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## Matters of Relations

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## Abstract

Boyd White and Tracie Costantino gather contributing authors to form the co-edited volume, *Aesthetics, Empathy, and Education*, documenting human beings' elemental capacities to seek empathetic connections. Through varied perspectives and mediums, contributing authors depict the ground empathy opens into as forming the generative terrain, the aesthetics of human understandings that maps out the educative journey. Empathy as always in process is, thus, never entirely achieved. In attending to this process character, authors included in this volume collectively challenge how education is typically conceived and enacted.

## Matters of Relations

Co-Editors, Boyd White and Tracie Costantino, foreground the notion of empathy-- revealing its interrelationships and interdependencies within aesthetics and education in their recently published volume, *Aesthetics, Empathy, and Education*. As a whole, the volume documents human beings' elemental capacities to seek connections. In doing so, it discloses empathy's ever evolving nature while bringing all involved nearer to the relational complexities at play in any given situation. Through varied perspectives and mediums contributing authors depict the ground empathy opens into as forming the generative terrain, the aesthetics of human understandings that maps out the educative journey. Empathy as always in process is, thus, never entirely achieved. In attending to this process character, authors of this volume collectively challenge how education is typically conceived and enacted. It is a challenge that confronts the detached, regulated, self-interested learning assumptions that frame education policies and practices invested in control and competition, and instead, orients towards social, co-operative, and interdependent learning assumptions invested in collective responsibilities for human well-being.

As a reader, each chapter's journey depicts how aesthetics, empathy, and education become inseparable and form the needed workings for humane living in the world with others. Artworks, ranging from visual art, writing, photography, and dance, to varied cross-curricular possibilities, organize and reorganize how these workings might work. The editors point out that it is primarily authors with a lived sense of arts' empathetic connections to learning of all kinds that responded to the call for chapters comprising the volume. So, while arts experiences vivify the workings among aesthetics, empathy, and education, readers should envision these workings as integral to curricula transcending all disciplines and interests.

In the Introduction, Boyd White recalls the beginnings of the book project as rooted in the thinking of David Swanger (1990) regarding empathy's necessary presence within education because knowledge would otherwise be incomplete (p. 76). White explains how Swanger's understanding deeply resonates, holding personal, persistent significances. Thus, exploring and unpacking these significances becomes the book project's task. To do so, the volume is structured into four sections that the editors conceive as *emphases* rather than strict boundaries. Therefore, a parts-to-whole relationship across the volume as a whole infuses each section's emphasis. Section I emphasizes research methodology from three differing perspectives. Section II emphasizes varying aspects of the self as research subject. Section III emphasizes challenges that confront underlying assumptions regarding aesthetics, empathy, and education. Section IV emphasizes curricular enactment possibilities, living at the intersections of aesthetics, empathy, and education. The four emphases are integral to the reading experience offered "wholly as a matter of relations" (Dewey, 1934, p. 102). The emphases provide openings to dwell within the given relations at play within each chapter.

And, these relations re-surface in varying ways throughout the volume, reminding the reader again and again of the intricate dynamics entailed among aesthetics, empathy, and education.

The emphasis of Section I considers research methodology enacted at the intersections of aesthetics, empathy, and education. Liora Bresler initiates ensuing considerations in Chapter 1, “The Spectrum of Distance: Empathetic Understanding and the Pedagogical Power of the Arts,” through revealing the self/other(s) movement incited through spending time with artworks as being integral to the conduct of research. Bresler turns toward artworks as opportunities to concretely experience this movement as a form of engagement oriented toward “deepening perception, interpretation, and openness to emerging themes and issues” (p. 18). She builds a case for the importance of cultivating such a researcher “mindset” (p. 25) that makes room for moving close within situations alongside gaining distance from self-understandings to make room for new insights into situation and self in relation to situation. In Chapter 2, “Writing Towards Empathy,” Terry Barrett relays the individual and collective sense-making room instilled through the writing process of fictional narratives by his art students as they study artworks. Students’ narratives reflect caring connections facilitated through “sympathetic imagination” (Nussbaum, 1997), enlarging and deepening empathetic capacities. Barrett’s chapter positions the teacher as hugely responsible for creating and nurturing the needed curricular conditions to do so. How education might enhance these conditions is explored by Laura Evans in Chapter 3, “Food for Thought: Idiom, Empathy, and Context in Lauren Greenfield’s *Thin*.” The importance of educational context to empathy is found to heighten bonds between viewers and attendees experiencing the art exhibit, *Thin*, revealing eating disorder sufferers through Greenfield’s documentary photographs. Evans illuminates how food for thought is the nurturing contextual substance needed to bring people near to others’ experiences and make empathy possible. It is such “far and near” relational navigations that all Section I chapters put forth as holding research significances for “insights into the remote, the absent, the obscure” (Dewey, 1910, p. 224). And, it is the room to locate such insights that all Section I chapters portray by bringing thinking, feeling, seeing, and acting into vital relationship, suggesting ways to proceed, fitting to particularities involved.

