

# Palgrave Studies in Educational Futures

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The series Educational Futures would be a call on all aspects of education, not only specific subject specialist, but policy makers, religious education leaders, curriculum theorists, and those involved in shaping the educational imagination through its foundations and both psychoanalytical and psychological investments with youth to address this extraordinary precarity and anxiety that is continually rising as things do not get better but worsen. A global de-territorialization is taking place, and new voices and visions need to be seen and heard. The series would address the following questions and concerns. The three key signifiers of the book series title address this state of risk and emergency:

1. **The Anthropocene:** The ‘human world,’ the world-for-us is drifting toward a global situation where human extinction is not out of the question due to economic industrialization and overdevelopment, as well as the exponential growth of global population. How to we address this ecologically and educationally to still make a difference?
2. **Ecology:** What might be ways of re-thinking our relationships with the non-human forms of existence and in-human forms of artificial intelligence that have emerged? Are there possibilities to rework the ecological imagination educationally from its over-romanticized view of Nature, as many have argued: Nature and culture are no longer tenable separate signifiers. Can teachers and professors address the ideas that surround differentiated subjectivity where agency is no long attributed to the ‘human’ alone?
3. **Aesthetic Imaginaries:** What are the creative responses that can fabulate aesthetic imaginaries that are viable in specific contexts where the emergent ideas, which are able to gather heterogeneous elements together to present projects that address the two former descriptors: the Anthropocene and the every changing modulating ecologies. Can educators drawn on these aesthetic imaginaries to offer exploratory hope for what is a changing globe that is in constant crisis?

The series Educational Futures: Anthropocene, Ecology, and Aesthetic Imaginaries attempts to secure manuscripts that are aware of the precarity that reverberates throughout all life, and attempts to explore and experiment to develop an educational imagination which, at the very least, makes conscious what is a dire situation.

More information about this series at  
<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15418>

Cathryn van Kessel

# An Education in ‘Evil’

Implications for Curriculum,  
Pedagogy, and Beyond

palgrave  
macmillan

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Palgrave Studies in Educational Futures  
ISBN 978-3-030-16604-5      ISBN 978-3-030-16605-2 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16605-2>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019936147

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature  
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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

## PREFACE

I was teaching a Grade 11 Social Studies class in Alberta in the 2008/2009 academic year. It was my first time teaching the course, and I was determined to do the curriculum justice, particularly the history of the Second World War. The theme of the course was nationalism, and I was teaching a set of lessons on genocide within the unit on ultranationalism. I knew that I wanted my students to go beyond the dehumanizing task of memorizing death tolls, and I thought that I had the solution—I would show them original video footage from Auschwitz.

The bell rang to begin class, and I had the video cued up and ready to go. The students settled into their seats, and I quickly explained that, further to our discussions of the Holocaust/Shoah from the last class (which admittedly were more so lists of names, dates, and contexts than “discussions”), we were going to watch a video that showed us more. The video barely finished when the bell that indicated the end of class rang. I turned on the lights to see many students in tears, and those who were not crying nonetheless looked like they had been punched in the stomach. I did not prepare them for that experience, nor did I debrief them. I watched them as they descended into despair and anger regarding the horrors they just encountered. I wish I had known this at the time, but Roger Simon (2014) aptly identified this problem in the context of exhibitions as “undirected emotions” (p. 194).

Luckily, at least some of those students could rise above my naïve, terrible pedagogy and became determined to prevent contemporary genocides—one even worked to raise awareness about the genocide in Darfur

that was raging at the time. I was left with a question festering in my mind and body—How might I engage with historical and contemporary tragedies in a respectful way, neither reproducing emotional pornography nor limiting discussions to cliché or surface-level information? This question eventually led me to pursue doctoral work at the University of Alberta.

Although I began with a specific question about how I might teach about genocide with high school students, it did not take long for my inquiry to expand into the topic of evil. I began by having my mind opened by Alain Badiou's (1993/2001) understandings of evil as betrayal, simulacrum, and disaster. I came to understand that seeing evil as a *process* instead of a *thing* had enormous potential for how we might understand the past as well as give ourselves the tools to make changes needed for societies to hurt less. Not long into my Ph.D. I presented at a conference, where an audience member from my presentation—a scholar from Germany—mentioned that I might be interested in the work of Hannah Arendt (1963/2006), particularly the banality of evil, that describes how some people contribute to violence and atrocities without intending to do so. Here is where my philosophical travels began. I saw the value in both Arendt and Badiou's theories, each proposing a helpful way to think about the ugliness of humans and human societies as at least partly in the domain of ordinary, average people. Soon thereafter, my dalliances with a few other philosophers also turned into longer-term investigations. Adding Ernest Becker to my theoretical toolkit complemented Arendt—while she explained how someone like you or me could perpetuate great harm without intending to, Becker (1975) explained how an ordinary person could delight in causing harm when they saw themselves as a hero fighting evil. In a horrible irony, we create evil by trying to conquer it. I also became interested in very radical ways of understanding evil, such as Jean Baudrillard's (1990/1993, 2004/2005) idea of *Symbolic Evil*. Admittedly, I hated Baudrillard when I first read him, but I am grateful that I continued reading. With each understanding of evil, I felt that there was an opportunity to think and rethink how and why terrible things happen, thus opening up new possibilities for curriculum and pedagogy.

My seemingly odd passion for evil eventually became a course at the university for senior undergraduate and graduate students. We met over several Saturdays, each day discussing a different conceptualization of evil and working together to consider how we might relate those ideas to

our own work as teachers, researchers, school leaders, and community members. It is from those classes that I derive this book. It is my hope that each chapter can stand alone, but be more powerful in combination. Perhaps readers might undertake a similar journey to my own—realizing that there are so many ways to springboard discussions about how we might live together on this planet.

Edmonton, Canada

Cathryn van Kessel

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book has felt like a rite of passage between my doctoral studies and my work as an early-career academic. I have been lucky to have had the support of colleagues, friends, and family during this process. I am deeply grateful for their insights (and pep talks).

My heartfelt thanks to my father, Hans van Kessel, as well as my friends and graduate students who read chapters (some multiple times!) and offered feedback: Kara Boucher, Francesca Catena, Garret Lashmar, Nick Jacobs, and Andy Scott. They helped me to develop my ideas, and, importantly, make those ideas accessible to my future readers. I could not have done this project without them!

Many thanks to my mentors, Kent den Heyer and Jan Jagodzinski. Kent guided me as my doctoral supervisor and helped me through the process of rigorous thinking. He seemed to always know when I needed help and when I needed to sort things out on my own. I strive to be a similar mentor to my own graduate students. Without the encouragement of Jan, I would not have written this book. His faith in me has seemed unwavering, and he helped guide me through the process of conceptualizing a book and approaching a publisher.

I would also like to thank those who have written articles with me on subjects related to this book. I am indebted to the following people: Kevin Burke, Ryan Crowley, Kent den Heyer, Kip Kline, Rebeka Plots, and my husband, Jeff Schimel. They not only contributed their scholarly insights, but also helped me figure out my own thinking. I have learned, and continue to learn, so much from them.



I could not have survived the creation of this book or even the process of completing my Ph.D. without the help of women I admire and respect. Special thanks to Erin Adams, Adriana Boffa, Kara Boucher, Neelam and Saliha Chattoo, as well as my mother, Anne, and my sister, Janna, for always believing in me.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my husband, Jeff, and son, Jack, for their support. Mere “thanks” is insufficient for the love and support they have shown me, and for the inspiration, they spark every day.

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