

## Foreword

William F. Pinar

If “historicity is a feature of our *awareness itself*” – as David Carr (2014, 162) suggests - then knowing what time it is becomes one prerequisite to assessing the significance of scholarship. So - what time is it? For Michael J Thompson (2022, 32), it is a time of “twilight of the self,” a “withering” of any sense of an “autonomous self,” what he considers a cultural calamity ascribable to “certain forces and tendencies ... that actively erode the requisite building blocks for critical, democratic forms of individuality.” The “common good,” Thompson argues, is one which “has the good of the individual at its core” (2022, 3). Unsurprisingly, given this account of what time it is, the self is not all that’s under erasure: constitutional democracy is too, as the two are in tandem.

It is in during this momentous moment that I welcome Thomas S. Poetter’s *Curriculum Fragments* to the Routledge Series in Curriculum Theory. The author of several intriguing books, Poetter is also the Editor of the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* (JCT), President of the Foundation for Curriculum Theorizing, and Director of the Annual Bergamo Conference. In 2016, with Professor (and now Dean) Denise Taliaferro Baszile,<sup>1</sup> Professor Poetter co-founded and co-edited *The Currere Exchange Journal* and has continued to direct its yearly conference.<sup>2</sup> This history of these conspicuous accomplishments was inspired by people and passions they prompted. Passion is one prerequisite for subjective presence; Kierkegaard (quoted in Thompson 2022, 5) cautioned: “So too in the world of individuals, remove the essential passion, the one purpose, then everything becomes an insignificant featureless outwardness; the flowing current of ideality stops and the life that people share becomes a stagnant lake.” Poetter’s passions –

“processes” he pronounces them – are also forms of “ideality,” and the currents Kierkegaard references Poetter calls “curriculum fragments.” They are narratives that are, as you will see, almost “ontological” (Carr 2014, 231).

Ontology – the nature of being – includes culture and politics; Poetter’s self-engagement contests the macro-trend of the moment, “the modern self becom[ing] embedded in the external dynamics and processes of the technologically patterned world,” a moment, Thompson (2022, 129) explains, when “one loses that Kierkegaardian quality of selfhood as a relation that relates to itself: put another way, one’s individuality is absorbed into the system, the self no longer an agent of its own ethical and volitional life but an extension of society.” No loss of Kierkegaardian selfhood for Thomas Poetter, as we see as he shares with us his educational journey, which is constituted by “fragmented pieces of the whole, the stories” that “frame the way I see the world, act, live.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, curriculum fragments are “small bits of memories of life and educational experience that continue to stick to me,” that “persistently influence my thinking and actions in my personal and professional lives.” Moreover, such fragments “guide, to some degree, how we all proceed, take a next step, think of the past and present while moving, and dream of the future and perhaps even act now to change the course of our experience and history.” Indeed: “they constitute the curriculum of our educational lives.” This is, as Carr (2014, 228) appreciates, “self-constitution as self-narration.” Resina (2020, 3) suggests something similar, namely that “striving for self-knowledge” is “a protensional activity that is subject-constitutive,” as “what comes about is the self as it discovers itself in and through writing,” a “mode of self-inscription aiming for self-disclosure.” It is self-disclosure in service self-understanding, as Thomas Poetter demonstrates.

Poetter's text testifies to what Resina (2020, 14) characterizes as "the performative force of writing," the "making present of the self to oneself and to others." Making present performs what Carr (2014, 228) appreciates as "the ontological role of narration," as it "reveals itself as practical," as an "organization of praxis." As a praxis of presence, *Curriculum Fragments* seems an "inseparably spiritual and physical exercise" (Traverso 2020, 16), in Haase's (2020, 147)<sup>4</sup> phrasing, both "mystical experience and psychological self-exploration." Simultaneously spiritual and material too, as Poetter's curriculum fragments suggest, in Traverso's (2020, 19)<sup>5</sup> terms, "a symbiosis between life and history," a testimony of "lived experience, intimate and therefore irreducibly singular, from which nonetheless a universal portrait of humanity finally emerges." Skeptical are you? Recall Siegfried Kracauer's comment in an essay on Georg Simmel, "the core of mankind's essence is accessible through even the smallest side door" (quoted in Moltke 2023, November 23, 31). Walking through that "door" can precipitate an experience of "interior liberation" (Traverso 2020, 28) insofar as one grapples with the "inner otherness of every human being as a constitutive human condition" (Haase 2020, 154).

"Inner otherness" may be ontological but it also accretes socially, as Poetter appreciates. Consequently, his "idea from the beginning has been to work my way through aspects of life experience that have informed my educational journey," and then "to theorize and speculate about their meaning and worth through the lens of seven different, though overlapping life processes," that term a concept borrowed from Louise Berman's 1968 *New Priorities in the Curriculum*. Poetter's chapters are titled after seven processes, processes that those curriculum fragments render concrete, even catalytic. Feet firmly on the ground, Poetter invites us to walk alongside him as he reactivates the past, and that sense of motion – biographic movement – pervades the "feel of the book," a phrase he invokes in his discussion of Berman's book.

