES: CREATIVE FEMINIST AND QUEER PRAXES WITH MIGRANTS IN ADULT LEARNING

Nelesi Rodrigues
University of Toronto

Katherine E. Entigar
University of Toronto

Natalia Balyasnikova
York University

Abstract

In this article, the authors share three moments of glow when restlessness, curiosity, and wonder punctuated their teaching with culturally and linguistically diverse migrant learners. The authors use these moments to sit with uncertainty and discomfort, feelings they consider crucial to adult learning and critical praxis. Each author's moment of glow—which incorporates a reflection on practice, followed by a response from the other authors—explores how creative practice and feminist and queer praxes collaborate to uncover critical insights and possibilities in community learning with Venezuelan migrants, 2SLGBTQ+ and/or migrant community members, and older migrants. The authors offer this piece as an example of collaborative inquiry that enacts feminist imagination in times when many feel unprepared to engage with discomfort in our teaching practices.

Résumé

Dans le présent article, les auteurs font part de trois moments spéciaux lors desquels l'agitation, la curiosité et l'émerveillement ont marqué leur enseignement d'apprenants migrants provenant de divers contextes culturels et linguistiques. Les auteurs se sont servis de ces moments pour accueillir l'incertitude et l'inconfort, sentiments qui sont selon eux essentiels à l'apprentissage des adultes et aux pratiques critiques. Le moment spécial de chaque auteur—qui comprend une réflexion sur la pratique suivie d'une réaction des autres auteurs—explore les interactions entre les pratiques créatives, féministes et queer menant à des découvertes essentielles et à des possibilités d'apprentissage communautaire pour les migrants vénézuéliens, les migrants ou membres de communauté 2SLGBTQ+ et les migrants plus âgés. Les auteurs présentent cet article à titre d'exemple

d'enquête collaborative mettant à profit l'imagination féministe dans des périodes lors desquelles beaucoup de gens ne se sentent pas prêts à confronter l'inconfort dans nos pratiques pédagogiques.

Keywords

migrants, feminist praxis, queer praxis, discomfort, community-based adult education, collaborative inquiry

Mots clés

migrants, pratiques féministes, pratiques queer, inconfort, éducation communautaire des adultes, enquête collaborative

When we began the work of discussing what we wanted this article to be, several things became important right away. First, the three of us shared and wanted to centre our work with migrants: culturally and linguistically dynamic people who experience injustices at the intersection of social locations like gender and race/ethnicity and migration. Second, we were all interested in writing about our experiences of discomfort—and curiosity about this discomfort—in our work in community-based learning settings. Third, each of us had different ways of positioning ourselves and our work in relation to creative practice and feminist and queer praxes, yet we were committed to working across those differences.

We shared that we wrestle with internalized expectations about what educators and education "should" be (i.e., have all the answers, encourage speaking, be conflict-less). Part of the work of feminist adult education is to "[unsettle] problematic assumptions and common-sense perspectives that have been instilled through traditional gendered or colonial narratives" (Clover et al., 2022, p. 5), especially those about teachers and learners. Resisting such narratives, which determine who is "deviant" and/or "illegal" and isolate us from one another, is likewise a primary concern of queer scholars of adult education. Grace and Hill (2016) asserted that "queer praxis emerges in the intersection of lived everyday experiences, as queer individuals navigate the pressures of domination and normalization" (p. 185). Rooted in feminist and queer approaches to adult learning and educational practice, both established and emerging from within ourselves, we (re)collect and (re)turn to three difficult moments in our teaching to argue that collaboration and contemplation—facilitated by creative practices—can help adult educators push against wrongful expectations and imagine a different way forward.

Collaborative ways of thinking and writing have long been central practices of feminist research (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2021; Swarr & Nagar, 2010; Taylor, 2017). Especially for Black and other women of colour, collective thinking has been a way to articulate and fight systemic oppression without flattening out differences. This approach has also remained a way to challenge forms of knowledge production that privilege and reward single authorship. As feminist praxis, thinking and writing together "provides a way to radically rethink existing approaches to subalternity, voice, authorship, and representation" (Swarr & Nagar, 2010, p. 2). We recognize that collective thinking has its challenges, and that those who engage in it must continually interrogate the practice so it does not simply become an echo chamber. Nonetheless, based on our own experience, we insist on it as a practice for feminist and

queer-identifying adult educators working to unlearn misconceptions about who and how teachers and learners must be—especially in precarious times that demand our vulnerability, solidarity, and courage.

We approach collaboration as imaginative work. The "imagination is a term for a commitment to making connections and seeing possibility" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 19). Collaboration in this article is powered by our imagining a world where the most transformative learning happens when we listen to and learn from those different from us. Moreover, we need to be imaginative, which for us is to get outside established thinking habits that are not (or no longer) useful. Imagination is key to designing conversations that no longer lead to the same dead ends, such as over-rationalization, moral superiority, fragility, and/or insularity as defence mechanisms. In the context of adult education, Clover et al. (2022) reminded us that feminist imagination dares us "to sit in discomfort as well as to take risks, to tell our stories and to listen to the stories of others, to be logical and reasonable yet creative and playful" (p. 6). In this article, we imagine and enact a feminist adult education method of thinking, writing, and working together in difficult times.

