

All Things Pointing Home

WESTRY WHITAKER

The George Washington University

The Autobiographical Demand of Place: Curriculum Inquiry in the American South. Brian Casemore. Washington, DC: Peter Lang, 2008. 144 pp.

SOMETIMES WE HAVE to return home to remember who we are. In *The Autobiographical Demand of Place: Curriculum Inquiry in the American South*, Brian Casemore suggests we do precisely this, either physically, emotionally, or psychically. As a theorist, teacher, and curriculum expert, Casemore's interest in the lacuna of the South (its imaginative history alongside its evasions of guilt and responsibility) gives way to a book that combines research with self-examination. He begins with a simple admission concerning his role as a teacher educator and a Southern male: "I want to understand the role of place in my experience" (p. 1). Casemore attempts this understanding of identity by bravely stepping out of a dominant narrative of Southernness and into a risky psychoanalysis of the regional themes that were so important to him and, by extension, to all of us as conscious beings struggling with difficult (or guilt-ridden) desire and knowledge. Embracing this autobiographical journey in a public reflection, Casemore successfully leads us into our own introspective unsettling while asking us to step out of our narcissisms, our own superficial definitions of place, and out of our own identities in order to discover and confront the Lacanian "Other"¹ and possibly an uncomfortable "Real"² definition of ourselves and our places—whether they be emotional or physical.

This unpacking of our inner bundles that Casemore suggests is evocative of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger's attempts to define being through the human experience of being-in-the-world—what Heidegger called *Dasein*. When we gather these experiences and allow them to contribute to the definition of our existence, to effectively link the past to the present or the public to the private and vice versa, we will similarly embrace that existential deconstruction of our lived experience that Pinar and Grumet (1976) called *currere*. And by understanding Being and his place through an understanding of that life that had formerly "slipped through the cracks of conscious[ness]" (M. A. Doll cited in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, Taubman, 2004, p. 518), Casemore thus follows those trails courageously traveled by Salvio (2007) and Whitlock (2007) in exploring the link between curriculum studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis, narrative of place, and autobiography of experience. Settling in comfortably within the company of such

theorists and paradigms, Casemore examines that tension slumbering between himself as person, himself as theorist, and himself as teacher.

Like a twisted psychoanalyst examining both her life and her utterly personal teaching methods, Salvio almost dares us to recognize ourselves (as she did) within Anne Sexton's "weird abundance" (2007). Coming to terms with what may be lurking in our history in the form of an investigation of that uncanny and possibly frightening loneliness or estrangement, we can thus find commonality with others and possibly stir another form of quiet rebellion as Whitlock inspired when she bravely declared that one can in fact, "be queer and a fundamentalist" (2007, p. 65). As *currere* suggests, such audacious attempts at understanding ourselves through the phenomenology of the uncomfortable are not meant to serve as a wedge breaking apart two traditions: rather, they are meant to inspire dialogue within, which can bring about a reconceptualization not only of ourselves but also of our understanding of curriculum. Casemore's blend of autobiography and theory thus fits within such work. Like Salvio and Whitlock who respectively dare us to embrace our past and redefine our traditions, Casemore distantly taunts us to become hermeneutically familiar with the many ways in which our place, our past, indeed the very places we grew up may have contributed to our innumerable selves. In doing so he embraces and accompanies Janet Miller and F. Michael Connelly as each understands curriculum autobiographically through voice, Madeline Grumet through feminist theory, Mary Aswell Doll with dreams, myths, and imagination, as well as Joe Kincheloe and William Pinar and their already influential work in the concept of place as "the life-force of fiction" (Kincheloe and Pinar in Pinar, et al., 2004, p. 533).

