

# Imagining Possibilities

## Notes on Janet L. Miller's "Nostalgia for the Future: Imagining Histories of *JCT* and the Bergamo Conferences"

ADAM HOWARD

*Colby College*

One must open the window to see further, the door to possibility.

—Susan Griffin, 1992, p. 284

I am urging you as well as myself to insert irony into any commemoration of a static "past" of this conference and its journal, or into any declared goals to rebuild the "lost home" of Bergamo.

—Janet L. Miller, 2010b, p. 12

**L**IKE STONES, history is a part of us. "Our own history and the history of the world [is] embedded in us" and we "hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung" (p. 8), Susan Griffin (1992) explains. Full of sorrow, we forget that we are history; as Griffin points out, "We have kept the left hand from knowing the right" (p. 11). Our efforts, therefore, should not be about connecting to/with our history since we are history, but instead, revealing the traces of that history embedded in us. Griffin argues that we should work toward becoming aware of the denial and secrecy that keep the traces of history hidden. When any secret of history is revealed to us (even ones that seem to have little significance), "our lives are made suddenly clearer to us, as the unnatural heaviness of unspoken truth is dispersed" (p. 8).

Born in the midst of World War II, Griffin's childhood experiences and memories of violence and war, especially the brutality and suffering associated with the Holocaust, had a lasting effect on her thinking and writing. This influence is clearly seen in *A Chorus of Stones* where she explores how the denial and secrecy surrounding war and violence affects personal lives. One of the main points in her work is that the usually unknown aspects of experience continue to be influential. Griffin provides a revealing interplay between private suffering and public tragedy. She opens a window into this relationship, and the denial and secrecy commonly a part of this relationship, to see and imagine different possibilities.

I first read *A Chorus of Stones* shortly after leaving my home and community to begin graduate school. It was an assigned text in a class about family narratives. Embedded with a history shaped by poverty and fundamentalist Christianity and marked by a denial and secrecy related to the abuse and shame that were a part of that history, Griffin's work partially disrupted previous notions I had about my relationship with my family and urged me to remain connected with that which I was so desperately trying to separate myself from. I left home to attend a graduate school miles away from the familiar in hopes of breaking away from my past. Entering a landscape of privilege and abundance of an elite graduate school, I wanted to erase my history to make room for different possibilities in the future. And I certainly put a lot of effort in trying to do just that. But no matter how much I changed my speech, appearance, rememberings, and surroundings, to name a few, I remained embedded with the history of my family and community.

After graduate school, Griffin's concept of history continued to influence my thinking as a high school teacher. As I've described elsewhere (Howard, 2000), I followed her thinking to understand history not as a record of isolated events that happened only to particular groups of people in particular places but as a part of us, a coming-to-understanding and questioning process, and a search for understanding ourselves. All history, no matter how seemingly distant from our current circumstances, conditions, realities, and so forth, is a part of us and when that history is revealed our lives are made clearer to us. This approach made the teaching and learning of history a more personal process than traditional approaches that separate, isolate, and compartmentalize the concept (and study) of history.

Griffin's perspective on history—as embedded in us, as a process of revealing, as a way of seeing possibilities—continues to influence my thinking as I read Janet L. Miller's "Nostalgia for the Future: Imagining Histories of *JCT* and the Bergamo Conferences." Although I originally intended to offer a "response" to Miller's article, this essay<sup>1</sup> has turned more into theoretical and autobiographical notes I have on my reading of her work—a sharing of my understandings and rememberings. In these notes, I primarily focus on her attempts "to seek viable ways of working within the acceleration of historical time, one that resists a total valorizing as much as a total denying, forgetting and dismissing of Bergamo and *JCT*'s pasts, and that works instead toward 'complicated conversations' ... with those pasts" (Miller, 2010b, p. 10). I am drawn to this notion of working toward, rather than within or against, history in posing some possibilities not only for Bergamo and *JCT* but also for the larger curriculum field. I recall and reflect on my own comparatively limited history with Bergamo in working toward understanding Miller's conception of "nostalgia for the future." I share some rememberings of that history in this essay to situate some of my imagined possibilities. My notes conclude with a look toward some current challenges we face in engaging our imaginations.

