

Authoring Teacher Authority in the Lives of Children: The Case of *M. Lazhar*

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Second World War, political philosopher Hannah Arendt turned her thought to education. She looked to the Americas for the promise education might bring to newcomers inserted into a world broken by fascism, colonialism, and genocide. There, she found child-centered education eroding traditional forms of authority and knowledge. Alarmed by the rise of child-centric, commodity culture in the United States, she penned a series of essays on “the crisis in education” that she saw as threatening teacher authority entrusted with caring for the newness children potentially bring to the world.¹

As Arendt predicted, the movement from traditional to child-centered to market-place authority in a post-industrial world radically diminished all forms of authority in society. Then, as now, Arendt finds teacher authority affected by the crisis:

The most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its depth and seriousness, is that it has spread to such pre-political areas as child-rearing and education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers.²

This article revives Arendt’s critical ideas on the potential of pre-political authority in education despite crises of political authority in public spheres. Now more than ever, pre-political authority requires serious educational consideration as young people find themselves in a world destabilized by postcolonial war and the abstract forces and flows of capital, knowledge, people, and ideas.³ Adult authority is at a crossroads, with existential meaning at an all-time low in the market-driven education of the child.

My treatment of Arendt’s educational ideas hinges on her separation of pre-political and political forms of authority,⁴ where she relegates intimate practices of “one’s own” to the *domos*, the private domain of family and education, and designates the “worldly” activities of action, freedom, and judgment to the *polis*, the public sphere of law and politics. Complicating Arendt’s strict demarcation of politics and education made in a previous century, this article positions education as a transitional pre-political space where one considers and tries out a personhood of “one’s own” in a public world of others. Following Lyotard,⁵ I read the “pre-” as what is pre-eminent in the political rather than as what precedes the political as commonly and temporally interpreted. In this sense childhood is an important time of idea formation in the life and world of a person in relation to communities of people. Blurring the realms of private and public life, education imbues the child with her first experiences of recognition and speaking in a community of peers.

Most adults concur with Arendt's separation of education from politics in the teaching of children. In her discussion of children's rights and activism, Sharon Jessop⁶ finds with Arendt: "As the child is not yet acquainted with the world, he must be gradually introduced to it; insofar as he is new, care must be taken that this new thing comes to fruition in the world as it is."⁷ Jessop heeds Arendt's caution to not "tokenize and manipulate" children in the sphere of adult affairs.⁸ In this widely held view, teachers are entrusted to protect children from adult politics, as well as the "tyranny of the majority,"⁹ as they are not yet "free" to act as non-political agents in the public sphere.¹⁰

Gert Biesta takes issue with this position, which emerges from what he describes as "Arendt's developmentalism"¹¹ in her conception of the child as not yet ready for politics.¹² For Biesta, childhood as preparation for future adulthood misses the present and able child. Biesta argues that education *provides* the child with, rather than prepares them for, first experiences of politics. He positions democratic education as a provisional form of political participation from which the child learns to think, act, and be.¹³

Education does provide the child with her first experiences of political life but not necessarily as an able participant. The (neo)liberal construction of child as actor forgets the child's radical dependence on adult influence and guardianship. Caught in between dependence and autonomy, in between their burgeoning ideas and the adult's highly coercive influence, children are in no position to freely participate in politics. In this regard, children are held at three extremes in adult politics: they are shielded from worldly affairs; they are deemed a problem for adults and are dismissed; or, they are used as agents of adult interests and policies. Furthermore, education that supposedly facilitates the child's democratic participation can collapse into tautological lessons that pervert knowledge for adult ends, as other adult-invested forms of teaching.

In the failure to see children as dependent on, and thus greatly subject to, adult influence, educators adopt a seemingly benign and adult-centric view of children as in need of protection, or, as sovereign actors, either unready or ready for politics. In reality, they are neither. The child's ability to politically act or not act is contingent on adult authority. The adult sets the social conditions in which the child is made to act, unable to act, or refuses to act.

Rather than focus on the child as actor, the adult might rethink the relevance of pre-political authority in social and political life. If Arendt deems pre-political authority to be "extremely limited and politically irrelevant,"¹⁴ I argue that through teacher and student relations, pre-political forms of authority immerse the child in preliminary modes of political participation. Soft politics arrives with the child as ideas of self, other, and the world in the words and actions of adults.

