Re-envisioning Decolonizing Pedagogies: Beyond Knowing, Delving into Being as an Access to Possible Decolonial Futures

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Abstract: *This article argues that ontological phenomenological methods, addressing being, becoming, and existence, provide novel forms of knowledge production and pathways to decolonizing pedagogy in higher education through critiquing its neoliberalist and anthropocentric settler-colonial foundations. Two metaphors are employed to explore ontological pedagogy: one metaphor highlights the linguistic dynamics of joke-telling and the other compares the acquisition of a new language to ontological learning. A concise overview of decolonizing pedagogy and ontological phenomenological pedagogy is provided through sharing the author's experiences, positionality, and exposures to these frameworks. The inquiry also explores whether ontological pedagogical framework remains mainly discursive or leads to material change, especially in light of autobiographical accounts of the author's encounters with systemic, material, and discursive oppression. The author intentionally refrains from conclusions, inviting readers to engage in a nuanced exploration of a less-traveled realm of ontological inquiry in higher education.*

زیرکی سباحی آمد در بحار   کم رهد غرق است او پایان کار

زیرکی بفروش وحیرانی بخر   زیرکی ظن است وحیرانی نظر[1]

Introduction

> There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures. (bell hooks)

The prevailing global neoliberal[2] paradigm has profoundly transformed the landscape of higher education, a transformation driven by a sole emphasis on market logic and economic efficiency which has positioned students as customers and reduced knowledge to a commodity (Giroux, 2007, 2014; Wendy Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005, 2010; Connell, 2013). Education has become primarily a means to produce skilled workers and technicians, and serves to promote economic growth, leaving out the broader aims of critical thinking, intellectual inquiry, consciousness raising, and the cultivation of engaged and ethical citizens. This market-oriented approach encourages competition over collaboration, reduces education to quantifiable outcomes rather than hard-to-measure growth, and necessitates an ever-growing reliance on metrics, rankings, and performance indicators that undermine the autonomy and intellectual freedom of both students and faculty (Harvey, 2010). Higher education is consequently framed as personal investment and a source of individual upward mobility which in turn reinforces inequalities and

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[1]"Intelligence is (like) swimming in the seas: he (the swimmer) is not saved: he is drowned at the end of the business/Sell intelligence and buy bewilderment: intelligence is opinion, while bewilderment is (immediate) Vision." Rumi, Mathnawi vol. I, p.349.

[2] For the history of education, market, and neoliberalism see Harvey (2007); Brown (2018); for higher education and neoliberalism see Giroux (2002); Olssen & Peters (2005); Davies & Bansel (2007).

perpetuates a narrow focus on individual tales of success rather than collective and communal well-being (Connell, 2013). Within this neoliberal context, the question of who the students are and who they become through education—the broader social and democratic purposes of education—are overlooked. Knowledge transfer is the primary concern in higher education while questions of "being" and "becoming" and "transformation" through education are ignored (Dall'Alba, 2008, 2009).

The above-mentioned scholars call for higher education to encompass communal and social wellbeing. Moreover, Indigenous scholars including Māori scholar Smith (1999), Unangax/Aleut scholar activist Tuck (2012), to name a few, and also Third World scholars such as Quijano (1992), Wynter (2003), Mohanty (2003), Mignolo (2011, 2013) argue for a deeper decolonization of higher education and knowledge production. Their scholarship calls for a critical inquiry into the genesis of higher education and how it is still complicit in settler colonial cosmology and anthropocentrism—revealing these normalized ideologies that work as a context determining what valuable knowledge and research methodologies are. In these ways, higher education perpetuates the normalization of human entitlement over all life forms, including the planet as a whole, by rationalizing the conquest and exploitation of the natural world and all life in the pursuit of progress and profit.

Added to this is the rapid unregulated progress of artificial intelligence (AI). While the regulations and policies for these new technologies are lagging behind, the implications of AI in exacerbating existing inequality, surveillance, and power dynamics have remained unexplored and unaddressed. AI may very well reshape and redefine the way knowledge and skills are transferred, and hence calling for a deeper contemplation on the significance of our human identity, human knowledge production, our existence in the world, and the role of education.

In this writing, I claim that ontological phenomenological methodology and pedagogy that address the questions of being, becoming, and existence, offer valuable access to new possible modes of knowledge production and promises to enact the commitment to decolonizing pedagogy in higher education.

In the coming pages, I will provide a brief overview of what I refer to as decolonizing pedagogy and ontological phenomenological pedagogy. Then, I will share about my positionality and my exposure to ontological phenomenological pedagogy and praxis. Following that, I will explain the methodology of ontological inquiry using two metaphors to illustrate the process. The first metaphor is about the use of language in telling a joke and what jokes elicit, while the second metaphor compares learning a new language to the process of ontological learning.

