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On Nationalism, Pluralism, and Educators Actively Questioning Our Identities

Shoshana Gottesman*

Heartbeat | The YMCA Jerusalem Youth Chorus

This practitioner reflection focuses on the challenges and possibilities of encounter dialogue-music education organizations in Israel/Palestine using musicking (Small, 1995) and dialogical programming to examine, question, and reflect upon the purpose and role of Israeli and Palestinian national days, markers which build individual and collective identity in irreconcilable dissonance with each other. By entering this vulnerable space, we as educators are not exempt from the internal and critical search for understanding of self and community while educational planning and teaching. By exploring “the heart of the educational mission” (Palmer, 2010, p.50) at its foundations of “how do we know what we know” and “by what warrant can we call our knowledge true,” we can collectively uncover through musicking past realities, while also co-creating new locations of possibility (hooks, 1994) in the pursuit of (e)quality of education.

Keywords: Liberatory Education | Music Education | Conflict Transformation | Nationalism | Identity

The personal fears that students and teachers bring to the classroom are fed by the fact that the roots of education are sunk deep in fearful ground. The ground I have in mind is one we rarely name: it is our dominant mode of knowing, a mode promoted with such arrogance that it is hard to see the fear behind it – until one remembers that arrogance often masks fear. A mode of knowing arises from the way we answer two questions at the heart of the educational mission: How do we know what we know? And by what warrant can we call our knowledge true? Our answers may be largely tacit, even unconscious, but they are continually communicated in the way we teach and learn. – Parker Palmer (2010, p. 50)

By very simply asking “How do we know what we know?” and “by what warrant can we call our knowledge true?” Palmer is offering us a thought-provoking, radical challenge to the hierarchical structure imposed upon and recreated by educators to be all knowing without question. Investigating how this impulse is constructed, and how it relates to the personal biases based upon understanding of self and the fear of entering a vulnerable space in front of our students and peers, we are exploring “the heart of the educational mission” (Palmer, 2010, p. 50) at its foundations. On a personal note as an educator, when I have faced situations of the educational unknown and self-doubt, Palmer’s philosophical explorations have nurtured my acceptance of not knowing, while also critically seeking not

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necessarily answers, but better questions. And this here, inspired by Palmer’s writing, is our jumping off point into this current exploration.

What Palmer speaks of is a remnant of traditional education, in which teacher is all knowing and student is an empty novice awaiting her or his teacher’s fulfillment of knowledge (Dewey, 2007; Freire, 1970). And yet I believe the “need” of the educator to be unquestioned and infallible in all respects of knowledge and understanding not only disables the dialogical nature of horizontal learning (Freire, 1970) with and from students, furthering a hierarchy within learning which recreates the systems of oppression existent in society, but as well prevents the incredibly transformative need for an educator to look inward to question and reflect upon herself. To co-create liberatory educational spaces (1994) as bell hooks¹ speaks of, educators are not exempt from the internal and critical search for understanding of self and community, but rather are called to this place in the pursuit of *(e)quality of education*.

Palmer’s quote transfers beyond a general context within teaching, but as well to a very particular one: the deconstructing, re-examining, and relearning of what role nationalism and identity plays in our lives and within education, not just as a place of learning but as a space in which to learn to live. One could assert that music education is included here as well. After all, music education is not simply learning how to play one’s instrument and how to read notes, but in addition it is exercising our expressive outlets in which to share our deepest selves, individually and collectively, while exploring how we interpret the creations of others. When we enter the realm of creation in musical spaces, educators must address questions of content, structure, and pedagogy. When we build spaces of learning in music, we must include “our humility toward our own perspective and our capacity to listen to the perspectives of others” (Allsup & Shieh, 2012), from the type of music that enters this space to the realities and musical traditions of our students. This required “wide-awakeness” as Maxine Greene (1995) speaks of enables educators in musical spaces to question alongside their students what is perceived as unquestionable, to reimagine what is thought of as permanent, to in the words of Palmer, “escape fear’s paralysis and enter a state of grace where encounters with otherness will not threaten us but will enrich our work and our lives” (Parker, 2010, p.57).

