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## *Reflections*

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# **“Born in the first light of the morning”: Feminist pedagogy in art museums and exhibitions toward a new professional development of care**

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### **Introduction**

**T**his article is situated in the interstices of feminist adult education and critical museum education (Clover et al., 2022) where we encourage an expanded form of professional education for social workers by mobilizing human aesthetic and imaginative dimensions and collective reflexive capacities through exhibitions in art galleries and creative narrative-poetic practices.

In this article, we share our own experiences of visiting land-based sites and exhibitions and how they expanded our own thinking and our creative work with university social work students who we took to a local museum in Milan, Italy to reflect on their work as social workers and more specifically, notions of care. We use a feminist pedagogical approach in our work inspired by the practice of compositional research of adult educator Laura Formenti (2018) and her museum-based educational work whereby she takes her social work students to visit a museum to experience the artworks and exhibitions and based on specific instructions provides them with opportunities to reflect on their practice using images and displays (Formenti & Vitale, 2016). Formenti’s compositional method is based on Bateson’s (1972) idea of ‘systemic epistemology’, an understanding that learning is a social process that happens through human interaction, and is both cognitive and felt. Our and Formenti’s work is based in creating

educational experiences that challenge assumptions, or what Mezirow (1991), a specialist in transformative learning called ‘meaning perspectives’ through exhibitions that encourage new ways of thinking, seeing and sensing our world. It is important to note here, however, that this type of teaching and learning in higher education is rare in Italy and we will address this shortly. Yet for us, and Formenti’s visiting exhibitions and viewing artworks is critical to nurturing ourselves in the busy city of Milano, a respite in what often feels overly hectic, but also, an important opportunity to apply a feminist lens, to our work. We are also mindful that while centuries of patriarchal colonial histories have silenced or distorted women’s stories, the feminist movement in Italy, beginning in the 1970s, laid the groundwork for what we are able to do today to learn about their bodies and challenge oppressive and hegemonic gender relations (Formenti et al., 2022; Lonzi, 1970). Using museums, we not only feel and think differently ourselves but they enable our students to think and feel differently.

In this article we discuss our application of feminist pedagogy and firstly, telling our own with ourselves as educators comes from approaches to social how we tell stories about

We discuss our application of feminist pedagogy and systemic epistemology by firstly, telling our own stories.

discuss our application of systemic epistemology by stories. The idea to start researchers and adult auto/biographical research that suggest that others (research subjects)

is connected to the stories we tell about ourselves (researchers). Secondly, we share how we worked with three women students around an exhibition of the land to capture their own reflections on their relationship to the earth, to the land and the notion of care in research diaries which we then analyzed and presented through I-poems. We conclude this article with a discussion of how feminist pedagogy in museums nurtured both (self) care and ideas of care for the three professional women.

### **Situating the researchers: Learning life histories and women art**

Our stimulation for the practices we share in this article were catalyzed in November 2022. We had the opportunity to visit the University of Victoria (UVic), Canada with the help of a grant called the Canada-Italy Innovation Award 2020. Our project title was *Changing gendered patterns of power through creative dialogic pedagogies*. On our first day, walking on campus with Professor Darlene Clover, the host researcher of the grant project, we entered the Ceremonial Hall of First People’s House, a place that for us seemed to celebrate conviviality and togetherness in respect and recognition of Indigenous ancestors’ caring of community and the land. The Ceremonial Hall is a large wooden room with bleachers and a central glass small pyramid under a hole in the roof that symbolizes the fire around which Indigenous peoples sat to tell stories. The space felt peaceful and evoked for us thoughts about our own ancestors who would have met around fires or candlelight, engaging in artisanal work and telling and listening to stories. Art created by Indigenous artists forms a gallery in this House but is also on display across the campus. This compelled us, as Europeans, to ask ourselves what our native origins were, and how our ancestors and their stories of migration, wisdom, struggle, and discrimination were celebrated. The history of Italy is characterized by massive internal migrations and urbanization after the Second World War. Millions of people left rural villages in what were in fact quite marginal areas particularly in the south and northeast to live as alienated

underclass in suburbs, with few services or sense of community (e.g., Colucci, 2018). The loss of a connection to the earth, to land created a sense of uprootedness. This is in fact the story of our own families and we will come to this.

In January 2023 we chose an exhibition called *Playing Loud* by a woman photographer named Lisetta Carmi in Turin in the Gallerie d'Italia because her photographic themes resonated with the questions triggered for us in Canada in relation to rural and working-class struggles, the land (and loss) in our lives and issues of migration, family, and violence against women. Carmi, one of the most interesting personalities in contemporary Italian photography who died in 2022 aged 98, documented and recounted with her camera uncomfortable social realities of Italy, which were frequently critiqued in the artworld for defying normative conventions of bourgeois society. Born in Genoa into a Jewish family during a period defined by racial laws, Carmi was forced to leave her studies, and after a career in music as a pianist began to devote herself to art entirely. She is known for capturing strike actions on camera in support of the dignity of social classes (steel mills workers, dock workers, peasant women) that had not been previously documented. She was also the first photographer in Italy to document the lives of 'transvestites' (men dressed as women and sex workers) who came from across Italy and lived together in marginality in the center of Genoa.

