

# “If You Wanna Play the Saxophone”

## A Review of *Troubling Method: Narrative Research as Being* by Petra Munro Hendry, Roland W. Mitchell, and Paul William Eaton (2018)

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**T**ROUBLING METHOD IS A BOOK WRITTEN BY FOUR AUTHORS: the three present on the cover (Petra Munro Hendry, Roland W. Mitchell, and Paul William Eaton) and a fourth, Becky Atkinson, who is the first co-author of chapter six. The book is divided into three main sections. Before and after the three main sections, there is a prologue, introduction, and conclusion. These pre- and post- scripts are written under a single authorial voice—with the exception of a point in the introduction where the authors break into dialogue—whereas, the rest are clearly marked by their respective authors. These demarcations are important and remind the reader that all but one of the six featured chapters contained in the three sections are republished articles and chapters. Eaton introduces each section, and they end with an “Interlude,” i.e., a dialogue that mainly happens between Hendry and Mitchell, with Eaton interjecting lightly.

On my reading, it seems clear that the three main authors bring different concerns and preoccupations into the book that surround the notion of narrative and its application in the social sciences. Hendry addresses narrative as something primordial to and constitutive of research while also trying to imagine a future without research as we know it. In this sense, she writes about narrative in a way that precedes the social sciences and qualitative inquiry while also attempting to look beyond them. Her tone might be read as homiletic and at times even prophetic in the style of the Jeremiad. Mitchell, by contrast, writes from a specific set of concerns that are framed by questions of race and gender in educational institutions—and it is this specificity that introduces us to a series of characters such as “Dr. Mason,” his co-author, Atkinson, and those present at a conference session. Mitchell’s writing also unfolds with clear methodological suggestions for the practice of narrative inquiry and qualitative research more broadly. His tone is direct but ponderous in the sense that he applies an almost Midrashic series of questions to the anecdotal events he describes; his prescribed theoretical interventions into narrative inquiry distinguish him from Hendry in the sense that his platform seems to be reformist and constructive in nature. Eaton’s concern is admirable as a curator of the work of his former teachers and co-authors. He also seems

to be the most insistent voice about the book's subtitle, *Narrative Research as Being*. Given this insistence, we might frame Eaton's concerns as primarily ontological, but a closer reading shows that, unlike Hendry and Mitchell's mutual concerns, which we will soon see, his concerns revolve around the permission to "keep thinking" (words he quotes from Mitchell's advice to him as a student). This motto seems to presently occupy a specific set of theoretical viewpoints in Eaton's thought that "new empiricism" and "ontological turns."

While the book refers to itself as "assemblage," this trendy piece of jargon may not sufficiently describe the exact structure of the work and the conditions under which that structure emerges. After all, this book is 229 pages, not a thousand plateaus. I find this structure and these conditions among the most interesting aspects of the book, which is manifestly not an edited collection nor a single or dual author book. Indeed this basic question—what kind of book is this book?—reveals a key and, to my mind, salutary basic element that takes this work out of its more specific social scientific domain and into the wild world of letters, into the more wide open place where the very idea of the "book" can be studied that we might call the humanities. Unlike the edited collection or the single or dual-authored book, this book in some respects resembles the book we call the Christian New Testament, a book that is comprised of separate books, curated internally and externally from letters and epistles, where the characters and authors diverge and converge and even disappear. It is perhaps more synoptic than apocryphal, but my main point is to simply show that the structure and conditions of emergence of this text hold an important lesson about the kind of work we can and do make as curriculum scholars—and I do use the word "scholars" here intentionally as opposed to the word "researchers." I am sure the scholar searches and researches and even re-researches—there is nothing wrong with the search or the journey or pilgrimage—but I refuse to pretend that we are consigned to being researchers in the Academy. We must assert our fundamental freedom to only conduct research as scholars, first and foremost.

