

Mapping American fascist tendencies and pedagogical responsibility in early childhood education

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Abstract

This essay highlights the critical nature of the current moment in the US, defining fascism and describing the ways in which fascist tendencies are at work today. I characterize microfascism and the way it precedes and sustains fascist movements, and identify some of the ways microfascisms are present in early childhood education, highlighting the undervaluing of care work, neoliberal trends in education, and cruelties in schools. I draw from critical and revolutionary theories in calling for pedagogies in early childhood education teacher preparation programs that might identify and challenge fascist tendencies, and for a praxis that moves us to respond to the current moment with the urgency it requires of us.

Keywords

early childhood education, fascism, microfascism, neoliberalism

Introduction

One day, when it's safe, when there's no personal downside to calling a thing what it is, when it's too late to hold anyone accountable, everyone will have always been against this. (Omar El Akkad, 2023)

In the current moment, where calls for an end to the genocide of Palestinians are deemed terroristic, where masked state agents are abducting people in unprecedented numbers, where lawmakers are selling merchandise lauding immigrant detention centers guarded by alligators and pythons (Leonard, 2025), and where the state's efforts to exclude transgender people from legal and public existence are rapidly intensifying (Trans Journalists Association, 2025), we are witnessing new evidence every day of the confluence of fascist tendencies like racism, state-sanctioned

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violence, misogyny, suppression of dissent, and more. Amidst this chaos, this paper offers an invitation for those of us who work in Early Childhood Education (ECE) to connect through a shared acknowledgement of the ways we must (and can) interrupt the current trajectory of the world. While my analysis is limited to fascist trends in the US, I offer it acknowledging that American manifestations are part of a larger, global fascist trend. While unspeakable horrors abound, there is also reason for hope. As authoritarian governments wreak havoc around the globe, so too are people coming together to care for and protect one another. In this paper, I describe some of the ways in which fascism is here now, how microfascisms precede and sustain fascist movements, how they are at work in ECE, and how we might do work in ECE teacher preparation programs that challenges fascist tendencies. I draw from critical and revolutionary theories in reminding ECE practitioners, organizations, and preparation programs to heed the warning Fred Hampton left us decades ago: “nothing is more important than stopping fascism, because fascism will stop us all” (*The Murder of Fred Hampton*, 1971).

What I mean by fascism

Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. (James Baldwin, 1963: 678)

I begin by making clear what I mean when I use the term fascism. This term has long, diverse histories and tremendous social and political implications. I use this word intentionally and without hyperbole, knowing that it can both be here now *and also* be unlike the ways it has materialized in the past. To have effective conversations around the nature of fascism today requires us to abandon binary thinking. I begin with a justification for my alignment with scholars who prefer to think of fascist tendencies over a static definition, and describe my own positionality, necessary for points I make later.

There are entire bodies of literature spanning more than a century working to define fascism, with scholars laboring to answer the “perennially vexing question” of what exactly is and is not fascism (Krabbe and Lewis, 2024: 378). Scholars studying fascism have identified consistencies in fascist societies that we can center in an analysis of fascist state power, largely being racism, misogyny, hyper-nationalism, rootlessness, a focus on the youth, sacralization of politics, unequal application of the rule of law, extreme militarism, state-sanctioned White violence, and charismatic appeal from a leader (Evans and Giroux, 2020; Hope and Mullen, 2024; Ross, 2017). Post Cold War, a new consensus was developed following the work of Roger Griffin (1994). He succinctly sums up the essence of fascism: “Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a paligenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism” (1994: 26). Put simply, what he means is that fascism is an ideology drawing on ancient myths seeking to restore, driven by a desire to return to mythic racial, ethnic, and national origins (Bratich, 2022; Ross, 2017).

