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Ungrasping the Other: The Parent, the Child, and the Making of Solidarities. A Response to Esther Ohito

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

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Ungrasping the Other: The Parent, the Child, and the Making of Solidarities. A Response to Esther Ohito

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández

The child reaches forward with his toes, extending to touch the world from the comfort of his mother's lap. She smiles, wide brown eyes into the camera, left hand resting on her left knee while the index finger of her right hand clinches the child's overalls near his belly, holding him in place. He smiles, wide eyes into the camera, right hand resting on her right wrist while the index finger of his left hand points forward. He feels the warmth of his mother's chin resting on his nearly bald head, nested in the safety of her crossed legs. The blades of grass reach up like threads bracing them both to the land. A scribble behind the photo, likely in my abuela's handwriting, marks the date, 8 noviembre 1972, 48 years ago today.



This picture of my mother and me has been sitting on my dresser since 1989, the year I packed my trunk and moved away from home—and away from my mother, my family, and my country of birth, Puerto Rico—at the age of 17. It has been a source of comfort and grounding for 31 years. I have never written about this photo, but from the moment I started to read Esther Ohito's moving essay in this issue, I knew that my response would involve this picture. It is not a mirror of Esther's image, but it points to a similar way of understanding what such images of ourselves as infants with our parents can reveal for and about us.

The child and the mother both stare at me, they both reach for me; her finger holds him in place then, while his finger points toward me now; away from that place to this place, from that moment to this moment, from that self to this self. These images and the memories of the moments and places they evoke are part of the story we tell ourselves about who we are now and who we are becoming. They both guide and help us make sense of our relationships to others and to ourselves. Indeed, how we remember our parents plays a foundational role in who we are becoming, as they shape the way we love and receive love, the way we relate to and perceive others, and also our emotional wounds and how those wounds direct our affective dispositions to others.

Another way of putting this is that these images provide a glimpse into our path toward affectional solidarities, “the kind of solidarity that grows out of intimate relationships of love and friendship” (Dean, 1996, p. 17). As Jodi Dean explains, “the child’s early experiences of love and connection provide the basis for the development of a sense of self-trust and of an ability to engage with and respond to the needs of the other” (p. 17). I don’t mean to suggest that there is solidarity between the parent and the child in these images, since the child cannot reciprocate the ability (or perhaps even the desire) to care for the parent—to hold and protect the parent from harm. Yet, as Dean suggests, solidarity is not “the same as the condition under which it is learned.” In fact, what Esther’s reflection points to is precisely that our evolving capacity to reciprocate solidarity with our parents hinges on our ability to recognize them, not just as separate from ourselves, but as ungraspable and beyond our capacity to know and understand.

Esther describes the man who holds her infant body as “a bruised man with a beautiful mind—an undeniable organic intellectual in Gramscian terms,” words that I could have used to describe my own mother. Like Esther’s father, my mother “could neither outrun the torment of [her] childhood nor tame the demons that, in adulthood, inhabited the dark recesses of [her] beautiful mind.” I don’t know whether they shared wounds in common (though perhaps the deep wounds of racism and colonization connect us across lands and oceans), but I would venture that for both Esther’s father and my mother, the wounds of childhood are what animated their lifelong commitments.

For my mother, this meant a revolt against patriarchy and a lifelong commitment to women’s rights, and the pursuit of equity and social justice against sexism and the colonial legacies of US imperialism in Puerto Rico and elsewhere. These commitments were the lap on which my infant body sat and from which my own commitments emerged, but also, in complex ways, the source of the wounds that would separate my mother and me.

Following Rumi, Esther reminds us that family photographs “can be floodlights on the path towards that wound” through which the light enters. Yet, following the light in order to see inside the wound in the family photograph requires that we “attend to the queer gesture—the handshake, look, posture—that contains the past as well as a way forward” (Silin, 2018, citing Muñoz, 2009). In Esther’s photograph, I see the father grasping the child, as the child grasps the Fanta bottle; the father eyes the child, as the child eyes the photographer and the viewer. The grasping and eyeing move inward and outward.

In my photograph, the mother's body is a womb that contains the infant body, even as the child extends his toes as if to take a step. Eventually, the child would also try to contain the mother, asking, "Can men be feminists?" The question sought to fix both mother and child in place in order to stabilize the otherwise unwieldy feeling of being loved; how can I be sure that you will always love me? Yet it failed: "No, they can't;" the index finger lets go, and the child stumbles, disoriented. "But men (and boys) can be along for the struggle."

I have come to understand the ungraspability of both feminism (as a cis-gendered man) and of my mother (as her son). I can't hook my index finger on her belly to keep her in place the way she did with my infant body. It is precisely from those wounds that the possibility of solidarity comes forth, and it is precisely the wounds that create a space for creative solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). This is a solidarity that does not seek to fix the other in place, but to create the conditions for subjects to be "otherwise." This solidarity finds freedom from the subjectifying process that grabs us and the subject positions from which we eye suspiciously. The moment when we no longer grab or hook on to the other is also precisely the moment we see them, are no longer suspicious, and are finally capable of enacting solidarity as a practice of freedom.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández is a professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and the director of the Youth Research Lab at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. His research focuses on the relationship between culture and the production of inequality and the role of cultural production in education. His theoretical work focuses on the relationship between creativity, decolonization, and solidarity.