

Foreword¹

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How can we account for intellectual breakthrough?² That is the question Charles David Axelrod asks in his study of Freud, Simmel, and Buber, a question that occurs to me as I reflect on the intellectual breakthrough of C. A. Bowers. Bowers was among the first and most persistent of those demanding that institutionalized education address the intensifying environmental crisis and our complicity in it. Schooling was the culprit in his still stunning comprehensive critique; in Bowers' scholarship schooling becomes almost a synecdoche for how we human beings think and act, explaining what is in us human beings that caused the calamity occurring right before our eyes. That collage of concerns—ecological, educational, cultural, technological—constitutes the courageous contribution of C. A. Bowers, an intellectual breakthrough at once enabled and resisted by colleagues and students, an accomplishment I attribute to Bowers' individual courage, commitment, and character.

Those qualities could make Bowers contentious; after all, he did not hesitate to criticize those complicit in the ongoing crisis. Constructivism, critical pedagogy, and technological rationality were among the modes and topics of thought and action Bowers accused of complicity in our ecological and civilizational crisis. He outed their arrogant anthropocentricity, condemned their self-righteous insularity, their unself-conscious collaboration in the decimation of life on earth. On one occasion I joined him.³ Searing such sacred cows as constructivism, critical pedagogy, and technologization cost Bowers community—hardly completely, as this collection testifies – but Bowers seemed unconcerned. He knew that:

Intellectual institutions (like the university) in our society that claim to understand and speak for Western intellectual tradition have often lost the very spirit of that tradition because of their self-limiting orientations. Their structuring of thought has made it inconsistent with thinking itself. Members of these institutions, who have submitted to institutional rule, have become merely its instruments. But more, they have violated the tradition from which they pretend to speak. The monumental moments of that tradition were certainly not moments of mimesis. They were ones of reflection, critique, and discourse.⁴

Axelrod is thinking of Freud, Simmel, and Buber as exemplary instances of this now-defiled Western tradition, individuals whose thought did not succumb to institutionalization, who enacted in their work the ideals of that tradition. Like those three figures, I suggest that C. A. Bowers also “represent[s] the heart of that tradition,”⁵ an intellectual engagé, committed to contest what caused Western cultural ideals to become so defiled and, in so doing, breakthrough those conceptual obstacles blocking their realization.

Of those three “monumental moments” of the Western tradition Axelrod names—“reflection, critique, and discourse”—in Bowers’ breakthrough critique is key. It is the central element binding the three together. Bowers criticized colleagues who, he judged, were submerged in simplistic confidence that progress is inevitable: “This hubris is especially prominent in the thinking of professors of education who view their missionary role as ensuring that students march to the current drumbeat of progress, which now requires or reliance upon computer-mediated learning.”⁶ Bowers’ criticism focused Wapner’s worry that: “Extreme confidence in human ingenuity and technological prowess, and the faith that humanity is the be all and end all of life on earth, suggests that, if we want, we can bioengineer new species and someday even bring back extinct ones.”⁷ The hubris that concerned both men is evident in current efforts at “solar climate intervention or solar

geoengineering.”⁸ The crises capitalism creates are those its Frankenstein—technology—can presumably solve.

As Bowers knew, such “extreme confidence”—hubris is his more pointed and precise designation – derives from as it propels those technologies in which we are now so entirely embedded. Bowers was clear concerning his own embeddedness: “Like the technology of print, I am dependent upon using the Internet even as I am aware of its limitations.”⁹ He suspected that “both print and data represent only a surface account of the emergent, relational, and interactive nature of embodied human experience.”¹⁰ While appreciative of Bowers’ concerns—his focus on data(ism) was prescient, as recent scholarship confirms¹¹—I am compelled to point out that being stuck on the surface depends on what is printed, as print can also be a portal to what is underneath the social surface, as the fiction of Virginia Woolf demonstrates. Bowers himself relied on print, and his print provided no “superficial account.” Print permeated with presence¹² -- often associated with orality, in Bowers’ case with critique—is what enables us to slip below the surface of the social.

Like Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous others like the Canadian political economist and communications theorist Harold Innis, Bowers knew that: “Oral cultures also have a more complex understanding of the importance of the non-monetized cultural commons.”¹³ With the present in shambles—“public space now threatened with extinction by images and simulacra of reality”¹⁴—and the future foreclosed, it is to the past we turn to reactivate our resolve, from where we can critique, engage in reflection and devise discourse, those the three elements of intellectual breakthrough Axelrod identified.

The “questions at the heart of the concept of ‘breakthrough’ [are] questions about thinking, individuality, and community,” Axelrod concludes.¹⁵ As this collection testifies, Bowers contested and created community as he provoked reflection, animated scholarly discourse, all through his individuated thinking. What strikes me about Bowers, then, is less his rich relation to his community

and more his single-minded, indeed individual, devotion to his calling: teaching. In his chapter, David Flinders reminds us that Bowers' teaching demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility to generations not-yet-born by addressing those of us alive today, showing students (for example) how the metaphorical character of language can reproduce discredited cultural assumptions from the past, and with catastrophic consequences.

Critique requires reflection: Bowers urged his fellow educators to encourage a heightened consciousness of everyone's situatedness: culturally, politically, biospherically. Today connectivity implies neither social solidarity nor self-development but an Internet connection. Bowers knew that technologization removes us farther from our organicism, from those fellow forms of life sharing the planet we all inhabit. "Marginalized by the digital revolution," Bowers appreciated, "are the forms of face-to-face, tacit, experience-based, and intergenerational knowledge rooted in local cultures, context, and ethnic practices."¹⁶ Marginalized may no longer be strong enough a term, as digitality destroys culture, updated forms of cultural genocide that Indigenous peoples have suffered for centuries.¹⁷ Replacing embodied place-based oral cultures is cyberculture, a pseudo-culture called the Cloud, e.g., no place in particular.