We engage in this dialogue as a collective of individuals now living and working on the traditional territories of various First Nations communities, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples, governed by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Williams Treaties with Mississaugas and Chippewa bands. To begin the work of articulating how discomfort, creative practices, and feminist and queer praxes show up in our work, we place ourselves first. Nelesi is a Luso-Venezuelan woman and migrant settler living in Turtle Island. She is an educator with a background in writing and rhetoric who is interested in how attention to movement—in its creative, geographical, political dimensions—can help develop more just and accessible pedagogies. In this article, Nelesi considers how feminist praxis and creative practices can support trauma-informed adult education, as she writes about an in-person and online workshop with Venezuelan migrants. Katie is a white settler and queer disabled scholar working in English language education with transnational people and facilitating 2SLGBTQ+ community groups in the USA and Canada. In this article, Katie reflects on facilitating trans and queer groups where silence figures powerfully in meaning making and community building. Natalia is a settler-Russian immigrant woman working at the intersection of adult education and applied linguistics. In this article, Natalia reflects on a moment when non-fiction storytelling with older adults opened a discursive space "of critique and possibility" (Clover, 2024, p. 12) and tested her understanding of her role as a feminist educator, compelling her to question the generative potential of conflict in the classroom.

In sharing our individual experiences as educators and scholars with different trajectories and positionalities, we recognized that some of our most meaningful teaching experiences had also been the most daunting: moments of discomfort that we experienced in embodied ways as messy, full of feelings, and political. Through the sharing process, we collectively acknowledged that queer and feminist praxes inform, and are informed by, creative practice, a dialectical process that grounds our work and sustains us.

In the course of writing this article, it became important to capture the multivocal nature of our exchanges by selecting a structure that interweaves the differences and connections that formed our collaborative process. Inspired by "moment" ideas from MacLure (2013) and Ahmed's "sweaty concepts" (2017), we designed a three-moment structure that would allow for remembering, reflecting, and responding:

- An itchy moment involving a vignette about an exchange or interaction in our teaching that has called us into reflection and accountability.
- A sweaty moment (Ahmed, 2017) of sense making, where each of us wrestles with questions inspired by the vignette and considers them via specific configurations of feminist or/and queer praxes.
- A sounding moment of the brief responses to each other's experiences and reflection.

This structure allows for the articulation and interweaving of experiences that might not be easily expressed through conventional analytical means. We (re)collect and (re)turn to ourselves while encountering and embracing each other's becoming. This emerging mutual companionship forms a light in the dark by which we chart our collective course as scholars and practitioners, an example that we hope contributes to ongoing discussion of feminist imagination and adult education in community learning with culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Nelesi: Itchy Moment

Sometimes, wonder finds us in the interactions that are the fabric of our practice. This was the case with Sacar y Echar Raíces (SER), a workshop series that I developed and facilitated in person and online between 2019 and 2022, with support from the Venezuelan grassroots organization Resonalia (n.d.). The purpose of SER was to offer Venezuelans living within and beyond the country's borders a space to reflect on, share, and learn about their/our wide-ranging experiences of migration. During the first workshop, a question from one learner propelled me to reflect on how feminist praxes have helped me centre care in community-based settings, especially when learners' experiences of trauma are likely to surface.

According to the UN's International Organization for Migration (2024), at the time of writing this article there are about 7.77 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees around the world. Those who remain in the South American country also experience profound shifts from the readjustments that occur as results of internal migration and mass exodus. It was with this understanding of migration that Resonalia and I facilitated SER workshops, both in person in Caracas and remotely via Zoom, with the explicit goal of engaging both people who had left the country and those who had remained in it. We had learners who had left Venezuela, whose whole families were outside the country, who had left and returned, who were thinking of leaving, and who were internal migrants.

I designed SER workshops as a Venezuelan first; I craved an opportunity to engage with our recent experiences of migration and displacement, in community and without the scripts that local and international news coverage had started imposing on us. My previous work as a creative movement and non-formal learning facilitator also informed the structure of the workshop. I wanted to centre the role of relationships (including long-standing, emergent, in flux) in Venezuelan migration stories. To bring them forth, I shared a series of creative strategies that helped us tap into their/our embodied knowledge and their/our sense of connection with loved ones, near and far, as well as with workshop participants present then and there.

Generally, SER workshops were divided into three moments: After welcoming learners and introducing the workshop framing, facilitators opened with a poetry-based meditation where we read aloud a selected poem while learners listened, visualized the words, and tuned

in to their bodies. Then we invited them to draw maps of their relations to land and people, a prompt that they were encouraged to interpret as literally or metaphorically as they wanted. In the last part of the workshop, learners gathered in groups and used a series of creative movement prompts to reflect on their experiences of Venezuelan migration and strategies for (or struggles to maintain and build) connection. We encouraged them to engage with those prompts via language and movement. Each workshop ended with groups sharing dance phrases developed from the embodied gestures and movements they gathered during their conversations.