Subsequently, I will inquire into whether this pedagogy remains confined to the discursive level or if it has the potential to bring about tangible material change. In this writing, I will share autobiographical accounts of my educational journey, possibilities, critical hope, and encounters with systemic material and discursive oppression. I intentionally refrain from offering any conclusion, as this paper aims to invite readers to consider and think about a lesser-practiced realm of inquiry rather than providing answers or persuading them towards specific premises.

Decolonizing

By decolonizing pedagogy, I refer to transformative processes that challenge and dismantle the entrenched systems, structures, and ideologies that perpetuate colonial legacies within the production, dissemination, and validation of knowledge. It involves critiquing and decentering dominant perspectives and methodologies, while centering marginalized, Indigenous, and non-Western epistemologies, worldviews, and ways of being. This process also necessitates a critical examination of the underlying assumptions, and hierarchies embedded in academic disciplines, research methodologies, curricula, and pedagogical practices. This is an epistemological and ontological process that calls for the recognition of alternative ways of being and knowing that emerge with the process of unlearning anthropocentric[3] frameworks that justify human dominion over all forms of life for short term benefit.

Decolonizing pedagogy[4] is an educational framework toward deconstructing the legacies of colonialism within the field of education. It examines the impact and limits of the hegemony of meanings and narratives that have historically influenced educational systems. It seeks to disrupt this dominance by centering the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of historically marginalized groups, alternative ways of being and knowing, particularly of indigenous peoples and people of color. It encourages students and educators to critically examine curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment.

I frame decolonizing as more than an intellectual and theoretical framework; it is a commitment, a mode of living, and an ongoing process of discovery, discerning, unlearning, undoing, unconcealing, and creating new relational ways of being and acting with people, the planet, and all forms of life. Imagining and envisioning new decolonial structures and worlds require courage, both ontological and intellectual resilience, and the ability to stay in the unknown and with uncertainty. It requires being open minded, humble, at ease with failure and mistakes and allowing imaginations to envision new possibilities and arrangements that are currently hidden from view.

In my educational experiences, I witnessed that knowing and common forms of teaching epistemologically about decolonization do not engender new life sustaining ways of being and acting in the classroom and beyond. Crucial theories and praxis[5] on the "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000) and its implications in higher education happens on the fringes of academia and reveal intersectional forms of violence from racism, misogyny, heterosexism, ableism and imperialism and so on. However, the pursuit of knowledge and the attempt to educate about the immense consequences of these systems and domains of discourse often fail to crack the normalized colonial framework that surrounds us. Even if educators manage to pass on a critical

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[3] Anthropocentrism centers human species as an isolated creature "in-here" inside itself and nature, life and others as "out-there," exterior resources to be manipulated, used, mastered, discarded or distinguished.

[4] For further readings on the topic of decolonizing, global circuits of power and matrix of domination and their discursive and material impacts in the current time, I refer the reader to the works of scholars such as Quijano, Fanon, Shariati, Césaire, Mignolo, Wynter, for feminist decolonial literature see Mohanty, Moraga, Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-ha.

[5] In the field of education, the term praxis refers to gaining first-hand experience and lived experiences of concepts in order to have access to new actions and engendering structural transformation. Freire (1979) believes that it is through praxis that oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition and access to new actions and freedom.

understanding of these entrenched structures through pedagogy, many still are not equipped through their own education to provide students with the necessary tools, care, autonomy, audacity to envision a world that transcends these confines. Beyond the material everyday violence they impose, these normalized ontologies and epistemologies also limit one by constricting the horizons of one's imagination.

In other words, students may acquire a deeper understanding of these oppressive systems and develop a strong conceptual grasp of them. They may become more socially aware or "woke," *per se*. However, the process of decolonization involves more than intellectual knowledge or awareness. It necessitates a fundamental transformation at a personal and relational level, courage and openness to imagine a whole new realm of relationalities and possibilities. It necessitates fostering new ways of being and relating with all forms of life. Grasping a conceptual understanding is a starting point but decolonization requires much more than that.

Ontological Phenomenological Pedagogy[6]

Ontological/phenomenological inquiry is a promising space of inquiry for discerning, loosening the grip of, and going beyond one's habitual ways of being in the world.[7] It can bridge the gap between knowing and being for students and provide tools and language of inquiry that allow for framing knowledge as a hands-on ongoing exploration in daily lives. Ontological methodology addresses mainly being and becoming rather than knowing and accumulating.

