

Moving at their Pace: Activism with Children¹

by Magdalena Olszanowski

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“Is that child dead?” S, my seven-year-old asks me, their eyes wide, pointing to a placard someone is holding. The cardboard placard is covered with an oversized photo of a child lying on the beach in their blood and a verse about genocide: 9,000 children under ten killed.

“Yes,” I answer. “Yes.”

“Oh.” S looks at me, looks back at the placard and tightens the grip on their own as we march down the southbound lanes of Parc Ave. in Montreal under the abundant October sun. We’re surrounded by other placards highlighting Palestinian artifacts: keffiyehs, tatreez, watermelons, thobes, pictures of *Anemone coronarias*, Arabic letters, olives, keys, Jaffa oranges, maqluba, and everything in red, white, green and black.

It’s a few weeks after October 7, 2023, and our first of many marches for Palestine. It’s also the first time S sees a dead child and is confronted with its possibility. The placard: a symbol of wit(h)nessing, to imagine what death might be like for someone like them.

Their eyes move towards and away from the poster and their pace slows down, fumbling into some people behind us. My body tenses and I’m queasy. A mom’s guilt, a mom’s pride: I will not coddle my child. I will not pretend that we can live as usual during a genocide. I will not make excuses that they are too young or too sensitive or that it’s too complicated. I will pay attention reading about the Nakba, how Zionism’s ethnic cleansing already began in the 19th century and how Zionism threatens our livelihood as Jews. I will keep at it to accumulate a language that makes sense for our children, in hopes to save all our children.

“How are you feeling, seeing that image?” I ask.

“It makes me angry and sad because I can’t do anything about it. I can’t just show up at Netanyahu’s house. But I also feel good when we do things for Palestine. I want to do things for Palestine.”

It’s not long before we run into some friends and are swept up in another part of the crowd.

I decide to start wearing my keffiyeh.

“Free, Free,” the packed crowd calls along another closed road.

This time we are downtown walking towards a media company building that protesters will poster in red paint after we leave. We attend marches regularly now, a collective performance among others wanting an end to genocide. Marches are not direct actions, but they are important too. They allow us to release our rage and anger in clapping and singing as loud as we can, to have our voices echo through the downtown buildings that wish to regulate us and keep us quiet. The marches fuel us for the difficult work we do elsewhere.

Liora, my two-year-old daughter looks up, and in response, bellows, “Palestine!” She skips ahead cocooned within the other bodies, and proclaims in her Frenglish, “Baby, ici! Baby, ici! Look, mama,” when she sees another toddler like her.

Liora wants me to be with her joy and simultaneously witness her recognition of being-in-the world with others. “Look, mama” is performative—a directive of relational collectivity in which she wants me to see what and how she sees. I need to look and respond both to the object of inquiry but also to her reaction to the object. Tuned into my children’s rhythms and desires, I can re-orient my own assumptions about activism.

We are all marching for a liveable future.

With their profound imagination, children recognize their place in a world crumbling before their eyes: “We are on the right side! It’s time to be political. Stop capitalism. Our brains have not been washed,” our nine-year-old friend Lola proclaims. Lola and her mom Marianne, Stasia, S, and I, are sitting at Lola’s house in front of a faded framed poster of Jerusalem from the early 20th century. I had asked Lola and Stasia what we should say to other kids who don’t know what’s happening in Gaza. S tilts their head and their eyes drift, mulling over Lola’s words and the tension of wonder and outrage in her conviction. S eagerly discusses it when we arrive back home.

Many of my parent friends also bring their children to the actions. Homemade flags and placards tucked into strollers—signs for public consumption. Like the sign that S, hunched over at their desk, has spent the morning making. Our voices matter, it says between the lines.

Activism in this sense is a felicitous childhood activity that reframes children’s and their parent’s being-in-the-world, interrogates childhood innocence, and cultivates intersectional justice as a way of life. “The insights of children are an important window into larger collective and social traumas and the political economy of suffering in which they are embedded,” Palestinian scholar Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019, 13) writes. I spend my early summer fielding eager questions from kids involved in Palestinian organizing in Montreal. These conversations stress how much all kids should be listened to and how they want to “do loads of ginormous actions” so that adults will take their opinions seriously.