At the end of our first SER workshop, one learner approached me to further talk about the experience. She asked: "How do you make sure that people are okay by the time they leave the workshop?" To be honest, my heart raced a bit listening to that question as I recognized that I did not have a ready answer. I shared a few thoughts about decisions I had made while building the workshop that I saw as prioritizing care, but I also acknowledged that my answer was incomplete, provisional. I left the session committed to giving her complex and important question its fair consideration.

Nelesi: Sweaty Moment

I now see that moment as an invitation to be accountable and to practise what rhetoricians Royster and Kirsch (2012, p. 21) called "strategic contemplation," a feminist interpretive strategy that involves "tacking in" (p. 87), paying attention to our emotional and embodied responses, and "tacking out" (p. 90), taking some distance to consider the context and conversations surrounding and piercing our research and practice. That participant's question created a moment of wonder, both in the sense of marvelling as I started to articulate connections between specific workshop design choices and lessons learned from feminist authors and mentors, as well as in the sense of posing a question: what does feminist praxis offer to trauma-informed adult education and facilitation?

My own feminist schooling has come mostly from Black feminists from the 1970s and 1980s such as Audre Lorde (2007) and June Jordan (2017), as well as feminists of colour and transnational feminists who often find and share ground in/with these Black feminists' work (Chatterjea et al., 2022; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2021; Swarr & Nagar, 2010). Without ignoring the tensions that exist between these feminist genealogies, I bring attention to their shared commitments: (1) the affirmation of experience as a source of knowledge and storytelling as a form of theorizing (Cooper, 2015; Lorde, 2007; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2021;); (2) the value of intersectional analyses that are critical and accountable (Crenshaw, 1989; Cooper, 2015; Nash, 2008) and that "address the asymmetries of the globalization process" (Swarr & Nagar, 2010, p. 3); and (3) the use of the collective as an empowering place of enunciation that still allows for difference, and of creative forms to access and centre other ways of thinking (Lorde, 2007; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2021). These commitments, largely attributed to 1960s–1970s Black feminists and taken up by many transnational feminists and feminists of colour, offer a counterpoint to (white) medicalized approaches to trauma-informed education (Farinde-Wu et al., 2023). Strategic contemplation allowed me to articulate that, informed by this feminist constellation, SER workshops adopted three feminist practices to enact a trauma-informed pedagogy of care:

1. Affirming learners' lived experiences as a source of knowledge, and communal spaces as contexts for sense making. In the United States during the 1970s, Black feminist groups such as the Combahee River Collective modelled how sharing and listening to personal experiences could serve as a starting point for understanding systemic oppression and cultivating solidarity (Taylor, 2017). Born as a direct response to a period of high media coverage about the Venezuelan exodus that often failed to capture the complexity of migrants' experiences, SER workshops centred the voices and knowledges of people experiencing migration and displacement first-hand to build nuanced and shared understandings of a collective experience.

2. Understanding creative practices as ways of knowing that allow us to tap into other layers of experience. In *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, Lorde (2007) reclaimed artmaking as "a revelatory distillation of experience" (p. 37). The "poetry" she referred to was everyday creative practices with life-altering potential, accessible to all people—a way of being in and with the world. In SER workshops, learners used creative methods to engage with experience in ways different than they were used to. Creating and physically moving together grounded learners and opened opportunities for release and connection in the here and now. As dance and community-engaged scholar Ananya Chatterjea (2011) explained about dance as shared experience, "our participation or witnessing immediately makes for knowledge of presence, and of the journeys of being and becoming" (pp. 12–13). In designing a workshop that started with looking inward and ended with groups performing their co-authored dance phrases, SER made space for collective sense making and for honouring relationships past, present, and future.

3. Encouraging curiosity and affirming learners' agency in potentially difficult learning experiences. Creative practices and arts-based learning help to cultivate a multilayered sense of agency that upholds the value of one's voice and actions regardless of social, political, cultural, or historical location, and that affirms the right to self-determination and imagination (Clover, 2023; Lorde, 2007). In SER workshops, we encouraged learners to both lean into discomfort and listen to their/our bodies to determine when to tap out. We took time to address the difference between feeling uncomfortable and feeling unsafe, which is key when deciding between asking questions and tapping out. Two principles of accessible facilitation that I have learned as a creative movement educator with Dance Exchange (n.d.) and that help us equip learners in SER workshops are that (1) variation is the mother of creativity, and (2) turning discomfort into inquiry can lead to meaningful learning (Lerman, 2011). In this way, we built trust in the space that we shared and affirmed learners' agency at a time when many of us had been experiencing situations where choice felt out of reach.

How do you make sure that people are okay by the time they leave the workshop? Based on this question, I took my own advice and turned the original discomfort caused by not having an answer into curiosity and strategic contemplation. This shift allowed for a deeper awareness of how feminist praxes informed SER workshops. It also led to a specific revision to further centre care. In collaboration with Resonalia, we created a living document to share with attendees after each session that contained resources and services on topics that included migrant mental health, community building, as well as educational and legal support.