I follow the work of those who consider fascism a broader phenomenon, comprised of political, cultural, and ideological mechanisms that are always in flux, always evolving, always manifest in individuals and in culture (Adorno et al., 1950; Bratich, 2022; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Evans and Giroux, 2020; Fromm, 1941; Ross, 2017). For example, Bratich (2022) writes that rather than being bound to historical manifestations of fascism, we are served by attending to the *tendencies* of these manifestations. He acknowledges that debating these features are “sometimes pedantic affairs, but as praxis matter because they set the stage for what it means to be anti-fascist” (2022: 3). He goes on to make the case for allowing our understandings of fascism to evolve, writing that if

we look for fascism to return to us in the ways it came before, we will be outmatched, missing the opportunity to understand the particularities of the fascist manifestations of the current moment. Guattari implored readers to forget the idea that fascism will not return, that it is not here now, saying “it passes through the tightest mesh; it is in constant evolution” (Guattari, 2009: 97), Lewis and Hyland (2022) also make this point, again quoting Guattari when he writes “fascism, like desire, is scattered everywhere, in separate bits and pieces, within the whole social realm; it crystallizes in one place or another, depending on the relationships of forces” (Guattari, 2009, as cited in Lewis and Hyland, 2022: 171). I work from the assumption that to identify and intervene in the present is to allow it to be complex and evolving, to lean into its “ambiguous terrain,” knowing that fascism is never completely in the past (Krabbe and Lewis, 2024: 378; see also Evans and Giroux, 2020).

Positionality and epistemological assumptions

Of course, these definitions and my subsequent analysis flow from epistemological assumptions, which I pause to illuminate here. To begin, I am a product of the Midwestern US, and while there are certainly global and historical tendencies to the fascist imaginary, I am writing about their American manifestations according to my American experience. I recognize that this work will be a small, limited piece in a broader, global conversation. Here, I think of the way Sarah Stein Lubrano (2025) describes her own positionality in relationship to her work: “The problems I describe, and even the solutions that might help, are aimed at precisely the kinds of places I’m from” (2025: 13). I am from places that have been steeped in and significantly shaped by White evangelical politics. Additionally, I write having been shaped by my experiences in a variety of popular movements in the geographic and cultural American Midwest. Professionally, my questions and recommendations for colleagues in higher education are shaped by my experiences working in ECE programs in a variety of capacities, in infant, toddler, preschool, school age, and now higher ed settings.

While my background does lend itself to describing the ways in which the Trump administration is ushering in new magnitudes of fascist threat, rather than make the case for Trump-as-fascist, I instead write to colleagues who share, or are at least sympathetic to, the assumption that Trumpism is a manifestation of American fascism that is both unique *and* part of a broader American tradition of fascist violence. My point here is then not to debate whether or not we are at a certain turning point in American politics but rather to ask, *a turning point for whom? Did Trumpian fascism appear suddenly, without warning, snatch power from well-intentioned Democrats, and upend institutions committed to equity and justice? Or did Trumpism grow from soil that had been tilled by the fascist imagination across American history?* Many experts on fascism, including those who survived fascist genocidal states, have asked similar questions. For example, Eric Fromm, a German Jew who fled Nazi violence, wrote while living in New York in 1941:

But what about ourselves? Is our own democracy threatened only by Fascism beyond the Atlantic there is no greater mistake and no graver danger than not to see that in our own society we are faced with the same phenomenon that is fertile soil for the rise of fascism anywhere: the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual. (1941: 74)

Highlighting warnings against the rise of fascism in the US during the World War II era, Lewis (2020) quotes Yale Professor Halford E Luccock as saying in 1938, “When and if fascism comes to America it will not be labeled ‘made in Germany’; it will not be marked with a swastika;

it will not even be called fascism; it will be called, of course, ‘Americanism’” (2020: 8). These scholars are not alone in their warning of the evidence for American fascism. Scholars working in the Black antifascist tradition describe the histories of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and the ongoing prison industrial complex as American anti-Black fascism (Hope and Mullen, 2024). Bobby Seale said that “the fascist power structure” in the US had subjected oppressed masses of people to genocide for hundreds of years (The Black Panther Party, 1969, as cited in Hope and Mullen, 2024). W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that “The democracy which the white world seeks to defend does not exist,” again highlighting long-standing fascist tendencies in the US (DuBois, 1983, as cited in Hope and Mullen, 2024: 73).