Carmi also traveled around Italy (and other parts of the world) to photograph women in rural local communities. What struck us most in the exhibition were the images of working-class women in Sardinia. Carmi had taken hundreds of black-and-white shots of the island and its inhabitants' daily life between 1962 and 1976 including peasants, bakers, fishers and cork workers all depicted in the landscapes of the Sardinian hinterland, with woods, lakes and rivers captured in their most arcane dimensions.

Following our visit to the exhibition we decided to share memories of our own relationships with the earth and landscape. Mine (Gaia) focused on a house in the countryside which belonged to grandparents. All my grandparents came from small, poor villages in northern Italy, specifically Friuli and Veneto. Although they migrated in the 1940s and lost contact with family, as a child I used to visit grandpa's house over weekends so this place in fact holds memories for me. My grandpa was a postman in Milan and my grandma worked as a tailor. After retirement my grandfather in fact returned to the countryside where he kept a vegetable garden, a small vineyard and apple orchard, made wooden objects and wrote a dictionary of the local dialect. My relationship with this man was not easy, but I reflected on the influence the house and rhythm of country life had on me (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Gaia's Grandpa's country house in Borghetto Borbera, Piedmont (after its sale in July 2017). Below – next page.



My (Silvia's) mother is a migrant originally from Polesine, a rural area in Veneto (Adria, Rovigo, Italy) where her older sister remains. I had a special relationship with this woman whom we visited every summer. My aunt was a farmer who would drive the tractor, not very common for a woman in Italy, and take me with her to the fields, even inviting me to leave the house alone to smell the earth during summer storms. My aunt died two years ago, and I currently live in Milan adjacent to an agricultural park (Figure 2) and always wondered about the legacy I received from her

while I walk in the park.



Figure 2: Silvia walked in the countryside in Milano thinking about the death of her old aunt, the last farmer of her family, Parco delle Cave, 2nd July 2020.

Our memories are very similar, of working class and rural cultures. We have met many adult educators like us with similar backgrounds and what is also common is that these stories were silenced by colonial patriarchal traditions of higher education. University programs in Italy that train adult educators focus on theories rather than self and social reflexivity and storytelling. In our feminist approach, reflection on life, and telling our stories, is how we learn not only

about ourselves but about the challenges we have faced as women. We also become more in tune with the embodied dimensions of patriarchal and colonialist power which have separated us from the land, both figurately and physically.

The ideas about land and (dis)connection that these reflections but also, Canada had triggered, suggested us to visit another exhibition in Pirelli Hangar Bicocca Gallery in Milan by a South African woman artist, Dineo Seshee Bopape. Her exhibition spoke about her relationship to the land and was titled *Born in the first light of the morning* [*moswara 'marapo*]. The words *moswara 'marapo* in Sepedi (Bantu language of South Africa) literally translates as 'the holder of bones', bones allegorically being the minerals that hold the memories. Her work also evokes the presence of a ceremonial guide accompanying individuals through rites of passage.

The multimodal artworks (earth architectures, installations, videos) made a strong impression on us (see Figure 3) by offering yet another possibility for reflection and storytelling about our own migrant origins but also, our educational work which scholars argue is a powerful form of feminist adult education (Clover et al., 2022). To tell our own stories is not seen as valuable in general in European higher education (e.g., West, 1996) so it is something that needs to be created as we go along.

We decided after our visit to the exhibition and the impact it had on us, to take a group of students in a Master of Education program, as a way to encourage them to use stories and artworks to help them become reflexive practitioners. Going to an exhibition with students was in fact a strategy to introduce a potentially transformative experience to activate feeling and thinking about memories that educators do not usually have occasions to contact in their work practice.

We are now going to introduce the exhibition and the students whose reflective essays we analyzed to better understand how an artistic experience in a museum with a feminist systemic pedagogy approach can generate new approaches in educators that deconstruct traditional power roles and separateness - nature/culture, reason/heart, body/mind (Damasio, 1994).

### **Setting the scene: Visit to the exhibition with the students**

**P**irelli Hangar Bicocca is a museum in an urban regenerated post-industrial site at the periphery of Milan which is led by a non-profit foundation. The large building that was used in the past for assembling trains hosts free temporary exhibitions that are usually multimodal, sensorial, and immersive. Seshee Bopape's exhibition (see Figure 3) showed objects made with organic and highly symbolic materials that allude to the concepts of memory, identity, and belonging. Soil was mixed with other substances such as coal, ash, and clay to create environmental installations.

