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Mapping Common Grounds Between Mother and Child: A Response to Alyssa Niccolini

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to both Dr. Alyssa Nicollini and Professor Gail Boldt for the opportunity to write this response.

Mapping Common Grounds Between Mother and Child: A Response to Alyssa Niccolini

Jennifer Rowsell

... *Who knew the body had so many hiding places?*¹

... Who knew the mind could move so swiftly into darkness?

Stories of mothers and daughters, of vulnerabilities, of literacies said and silent, lost and found, provoked and placated.

In *Early Childhood, Aging, and the Life Cycle: Mapping Common Ground*, Jonathan Silin (2018) reflects on his initial reactions to moving from New York to Toronto: “I found myself repeatedly ambushed by surprising emotions, often sparked by mundane events that spoke to the deep sense of emotional and social displacement I experienced” (p. 75). In a twist of fate, I found the very same repeated ambushing of surprising emotion when I moved from Toronto to Princeton in 2005—the same deep sense of emotional and social displacement that gnawed at me in my first couple of years in the United States. What I recognize now in my older self are the reverberations of grief over my mother’s death to cancer a year earlier, in 2004.

But it is these vulnerabilities—these spaces of warp and wound, openness and instability—that can usher in new possibilities.

Alyssa Niccolini’s deceptively simple allegory about ticks on her daughter’s body is a cautionary tale as much as it is a raw portrait of a mum’s primal attachment and visceral fears about her child. It dislodged my own mother-daughter story, the potent, hardwired force that runs between mother and child jointly experiencing the circuits and flows of anxiety and fear. *At night, I sift through the mental curation I store of her strange sensations, hilarious descriptions, uncanny feelings, surprising observations, beautiful incoherence—what is normal childhood?*

I remember her hands, rough to touch and smelling of cigarettes. So wise that you could actually feel the wisdom coming off of her. I hungered for her attention. In *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver (1988) says, “sadness is more or less like a head cold—with patience, it passes. Depression is like cancer” (p. 173) Actually, depression becomes cancer. Depression became cancer. When I read Kingsolver’s description, I was ambushed by surprising emotions. This is what vulnerable literacies do: they resonate, they vibrate, they have vitality (Boldt, 2020). Living with someone who experiences depression makes you put it on like a familiar coat. It makes you aware of vulnerable literacies because they are never far off, and any sniff of them in text form and content renders them live, dense, and felt.

I have nightmares about ticks. Every inch of my child’s body covered in a glittering, moving coat of parasites. I wake up crawling in my sheets.

Vulnerability gives fluency to literacy. In whatever form or composition, vulnerability can open up expressive flood gates. Leonard Cohen recognized its capacity and he

1 Unless otherwise indicated, sentences in italics are quotations from Alyssa Niccolini’s article, this issue.

carved out a career splitting open vulnerabilities. When asked about the inspiration for his iconic and ubiquitous song, “Hallelujah,” Cohen said, “I wanted to stand with those who clearly see G-d’s holy broken world for what it is, and still find the courage or heart to praise it” (Wieseltier, 2016, para. 1). The broken understand vulnerability, everyone does really, but perhaps it is more acute for the broken. Cohen understood brokenness and refused to view sin, vulnerability, or weakness as failures. To be human is to sin. To be vulnerable is to feel.

To suffer and be vulnerable leads to expression.

Even though it all went wrong/I’ll stand before the Lord of Song/With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah (Cohen, 1984).

As a kindergarten teacher to Black, White, Asian, Indian, and Middle Eastern children in the Jane-Finch corridor, purportedly Toronto’s toughest neighborhood, for over 20 years Sunny Rowsell made literacies for children in her classroom real, human, and felt. Through her words, actions, songs, and play, children experienced what Silin describes as honoring “the satisfactions of unarticulated experiences” (2003, p. 264). Sunny Rowsell’s work with children was embodied and palpable. It carried an abundance of care and belonging. Every child in her room belonged with her in each moment.

In an age of human-based environmental devastation and a global pandemic, the creatures in my drawer underscore the pedagogical consequences of human interference.

This deeply personal response to Alyssa’s article comes from a place of vulnerability. There is something deafening about the pandemic. Equally, the opening up of vulnerabilities witnessed in children and teenagers’ artwork, poetry, writing, photographs, and films during lockdown “perform sensations that something is happening—something needs attending to” (Stewart, 2007, p. 5). There is absolutely no doubt that this moment in time has exorcised vulnerabilities and that these vulnerabilities have steadied, sustained, and calmed the young and the old.

Bedtime reading is a brief moment when body and text, human and animal, forest and home, original and translation, self and other gloriously tangle into each other.

My mum’s favourite poem was “Stop All the Clocks”—a melancholy tribute to W. H. Auden’s lover, who spurned him.

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

Words put together like this, in this precise order and methodical rhythm, pierce through you and furl around your senses. They stop you in your tracks.

Just as mother frantically searches for ticks, so too daughter obsessively phones mother. Searching, scanning, picking warm boundaries for ticks; caressing, hugging, longing for a connection. Mothers and daughters cleave to each for life and limb. These are vulnerable moments that pass. These are vulnerable times that pass. Vulnerable literacies move us to new places.

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