Reflecting on Two National Days in One Land

This past spring both of the encounter dialogue-music education organizations² I work with attempted to approach with our youth musicians and singers what is the purpose and role of Israeli and Palestinian national days in society, what traumatic events were the impulse to create these national days, and to question how and why these markers build individual

¹ bell hooks is the pen name of author, feminist, and social activist Gloria Jean Watkins. She insists her pen name be written all in lower case. (bell hooks. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell_hooks#cite_note-pen-name-1)

² Heartbeat (heartbeat.fm/) creates spaces and opportunities for Palestinian, Palestinian-Israeli, and Israeli Jewish youth musicians to build critical awareness, respect, and trust while harnessing creative nonviolent tools for self-expression and social change. The YMCA Jerusalem Youth Chorus (ymca.jerusalemouthchorus.org/) is a choral and dialogue program for Israeli and Palestinian high school students from East and West Jerusalem, providing a space for young people to grow together in song and dialogue.

and collective identity in irreconcilable dissonance with each other. These events and days include: The Holocaust -*Yom Ha'Shoah* (and its relation to Day of Remembrance - *Yom Ha'Zikaron* for Israeli Jews, and Israeli Independence Day -*Yom Ha'Azmaut*), and the Nakba – *Yom el-Nakba* – Day of Catastrophe for Palestinians (and its relation to Land Day - *Yom el-Ard*, and the Day of Setback -*Yom el-Naksa*). Before implementing the program, my colleagues and I first had to explore these questions ourselves, and reflect upon what is our role and biases as educators when investigating these topics amongst each other and our students. Essentially, we had to first ask ourselves, “How do we know what we know?” and “by what warrant can we call our knowledge true?”

Palestinian and Israeli national days evoke individual and collective memory and trauma in differing ways for both Israelis and Palestinians. Each ethnicity tends to learn about the events that created these days either through cultural-social reproduction and in the school system, while without learning or sometimes ever hearing about the history of the “Other.” Besides the few binational, bilingual schools that exist in Israel, such as the Hand in Hand – *Yad b'Yad* Schools³ and Waldorf kindergarten *Ein Bustan*⁴, the Israeli school system, for Israeli Jews and Palestinian-Israelis, is segregated, not to mention the complete separation of Israeli Jews and Palestinian-Israelis from Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza (Shuttleworth, 2014; Kalinski, 2016; Black, 2014). This creates a situation where the majority of Israeli and Palestinian youth do not learn about each other's most tragic, intertwined histories and therefore are unable to empathize with the most devastating tragedy of the “Other” (Zaveloff, 2013). The roots and reach of these phenomena are extremely deep in both societies, furthered by fear, systemic injustice, cultural violence (Galtung, 1990), cultures of silence (Freire, 1970), militarism, and of course, nationalism. In addition, questioning or thinking critically about these days in general is foreign out of fear, denial, and lack of support.

Challenges in Addressing Intergroup Conflict in the Education System

From an educational lens, how can teachers, who are already struggling for additional support from the Israeli Ministry of Education⁵ (Kashti, 2014), be prepared to teach the history of the “Other” without undergoing teacher preparation for such a difficult topic? To even take one step prior, do Israeli and Palestinian educators as individuals recognize the multiple lenses of history? Have they had the time or support to question what role do nationalistic days play in the formation and reformation of our individual and collective identities? Have they had the chance to consider: if a country utilizes nationalism to build

³ Hand in Hand: Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel operates six bilingual, binational schools in Jerusalem, the Galilee, Wadi Ara, Jaffa, Haifa, and Tira-Kfar Saba, working to build a shared, inclusive society in Israel. It is also accredited by the Israel Ministry of Education. (<https://www.handinhandk12.org/>)

⁴ Ein Bustan (“Spring in the Garden”) Arab Jewish Education operates a Waldorf bilingual, multicultural kindergarten, and first and second grades in the lower Galilee. The kindergarten is also accredited by the Israel Ministry of Education, though has had difficulties receiving accreditation by the ministry for the grade school levels (Kashti, 2013). (www.ein-bustan.org/)

⁵ It is important to recognize that under the Israeli Ministry of Education, schools are segregated into systems depending on ethnicity and religion. Sometimes the curriculum taught in these different school systems differs and other times they are similar. (Dattel, 2014)

identity, can two nationalisms exist in the same space equally, especially when they already both exist on the same land?