More radically, Bernard Stiegler argues that pre-political authority potentially revives failed and impotent forms of political authority. Education, Stiegler insists, enacts a psychosocial "battle of intelligence for maturity" of children and youth, an existential contest that sets the conditions for political and social life.¹⁵ As long as

children are born dependent and in need of education, they require viable forms of authority to nurture and shape this intelligence. From this soft spot of pre-political pre-eminence, social change in the world is possible.

The role of pre-political authority in the recognition and representation of one's existence alerts us to its powerful sway in the human politic. Despite our wish for freedom and self-sovereignty, we cannot let go of our authorities. Whether in the "figure" of wealth accumulation, or socially-driven media or peer pressure, or ideology, or fundamentalism, human beings rely on meaningful forms of authority to direct and give their lives significance. Kristeva argues: "I am only if a beloved authority acknowledges me."¹⁶ Without available, loving authorities, young people go elsewhere, and often to great peril, to find someone in whom they can trust and believe.

For Jacques Derrida,¹⁷ a re-investment in authority requires attention to elemental/maternal social ties that give rise to the *authorial* function of authority in the symbolic formation of one's life. Rather than submit this incredible mythic force to markets, social hierarchies, ideologies, extreme narcissisms, and other such life-killing systems that usurp adult responsibility, we can enact a just use of authority given, waiting and wanting in the full potential of the child. Thus, pre-political authority may provide a soft pedagogical means by which to renew dysfunctional forms of political authority.

THE AUTHORIAL FORM OF AUTHORITY

In his article "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," Derrida argues that the Law takes its keynote from mythic rather than ontic, epistemological, empirical, or natural truths. Formulated in the political space of jurisprudence, Derrida's conception of authority hinges on "elemental," and thus pre-political, forms of authority.¹⁸ Derrida figures authority as an address to the other made on the other's terms of existence, as "speaking in the other's language as it is more just." He highlights authority's fictional sway, one that is summoned, or "made up" in facing others.

Basic to a relational conception of authority is the child's willingness to consider, take in, and trust in the adult's composition of her existence. In mind and memory, the child internalizes this figure of authority. Authority is not simply granted to the adult by virtue of height, power, or knowledge, but "made up" to justly address the child's legitimate and pressing question of existence (who am I?). Addressing the *particular* child's existence, the adult supports the child to build a story of care, nurturance, and knowledge representative of herself in the world, in which she comes to trust for all of her life.

With Derrida, Charles Bingham argues that educational authority is relational and literary. He writes: "The relation of authority between student and teacher, if it is to be 'entered' properly, is one wherein student and teacher must engage in interpretation rather than direct knowledge. Students and teachers, so considered, are akin to readers of novels."¹⁹ Still, by likening both teachers *and* students to readers of novels, Bingham overlooks the uneven economy of literary exchange guiding relational authority. In Derrida's notion of just address, the teacher composes an

address received *by* the child. As author of the child's existence, Arthur Jacobson suggests that the adult occupies a leading narrative role in the life of the child:

The only authority in this way of thinking is the authority of the author. Only one who creates a texts, leaves a record, has authority. That is why parents have authority over their children: they create their children, they make their children in their image, and their children are the record of that creation.²⁰

Acknowledging the inequality of authorial exchange, Jacobson's temporal framing also misses Derrida's insistence that authority derives its keynote from "just" address. As prerecorded and prefabricated account, authority loses force. Authority is generated through an immediate yet indecisive, and thus continually renewing, *address* that labors to *do justice* to the other.²¹ The adult's address is plausible, hospitable, and open to revision for her authority to speak to the child's existence – if unappealing, hostile, or closed to the child, teacher authority loses credibility for the child, or worse, forecloses the child's potential.

To depict pre-political authority as a creative address of the adult to the child, it is useful here to draw on a film. Arendt's insistence on responsible authority and Derrida's authorial conception find a demonstrable and postcolonial model in the filmic teaching figure, M. Lazhar. For teachers, M. Lazhar depicts a form of just authority that creatively and deliberately addresses the child's becoming in a world broken by political and adult failure to take responsibility for children.

JUST AUTHORITY: THE CASE OF *M. LAZHAR*

The film *Monsieur Lazhar*²² features the brief teaching stint of Bachir Lazhar, an uncertified teacher. Seeking refuge from war-torn Algeria in French multicultural Montreal, Lazhar reads a newspaper story about students in dire need of a teacher. He learns that their former teacher has spectacularly taken her life in the primary school classroom. Grieving for his family, killed in a politically motivated act, Lazhar is compelled to apply for the job. In her haste to find a teacher for a traumatized classroom where no one wants to teach, the principal hires M. Lazhar.