I suppose I can now interject that this note on scholarship is my proposed solution to one of Hendry's questions about what would become of the research university in the absence of research. The complicated historical answer is that the idea of *Wissenschaft*, which gave birth to the ideas of the Prussian research university and has become a part of the American university of today, was never meant to be simple "research;" there many kinds of *Wissenschaft* or research in this university, including those that are not sciences, that do not obey or submit to the natural sciences or their methods. In German, these would be called the *Geisteswissenschaft*, which might be literally translated to the science of the spirit or mind. They refer to a sense of social science that does not grow in the shadow of the *Naturwissenschaft* or, in English, the sciences of nature. Notice how this word "science" is not reducible to the science we have Anglicized into Science and the debates of scientific method. On this complicated yet oversimplified historical and linguistic analysis, the social science of qualitative research, living within the monumentally stupid Creswell Trinity of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, has chosen to live in the *Naturwissenschaft*, but recently, it seems to have realized that it would rather dwell in the *Geisteswissenschaft*, where the human sciences are contained in the work of what we would today in English call the arts and humanities. A number of simple confusions concerning these entities pervades the field, but I think what is most interesting about this book (as I now return to my more technical analysis) is how it suffers from the same confusion but also surpasses it in key confessional moments of insight and expressions of desire. When the authors together ask the question, "What do we fear?" I read this question as itself a potential mark of the fear that today's field of education, still reeling from Dewey's psychologism and Thorndike's instrumentalism, has in finding its way from the *Naturwissenschaft* of the social sciences to the *Geisteswissenschaft* of

the humanities, where concept as method—older than 400 years as we see in *elenchus* known today as Socratic Method or *lectio, quaestio, disputatio* known today as Scholastic Method—and where even the concept, history, and practice of concepts have always and will always live and abide both in and out of the formal academy. In case my assessment seems out of place in curriculum studies, allow me to join the chorus of reconceptualists who, even before foundation of the Bergamo conference in 1979, were already saying these things. In her 2006 preface, added to the second edition of *Toward a Poor Curriculum*, Grumet notes that she and Pinar wrote their book—and in many ways inaugurated curriculum theory—“to propose a humanities methodology as an alternative to the social science inquiries that were dominating educational research.” (p. ii). When I read the question “What do we fear?” in this reconceptualist register, I read a field that has become afraid of its own shadow, and while this book does have its redemptive moments, it might also be relieved of some of its psychic burdens by the consolation of knowing that, at Bergamo, curriculum scholars has always done this work of the humanities.

Returning to the book, there is unique and exceptional feature to be found in the interludes. The conversations read roughly like a transcript, but the roughness gives way to a realism of a conversational voice. In these pages, we find incredible soul and honesty. Hendry talks about the spiritual longings of her heart that she finds in stories and the gift of language that feminism was to her and questions of death and eternal memory. Mitchell speaks of his love of history and the material conditions that led him into the field but also of the soulful and tragic question that haunts him: the question of human suffering. Together, in these personal interludes, Hendry and Mitchell lift away many of the more technical and theoretical aspects and concerns for method or narrative or ontology and display a mutually troubled concern for social change. I must admit that I was prepared to launch a full offensive, in every sense of the word, in this review until these interludes stopped me in my tracks. Their depth convicted me and forced me to re-read their chapters in this light. Suddenly, I was guided by the spirit of their mutual concerns and no longer saw them as a collection of separates. Eaton’s voice, which is minimal in the interludes, was transformed into a great listener: a student who truly knows how to study. I was convicted by that, too.

