Pandemic Trauma Dreams: An Experiment in Embodied Anxiety/Intimacy Towards a Relational Future

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> Self-critical and interpretive receptivity to what experience reveals is a form of listening: it is as if we are straining to hear what we're being told. Structured by certain receptivity, relationship—with others (including the dead and not yet born), with ourselves, with the biosphere in which we are embedded, and with what is beyond—may be functional, maybe even foreordained. It might be moral. (Pinar, 2019, p. 287)

Throughout my life I have moved in and out of intense introspection, receptivity to experience, and meaning making. These inward looking moments have often coincided with times of quiet. These have not, however, been the male, hermitical spaces of quiet of the Christian monastic model, drawn on by Grant and others Pinar (2019) cites. Rather, they have been mired in the intense intimacy, bodily fluids, and natural rhythms of biological cycles, pregnancy loss, and mothering.

I am at a point in my life where the natally mandated slowdowns have come and gone. My children are growing, and my husband continually takes on more of their care, freeing me to pursue career, scholarship, and community engagement. As I embarked on my PhD studies, I believed that my times of biologically determined quietude were behind me. Then, in March of 2020, COVID-19 hit Canada.

The arrival of the pandemic felt like anything but quietude. As an instructional designer with experience building online education, I was tasked with leading my faculty's "Business Continuity Plan," moving both academic and professional development courses online immediately. Those first few weeks did not allow for reflection or searching. But then we were at home. And we are still here. The unequivocal biological force of a virus has demanded from us ethical obedience through domestic quietude. We have been forced into the conditions of collective contemplation.

Like my previous experiences of biologically compelled quietude, the conditions that compel sheltering in place are not gentle ones. As in any convalescence, we are compelled to be at home because we are battling an ailment. In 2020, the ailments, both physical and spiritual, are rending the very foundation of our "normal." Faultlines are opening up, driven not just by the virus but by this year's horrendous examples of ongoing systemic racism and contentious elections full of populist divisiveness. We are being forced to contemplate the striking enactment of pervasive idolatrous worship of personal freedom (O'Donovan as cited in Pinar, 2019). Much of the rending momentum deepening these cracks is contention about concepts at the heart of curriculum—the nature and value of knowledge as well as the tensions between humanistic and economic ends. In both myself and others, I am witnessing instinctual responses to these challenging battles compelling us towards the reactions of anxiety and intimacy. In this article, I look to my past, present, and future as imagined through a 2020 *currere* process to explore the forces of anxiety and intimacy in the varied contexts of domestic, public, and technologically mitigated spaces, especially where those spaces touch upon issues related to curriculum. I will reflect on the potential fecundity of this time of forced contemplation and ask—what may the anxiety and intimacy of this pandemic-time birth?

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Fault Lines: Embodied Anxiety

> I sit with my dad in the cozy dining room of our small farmhouse. My dad is going over a list of words with me. They are reading words. My first reading test of grade one is coming up tomorrow. I don't remember the words now with the exception of the word *the*. Despite the warm, comforting context of my loving family home, I am in a state of panic. Intense distress. Tears fill my eyes. My chest is tight and breathing is shallow. My panic stems from something deeper than embarrassment. My anxiety, whatever it is that is overtaking me as I face this test, is intense and is manifesting itself physically. It has embodied itself as a blockage within me. I cannot pronounce the word *the*. I cannot do it. My mouth and throat, my vocal cords are rebelling—constricting—seemingly at the direction of the heavy knot of dread in the pit of my stomach. No matter how hard I try, I cannot choke out the word *the*.
>
> - Mayoh-Bauche, Regressive Writing 2020 *Currere*

I begin my *currere* with embodied anxiety strangling me, choking me from the inside out. The traditional, instruct and test, format of my early elementary curriculum fed the forces of anxiety and self-undermining uncertainty within me.

> The present reveals a new relationship to this anxiety, achieved through formal education itself (in addition to therapy and meds). The past years of growing towards comfort with ambiguity, towards mindfulness and away from judgement of self and others are the years of my Master's studies. I deliberately spent these years studying the ontological basis for change—its complexity, uncontrollability, and the vital role of disruption in enacting it.
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> - Mayoh-Bauche, Analytic Writing 2020 *Currere*

The zen inspired mindful responsiveness to anxiety I have achieved in the present has generally served me well. I have not fully achieved detachment though by any means, nor do I really believe I want to, so my protection is half-hearted. It has not been able to withstand the constant buffeting of the unprecedented storms of anxiety that are the new meteorological normal in our shifting climate.

