Critical Educational Autobiography

••Excerpt••

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What follows is the first part of a three-part critical educational autobiography that I wrote for Concha Delgado-Gaitán, when, in 1995, I took her Culture and Learning course as part of my graduate studies in Sociocultural Studies of Education at the University of California, Davis. In the preface to the paper, I describe the work as a triptych, “an altarpiece or devotional picture . . . with one central panel and two hinged wings” (Janson, 1977). I write, “Although here the printed page has replaced the painted canvas, it is still a work of three parts that, taken together, tell one story. In the first part of this paper, I have tried to listen to the child-voice that still lives inside me as I reflect on an experience that refuses to be buried despite a lifetime of effort to the contrary; in the second part, my adult-voice tries to make sense of my lived reaction to this experience by construction/deconstructing that reaction against the backdrop of my own culture and learning; and, in the third part, I describe the autobiographical process as I experienced it in authoring this very work.” I share the first part of my triptych, the first hinged-wing, with you now in hopes that it reveals the kinds of experiences I bring to my interest in engaged pedagogy and research and, also, that it attracts further interest in the transformational process and outcomes of critical educational autobiography. Writing this may have been more important to my making it though young adulthood than I will ever know. It is a vivid reminder of the power of the assignments we give to our
students, an indisputable artifact of the connection between “professionalization” and the personal.


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**KNOWING HOME**

“3800 N.E. 23rd.” With fierce determination I marched off to school reciting the numbers under my breath. Past the gas station, the drug store, the market, I charged on. Mrs. Bayard would be pleased that I knew my address. She would pull me to her, smelling all old-lady sweet, blow her nose on a tissue pulled from the sleeve of her dress, and send me off to claim my reward. All the children in Mrs. Bayard’s morning kindergarten class got a reward when they learned their address– a construction-paper silhouette of a house on which, after they glued a lop-sided door here and a mid-sized window or two there, she would inscribe the newly-mastered information in adult-perfect, black felt-pen writing across the top. But it was not so much the paper-house prize that drove me on to school so intently that morning – it was knowing that the numbers were *my* numbers. I was proud of my numbers for they stood for *my* place. *My* yellow house with a creaky green swing on the front porch and a tetherball in the backyard. *My* mom who’d lay me down on the ironing board to wash me hair in the kitchen sink and let me sit under the sewing table and press the foot lever while she made my clothes. *My* dad who, when he wasn’t sitting in his corner of the living room reading
and getting mad when I played the piano real loud, would sit outside with me at night, telling Brer Rabbit stories, and giving me puffs of his cigars. My siblings, all seven of them, most of whom treated me especially nicely because I was the youngest, except of course for T my older brother, who, being closest to me in age, was my perpetual torturer. Take a map of Portland, Oregon and you will find 3800 N.E. 23rd north and east of the city center. Make a map of my internal geography and 3800 N.E. is the center. I claimed it that day. I ran all the way home, my construction-paper house fluttering like a flag at my side, and claimed it.

THE TRESPASS

Then S came home from college and slowly, over the next five ears, began to take it all away. Because she left for college when I was just two, up until her return I knew her only through vacation visits and the family stories and photos that filled the gaps in between. I knew she was the second-oldest sister, that she came after M and before J, A, G, s, T and me. I knew she wore her hair in pretty brown braids and had been on dance team in high school. I knew she used to sing “Ragtime Cowboy Joe” to me as she rocked me to sleep. But I didn’t really know her. Now, my sisters say that’s for the better. “You don’t really know what you’ve lost if you never knew what you had in the first place” they say. But I did know what I’d lost. My home. It was never the same.

When I was ten they finally took her away. Although I don’t think I really grasped what was wrong, I wasn’t surprised. I knew she was “weird” and that she always embarrassed me. Like the time she made me ride the bus with her and read the Bible out loud so that everyone could hear. They pretended it wasn’t happening, but I knew they
were listening and thinking, “Oh, that poor girl with the crazy sister.” Or the time I brought my best friend, over after school with the guy she had a crush on, and I made toast and S came up from the basement, which was where she had lived, and she pointed a finger at my friend’s guy, all greasy with her bedclothes all crimped and dirty, and screamed, “He’s the Devil, get him out of the house!” and my friend and her guy looked at me all scared and I said, “Oh, she must just be dreaming,” like it was just something that happened everyday. (Later, when I was in college, I heard that my friend’s guy jumped off the Burnside Bridge and drown himself, something that S also tried to do, but she forgot she was such a good swimmer and just ended up with a bruised butt, and I couldn’t help wondering if somehow being called the Devil had started my friend’s guy down this path of sorrows). So I was glad, really, when they took her away. But I wish they’d been able to come in with a big old broom and sweep away all the sadness she left behind.

WAYS OF UNHAPPINESS

I know that Tolstoy once said that all happy families are the same, but that an unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. My family’s way of being unhappy was to pretend that we weren’t. Not that we acted happy, because we didn’t do that either. We just behaved as if nothing had happened. Or that what had happened was nothing special. I’ll never know the unhappiness that my parents felt in watching their child descend into madness. I’ll never know how my siblings felt watching S go off to discover the world only to return having lost it. I’ll never know these things because they were never
spoken. We just went on with our days as if now that she was gone, that was it, she was
gone. But I knew she wasn’t.

She followed me around. When I got ready for school, there she’d be staring
back in the mirror. I’d lean closer to get a better look and, sure enough, her brown hair,
her pale skin, her small eyes, her hooknose, they were all there. They were also there; she
was there, on the faces of my sisters. Now, if we all carried around some of her looks on
our outsides, then couldn’t we also be carrying around some of her craziness in our
insides? This was a frightening question and a deadly one. It killed a part of me; I think,
right on the spot – the important part that lets children trust life so completely. What I
used to experience as moments of pure joy began to lose their luster. My sisters’
sidewalk renditions of Janis Joplin now made me squirm as we walked to the store. I
wanted to tell them to shut up and just act “normal” when I felt the gaze of the other
pedestrians fall heavily on my shoulders. My sisters became sources of shame for me.
Whereas their beautiful, young bodies had mesmerized me the many times I watched
them turn the living room into a dance floor, moving wildly to the rhythms of Aretha, I
now felt embarrassed – at their second-hand clothes, their unshaven armpits and legs,
their laughter so loud and free. I felt that somehow this behavior would awaken the
craziness that lay sleeping in all of us. You see, maybe if we were quiet enough it would
pass us by. She had lived too boldly and so she brought it on herself. I knew that from the
stories they would tell me about her. She had been too smart, too pretty, too popular with
boys. And then she went to college and became too artsy, spending all of her time
painting and writing poetry, even taking some drugs to help her see the world more
“creatively,” although this last part they didn’t intend for me to understand. But I was
older that they thought, even felt older than them sometimes, like an old woman living in a child’s body. My teachers began to describe me as “serious.” But then wasn’t it serious business keeping all that craziness locked away?

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