According to the anthropological educational study *Scenes of School Life* (Yaron & Harpaz, 2014) of Israeli Jewish, secular mainstream schools, reported on in a Ha'aretz article in August 2014, an interviewed school principal, when discussing the issue of ethnic hatred within school culture and the complications of addressing this problem, comments:

There is no discussion about the topic of racism in the school and there probably will not be," the principal admits. "We are not prepared for the deep, long-term process that's necessary. Even though I am constantly aware of the problem, it is far from being dealt with. It stems in the first place from the home, the community and the society, and it's hard for us to cope with it. You have to remember that another reason it's hard to deal with the problem is that it also exists among the teachers. Issues such as "human dignity" or "humanism" are in any case considered left-wing, and anyone who addresses them is considered tainted.

In addition, co-author Yaron questions what is the role of the education system in addressing this issue and whether it is capable or even interested in doing so. Or Kashti, author of the report, writes:

The book is nothing short of a page-turner, especially now [during Operation Cast-Lead/the Second War between Israel and Gaza], following the overt displays of racism and hatred of the Other that have been revealed in the country in the past month or so. Maybe "revealed" isn't the right word, as it suggests surprise at the intensity of the phenomenon. But Yaron's descriptions of what he saw at the school show that such hatred is a basic everyday element among youth, and a key component of their identity. Yaron portrays the hatred without rose-colored glasses or any attempt to present it as a sign of social "unity." What he observed is unfiltered hatred. One conclusion that arises from the text is how little the education system is able – or wants – to deal with the racism problem.

Not all educators are indifferent or ineffective. There are, of course, teachers and others in the realm of education who adopt a different approach, who dare to try and take on the system. But they are a minority. The system's internal logic operates differently.

Palestinian schools in the West Bank and parts of East Jerusalem led by the Palestinian Ministry of Education also suffer from a wide range of issues, even before being able to address the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in schools. These include low teacher pay forcing teachers to take a second job just to survive, which prevents teacher preparation and support of students after class, constant surrounding violence, desperation of Palestinian families still to this day living in refugee camps, and occupation (Khalife', 2016). The cyclical nature of intergroup conflict can be seen in these examples, furthered and sustained by the education system, in conscious and unconscious ways where "education is part of the problem not the solution, because it serves to divide and antagonize groups both intentionally and unintentionally" (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, p.33). Are we as

educators, especially when teaching within an intergroup conflict, ever really free of our own personal and collective trauma while educational planning and teaching? What progress can teachers make in approaching these difficult topics if not supported by the wider education system, and when segregated education ensures, as Bush and Saltarelli claim, inequality, inferiority, and stereotypes.

Embracing the Educator's Own Vulnerability and National Identity

It is the fact that, at a certain moment, when we are so far from our own country... we are seized by a vague fear, and an instinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits... At that moment, we are feverish but also porous, so that the slightest touch makes us quiver to the depths of our being. We come across a cascade of light, and there is eternity. – Alfred Camus (1963, p. 13-14)

In the case of the nonformal education programs I work with, educators typically have more opportunities, space, and support in which to ask and reflect upon these challenging questions, after all this is the crux of our work with Palestinian and Israeli youth musicians and singers. And yet at this point there still is no “blue print” in which to approach these issues even amongst us. As a practitioner in this field of musicking and peacebuilding and human rights education for many years, it is clear that this multidisciplinary cross-section is still very young, and certainly organizations’ constant struggle for funding affects where they can put their energy and focus (Braunold, 2016). Simply, the amount of educational research and resources, which could theoretically support these programs, is minimal. In addition, the amount of segregation, frequency of “hidden curriculum” (Freire, 1970) supporting the status quo of inequality and oppression, and susceptibility of programs to exclude a critical lens and approach to these topics, are the norm, which further portrays how deeply planted the systemic structures of conflict and injustice are within society (Gooding, 2016; Lazarus, 2015). As music educators and facilitators using music as a transformative tool to be seen, heard, co-create, and learn with and through, we must also be especially aware of the dangers of cultural appropriation, normalization (Silver, 2014), and the strength of power dynamics during musicking (Small, 1995) and co-creation.