It is important to acknowledge that phenomenological questions of consciousness and ontological questions of being are not at all novel or contemporary. They have been practiced by various nonwestern cultures for centuries. Ontological inquiries have been central in Indigenous cosmology for millennia. Numerous traditions have addressed being and generated knowledge rooted in existence, but often outside the confines of university settings. Drawing from my upbringing in Iran, Persian poetry and Sufi literature provide abundant examples of writers, poets, and thinkers who have delved into being and articulated it without employing the specific modern and western naming and labeling of it as ontological or phenomenological inquiry.

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[6] In the topic of the importance of possible dialogues between ontological methodology and decoloniality, see Walter Mignolo's essay, "Decoloniality and Phenomenology: The Geopolitics of Knowing and Epistemic/Ontological Colonial Differences" (2018). Mignolo situates Husserl and Heidegger's ontological and phenomenological questions about time, space, lifeworld, being and cognition inside the historical/intellectual atmosphere of continental philosophy and their position in the world. He argues that the positionality of these philosophers allows them to simply ignore the ontological questions of coloniality of being, languaging, memory, time and space underlying modernity. Due to the colonial history of European dominance, they did not consider the question of identity and location relative to their ontological knowledge production about being and time. However, for many southern theorists, in doing ontological/phenomenological inquiry, it is this inherited complacency in concealing the underlying colonial logic of white settlers and modern Western societies since 1500 that allows for only limited ways of being in the world. This settler-colonial logic works as a decisive context that determines the possible contents of meaning making and living in modern societies.

[7] There is so much more that can be said about the genealogy of the feminist, transnational and queer scholarship and their direct line to phenomenology from de Bevoire's phenomenology of sex and gender to later black and transnational feminists, Indigenous scholars theorizing on the importance of praxis, centrality of lived experience, to queer theory and performativity of language and so on. See Sara Ahmed (2006) and Judith Butler (2004).

Ontological/phenomenological inquiry refers to a vast realm of knowledge production with or without the name.[8]

Also, here my use of ontological/phenomenological pedagogy is not meant to delve into the disciplinary fields of philosophy nor the historical movement of phenomenology as the philosophical tradition launched in the first half of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, etc. The field of philosophy extensively explores the realm of epistemology and ontology, offering a variety of interpretations and definitions. Similarly, there is a rich theoretical literature on the decolonization of knowledge. My intention is to engage with pedagogy, translating these definitions into actionable strategies for classrooms, trying to apply abstract theory in action and in an accessible way for students without needing to know these intellectual fields.

I refer in a broad sense to phenomenology as the study of structures of consciousness experienced from the first-person point of view and ontology as the study of being as a pedagogical approach and I give examples from my experiences with a particular curriculums that use this methodology mainly a course named "Being A Leader and The Effective Exercise of Leadership: An Ontological/ Phenomenological Model" (see Erhard, et al, 2012). This course has been designed for the university setting and for students from different disciplines and interests. I have been engaged with this particular course material since 2010 and have personally witnessed its impact, its efficacy or limitations in the lives of both educators and students.

My years of experience with ontological inquiry inside higher education showed me that summoning "being" inside the settler-colonial educational paradigm has a disruptive nature. Ontological inquiry questions the centrality of epistemology and who we are and is counterintuitive and anxiety producing. Habitual and normalized university training is driven by a revered desire to possess knowledge, conquer, exert mastery, domesticate, demystify, rectify, improve, find answers, and enhance performance. Students are not educated or supported to ask about becoming and being and how to stay with discomfort and uncertainty, but to learn conceptually. Dwelling with "being" is not a common practice; students are generally rewarded for memorizing, figuring out, answering, accumulating, critiquing, finding faults with arguments and data, debating, arguing, convincing, and for knowing. However, knowledge that stays at the level of concepts does not engender new radical relational, ethical, and caring ways of being in the world.

If educators strive to support students in exploring new ways of being in the world and embracing decolonial modes of existence, do they have the necessary language and distinctions to address modes of being? Furthermore, how can we teach and navigate the realms of being within a modern educational setting? Within the existing paradigm of higher education, how do we evaluate this potential transformative mode of knowledge production? Can the ways in which we exist in the world themselves be regarded as a form of knowledge production?

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[8] Zoe Todd (2016), a *Métis* anthropologist and scholar of Indigenous studies writes about how the recent ontological turn in anthropology is Indigenous cosmology and what Indigenous people have been expressing for millennia. It is important to acknowledge the taken for granted assumptions about ontological methodologies and recognize the genealogies of ontological inquiry outside of Re-dominant Eurocentric narratives.