By placing his text on the tables of our conferences, Casemore not only joins Kincheloe and Pinar in understanding the importance of place, but also encourages us as curriculum theorists and teachers to stack his work alongside the already dog-eared, broken-spined, and borrowed copies of the favorite literature that we formerly turned to for personal examinations of place and our valuable relationships to it. Furthermore, with *The Autobiographical Demand of Place*, we have a theoretical model that illustrates how autobiography, and indeed place, can be what Madeline Grumet has called "a medium for both teaching and research" (in Pinar, et. al, 2004, p. 515) as well as proof that there can be "no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves" (F.M. Connelly & D.J. Clandinin cited in Pinar, et. al, 2004, p. 515).

Casemore's study works through theoretical chapters and "interludes" in which discussions of modern curriculum theory, culture, Southern white masculinity, and Southern literature are blended and also juxtaposed with his personal and genuinely autobiographical tales of growing up Southern, white male, and "traditionally" family oriented around parents, his brother and sister, and sister-in-law, whom he recognizes as his "most imaginative and daring teachers" (p. xi). In weaving together theoretical research and autobiography, Casemore shows us the true nature of reflection we are supposed to have learned and embraced in our teacher preparation programs – that reflection that gives us the ability to learn from experience. Within this modeling lies that which makes Casemore's work truly stand out as not only as a contribution to progressive curriculum reform, but also to projects of self-understanding. By modeling his own introspective dive into his past and present, he is not telling us to do something as readers, he is doing it himself, writing about the process, and therefore inspiring us to do the same. As teachers, curriculum theorists, and people, we can therefore learn to deconstruct all that we know and have been told, what Plato has called the *Mythos*, in order to point the way toward true transformation and a *Logos* that can only be found by building on a foundation strengthened by experience, prior knowledge, identity, and our history as people.

Chapter One introduces this process with an attempt to confront and understand the past as it relates to Southernness. Casemore begins by exploring the social and psychosocial conditions of the American South as a product of racism altogether influenced by the shame of slavery. This historic reflection on personality as a product of place provides the link that delivers white patriarchal culture to the doorstep of the South, essentially describing how “what was here is inseparable from what is here” (Lippard, quoted on p. 7). A discussion of the Southern Agrarians later theorizes the origin of Southern masculinity and the power, pride, and hidden shame that is seemingly born from their self-imposed, romanticized, and idealistic pastoral existence. Guided by the works of Reginald McKnight and Randall Kenan, Chapter Three provides a possible clue as to how to best rethink what it means to be not only Southern but perhaps most importantly white, male and Southern.

The disruption and “unmooring” (p. 21) of the South’s sense of place provided by these authors continues into Chapter Four as Casemore turns to the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa and Ellen Douglas for inspiration and a model by which others may interpret their experiences of place, whether they be painful or pleasurable. By confronting their uncanny emotions and possible shame, Casemore describes how these authors play a role in transforming the South from a relaxed region of farmland and sweet tea into an ideal setting for valuable social and psycho-social inquiry – and, therefore, perhaps the best position from which to begin a Southern effort at social change. If social change and true progression in curriculum design is indeed our goal, we must follow Casemore’s lead in accepting and addressing the “tension between repeating and transcending the past” (p. 118).

In encouraging the confrontation that is associated with taking a new look at the place we call home (both physically and as foundation), Casemore’s reflective style builds a possibly new approach to curriculum theorizing constructed by many literary inspirations spanning English literature: one that asks us to stop, look around, and think about who we are, how we became that person, and ultimately how we can use our experience to better reach and teach others. In his gentle and intensely lonesome view of the pastoral and the home-place as an inspirational site that can allow us to not only confront the horrors of our place and our past but also “see into the light of things” to which we are connected, it would not be too much of a stretch to notice how Casemore’s careful reflectivity echoes that of the Romantic poets in their attempt at an introspective understanding of that same connection between person and place (Wordsworth, 1798).

