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Dorothy Lander

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Complicating Public Mothers with Private Others: Eros as the Strange Attractor of Social Action

Dorothy Lander

Abstract: Smith-Rosenberg's (1984) term, "public mothers," characterizes independent women reformers (typically not birth mothers), and shapes this study of three educator-activists in Canadian social movements—Lotta Hitschmanova, Letitia Youmans, and Mary Arnold. Using historical/biographical inquiry as my methodology, I elaborate on the close relationships of these public mothers, often with a particular "great friend," to explicate Eros as a life force in all of its embodied, sensory, and learning "elements, not only sexual desire" (Estola, 2003, p. 2). I conceptualize Eros in the quantum language of the strange attractor, that is, as a learning site around which energy clusters.

The enduring distinctions between public and private that "make us believe that love has no place in the classroom" (hooks, 1994, p. 198) also erase Eros from adult education and social movements. Fenwick (2003a) connects the obliteration of "sexuality, desire and fantasy ... [from] adult education discourses of experiential learning" (p. 13) to the fundamental western splitting of individual/environment, mind/body. Like hooks and O'Sullivan (1999) I draw on Sam Keen's (1994) counter-discourse of Eros as the moving force that propels every life-form from a state of mere potentiality to actuality. "The deep relational pull" (O'Sullivan, 1999) of Eros, which "expands the awareness of bodily presence into the wider life community" (p. 279) also defines the fractal properties of the "strange attractor" in chaos theory. Eros "creates the desire to unite with others, ... the vital coupling and uncoupling, and re-coupling of the self with environment" (Pryor, 2001, p. 77).

"Complicating" in my title signals the postmodern shift in adult education from metanarratives that simplify and universalize the conditions for adult learning and social action to the chaos theory language of "connectedness, participation, uncertainty, diversity and instability" (Osberg, 2003, p. 6). Other words in common are "non-linear, qualitative, wholistic, and feedback" (Thomas, 1994, p. 400), and, "emergence." Eros *embodies* the strange attractor of meaning making and learning. My research theorizes on historical exemplars of Eros as the "strange attractor" that with enough iterations produces the fractal of a social movement, a pattern that *emerges* when "bifurcations cascade or follow each other in close succession" (Ward, 1995, p. 633).

Lotta Hitschmanova

The memories that the name Lotta Hitschmanova evokes today among Canadians who grew up in the 1950s are embodied images—we remember her accented Eastern European voice in the public service announcements for the Unitarian Service Committee and its famous address, 56 Sparks Street. From the television ads, we also remember the physically tiny women in a peaked cap and olive-green uniform with rows of medal ribbons (from Lesotho, Korea, India, Greece), and "Canada" firmly pinned on her lapel.

Lotta's accent and the anachronism of wearing a war uniform were also a source of mockery and disparagement, inviting characterizations of her as a martinet—an image that endures. Farrant's (1997) short story, *Starring Lotta Hitschmanova*, parodies Lotta's celebrity and her "quasi-military suit," and lampoons her concern for "thee leedle children... Minny, minny orphans go hungry" (p. 16), and then leaps to a grotesque comparison with Michael

Jackson's pedophile celebrity. This example points to popular culture discourses that magnify the patriarchal distortion of Eros as a form of sexual dominance; these discourses heighten anxiety that Eros in educational settings encourages "the flow of sexual and social energies ... [that] promote social and psychic violence" (Pryor, 2001, p. 77). Farrant's story exemplifies the use of the erotic against women and public mothers, which has the effect, writes Lorde (2001), of women often turning away "from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic" (p. 54).

Eros manifests as social and psychic violence in descriptions of Lotta's relations with her office staff and reporters/editors, and in contradistinction to the Eros of her self-identified friendships with international partners of the USC, volunteers, and the children that she cared about. Even when she was absent from Ottawa, she insisted on a letter twice a week when abroad, three times a week when touring Canada, from each of the "desks" (Canadian, Publicity, and Foster Parents) (Sanger, 1986, p. 153). As a refugee in Paris escaping the Nazi incursion, Lotta lived on a diet of beetroot and carrots; she made her first contact with the USC after fainting in the street from fatigue and hunger in 1942 (Sanger, p. 25). This same summer she was granted a visa to Canada. In the summer of 1945, Lotta learned the fate of her parents in the Auschwitz gas chambers; by this time Lotta had been organizing the USC full time for nearly 3 months and her younger sister Lilly, an architect, was making a living as a dressmaker in Palestine. In an evocation of Eros as coupling and uncoupling, Lotta wrote to a woman friend in Europe: "If I tell you that nobody is waiting for me any longer, that I have lost the beings who are the most dear to me, you will measure my despair, for you have the same sorrow. There's only one thing: to work, so that their sacrifice may not be in vain" (Sanger, p. 38).

