A Curriculum of Illusion and the Miraculous During Dreadful(l) Times

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OUR CURRENT SITUATION CAN BE DESCRIBED VARIOUSLY as the *Necrocene* (Mcbrien, 2016) and/or *Plantationocene* (Haraway et al., 2016), among the many other names for this moment in time (Chwalczyk, 2020). The Necrocene points to the present and future ontological significance of the deaths of species, societies, and cultures, while the Plantationocene points back to the roots of this problematic: extractive biological and social practices (van Kessel, 2020). Given the ongoing inevitability of various forms of crisis both imminent and emergent as a result of climate change, education must seek ways through. Both authors of this article teach and research in the United States where gun violence in and out of schools, among other horrors, has become a form of mundane terror: ongoing, inevitable, devastating. Which is to say that, in spite of disaster that can poison the wellspring of hope—there is a need for invitations to feel, think, and act in ways that do not foreclose the future. We wonder here, then: *What might we do in order to "keep going," particularly from an ethical standpoint?*

Gun violence is the dominant underlying cause of death for children and teenagers in the United States: more than motor vehicle crashes, cancer, and poison (Goldstick et al., 2022). At the time of the final revision to this article, recently released statistics reveal that the situation seems even more bleak: in 2023, gun violence killed 301 children and 1,407 teens (Gun Violence Archive, 2024). This horrific situation in the United States is not the case in comparable countries: "Firearms account for 20% of all child and teen deaths in the U.S., compared to an average of less than 2% of child and teen deaths in similarly large and wealthy nations" (KFF, 2022, para. 6). While the United States has a child and teen firearm mortality rate of 5.6 per 100,000, the combined average of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom is only 0.3 per 100,000. Canada is second place to the United States with 0.8 per 100,000 (KFF, 2022).

But of course, other crises, broader than U.S. gun violence, abound. Existing conditions right now in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) are not only

objectionable, but unsustainable; specifically, climate change as a result of "ecocidal" logics. While some of the global changes are subtle, others are not. Severe droughts, floods, heatwaves, wildfires, hurricanes, and tornadoes have sharply increased in frequency and intensity: "Over the past four decades, the United States has experienced an average of 7.7 billion-dollar disasters annually. But since 2017, the average has jumped to nearly 18 each year" (Dennis, 2022; see also World Meteorological Organization, 2022). Ecocidal logics "are not inevitable or 'human nature' but are the result of a series of decisions that have their origins and reverberations in colonization" (Davis & Todd, 2017, p. 763). This link to colonialism and colonial logics is vital because many humans hope for (and seek) a technological fix for climate catastrophe (e.g., carbon capture, alternative energy sources, etc.), but many of these "fixes" do not address the underlying problems of systems that rely on expansion and exploitation, such as corporate capitalism.

Similarly troubling, a recent manufactured crisis targeting transpeople has been routed through multiple state legislatures in the United States. Despite the fact that every single major medical association and world health authority supports healthcare for transgender people, many of these proposed laws not only ban gender-affirming care but also punish those seeking care or the people supporting those seeking care. In Florida, for example, providing such care is a felony offense and the state will strip parental rights from parents who support their transgender children. Across the United States in 2022 there were:

- Eighty bills aimed to prevent transgender youth from playing school sports consistent with their gender identity. Nineteen states now exclude transgender athletes in school sports.
- Forty-two bills to prevent transgender and non-binary youth from receiving lifesaving, medically necessary gender-affirming healthcare. Five states now restrict access to gender-affirming care.
- Seventy curriculum censorship bills tried to turn back the clock and restrict teachers from discussing LGBTQ+ issues and other marginalized communities in their classrooms. Seven passed into law. (HRC, 2023, para. 9)

Throughout the United States, state legislators have introduced more than 450 bills that target the LGBTQ+ community, and over 150 bills that specifically target transgender community members (ACLU, 2022), and these numbers will likely continue to worsen given the 2024 election.