His thoughts are well anchored throughout by the works of Komunyakaa, Douglas, Kenan, and McKnight, yet, in comparison, his autobiographical interludes are written with the same passion and attention to detail as that of Maya Angelou’s long walk through the smell of descending humidity. The honesty of his interweaving story, however, inherently matches best with another classical work of Southern literature: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As does Lee in her depiction of sleepy, slow-moving Maycomb County and an innocence in Scout and Jem that is shattered by the evils of rape, racism, and lynching, Casemore exposes the South in its dualistic and ubiquitous nature. It is a simple, quiet, honest place where front porch life and open windows supposedly greet outsiders with an Atticus Finch-type morality; however, this pleasantness on the surface is inconspicuously contrasted by a history marred by brutal images of slavery and racism and a modern ignorance of its own sexism, homophobia, and stereotypical fear of the Other that has too long been ignored by Southern white men and/or shoved into its own closet by those afraid of and intolerant of the pollution that savagely infects Southern identity.

In exploring these contrasting images and the identity that is created when the former hides the later, Casemore “interrogates” his own relationship to the American South, explores the

“autobiographical roots of [his] knowledge about the region,” and thereby develops what he calls a “more capacious understanding of [his] place in it” (p. 94). In doing so, Casemore very effectively unsettles us and takes on the role as a new Southern “Scout” who honestly, bravely, and inspiringly leads us into the deep, dark, mysterious places where we hide trauma, regret, victimization, and inherited dominations that may prevent true progressive reform in our practice.

Late in his book, Casemore’s voice is heard in Komunyakaa’s suggestion: before a renewal of the South can occur, Southerners must first work through and name that terror which haunts them (p. 121). The metaphor within Casemore’s study is indeed apparent for curriculum reformation: by encouraging us to look inside and around us for insight into who we are and what we have become, Casemore suggests that we as curriculum theorists do the same. Rather than abandoning the past, ignoring its progresses or failures, and attempting to rebuild a new foundation, Casemore suggests that we embrace our past, learn from our successes, and confront our failures in order to continue to build upon the foundation that was already laid by our curriculum predecessors. Essentially, just as Southerners should work through and identify that which haunts them in order to bring about social change, we as curriculum theorists should work through our past and pinpoint those failures, fears, and embarrassments that may also haunt us.

Despite all of the immediate relevance of this idea, it is almost as if Casemore shies away from exposing this viewpoint, preferring perhaps to leave it open to our own subjective speculation. It is an important gap, however, that almost aches to be exposed as it connects Southern identity with critical theory building on concepts and questions of reconceptualist curriculum. Just as Southerners do not have to cleanse or disregard their painful history in order to eliminate the hatred contained in it, we, as students, theorists, or practitioners of curriculum, do not have to erase or reject curriculum constructions of the past in order to advance forward. This is a metaphor that deserves further exploration. Just as Casemore represents within himself that renewal of spirit that is possible through an eye-to-eye meeting with history, we should assume that curriculum standardization, our obsession with testing, indeed all pieces contributing to that great umbrella that is the “end of learning” (Taubman, 2008) deserve to be understood before they are assaulted. In order to achieve a renewal, or a renaissance in curriculum that our students may deserve, we must, according to Casemore, first understand our failures, not simply blame them; we must acknowledge the existence of our ‘isms, not deny them; we must confront our problems, not just identify them; and we must pursue solutions, not just name them. Perhaps future study can explore such attempts by continuing to personalize these confrontations and thus strengthen that bridge that links all which has haunted us with all we want to be, everywhere we want to go, and indeed where we must turn next.