Morton (2018), in exploring humanity's conflicted responses to climate change, asserts that the genre of global warming information is "information dump mode" (p. xxii), where we cascade punishing piles of factoids, little bits of facts designed to elicit particular responses, onto ourselves and then admonish those who do not respond to these factoids "appropriately." He connects this mode of being with the trauma dreams of PTSD sufferers that seek, so Freud asserts, to position them before their trauma, giving them space to feel the anxiety of impending trauma rather than the raw fright of the trauma itself (Morton, 2018). Anxiety is a bubble meant to transmute trauma, Morton argues. It is exactly the opposite of what will allow us to live the trauma of the here and now and respond appropriately.

Anxiety in Domestic Space

> Foreseeing and planning are strangely overrated, as neurology is now telling us, and as phenomenology has been telling us. It has to do with how we overweight the idea of free will. (Morton, 2018, p. xxv)

The pandemic started in Canada with hoarding. In preparing for the impending emergency, people hoarded toilet paper and hand sanitizer, then it was groceries and puzzles, then baby chicks, gardening, and canning supplies. My kids delighted in figuring what was the new toilet paper.

My husband and I were both suddenly working from home, and our kids were home for five months, all of us learning in close quarters. In July, my sister and her husband's marriage, already strained, buckled under the weight of this compression. My sister and her children moved in with us, bringing the heart wrenching anxiety of a family navigating separation, divorce, and newfound sobriety. Five boys aged two to nine now roam the house in a herd.

My husband and I also felt the pressure of this "bubble" closing in on us—navigating being together all the time, the loss of community connection and support, and the pressures of accommodating new exuberant people in our house of introverts. We, both perfectionists in our own ways, bristled at the failures of the other so constantly on display. We navigated, with tears and blame, the move in a few short months from my husband working away doing shiftwork, seeing each other only hours a week, to being together constantly in a commune house full of children.

And we were not the only thing impeding on each other's private space. Work was suddenly in our home, and my work, focused on public policy, brought the panic and anxiety of the pandemic streaming in. One day I streamed my school's lecture on the medical ethics dilemmas posed by COVID 19—overflowing New York hospitals, who should get a ventilator, are the lives of the elderly worth less than the young, whose life is worth the most—while painting our family room.

Anxiety In/About Technological Space

In the first and only pre-quarantine emergency planning meeting in my school, one faculty member spoke out strongly against a move to online instruction. This was not a surprise coming from him; he had voiced concerns about the inferior quality and pedagogical inappropriateness of online instruction before. I was tasked with orientating him to the tools of online instruction, and as I did so, he warned me, "You'll see; they are going to use this to force all learning online." When the email came announcing the decision to continue with emergency remote instruction into the next school year he reached out—"See, I told you." While he was the lone outspoken voice in our faculty, he was not alone in his opinions. Scholars such as Kessler and Wall (2016) and Rose and Adams (2014) have decried technologically mediated learning as inferior and disconnected.

Pinar himself explores Grant's notions that technology writ large is taking us away from our true calling of attunement.

> Distracted by devices, we are now attuned to virtual—not historical or transcendent—reality. No longer supplicants on a spiritual mission too many have become, in Grant's terms, "clever ape[s]" fastened on finding "comfort and security through techniques." For Grant our "destiny" is to find ourselves "in the infinite." (Pinar, 2019, p. 289)

I don't know if technology, which is now mediating much more of life than even the short time ago when Pinar weighed in, is turning me into a clever ape or drawing me away from the infinite. But I do know that it feeds my anxiety. In moments of anxiety, I am drawn to my phone and social media, technologies designed to dole out and strategically withhold little doses of endorphins and dopamine. I have lived the anxious moments of these last nine months through screens. My twitter feed is alive with those

decrying the lack of public action as COVID-19 cases rise, asserting and debating our Government's neo-liberal agenda, and the dichotomy or false dichotomy of lives versus dollars. Every few days I watch Facebook live feeds of government press conferences updating us on the COVID latest. As I watch the contrast between the message delivered by politicians and the more urgent but constrained messages of top doctors, comments pop up in the discussion box and emojis float across the screen—hearts, little yellow crying faces, rage faces, people calling each other liars and idiots, swearing they will never get the vaccine. Even in my Facebook feed, where it is mostly family and friends, the anxiety inducing controversy doesn't end. Close family members post misinformation and conspiracy, not just about the pandemic but about unfolding social issues, taking my breath away and throwing me into confusion about how to respond. Should I, as Morton (2018) warns us against, blast them with facts, the true information, to shame them into knowing properly? If I do not will my silence be complicit in the very real violence and death that come from lack of caution in a pandemic and ongoing systemic racism in our social systems?