Katie: Sounding Moment

Wow, such a beautiful discussion here! The co-authoring of dance phrases echoes queer playfulness and creativity and makes me think of Liberation on the Dance Floor, a project a peer mentor of mine shared with me charting the power of collective dance in 1970s and 1980s queer liberation movements in Canada, a legacy that continues today:

> Community-run underground dance spaces have long served as a type of "cultural security zone" for marginalized communities—spaces where individuals who face oppression can come together to glean a sense of collectivity, care, and agency. Paying attention to dance music histories affords ways into regional queer spaces and imaginaries as well as an opportunity to connect seemingly disparate spaces, movements, and participants in these queer pasts. (Jennex, 2020, p. 425)

Perhaps you have created your own "cultural security zone" with your learners in the SER workshops. Perhaps this is what we are creating in this paper, too, imagining and forging connections across distances by sharing our individual moments of collectivity, of discomfort, of seeking, of sharing.

Natalia: Sounding Moment

I keep returning to this idea of learning as something so deeply relational. What would adult education even look like if we really leaned in to the idea that learning isn't just about efficiently pouring knowledge into the empty vessel of a learner? But instead, it's about making a space for more contemplative, relational practice? It got me thinking about some gerontological research I've read, where a lot of conversations return to seeing our being in the world as "journeying slower, deeper, and wider" into later life (Randall, 2023, p. 262).

I wonder, how do we actually create a space for slowness and depth? Maybe this is where the arts come in as we slow down and enter messy but real places where we can somehow get more resilient (Randall, 2001, 2013). It's interesting because, too often, the adult education models give us prescriptive and honestly narrow ways of working: we need to be active, engaged, ready to solve things. But what's missing, right, is time or space to just sit with the discomfort of things as a feminist praxis rooted in slowness, in care, in attentiveness (Olivieri & Alverde, 2025).

So when you ask that question at the end of your reflection, it's one of those questions that doesn't have a quick answer. Rather, it invites us to pause and contemplate our multiple layers of experience. Your sweaty moment feels like an invitation to just be present, to be, I guess, honest and contemplative with the time we have. How can we continue using arts to honour our slowness, fragility, discomfort, and vulnerability, even if mainstream adult education doesn't really make space for us to do so?

Katie: Itchy Moment

Figure 1

Silence
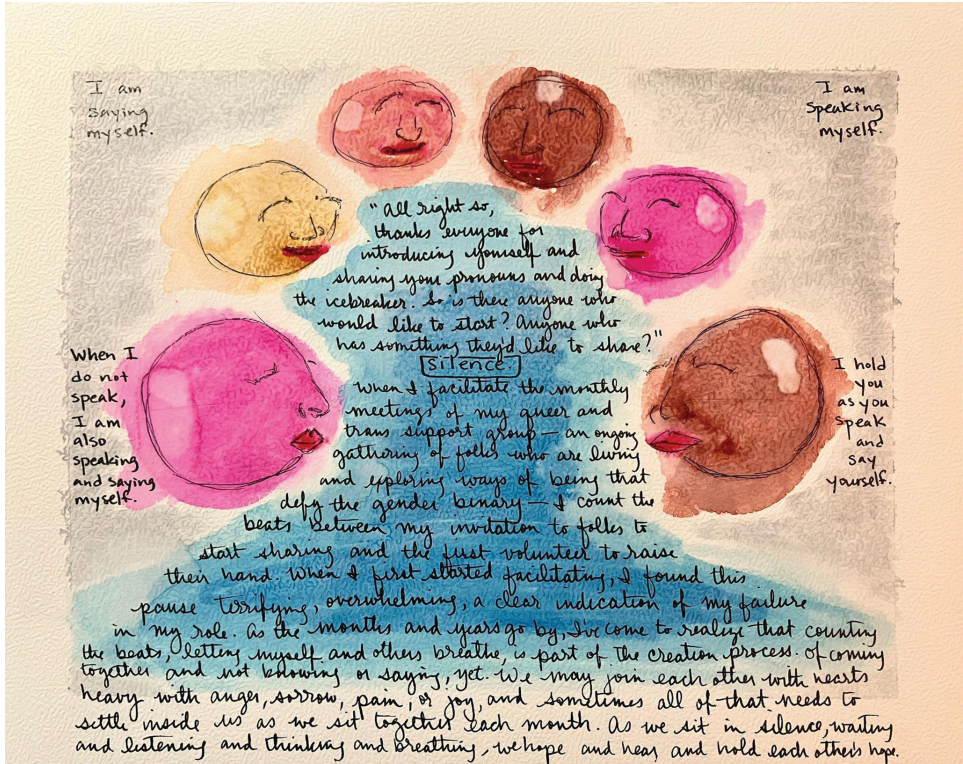
I am saying myself.

I am speaking myself.

When I do not speak, I am also speaking and saying myself.

I hold you as you speak and say yourself.