As bleak as the paragraphs above are, some additional context is needed for a more complete picture. Nearly 70% of Americans support the United States shifting to become carbon-neutral by 2050; although, notably, concern about climate change is not as high as in peer countries, and within the United States such attitudes have strong partisan divides (Tyson et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the divide between public opinion and actions of politicians are particularly stunning for gun legislation and LGBTQ+ rights. A 2022 ABC News/Ipsos Reid poll revealed that seventy percent of Americans "think enacting new gun control laws should take precedence over protecting ownership rights" (Saric, 2022, para. 1), and HRC (2023) data indicate that:

> Support for LGBTQ+ rights is on the rise in Florida and nationwide: 80% of Florida residents support nondiscrimination protections, and 66% of Florida residents oppose refusal of service on religious grounds. About eight in ten Americans (80%) favor laws that would protect LGBTQ+ people against discrimination in jobs, public accommodations, and housing. This reflects a dramatic increase in the proportion of Americans who support non-discrimination protections since 2015, when it was 71%. (HRC, 2023, p. 11)

Given this disconnect between the will of the people and legislation (or lack thereof) present in the United States (and seemingly elsewhere in the world, such as Canada and the United Kingdom),

it is important that those of us concerned about each other and the planet persevere in our ethical stances toward societies that hurt less. There are, and will continue to be, numerous ways we might take up this task to "keep going." On our minds at present is a *curriculum of illusion and the miraculous*.

A Curriculum of Illusion and the Miraculous

Illusion invites us to suspend, extend, or even negate our present situations in embodied ways. Similarly, Orsi (2016a) reveals to us what we've lost in abandoning a robust sense of the miraculous. Recovering the notion of *presence* (i.e., an emergence of the miraculous in our quotidian lives) means that we don't foreclose the possibility of a world that hurts less—in which change is always possible. The avenue explored in this paper weaves together *illusion* via Jean Baudrillard (1983/1990; 2004/2005) with Robert Orsi's (2016a) call to reclaim the language of immanence, the miraculous, in the social sciences.

Baudrillard (1981/1983, 1983/1990, 2004/2005) has been part of curricular conversations as well as education more broadly for decades. These inquiries have added to how we might consider hyperreality (i.e., simulacra that are more real than real) and its very real effects on how we understand curricular foci (e.g., Ajeesh & Rukmini, 2022; Bulfin, 2017; van Kessel et al., 2025), the educational situation more broadly (e.g., Humphreys et al., 2022; Moran & Kendall, 2009; van Kessel & Kline, 2019), and the conceptualization of particular social identity groups such as youth (e.g., van Kessel, 2016) and Indigenous peoples (e.g., Steckley, 2003). Less frequently taken up is his radical thinking—Baudrillard's challenge to do something more than employ criticality. We're thinking here of Kline's (2016a, 2016b) and Liu's (2022) dive into aspects of fatal theory and Ramirez's (2017) challenge to the sociology of higher education. This article engages with radical thinking, particularly the concept of *illusion*, one of Baudrillard's fatal strategies. Illusion is more than a deceptive appearance; it is a philosophical challenge. Because reality is often far too wobbly than many of us care to admit (van Kessel et al., 2025), illusion can (and perhaps ought to) nudge us toward not what is, but what can be. Illusion is an imagining that ruptures what we take for granted as reality.

Robert Orsi's (2016a, 2016b) work similarly takes up a rupture of the commonplace. His concern, rooted in experiences of the divine (appearances of the Virgin Mary at Knock in Ireland; the healing dirt of the Santuaria of Chimayo; pilgrimages to Lourdes and their evident effects on the devoted) lies the loss of the cognizability of these experiences for the social sciences. That is, though there might be studies of a sense of the hóly in the world, there really isn't a frame—he calls it the immanent frame—for understanding cases where the real presence of the divine emerges into the world for people. An example of what this might look like is the doom-loop of prophesying chronicled by Matthew Taylor (2024) in his account of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). This manifests in independent charismatic Christian congregations in speaking in tongues, but more so in the constantly shifting, divine justifications for Christian supremacism and the divinely ordained political trajectory of Donald Trump. That is: calling Christians in the NAR hypocrites for asserting certain Biblical values while voting for a libertine authoritarian like Donald Trump precisely misses the point that leaders in the movement have received divine messages dictating the inevitability of his reign. Whether these apostolic assertions are true or not is beside the point; what matters is that, for believers, the divine has emerged to affirm the rise of a tyrant. And so now what? More mundane—for its familiarity though perhaps

not its implications—is the Catholic belief in Transubstantiation: that in the mass the Eucharist is transformed from bread into the literal embodied presence of Christ-in-the-world. Here, as for members of the NAR, God has broken into the world in ways that defy the reality structure of most critical academic understanding. What, we wonder, might be done in light of this reality for its possibility? Certainly we should worry about the political influence of leaders of the NAR like Sean Feucht who believe God is telling them to defy public health mandates; but we might also take heart in the invitation Orsi (2016b) offers that we "try the thought experiment of approaching [our] particular areas of inquiry in religion, history, and culture through a matrix of presence" (para. 9). That is: if the supernatural is present in ways we can't fully understand, what does that open up for us?