Obviously there is no immediate answer to these inquiries--they serve as but an invitation to consider these questions in higher education, and to engage in decolonial projects and to seek cosmologies that facilitate access to transforming various modes of existence. These questions call for a deeper examination of the intersections between knowledge, being, and the potential transformative possibilities that emerge from them.

In this writing, I weave together my 18 years of experimenting with various forms of education and ontological methodology in the capacity of a student, educator, in geographies and universities in Iran, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, and the USA, with a diverse range of students and with my commitment to and academic work on decolonial praxis.

Additionally, I emphasize that this article is written from my current standpoint and positionality, encompassing my specific political and personal background as a neurodivergent Iranian woman, mother, and student/educator residing in the United States. My upbringing was in a community of educators who actively participated in political upheavals in Iran, and cultivated an environment of high political engagement. Both my activism and scholarly pursuits center around liberatory education and teacher's movements. My recent organizing has been around the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran, creating alliances, collectives, plenaries, petitions and raising awareness beyond the confines of mainstream representations of Iranian history.

My positionality and my Exposure to Ontological/Phenomenological Pedagogy

Every day she came back home after a day of teaching Persian literature to high school students with an exhausted body but a fulfilled and proud presence. With the faint traces of white chalk powder on her black scarf she was content with her days spent with young people. Since my earliest memories, I knew my mom as a teacher and her classrooms as her second home and place of joy. As I entered school, I embraced it as my second home too, having a sense of belonging and community. Despite all the shortcomings in my K12 education in Iran, I enjoyed and cherished most of my moments, friendships, teachers, and adventures in classrooms and always envisioned my life to be about education. I was brought up with the story of my mom's love for education, how she pleaded with her father to allow her to have it and her relentless struggle for being the only girl in her family who went to school, and the only child who went to university. I had an affinity for and hope in education and treated it like a priceless treasure earned by generational hard work, love, and passion. I knew that education transformed my mother's life, my aunts' (father's sisters) and their friends' trajectories giving them access to more agency, power and voice. I knew that education made them revolutionary women/teachers/mothers, committed to social transformation.[9] Having spent a significant portion of my life in various educational settings in various countries, I approach the question of decoloniality in classrooms and the impact of ontological/phenomenological methodology and pedagogy from this particular standpoint.

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[9] I here refer to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and these women's active role in this process. For more information of the history of the Iranian Revolution see Ebrahamian, Najmabadi

Here, I would like to share the story of my initial curiosity toward ontological inquiry and my social and political background.

During the past century, Iran has witnessed two significant revolutions: the constitutional revolution (1905-1911) and the Islamic revolution (1979), both accompanied by ongoing struggles for autonomy. I was born in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), an eight-year conflict enabled by the use of US and European-made weapons and chemical bombs, which claimed the lives of numerous civilians, including my cousin. Throughout my teenage years, Iran experienced the emergence of the Reform Movement, which eventually led to the election of the first reformist president, Mohammad Khatami. During his time, unprecedented opportunities for organizing, artistic expression, and literary endeavors flourished. At the age of fifteen, I wrote a paper that was chosen for the conference of "Youth and Dialogue Among Civilization." In this conference, I met an educator Dr. Farzin Shokouh who shared about his lifelong education in various schools from Tehran to Berkeley, and how exposure to "the study of being/ontological inquiry" altered his views of civic engagement and opened his mind to new social imaginaries[10] previously hidden from his view.

Together with a group of older conference attendees, and my elder sister, we would frequently gather and talk about social issues. The unusual philosophical conversations about being for human beings as opposed to human doing and having, humble inquiries, pauses, and openness and presence in those conversations intrigued me. There was a quality in those conversations that called me and engaged me into thinking in a way that no other education did.

I imagine what this educator described to be a way of living poetry, a poetic mystical relational way of living here and now, not in an abstract way, in an isolated mystical enchanted world but out here in action in and with the community without needing to attach those meanings to a particular religious tradition. I was inspired and curious by it and promised myself to give this educational experience to myself. Little did I know that I was entering a lifelong inquiry into "being" and pedagogy, that led me to learn new languages and to take a series of different jobs that allowed me to travel and explore education in different countries.

