

Risking Sentiment

Margins, Voices, and Literacy as a Social Act

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FLANNERY O’CONNOR WROTE, “To expect too much is to have a sentimental view of life and this is a softness that ends in bitterness.” In fact, not only did O’Connor possess what George Weigel calls a “relentless, faith-driven unsentimentality” (2009), but her explications of a pointedly *unsentimental* Christian realism underscore a body of work commonly described—too neatly and insufficiently—as “grotesque.”¹ O’Connor’s conviction of Catholic realism contrasts, as we may gather from her personal correspondence collected in *The Habit of Being*, sharply with the “shouting fundamentalists” she wrote. In fact, O’Connor’s fundamentalist prophets are conventions—“loud, startling figures”—she employs to illustrate the distinction of emotional, sentiment-infused Southern fundamentalist Christian religions in which believers can *feel* salvation, for example, with her belief that good and evil are objective realities in the world rather than matters of the mind and heart. Writing as a Southern fundamentalist myself (backslidden as I may be...), I find I have special insight into my particular situatedness within the spaces of those varied contrasts drawn by O’Connor, self-proclaimed Catholic writer in the South. For example, O’Connor, in her Southern Catholic authorial voice, narrates and writes characters in a Southern fundamentalist, Protestant voice, yet she is not writing *about* the South and Southerners. She is writing about real and present forces of good and evil and the workings of grace upon humans. This is how O’Connor (1969) “renders justice to the visible universe” (p. 80). In reading O’Connor I grapple with these epic ideas, as I believe she would have us do, but as a Southern fundamentalist reader, I also note the place-inflected characters upon whom God’s horrible grace is enacted. I learn about the South and (my)self-within-place. I have no wish to renounce my sentiments and sensibilities, but to gain clearer understandings of them. O’Connor’s un-sentimentality becomes my loud, startling figure.

Actually, I move outward from sentimentality to the two notions flanking it: expectation and disappointment. It occurs to me, some 2 months after the latest Bergamo Conference and 30 years since the first, that inherent in curriculum studies—in reconceptualized curriculum theory—is *expectation*. The lure of the transcendent (Huebner), a prayerful act (MacDonald), incompleteness (Miller), letters in running water (M. A. Doll)—are a few of my favorites. For over 40 years curriculum has been described in as many ways as there are those of us writing

about it, but in most, it holds the promise of, well, promise. The expectation of much—by which we risk, according to O’Connor’s estimation, being vulnerable to bitterness. We—teachers, curriculum workers—work this tension within an educational system that has become sentiment-proof. We are saved from bitterness, failure, and leaving children behind by accountability measures through which we are assured—through our students’ performance outcomes—that we will meet or exceed expectations. We are, in fact, spared intellectual engagement by the security of “best practices.”

I began these ponderings still moved by a ripple of activity brought about by Madeleine Grumet’s keynote at the 31st Bergamo conference in which she reminded us curriculum folks of “The Penalties of Abstention.” People left the cavernous chapel that held us rededicated to curriculum in its verb-form, seeking our own verbs. Wanting to *act*. And, on a cold December afternoon, I picked up William Pinar’s (2009) *The Worldliness of a Cosmopolitan Education: Passionate Lives in Public Service*, where he offers a curriculum of cosmopolitan education that asks of us the self-work of subjective engagement. He writes,

However split off, interiority is always of and in the world. It is cosmopolitanism as subjectively being-in-the-world that I sketch here, subjective engagement in and for the world that complicates the self and its narration as it challenges—even “changes”—the world. (p. 3)

Interiority, the inner-self, remains mostly a mystery to me, and I, like Patti Lather (Bergamo Spotlight Session, 2010)³, will leave its psychoanalytical theorizing to Deborah Britzman (and William Pinar and Paula Salvio and Peter Taubman and Marla Morris and Jen Gilbert and Brian Casmore, among others). Interiority is also the location of our spiritual selves and the wellspring of passion. “Immanence informs worldliness,” Pinar (2009) tells us (p. 145) in his delving into “passionate lives.” Considering curriculum, then, as worldly, curriculum work means working from within. Working passion. Sentiment-al.

Pinar (2009) claims cosmopolitanism for curriculum studies, envisioning a cosmopolitan curriculum whose “educational significance is demonstrated by providing intellectual and lived bridges between self and society” (p. 9). Contingent on this bridging is its attending—“testifying”—to (p. 33) individual subjectivities, returning us to the idea of “working from within” (that he mentions here but first took up in an early reconceptualist piece on Jackson Pollock) to make meanings of that which is without. Teachers cultivate cosmopolitanism through the study of the “alterity of actuality” (p. viii), and there are patinae of alterity surrounding all that might be bridged: intellectual and lived, self and society. The question is not so much whether nor how individual and collective identities are co-constituted as world-ly, but rather how we might develop a kind of deep lenticularity² (see Macpherson, 2003) for considering both concurrently. Little wonder Pinar turns to a most sacred model of “inner dialogue and study, academic versions of prayer” (p. 16). Prayer is the ultimate expression of expectation through sentiment, by its very nature a deterrent of bitterness.

