

A Brief Curriculum Commentary on Place

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IN THIS *JCT SPECIAL ISSUE*, Professors Ming Fang He and Sabrina Ross offer counter narratives of “lives in-between.” Along with their fellow colleagues at Georgia Southern University, including my curriculum friends Bill Reynolds, John Weaver, and Marla Morris, they continue the hard and complex work of curriculum studies. From that now-large body of work evolves a growing strand of scholarship on Southern place, I am both excited about and appreciative of this work. As He and Ross acknowledge in their Introduction, the collective work at Georgia Southern builds upon the call for a Southern Curriculum of Place by Kincheloe and Pinar in *Curriculum as Social Psychoanalysis: The Significance of Place* (1991) and again by Pinar in *What Is Curriculum Theory?* (2004). It is work that I eagerly took up as a doctoral student years ago at Louisiana State University and continue today.

That He and Ross focus in this issue on “the power of counter narrative as a means to contest the official or metanarrative that often portrays disenfranchised individuals and groups as deficient and inferior” (Introduction) is also significant to larger curriculum projects. For example, I am reminded of the recent “Canon Project” undertaken by the *American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies* (AAACS) from 2009-2011. The Canon Project called for the compilation of a list of works seminal to American curriculum studies by which professors and scholars in a field increasingly subsumed into other departments in colleges of education (such as teacher education and educational leadership) might indeed acknowledge as seminal in order to move toward advancing our interdisciplinary field. The committee charged by the Association—and made up of a diverse group of scholars—attempted the impossible task of making a list, a kind of “standard,” which is the definition of *canon*. Alas, their collection—always intended as historically bound, yet fluid, changing, and ultimately bound-less—I shall refer to it as Canon 1.0—was no more satisfactory to some folks than a list of people to be thanked in a speech at the Oscars.

In the last issue of *JCT*, for example, Chandni Desai asks, “Do we want something new or just repetition of 1492? Engaging with the “next” moment in curriculum studies.” Desai is strongly critical of the Canon Project for being “rooted only within Euro-American thought, while the knowledge of/from different civilizations are not included on the list, nor are their perspectives of analysis and paradigms of reality” (p. 157). However, it is noteworthy that Desai ironically does NOT acknowledge the historical contextualization for this Canon listing; sorely lacking in this author’s critique is a citing of criteria listed by the Canon Committee,

criteria that situate the “list” directly within the “beginnings” of the curriculum field in the U. S., writ large. An analysis of Canon 1.0 does indeed show a heavy presence of “old white guys,” and further analysis allows me to form an opinion as to why this is so. While the Canon committee paid attention to voices and narratives that ran counter to dominant privileged discourses, they also attempted represent the field with works that were *present within particular historical and introductory moments in and influences on the field as a field*. And the field (U.S. curriculum studies) *at that time* was rooted in Western civilization perspectives and orientations. Thus, I am not sure we can represent the “old” moment in contexts of the “next,” or even present, moment*.

Always acknowledging our histories of and as a field, most of us work to honor those antecedents, even as we now are demanding of one another that we decenter curriculum discourses to include counter narrative discourses, such as those collected here by He and Ross. For example, Canon 1.0 included very few alternate genres and modalities that might *count* (my word) as curriculum studies/theory. This might be because within the historical scope that the list was to encompass, 1890-1970, nobody was calling for thinking about curriculum in ways that challenged dominant, positivist and Enlightenment assumptions and discourses. Certainly, for many of us, to look back at the historical context of U.S. curriculum studies/theory in the first three-quarters of the 20th century is as ugly and hurtful as looking at U.S. history itself (or any other colonial power) during the same time period. Therefore, it is for us now, who can look back at the narratives we now interpret history to have “been,” to demand constant re-thinking of curriculum within current and infinitely more complex social and cultural contexts both within the U.S. and worldwide.

I propose that this overarching task indeed is the major legacy of the Reconceptual moment in the U. S. (and the major challenge of the more postmodern “post”-Reconceptualist “next” moment Erik Malewski and others have identified). I propose that scholars such as He and Ross are muddling the constraining bounds of curriculum studies—what Patti Lather (2011) might call “getting messy”—by inviting counter narratives of folks who are as diverse academically and disciplinarily as they are culturally and socially. They shape Canon 2.0, which welcomes both new and ancient voices and genres to curriculum studies. And regarding the contemporary conceptualization of curriculum “moments,” we can look *toward* the next, *from* the present, *at* the past (See Janet Miller’s “Nostalgia for the future: Imagining histories of *JCT* and the Bergamo Conference,” *JCT*, 26(2), 2010, for what this means and how we might attempt it).