“What if it was their parents or sister or brother that were bombed? What if it was them? That’s what I think in my head a lot,” Aviva, who is seven and Jewish, tells me.

Naomi Klein (2024), reviewing Jonathan Glazer’s *The Zone of Interest* (2023) as an inadvertent “too-timely” parallel to Gaza, writes “It’s not that these people [the Hoss family] don’t know that an industrial-scale killing

machine whirs just beyond their garden wall. They have simply learned to lead contented lives with ambient genocide.” The familial pro-Palestinian activism in Montreal is a practice of refusal to become habituated to the ambience of genocide and a way for children to “occupy the position of the witness ... who are ultimately heard—even if it is just as a storyteller” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019, 37). Shalhoub-Kevorkian is referring to the children in Palestine. The same is true here: we do our best to recognize and amplify Palestinian children’s stories and help our children to share their witnessing.²

Children’s experiences are often translated through an adult’s point of view or treated as an appendage, but they needn’t be.

In the late fall of 2023, there were various high-profile protest actions at Indigo bookstores in response to CEO Heather Reisman’s longstanding financial support of the IDF through her charity. Ala, child of an activist mother in Montreal, questioned the absence of children at these actions and suggested a child-led reading at the store. Her parents listened, sent out a call to trusted friends, and planned a direct child-led action—a read-in at Montreal’s flagship Indigo location. After all, what is a bookstore if not for reading?

It’s the bustling holiday shopping season. We pool into the Eaton Centre’s food court, many of us meeting for the first time, and self-organize like a mushroom network. We easily step in line, powerful as a collective, and make our way to Indigo. We set up on the second floor with a large hand-painted banner, *Families Unite for Palestine*. The children are buzzing and some manage to sit in a semi-circle with Palestinian books, ready to read. Apprehensive security is mingling around. Given the robust police retaliation at other Indigo stores, I am sure we will be shut down before anything starts despite the action’s wholesome nature. We don’t get shut down, not even after the children and parents take turns reading several books, not after a speech on a megaphone, and not as we saunter down the stairs towards the exit holding hands. The children, used to many of the chants, are the loudest.

“The people, united, will never be defeated!” The sustained chanting unifies us into a collective, *Familles Montrealaises Pour La Palestine*.

Days after, I talk to S about the weaponization of Judaism, antisemitism, white supremacy, and relate it to the importance of independent bookshops. They ask to buy books about Palestine, like *Sitti’s Bird*, which we later read to Liora.

The group’s members go on to facilitate and support many other family-oriented events. The collective is non-hierarchical, and in some ways ad-hoc, as people’s involvement oscillates; doing things with children is unpredictable and often beholden to nap times. We do not have a basis of unity and there is no leader. A member has an idea and asks if others can help; a subgroup forms for that action and executes the idea. We don’t attach our names to the actions, unless necessary for safety, because the work is always collective. Individualizing can create the hierarchies we want to avoid. For an Op Ed in *La Presse* I co-wrote about the need for action in the face of passivity by Canada’s elected officials, we took time to figure out who would write it and who would be in the byline (Heap-Lalonde, Olszanowski and Rowell-Katzemba 2024).

To ground my own activism, as well as the collective activism with other families, we do our best to listen and center Palestinian voices; a messy decolonial practice in which the tensions of working through the paradoxes—many of the parent activists in Montreal are not Palestinian and several are Jewish—are profound and necessary. As such, our safety and vulnerability, as well as our children’s, are not put to the test in the way that they are for diasporic Palestinian activist parents. Aware of this, and learning from scholars like Julie Peteet (1997), we step in as necessary. We fundraise for Summer Alkhdour and many join her daily sit-ins outside Federal Immigration Minister Marc Miller’s office, managing a steady share of Zionist and police harassment. Summer came to Montreal with only some of her family and children. Janna, her disabled child, was not allowed to leave Gaza then died from lack of healthcare while waiting to come to Canada.