Technology has long been the accomplice of capitalism, creating pseudo-cultures of consumption and commodification, crafting a commons cut off from actual connection to the natural world, cut off from that cultural patterning "that connect us with one another and with the natural systems upon which we depend."¹⁸ Once connected but now cut off, Bowers knew "there is a problem of whether there will be any place for different cultural traditions of wisdom and moral values as data, the decision-making programs of computer experts, and the Western myth of the autonomous (that is, self-centered) individual become more widespread."¹⁹ While spot-on, here Bowers' insight also sidesteps the fact that he was himself very much the individual(ist), exercising old-fashioned human—not the self-centered narcissistic sort he is decrying above - autonomy to

sound the alarm, over and over again, alerting us to just how wrong our relationship to the natural world has gone.

Curriculum could conceivably come to the rescue, if only curriculum were encoded with “ecological intelligence”²⁰ instead of “innovation” and “entrepreneurialism,” if only curriculum were conservative, “aligned with the interdependent and largely non-monetized world of the cultural commons where the analogs are framed by an awareness of the need to conserve species, habitats, and the gift economy of intergenerational knowledge and skills practices across a wide range of human activity.”²¹ I, too, have reclaimed the concept of “conservative” from those reckless revolutionaries currently claiming the concept: “To be progressive today is to become conservative, committed to the preservation of public education and, through education, the preservation of the planet.”²² The scale of the curricular challenge is as daunting as it is urgent; as Flinders emphasizes: “Taken together, the chapters in this volume represent not a retrospective of Bowers’ work, but only a beginning to the vast work in curriculum studies needed to reorient education in ways that align learning with today’s environmental challenges.”²³

There is a subjective side to such a reorientation - such a reconceptualization—one that Bowers himself appreciated: “Neither can the digital revolution lead to the inner transformations in consciousness and self-identity that would lead to adopting a life of voluntary simplicity—to cite just one example of a possible personal transformation.”²⁴ There is in this insight an echo of another great curriculum theorist: Dwayne Huebner knew that: “Priority must be given to human beings and the natural order. Then we can see more clearly how humankind participates in the continual creation of the world. We can also see how the ‘creations’ of humankind sometimes bring us closer to extinction.”²⁵ Among those “creations” that bring us closer to “extinction” is technology itself. Bowers knew that digital culture does not enable people to experience the deepest levels of meaning and personal commitment previously associated with the wisdom traditions summarized here.²⁶ But

it can lead to the form of consciousness that reflects the adolescent stage of development promoted by corporate capitalism where everything is exciting, continually changing, free of long-term consequences, and seemingly in endless abundance.

In contrast to the illusory “abundance” capitalism creates, there can be a curriculum of actual abundance, as Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen affirm,²⁷ curriculum encouraging what Bowers attests, those “deepest levels of meaning and personal commitment.” Bowers knew we won’t see such a curriculum anytime soon, not in time to save the species. James B. Macdonald knew too, emphasizing the apparently impossible choice we face: “Short of de-technologizing society, we are faced with the fact that political action that in any way threatens our fundamental technological cultural base is no longer a viable alternative unless we are willing, in the name of ideals, to inflict untold suffering and the threat of extinction on millions of human beings.”²⁸ Bowers seemed sometimes willing to take that risk, mobilized as he was by his knowledge that the human species - and not only our own, as mass extinction is well underway—is already at risk for extinction. That knowledge animated his tireless teaching.

Bowers’ intellectual breakthrough was both paradigmatic— contextualizing the present calamity culturally, conceptually, and technologically, showing how purportedly “progressive” movements like constructivism and critical pedagogy were complicitous—and individual, as Bowers himself interwove insights from several bodies of knowledge to make an original, prolonged, still resounding statement, a teaching taken up so stirringly in this volume. This tireless teacher sought no disciples. Like Georg Simmel—whose accomplishment Axelrod studied – Bowers seemed to say: “I know that I shall die without intellectual heirs, and that is as it should be. My legacy will be like cash, distributed to many heirs, each transforming his part into use according to his nature—a use which will no longer reveal its indebtedness to this heritage.”²⁹ That That humility steadies us still,

we who resolve to remember and enact C. A. Bowers' intellectual breakthrough.

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¹ Foreword to *Curriculum, Environment, and the Work of C. A. Bowers: Ecological and Cultural Perspectives* (xv-xx), edited by A.M. Dentith, David Flinders, J. Lupinacci, and J.S. Thom. Routledge, 2022.

² Axelrod 1979, 67.

³ Bowers and Pinar, 1992.

⁴ Axelrod, 1979, 68.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 2016, 34.

⁷ 2010, 154.

⁸ Flavelle 2020, October 29, B.

⁹ 2016, p. xv.

¹⁰ 2016, 23.

¹¹ See, for example, Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Koopman 2019; Williamson 2017.

¹² Gumbrecht 2004.

¹³ 2016, 39.

¹⁴ Jay 1993, 74.

¹⁵ 1979, 2.

¹⁶ 2016, xiv.

¹⁷ Dickason and Newbigging 2010, 334; Conn 2004, 30; Hoxie 2001, 128.

¹⁸ Quoting Flinders in Chapter 1.

¹⁹ 2016, 60.

²⁰ Bowers 2016, 82.

²¹ Bowers 2016, 81.

²² Pinar 2019, 126.

²³ Quoted from this volume.

²⁴ 2016, 74.

²⁵ 1999, 408.

²⁶ 2016, 74.

²⁷ 2006.

²⁸ 1995, 73.

²⁹ Quoted in Axelrod 1979, 48.