

Attending to Particularity, Refusing the “Central Story”

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Re-reading Carolyn Kay Steedman’s wonderful book *Landscape for a Good Woman*, in which she considers “lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don’t quite work” (1987, p. 5), one is struck by the way in which Steedman’s phrase is an apt description of the work being done here – each of the articles featured in this issue draws our attention to lives, experiences, identities, bodies for whom the central interpretive devices of education, curriculum, and culture don’t quite work. Steedman’s book is an evocative display of the tensions between the particularities of experience and “the official interpretive devices of culture” (1987, p. 6), and of the complex work required to tell stories and make theories that refuse to allow the particular story to be subsumed by the central one. For Steedman, and for the authors in this issue, such particularity cannot be explained through discourses of ‘exceptionality’ or ‘anomaly,’ which often get mobilized as forms of dismissal. Rather, the particularity of experience can be understood, not as an ‘exception to the rule,’ but as evidence that contradicts the rule’s status as such.

The challenge for us as curriculum theorists and educational researchers is to make theories and tell stories that can tolerate this particularity. How can we make a curriculum theory that welcomes

alterity and critique? Like Steedman, the articles in this issue draw our attention to “the irreducible nature” of experience and, in doing so, perform a defiant refusal “to let this be absorbed by the central story” (Steedman, 1987, p. 144).

In his insightful discussion of the ways that disability studies might complicate and enrich complexity theories in education, Steven Khan reminds us, “when we take developmental potentials seriously, the anomalous no longer seems abnormal and the different is no longer able to be easily constructed as deviant.” Instead, he suggests, “*dis-embodiment*” provides a position “from which to offer social critique and construct different, more inclusive, bodies politic.” Our attention to the particularities of embodiment on its own terms makes visible a diversity and developmental potential that immediately undermines the ‘central story’ about normality and pathology. In this way, as complexity theory suggests, “seemingly minor... events can trigger massive changes and revolutionary reorganization at the level of the entire system.” Khan argues that our attention to disability studies and to the particularities of embodiment may reveal “what *more* it might mean *to be* human.”

Christopher DeLuca’s article turns our attention to another set of experiences that also challenges “normal ways of being.” Through a vivid and wide-ranging exploration of, among other things, the Bloomsbury Group, the writings of Virginia Woolf, and the musical *Rent*, DeLuca considers how the figure of “bohemian” and the concept of “cultural bricolage” might be productive for curriculum theory. How do these examples offer us “a framework for understanding transgression of normativities toward more creative ways of being”? As an outsider “opposed to and in rebellion against mainstream culture,” the figure of the bohemian suggests the necessity of pushing “on the bounds of normal ways of being” in order to foster creativity, new ways of thinking, and the evolution of thought. Similarly, DeLuca’s “bohemian curriculum” might create spaces “that encourage interrogation of

cultural normativities and that provide space for the rewriting of self-narratives and the creative expression of self."

Writing about a different context, but in ways that continue to resonate with the preceding articles, Laura Elizabeth Pinto and Elizabeth Coulson consider how an attention to gender and to the particular socio-economic experiences of women might complicate and enrich the increasingly common turn to financial literacy curricula. Their study, a discourse analysis of "three popular Canadian financial literacy curriculum resources," suggests that the 'central stories' of financial literacy education, which emphasize "choice" and "neutrality," fail to account for "the ways in which gender affects one's ability to equitably participate in financial activity, and especially to build wealth in contemporary Canadian society." The absence of attention to the particularities of women's realities "creates a false impression of economic equity" and does a great disservice to our students, who remain ill equipped to face the complexities and inequities of financial life. The meritocratic thinking that undergirds our approach to financial literacy might be challenged by a curriculum that invites attention to the lived particularities of socio-economic inequity and social justice.

Finally, the article by Craig MacDonald and Sean Wiebe offers what might be described as an experiment in attending to the particular and in the affordances of an auto-ethnographic method. MacDonald and Wiebe undertake the complex and difficult task of weaving story and theory together, and recognize that such a method, rather than offering answers, may call us to remain in process: "By representing our experiences, we mean to explore our own sense of living in these experiences... We are not offering knowledge on the platter, as if the hunt were finished. We bring questions instead." As Steedman does in her auto-ethnographic work, MacDonald and Wiebe come to recognize the necessarily fragmented nature of evidence grounded in the particularities of life, as well as the sometimes coercive and centralizing

force inherent to many of our interpretive devices.

MacDonald and Wiebe describe how “the inevitable metonymic and metaphoric coherence which arises from lived fragments draws our attention to the closing down of meanings inherent to all acts of telling.” Alternately, Steedman suggests that the evidence of lives lived, of particular lives, causes a disturbance for our theories and histories, the central explanatory devices of our culture. She wonders, as do all of the authors featured here, what it might mean to see our theories about human experience and “the making of history... as the theorization of such disruption and dislocation” (Steedman, 1987, p. 127).

Finally, we want to take a moment here to welcome our new Book Reviews Editor, Dr. Sara Matthews (Wilfred Laurier University) to the JCACS editorial team and thank her for all of her hard work in getting this new section of the journal off the ground. It is with great excitement that we inaugurate our Book Reviews section with a timely review of *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom* by Dr. Bronwen Low (McGill University). More reviews are underway and will appear in forthcoming issues. Please contact Sara directly (smatthews@wlu.ca) if you wish to submit a review or suggest a book for review.

References

Steedman, C. K. (1987). *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*. Rutgers University Press.