I here now, in the spirit of such challenges, offer a brief after-afterthought on place, with a little place narrative of my own to honor those counter narratives in this edition. I will do so as a deliberate rejection of the notion that I, as a privileged white woman scholar, have any business getting the final word on the voices of “Other(s)” as an expert on “place.” My place-work undermines power and privilege constructed and sustained within contexts of Southern place, and sometimes it involves making sense of experiences that seem as random as a movie or a celebrity sighting.

I live in Kennesaw, Georgia, at the foot of Kennesaw Mountain, near Marietta—in fact I have written about this area in the collection *Queer South Rising: Voices of a Contested Place* (2013), including a description of the “Big Chicken” and other area landmarks. Marietta Square has not changed much in the last century, and the local folks like it that way. In one corner of the Square sits the Earl Strand Theater, restored to its original 1920s motif. Every year the Strand

presents a special screening of *Gone With The Wind* (GWTW)—and on the back of the ticket stub is free admission to the *GWST Museum: Scarlett on the Square*.

I must admit that I was excited when I first learned of this opportunity. For a time I collected *GWTW* memorabilia: plates, Christmas tree ornaments, posters, a knit throw with Scarlett running through the front lawn of Tara, Rhett and Scarlett figurines. I was a child in Alabama when I first saw the movie—at that time small town Southern theaters regularly showed it once a year—in Tuscumbia, Alabama. My whole family went, and I was awed. It was bright; it was BIG. It had beautiful (White) people in beautiful costumes. And the “colored people” were funny. When the movie came out on VHS, I bought a copy; when it came out on DVD, I bought a copy. When it was shown on Ted Turner’s Atlanta-based station TNT every year, I watched it. (I still do, and I will admit this in the spirit of full curriculum disclosure.) And in January, I saw the announcement on Twitter that it was going to be shown at the Strand. I was eager to re-create my childhood experience of seeing the vintage film in a vintage theater in a vintage town square. It was exactly the kind of experience that fuels my research on place. It is an anachronism that helps me write about an anachronistic South and the oppressive structures kept in place to help it stay that way. Structures that, not incidentally, maintain hegemonic power and privilege. Of course I was going. The following is the exchange, via text message, between me and my friend and colleague Professor Nichole Guillory, whom, I will tell you, is African American – as this information is important to the exchange.

- Ugena: Guess what I’m doing Friday night? Seeing *Gone With the Wind* in Marietta Square.
- Nichole: I thought your "Southern identity" had "progressed" into this century. So why are you going "backward"?
- Ugena: Maybe because it helps me write my scathing critiques of the South ☺
- Nichole: Scathing is overstating...
- Ugena: Well, I will step it up.

I decided I could rely on my memories of both the movie and of the Strand and re-construct my own experience. In other words, I did not go.

The next month, my institution, located on the site of the last Confederate stand before Sherman marched into Atlanta, and also located on the site of ancient Native American grounds stolen by the government and the railroads to connect Atlanta with the industrialized North and the western frontier (so that more land could be stolen and etc.), hosted Professor Cornell West on campus to talk about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I did not tell my friend I was going, and let me tell you why. I did not tell her because it was “white people work” I was doing. I did not want her to think that I thought I was an enlightened Progressive White seeking congratulations for celebrating Black History Month and Dr. King. I try to do those things, but that is not why I went. I did not want her to think that I went as an act of contrition or self-flagellation for my Southern White Guilt. I have it, but my claiming of my white privilege means that I may not absolve myself of White Guilt by confessing it to Black People. I did not want her to think that I went to finally get the scoop as to “what Black People wanted from White People, anyway,” as we Whites are prone to saying. I will tell you why I really went. I went because my institution was bringing a celebrity to campus. I went because I had seen him on CNN; he was the fellow with the fabulous scarf. And, I went because I consider myself an enlightened Progressive White to be congratulated for observing MLK Day. And as such, didn’t I belong there?