Taken together, Baudrillard and Orsi invite us to continue our lives and struggles with radical hope (Lear, 2008) instead of falling into denial or cynicism, and are synergistic with neoanarchist ethics: to cultivate our responsibility to others' existence and suffering as a philosophy of responsibility (Critchley, 2013). Feeling (and perhaps being) powerless within the State does not foreclose taking action in whatever interstitial spaces we can find and create together in our communities. Curriculum is the story we tell ourselves and others about the past and present that shapes our impressions of reality and possible futures, and consequently our proposition is that a curriculum of illusion and the miraculous helps tell a story that encourages persistence in the face of dread, but without being rigid in conceptualization or implementation.

Recovering Illusion

Although it may be helpful to consider loss in terms of death and grief (e. g. , Christ et al. , 2021; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021; Varga et al. , 2021), in this article we are considering what is *lost* in education when we neglect illusion during times that are full of significant societal dread: *dreadful(l)*. Change can be unnerving, and Power (here, abstractly referring to those people in positions to shape all of our lives, such as billionaires and the prominent politicians in their pockets) benefits from the rest of us being too tired and disheartened to imagine how things might be different. The loss of illusion, therefore, is a loss of possibility and, in the end, a loss of agency.

As the poet and playwright Oscar Wilde (1891/2007) stated, a "practical scheme" is too often considered to be one that either exists already or "could be carried out under existing conditions. But it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to; and any scheme that could accept these conditions is wrong and foolish" (p. 1062). The activist and writer Emma Goldman (1917) expanded upon Wilde: When these existing conditions are objectionable, the only valid criterion for a practical scheme is sufficient vitality "to leave the stagnant waters of the old, and build, as well as sustain, new life" (p. 55). Failing to engage with illusion runs the risk of losing a way to persevere through death and grief. To conceptualize illusion, we are drawing from Jean Baudrillard here, but this concept lives in other traditions as well.

Baudrillard (2004/2005) articulated an energy of challenge, defiance, creativity, and renewal when we undertake "fatal strategies" to break harmful structures: *hyperconformity*, *enigma*, and *illusion* (Baudrillard, 1983/1990; Kline, 2016; Kline & Holland, 2020; van Kessel et al. , 2024). These strategies are creative—and perhaps at times even joyous—attempts to force systems (e. g. , the settler colonial, corporate, white supremacist heteropatriarchy) to reverse their course. Hyperconformity invites us to adhere to a system in a way that breaks it. An example of such a practice is malicious compliance, where people follow the rules so closely that it disrupts

the power structures of a particular context. A student at a school, an employee at a workplace, or others can follow an order or directive as it is articulated, but in a subversive way that undermines its intent (e. g. , following the dress code too literally). Enigma as a strategy makes what was once clear rethinkable. In this way, we make "the world even more unintelligible" (Kline & Holland, 2020, p. 68). From this perspective the goal is not necessarily to uncover a truth in a stable form, but to "make friends with chaos" (Berardi, 2019, p. 3; see also Kline & Holland, 2020). Against the backdrop of our dreadful(l) times (from a Baudrillardian perspective), it might be more helpful to have "a despairing analysis in felicitous language than an optimistic analysis in an infelicitous language that is maddeningly tedious and demoralizingly platitudinous, as is most often the case" (Baudrillard, 1995/2008, p. 104). This manuscript focuses, however, not on hyperconformity or enigma, but on the third strategy: *illusion*—how it can open up possible futures and thus help us persist through our dreadful(1) times.