During the many tedious hours and meetings of program preparation, I found myself struggling internally alongside my incredible colleagues. How could we shed light on different situations of educational discord within the topics of nationalism, privilege, dominance, and identity, and yet enable “locations of possibility” (hooks, 1994) to break through the dualities of the “oppressor-oppressed distinction” (Freire, 1970), “Othering,” and “Us vs. Them?” And since both programs use music as a tool for social activism, what role can music or musicking (Small, 1995) play during this transformative journey? As a jumping off point, we began to think about the possibility of Israeli-Palestinian binationalism through the writing of Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg’s newest co-written book *The Holocaust and the Nakba: Memory, National Identity and Jewish-Arab Partnership*. Their book explores how Israeli and Palestinian societies are more intertwined, though unequally, than ever before, and how co-witnessing and co-learning about the traumatic, identity-constructing events of both people, the Holocaust and the Nakba, could disrupt the current inequality, separation, occupation, and conflict. They desperately call for a “new moral and political vocabulary” (lecture, March 27, 2016) to

make sense of what has been happening for the past 20 years in Israel/Palestine and in light of people's current mentality, and the facts on the ground, of returning to the reality of 1948⁶ instead of 1967⁷. To learn and adopt this new language, both Israelis and Palestinians must not only recognize and learn about the "Other's" most catastrophic events, the Holocaust and the Nakba, but with and through a deep, equalizing process. This educational journey of redefining national identity and consciousness could enable new understandings of Palestinian-Israeli binationalism, which could lead to the pursuit of equally shared societies. Through this framework, we began to question how to uncover, decode, and relearn how to understand differently nationalistic days of remembrance and commemoration within the Palestinian and Israeli narratives. Essentially, we asked ourselves "How do we know what we know?" and "by what warrant can we call our knowledge true?"

Educators examining these topics often experience an emotional toll as well, since we are not separated from our vulnerability in relation to discussing and teaching about these topics. After all, like our students, we also all have our own collective memory and trauma which have constructed the strands of our identities within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. How should we as educators face vulnerability in front of our students? Is it fair to share this vulnerable space with our students? Within my own narrative, my personal struggle during this time period of educational planning and implementation felt heavier than usual. As it turns out, my father was born near *Haifa* in 1956 and I am the grandchild of Holocaust survivors. The day my colleague and I visited The Ghetto Fighters' House Museum to determine which exhibits would be appropriate for our students, I had to face one of the places I most dislike: Holocaust museums. In one exhibit, there was a display of a Nazi uniform modeled in a structure like a standing human being. I approached the glass exhibit with apprehension, peered inside, and noticed immediately a metal skull of death front in center on the Nazi uniform hat, in addition to a complementing ring in the next display with the same metal skull of death. In those moments, I felt horrified and sick emotionally and physically. There are no words that can explain the type of pain I felt. How was I going to manage my emotions and feelings during the real visit with our students, while also needing to be a pillar of support for them?

Visiting depopulated 1948 Palestinian villages like *Lifta* or *Lubya* also has a similar weight of haunting despair. During our visit to *Lubya*, there was a moment when we realized we were amidst a cemetery from the village. We had hardly noticed at first, because of all the wild vegetation that had grown over the entire area for more than 68 years. While visiting these villages, I held feelings of guilt, confusion, and fear of the catastrophe that clearly happened in these lonely, once vibrant places at the hands of my people. And yet when you participate in this type of work, these feelings are not just about you and your people's history. What about the pain of my Palestinian colleagues as we stood amidst the "immortal olive tree" (Darwish, 2013), facing their largest historical

⁶ "One-state solution" is a Track 1 Diplomacy method to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by creating a unitary, federal or confederate Israeli-Palestinian state in the current place of The State of Israel, the West Bank, and possibly Gaza (Beauchamp, 2015).