"All right so, thanks everyone for introducing yourself and sharing your pronouns and doing the icebreaker. So is there anyone who would like to start? Anyone who has something they'd like to share?" Silence. When I facilitate the monthly meetings of my queer and trans support group—an ongoing gathering of folks who are living and exploring ways of being that defy the gender binary—I count the beats between my invitation to folks to start sharing and the first volunteer to raise their hand. When I first started

facilitating, I found this pause terrifying, overwhelming, a clear indication of my failure in my role. As the months and years go by, I've come to realize that counting the beats, letting myself and others breathe, is part of the creation process. Of coming together and not knowing or saying, yet. We may join each other with hearts heavy with anger, sorrow, pain, or joy, and sometimes all of that needs to settle inside us as we sit together each month. As we sit in silence, waiting and listening and thinking and breathing, we hope and hear and hold each other's hope.

Katie: Sweaty Moment

The image above encapsulates many experiences I've had in 2SLGBTQ+ affinity groups, telling stories, asking questions, and learning with others. In some groups, I've observed how experienced facilitators don't tell people their experiences are "right" or "true," or give unsolicited advice. Instead, they lean in along with the rest of us, waiting for folks to share if they want. While groups change over time, those who remain come to generate a capacious, flexible trust, holding space for each other and newcomers that is rarely discovered elsewhere.

In creating similar groups in community-based organizations and my own university, meetings that include refugees, international students, and other newcomers, I see this work as a unique form of peer mentorship, where individuals attend to each other's ongoing authoring of self within a collective story of resistance to violence and erasure. In these groups, there is no "leader" or "teacher"; while I maintain communications and collectively defined community agreements for safety and care, I do not dictate how interactions go. Sometimes I say little at all. A central tenet of these spaces is that age, dating experience, medical procedures/experiences, or being "more out"/"out for longer" has no bearing on who should give advice. I have been profoundly nourished by these experiences, both when I've shared something with the group and when I've witnessed others' stories of coming out, dating, seeking medical care, and developing new tools to navigate the world. It is healing to hear younger group members offering perspectives people like me hadn't considered. What we create together is a radical, emergent companionship that is pluri-directional and pluriform, constantly emerging and renewed. Witnessing each other's contributions—both verbalized and silent—we (re)invigorate a space where we can know and be known in ways we yearn for.

Reflecting on these experiences, I believe one of the strengths of this companionship is the lack of pressure to participate verbally in order to belong. Indeed, I believe silence and the value we give it are crucial. As a communicative phenomenon, silence is intriguing. Perennially, scholars have struggled to capture the range of meanings and impacts silence has in social interaction. In my own work, I examine silence as a marker of the potentiality of contribution, something unscripted yet vital. Silence can be disruptive of the dominant monological version of reality written as "true" for everyone else (Entigar, 2020) or a force leveraged by newcomers to disrupt teacher authority while protecting their membership as learners, which I am currently exploring. While relevant to queer scholarship that charts how silence indexes erasure and invisibility (e.g., Cummings & Cranston-Reimer, 2020; Kastein, 2023; Khalid et al., 2024), resistance (e.g., Halberstam, 2011; Smilges, 2022), and other themes significant to queer struggles for recognition, rights, and dignity, in the case of queer peer mentorship, I think about silence as a refuge from the violent dialogue dominant society forces us into every day. For 2SLGBTQ+ folks, in moving how we move, wearing

what we wear, and loving how we love, we are forced to participate in a conversation that uses us as both its subject and object of consumption. We walk down the sidewalk, get on an empty subway car, sit down to work, learn, worship, or get care, and feel eyes on us, probing, warning us that today might be *the day that . . .* It is exhausting to live this way, evident in our community's high rates of depression, homelessness, and suicidality.

Holding space for silence in queer peer mentoring spaces means recognizing that we are sitting together, we are safe, and we don't have to fight to keep the keel even. Here, listening and breathing together without words is indeed speaking together, a collective respite, a sharing of self often more real than any act of verbal communication. This silence contains possibilities that are fuller when left inarticulate, and hopeful heart rhythms that shift when another's story resonates with us. Silence is a form of imagining in these groups, an act of mutual recognition against the strategies of control that require individuals to conform to visible social categories as a condition of belonging and membership. Guillaume and Schweiger (2018) described silence as "a yielding which binds and joins . . . individuals or groups which is constitutive of specific communities" (p. 101). Silence thus becomes a shared activity, generating a collective ethics that nourishes radical love and belonging against an isolating and violent world. Each participant can find healing in this companionship, a love for ourselves and each other that we carry back out into the world.

Yet I struggle with the tensions between my professional and social memberships vis-à-vis the question of silence. I feel pressure to be visible as an academic and practitioner, though I recognize the Euro-descended, neocolonial, and neoliberal values inherent in such thinking. To be silent as an academic, someone who is meant to know and produce, is effectively academic death. And as a practitioner, to embrace my students' silence means . . . what? I lose control? I can't track their learning? If so, how could I justify my work with them? I believe that any practitioners (particularly those with multiple social privileges) committed to anti-oppressive, anti-racist, feminist education should ask themselves these questions. We rarely confront our assumed authority to interpret learner contributions to the ethics and politics of learning via the communicative choices they make. I suggest this is rooted in the onto-epistemic hierarchies inherent in the educational text (Kurzon, 2007) of teaching and learning, where practitioners have unilateral power to define what counts as meaningful and ethical. This is true irrespective of the type of pedagogy they employ, whether it be culturally responsive/relevant, critical, or emancipatory, because practitioners are qualified—empowered—to define how "good" and "just" learning should happen. I critique this issue in my work on pedagogy (Entigar, 2017) and inclusion (Entigar, 2022) with transnational migrant learners, culturally and linguistically dynamic people who I argue agentively contribute to the ethics and politics of learning.