### My Rememberings

Even in the retelling of one story, so many details have had to be left out.

—Susan Griffin, 1992, p. 281

Memories often are tempered, twisted, shattered, repressed, idealized by shifting subjectivities and the unconscious as well as by prevailing discourses and historical contexts

that not only re-frame but also contribute to constantly changing versions of those rememberings and subsequent tellings.

—Janet L. Miller, 2010b, p. 11

I attended my first Bergamo Conference after Ellen Brantlinger, a mentor and friend, urged me to attend the conference to make connections with curriculum theorists and to find a professional space for presenting my work that would challenge me in ways I needed to be challenged. As usual, I did what Ellen suggested.

The first person I met when I walked into the lobby the Bergamo Center looked somewhat familiar. She was standing alone next to a table of books. I had seen her before but couldn't place her until I got close enough to read her nametag. Ah yeah, that's who that is. I first saw her about five years prior to that moment and from a distance while she delivered a public lecture at my graduate school. About to meet an accomplished scholar, I quickly became nervous and felt too intimidated to initiate conversation. I didn't need to worry about that for very long. She looked over at me and began talking as if we were in the middle of a conversation.

"What do you focus on, write about?" she asked.

I responded timidly, "I study social class and its ..."

"No one studies that anymore," she interrupted, "Why are you focusing on that?"

Without giving me time to respond, she then asked if I had read a number of scholars' works that related to what she understood to be the focus of my work. I hadn't—not one person on her list of scholars sounded familiar. But I couldn't share that since she gave me no room to talk in our conversation. I can't retrieve much more about our exchange. I walked away feeling disappointed.

My first year at Bergamo was not what I had hoped it would be. My presentation didn't go well and my session poorly attended. I didn't make any productive connections with scholars. Besides the exchange I had as I entered the conference, I can only remember talking to one other attendee—that conversation was also not very positive. And there seemed to be something going on around me that I remained clueless about (it was the year after a group of scholars left the Bergamo Conference to begin the Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference). Feeling quite awful about what I was experiencing, I left the conference that year earlier than planned.

As I shared my negative experiences with other scholars more familiar with Bergamo than I was at the time, I heard, repeatedly, about the historical significance of Bergamo and its journal in the curriculum field that several scholars have described in detail (e.g., Kridel, 1999; Pinar, 2006). After learning more about the history of the conference and journal from study and what I had gathered from others, I returned two years later.

When I arrived at the Bergamo Center that October, the lobby was crowded with small groups of people drinking coffee and nibbling on pastries and bagels. Buzzing with conversation, the tone and atmosphere seemed different than I remembered. The space didn't feel as intimidating or as hostile this time. It couldn't have been more than 10 minutes after my arrival when I was approached by a group of graduate students from Louisiana State University—Ugena Whitlock, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, and Brian Casemore, if memory serves me correctly. We formed an instant friendship. From that moment on, I spent the majority of the next few days with them attending sessions together and having lively conversations over meals and cocktails, during breaks, and late into the night. We talked non-stop. Forming these friendships was important in breaking through my usual shyness in unfamiliar contexts to have meaningful exchanges with others that year.

One such exchange was with Bill Pinar, who I met for the first time that year. Bill attended my paper presentation on the experiences of African American students at affluent, White schools. While presenting my paper, I had no idea he was in the audience. It wasn't until he approached me later that day to provide some feedback on my paper when I put a face with his name. I can't recall exactly what he said about my paper. And, of course, what I do vaguely remember are the criticisms he offered rather than his praises. His approach to providing me feedback on my work, though, left an imprint. Posing questions that I could not answer at the time but opening up new avenues to consider. Urging me to think differently without dismissing the work I had done already. He engaged me in the kind of conversation that communicated he had an earnest interest/concern for my development as a scholar.