Lola believes that events and actions are necessary because she thinks that they will pressure the Israeli and Canadian governments. On a late winter day, outside the Montreal Jewish library, we join other families, including many Jewish ones, in protest after the books of esteemed and prolific Montreal children's author Elise Gravel were banned because she posted support for Palestine on her social media. The children's frustration is palpable. Many media outlets are there too, later penning articles mostly in support of Gravel and against the fruitless censorship. Gravel donates dozens of her books, including *Pink, Blue and You: Questions for Kids about Gender Stereotypes* and *What is a Refugee?*, to distribute. As we walk up and down the block with our placards featuring Gravel characters and slogans, children sit on the rampart reading the donated books. Through first-hand action, what us academics would call praxis, our children learn about censorship, book banning, and the potential of public pressure: the library rescinded and brought back Gravel's collection.

What role does the family play within larger modes of political participation? How do these activities make children witnesses?

As always, I turn to philosophy. My graduate studies make the most sense when applied to my parenting. Not in some pretentious way but in a pragmatic way: a way to see my children more clearly in their *always-becoming* and connect with their process.

For Merleau-Ponty, the ontological question of seeing was one of perception—an embodied sense that makes us beings-in-the-world. He argued that our body is the condition and context through which we can have a relation to objects with the world (cited in Grosz 1994, 86). This perspective posits an interrelation between the subject and the world—the body as I live it, experience it, and how I am shaped by my experience. This phenomenological frame sets up the mediation between the subject and the world, the body and the subject, the body and the world, and how children perceive this balance via activist practices. In other words, the children come to understand what it means to witness injustice.

In one of Lola's classes, they talked about children's rights: emphasizing that kids should be allowed to express themselves. When Lola's white teacher told her she was no longer allowed to do any arts and crafts related to Palestine in the class, Lola knew exactly what it meant: "I'm not allowed to express myself." My friend's daughter Asma attends the same school and was prohibited from wearing a headscarf because it "incites politics." Asma is Palestinian. Lola points out the obvious anti-Arab bias and double standard where certain cultures and religions are taken as de facto innocent and given the space to be in the world.

For Foucault (1981, 55), "the persistence of childhood innocence as an untouchable construct and 'true' discourse is 'both reinforced and renewed by a whole strata of practices, such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries; learned societies and laboratories.'" This is why fighting for Gravel's books not to be banned at the Montreal Jewish Library and involving children in the fight was so necessary.

The effort to construct the innocent child emerged out of a will to create dominant schemas of observable, measurable, classifiable knowledge (Foucault in Garlen et al. 2021, 655).

To uphold this antagonistic world, the child needs to be understood and treated as a *tabula rasa* for the adult's expectations and projections, contrary to the way children grow into the world, as Maria Montessori (1995) notes. This fallacy affirms a hierarchical dichotomy between adults and children, in which the adults "know best" and must "regulate" children. It also allows for the positioning of some children as innocent and others as *a priori* transgressed. The clearest indication of this schema is how Israel's Prime Minister, Netanyahu, describes the Israeli children versus the Palestinian ones: "This is a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

What is an appropriate boundary between a genuine shielding of our children from the brutality of the world and the reproduction of this myth of innocence? The ambivalence about my child's encounter with the placard only holds when I also position them as innocent. They bore witness to it. There is no going back. There is the opportunity to observe what has changed inside them and to recognize and challenge the role of white sight. Here on the placard was a photo of a kid that could be their age—martyred. Most children in the world have no choice but to look.

Is the age of innocence bound to geography?

Two of my most engaged friends in Palestinian activism bring their seven- and four-year olds to many events yet they attempt to be more careful in what they expose their children to. One of their main fears has been that highlighting their dedication and militancy will have the opposite effect on their children; they will rebel. They have a few friends who look askance at how their own parents' activism (albeit about different struggles) affected them.

I try to assuage their fears. "But activism is a spectrum, your actions are shaping your children's beliefs, without dictating them, and it's so beautiful. To them, this, all that you do, is living." To punctuate my stance, I look up a paragraph of Baldwin's (1980) essay on my phone to read out loud. An excerpt that has been turned into a poem quoted and requoted on social media as we grapple with the murder of so many Palestinian children.