I offer that an emergent relational ethics, one that encounters silence as a shared doing and speaking of self in queer peer mentorship, can be a goal for anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and feminist practitioners and scholars working with newcomers, international students, and others traversing different kinds of borders. This means several things. First, we cannot know who learners are, or how they wish to represent themselves, until we share space with them. As people author themselves in education, silence contributes to a shared collective utterance (Bakhtin, 2010). This coming together is a constituent part of agentive self-making in relation with others as a process of building the world together. Second, we must start with the premise that trust between learners and teachers is contingent, never a given. This

activates Vakil et al.'s (2016) notion of politicized trust, an emergent, contingent offering that calls for "ongoing building and cultivation of mutual trust and racial solidarity" (p. 199).

Regardless of our good intentions as practitioners or scholars, we can easily fall prey to the scripts that empower us to define what counts as meaningful and ethical in learning. Could we try something else, something perhaps deeply uncomfortable yet potentially healing for all of us who are objectified by white cis-hetero-patriarchal nationalistic society, including people who are 2SLGBTQ+ community members and/or newcomers? Could we co-author new scripts that emerge from within us and among us? Could we consider that the ways each learner contributes to meaning making may change, and that we can honour these contributions as crucial agentic expressions of self, including in the form of silence? For practitioners, this radical stance signifies an activity of re-cover-y, re-collecting ourselves, and re-turning to each other, giving space to each other to be, to breathe, to imagine together the possible.

Natalia: Sounding Moment

Oh, I'm struck by the notion of trust you brought up in your moment. Trust, as both a concept and a practice, occupies a fundamental place within feminist epistemology (Grasswick, 2017). Here trust resists a static definition but instead requires deeply ethical and epistemic reflection, as we navigate the complexities of privilege and marginalization. At the same time, as an educational gerontologist, I think about trust as layered through multiple lived stories and experiences over the different lifespans. Our knowledge, in a way, is rooted in those past stories; sharing them can bring up feelings of discomfort. It's this kind of trust that no institution can replicate—not set in rigid definitions but coming alive through art, right? And through mutual vulnerability. Are these also "important social functions" (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006, p. 165) of telling and listening to stories beyond passing on knowledge? Is each act of artistic creation and reception, then, in fact an invitation to trust, even though it remains delicate, fragile even?

Nelesi: Sounding Moment

Mhm! Your reflections here bring into perspective overwhelming assumptions about silence in feminist spaces ("your silence won't protect you," as Audre Lorde famously wrote). Silence can be meaning-full, life saving, and life giving, as your discussion of 2SLGBTQ+ affinity groups and peer mentorship show. Being-with, in silence and not knowing, also has an important place in the feminist practice of acompañamiento, which is most common in the context of supporting access to safe abortions and transitioning out of domestic violence situations (Krauss, 2019). Even though acompañadoras might take on facilitator and advocate roles in these moments, oftentimes their main contribution is their mere presence—being with someone through a painful, difficult, and perhaps terrifying experience; letting them know that they are not alone. Acompañamientos are intimate and care-full interactions, even though there is much that remains unspoken and unknown between who offers and who receives companionship. 2SLGBTQ+ affinity groups and feminist acompañamientos seem to be instances where meaning and learning result from the reciprocal commitment to be in relation without knowing each other as a prerequisite, or without assuming that fully knowing one another will ever be possible (Glissant, 1997). And I appreciate you highlighting tensions between these ways of relating and academia—a context driven by the desire to know.

Natalia: Itchy Moment

In 2012, I developed a creative non-fiction storytelling class for older migrants learning English in a space called UBC Learning Exchange in Vancouver, Canada. I imagined this class as a place where sharing personal stories would create a sense of belonging, a shared understanding that would hold us all and connect us across ages and backgrounds. But in one class on the importance of intergenerational connections, my idealized vision of a community blurred.

An ordinary class quickly became quite complex. Two learners—Ann (from China) and Justin (from Taiwan) (both pseudonyms)—shared their personal stories about the roots of loneliness in later life. Their perspectives could not have been more different and turned the conversation toward a political debate on Chinese policies, an area I was unfamiliar with at that time, but that deeply resonated with the rest of the class. Justin laid the blame of loneliness in later life on China's one-child policy, saying, "There are too many lonely elders because of policy and culture." Ann fiercely resisted. "The elders in China are strong," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Their minds are sharp, they are not helpless." Ann spoke of the barriers that kept her from visiting her parents in China, obligations that stretched her thin, that held her back. "It's not culture," she said, her voice trembling. Other learners began to speak. One shared a story of older migrants in Canada who were also "weak, sick, and without money," left vulnerable by a system that failed them. As I tried to pull us back, to bring the conversation to safer ground, I could feel the room slipping away from me. Another learner spoke up: "Foreign people will never really understand what China faces."