The question that comes to mind, then, is *who is centered in a critique of fascism that normalizes, erases this history of fascist violence?* I offer a popular slogan from recent anti-Trump “No Kings” rallies to illustrate this point. The sign, held across the country and having gone viral online, read, “If Kamala was president we’d all be at brunch.” Would there not be work to do in combating American fascist tendencies if Kamala Harris had been elected? This pervasive normalization is what I seek to interrupt. My aim here is not to equate a hypothetical Harris administration with that of Trump, but to say that it is precisely because of the investments and priorities of the administrations that came before that the Trump administration has the infrastructure to so swiftly terrorize US communities with ICE agents, militarized police, and chemical warfare. Of course, the historical violence on a global scale is incomprehensible—consider the experience of the Palestinian people as evidence of the way American politicians are very much united on issues of fascist tendency. We will benefit from heeding the warnings from these scholars in troubling our constructions of American fascism. This shift is imperative in the current moment where so many are being mobilized. Without a more critical analysis, we are at risk of channeling vital energy into fascist theories of change.

Against a too-late-analysis: A case for combating microfascism

If we are to be effective in combating fascist power, we must learn to identify the many ways fascism comes to be. When we fail to locate the ideas, desires, prejudices, preferences that compel those who come together to form a fascist movement, our analysis becomes “*already-too-late*; the moment to understand culture is over, since it only mattered in the moment it was instrumentalized” (Bratich, 2022: 5; original emphasis). In considering the ways that culture drives fascism, many scholars work from the theoretical foundations of Deleuze and Guattari, who explore the quotidian aspect of fascism across much of their writing (Bratich, 2022; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Klein-Cardena, 2024). Bratich (2022) draws from that foundation to define microfascism as a term that describes the ways in which less perceptible occurrences of fascist thought or desire are operative across people or culture, much like the ecology of the microbiome. He writes,

Microfascism delves into the subjective realm with three main characteristics that are also qualifications:

- 1) it takes place “before” but really in excess of the state; 2) it exists in minds but moreover in desires, bodies and practices; and 3) it is composed in culture to create individual and collective actions with their own specific fascist results. (Bratich, 2022: 11)

In this way, fascism is not only a force from the state, but it is also at work in each individual’s psychological development, functioning at the personal and interpersonal levels in seemingly insignificant ways. In turning toward the micro levels of fascist politics, we can describe the everyday, ordinary instances of fascism-in-progress, the normalized ways that culture precedes and sustains

fascism (Bratich, 2022). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write that it is the molecular or micropolitical power of fascism that makes it so dangerous, being difficult to identify until coalescing as a regime. Microfascism illuminates how fascism is an issue of desire, being about desiring control, violation, colonization, power, and seeking to eliminate differences among people (Bratich, 2022; Evans and Giroux, 2020; Siefert, 2024). Put simply, microfascism was made visible when White nationalists marched with tiki torches to defend Confederate monuments, but it was also at work decades ago when the statues were first erected (Bratich, 2022).

Additionally, scholars have noticed the ways the current neoliberal, capitalist context infuses us all with fascist desires; for example, Guattari argues that “Capitalist power injects a microfascism into all the attitudes of the individuals, into their relation to perception, to the body, to children, to sexual partners, etc.” (Guattari, 2009: 287). Wherever a person participates in capitalism, there is a production of fascism, as capitalism creates and distributes its own norms, ideas, perceptions (Siefert, 2024). More specifically, Siefert (2024) writes that neoliberalism creates fascism, that the current wave of neofascism we are experiencing is a reaction to the production of neoliberalism. As people become increasingly disillusioned with the political apparatus, especially paired with increasing poverty, erosion of job security, housing, etc., their unmet needs and insecurities are weaponized toward the Other, as they look to a leader to restore the realities of a better, albeit mythic, time.