Illusion as a Practical Scheme

Illusion as a strategy helps us imagine other ways of being and thus can be a "practical scheme" in Wilde and Goldman's sense. Illusion may seem disconnected from reality, but according to Baudrillard (1981/1983), we have already swapped reality for hyperreality. In this way, "[i]llusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (p. 38). Without going into heavy detail, hyperreality is the situation we are currently in, whereby technologies (broadly defined) have developed in a way that divorces us from reality to the point that simulacra (i.e., copies that lack a core element of their referent) replace originals: "It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist" (Baudrillard, 1981/1983, p. 147). In terms of cinema, for example, "the magic and illusion of film disappear in an alluvion of perfect simulacra" (Kline, 2016a, p. 3). Technical perfection forecloses possibilities of discerning real from hyperreal and thus shuts down illusion. As Baudrillard (1983/1990) noted,

> That which is no longer illusion is dead and inspires terror. This is what the cadaver does, as does the clone, and more generally, anything that can be so confused with itself that it is no longer even capable of playing its own appearance. This limit of disillusion is that of death. (pp. 74-75)

Consequently, we need to remake and rediscover illusion, which was seen in the past in ceremonies (notably, we disagree with Baudrillard who thought that all ceremonies no longer have this power), and can be seen at present in art, theatre, and language that "maintain the tiny distance that makes the real play with its own reality" (Baudrillard, 1983/1990, p. 211).

Importantly, fatal strategies, including illusion, don't "succumb to being subsumed in the way that the negative is subsumed in the late capitalist code" (Kline, 2016a, p. 120). Our contemporary times demand strategies that cannot be countered easily by those accustomed to squashing dissent for: "illusion keeps its power without giving up its secret (there isn't any)" (Baudrillard, 1983/1990, p. 86). Illusion is slippery—not as easily recognized (and thus dismissed) as some more conventional critical strategies because it "is not false, for it doesn't use false signs; it uses senseless signs, signs that point nowhere. This deceives and disappoints our demand for meaning, but it does so enchantingly" (Baudrillard, 1983/1990, p. 75).

From Greene (1995), Saleh (2021), and other educational scholars, the process of imagining is itself an action upon the world: "storied, experiential, embodied, and enacted" (Saleh, 2021, p. 225). From a Baudrillardian perspective, this action is possible because of the energy of illusion, and how those involved are "in the process of being swept away" (Baudrillard, 1983/1990, p. 87). Illusion is an action, and we see the power of this fluid strategy in the process of science fictioning. Beier (2021), drawing from Fisher (2016), illustrated in how reading a "poor curriculum" (Pinar & Grumet, 2015) as science fiction can tap into the power of the "weird": "what the weird exposes is not only something out of place or out of time, but rather how the common-sense categories, delineations, and correlations through which we make sense of the world are themselves inadequate" (Beier, 2021, p. 153).

Perhaps somewhat ironically, we can attune ourselves to our existence as well as other entities (including the planet) by engaging in illusion. Although it may be hard to keep an open heart, using illusion may require an attenuation of the tendency to seek "truth" in the face of, for instance, the very real consequences of an era of deepfakes, AI generated misinformation, and fake news. What we fear, in other words, is a hardline return to the comfort of positivism (which can only provide a false sense of stability) in the midst of a revolution of new ways of producing (hyper)realities. Engagement with illusion allows us to think anew through the value of immanence and radical presence. Perhaps some might have (understandable) feelings of discomfort thinking with and through the language of religion/faith, but nonetheless here we find it helpful. We invite readers to "stick with us" as we engage with some religious language to explore the miraculous as a way of connecting deeply with illusion, but without foreclosing more secular approaches, or approaches couched in other religious or spiritual traditions.

Recovering Presence: Transcendence and Secular Education

Robert Orsi (2016a) writes of the anesthetization of embodied religious experience through the creation of what we might consider an inevitable administrative imperative: modern Christendom responding and coming to shape through Enlightenment ideals. This mirrors work in secularisms from Jakobsen and Pelligrini (2008) who make the observation that "forms of secularism tend to vary with the religious formation in relation to which they develop" (p. 12). The point that follows, it should be clear, is that this is a dialogic relationship such that religions form out of and in response to the secularisms which they re/create over time. Taking a historical view, Asad (2003) makes the point that in "medieval theology, the overriding antinomy was between 'the divine' and 'the satanic' (both of them transcendent powers) or 'the spiritus' and 'the temporal' (both of them worldly institutions), not between a supernatural sacred and a natural profane" (p. 32). The denaturalization of the sacred as set in a wholly separate metaphysical plane from the profaned secular is, thus, as much a human construction as its progenitor rooted in processes initiated by anthropologists and later theologians who came to define the sacred as beyond the objective limits of understanding (p. 33). That which was considered illusory, in other words—over and against that which was concretized as "in" and "of" the world—was very much culturally and historically situated and thus remains contingent.