The unthinkable backstory to the orphaned classroom flashes by in the film's opening scene. Delivering milk to his classroom, Simon finds his teacher's body dangling lifelessly from the rafters. Along with his classmate Alice, the child bears witness to their teacher, Martine, "hanging from a pipe using her blue scarf." The plot hovers over the conflicted interactions of these child witnesses, who, in the glaring absence of adult authority, take it upon themselves and on each other to determine the truth of their teacher's untimely demise.

The dead teacher's act opens up a ruined world for the children in which they are inserted and made to survive. In this broken world, one expects the surviving adults to navigate the meanings of the unthinkable tragedy in response to the educational and emotional needs of the children. Yet, the teachers are unable or unwilling to address their colleague's sudden death. As chaos ensues, the teachers are seen mostly supporting each other, having forgotten the children. In the midst of the penultimate scene depicting a lack of adult authority, Alice smartly informs M. Lazhar: "everyone one thinks we are traumatized, it's the adults who are."

Where no other teacher dares, M. Lazhar goes to the heart of the children's grief. Staging a symbolic revolt against impotent teacher authority, M. Lazhar mines the curricular themes of the tragedy to compose for his students a just and credible address. He carefully guides his students in classroom deliberations of the ontological problems of violence, death, suffering, and loss. With sympathetic words and kindness, and without public solicitation, he addresses the private matter of each student's grief.

To respond to the children's unspoken questions about life and death that beg to be heard, M. Lazhar relies on a surprisingly underwhelming and traditional pedagogy. The content of his age-inappropriate and formal curriculum is sourced by the life-giving vocabulary of Balzac and Molière. His Socratic, indignant style of teaching taps into the contours of the children's grief-stricken world. As a bridge between the "dead" presence of teachers and the children's clamoring for a present and knowledgeable adult authority, he taps into the disturbing loss unraveling their world. Relying on his direct knowledge and memory of political violence, trauma, and senseless death, M. Lazar assumes a "creative" authority with the children, one that is lost on the training of his fellow teachers. This form of authority takes its basis in response to each particular child's situation rather than common values or "virtues" based in any single metaphysical or political tradition.²³ Finding themselves within their teacher's creative address, the children are enraptured and emboldened by multiple and universally recognizable compositions of their collective experience. In exchange for this dignified recognition of their loss, the children offer their teacher their quiet affection, gratitude, and trust.

The teacher's refusal to speak of the school tragedy is glaring. In the deafening silence, a rumor circulates that implicates the child witness, Simon, in the circumstance of the dead teacher. Unbeknownst to M. Lazhar, Simon previously alleged that Martine, "came too close" after she "kisses" him in a gesture of encouragement during a tutoring session, in which he discloses to her details of his troubled home life. Through their barely veiled, hostile treatment, teachers unconscionably hold Simon, and his "mistaken" complaint, responsible for their colleagues' death. Under the influence of their teachers' unspoken and irresponsible accusation, his classmates, and only friend Alice, assume Simon is at fault. Wracked with guilt and uncertainty regarding his complex relation to the dead teacher, and faced with his school community's silent yet unrelenting demand for a *mea culpa*, Simon breaks down: "It's not my fault," he says, heartbreakingly, to the class, as if he cannot know for sure if it is. "It's not my fault," he says to his only friend Alice, thinking it might be.

Horried by his colleagues' egregious role in Simon's terrible assumption of guilt and untold suffering, M. Lazhar cannot remain silent. He immediately takes responsibility for his colleagues' spun story and revises the adults' gravely irresponsible and politically charged inferences, which the children have desperately absorbed to make sense of their place in the beloved teacher's death. Softly, he counsels:

Do not try to find meaning to Martine's death. There isn't one. A classroom is a home. It's a place of friendship, of work and courtesy. Yes courtesy. A place full of life. Where you devote your life. A place where you give of your life. Not infect a whole school with your despair.

With this public utterance, M. Lazhar shifts the child's assumption of guilt for a world broken by adults back to the teacher. Without recrimination and blame, M. Lazhar absolves Simon of his real and imagined part in their teacher's death. More than this, M. Lazhar offers the children another version of the tragedy, one of failed adult authority befalling them all. With this deliberative retrieval of adult authority from the ruins of their teacher's death, M. Lazhar releases the children from their terrible burden of responsibility. The film ends with scenes of the children's incredible capacity to forgive, and live again, in their broken classroom, with their teacher, together in courtesy and friendship.