To engage with microfascism is to develop a way of seeing and understanding fascist threat that otherwise goes undetected, providing the opportunity to combat these trends before they become a movement or a regime. Scholars have used this concept to explore how fascist tendencies are at work in educational settings as well. In an article exploring the “(Un-)making of microfascism in schools,” Michalinos Zembylas (2020) writes that understanding the ways in which microfascism is cultivated in schools enables educators to respond pedagogically. Wherever the lens is utilized, an orientation to the microfascist provides opportunity to recognize and combat the subtle, everyday impulses related to fascist desire.

How do microfascisms permeate the bounds of ECE?

As ECE becomes increasingly dominated by neoliberal discourse, it will serve us to trace the threads of microfascisms across our work. To name the harm is to begin to develop a language of resistance. Here, I center the more subtle yet still very pervasive beliefs and practices that make way for fascism. In making clear the connection between neoliberalism and fascism and mapping its presence in ECE, discourse related to these trends can be recontextualized as part of a larger, darker, more violent trend than what we have been naming. It likely goes without saying that ECE is also under the real threat of full-blown fascist desire, with legislatures in states across the nation considering bills that would (or already have) limit(ed) teaching related to race, gender, and history, bills commonly rooted in Christian White nationalism (Weiner, 2022). This type of educational absolutism is not unlike what has happened in fascist regimes in the past (Vavrus, 2022). I offer the map that follows as a starting point for what I hope will be an ongoing conversation, knowing that one essay will not provide a comprehensive cartography of microfascism in US ECE.

Before exploring what is happening in ECE classrooms and programs, I start with a broader recognition of the ways in which ECE work has been rendered of such low value. This point is enormous on its own and I can only briefly visit it here. ECE is uniquely undervalued, with an ECE degree having the lowest lifetime earning potential of any area of study (Whitebook et al., 2018). The subordination of the work done in ECE is inextricably linked to racist, sexist ideas

about work done by women, especially work done by women of color. Lloyd et al. (2021) provide a historical overview of ECE policy and put it this way:

For Black women in particular, forced relegation to domestic work, caretaking, and child care (both during and after slavery) ... has also resulted in a long standing and intractable phenomenon of child care being associated with Black women ... As a result, the child care field is rife with racialized and gendered economic discrimination and exploitation. (2021: 3)

As I mentioned previously, misogyny and racism are fascist tendencies, and we see them both at work in the undervaluing of care work. Bratich (2022) writes extensively about patriarchy being foundational in fascist thinking, writing that it is “a key feature of microfascist culture” that aims to “establish man as transcendent and sovereign” (2022: 17). Work done in ECE is undervalued because of the ways we think about the type of work that women have historically done (or been forced to do). Also at work here is a problematic bio-essentialist belief that women are naturally good at care work, that they are nurturing, responsive to the needs of those around them, that they tend to others because of an inherent desire for caregiving. These ideas are microfascisms; they work as technologies of erasure and elimination, diminishing women’s capacities (surely the ways in which women respond to children’s needs with such finesse requires significant skill) and rendering their work of little value (Andrew, 2015; Bratich, 2022). I write about this more extensively elsewhere (Sloan, 2025), but this point cannot be overstated. Reductive, patriarchal ideas about women, women’s work, and especially the ideas and values we continue to embody related to the subordination of Black women are microfascisms that have tremendous material consequences across the field; Bratich (2022) calling them “ordinary operations in the ongoing war against women” (2022: 23).

Neoliberal cascade as microfascism

Many of the microfascisms we see in ECE pervade the nursery under the guise of accountability, measurement, regulation, and quality, trends rooted in neoliberal logics. I work from foundations laid by scholars like Paulo Freire, Hannah Arendt, Henry Giroux, and others in interrupting the hegemonic belief that education should in any way be modeled after or controlled by the powers of the market (Giroux, 2011). The neoliberal educational policy of the 1990s has only intensified in recent decades, bringing disastrous implications for children, their families, and their educators. In the neoliberal education system, teachers are more technicians than experts, they are no longer guiding the development of policy, they are surveilled in ways unlike ever before, and they are required to teach using scripts developed by testing and curriculum companies (Niesz, 2018). These trends contribute significantly to the microfascist environment by which children are shaped today; I visit a few of the ways they are at work in paragraphs below.