⁷ "Two-state solution" is a Track 1 Diplomacy method to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by creating two independent states of Israel and Palestine based upon the 1967 Green Line, with land swaps to take into account Israeli settlements (Beauchamp, 2015).

tragedy? How could I, Shoshana, the Jewish daughter of an Israeli-born father, as an educator hold the realities of both of these narratives? How could I, Shoshana, the grandchild of Holocaust survivors, as an educator co-create a space for my youth musicians and singers to address the most traumatic parts of their collective identity on their terms, and yet within the aim of equality within binational understandings? How could my colleagues and I, Israeli Jews and Palestinians, shed light on different situations of educational discord within even ourselves, and how could we, as educators, not allow our assumptions of knowing overthrow “the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends” (Palmer, 2010, p.51).

Recognizing Multiple Lenses of History through Musicking

Brené Brown (2010), a researcher, professor, and storyteller, who studies vulnerability, courage, authenticity, and shame, speaks of vulnerability as “the birthplace of joy, creativity, of belonging, of love.” And yet when vulnerability is not embraced and certain feelings are numbed to avoid vulnerability, this also in turn suppresses all other feelings, like joy, belonging, and love. Selective numbing of only certain feelings is not an option. In other words, as educators diving deep into difficult emotionally-charged topics connected to our own identities and nationalistic leanings, we must take it upon ourselves to embrace our vulnerability alongside our students if we expect our students to also do the same. We need to be pushed to feel when for too long we have been socialized to numb trauma and violence of the “Other,” which is also truly violence against ourselves. These are both patterns of dehumanization, regardless whether the oppressor or the oppressed. In the words of Freire, “Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire, 1970, p.44). In conflict transformation philosopher John Paul Lederach’s (2005) book *The Moral Imagination*, he asks, “How do we transcend the patterns that create such great pain and still attend to the difficult bogs where our feet seem mired?” He answers with, “I have come to believe that it has something to do with the artistic endeavor more than the feat of engineering. It is a process that must breathe life, put wings on the pepper pod, and paint the canvas of what could be while not forgetting what has been” (Lederach, 2005, p. 158). By entering the process of musicking (Small, 1995) together as staff and with our youth musicians and singers, we could witness and challenge our collective trauma, erasure, and mourn together (Berlack, 2004), while co-creating new patterns, frameworks, and categories of binational understanding in the present.

Musically these concepts manifested in several ways and directions that led to musical co-creation and critical dialogue. Since musicking (Small, 1995) enables us to communicate ideas, stories, and feelings, even without a common language, we developed educational programming for our youth musicians and singers to experience visiting emotionally difficult places, such as The Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum - *Beit Lohamei HaGhettoat* and the 1948 depopulated Palestinian villages of *Lifta* and *Lubya*, on an aesthetic level. This included one activity where we asked our youth singers to record with their phones while in complete silence the sounds of *Lubya* amidst the mounds of stones that were once houses and the swaying trees, and then to listen to everyone’s recordings later while in dialogue to reflect on what the sounds were, what sounds were missing, and

what feelings were connected to these sounds for each individual in their dialogue group. After our musical processing, we asked what it would mean to include elements of sound from *Lubya* and elements of sound from our visit to *Lohamei HaGhettoat* from only one day earlier, including even sounds that were missing from either place. We asked questions in our dialogue sessions such as: What could be co-created from these two experiences and in connection to our own identities and nationalities? Should these exist together in the same space, and if so, how? What does co-creation of the past sound like now in the present, and when in the present, what does this mean to us here and now as Palestinian and Israeli youth? How do we co-create together as equals? Questions like these led to deeper discussions about nationality, identity, pluralism, equality, collective memory, and trauma. The short songs co-created from these experiences were raw, holding multiple truths and realities within the same transformative space. Some were merely melodies without words that were looped over and over again until reaching a climax and then an ending, with perhaps no other purpose than existing in those moments as a dually shared space of being, feeling, and reflecting. Two other songs, which were written by two different ensembles during the meetings after the initial visits to these sites each possessed a few similar, overarching ideas:

1. **“Untitled”**

*In your hands I'm feeling warm. I have a house, but I want a home, so I have to go...
Searching for place to rest my bones, a place where I don't feel alone.
So I have to go, I have to go...*

*Looking out the window of a moving car.
Walking the footsteps of a shooting... Star.
Go where... the wild things are.
Near the eye of the storm.*