TEACHER AUTHORITY AS AUTHORIZING RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILDREN

M. Lazhar embodies positions of authority put forth by both Arendt and Derrida. He accepts pre-political authority for children clamoring with need for adult response-ability in a time of educational crisis. Rather than presume what the children need or should be, M. Lazhar assumes an authority of just address composed of multiple sources derived from the children's world and immediate experience. M. Lazhar refrains from projecting his past experience of senseless death on the children, tersely noting to a colleague that it is "not part of the curriculum." He refuses to protect or politicize children by ignoring their conditions or implicating them in the adult mess of the world. Gently, and with infinite care for their singular being, M. Lazhar addresses each child's immediate situation in her language to bring established knowledge to the meanings of her ruined world. M. Lazhar fashions for each child a reparative, just address, accounting for a ruined world so each can come together with others and live again.

The teacher's taking her own life in full witness of her charges apocalyptically images an Arendtian prophesy of dead authority, where adults fatally refuse to take responsibility for domestic, civil, and world wars devastating the lives of the young. The lifeless body of the teacher foreshadows a world of orphaned children left to fend in the world with their own limited devices. The adult's deadly crisis of meaning directly impacts upon the possibility of the child's existence. Without significant adult care, responsibility, judgment, and authority, the child can barely exist.

The public school teacher is well positioned to responsibly address the child's dire need of pre-political authority in a rapidly changing world. Free of libidinal attachment and entrusted to serve the public good, teachers occupy pre-political influence and responsibility in the ongoing care, nurturance, and wellbeing of children. Following Arendt,²⁴ teacher responsibility is a form of meaningful action and special duty to act in the wellbeing of children and bring significance to their lives. Rather than charge children with the adult mandate of changing the world, or politically inculcate children in world problems, the task of the teacher is to symbolize just and worldly forms of care, nurturance, judgment, forgiveness, and knowledge with which children can grow and live in the world according to their own, and potentially better, forms of social participation, decision-making, and thinking.

The authorial space of pre-political authority is not one of equality and protection, nor is it child-centric. With significantly more language and experience in the world, adults bear the burden of our careful and critical deliberation when we

address children. We cannot simply take for granted that our knowledge is best for the child as it already influenced, disproportionate, tainted in a sense, by our views and experience of the world, in our time, according to our meanings. We cannot leave it to children to take care of themselves, as they need adults to survive. Enlivening the sphere of the child's potential requires responsive teacher knowledge, vocabulary, and worldview beyond our self-referential and invested sense of history, understanding of childhood, and cultural membership.

If Arendt draws a line between private and political, and feminists claim the private is political, in education it is useful to think of the space between private and public life as liminal. This transitional space of pre-political idea formation is one where the intimate story of the child is written and overwritten with social, historical, and political versions of "childhood" in a beautiful yet terribly divided and unfair world. The teacher pedagogically narrates this space as a meeting place of a particular child's worldly concerns and questions, rather than residing there as sole authority of her being. In this sense, the teacher is required to have deep interpretive, critical, and worldly knowledge of the unique life of the child, and the current historical, political, and social forces that steer her becoming. The teacher acts as a mediator, and sometimes an arbitrator, between the child, the family, the state and the cultural and educational imperatives of a society within a historical context. To act in this way requires more than the love of the child; it also necessitates a love of the world.²⁵ Drawing from multiple sources, the teacher creatively addresses the child to support her to navigate and derive meaning of her often-discordant selves and worlds.

Authority, writes Derrida,²⁶ is not bolstered by any true foundation, whether in the form of truth, knowledge, politics, law, expertise, or professionalism. Authority is instead already in crisis, tasked with the heavy responsibility of justly addressing the other. As herepeatedly insists: whenever we write of others we risk committing a violent representation of "them" and their world.²⁷ In the interest of justice, teacher authority does not rest on preformed facts and figures. It does not replicate the version of the child held by the parent who is intimately and overly invested. Nor does teacher authority rely on the public mold of the child already mired in competing political interests.²⁸ From the teachers' creative capacity to deliberately "hold court" and "fair play" over these converging and competing interests emerges an authorial form of authority that justly addresses and responds to a child's existence precariously under formation.²⁹ Rather than decide on the true story of the child, the teacher justly opens up the potential of the child's participation by gifting her with many narratives of existence with which she can thrive and co-exist in a world of others.