Ann didn't return after that day. She sent a message about scheduling conflicts, but I worry that she left because the space I had imagined was not in fact a harmonious welcoming community. I worry that I failed as an educator.

Natalia: Sweaty Moment

To this day, I find myself sitting with the discomfort of what unfolded in that classroom. I had envisioned this class as a space of community, built on mutual respect and understanding, where personal stories would serve as bridges, not walls (Balyasnikova & Gillard, 2018, 2021). Yet that day felt entirely different. In that moment of discomfort I found myself wondering: What does it mean to acknowledge that the creative united community I had imagined did not materialize as I had hoped, but instead it was the very act of sharing personal stories that created disruption? How to reconcile that the neat boundaries of my planning were blurred by the rawness of real-world politics. And importantly, could such disruptions be necessary?

As a language educator, I engage in and build learning environments marked by intricate dynamics, grounded in systems of power deeply rooted in colonial legacies and nation-building efforts. Working with older migrants, I had long understood that the classroom is far from neutral as learners embody multilayered identities shaped at the intersection of aging and migration. Thus our community is constructed by distinct perspectives on learning and politics. I had hoped that through storytelling we would be able to challenge existing systems of control, build some shared community of understanding. But when the discussion started, I sensed danger and found myself wanting to restore peace. I saw myself gripping onto control in an attempt to steer the conversation back to safer ground. However, if "teaching is a performative act" (hooks, 1994, p. 11) that questions the very notion of control, I wonder now if, in trying to smooth over the discomfort, I was failing to live up to this call to let go,

to let the learners lead the conversation, even when it felt uncomfortable. Instead, I found myself wanting to steer the conversation back to what felt more comfortable and safe for me, not for the learners necessarily.

The storytelling club did not have an explicit objective of challenging any dominant narratives; rather, it was rooted in a belief that the stories of older migrants are worth hearing. I've long believed that the art of storytelling allows us to see ourselves in relation to others, to share our experiences in ways that build intergenerational solidarity. But as I reflect on what happened in my classroom, I'm reminded that storytelling is not a straightforward path to solidarity. Instead it's a dynamic arts-based practice that can open spaces for connection but also tensions.

Feminism is a "complex weave of our different experiences, identities, and contexts" (Weatherall, 2020, p. 475), and "[feminist] practices are (always) imperfect and contested, but can aid feminists in imagining and working towards a better world" (p. 476). If we truly embrace this complexity and imperfection, there will always be moments of discomfort in our sharing of these experiences. Hemmings (2012) wrote about "affective dissonance" (p. 148), sitting with the discomfort of difference rather than smoothing it over. In my classroom that day, I was confronted with that dissonance. I felt the push and pull of conflicting stories, the tension between perspectives that did not easily harmonize.

The creative practice of storytelling is not just rooted in speaking. It is a relational practice of listening (Low et al., 2016). Indeed, "stories are shaped by who they are told to" (Bjerkmo et al., 2023, p. 2), and listeners essentially influence whether the older storyteller reveals a deep, layered account of their life or a simplified, superficial one (Randall et al., 2006). To listen to other people's stories, especially in the context of intergenerational learning, should be grounded in moral humility and the recognition that we may never fully understand another's experience. Young (1997) talked about asymmetrical reciprocity, the idea that giving and receiving are never equal. I wonder if that's what makes true community possible. In my classroom, I struggled with this. I wanted everyone to feel heard, but I wonder if I could have done more to create space for that unevenness, to allow the conversation to remain imperfect, even uncomfortable. What does it mean to listen with moral humility, to accept that the stories we hear may not align with our own?

I realize I was trained to see harmony as the goal in educational spaces, rather than embracing the discomfort of a conflict, seeing it only as danger. There is danger, yes, but also the potential for transformation. As feminist educators, we must be brave enough to walk into that danger. I wasn't ready for it then. But now I am unlearning the predetermined norms of behaviour and a vision of perfection (as noted by Ahmed, 2017) and learning to work through the messiness with empathy, not fear. In moments like the one in my classroom, empathy felt like something we had to fight for. I wonder if I could have done more to guide us through that fight, rather than stepping in to defuse it too quickly. Maybe the debate between the participants was itself a kind of invitation—to move toward what Hemmings (2012) called affective solidarity, where we engage with our differences and find connection through that struggle, rather than in spite of it.

Storytelling is still a powerful practice for me. Stories "provide orientation; we tell stories in order to understand ourselves and our relation to the world" (Hesford, 1990, p. 2), so I still believe this practice can build community. But I now see that we cannot idealize this process. There are possibilities of discomfort, but they are all part of what storytelling can bring into the room. It's about letting the learning happen even when it feels like it's falling apart.