The selections in this issue each illustrate the back-and-forthness of without and within contained in and exceeding both curriculum and pedagogy. Each presents literacy as a social act directly connected to the deliberate engagement of subjectivity. In “What is in a Voice? A Pedagogy of Voice for Museums” Annette Furo conceptualizes pedagogy as “an ongoing process of learning in which we learn about ourselves and others, in turn coming to a more critical awareness of our own relation to the social world.” She explores what she terms a “pedagogy of

voice” through examining how voices of Aboriginal people are presented and represented in an exhibit in a Canadian museum. She ponders the hegemonic conundrum of dominant voices presenting marginalized ones; with the best intentions, the privilege still rests with those charged with choosing representative voices, designing ways to exhibit them in “representative” ways, and subjecting them to the public’s gaze. Furo models her pedagogy of voice even as she describes it, turning outward toward observations and critiques of exhibiting cultures and inward to do the self-work that is central to a pedagogy of voice. She writes, for example,

I cannot pretend that my own voice does not contribute to my interpretation of the museum exhibitions...It is unreasonable to pretend that my words belong to an impartial colourless, genderless observer. In fact, I find it easy fit in with the dominant narratives and voices of my society all too easily, being white, female and educated.

In destabilizing her own culturally-immersed gaze, Furo demonstrates ways we can make meaning of the self and Other without reifying what we think we know about cultures unfamiliar to our own.

Cheu-jey Lee also turns our attention to the self-work of cultural interrogation in “How Can White Pre-service Teachers Experience the Power of Literacy?” Lee challenges pre-service teachers, most of whom are young white women, to acknowledge and interrogate their whiteness as it relates to literacy as a power(full) social act. Noting the “Janus face,” of literacy he writes,

On the one hand...literacy can be used to perpetuate the oppression of the marginalized. On the other hand, literacy is empowering or liberating. It can be used to help the marginalized examine their status quo critically and thus empower them to change it.

And while he might delve more deeply to uncover complexities and stratifications—particularities of subjectivities—among both dominant and marginalized subjects (he refers to “the” dominant and “the” marginalized), Lee’s literacy and Furo’s museum voices share the conundrum: that unexamined and un-complicated, both “voices” serve to perpetuate social and institutional—and individual—embedded structures of dominant cultures.

Literacies concludes with Marnina Gonick’s, “Notes on Notes: Literacy in the Margins.” In it, Gonick engages with the work of Vancouver artist Kyla Mallett’s photographic series entitled *Marginalia*. Through her analysis of the photographs of notes readers have made in the margins—thus, marginalia—of library books, Gonick explores the “often hidden processes” of literacy as she proposes a “self-fashioning” of literate subjects found in notes left behind by “unknown readers.” Gonick too posits literacy as a social act of power, here found in a most intimate expression, that of marginalia. She writes,

Marginalia, Mallett’s photographs suggest, render visible the social hierarchization concealed in the practice of reading...They mark the site where social inequalities, resistance and poetics intersect. They illustrate how literary engagements can function as archival sites for creative and critical interpretation.

The social, and the subject’s location within sites of collective identities, are rendered visible by the invisible acts of interpretation that model what Pinar (2009) might term, the “solitary journey in the company of others” (p. 43) we as teachers are compelled to ask of others.

If for a moment I may liken passion to sentiment, then living passionate lives in public service—passionate curriculum theorists, for example—is a risky enterprise. Subjective engagement is arduous work whose labor may only be exceeded by the vulnerability—softness—that opens us to the bitterness of disappointment and futility. But, what I am hearing in the curriculum of cosmopolitanism, and in the selections presented here, is the opportunity for the possible. Bitterness, it seems to me—whether from burn-out, rejection, repeated frustrations—happens when we have only left ourselves open to one possibility and it isn't the one we get. O'Connor wrote, "The way to despair is to refuse to have any kind of experience" (1969, p. 78). The risk, then, lies not in the possibility of failing to move toward reconstruction of ourselves as world-ly subjects, but in the unwillingness to proffer the contemplative "intellectual and lived" (Pinar, 2009, p. 9) labor required of us. And as a Southern writer who must look deep within a subjectivity rooted in fundamentalist Christianity and Confederacy and without to a place that bears the marks of both, it is a risk I am willing—one that I am compelled—to take.

NOTES

1. *Grotesque* is generally used as an adjective to describe anything that is strange, ugly, incongruous, disgusting, etc. It has been used as a designatory category in art, architecture, and literature. O'Connor—and Faulkner—are identified with Southern gothic literature, a particular kind of grotesque. I will leave it to the reader to become more acquainted with O'Connor and her deep, powerful work (I suggest starting with "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and her letters in *The Habit of Being*.) For now, I will leave you with her own words from "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," from *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1969):

In nineteenth-century American writing, there was a good deal of grotesque literature which came from the frontier and was supposed to be funny; but our present grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity. I believe that they come about from the prophetic vision peculiar to any novelist whose concerns I have been describing. In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque.

2. Lenticularity is a term I first encountered in Tara MacPherson's, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Lenticular logic is the metaphor she uses to represent perspectives for viewing race in the South, derived from a "lenticular" postcard, the kind that shows one image when looked at from one angle and a different one when looked at from another (Remember old baseball cards?). But, she notes, "one approaches the limits of this logic when one attempts to understand how the images [of black and white] are joined or related" (2003, p. 23). I use it similarly here to see whether it might be used for perspective on complexities of individual and collective identities.

3. JCT Bergamo Conference, Friday, October 15, 2010. Spotlight Session 1: "Reflections and Directions: Poststructural Feminisms in Theory and Research." Presenters: Patti Lather, Janet Miller, Wanda Pillow, Petra Munro Hendry, Annie Winfield, and Becky Atkinson.

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