Weiner (2022) pulls from work done by Evans and Giroux (2020) on the principles of American fascism today in identifying what he calls the pillars of neoliberal fascist schooling. One of these pillars is the normalization of the emergency, where crisis is used as a “fascist condition of possibility,” a phenomenon we see at work in ECE today (Weiner, 2022: 56). The threat in these constructions of crisis is not the identification of crisis itself (we are living in a time of multiple, unrelenting crises) but in the simple, alluring solutions fascist desire extends. Hannah Arendt, in her work on totalitarianism, wrote that these regimes offer “unparalleled clarity” regarding the “uncertainties of our time” (1973: viii). The fascist tendency is to offer up a construction of the crisis that is simple enough to be emotionally captivating to the masses. Max Haiven describes these fascist solutions as being “narcotically-simple,” a framing that highlights the mind-numbing

effect of this tactic (2025, personal communication). Umberto Eco argued that fascism appeals to frustrated and humiliated masses by exploiting their fears and frustrations (1995).

Working from these assumptions, we can understand the state's framing of educational crises in new ways. Take, for example, the crises of student achievement. It is common to hear politicians make claims related to the ways children are failing and being failed by schools—crises are being shaped because students cannot read at grade level, they are not performing well enough on standardized tests, they are not kindergarten-ready, they are not proficient in English, they experience summer learning loss, the list goes on and on. Rather than orient toward the multivariate nature of these issues, taking, for example, into consideration forces like developmentally inappropriate practice and expectation, capitalism, racism, etc., the state offers simple solutions that appeal to the frustrated and anxious populus, interventions like new tests and increased regulation. These solutions also provide a clear enemy on whom to blame the crisis—enemies by way of teacher unions, unruly students, minoritized populations, for instance. The manufacture of these crises and subsequent erosion of the rights of the child through simple solutions is normalized in the current neoliberal context, altering childhood and school via neoliberalism's marketization of life.

Wendy Brown (2015) highlights how neoliberalism has reconfigured human beings exclusively as market actors, reconceptualized as "homo oeconomicus" (2015: 31), with every facet of their existence being driven by the market (Siefert, 2024). Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) explore how this reconfiguration is at work in ECE specifically, writing about the ways in which the neoliberal imaginary has created new renderings of one another and of institutions, with the image of the child becoming that of an investment, the parent becoming a consumer, and the early childhood center becoming a plant that produces, in standardized ways, the most desirable units of human capital (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021).

These neoliberal imaginaries normalize expectation and practice that forfeit children's needs in the pursuit of school-and-ultimately-college-and-career readiness. In this model, we forego the type of schooling that would benefit children and society writ large in favor of that which provides the allure of increased future profitability (Brown, 2015). These trends have pushed academic pressure down into ECE spaces for decades, restricting the physical movement of children's bodies in pursuit of standardized testing and whole-group instruction (Bassok et al., 2016), eroding and even eliminating play from the school day (Bjorklund et al., 2023; Doyle and Sahlberg, 2019).

Cruelty as conduit of fascist desire. As Hitler rose to power in Nazi Germany, some scholars fled under threat of violence to the US, where they studied the development of fascism (Fischer, 2018), which they published in *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950). In this work, Adorno and his colleagues identify the early childhood years as being particularly important in the development of fascist desire, as much of personality development happens in childhood (Lewis, 2020). These scholars make the case that authoritarianism comes from "the development of a personality that feels powerless and alone, anxious and insecure" (Adorno et al., 1950: 74). Adorno argued that schools are sites of cruelty where microfascist socialization begins for very young learners, where essentially, as a young person is robbed of autonomy and rendered powerless, they are also being socialized to be prejudicial, resulting in a type of cruelty that is externalized onto the Other. Lewis (2020) summarizes Adorno's point in listing three "interlocking and mutually reinforcing dimensions" that work together in cruelty to develop microfascisms in the child, which are manipulateness, hardness, and coldness (2020: 9). Basically, through a process of hardening, a person develops an apathy toward the suffering of others, experiencing love in relation to abstracted concepts like that of the nation, and in place of empathy, develops a desire to dominate (Lewis, 2020: 10).