What I heard was a public intellectual continue a talk on love that had been initiated by another public intellectual over half century ago. I tried to think about my self and my narrative within the contexts outlined by Dr. West and to figure out how I might live and write so as to undermine structures that keep up those old evils of poverty, war, and racism. But I found, as I sat there, as I think back upon it now, that my internal conversation kept interrupting his speech. Who was I while I was there? What was offered to me to take away? Was anything? And what could I give? I could not think of any other way to be there as a White person. I was White before I was a woman, working class, or an academic. Even as I write THAT, I question whether I want to feel good about myself for it. I felt, feel now, that the appropriate response is a stripping away—of assumptions, identity, emotions, of the parts of me that are fixed in place and time. And I felt, feel now, that the context of place was as important this night as it had been for the movie. As if to punctuate this point, on my way to the office today an insurance commercial came on the car radio: “Hey Atlanta!...Civil Right City with a Gone With the Wind Backdrop....” It ended by asking customers to “Get to a better State...”

This is not a self-congratulatory White Southern progress narrative that reduces these counter narratives to race, or more specifically to the predictable limiting of race to Black/White in the South. It is to illustrate that the anti-racist place work I do takes place in a setting that can celebrate a white supremacist pro-slavery, pro-KKK spectacle and celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornell West within 30 days of each other. Without questioning how that can be so. Just as I must question a little more deeply my excuse for enthusiastically wanting to attend *Gone With the Wind*, that is, that it helps me write about Southern place. Place, like history like identity like curriculum studies, is always partial, contingent, fluid, and contextualized. Regarding all of them, I find it infinitely more helpful to ask those questions—how can this be so, for example—because seeking any supposed “answers” is maddening and dangerous. Not necessarily because there are no answers, but because we start thinking we may have found some.

Ming Fang He and Sabrina Ross write about the contributors to this edition, “These curriculum inquirers explore eclectic ways of engaging in activist oriented inquiries...and critically reflect[ing] upon their backgrounds, experiences, and values and the ways in which their personal histories, languages, cultures, identities, and experiences affect who they are as curriculum workers, how they interact with others, and how they live their lives in the South” (Introduction). If there is to be a reconstruction of Southern subjectivity, as Kincheloe and Pinar suggest (1991, p. 6), it will be constructed out of counter narratives that shatter the old, long-held oppressive dominant narratives of neo-colonial white supremacist capitalist patriarchies, to use bell hooks’ (2000) precise descriptors. The shattering counter narratives of Southern curriculum of place are part of the reflexive past-present-next moment in curriculum; think of it as Counter-Canon 2.0.

Note*

The “Canon Committee was constituted following the 2009 AAACS annual meeting and charged with formulating a specific list of “key texts in the intellectual history of curriculum studies” (AAACS Canon Project) that, in the professional judgment of the committee, would constitute “a base-line of curriculum studies expertise” (Pinar, 2008). From September 2009 through January

2010, the committee communicated by email and met multiple times by phone. The committee first developed criteria for judging whether or not a particular text merited inclusion on the list:

I. Eligibility Criteria:

- a. Published prior to 1970
- b. Major contribution that by all reasonable standards falls within the scope of curriculum studies.

II. Evaluative Criteria:

- a. Key text that made “a distinctive and necessary contribution” to the field of curriculum studies;
- b. Key text that represented a “turning point” in the field of curriculum studies;
- c. Key text that “helped change the direction and scope of curriculum studies;”
- d. Key text that was generative of new lines of inquiry in the curriculum studies field.

The committee discussed at length the challenge of being inclusive while avoiding tokenism or broadening the list beyond what was felt to be a useful core. Thus, the committee ran into an inherent conflict: by attempting to name texts that met the criteria for the project, it necessarily did not include many important works that might have brought more diversity to the list. While we, the committee, dislike the fact that the intellectual history of the curriculum studies field lacks, among other forms of difference, intellectual, racial, gender, and class diversity, a comparison of that history to the present day field illustrates both how far we have come and how far we have to go. If nothing else, it is the committee’s hope that the curriculum studies canon will encourage, through concrete understanding of the field’s historicity, curriculum scholars to see their own work in complicated conversations with this history, and to imagine and work toward a curriculum canon of the future that will represent a plurality of diverse voices, experiences, and ideas.

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