Berman, too, focused on motion and movement, characterizing “process-oriented persons” as “ongoing, growing, developing beings,” not buried “under the debris of nonessential or nonmeaningful aspects of life,” instead immersed in “change and movement,” persons tending “toward internal integrity rather than outward conformity to the unknown,” concerned “with the moral and the ethical,” requiring their attention on “the past as it relates to the present and future.” Poetter exemplifies the “process-oriented” person Berman postulates. Like Berman’s book, Poetter’s book is “persuasive, stimulating, scholarly, and eminently readable.” As did Berman, Poetter “interact[s] with and develop[s] life processes as aspects reflective of educational experience. “When,” he explains, “we take our educational journeys in an effort to understand them and the world and our places in it more completely, to explore them deeply, we become who we are supposed to be, or see truly who we are and what we might become.”

Poetter’s prose is insightful, heartfelt, poetical. Here I’ll selected sentences that illustrate these qualities, indicating in parenthesis the process they provoke: “The prevalence of loss sings in every breath I take” (loss), “I know how it feels to hurt someone” (knowledge), “How can any of us who have bruised others or been bruised respond and work on this without being trite about the pain and without being flippant about the power of forgiveness when serious, even mortal harm has been done?” (forgiving), “This journey, this life, this education, at each turn, takes two, at least,” in this instance his beloved teacher Mrs. Kemp, to whom he writes: “Rest in peace, with a knowing wink through gladsome tears of gratitude for all that you taught me” (relating), “Where is our hope?” (hoping), “How can we soar again as human beings and be full of freedom and possibility and love, when we feel as though, and may actually be, grounded by hate, ignorance, and despair?” (growing), and (last but not least) “For love, as an aspiration and as a reality in action ... binds humanity and the world as the most central, driving force and purpose

of our existence” (loving). That “driving force” animates his final chapter, his “synthesis,” acknowledgement of that “critical point that life processes exist in and imbue life experiences,” not only retrospective summation but also “key starting points for the work at hand and ahead.” What that work will include we may not yet know but, like Cusk’s character, Thomas Poetter is “interested in the existence of things before our knowledge of them” (2021, 13).

Poetter’s concept of curriculum fragments particularize life’s processes by detailing how these events and relationships comprised transformative moments, that last phrase a concept from Poetter’s professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Professor James Loder. Just as the concrete and abstract – the particular in the process - intersect here, so does the historical time and eternity. “How do we make sense of lives that are finite as having infinite, timeless qualities?” Poetter asks, adding: “And why do we hold to such things, know them, believe in them?” Transformative moments represent being “re-baptized by an empathetic divinity,” leaving Poetter to ponder: “What kind of life would I be leading or committed to if not ever faced with the paradox, the double metaphor, the dialectic of life?” Facing these he does, not necessarily obtaining answers but certainly clarifying the questions, as lived experience becomes “clearer” by “thinking through life’s events, making sense of them, and developing ways of viewing the world through reflection,” an ongoing self-engagement that “helps me survive and thrive.” The “point of the work,” Poetter knows, “is movement, not stasis.” Such movement enables him to craft “a point of view from multiple angles, sometimes with different voices in play,” always “trying to come to terms with so many paradoxes that get expressed and re-expressed allegorically in the stories at hand.” Sagely, Poetter knows that “reflection and generation through autobiographical work may even help us reclaim lost ground, understand where we have been and where we are going, and also maybe open doors that we may have

thought of previously as leading nowhere.” He knows, as does Hongyu Wang (2024, 118), that “transformation has to happen from within.”

I know, some will say all this amounts to nothing more than “a wake for a disappearing world” (Stepanova 2018, 229). Certainly the world Poetter inhabited and that which he reactivates here is indeed “disappearing,” although, as Faulkner knew, the past is not past.<sup>6</sup> So disappearing alright, but not ghosted. The human subject is not (yet), as Resina (2020, 1) reminds: “after decades of critique of the subject, the self obstinately refuses to give up the ghost.” Still, as this text testifies, the “ghost” – the past, “the lived and unspoken past” (Stepanova 2018, 33) – structures the self, even as the technologization of everything threatens to dissolve both past and future in our predatory present, itself a “a false sense of being rooted in the present” (Stepanova 2018, 187), as we’re not here but in the Cloud, mesmerized by the screen, out of place and time. Stepanova (2018, 34) mourns the extinction of the embodied lived present as she ponders “what memory wants from me,” acutely aware that “history is an open wound” (2018, 92), and that “all of us, both the living and the dead, seemed equally to belong to the past” (2018, 419). The future is not front of us but in back; Thomas Poetter points the way.

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#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wayne.edu/people/hq4976>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.currereexchange.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages come from this text.

<sup>4</sup> Haase is discussing Teresa of Ávila and Julia Kristeva.

<sup>5</sup> Traverso is discussing the writing of Jean Améry.

<sup>6</sup> The actual line is: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past. All of us labor in webs spun long before we were born, webs of heredity and environment, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity.” <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/10279648-the-past-is-never-dead-it-s-not-even-past-all>