At nineteen years, I found a course that adopted an ontological methodology at a university in Tehran. Despite its shortcomings, I saw the potential of these forms of pedagogy to make a space for dialogue among students with opposing and rigid political views. Students were given tools and support to practice powerful tools for listening to each other and entering new worlds and building new meaningful connections. While the course may not have been explicitly politically engaged, I recognized its radical work and its immense potential to provide a platform for authentic listening, observation, communication, and communal transformation. What deeply resonated with me was witnessing how students had access to liberate themselves from the constraints of their rigid dogmatic political and other belief systems, allowing for a newfound openness and courage to truly embrace the diverse humanity and realities of others. I observed a powerful transformation among students, as they moved away from being solely defined by their

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[10] By imaginaries I refer to Manfred Steger and Paul James' definitions in the article, "Levels of Subjective Globalization: Ideologies, Imaginaries, Ontologies." *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 12(1-2), 17-40. Imaginaries are patterned convocations of the social whole--deep-seated modes of understanding that provide largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence, which may be expressed, for example, in conceptions of morality, of global vs national and so on. See Jean-Paul Sartre's 1940 book *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*.

perspectives and self-righteous positions. Instead, they dared to embrace their shared humanity, allowing for a broader engagement with the world and the potential to enact meaningful and impactful changes and create unexpected communities. I felt hopeful by witnessing individuals from contrasting political affiliations and diverse and even oppositional backgrounds connect with each other on a deeper compassionate level that gave them access to openness, courage and more generosity in their belief systems. This experience highlighted the transformative power of education, which extends beyond attaching one's identities and entire existence solely to one's viewpoints. Growing up in an environment characterized by intense political polarization, where opposing ideologies fought for power, I witnessed the devastating consequences of such divisions. People lost their lives, were exiled, and imprisoned due to the systemic rigidity that pervaded society. Motivated by this realization, I dedicated several years of my life as a volunteer, actively working to expand its reach to various cities in Iran. I felt immense joy witnessing a new level of connection and dialogue among students from diverse backgrounds, even those with highly charged opposing views. This level of engagement was something that conventional teaching methods, which emphasized evidence-based arguments to convince different groups to try out new perspectives and look at their perceived absolute truths, could not achieve. Since then, this pedagogy has become an integral part of my life, alongside my professional and academic work in different countries.

Beginning in 2013, while a PhD student in the field of education in the US, I joined a professional learning community to work on teaching a leadership course in the university environment that uses an ontological approach to education. I took this course at Nanyang University in Singapore, Rutgers University, and UCLA. Some Iranian friends and I engaged in translating into Farsi the 1000 slide textbook for the course "Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership: An Ontological/ Phenomenological Model." I also provided simultaneous Farsi translation of the English spoken by the course instructors. This translation made ontological inquiry available to hundreds of participants in Dubai in 2014 and in Abu Dhabi in 2016 and is still available online for further use.

How does ontological methodology work? Metaphors for Ontological Pedagogy: First Metaphor: a Joke

> Human beings are magical. *Bios* and *Logos*. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities […]. And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms. (Sylvia Wynter, 1995, 35)

Ontological teaching is distinct and inherently different from epistemological teaching. Engaging in ontological inquiry as a student can be similar to the experience of listening to a joke and laughing at a particular point in the joke. If the listeners are open and willing to accept the narrative of a joke without insistence on critically examining the conceptual accuracy of its lines, they will be touched by the punch line, which often reveals an element of absurdity and engenders laughter. This turning moment in a joke/punch line may elicit wonder and evoke laughter.

For a joke to evoke laughter, firstly, one must rely on a specific use of language. The choice of words and carefully crafted statements within a joke determine the impact of the punch

line. The linguistic elements employed in constructing the narrative of a joke contribute to its overall impact and the reaction it elicits. Altering the language used in the joke may result in a loss of its punch. Many times one can retell a joke, using the same narrative with different language and fail to elicit the punch and the "aha" moment. Have you ever repeated a joke in a descriptive way and the language did not perform the intention, losing the punch line?

The story itself may remain the same, but the wording determines whether the punch and laughter are elicited or missed. Clearly the presence, willingness, and openness of the listener are essential for a joke to work at its best.

Various forms of literature and linguistic expressions, such as poetry, Haiku, and Zen koans, use certain forms of languaging to evoke moments of wonder or potentially elicit laughter at the absurdity presented within the ideas or stories. These art forms often rely on carefully chosen words to create a sense of surprise or aha moments that invite contemplation and wonder. These forms of using language can prompt us to perceive the world in new and unexpected ways, inviting laughter at the perceived absurdity or offering a deeper insight into the nature of reality.