As a public mother, Lotta's homely slogans such as Bread for Greece and the March of Diapers, and the familiar image of her "bending over some scrap of a child, ladling out milk, 'white gold from Canada,' ... into a tin mug" (Sanger, p. 10) highlight her readiness to invoke maternal rhetoric at the interstices of public and private spheres. Lilly's emigration to Canada in 1948 coincided with Lotta's efforts through USC Canada to organize shipments of food and clothing to children's refugee camps in Czechoslovakia and her cross-Canada tour to set up the foster parent scheme for "adopting" a Czechoslovak child for 3 months for 45 dollars (Sanger, p. 55).

Letitia Creighton Youmans

Erotic encounters intersect the private and public in Letitia Youmans's (1893) autobiography. Contemporary discourses of leading with the body to "know" something animate 16-year-old Letitia's response to her father's announcement in 1843 that she would attend Cobourg Ladies Seminary. "Quite an electric shock, I scarcely knew whether I was in the body or out of the body" (Youmans, p. 45). She remembers leaving home "as vividly as though it had been yesterday." Seated by her father in a little one-horse wagon, her father broke the silence, "Well, you have the desire of your heart at last. ... If you come out creditably at the close of the school, I shall feel well repaid" (p. 45). With "choked utterance," Letitia responded, "I will do my very best" (p. 46).

In 1849, Letitia accepted the position of assistant teacher at Picton Ladies' Academy, and continued there until receiving an offer of marriage from widower Arthur Youmans. She married Arthur in 1850 when she was 23 years old, taking on a family of eight—"some of them not much my junior in age, others of them helpless children" (p. 68)—and the new roles of mother and farm wife. When they moved into the town of Picton, Letitia's work as a temperance educator began in earnest, introducing the Band of Hope, which enjoined children to make total

abstinence pledges as part of Bible-class and Sunday School. A subscriber to Sabbath-school periodicals, she learned of an assembly to be held at Lake Chautauqua in 1874, and she and Arthur journeyed there by train and steamer. When the assembly was drawing to a close, the temperance women met to take steps towards forming a Woman's National Temperance Association, arranging themselves in groups according to the states they represented. In the first of many instances, Letitia acknowledges Arthur's strategic support: "I alone was left out in the cold being the only Canadian woman. My husband standing very near the enclosure or tent, addressed the lady presiding, "Mrs. Willing, could you take in Canada?" She responded smilingly, "Certainly, we will make it international" (pp. 103-104).

Arthur had been Letitia's traveling companion for several years during her speaking engagements and organizing of WCTU chapters, and initially his death on November 1, 1882, "a marked era in [Letitia's] life history" (p. 238), suggested to her with "overwhelming force, I can never go out alone, my journeying must cease" (p. 240). The life force of Eros at the moment of death emerges as a wellspring of inspiration, as an "entire sensuality" (Trask, 1986). The erotic as a life force for women "offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough" (Lorde, 1984, p. 54). The particularity of the details that Letitia recalls around learning of her husband's death are akin to Griffin's (1995) interpretations of Eros as she cared for her dying mother: "We were being held in an ancient pattern ... [of] composing and decomposing life. ... At one moment, particles suspended in fields of energy and at another matter and energy existing as waves. ... I emerged from the commingled state into being" (pp. 148).

Letitia accepted as her husband's dying message, the letter he had sent her a few days before: "Do all you can, your reward will come in the great future. Your affectionate husband" (p. 240). Letitia saw her "*duty was quite plain*" in 1885 when the Ontario Government gave unmarried women the municipal vote—"to vote myself and urge my sisters to do the same. It did seem a dear price to pay for a vote when my husband was taken away" (p. 207). Eros leads in Letitia's process of questioning assumptions and imagining alternatives, enacting the inescapable (fractal) pattern of personal learning and commitment to social change. Exemplifying women's consciousness-raising Letitia mused: "An old-fashioned maxim declares, 'It is a poor rule that won't work both ways.' ... If only widows and spinsters are allowed to vote, then surely bachelors and widowers should be the only men eligible to the same privilege" (p. 207).

Mary Ellicott Arnold

Mary Ellicott Arnold (1876-1968), most readily recognizable as an adult educator among the three public mothers in this inquiry, was the operational and educational force of the cooperative housing project, Tompkinsville—11 single-family dwellings built in Cape Breton in 1 year, 1937. Arnold's association with her life-long companion Mabel Reed and Mabel's role in the housing project are an untold story of the Antigonish Movement (Neal, 1999). Eros is erased from *The Story of Tompkinsville*, evoking Fenwick's (2003a) lament that "conveniently excised from these lessons is the body—the sweating, aching body, the sexually-hungry, dribbling body, the crying, singing, longing body, that is child-tied and labour-marked, rooted in history and responsibility" (p. 11). In contrast, Eros *embodies* Mary's and Mabel's (1957) account of living, teaching and learning with the Karok Indians in California in 1908-1909. *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song* includes pictures of both Mary and Mabel, on horseback and in the company of their Indian friends, both men and women. *The Story of Tompkinsville* includes only pictures of Mary with the miners in study circles and on construction sites.