I would like to conclude with four notes that hopefully repeat the spirit of the sense of narrative I took from this book. I am afraid that I do not have time to closely elaborate my argument that the idea of narrative in this book is phenomenological in certain respects but also in grave danger of falling into the phenomenological pitfall of psychologism. On the one hand, narrative is understood as an appearance, a phenomenon. But this is not the end of the story for a phenomenological concept; we must also at the very least move from the natural attitude to a phenomenological or philosophical attitude in our attention and attendance to it as a phenomenon. I think the book has a mixed record of this, but the interludes, as I have shown, exceed the very phenomenon of narrative and open up a new reduction that I am still trying to appreciate and understand. On the other hand, a great deal of the claims about narratives being objects that have agency is too cavalier, in my view, about the dangers of objectification. Humanism—that much abused but little understood word—need not entail that only humans experience the inner life of subjectivity, but phenomenology is boldly and crucially humanist in the sense that the life of narrative cannot exist outside of its ontogenetic *poesis*. What this means in plain talk is that stories surely can be ascribed a life of their own in letters and books and song and verse and more, but this life is not natural or objective so much as it is a *work*, a making, it is the result of what the Greek word *poesis* means: “to make.” In Curriculum Studies, there is an entire transition from James McDonald to Timothy Leonard that is about a sense in which *mythopoesis*—which means “to make stories”—is argued to be what curriculum fundamentally is. This mythopoetic tradition

has not enjoyed the popularity or success of the narrative social sciences, but it does show us a clear path towards a study of narrative that is a part of the *Geisteswissenschaft* tradition not the *Naturwissenschaft*, the humanities not the social sciences. However, this tradition shares all of Hendry's primordial senses of narratives while perhaps suffering from other defects from Mitchell and Eaton's perspective.

My final two points are iterative in the sense that they are two stories that repeat the same thing. I would like to end with them as parables that may explain my own reading of this book and also, perhaps, if I may be so bold, allow me to add some notes to its message. The first story comes from the book of Matthew, Chapter 19. In this story, a rich man asks Jesus what he must do to possess eternal life. Jesus replies that he must keep the commandments. The rich man replies, saying that he has kept all the commandments and now wants to know what he should do next. Jesus replies that he should now go and sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor and then come and follow him. Upon hearing this, the rich man walks away in shame. To this Jesus says, "In truth I tell you, it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven." This is a story about method; it is about the law and the commandments. It is also a story about troubling method and asking the most difficult questions, confronting what we fear. To understand it better, we might turn to another story that is more mythic in the ancient sense because it comes to us as verse and song. It is a song written for episode 2310 of the American educational public television show, *Sesame Street*, entitled "Put Down the Duckie." The song is a duet sung between Hoots the Owl—a seasoned jazz saxophone player—and Ernie, the constant companion and partner to Bert. Ernie is well known for his love of his rubber ducky, and he sings a series of odes to his rubber ducky, most famously "Rubber Ducky You're the One," sung from his bathtub in which rubber ducky accompanies Ernie, squeaking between each stanza of the chorus. In "Put Down the Duckie," however, Ernie's love of his rubber ducky becomes an obstacle to his desire to play the saxophone. Hoots the Owl sings to him, "You got to put down the Duckie if you wanna play the saxophone." I read Hoot's message as analogous to the Matthean narrative about Jesus and the rich man. The message is that our possessions can get in the way of the things we truly desire, things like eternal life and playing the saxophone.

In a similar spirit, I read *Troubling Method* as asking similar questions at depths as theologically and educationally ambitious as these two stories I've shared. The book asks the reader to imagine and consider what we would be willing to give up in order to be able to do the kind of work we really want or need to do. The book might be said to be asking us as scholars to trouble not only method but to trouble ourselves by attending to the question, "What are the desires of my heart?" What are the things I want to want, how should we live and die, and more. These are surely curriculum questions, too, and I would invite you to read the book in that way. Where the trouble emerges is in the interludes where it becomes clear that educational research is filled with people who love the *Geisteswissenschaft*, who love literature and history and philosophy, but, for some reason, many of them cannot seem to put down the ducky of social science to play the saxophone or Maxine Greene's blue guitar: the tools and instruments we possess to truly study as scholars who search, not as researchers who mine scholarship for citations.

With thanks to the authors, I end by simply echoing those sage words of Hoots the Owl the Scholar to Ernie the Social Scientist and sing: "You gotta put down the ducky, you gotta put down the ducky, you gotta put down the ducky if you wanna to play the saxophone."

## References

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- Pinar, W. F., & Grumet, M. R. (2015). *Toward a poor curriculum* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Kingston, NY: Educator's International Press.