My rememberings of subsequent conferences are not all embedded with such positive experiences and meaningful exchanges. There have been years since then when it seemed more like I was returning to my first year at the conference. But over these years, Bergamo has become the most important site for my intellectual and professional development. I found a community of friends and allies at Bergamo. I also came to believe what Pinar (2006) contends that “as a site of memory for a field in danger ... Bergamo has never been more important” (p. 160).

It was Bergamo's historical significance for me as an individual as well as for the larger field that I had in mind as I read the email informing us in 2007 that the conference was ending. Hearing the news, I developed a sense of “nostalgia for the past”—a past that I knew from reading and what others told me and a past that I had experienced. My worries about what the end to Bergamo meant for the curriculum field in the future and present were overshadowed by my longing to retrieve a past that I worried would become lost or unavailable. This form of nostalgia, however, is not very useful for discovering possibilities for the very past that is longed-for or for locating the possibilities in the present and future. Instead, it leads to a dead-end—unable to move forward or return to the past, you have nowhere to go. Fortunately, I emerged from this unproductive nostalgic state to adopt a form of nostalgia similar to what Miller describes in her article.

After further reflection, I came to the understanding, along with others who joined me in the leadership of Bergamo and *JCT*,<sup>2</sup> that the conference remained relevant for the curriculum field. The time was not right for the conference to come to an end. The conference remains significant as a site within the field for imagining possibilities yet to be discovered. Of course, there are other sites where curriculum scholars do this imagining—C & P Conference, AAACS Conference, Division B of AERA, to name a few—but each has its own history. And Bergamo's history still plays an important role in advancing the intellectual vibrancy of the larger field. It remained in 2007 at the brink of ending as it had in 1979 at its origins and continues to be, in the words of Pinar (2006), “a safe haven for intellectually-experimental work” (p. 159). Although I think Bergamo offers more than just this safe haven, this quality alone makes the conference as relevant for the curriculum field today as it has been over the years.

### Avoiding Foregone Conclusions

To continue in that old form would inevitably lead to a *cul de sac*. A foregone conclusion.

—Susan Griffin, 1992, p. 283

[Historical engagement] is a way of engaging with the past through which the present and possible futures can be seen in interrelated contexts and with diverse forms of social as well as subjective—and therefore contingent and fluid—rememberings.

—Janet L. Miller, 2010b, p. 20

As we engage with the past we have to do more than just examine, acknowledge, and situate ourselves in the past/history. The challenges posed by the external pressures for educational standardization and the fragmentations within the curriculum studies field, for example, present difficult problems for us and demand a profoundly committed sense to move toward a future that does not endlessly repeat the present or past (Giroux, 2006). At the current moment, there is much standing in the way for curriculum scholars to open up theoretical spaces to further redefine, challenge, and resist limited and uncomplicated conceptions of curriculum. For, as Miller (2010b) contends, “We working in the curriculum field are under siege again, this time to not only resist losing the gains that we have made in terms of theorizing curriculum—from whatever theoretical orientations and ideological commitments—but also to vision anew how we might expand and continue to legitimize conceptions of curriculum devised from ... a riotous array of theoretical, ideological and methodological orientations ...” (p. 19).

I disagree with those who claim that focusing on the present and current challenges reflects “historic amnesia” (Morris, 2009, p. 74) or a lack of knowledge of “the history of the former generation” (p. 67). Malewski’s (2010) recent state-of-the-field collection serves as one example to suggest otherwise. As demonstrated in this work, younger generations are not only building their work upon the history of former generations but also engaging in complicated conversations with that history. A focus on the harsh conditions of the present, or what Pinar (2004) describes as “the nightmare that is the present” (p. 239), does not necessarily reflect a lack of engagement with history. Neither does focusing on what lies ahead.

Engagement with history should not be about holding onto old and current forms or about, what Miller (2010b) describes as, “a search or a longing for ontological security supposedly lodged in the past,” (p. 21) but instead a means for moving toward possibilities unforeseeable from past and present perspectives to remain engaged in, as Griffin (1992) suggests, “a work in progress, a work that still continues off the page, and is only completed in the imagination” (p. 275). This kind of work/engagement is guided by a commitment to the past and present but not necessarily current and old forms in imagining off-the-page possibilities. There will be, of course, different versions of the unforeseeable possibilities that emerge from varied imaginations. Following Miller’s example, we should remain “unhinged” to one final version.