Delaney (1985) records that the home of Mary Arnold and her companion, Mabel Read (*sic*), was the centre of education for the men working on the technical and business details of the housing project but also for the women's meetings: "They made curtains and quilts and pored over house plans" (p. 142). An early iteration of "women's work" appears in Mabel Reed's role with the Karok Indians. Mabel "regards with bitterness the fact that [Mary] is no seamstress" (Arnold & Reed, 1957, p. 202); Mabel spends every minute she can spare knitting mufflers, making tobacco pouches out of bits of cotton or silk, and making shirts (from her own pattern) as Christmas presents for their closest Indian friends. The gendered division of work is repeated in their teaching efforts with the Karok Indians "The excitement in Mabel's corner grew with every class day. The number of squaws who came to school increased so fast that Mabel had to divide her work into grades" (p. 93). Meanwhile, in Mary's corner of the room "were all the Indian men. ... One day I collected a group of young fellows who had been leaning against the door and tried them out with a few questions in mental arithmetic" (p. 94).

The Eros of teaching and learning emerges under the circumstances of Mary and Mabel opening a Sunday School under steady pressure to do so from both Indians and whites. At the close of the formal Sunday School in their home, "fairly bristling with a congregation," a shadow appeared in the doorway, that of Á-su-ná-pee, a slight old Indian woman with an Indian cap on her head and a long shawl that fell to her knees. They knew of Á-su-ná-pee as belonging to "the oldest profession," and as she sat on the little stool by their fireplace, they did not wonder that any man would pay four bits for her smile. "As Á-su-ná-pee sat quietly in our room, not looking at us, we kept hoping she would move or speak. She was not beautiful and yet she had a quality of beauty that made us breathe more quickly, and her slightest movement was the nearest thing to beauty we had ever seen" (p. 243). Mary and Mabel began to speak Indian as Á-su-ná-pee lost patience if they did not understand at once what she was saying. They acknowledge that after 40 years, (and long after their involvement with the Antigonish Movement), the shadow of Á-su-ná-pee in their doorway stayed with them.

Implications for Adult Education

Lotta, Letitia, and Mary stand as exemplars of "deriving theory from the authority of lived material experience [Eros of everyday life] and using it in ways which connect with the similar or related experiences of others to establish a 'critical mass' which can join together to develop collective and public forms of social action to achieve political change" (Thompson, 1997, pp. 145-146). Newman (1999) urges adult educators to help make the opposition and struggle inherent in social action "proactive by seeing it first and foremost in terms of learning" (p. 163). These three exemplars of public mothers integrate Eros with chaos theory and adult learning theory at the interstices of the public and private. The co-emergence of learner and setting for these three activist-educators implicates Eros as the strange attractor in Fenwick's (2003b) application of complexity theory to the collective activity of conversations: "Interaction enfolds the participants and moves beyond them in a 'commingling of consciousness.' ... As each contributes, changing the conversational dynamic, other participants are changed, the relational space among them all change, and the looping-back changes the contributor" (p. 35).

Holtz (2002) reminds us that the informal and often incidental learning in social movements, which is tacit and embedded in action, is often not recognized as learning (p. 91); these three public mothers further illustrate that this incidental learning is often not recognized as relational and erotic. Holtz also emphasizes the fundamental importance of a critique of capitalism for understanding learning and education in social movements (p. 91). Recall how pivotal Eros is to Letitia's structural analysis of patriarchy (and its partner, capitalism) inherent

in restricting the municipal vote to unmarried women. The cruel irony of losing the “tender sympathy ... [of her] bosom friend” (Youmans, p. 241) in order to be granted the vote, cascades into critical analysis and social action.

The erotic encounters between Mary Arnold and Mabel Reed with Á-su-ná-pee affirm the positive and productive life force of feminist Eros and depart from psychoanalytic learning theory posited as an ontology of *lack* in curriculum theory (e.g., Pryor, 2001), and experiential learning (Fenwick, 2003b). Indeed feminist Eros is dangerous to patriarchal structures of Eros in which what women lack is constitutive of desire and struggle, whether “in terms of have/have not (Freud) or in the Lacanian mode of to be/to have the Phallus” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 104).

The three case studies confirm Trask’s (1986) argument for feminist Eros, drawn from Marcuse’s “sensuous rationality”: women’s erotic/reproductive forms of social practice are closer to the sources of the pleasure principle and less subjugated by the performance principle, thereby creating the potential for collapsing “their *work* into their *life*, forcing them to mediate a false division while also supporting it” (p. 90). The intolerable contradictions of women’s experience of “timelessness” set against the dominant capitalist organization of time (Trask, p. 91), appear in the formal and informal sites of Lotta’s work world: as the Diaper Lady she cares for the refugee children in Greece and contributes productively to the conversational space; as an office manager at headquarters in Ottawa she is enslaved and enslaves others in her demands for time-organized “performance” from the “desks.”

The Eros of everyday life understands the “universe as a place of constant cooking and cleaning, merging and separation” (Griffin, 1995, p. 149). Eros as the strange attractor assumes its fractal shape from each recursive trajectory of private and public meetings, formal and informal learning. This comparative study of Lotta Hitchmanova, Letitia Youmans, and Mary Arnold provides evidence of Eros as the site of learning where the entire sensuality of energy clusters and cascades into action, contradictorily manifesting as psychic or social violence and as positive social action.

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