Nelesi: Sounding Moment

I am drawn to your thoughts about the performative nature of teaching (by way of bell hooks) and the role of listening in education. hooks wrote about teaching as performative in the sense that it is open and unpredictable; that because learning spaces are co-constructed, they require our full presence in the here, now, and with. We are called to remain present in and respond to what happens in the classroom as it unfolds, which is easier said than done . . . Oof! How do we do that? I don't have a definitive answer, but a creative practice comes to mind as a starting point: Improvisational theatre's number one rule, "yes, and . . . ," is a commitment to first accept what a partner offers to you, and then to elaborate on, stretch, layer it. This is not necessarily agreement; it is making room for someone else's story to exist alongside, perhaps even interwoven with, yours. This strategy might help us educators remain both grounded and agile as we lead unpredictable learning spaces. It might also encourage learners to practise listening with the openness to accommodate multiple (and sometimes conflicting) perspectives on the different issues that will inevitably sneak into spaces like your storytelling class.

Katie: Sounding Moment

Yes!! I connect to this exploration of education as we relate through speaking and listening to our stories together, acknowledging that meaning making involves non-ideal and sometimes painful human interactions. We are always authoring ourselves, an ongoing becoming of self that we hope will be embraced, if not fully understood, by others. This is such a vulnerable act, including for practitioners like the three of us.

Yet we are not told this! For those of us trained in Eurocentric institutions, we learn to see "good" teaching as a successful application of pedagogy and resulting management of learning (a corporate idea!). When a learner withdraws, especially for uncertain reasons, we feel we've failed. Yet you supported this learner's agency in determining when, how, and whether to be included (Entigar, 2022). Perhaps a way of thinking about storytelling, one which centres a different, perhaps more feminist, ethics, is that each speaker should be allowed to define who their interlocutors are, and whether/when they have access to this story.

Conclusion

In this article we shared moments of discomfort from our practice, brainstorming together and offering solutions in a peaceful, linear fashion. We hope this is not the reader's takeaway. We discovered many things in writing this paper together that defy this kind of conclusion. Getting out of our heads and onto the page, getting out of our offices and our training (our mental offices) and into dialogue together, reminded us that learning in collaborative practice with others can be complicated, emotional work. As we wrote together over time, our eyes and throats belied the truth of our struggles not solely as practitioners, but indeed as humans. There were tears, tensions, and sighs, openings of self and quiet closings and returns to our respective spaces. It became clear that this generative, reflective practice—selecting the "me" to be seen and heard, as well as the rhetorical/stylistic form this took—had to be balanced with forging a group ethics that helped us reckon with frustrations and struggles that happened along the way.

This emergent collective practice, which we see as deeply feminist and queer in its capacity to embrace uncertainty within a framework of care and mutual recognition, became a source of strength for us as colleagues. As we shared our itchy and sweaty moments, struggling with the positions of power we have occupied and the potential our practices hold to cause harm, we witnessed each other's struggles. We became vulnerable as people in ways we could not elsewhere, rather than workers whose occasional missteps should be quickly and quietly corrected. We walked together in our struggles and learned deeply from them and from each other. We found ourselves asking several questions, questions we share with the reader now.

What does it mean to slow down, to take time to acknowledge the breakdowns in our practice as well as the fact that even our best intentions cannot keep us from failing, from causing harm—a deeply uncomfortable proposition? How can we as practitioners take time to sit with our failures in a sustained process of reflection and change, allowing discomfort to be a teacher and guide? And what does "failure" actually mean in our work with migrants and other culturally and linguistically dynamic people, with whom we may have some experiences in common or none at all? Could failure signify a much-needed limit on our official position as knowers in and controllers of the educational process, which relegates learners' agency to function in support of our position of power? What if we could allow ourselves to fail, or, better yet, allow ourselves to co-determine what counts as failure with our learners? While we cannot, and perhaps should not, know everything about learners, we can embrace their contributions as activities of self-authoring by people living across borders. We reflect on this tension of visibility/invisibility, of knowing/not knowing, and consider what it means to strive for the kind of moral humility this requires, especially when listening for such contributions threatens our plans for how learning is supposed to go.

We hope this article can offer other scholars and practitioners like us an example of collaborative inquiry and a way forward in times when we feel sorely unprepared to engage with disruption in our teaching and the process of writing together. We invite fellow practitioners to consider the roles silence, not knowing, accountability, and discomfort have in both meaning making and disrupting our unilateral, unquestioned power in learning spaces. This is possible through collective thinking grounded in feminist and queer praxes as a first step toward imagining what is possible beyond the given. Trans scholars Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias (2019) have described imagination as "a powerful tool that allows us to acknowledge the many creative modes of survival and coexistence that have characterized individuals and communities who identify with transgressive genders, sexualities, and desire" (p. 240). This is a time when collective imagining is sorely needed, for all people. It is here that we can begin the search for what else can be dis-/un-/re-covered, in a collective envisioning of the not yet but coming soon. In a traumatic and disconnected time short of hope, we can rely on creativity to navigate the uncertainty of the path ahead, where no map exists but our commitments: to showing up, to being with each other, and to remaining accountable to the communities we work with.

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