The point here is that many children are being socialized in spaces where marketization and punishment are central, and that this type of education pervades the child's bounds of autonomy, which can aid the development of the type of cruelty present in authoritarian personalities (Giroux, 2011; Lewis, 2020). Adorno and his colleagues called for teachers to attend to these issues in early childhood specifically, believing that schools are cultivating the development of desire that could either interrupt or aid fascist tendencies of the future. Lewis (2020) describes how an adherence to authority as an end in itself is problematic, since children reproduce the relations of power to which they bear witness. He describes how cold and cruel educational spaces were central to fascist regimes of the past:

“Indeed, Hitler himself described the ideal fascist education as ‘a harsh one,’ where ‘weakness must be stamped out’ in order to produce a ‘violent, masterful, dauntless, cruel younger generation’ with ‘nothing weak and tender about it’” (2020: 10).

These histories then beg the question, *what are the ways that children are experiencing “manipulativeness, hardness, and coldness” in schools* (Lewis, 2020: 9)? *Is there a harshness about US education? Where could these microfascisms be operative in ECE? If fascist, genocidal power prohibits tenderness, could care be an antidote?* I offer these questions as provocations to the field amidst intensifying neoliberal trends in ECE that are related to myriad measures of suffering for children, including: decreased self-confidence (Bassok et al., 2016), increased fear of failure (Bjorklund et al., 2023), increased depression (Ginsburg et al., 2007), surging rates of death by suicide (with these deaths being twice as high during weeks when school is in session) (Bjorklund et al., 2023; Gray, 2011), increased anger, pessimism, and boredom (Holbein and Ladd, 2017), growing rates of suspension and expulsion (stratified across race and gender) (Stegelin, 2018), increased rates of emergency mental health admissions (Bjorklund et al., 2023), and decreased emotional and verbal expression, humor, and imagination (Doyle and Sahlberg, 2019). Of course, a consideration of the ways children experience “manipulativeness, hardness, and coldness” in schools (Lewis, 2020: 9) also needs to attend to the ways young children are othered by microfascist ideology and desire. Surely language and practice that pathologize or diminish children who do not fit within narrow, White, middle-class parameters (Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol, 2018) are operative in the cruelty I described.

Finally, I would be remiss not to also mention the more obvious (yet largely unchallenged) microfascist rituals happening in ECE spaces. The nature of the hegemonic veil in the US is such that practices celebrating patriotism, the police state, and US imperialism are celebrated. Let us take seriously the way these practices construct a governable *populus* necessary in the maintenance of fascist regimes. How might young children be socialized to be governable through early and ongoing engagement with curricula that revere the police state through constructions of “home-town heroes”? Five-year-old children across this country are starting their school day by chanting in unison, turned to face a flag with their hands over their hearts, pledging their allegiance to a nation state. Surely these rituals warrant critique.

Pedagogies for “unmaking” microfascisms in ECE

In remaining sections of this paper, I explore possible sites of resistance, knowing that fascism will be fought in ways even more diverse than it is spread (Lavin, 2022). I use the word possible here in earnest, wondering in what ways and to what extent it is possible to combat fascist desire from within US educational spaces that are state-sponsored. While that tension is significant and

complicated, I choose to believe that while limited, there is (still) *some* potential in higher education. I draw from a rich body of scholarship to answer my original question: *What would ECE teacher preparation programs look like in a commitment to resisting fascist tendencies?* My arguments should not be interpreted as diagnostic nor prescriptive (Krabbe, 2023) but as provocations amidst growing work related to resistance in ECE. The good and the bad of working in academia in times of intensifying fascist tendency is that academics are both uniquely responsible *and* equipped for resisting. I envision our work at this crossroads because of the potential for education to be liberatory, remembering bell hooks's (1994) encouragement that education is about practicing freedom, that the classroom is a radical space of possibility. I title this section inspired by Zembylas's (2020) work on pedagogy as an "unmaking" of microfascism, knowing that this work is difficult and complicated, that "to escape the threads of fascism, pedagogic work has to take the form of creating spaces and practices that attempt to invent new social imaginaries, relationalities and embodiments" (2020: 12).