Taking as a starting point her homeland, South Africa, she investigates archetypes and myths in which the female figure plays a central role, incorporating different media, like sculpture, drawing, video, and sound, through a poetic approach that has its origins in matter.



Figure 3: <https://pirellihangarbicocca.org/en/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape/>.

In January, Silvia visited the exhibition with a group of 13 students from a Master of Education at the University of Milano Bicocca, where she had a teaching assignment for a practice module called "The Reflexive Practitioner".

The method was inspired by workshops conducted by Silvia in the past dedicated to career guidance (Formenti & Vitale, 2016; Luraschi 2020), where high school and non-traditional students were invited to a collective immersion in the exhibition to reflect about their future. This time, the participants were professionals invited to reflect about their past and their present, not their future. The workshop finished after the exhibition. However, the module with several other activities asked the professionals to keep a research diary and select 5 significant pages to submit for the final exam.

To visit the Seshee Bopape's exhibition, students were invited to meet at the museum, and were welcomed by Silvia and a museum guide. The guide briefly presented both the history of the museum space, and the value of having chosen to curate the first exhibition in Italy dedicated to a young African female artist. This is truly exceptional in Italy for a black woman, as women in general struggle to make a place for themselves in the art scene and a racist atmosphere still resists.

Silvia invited students to visit the exhibition and take notes using paper and pencil of their physical perceptions, bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts (Luraschi, 2020). The group was suggested to visit by using their other senses and reducing the number of words exchanged with peers to as few as possible, for about an hour and then meet together at the exit. On the way out, the group of students met with Silvia and the guide to discuss and ask questions about what they had seen including more information about the artist's work. A conversation followed whereby students explored their own personal relationships with earth and land. The students wrote these reflections in a research diary, which

A conversation followed whereby students explored their own personal relationships with earth and land. The students wrote these reflections in a research diary,

Nadine and Cassell (2006) and Formenti and Rigamonti (2020) see as a tool for reflective practice to connect the different embodied and aesthetic experiences, and systemic reflexivity on their work. While there had been no specific focus on their relationship with earth previously, the visit to Seshee Bopape's exhibition brought this out in detail.

Following our visit, we selected and analyzed the texts of three students. These texts were chosen as they specifically named the exhibition in their writings. Silvia chose the three essays, and Gaia, who had not taken part to the museum visit or read the texts before, made a selection with an auto/biographical approach (West, 2016) with the intention to explore what the 'earth' topic might have triggered for the interrelation of personal and political dimensions in education professionals. They gave us their consent to analyze their work and sent us a few lines to introduce themselves, although the names we use pseudonyms and chosen by the women themselves. Viviana, age 26, wrote that she had always lived in the countryside, in a large family that worked the fields and raised animals. From a young age the call to the land has always been strong, between the environment around her and the travels to Africa undertaken by some of her family members. The desire to visit the African continent came back strongly that day at the exhibition and became true this year. Elsa, age 29, "was born and raised in green Brianza (Italy) in the middle of fields and woods. Always been a lover of nature and the earth to which she feels attached. Earth as a natural element, as a garden where she grew up and where she played for years as a child. Lauren, age 26, was born in southern India and grew up in the middle of the Po Valley (Italy). It is very deep the bond she feels with her homeland, but also the relationship she has with the Land where she grew up. The former because of a blood tie, the latter because of a more emotional aspect, both lands: as similar as they are different.

### The I-poem process

**A**s noted in the introduction, one of our approaches as feminist adult education researchers is to use I-poems as an analytical method. Developed by feminist Gilligan (2015; Gilligan & Eddy, 2017) I-poems are an approach to listening to the 'I's', the first-person voices of women. I-poems require researchers to focus on sentences made by the interviewees that include the word "I," and without changing the order of those sentences, to present them in poetic stanzas. The I-poem enables researchers to identify patterns, or continuities and changes in how research participants speak, think, and feel about themselves. Although I-poems are normally used with interview data, we applied them to the textual data of the three women's research diaries.

The creation of an I-poem involves three stages. In Stage 1 the researcher reads through the data and highlights each use of the first person 'I' and associated verb or seemingly important accompanying text. The aim is for the research participant's sense of self, to stand out. In Stage 2 the researcher pastes the findings into a new document in the exact same sequence that they occur originally. Each I-phase is on a separate line which creates stanzas based on breaks in the topics and 'voices'. Stage 3 includes identifying the different types of 'voices' and giving them names (e.g., confident voice, unsure voice, admiring voice, etc.) (Gilligan, 2015).

To create the I-poems we followed all the steps, shared them between ourselves and then through an online conversation with the students, collectively selecting one stanza for each student where a particular voice stood out and finalizing the I-poems which we share and discuss below.