Thus, for Orsi (2016a) it makes sense not only to suggest that "Western Christendom existed as a map of bones before it became a legal and ecclesiastical entity" (p. 11) but also to chronicle the ways in which church authority came to assert control over the supernatural meanings tied to those healing saints' bones, fostering along the way an economy of acceptable immanence:

the Christian God exists in the world so we're going to need a process to distinguish His real presence from the ramblings of cranks or, heaven forfend, the words and embodied encounters of the insufficiently sympathetic poor. This process of administrative assertion is linked, always, with authority, a reminder of Althaus-Reid's (2000) caution that "every discourse of religious and political authority hides under its skirts suppressed knowledge in exile, which is marginal and indirect speech" (p. 20). Thus, one task to concern ourselves with lies in considering just what possibilities might be hidden in a reconceptualization of the sacred as it re-emerges into the world.

Wexler (2013) wonders about the "*possibilities of mysticism as a source for social analysis"* (p. 6), suggesting that in education in particular, a turn towards functionalist, empiricist and even (or particularly) in leftist circles, Marxist paradigms "led its practitioners to ignore or deny the appearance of newly important phenomena like religion" (p. 6) or its misty double, spirituality. There is an added irony here given the roots in educational Marxism as they run through, most prominently, Freire, a practitioner of religious analysis throughout his work. Still, the point is that educational research has too often ignored the possibility of the religious, mystical, theological, and, as we argue here, the paraliturgical and devotional as sources for theorizing different value into and from the dread of loss and promise of remembrance in schooling among other things. What we want to suggest with our work here, however, isn't necessarily in relation to a particularized loss related to, for instance, the grief that comes with death as it surrounds classrooms in the midst of tragedy. Rather our interest lies in what is *lost* in education when we fail to attend to the abundant, the transcendent, the miraculous theologically understood. It is, we should note before continuing, a character of our own impoverished sense of miracles in the world that they have largely been treated in education as rooted in the false narratives of turnaround schools, which have worked fleeting and produced misleading wonders in the test scores of students through pushout or brutalizing test preparation. In this sense, the legal ecclesiastical entity authorizing the irruption of the manifold possibility of the supernatural in schools has become the College Board and its ilk. And Jesus wept.

There are other ways forward of course, and loss can be a deeply cathartic process. And what this process of recovery will require is a kind of remembrance of a strand of curriculum studies past, before moving through various theological accounts of what becomes possible through a reconvention against the structured ignorance of a world closed to the miraculous. Indeed, MacDonald (1995) suggests that "the act of theorizing is an act of faith, a religious act" where "curriculum theorizing is a prayerful act" (p. 181) which he links back to a sense of the mytho-poetic work of desiring in education: seeking a better world through faith in something beyond our own individualized humanity. Heubner (2008) works similarly reminding that "various religious traditions" contain "veins of language about the spiritual" which "should be mined for the educator" particularly because they can draw from different "histories, stories, myths and poems [which] are symbols of moreness, of otherness, of the transcendent" manifest most clearly in creativity (p. 344). It is incumbent on us, then, in this work to acknowledge the ongoing structuring of educational possibility in the West, and especially in the United States, by specific (and mostly conservative) Christian conceptions of the good as they are read through language, ritual, and practice that normalize and make invisible religious/secular experiences of education (e. g. Burke & Segall, 2011, 2015, 2017). Which is to say: the loss in education and educational research has not been a loss of religion but rather an inability and unwillingness to attend to and remember just how religious supposedly secular education already is. But also, in its resistance to religious conservatism, much otherwise nominally progressive or radical educational research has

left behind a powerful tool of hope: the excess of possibility that comes with the emergence of the divine into the world. Let us, then, raise the dead here.

Recapturing the Miraculous

Although so-called "secular" education in places like the United States is imbued with many aspects of Christianity (Burke & Segall, 2011, 2015, 2017), educational research generally fails to reckon with the possibilities of thinking theologically toward different ends. One of the central concerns that Orsi (2016a) raises in his work is a sense that the secular social sciences don't have a way to think about "when the transcendent breaks into time" (p. 111) choosing instead to assume that "what appears to be happening to the men and women to whom it is happening" is not, in fact "real" (p. 59). The second author (Kevin) is writing, specifically, of some certain Catholic experiences with great healing miracles: all those abandoned crutches at Knock, at Medjugorje; at Lourdes. There is no particular understanding in the social sciences of the affective power, which is to say the subjective reality that makes rational a belief that sleeping with a bag of dirt from Chimayo in New Mexico might just lead to remission of a particularly rabid cancer.