The emphasis of Section II draws readers’ attention toward the stance required of all who embark on inquiry paths as the research subject. The stance is characterized throughout as an attitude that embraces processes and the ensuing difficulties and differences that unfold, alongside a willingness to question and confront self-understandings, changing and adapting as situations call forth. In Chapter 4, “Art in the Expanded Field: Notions of Empathy, Aesthetic Consciousness, and Implications for Education,” Sherry Mayo reveals the pathway she encounters through the self-reflective meeting place at the intersection of aesthetics, empathy, and consciousness, offered via a haven ball as a visual symbol of the mind. Mayo distinguishes art education as being in a “unique position” (p. 79) to facilitate such meeting places with its emphasis on making meaning and concomitantly making self. Such negotiation

takes form as physical movement intertwining aesthetics and empathy in Chapter 5, “Expanding Empathy Through Dance, by Indrani Margolin. She describes how young women dancers “learned to be fully present...” (p. 97). The embodied individual/ collective movement that evolves continually seeks attunement with self and other(s). Poetic writing becomes another form of such self-other negotiation-- a search for attunement in the form of *ekphrasis*”- a speaking out”- elucidating the pathway to presence that Boyd White characterizes in Chapter 6 as “Pay Attention, Pay Attention, Pay Attention.” He conveys the corporeal, affective and intellectual engagement of an aesthetic experience as being reciprocally embodied within the act of attending. Poetics is also the medium fusing understandings of self in the world conveyed by David Swanger in Chapter 7, “Notes on Empathy in Poetry”. Swanger knows the intimacy poetry embodies, connecting all involved. He also knows these felt connections are enabled by empathy and how poetry educates empathy. In all Section II chapters authors bring readers face-to-face with how the arts powerfully make very visible and tangible sense-making journeys and how openness is the necessary accompaniment by all involved.

The emphasis of Section III includes two chapters that remind readers of genuine meaning-making’s acceptance of the aesthetic journey as not being necessarily smooth. Both chapters relay how a thinking rhythm emerges that sets its own pace through given educative challenges and opportunities. Sean Wiebe terms such reminders “punctures” (p. 145) in Chapter 8, “Aesthetic/Empathetic Punctures Through Poetry: A Lacanian Slip into Something Other than Education.” Turing to poetry, Wiebe reveals the sometimes-jarring movement of thinking that unveils unconscious assumptions, values, and beliefs, brought to any situation. Human capacity to accept these punctures as being productive challenges how education is typically conceived and practiced. And, as Donald Blumenfeld-Jones asserts in Chapter 9, Johnson, Levinas, and Sensibility: An Aesthetic Avenue to Ethics?” it is an attitude reflecting artistic sensibilities, trusting process as shaping arts’ products en-route. Blumenfeld-Jones importantly explicates how it is such an attitude that allows for the fullness of movement of thinking, surfacing what is new and unusual. He argues for “the salience of the artistic process of presence and noticing that is of importance; it is not the making of an art product that produces ethical consciousness” (p. 163). Both chapters warn readers of how critical it is to enter with integrity into meaning making as meaning makers with a searching attitude rather than an attitude of mastery and predetermination.