Anxiety in Public Space

The wave after wave of anxiety battering my defenses in this unprecedented storm comes primarily from the constant reminders, issue after issue, election after election, of division and ignorance in our midst. I fear this time we inhabit where "the only meaning of 'citizen' is as 'consumer'" and "without a world in which we are grounded existentially and to which we are committed politically, we can dissolve as individuals and disappear as citizens" (Pinar, 2012, p. 214). The reckoning is here for our overweighing of free will (Morton, 2018).

It has not just been the pandemic, the refusal to wear masks or stay home, the deaths linked to young people going out clubbing, the politicians stressing economy over life, or even Texas' Lieutenant Governor promoting grandparents sacrificing their lives at the altar of their grandchildren's future earnings. Racialized police brutality and the explicit support it receives, the violent terrorizing of Indigenous lobster fisherman in Nova Scotia, the incessant lies of Donald Trump, my provincial government ignoring and harassing a young activist bringing attention to the suicide epidemic amongst Indigenous kids—it all kept coming. And in my space, we lived through election after election highlighting division, a provincial election, the American election, a municipal election, one after the other, in a course of months.

At the centre of the division is ignorance, the devaluing of knowledge, the flourishing of an individualism so strong that whatever I believe is so. I find myself like Young (2008) asking, what went wrong with knowledge? Where is the balance Young identified, and that I cling to, between acknowledging the social basis of knowledge and still striving for objective actionable knowledge about the world? How can it be that so many in my province, my country, this world, are dismissing knowledge, science, facts? And when we let go of knowledge to cling to our rights and freedoms, where are we? I find myself getting fired up, self-righteous, anxious. Maybe Morton (2018) is right, and the deniers and I with my facts are all reacting against the "weirdness of our modern scientific age" (p. xxxvi). And who am I to say really? How can "I" assert myself as a "unitary context-free, cohesive self" (Pinar, 2009, p. 193) observing the effects of the oppressive, neo-liberal power flowing through the conduits of these anti-maskers and all-life-matterers leaving me conveniently outside of its flow. And so I turn to the autobiographical—constituting the "I," as Pinar (2009) suggests—looking to my past, present, and future within the context of the reciprocal relationship between my individual being and agency and the collective struggle of those around me.

Inhabiting the Faults: Embodied Intimacy

Riffing on Deleuze, Pinar (2009) suggests that we encounter ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves. Thomas (2018) echoes this, asserting that it is through intimate dialogue with the other, modelled after the Sufi path of dialogue, that we learn and grow. This intimate dialogue, a prayerful act that brings us into deep, close, knowing of the other, is contrasted with the Shariah of education, driven by mandates and measures (Thomas, 2018). The Sufi path of dialogue driven by intimate, reciprocal knowing of the other does not hold space for the splintered othering of critical theory that Pinar (2009) describes. This intimacy is a state both excluded and required by the locked down world we now inhabit.

Intimacy in Domestic Space

> That which is of central importance to me in the present is: *Family*—the closeness and intimacy of my life with my husband and two sons, the giving and joy that comes of "commune life," living the value of hospitality with extended family and friends. *Beauty*—a sense of home and comfort are forefront to me. I love continually building a beautiful, peaceful living space with my husband. I cherish times and spaces that can connect me to nature and its beauty.
>
> - Mayoh-Bauche, Analytical Writing, 2020 *Currere*

> Being grounded in the private sphere—wherein one becomes attuned to the transcendent—enables citizens to engage others in the common or public realm. (Pinar, 2019, p. 272)

While my husband and I moved into the intimacy of close contact during the pandemic on a challenging path, it was a fecund one. The beauty of my job is that I work with exceptional, humble leaders who have answered the call to bring that which is dialogically opposed together to have impact—the practical and the ideological, us and them. As dedicatedly non-partisan public servants, they are people who put their feet to the ground to realize positive change, channelling the best in the changing ideologies of the varying parties in power. "Be a radical pragmatist," one of my colleagues told me. I can see in his life and those of other colleagues that they have been spending their careers forwarding the cause of peaceful and fruitful mediation-informed approaches to problems, being proactive and cooperative in forums where no one had been before. These are people who have found the middle ground explored by Pinar and Grant where the pursuit of good meets pragmatism (Pinar, 2019). And so, as I work with them to develop learning, as I get to know them, I learn. This learning—the mediation strategies they espouse for use in a variety of circumstances—have informed my husband and me in our pandemic intimacy. We have explicitly adopted them, challenged ourselves to use them, think differently, and grow.