Some of this can be attributed to an overreliance on the kind of paranoid reading whose knowing chastisement Sedgwick (2003) warned against: that affective experience you're having isn't something you understand; let me explain it rationally to you and your false consciousness. What Orsi (2016a) sees as particularly concerning is the way in which interpretation can become "a refusal to listen" (p. 110) such that those of us committed to all the phantasy of the posts or the psychoanalytic or whatever post/qualitative tradition one might choose to list, forget that sometimes it might well be possible for the divine to irrupt into the everyday. What does it mean, in other words, to acknowledge that for some of the people with whom we work or alongside whom we might study, the miraculous exists, even paradoxically, in the quotidian but more so as a generalized orientation to the world and especially to education. What changes, in essence, if we allow for what Asad (2003) calls the "epiphany" or "the sudden showing forth of the spiritual in the actual" (p. 53)? It would require a sense that "whether everyone sees them or not, the gods are there" (Orsi, 2016a, p. 251) and we'd do well to consider what this might mean for the educational project.

Devotion and Grace

It will be clear to the reader here the relative contours that limit the edges of the authors' archive: we are writing of presence from a very narrow Catholic (albeit feminist, queer inflected, but still very much American and too-White) tradition. The miraculous lost, then, in this tradition is necessarily limited and, especially with Marian apparitions, is inherently colonial and sexist/sexualized (Anzaldua, 1987/2012). Such is the nature of particularized interventions which, hopefully, ripple outward: What will we have to consider if we are to reapprehend the miraculous as possible for education? An exhaustive treatment is necessarily impossible, but we can gesture towards conceptual possibility. In that light, then, we offer two possible reads forward through devotion and grace.

In her book chronicling the dance of the Giglio in a Brooklyn Catholic parish, Maldonado-Estrada (2020) proffers an exhaustive account of the construction of the annual shrines wholly fabricated and then ceremonially lifted by (mostly) Italian American men, to be paraded through

the streets of Williamsburg as a sign of devotion to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, another Marian manifestation. The scene is one of ritual masculine maintenance in the shadow of religious necessity: here is tradition engaged for fundraising at, in some senses, its most crass. Build the shrine, bring the masses—sell alcohol, funnel cakes, and pull tabs—fund the Church. This, at least in part, is so that the tradition itself can live on, but also so that religious and ethnic changes in the neighbourhood can be warded off—or elided—for another year. There's also a kind of "role maintenance" (p. 144) which allows men to sustain status in a religious sphere that might, otherwise, become coded as unacceptably feminized. An odd paradox in a hierarchical, explicitly patriarchal organization, certainly, but one which accounts very much for the physicality tied into building and then lifting the massive shrine as a collective all-male group. There's homosociality certainly. But there's also devotion: to parish, to history and tradition, to each other, and especially to the possibility of finding the divine in the joy of the Dance itself. While the men's "devotional lives" as they deconstruct, and reconstruct, and then play act the parade of the Giglio, "are very much entangled with their relationships with other men" (p. 41) they are also lifting, dancing, and walking a 72-foot, 8,000-pound shrine to the mother of Jesus. They are seeking, in this babbling tower, a connection to a remembered past, an as yet uncertain future, but as much as anything, the miracle of living on beyond their own lives.

In the stories of Giglios' past told ritually as they build and reminisce, they commune with the dead, the fathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, and friends who danced, painted, worshiped, and drank with them who are otherwise cordoned off from the secular world. The Giglio brings them back in their shared devotion to the shrine, certainly, but really to the miracle of transcendence through time: the Giglio is a miracle of presence. It connects them back in ritual and links them forward as they share with their own sons and nephews the tales of their encounters with the sacred, often inked in tattoo on skin, but also etched in hearts and souls through the bittersweet grief of passing time, past/passed mentors, secret lovers, dear friends.