In her article and elsewhere (e.g., Miller, 2009), Miller has framed such possibilities for us to consider “by speaking of the field itself as always in-the-making ... and of ourselves—even as varied, complicated, and oppositional as our perspectives might be—as constantly implicated in those makings, as *never* able to assume that work is completed, the field totally and completely re-envisioned, or ourselves forever changed” (2010b, p. 21). These possibilities urge us to embrace rather than retreat from or try to control the unknowable by seeing the field and ourselves as constantly in progress and never complete (see also Miller, 2010a). In my own efforts to imagine possibilities for Bergamo and *JCT* (Howard, 2009), I turned to the life and work of Bernice Johnson Reagon to surface some possibilities for productively working within and through crises and tensions and for doing “some wonderful things in a crisis” (Reagon, 1983, p. 368). In her perspective, coalitions are based on a struggle to move toward possibilities that are unforeseeable while in a “barred room” (p. 356). I proposed that we have to step outside

barred rooms and home-like spaces for the advancement, and possibly even the survival, of the journal and conference as well as the curriculum studies field. Like Miller, though, I remain “unhinged” to one final version of the possibilities for Bergamo and *JCT* or the larger field.

I believe Bergamo and *JCT* are sites within the curriculum field where individuals can take on the immense task of trying, in the words of Alain Badiou (1998), “to propose a few possibilities, in the plural—a few possibilities other than what we are told is possible. It is a matter of showing how the space of the possible is larger than the one assigned—that something else is possible ...” (pp. 115–16). And making these proposals with the understanding that we are embedded with history. As Miller rightly points out, we must maintain a sense of “nostalgia for the future” in proposing a few possibilities.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Bruce Parker for his valuable feedback on this essay.
2. The other members of the leadership group were Greg Dimitriadis, Bruce Parker, Aliya Rahman, Lori Sirtosky, Denise Taliaferro Baszille, Hongyu Wang, and Ugena Whitlock.

## REFERENCES

- Badiou, A. (1998). *Ethics: An essay on the understanding of evil*. London: Verso.
- Giroux, H. (2006, Fall). Higher education under siege: Implications for public intellectuals. *Thought & Action*, 63–78.
- Griffin, S. (1992). *A chorus of stones: The private life of war*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Howard, A. (2000). Pedagogy for the affluent. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 13(2), 34–40.
- Howard, A. (2009, October). *Stepping outside the barred room: Building coalitions to advance shared principles*. Paper presented at the Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference, Decatur, Georgia.
- Kridel, C. (1999). The Bergamo conferences, 1973–1997: Reconceptualization and the curriculum theory conferences. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *Contemporary curriculum discourses: Twenty years of JCT* (pp. 509–526). New York: Peter Lang.
- Malewski, E. (Ed.). (2010). *Curriculum studies handbook: The next moment*. New York: Routledge.
- Miller, J. L. (2009). Curriculum studies and transnational flows and mobilities: Feminist autobiographical perspectives. In E. Ropo & T. Autio (Eds.), *International conversations on curriculum studies: Subject, society and curriculum* (pp. 43–70). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Miller, J. L. (2010a). Communities without consensus. In E. Malewski (Ed.), *Curriculum studies handbook: The next moment* (pp. 95–100). New York: Routledge.
- Miller, J. L. (2010b). “Nostalgia for the future: Imagining histories of *JCT* and the Bergamo conferences.” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 26(2), 7-23.
- Morris, M. (2009). Dare curriculum scholars cultivate historical memory? *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 6(1), 67–74.
- Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Pinar, W. F. (2006). *The synoptic text today and other essays: Curriculum development after the reconceptualization*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Reagon, B. J. (1983). Coalition politics: Turning the century. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Home girls: A black feminist anthology* (pp. 356–368). New York: Kitchen Table Press.