One other distinguishing aspect of jokes is that they do not need to adhere to an objective "truth," reality, or factual accuracy. When listening to a joke like, "How does one put three elephants inside a fridge?" we don't argue the scarce probability of fitting elephants inside a fridge. Instead, we willingly suspend our disbelief, bracket our knowledge and allow our imagination to explore the possibility of it. It's a playful and imaginative exercise where we entertain the notion of what might happen if three elephants could be placed inside a fridge. Jokes create a space where one can temporarily set aside notions of objective reality and righteousness, without anxiety of losing one's sanity or structure of reality. When asked "how does one put three elephants in the fridge?" one may not feel threatened or insulted or afraid of being seen as stupid. Generally, one may not feel out of control or threatened by embracing the more imaginative perspective given in proper jokes and the reward for this suspension of reality is laughter, lightness, and a surge of endorphins. Therefore, for jokes to work, there should be a receptive listener who is open to suspending reality and engaging with the imaginative scenario. The elicited laughter is a communal result of the mental participation of both the comic and the audience.

Ontological phenomenological inquiry performs in a similar way, in that it does not intend to uncover an ultimate "truth" or adhere to a fixed set of beliefs. Engaging in such inquiry can be like listening to a cosmic joke that encompasses the vast realms of human existence, social structures, life, worldviews, and the structures of our thoughts and beliefs. It invites us to approach the inquiry with openness, allowing ourselves to embrace and play with new ideas and possibilities. The ontological method addresses our anxieties of the potential loss of our constructed reality and solid sense of self grounded in what we know. While supporting students in developing audacity and a sense of safety and skill with suspending one's knowledge (bracketing ideas), ontological inquiry invites them to a playful consideration of other possibilities. This journey into the unknown and being with cognitive dissonance and entertaining and holding contradictory truths, offers liberation, and a new space of creativity.

The methodology maintains a rigorous yet playful nature, supporting individuals to loosen their grip on taken-for-granted ideas and recognize the inherent absurdity in our deeply ingrained beliefs. It helps students develop the capacity to experiment with novel perspectives

without feeling compelled to accept or change any particular possibility as an absolute "truth." In this way, ontological phenomenological inquiry fosters an environment where students can embrace openness and intellectual courage, navigate the anxiety that may arise from detachment from fixed beliefs, and embark on a journey of exploration and discovery. It invites a willingness to engage with new possibilities, while simultaneously recognizing the inherent absurdity of attachment to our everydayness.[11]

These practices of the ontological method align with the ideas of neuroplasticity, as recognized by neuroscientists.[12] By actively engaging in suspending beliefs, curiosity, and embracing new experiences, our brains have the capacity to rewire and adapt, fostering growth and reshaping of neural connections. Neuroplasticity allows us to expand our perspectives, challenge ingrained patterns of thinking, and unlock new possibilities.

Ontological inquiry encourages students to explore new possibilities, entertain "what if" scenarios with the intention of addressing and giving space to being. I find that the final goal of this method is for the student to have tools to be able to decenter their reality as an isolated being, confined "in here" with everything else and other beings outside them or "out there," and create new relationality with living, and beings, in other words the possibility of undoing anthropocentrism.

Using these metaphors to describe how ontological inquiry works in the classroom, is like telling a descriptive joke with no punch line and impact. In action, however, ontological inquiry can generate wonderment and shatter rigid viewpoints and opens us up to new possible arrangements and assemblages and undared territories in one's self, world, and structures. It requires rigorous language. By engaging in ontological inquiry, individuals can cultivate a heightened awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings and phenomena, fostering a more conscious and compassionate worldview.

Second metaphor: Speaking Being:[13] A New Language

حرف وصوت وگفت را بر هم زنم   تا که بی این هر سه با تو دم زنم [14]

To perform its intended disruptive nature, ontological inquiry requires deliberate language experimentation and the utilization of meticulously crafted terminology. This approach aims to suspend normalized thought patterns and assumptions, to foster a transformative shift in perception through the use of language and engaged listening. It gives access to profound authentic philosophical inquiries of being and personhood, identity and society, without prior

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[11] See "everydayness" (*Alltäglichkeit*) in Heidegger that refers to the everyday, conformist mode of existence that tends to suppress individual authenticity and reflection. He asserts that in this state of everydayness, people often find themselves caught up in a tranquilized, superficial way of living, detached from authentic self-discovery.

[12] For more on neuroplasticity, see works of Michael Merzenich, Thomas M. Van Vleet, and Mor Nahum. "Brain plasticity-based therapeutics" (2014).

[13] For more on this topic see *Speaking Being: Werner Erhard, Martin Heidegger, and a New Possibility of Being Human.*

[14] I will throw word and sound and speech into confusion, that without these three I may converse with thee. Rumi, Mathnawi, Volume I.

philosophical training as a prerequisite. Hence, I use the metaphor of a new language learning process that rewards one with a world of new possibilities.