Peter McLaren's (1999) book on schooling as ritual uncovers the tension of a Catholic school—in Canada—which serves in its Catholicism as a "chronic defender of capital" and ideological weapon against social progressivism, over and against the faith as a "practice of living critically and compassionately" while providing "a symbol of hope, resistance, and social and spiritual transformation" (p. xxxiii). This dual lens allows the author to attend to the hegemonic potential of educational ritualization, really the Taylorization of the spiritual while still holding space for the ways in which ritual can be used to forge a connection to the supernatural through, in one case, the acknowledgement that the cross might be both a call to take up the pain and humiliation inherent in Christ's crucifixion as told in the Christian narrative, but also as a symbol of joy and transcendence. Huebner (2008) would call this attention to the possibility and pain in ritual a kind of protest against form, in the sense that theologian Paul Tillich asserted: "form gradually loses its vocation, becomes idolatrous, and no longer points to the transcendent" (p. 413). Maintenance of the possibility of this continual emergence of that which crosses the boundaries between the sacred and profane that we have constructed is possible perhaps most saliently, through grace.

The second author, Kevin, spent 2010 conducting his dissertation study at a working class, mostly white all-boys Catholic high school in the Midwest (Burke, 2011). Every other Friday before classes started, in the massive, ornate chapel appended to the side of the school, he and a few others attended a small ceremony set off in a side alcove in the midst of flickering candles, in the shadow of imposing pink marble columns. A priest convened these quiet pre-dawn gatherings.

The author was there to write about the boys' participation, but also there to figure out the pull of this kind of thing on him.

> *We'd pray in a general way, and then Fr. Chuck would take up a truly bizarre gold contraption, a kind of modified chalice called a monstrance, which rather than culminating in the negative space below the rim as in a cup, was built up into an effigy of the sun topped by a smaller cross in filigreed gold in the centre of which, set against velvet and protected by glass, sat the shard of St. Rita's fingerbone. We'd ask for St. Rita's intercession in our lives and in the lives of others, and then, having spent fifteen minutes in reverent almost-silence, concentrating on a bit of calcified human remains left over from the 14th century, we'd head off to homeroom, incense trailing us on our way back to the secular present.*

It's impossible to know if the boys who were there on any given Friday were praying for miracles. This sort of practice has a kind of hierarchy in the Catholic Church. The bone itself is considered a relic and technically because it's a part of the former St. Rita, it's a first-class relic. Saints' possessions are second class relics and on down the line to objects that were merely *touched* by a saint. The glib interpretation is that this is saint worship or worse, some form of necrophilia, one might suppose. But the Catholic rite is about seeking intercession from a saint through prayer; in essence it's a kind of hotline to God where the saint is an emissary or, if you'd prefer, an old-fashioned phone operator working the switchboard. What we can know is that outside that alcove, the practice seems absurd, particularly at more than a decade's remove, but in the moment of reverence with those boys, in the flickering dark, something differently possible felt opened up. An emergence into time and another fixed point on Orsi's (2016a) map of bones.

Later in the year a recent alumnus of the school died after a long bout with cancer. He'd been close with a number of the kids still enrolled at the high school and, bereft, the boys spent time outside of class just kneeling in the chapel, heads down, grieving. When Kevin wrote about this in his dissertation and subsequent book, he highlighted the possibility of a space for ritualized grief: a kind of release valve for the sort of emotions not allowed in other parts of the school for their coded femininity. What he missed, however, was the possibility of grace in this emotional collapse into the pews.

Grace, for Catholics, borrowing heavily from Michael Himes (2004) here, is manifest in the sacramental. Traditionally there are seven sacraments in the Church (Marriage, Last Rites, First Communion, etc.) but Himes' point is that the sacramental is an attending to God's grace extended beyond the Trinity, which is to say, a sacrament is any time we recognize grace in the world. So, there are rituals that encode this grace and direct our attention to it, but in essence, anything in the world has the chance to be sacramental should it get us to apprehend grace in our lives. There is God, in this mode of belief, ever present in the world missed but for our attending to the divine's presence. Immanence is part of the quotidian in this way of thinking and thus, finding space to see the spiritual as it manifests in the actual, or the transcendent as it emerges into time, is really about paying attention to the possibility of it happening at any given moment in any given situation, person, space, text, pedagogical intervention, and practice. The miraculous, in other words, is always ever with us if we want it. We just need to figure out if we've lost our eyes to see it, the ears to hear it.