To begin, faculty in ECE programs can be preparing future teachers who know what fascism is and how it operates so that they are prepared to work against it. Without learning to recognize the microfascist environment in ECE, teachers are at risk of perpetuating fascist desire in their classrooms (Burley, 2017). In Deleuze and Guattari's (Foucault, 1983) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Michel Foucault writes that we find microfascism in our desires for power and hierarchy, and we can use this generalization to support our students in tracing threads of microfascism. Remembering that fascist tendencies include forces like racism, misogyny, hyper-nationalism, unequal application of the rule of law, extreme militarism, state-sanctioned White violence (Evans and Giroux, 2020; Hope and Mullen, 2024; Ross, 2017), we can work to locate them in ECE policy, curricula, discourse, values, etc. Together with our students, we can ask questions to map out the constellation of microfascisms in our field: *Where are desires for power and for hierarchy located in ECE? How do our syllabi, ECE curricula, programming, policy, reflect these and other microfascist tendencies?*

I previously highlighted some of the ways microfascisms are at work in ECE. If we were to set out to intentionally teach our students to identify their locations, they would be able to recognize the undervaluing of their work as a confluence of sexist and racist ideas stemming from settler colonialism and chattel slavery. Rather than internalizing those logics, they would reject them, pushing back when their skill is diminished. They would see the neoliberal cascade, and they would be equipped to creatively refuse its pressures, learning from resistance-based literature in ECE (Archer, 2022). These teachers would recognize problematic constructions of quality in ECE and seek to ask instead how local communities, families, and children define quality in their context (Berlin and Ostendorf, 2022). Relatedly, future ECE teachers could reject curricula that require them to teach from scripts, instead using culturally sustaining, place-based approaches to center the knowledges, experiences, and assets of the people and communities in which they teach (Popielarz and Galliher, 2022).

Similarly, they would see neoliberalism at work in the obsessions of "school-readiness" that plague ECE today. They would refuse to deny children bodily autonomy, they could reject practices that physically and emotionally harm children, knowing that when schools prioritize the market over a child's needs, they perpetuate state violence. Here, I am thinking especially about how access to play is increasingly eroded in US ECE contexts. In addressing fascist tendencies, we would recognize these trends as issues of domination, make visible and dismantle the hierarchies between adults and children, and refuse to conceive of children as undeserving of agency. Knowing that erasure and elimination of difference are fascist tendencies, they would also reject White supremacist practices that center White and English norms, along with ableist constructions of behavior and development.

Finally, remembering that fascist regimes of the past called specifically for schools to be sites of cruelty, let us consider how a commitment to care and to tenderness could be antifascist. Sara

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2017) wrote that to see schools “as primary sites for teaching love and learning freedom is countercultural, even revolutionary,” and while teaching from a place of love and reverence for our students may sound trite, I am referring to a softness here that is also sharp, a softness that can be used to pierce the hegemonic veil of the microfascist environment. I am thinking of the work of Paulo Freire (2005) when he said that educators needed to embody a type of “armed love,” a commitment to fighting injustice with a lovingness toward students (2005: 41). Darder (2011) clarifies that Freire’s armed love is not a romanticized, feel-good notion of love but a forceful, critical love from one who is aware of and committed to their duty to fight alongside and for their students. hooks (1994) writes that her pedagogy was inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh, who spoke of teacher as healer. What would college classrooms look like if we were to emphasize wholeness, caring, healing in our pedagogies? Of course, as we educate in this way, we also are modeling for our students how to partner relationally to undo microfascisms in their future classrooms, resisting neoliberalisms that seek to atomize (Seyed Yousef, 2019; Siefert, 2024). Using critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies, pedagogies of place, ways of teaching that question power, we cultivate critical consciousness in the classroom (Freire, 2005; Paris and Alim, 2017). Knowing our students and caring for them is subversive in the current neoliberal context (Siefert, 2024); Burley (2017) wrote that the relationship in itself is political resistance. I join Carla Shalaby (2017) in her call for educators here, “I am calling on all educators—those in our classrooms, in our homes, and on our streets—to embrace and to respond to the urgency of our collective need to teach love and to learn freedom” (2017: xviii). In working from critical, loving, culturally sustaining pedagogies, we can resist the microfascisms of the times, weaving a tender, loving, sharp care across the collective.