***Viviana's story of discomfort***

UNCOMFORTABLE

I did not want to face it

I remember how uncomfortable

I felt that day lying in the grass together with my fellow students

I cannot focus on bodily perceptions

I am in constant reflection about what is happening around me

I have no control

(stanza extracted from the complete I-poem created by Gaia from the research diary of Viviana)

In this stanza, Viviana speaks about her alienation from earth. It is a relationship she is not prepared to share with others in a university lesson. Silvia at the time proposed a collective Feldenkrais Method lesson (Feldenkrais, 2019), another activity part of the module, to the students in a public park close to campus some weeks before the visit to Seshee Bopape exhibition. Having no control (not knowing) is uncomfortable. Later in the poem other words indicate feeling exposed, and frustrated for being asked to do something she did not understand. Viviana asked herself what the experience of the children and young adults was, when she asked to do something without understanding. She instructs them. Was there a theme of trust and reciprocity?

***Elsa's story of reconnection***

VISCERAL

I had to touch everything

I was a child

I loved that sea, those flowers and colors that were created when Bopape dipped milk

I bring to the community as a worker

I recognized my strong struggle to propose something "unusual"

I don't know how it would go

(stanza extracted from the complete I-poem created by Gaia from the research diary of Elsa)

Elsa speaks here about her visit to the exhibition. This experience generated memories of childhood freedom to touch and play with natural elements. She recognized that she brings on that spirit now as a care giver when she proposes unusual experiences to the minors. She accepts not knowing but struggles to do so in her professional environment. Later in the I-poem she tells about hiding behind organizational culture and roles to avoid the struggle. Other times, however, she is able to access voice and singing as freeing bodily strategies to connect to self and other. Her father's loud voice and difficult memories of conflict in her family became a resource for her, drawing on the human voice's visceral power to touch and be touched also in educational relationships and contexts. Voice can be a ritual of reconnection with earth and people, like in Seshee Bopape's art.

***Laureen's story of multiplicity***



## INTROSPECTIVE

I hardly show myself to others

I open up a little at a time

I had written “a multiplicity of layers as new possibilities”

I have been learning

I have met

(stanza extracted from the complete I-poem created by Gaia from the research diary of Laureen)

Laureen was an adopted child. From the I-poem emerges a professional episode when she listened to the story of abuse of a little girl from her brother. She was able to give the girl freedom to speak and free rein for her thoughts, not directing her to a correct answer. Laureen was shaken and connected to her emotions. So, she asked the girl how she felt. At the end she saved the figure of her brother and shared the story with her team. In the lines we selected, Laureen shows that she herself has many layers of relationship. Coming close to another takes time and staying in contact with your own emotions of fragility.

What has discomfort, reconnection, and multiplicity to do with feminist pedagogy in museums? In our experience, contemporary art can shake us from our comfort zones. It can also trigger a desire to reconnect to lost parts of our biographies and cultural origins, indigenous or popular. This process may promote the recognition of multiplicity in self and others (Formenti & West, 2018). These thoughts bring us to the conclusions to connect the dots of our experience of professional development of care through art.

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### Developing connection and (self-)care through artful feminist pedagogy

What does the earth element bring to feminist pedagogy? Earth and soil bring us into dialogue with memories in geological time, therefore multilayered and dynamic, continuously transforming yet informing us. They also help education professionals’ grounding themselves in the face of a hectic city life. In our fast speed lives as social researchers, teachers and educators, we can become alienated from rituals that shape social and natural processes. Native and rural cultures continue to teach us about the importance of these dimensions at a time of climate crisis. They remind us the authors, Italian researchers in the rich North of Italy, of our recent past of migration and disconnection from rural marginal areas, communities, and ways of knowing.

Artist experience, like telling biographical stories of our ancestors with gestures, living matter and everyday wisdom, may help us and our students, professionals in education, to rediscover what lies deep in human life. Writing and dialogue may support longer processes in formal settings for becoming more reflexive educators.

In this case, as our analysis with an I-poems method showed, women educators and students visiting an exhibition together and reflecting in conversation and in writing about their

experience, developed new ideas to interact with children and adults by ‘showing themselves’, meaning using voice, active listening, proposing non-directive and unusual activities to make space for the unknown and creativity. The analysis of the materials we collected showed us that sharing embarrassment through art about memory, identity and belonging may generate self-care and mutual support in education professionals teaching and learning in higher education settings. It can also make professionals in education more aware about the dynamic relationship of dimensions of self, memory, socio-politics, history, sovereignty, form, nature and spirit in social and educational work. For us, feminist pedagogy and critical museum education are approaches that are highly valuable in teaching education professionals, provided that the teachers themselves engage in self-reflexive practices of visiting museums and writing autobiographical memories. As rural cultures have taught us, what helps to develop both nature and human beings is time, care and of course, art.

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## Sitography

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