2. **“Finding the Gray”**

*We found something to stand on to keep each other warm.
Between the black and the white. The winds kept at bay.
We'll watch the rain through our window, we're finding the gray.*

In these meetings where we held critical dialogue about our visits, while also reflecting on the group's and individual's personal realities in relation to the Nakba and the Holocaust, music was often either a tool for processing, bonding, feeling in collective “witness,” and creating new understandings of identity and narrative. Musical preference can be described as an “identity badge” (Frith, 1981) through, “which people shape and reshape their identities” (Gilboa, 2009, p. 8; Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2002; Ruud, 1997, 1998). By utilizing these associations and combining them with new ones co-constructed through “doing and undergoing” (Dewey, 2005) in the form of musicking, youth singers and musicians had the tools and opportunities to, as David Hansen says, “experience local and broader traditions educationally rather than solely from the point of view of socialization” (p.300). In other words, youth singers and musicians could explore

the known, in addition to being open to the new and unknown. This lens of cosmopolitan inheritance (Hansen, 2008) enables experiences of musicking (Small, 1995) as spaces of praxis (Freire, 1970), where building empathy and critical thinking pave the way for even deeper questioning and self-exploration of the past and current realities within Palestine and Israel.

Throughout the process, my colleagues and I had to consider how to create an educational environment for our youth musicians and singers that took into account the inequality that already exists. One place of collective and historical memory and trauma connected with Israeli Jews is readily recognized by the dominant ethnicity and governing power, while another place of collective and historical memory and trauma connected with Palestinians has been either oppressed, repurposed, or caste out as “Other.” Without addressing this very basic structural inequality, the activities we planned would not have succeeded, and furthermore, this would not have been *(e)quality of education*. Our exploration through musicking (Small, 1995) and co-creating helped us look beyond the dualities of what is, and question what could be.

Asking Questions in the Present and for the Future

Now reflecting upon this experience, I have concluded that the following questions which accompanied me along the way may serve as a self-reflection guide, when contextualized, for educators undergoing this process:

1. What does it take for me as an educator to look at myself in the mirror and ask: “How does the greatest human tragedy that my people and family experienced make me who I am today and in what ways does this affect my actions, ideas, and spirit?”
2. Does my collective memory and trauma stop with me, or how am I tacitly reviving it in my teaching?
3. If nationalism is identity-building, can I, as an Israeli/as a Palestinian, ever be truly equal to the “Other” and if so, in which ways or contexts?
4. If it is my purpose or right to disrupt the patterns of socialization (Hansen, 2010), and to “name the injustice” (Allsup, R. & Shieh, E., 2012), how is this translated into the educational programming I write and my interactions with my students and colleagues?
5. What do I personally need to do to support myself in filling my “empathy wells” and implementing self-care during this emotional struggle seeking equality, justice, recognition, re-membrance, coexistence, and coresistance?

Of course, these are not the only questions to ask. To seek answers to these questions or even say that one doesn’t know how to answer them is very critical, honest work, and perhaps a first step along the journey towards transformative and liberatory education. The educator is called to face and process the rawest, most terrifyingly uncomfortable nationalistic and identity-building elements of herself in what we loosely call peacebuilding education and reconciliation. And yet, we must overcome, like Paulo Freire speaks of, “being entrenched in the circuit of my own truth” (Freire, 2005, p. 39). Perhaps this is exactly the vulnerable space we must coexist, through coresisting the oppressive

fronts preventing (e)quality of education, from standardized testing and education reform to “education as a weapon of war” and “segregated education as a means of ensuring inequality, inferiority, and stereotypes” (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, p. 34). In turn to be able to do this, we educators must let go of the “need” to know all while preaching to our students that they must also be all knowing without questioning what it means “to know.” This is as much relevant to the struggle in Israel and Palestine as in other locations of conflict, post-conflict, and systemic injustice. We, educators, including myself, are all embedded in this reality of interrupter, of resistance, of loving and caring, of vulnerability. Will we take upon ourselves the responsibility to enter this vulnerable space of questioning as our exploration continues? The invitation is always there.

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Author Notes

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