Conclusions: Beyond (pay)walls and borders

If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or menage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us. (Toni Morrison, 2001: 7)

Having made a case for the operative nature of microfascisms in education and ECE in the US today, I have offered questions and entry points for pedagogical responses in academia. I conclude by addressing the necessity for academics to get outside of the ivory tower in their pursuit of more liberatory and democratic futures. While conversations surrounding how to do research and service resistant to fascist power will be important as we navigate these times, I can only minimally touch on these topics here. Briefly, the potential for resistance through public-facing research, for example, is significant. So often work done in academic research is abstracted from the lives of the working class. What are the ways that our work can be public-facing, generative in supporting resistances happening outside of the ivory tower?

There is also an enormity of untapped potential in the area of coalition building. We will benefit from building relationships in the places where we live and work. Of utmost importance is addressing the divide between educators and movement work. People everywhere are building antifascist coalitions, and researchers and educators have both so much to learn *and* to contribute to these movements. Peters et al. (2025), in their writing on the power teachers have related to organizing, ask the reader to imagine what it might look like for educator groups to build coalitions with other collectives like Black Lives Matter or the Poor People’s Campaign, and I join them in wondering what might be possible through this kind of coalition building.

Early childhood educators are especially equipped to contribute to movement work, as parents, caregivers, and young children are so often excluded from organizing spaces. Any strong

movement will take intentionality in providing care and education to young children. In their work titled *Don't Leave Your Friends Behind*, Victoria Law and China Martens (2012) describe why inclusive movements are so important, writing:

When movements and communities fail to collectively support having children in their spaces and events, they perpetuate and reinforce the belief that families need to turn back to the dominant system—with all its privilege, lack of privilege, patriarchy, exploitation, inequality and injustice—to take care of their needs. (2012: 7)

Early childhood educators offer tremendous potential in the area of creating strong and all-ages movements, bringing expertise that can shape spaces in ways that enable children to be active members of the community.

Being rooted in community would also mean building relationships with the students on our own campuses who are doing movement work. Students are routinely brutalized in these movements, which have consistently landed on the right side of history. These movements are stronger when faculty join them. I am thinking currently about the Palestinian solidarity movements happening across university campuses in recent years, and the antifascist education and praxis that they cultivated. Finally, I remember the words of Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver, who, becoming exasperated by a lack of material change, said, “This shit has been examined and analyzed for decades and generations from every angle. My opinion is that most of what happens in this country does not need to be analyzed any further” (Hope and Mullen, 2024: 151). What are the points that no longer need to be belabored? How can we turn instead toward work that can bring substantive change? Fascisms are here now and will show up tomorrow in other ways; the nature of capitalism is that the conditions of tomorrow will be even worse than those of today. And, as the popular mutual aid slogan goes, while we are all we have, we are also all we need. I offer the following pair of excerpts as a closing provocation, addressing myself along with the reader. First, Hannah Arendt (1973), in her work on totalitarianism, wrote, “Terror becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition; it rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way” (1973: 464). Drake and Ogelsby (forthcoming) offer the following charge: “The political moment we are in requires us to be brave. Rather than letting fear guide our decision-making, we need to ask ourselves: ‘How much braver are we willing to be?’” (forthcoming: 143). How can each of us individually and collectively stand in the way? Where does fear guide our decision-making, and how can we break loose of that fear?

How much braver are we willing to be?


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