What This Means

We'll need different lenses for thinking about educational possibility, certainly. This journey is very much underway in the work of Indigenous and decolonial scholars particularly made manifest in the ongoing acknowledgment and centring of notions rooted in a belief that "water is life" and "land is our first teacher" (Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019, p. 1). This certainly doesn't contain all of the sacred cosmologies of Indigenous beliefs, but it seems synecdochic for an integration of precisely the concern about the way in which Western anthropology and subsequently theology failed in its interpretive capacities as it calved off the sacred from the profane. This is written about differently by Bentley Hart (2013) who, again, reminds philosophers and scientists in the premodern West, "no absolute division could be drawn between physical and metaphysical explanations of the cosmos, or at least between material and 'spiritual' causes" (p. 54). If there's a problem of separating the miraculous from the quotidian, in essence, and if that's linked to a kind of colonialism that seeks to ravage the sensibility that indeed we can be taught by land and that water itself is life, then some of the work of critical scholars in education might need to be a reconnection with immanence. Which means, we suspect, that we're going to have to start reading more theology and folklore and understand that the difference between the two is likely in terms of a category error: it's not so much that the transcendent occasionally breaks into time, but that we mostly fail to see the transcendent as it is woven through the very nature of our daily lives.

Education has an opportunity to do something different, to practice what Elizabeth Johnson (2011) calls "dangerous memory" (p. 66). The danger lies in the trouble of engaging with religion in educational spaces, but really it sits at the juncture of literacy and belief: what if the ululations of those taken by the spirit have educational value that is, by its very nature, immeasurable? What does that mean for the educational project and, in particular, for a field that preaches a kind of cultural sustainability that often stops right at the edge of embodied religious experience, indeed sees it as premodern, uncouth, immature, worthy of disdain?

One of the main points that Asad (2003) makes about grace is that from its theological genesis it was, similar to religious iconography, "both itself and a sign of what is already present…it points backward to…memory and forward to…expectation as Christians" (p. 34) and thus grace is the engagement of the Christian subject with what the eyes see alongside what they can't possibly see simultaneously. When something pulls aside the scrim that divides the sign itself—that monstrance; the Giglio; the collective practice of joy in a classroom moment—from its connection to past and present, the miraculous occurs. Time stops, turns over, and new possibility emerges. We've mostly lost the capacity to wonder about this in education, reducing it to the cloying of the teachable moment.

Persistence in Face of Dread

It's a problem that many have separated the miraculous and illusory from the quotidian, in general as well as through many Western philosophies and theories translated into curriculum and educational theory. It is vital to consider the spirit of educational work as we "relationally imagine, co-create, and live a curriculum of rahma[1] whereby our already intact humanity is lovingly embraced, sustained and heartened" (Saleh, 2021, p. 223).

At times, writing this article was difficult; for example, it was difficult researching and writing some of the dreadful statistics in the introduction. Persisting in these contexts is difficult,

even with some tethering to ideas that help us muddle through them. Part of the point of this article is that our current milieu is heartbreaking. As authors, we wanted to share some of the theoretical framings that are helping us muddle through our professional and personal lives, without foreclosing other possibilities for thinking through these dreadful(l) times. Schwittay (2025), for example, formulated a pedagogy informed by Freire, Gibson-Graham, and Amsler that "articulates whole-person learning, design and arts methods, praxis, and critical hope in an interlinked, expandable practice" (p. 85). Of particular interest to us as authors is Schwittay's (2025) consideration of the sort of hope that urges action in the face of daunting situations, without falling into saviourism or into a pit of cynicism and despair.

What we're suggesting in this space is that there are losses—as we fail to attend to illusion and immanence, as we elide the possibility of imagination—that are significant, and they are an acceptance of the reduction of education to the concrete of schooling and our societal situations that are imbued with dread. This is part and parcel of the failure to acknowledge the very queerness of quantification (Greteman & Thorpe, 2015) itself just as it's an accession to the avoidance of the kind of beauty that comes with the risk that we just can't know all of what happens in the educational moment (Biesta, 2014). The difficulty here is that we can't backwards plan our way to the weird and the transcendent which, in the end, seems the best kind of argument for thinking them back into existence in our work.

Notes

1. Rahma (رحمة) is an Arabic word that usually is translated to mean "mercy", but educational scholar Muna Saleh (2021) has developed a *curriculum of rahma* as an embodied form of nurturance, compassion, and radical love against inequitable situations, drawing from the root of word (rahm) which means womb.

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