It was not just us. In many ways the whole world turned towards domestic intimacy in the early days of the pandemic. We drew hearts on our windows and held our children close. We praised the new heroes of our era—nurturers and nurses. Many, myself included, found ourselves nurturing sourdough bread starters, mimicking the physical care we might offer a newborn as we fed and changed them, day in and day out, and used them to bake for our families. We turned towards the most elemental acts of intimacy—feeding each other and breaking bread together. In many ways life looked a lot more like the pre-technological era than it had in decades. Children learned at home with their parents; we gardened and built things by hand. In other ways, however, this was the most technologically determined time we have ever experienced.

Intimacy in Technological Space

> I am fascinated by the promise of technology; not naively, as I recognize and resist its ability to overtake our lives or merely reinforce our consumeristic culture. But rather, I am curious about where in the webs of technology's roles and impacts on our lives we can direct it towards enhancing our creativity and our connection to others.
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> - Mayoh-Bauche, Analytical Writing, 2020 *Currere*

The first course I had to move to an emergency remote format was a training course for Public Sector Board members on Governance. Many of the attendees were older, well established in their careers and fields and now giving of their time on public boards like those of schools, libraries, and social services organizations. Both the instructors and the students were nervous about the move online. But they quickly pulled together to do something they were uncertain they could do. Participants surprised themselves with their ability to learn new technologies and connect meaningfully through them. The course suddenly switched focus and facilitated deep discussions about the challenges of the pandemic for the public sector organizations that the participants were leading and how to address them. One evening a participant, a busy doctor in an area recently hit by COVID-19, participated while clearly overwhelmed by exhaustion; towards the end of the class she spoke, slowly and measuredly, about the challenges of responding to the pandemic and the importance of the work that they were all doing towards building strong public institutions; many of the participants and I wept.

And suddenly technology is all we have to foster intimacy with our extended families, our friend groups, our colleagues. It is through tech that we reach out. Not long into the lockdown, my boss's family connected via Zoom. But this gathering, unlike those before it, included those far flung cousins, still inhabiting their family's original home in Great Britain. For the holidays, I gathered not only with my husband's family and mine, but also with extended family and friends on different occasions, not limited as before by space and time.

Intimacy in Public Space

> My personal growth is connected, linked inexorably with the struggle that exists in our world right now away from division and ignorance, towards connection and wisdom. I struggle personally and through my words and actions against the political climate described by Smith (2011) that conflates progress with unending economic growth and situates learning only as a tool within capitalist supremacy. I struggle with my responsibility in a democratic society to challenge these narratives through political engagement.
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> - Mayoh-Bauche, Synthetical Writing, 2020 *Currere*

As I watched the political divisions of my world swirl ominously on my Twitter feed, I struggled to translate my frustration into something meaningful. Early on in the pandemic, my son and I attended a Black Lives Matter protest, masked and distanced. Later, I made the usual calls to my political representatives, eloquently exhorting their answering machines to rise to the challenges and work for the people. I donated money to organizations and activists, but politically I saw very little reason to hope. As I watched our provincial election campaign roll out, with its inevitable conclusion of the election of the parochial, conservative incumbent party, I struggled. Then I began to watch the campaign of one new opposition party candidate, a dynamic local business owner and school board trustee who had championed the rights of LGBTQ students. I watched on

Twitter, day after day, as she hit the sidewalks, door-knocking in her riding, heavy in the late stages of her first pregnancy. What I saw, strikingly absent from most of the public space I was inhabiting, was connection. Below pictures of her door-knocking in her "People Before Profits" campaign-hat, she shared stories of connecting with individuals in her riding across political divides. She would report, after busy days of campaigning, the many baby supplies and clothes she had been gifted with by loving people, even those who vowed they would never support her politically. She wrote eloquently about the need for a higher minimum wage and the way she supplied it to her workers, including my cousin, who she relied upon and valued. I was inspired. I did what I could to support her and her party.