The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality. Or, I am saying, in other words, that we, the elders, are the only models children have. What we see in the children is what they have seen in us—or, more accurately perhaps, what they *see* in us. (Baldwin 1980)

Marianne tells me that Lola, five at the time, was very scared after they talked about the death of George Floyd in 2020: "I hope it was the right thing to do. Now, she is connecting Palestine to BLM, so maybe that's my answer."

It is essential to ensure that children's perspectives are not merely an afterthought but a central focus. Sustainable activism with children is not about bringing them along and giving them busy work, as if they are an appendage to our engagement. While this may be okay sometimes, as it is still surrounded by the ambience of organizing, our activism must integrate their pace, needs, interests, and feelings into engagement. Our sustained activism normalizes Palestine for our children, something my Palestinian colleagues say was visibly absent before October 7th.

Activism allows us and our children to pay attention.

"I always listen to them [the speeches at the marches/events]. I know every single lyric and every single song that I hear. I hear every single word that every single person says, even if it's a whisper," Lola tells me.

How should adults listen to children?

"Just listen! That's a start," S declares. They believe I protest because I want to be a good influence on them and their baby sister. I want them to absorb the various ways one can fight for justice, like the postcards we send out to government officials, or the zines we make to tuck into the Little Free Libraries in our neighbourhood.

Dozens of us huddle, preparing our kites, in the biting cold of Montreal's mid-January under Parc Jarry's gazebo with hot coffee and food donated by local restaurants. We are part of World Kite Flying Day for Gaza

—a day for celebrating how, in 2011, Gaza's children broke the record for the most kites flown simultaneously. We run across the swaths of snow-covered ground with our homemade and store-bought kites remixed with Palestinian colours and watermelons.

“The whole world is flying its kites for the children in Gaza,” I tell S.

“Do you think they can see us?”

“Yes, they know we are running with them,” I assure both of us while unravelling twine from our paper kite stuck in a bush.

We almost didn't make it because I had been up all night with my toddler, yoked in the quiet of our home. But I needed to show up for the children in Gaza who have no reprieve. A friend tells me it's easier to not feel completely beat down when you are engaged in activism; in any capacity, activism feels forward momentum-ing.

Two months later, in March, *Familles Montrealsaises Pour La Palestine* organize a successful event at an art gallery during Nuit Blanche—a gathering to commemorate the children of Palestine. The dance component is S's idea. They wanted to dance for the children of Gaza after the parents in their break-dancing class vehemently rejected the same idea from their teacher. S's enthusiasm was quelled by the parents' assumptions that it's inappropriate for children to know what's going on in Gaza. Channelling the anger of that silencing, I watch them move a dance floor of kids, this time as a response to the steadfast Camps Breakerz in Gaza, the dance crew born in 2004 and still moving through siege and rubble. We see you, we're trying, we won't forget you, the dancing says. As do the dozens of Birds of Gaza affixed to the walls, coloured in by children and their attentive parents.

Under what conditions are children appropriated for state power and domination? And how must we teach our children that this not ok? When we march with our children, we do so as settler immigrants on unceded territory. It has been over eight months since the first march with S and the haunting placard. They are eight and a half now and have not seen the endless real-time stream of images of human suffering from Gaza as the adults in their life have. But phrases about children being bombed, killed, and starved are their parlance about Palestine now. So is placing Palestine on a map when its name has been deliberately erased, placing its delicious food and rich culture outside of victimhood—orientations white sight prefers we singularly perceive. S now knows how dedicated its people, including the children, are to preserving their land and their history, and how that relates to Indigenous communities; how the fight for a free Palestine connects with the militarization of our everyday, the climate crisis, racism, and capitalism.

“Activism is hard and nerve-racking because we are risking things for ourselves,” Marianne reveals. Indeed, when we take risks for more just and humane ways of life that extend empathy to all, that is what the children see in us. They perceive a more just future that requires risk to achieve.

Lola laughs when I ask her if she plans to keep protesting for Palestine, “Of course I will! Why would anyone you ask say no?”

S chimes in, “We should go and help rebuild it when it's free!”

It will be free. We will go. They agree.

Endnotes

1. Minor parts of this essay appeared in my personal Substack (Olszanowski 2024). All names have been changed.
2. The encampment newspaper, *The Palestimes*, is one such example, facilitated by a parent and professor.

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