When speaking the new language of speaking "being" all is new, and it requires one to be willing to allow the newness and uncertainty. Moreover, one may not know a large community who speak that language but can be willing to try it. It takes immense courage. In language learning, an adult must first accept that this is a new language, and so must begin with a level of humbleness, receptiveness, and beginner's mind. One must be willing to be newly born and expand in a new language. Mistakes are inevitable and yet there is joy in accessing new possibilities and realms of expression.

Similarly, one can imagine that there is a less spoken domain of speaking: the language of "being." This new language is designed with the purpose of accessing being and distinguishing that realm. I invite you to be open to the possibility of the existence of distinct syntaxes, semantics, and grammars in a new conversational domain with unique horizons, often hidden from our view and practices; the language of "being" that once practiced, gives access to new possibilities for living in a new world.

Speaking being and conjuring ontological inquiry is a poetic work. It provokes a clearing for being to emerge. However, while one can translate these meanings into the sacred and spiritual realm, phenomenological inquiry and giving space to being does not require a certain spiritual meaning or religious tendency at all. Phenomenology engages with here and now, material and discursive. It is upon just one premise that we all "are" that there is our being in the world. Attempting to translate the language of being into the common language of knowing, figuring out, and having a piece of knowledge, is not the same as practicing and living with the language of being. A translation of Rumi's poetry above, for instance, rarely creates the same experience that is conjured in Persian. Many people share similar encounters with poetry. For instance, for many when reciting Persian classical poetry, a presence of "being" arises, leaving behind a disruptive presence similar to being transported to a new realm. Words possess agency, perform and act.[15] This transportation, however, is beyond translation; while we may strive to comprehend the poem's words on an epistemological level, we cannot epistemologically convey the realm that the poetry evokes. Being eludes translation.

The methodology of ontological learning is phenomenology, hence the living of it is how it works. One can explain, analyze, describe, calculate, define the experience of balance in water but getting it with the whole body[16] is distinct. Ontological inquiry is a distinct language that gives access to living a phenomenon as opposed to knowing it.

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[15] Language does not simply describe the world but instead function as a form of social action. For a foundational text about performativity of language see Austin (1962) in which he gives expansive explanations about constative or descriptive language and performative language; locutionary (language that describes), illocutionary (language that does things in the world), and perlocutionary (language that is the effect of that doing). For the speech act theory see Searle (1969), for the fundamental text in the development of performativity as a social process as related to gender, sex, and sexuality see Butler (1990, 1993, 1997).

[16] The body as what Beauvoir in her phenomenological account alludes to, is a complex and non-reductive picture that shows the intertwining of the material, discursive and the cultural in the formation of our embodied selves (see Kruks 2010, Sandford 2006, Moi 1999). Body as lived throughout the different stages of a life, the body in situation, in the world.

Border Crossings, Identities,[17] Discursive or material transformation?[18]

> …the act of love is commitment to […] the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, ... It must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love. [...] If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue. (Paulo Freire)

So far in this writing I advocate for ontological pedagogy and its potentials as an access to long term decolonizing commitment and transformation in higher education. However, I ask myself whether in the prevailing "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2015) ontological inquiry can make a meaningful structural difference? Aren't all these claims overly simplistic?

I don't have an answer to these concerns. In navigating these important questions, I will share my own experience with discursive and material oppression and my relentlessly stubborn effort to apply all my education to remedy them and my failures in doing so.

The location and history of my birth, and my ongoing border crossing, exposed me to abundant forms of systematic subjugation. My everyday life since childhood has been shaped and impacted by the intersection of various axes of power and oppression such as classism, ableism, imperialism, dictatorship, international wars, fundamentalism, executions, exile and incarceration for political views, misogyny and heteronormativity to name a few.

Border crossing also exposed me to many new forms of subjugation. I was hailed and treated in immigration offices and on many occasions in daily life as an outsider and "the other"; a member of the Muslim minority in a Hindu majority India, a member of the Shiite Muslim minority in Sunni Muslim majority Malaysia, to now being an alien Iranian woman in the United States. Within this background, I witnessed various manifestations of material oppression such as poverty, mental health challenges, disabilities, exposing the fallacy of idealizing education or any pedagogical methodology. These harsh realities dismantle the romanticization of education, highlighting the need to address systemic issues beyond the realm of pedagogy.

As a teenager, I relied on a romanticized view of education as the way to transform selves, people, policies and unjust social structures. Also, growing up in Iran, with the everyday power of imperialism and internalized colonial perspectives, I could not escape the glimmer of hope that maybe the Western higher education system and living there could offer some magical solutions.