M. Lazhar is terminated from teaching when found to be an imposter and illegal immigrant, and yet, his profound influence remains in the mind and memory of his students. In a heartbreaking and poignant final lesson to the children, Bachir images the profound authorial significance of the pre-political pedagogical relation in the form of a fable of a tree and a chrysalis. The fable goes like this: A tree is entrusted with caring for a chrysalis perched upon her branch. Having sheltered and nourished the beloved chrysalis, the tree cannot let her go. A fire overcomes the tree and both

the tree and her charge perish. M. Lazhar revises the story at its precarious moment. Sensing that the chrysalis is to become a butterfly, the tree lets her go into the world, long before the event of the fire. The chrysalis flies away and lives.

In this final address, M. Lazhar enacts Arendt's sense of the "educational activity" to responsibly "preserve what is new and revolutionary in every child"³⁰ by inserting a difference. Rather than hold the child too close to preservation, M. Lazhar carefully nurtures and releases what in each is new and revolutionary, to fly into its own beautiful creature in a waiting world. Revising the tale of the tree and the chrysalis into the tree and the butterfly, the teacher suggests that loving adult authority is a life-sustaining address the child crystalizes and carries within to write to others her own story of care, beauty, love, and justice in a shared world.

According to Stiegler,³¹ a pre-political precedent already informs the ongoing political structure of society. Pre-political authority is not simply the requirement that children listen to and obey their parents and teacher. An emphasis on the pre-political grounds of political authority makes it incumbent on adults entrusted with the child's care to justly address children in matters of concern to them in their world. This relational form of authority does not promote abuse, toxic dependence, preservation, protection, perdition, punishment, indulgence, or neglect. It authors in and with each child an internal and public capacity to survive, to play, to judge, and to be responsible so that they can make their own way in the world with a loving figure of authority in mind and memory. With concern and judgment, parents and teachers instill in children considerate and deliberating resources with which to vet, interpret, and symbolize possible and better realities. Authority, Stiegler insists, is critical to a co-existent, or what he calls consistent (being together), future of societies: "Authority is the condition of all consistence: it designates consistence in general; it is the general structure through which consistences are possible."³² Meaningful and responsible pre-political forms of authority enacted in and by teachers at school can renew political authority in all aspects of social life. Meaningful and responsible forms of teacher authority might then provide a consistent horizon of justice in which a child, society, and world are yet to be.

1. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 91-141.

2. Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," 92.

3. Fazal Rizvi, "Postcolonialism and globalization in education," *Cultural Studies. Critical Methodologies* 7, no. 3 (2007): 256-263.

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

5. Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington & R. Bowlby (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

6. Sharon Jessop, "Children's Participation: An Arendtian Criticism," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 9 (2009): 979-996.

7. Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," 186.

8. Jessop, "Children's participation," 994.

9. Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," 181.

10. Hannah Arendt, "What is authority?," *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 110.

11. Biesta somewhat reductively characterizes Arendt's developmentalism as psychological when it is humanist and thus metaphysical, as Arendt uses ontic concepts of time, natality, immanence, potential to figure the child's immaturity and dependence on the adult. See Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (New York: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).
12. Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (New York: Paradigm, 2014), 110.
13. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 123.
14. Arendt, "What is authority", 110.
15. Bernard Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 29.
16. Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (New York: Columbia Press, 2009), 18.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1993).
18. Jacques Derrida, "The Force of Law. The Mystical Foundation of Authority," in D. Cornell ed. *Deconstruction and the possibility of justice* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3-67.
19. Charles Bingham, "The Literary Life of Educational Authority," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 40, no. 3 (2006): 357-369, 363.
20. Arthur Jacobson, "Authority: An Hommage to Jacques Derrida and Mary Quantance," *Cardoza Law Review* 27, no. 2 (2005): 791-800, 796-7.
21. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 16.
22. Pierre Farladeau, (Dir.) *Monsieur Lazhar* (Belgium: Microscope Co., 2011).
23. In contrast to proponents of democratic education, pre-political authority symbolizes a politics of education that is not yet political. An authorial form of authority supports teachers to give citation to democratic ideals as a form of praxis rather than as politics. Educational authority is sustained by (hi) story and narrative rather than mandated by "educational policy" as advanced, for example, by Amy Gutman, *Democratic Education* (Princeton University Press, 1987).
24. Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).
25. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1968).
26. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.
27. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. P. Menash (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
28. See Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority* (Boston: Harvard Educational Press, 1998).
29. Deborah Britzman, *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Profession* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 104.
30. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192-193.
31. Stiegler, *Uncontrollable societies of disaffected individuals*.
32. Stiegler, *Uncontrollable societies of disaffected individuals*, 45.