A critic of narrative autobiographical discourse might easily name as problematic the almost therapeutic personal benefits that such an autobiographical experience affords. Psychoanalysis, as inspired by Freud and later borne into curriculum theory, is after all rooted in a devotion to understanding human psychological function and behavior; yet, when it is turned upon the self in narrative autobiographical discourse, such an endeavor does walk a line that has been suggested by Sartre as being innately narcissistic in its drive toward a definition of human existence. The critic could therefore suggest that the interrogation of personal history for the purposes of discourse is ultimately narcissistic and therefore utterly arrogant and self-absorbed. However, in defense of narrative autobiographical discourse, when the Being interrogating himself is considered in Sartre’s terms and called the *pour soi* (the for-itself that is conscious of being and awaiting influence), he is then responsible for filling in the void that is for-itself by becoming conscious of himself and that which surrounds him. The only way for such a being to fill in this hole is to allow it to be filled by that *en soi* (the in-itself that is objective and providing of

meaning) that surrounds him. Attending to this void that must be filled by objective material, Sartre describes a process by which an individual may be able to provide one sort of meaning for his own existence: he takes note of that which surrounds him, and by recognizing those personal experiences with place, history, society, and normative tradition that engage him in this world, he may quite honestly interpret his presence. The result is an inevitable battle of existential paradox between consciousness and objectivity that requires real courage to confront. And when confronted in such a manner as is inspired by Casemore in his symbolic grappling with Southernness, we can allow such confrontation to develop a mutually beneficial relationship to emerge when the experience of one person can help another define his own.

Casemore's *The Autobiographical Demand of Place* is thus written for all of us. We are all very different people in our *Daesin*, in our being-in-the-world, yet we are all uniquely similar in our desire for understanding. Whether we are theorists or practitioners, we can thus all benefit from exploring that tension between the *pour soi* and the *en soi*, between the past and the present, between our goals and those traditions that try to define us, between ourselves as people (today) and ourselves as teachers (tomorrow). As adults we may not like to think that a thing in our childhood can be so influential to our present; yet as teachers, when we do exactly this we can acknowledge how education may have let us down in the past, and we can alter its practice in our present. Autobiographical inquiry and narrative discourse will allow us to personally re-interpret these stories and come to terms with how they may have affected our life. Professionally they will allow us to hear the same stories and understand how they may have affected our practice. The personal (micro) can thus help us critique the theoretical (macro) that is all around us, just as the theoretical can in turn help us to critique the personal. This is another mutually beneficial relationship that can help us to better define our existence and better face the challenges awaiting us within it.

As students of curriculum theory, Casemore's lesson is one that hits hard like that brick thrown into Komunyakaa's living room (Komunyakaa, 1992): if we are to successfully reform education, we must first evolve inward before we can progress outward (Komunyakaa, as quoted in Casemore, p. 104). Similarly, since working through our problems requires that we acknowledge them (LaCapra, as quoted in Casemore, p. 118), we must allow the past to influence us, identify that influence, and grow with it as we learn to resuscitate this "something dead under the foundation" (Komuyakaa, as quoted in Casemore, p. 104). Perhaps then we can move beyond the stagnation we face in denial and truly work through our problems, just as Casemore so honestly works within himself.

NOTES

1. Lacan refers to the Other as radical alterity, or the Symbolic domain of culture that cannot be understood through identification alone. Here, the unconscious is the site of the most significant discourse where all material things are eventually absorbed.
2. The Lacanian Real is understood as all things opposed to the imaginary. It is the always present "world of words" that Lacan claimed as responsible for creating "the world of things."

REFERENCES

Angelou, M. (1969). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York: Bantam Books

- Casemore, B. (2008). *The autobiographical demand of place: Curriculum inquiry in the American south*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Komunyakaa, Y. (1992). *Magic city*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England
- Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. New York: Warner Books, Inc.
- Pinar, W.F., & Grumet, M. (1976). *Toward a poor curriculum*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Pinar, W.F., Reynolds, W.M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P.M. (Eds.), *Understanding Curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Salvio, P. (2007). *Anne Sexton: Teacher of weird abundance*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Taubman, P. (2008, April). *The end of learning*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies. New York, NY.
- Whitlock, R.U. (2007). Queerly fundamental: Surviving straightness in a rural southern high school. In N. Rodriguez & W. Pinar (Eds.), *Queering straight teachers: Discourse and identity in education* (pp. 65–94). New York: Peter Lang.