I also saw strong connection-based leadership in Jacinda Ardent, as she led New Zealand through the pandemic, addressing kids and her worried nation over streaming video from her home in a well-worn sweatshirt after putting her kids to bed. These women were connecting their intimate domestic lives to public well-being. They were prioritising intimacy in the public space. A colleague circulated an article about Ardent for use in our training—it identified her approach as empathic leadership. Here was empathy, connection, intimacy offering hope in politics. This smacked up against a hopelessness within me, a possibly well-founded cynicism, fed by assertions like those of Pinar (2019) quoting Reimer of the "impossibility of politics and radical activity for social change" (p. 275). As the provincial election came and went with its uninspiring results, one high point buoyed me, the opposition MLA made good on her campaign slogan "Ready to Deliver," birthing both baby Hera and a legislative seat within a few days of each other.

Birthing a Relational Future

"'As an enactment of ethics,' Lipari tells us, 'listening, like quickening, brings a recognition of an unknown other to whom we are bound and about whom we feel care and concern'" (Pinar, 2019, p. 268). Quickening—the moment in which we recognize the unknown other, the life inside us, through their movement. I remember experiencing quickening with my second child Ollie. I was driving home from Easter celebrations at my parent's house. I was well over the constant exhaustion of the first trimester, but a six hour drive was still a challenge for my now heavy body. I suddenly felt my baby move. The movements were sure and energetic, like leaps or hops inside of me. My heart filled with a joy I had rarely experienced during this pregnancy. I had been told early on that something was wrong with this child's heart, that she may die before being born or soon after. It turned out these early movements were the only experience I had of Ollie alive and vigorous. After being told her heartbeat was gone, I went into the hospital to be induced. The pain of that delivery was much more severe than either of my other two. When the pain killers I was offered wore off, I was refused more to avoid my becoming an instant drug addict. As I birthed my child in a fog of intense grief, I started to hemorrhage; doctors and nurses crowded the room as my vitals dropped. I was eerily detached. As a doctor reached his large hand deep into my uterus, I watched my mom and husband huddled in the corner terrified. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the doctor kept apologizing for the pain he was causing me. "It's OK," I replied, numb. Later that night, as I held my perfect tiny baby, counted her fingers and toes and stroked her hair, I could barely feel. The hum of deafening shock seemed to drown out all emotions. And it was the same way later in my dreams and flashbacks to that time—PTSD dreams of trauma that shadowed and obscured the true hurt of loss.

I'm not sure if it helps to see the anxiety on both sides of the pandemic fence as trauma dreams—a bubble of disconnection masquerading as engagement with pandemic

trauma through denial and resistance or self-congratulatory panic. I don't know if it helps, but it is convincing. The pregnancy after Ollie's death and birth was enveloped in acute anxiety so intense it kept me from feeling deeply. Even after my son Arthur was born, I did not bond with him immediately or strongly. It was only over months and really years, as I let go of the anxiety, that intimacy could flourish. It was only as I opened myself up to the other in vulnerability, opened up to loss and the pain I may find within it, that I could move forward.

> One of my most beautiful realizations in my journey of growth as a self-aware scholar is that my learning, my reading, the intense drive for intellectual knowledge absolutely central to my true self springs conversely from the strongest most fecund gifts of my nature and from the fear and brokenness within me. That is as it should be as "wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life" (Palmer, 2004, p. 5).
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> I am presently at an exciting precipice in my academic journey moving into the scholarly world not only through personal learning but through relationship and teaching—through action. I do not know where I will live a few years from now or what I will do. But I have what I need to centre me. I have a place inside where I connect with me. I both understand intellectually and honour spiritually the relational, energetic force of emergence that will unfold for me in a way that no prescribed curriculum can foresee.
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> - Mayoh-Bauche, Synthetical Writing, 2020 *Currere*

I believe that this time of pandemic induced reflection, anxiety, and intimacy will change our relational future on the large scale; that the faults that are being rendered will move us away from us or towards a more authentic wholeness that encompasses imperfection. I am hopeful it can act as Pinar (2019) describes as "social withdrawal for the sake of subjective reconstruction, registering in—maybe working through—mind and mood the tension between what this world demands and what might be beyond invites, then mobilizing that synthesis (should things congeal) for social reconstruction" (Pinar, 2019, p. 276). It is my hope that, through this pause, we are currently birthing a relational future of mutuality—of intimacy. I am not naïve. I do not think that this is necessarily so or that it will be easy. But birth is rarely easy. If we can push past the numbing bubble of anxiety into genuine engagement with the pain of traumas of this moment, if we can inhabit the faults, maybe, just maybe, the pains we feel now can be the fruitful pains of birthing a new, more-authentic curriculum of intimacy across divides.

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