The emphasis of Section IV offers concrete curricular examples of the interplay of aesthetics and empathy with education. In each case, educative experiences are located at the intersections of situation and interaction. And, it is the inseparability of situation from interaction derived from the particularities of subject matter, participants, and contexts that give each experience its own unique structure. Therefore, each chapter reveals its own telling significances. In Chapter 10, “Multisensory Aesthetic Experiences and the Development of

Empathy,” Juli Kramer unpacks the purposeful creation of an aesthetic/empathetic learning experience, bringing to bear a field trip she takes with teachers and high school students to a wolf sanctuary. The careful teacher planning and attention to learning intentions are key bearings throughout the lived curricular experience. Deliberate physical and material involvement enables students’ and teachers’ efforts to make meaningful connections. Tom Anderson and Annina Suominen Guyas in Chapter 11, “Earth Education: Interbeing and Empathy for Mother Earth” posit that it is disconnection that undermines and thwarts empathy all together. Reframing education, Anderson and Suominen Guyas state their belief in “a fundamental feelingful, embodied reconnection” ...”with the Earth”...with the “heart of this reconnection” being “empathetic connection to the other living beings on the planet” (p. 189). This stance is termed interbeing and the relational mode of such a stance is mapped out through key operative principles. A relational stance is also fostered in prospective teachers as Tracie Costantino in Chapter 12, “Cultivating the Social Imagination of Preservice Teachers through Aesthetic Reflection” relays her efforts to retrace narratives of curricular experiences with her preservice teachers reflecting on learning to teach. The tremendous insights gained through reflective practices connecting both making and seeing possibilities within curricular enactment, enables prospective teachers to see more and more relational complexities within their classrooms and gain insights into the diversity of students they will meet in their future classrooms. It seems they come to see who they are becoming as teachers and increasingly care how this identity forms and informs how they might see their students. Caring students and teachers within a caring learning community assumes learning experiences matter to all involved. Belongingness within curricular enactment takes root that is interdependent with inner necessities for learning rather than externally imposed reasons. Care as cultivating such belongingness connecting self and the world is the subject matter of Chapter 13, “Teaching What We Value: Care as an Outcome of Aesthetic Education” by Lauren Phillips and Richard Siegesmund. A teacher’s capacity to respond to the care elicited by her students is caringly chronicled in this chapter. The importance of this teaching capacity is echoed in Chapter 14, “Empathy and Art Education” by Richard Hickman. He points to the ways in which subject matter is taught rather than the subject matter itself that creates opportunities to develop empathy. Calling attention to artistic thinking, Hickman delves into the art in education integral within a studio environment, making, noticing, and imagining, as the matters at the core of all learning. Reiterating art education’s significances in prompting the arts in all education, Hickman’s chapter brings a fitting conclusion to a permeating theme infusing the entire volume.

The matters of relations that White and Costantino’s edited book as a whole gathers, emphasizes deep engagement seeking connections through attunement to self and other(s) alongside a searching attitude, attending to process found fitting for the particulars involved. The book documents how these matters dynamically shape the relational complexities that uniquely structure educative experiences. And, these matters are revealed throughout the

edited volume as fostering empathetic expression. It is this acknowledgement of human beings' capacities for seeking empathetic connections that holds tremendous potential for reorienting education toward relational matters. Thus, the book importantly gives much needed expression to empathy's transformative roles and contributions to learners and learning as the matters constituting educative experiences. White and Costantino have provided all invested in reorienting education accordingly with contexts and language to do so, making this volume a most worthy read.

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### About the author

Margaret A. Macintyre Latta is a Professor and Director of Graduate Programs and Research at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan. Her books, *Curricular Conversations: Play is the (Missing) Thing* (2013), *Teaching the Arts to Engage ELLs* (2011), and *The Possibilities of Play in the Classroom: On the Power of Aesthetic Experience in Teaching, Learning, and Researching* (2001), document and reveal the aesthetics of human understanding as integral within learning of all kinds. Additional scholarship can be found in well-known journals in the field of education. Email: Margaret.Macintyre.Latta@ubc.ca.

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