However, my life in the northern hemisphere and doing my PhD in Education in the United States during the presidency of Donald Trump was a process of profound disenchantment. This period was filled with exacerbated levels of oppression, trauma, and adversity in many communities both within the US and globally. The Syrian civil war and Yemen conflicts, the predicaments of refugees, and the juxtaposition of these haunting realities with my academic work was more than ever draining. Additionally, new sanctions were imposed

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[17] See Linda Alcoff (2015); discussion of identity and identity shifts through change of location.

[18] While discursive analysis examines language, meanings, conversational domains and discourse, material analysis examines the physical manifestations and implications of phenomena (Foucault, 1969; Butler, 1990; Hall, 1997).

on Iran, resulting in the scarcity of essential medications and a significant devaluation of the Iranian currency by approximately 600 percent. Millions of people in Iran were impoverished due to the corruption of the state and the US sanctions. Despite a century of sacrifice and dedication to autonomy and justice in my country, it found itself in its worst crisis. Compounded by travel bans[19] enforced by the Trump administration, I was prevented from crossing the US border to reunite with my family and community even for the funeral of my dear ones.

The isolation of lengthy New England winters, my reading, teaching, and conducting research on the historical and ongoing impacts of racial capitalism, genocide, settler colonialism, and colonialism were overpowering. Being physically distant from my community and the resources that nurtured hope and communal well-being, I underwent the lowest time of my life. The question "SO WHAT? What is the point of all of this effort?" haunted me more than ever.

Staring at the image of a refugee child with red clothes lifeless on the shore, I had no deities left to surrender to finding solace in their eternal wisdom, and no comfort in arrogant science to give any answer, I was left with anguish. The comforting lies, the romantic hopes, and the yearning for a utopian escape, new horizons, desire to find new liberatory ideas or theories were all exposed. Nothing could change that fact. I was devoid of any enchantment.

My extensive ontological training had been giving me access to power and hope to act in my lowest moments. However, this time I was angry and questioned the value of all the years dedicated to ontological pedagogy. After years of reading and researching, I felt entitled to be given solace, a comfortable answer, a remedy to alleviate the anguish, a promise of pathways to undo all of this. I longed for something to cling to, believe in, or rely on, a tale with a happy ending, and I could no longer pretend that there was one.

This time, my ontological inquiry failed to give me any shortcut or comfort. Instead, it reminded me of my power and built up resilience in being with discomfort of what is so, being with no answer, no fantasy, no good news, no promise of change, left with nothing.

Rage, sadness, grief, fear, vengeance, bitterness, hate, and anguish showed up and I granted them being. I let them be. I gave space for all of it. The need, attachment to, and investment in a world that works for all, and a transformed future, and knowing myself as someone committed to that disappeared. My compulsive need for fixing and improving the world lost its illusionary lure and significance. There was no reward, no promise, no guarantee, no virtue, no high morality, all of them showed up as inauthentic. I was left with nothingness. My constant struggle to make things better, improve, know more, learn more, find new forms of knowledge, people, scholars, countries, communities who figured it out, all were disappearing. The egoic need to make up a narrative about why my work or any other human work, theory, praxis or books could be significant and impactful enough, lost its meaning. Even my attachment to romanticizing transformation through ontological pedagogy was revealed to be inauthentic. My ontological practice has been a constant path to dismantling its own significance.

All my lifetime of seeking answers led me once again to "nothingness" and surrender.

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[19] The Trump administration implemented an executive order (2016) which restricted entry into the United States for individuals from certain predominantly Muslim-majority countries.

And in that nothingness, there was freedom and lightness to be and act beyond needing hope or any promise from life, no entitlement as human being at the center of it all.

I love to share a methodology in teaching that supports students in discovering nothingness and access to acting according to their chosen values without needing to attach significance, dogma, virtue signaling and self-centeredness to it all.

Historic and systemic change requires much more than what any type of pedagogy and knowledge production can offer. Yet education can serve as a crucible, confronting us with the realities of our mortality, insignificance, and nothingness. It can humble us to new relationality, to love, care, doing political and social activism with humility and unconditional strength. I dare to envision ontological/phenomenological inquiry as a radical beginning of lifetime inquiries for students, a possibility toward getting nothingness, opening up space for liberation, love and undared maps of decolonial futures.

While these claims may be overly idealistic or naïve for university classrooms and higher education, considering the state of the world, why not dare to try them out with care, curiosity, and a touch of humor and lightness?

Ω

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