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Author(s): Patricia Burdell and Beth Blue Swadener
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Critical Personal Narrative and Autoethnography in Education: Reflections on a Genre

PATRICIA BURDELL  BETH BLUE SWADENER

As critical educators, we are frequently searching for provocative texts to inform our scholarship and teaching, as well as to strengthen the connections we make between theory and praxis. Our research has used narrative inquiry, collaborative ethnography, and applied semiotics. Between us, we share an identity and scholarship in critical and feminist curriculum theory. Our work interrogates risk/deficit images of children, youth, and families, and we seek to decolonize researcher relationships with participants. We both struggle to create substantial intersections between theory and the day-to-day pragmatic needs of teacher education—specifically, in early childhood and secondary education.

We are frequent border-crossers, teaching courses in cultural foundations and qualitative research methods, as well as in our "home" discipline of curriculum and instruction. In addition, we try to make direct linkages between these areas when we teach "strategies and methods." We frequently draw from sources including sociology and anthropology, and take active roles in reframing our respective disciplines outside their prevailing developmental and subject matter focused boundaries. As such, we seek texts that allow us to enter the world of others in ways that have us more present in their experience, while better understanding our own. Recently, several volumes have been published which combine autobiographical narratives with a variety of theoretical perspectives, including critical, dialogic, phenomenological, feminist, and semiotic perspectives. It is perhaps both the intent and effect of many of these texts to broaden the "acceptable" or give voice to the intellectual contradictions and tensions in everyday lives of scholar-teachers and researchers. In this essay/review we discuss what we see as an emerging genre in educational scholarship—a genre that we are naming critical personal narrative and autoethnography in education.

Four edited volumes published in 1998 offer personal, political, and theoretical narratives. These are Education, Power and Personal Biography: Dialogues with Critical Educators (Carlos Alberto Torres), Multicultural Research: A Reflective Engagement with Race, Class, Gender and Sexual Orientation (Carl Grant), Inside Stories: Qualitative Research Reflections (Kathleen Bennett deMarrais), and Wish I Were: Felt Pathways of the Self (Linda Rogers). In this essay, we locate these texts within the disciplines they inform, explore some of the intersections and contradictions within this growing genre, and relate each to our scholarship and praxis. We also raise a number of questions related to critical curriculum studies that examine the growing use of academics' personal narratives in scholarly publications.

**Anatomy of a Genre**

If you scratch a theory you'll find a biography.


As Chamberlain and Thompson (1998) point out, the notion of genre has a long and confusing history in the arts and literature and is relatively new to the social sciences. Because there are no settled definitions of genre, it can be characterized in a range of ways, including by a particular shared purpose, form, mood, ideology, or content (Naussbaum, 1998). We argue that there are several specific "genres" in academic and professional discourse about teaching and schooling. Students of education read a variety of "stories" about education and about teaching, including teacher success stories (Ayers, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994), children "at risk" stories (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Wollons, 1992), exemplars of practice (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Ayers, 1993; Paley, 1979), urban education sagas (Kohl, 1967; Kotlowitz, 1991; Kozol, 1991) and "reform" stories (Anyon, 1997; Lipman, 1998; Seizer 1984; Sleeter, 1992).

Turning to the more specific attributes of the form and content of critical personal narrative and autoethnography in education, the narratives we review share a form that draws, in part, from poststructural and postcolonial themes. They are multivocal and question previous assumptions of empirical authority, while also interrogating the construction of subjectivity. While these texts use a poststructural form, much of their content draws from critical theories, in that they embody a critique of prevailing structures and relationships of power and inequity in a relational context. That is, either implicitly or explicitly, each of these volumes assumes materialist social forms or discursive structures which serve particular social interests. Thus, we have added the marker "critical" to personal narrative to signify this explicitly political project.
As a means of further identifying the nuances of what we are calling critical narrative and autoethnography in education, we draw from Deborah E. Reed-Danahay’s (1997) work on “auto/ethnography,” which explores intersections of genre and voice, border crossing, multiple identities, dual consciousness, and selfhood, within the changing field of anthropology. Autoethnography is defined as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text (Reed-Danahay, p. 9). Although the construct of autoethnography has been used for over two decades by literary critics, anthropologists, and sociologists, Reed-Danahay states, “We are in the midst of a renewed interest in personal narrative, in life history, and other autobiography among anthropologists,” and she situates this dynamic within the “changing nature of field work in a post-colonial and postmodern world” (p. 1).

Within the specific historical spaces of curriculum theorizing and ethnographic work in education there exists a dialectical tension between the more applied or technocratic aspects of education (e.g., issues of certification, proficiency testing, persistent “teacher proof” curricula, and the standards movement) and a more reflexive and theorized praxis. In the 1970s, the movement away from the prevailing behavioral rationalism in teacher education and curriculum theory drew from a range of theories in the social sciences and humanities. As Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) and others have detailed, an array of highly theorized curriculum discourses has increased the available narratives, metaphors, and methodological approaches for curriculum scholars and teacher educators. However, this increasingly “hyper-theoretical” writing has been criticized for having the effect of disconnecting the experiences and daily lives of those to whom the authors would give “voice.” A lack of accessibility in some of these texts has been described as perpetuating a colonizing or “othering” discourse that serves to separate theory from classroom praxis.

One response to these concerns has been the increasing use of personal narrative—including the narratives of those who had been “written about” in the past, as well as more personal disclosure of the relationship between the personal and the political in education theorists’ lives. The greater use of personal narrative in an array of education-related scholarship began, in part, as a form of resistance to “othering” (hooks, 1994; Reed-Danahay, 1997) and ventriloquy (Fine, 1994) in ethnography. Thus, what we are seeing in this new genre is a movement away from distanced theoretical writing to writing that details the individual and imaginative aspects of agency. We find in these texts narratives that draw from collective experience, struggle, and identity contestation in ways that illuminate the complexity of, and contradictions to, assumptions in various disciplines, often serving as manifestos in their respective fields. In order to raise a number of critical questions regarding the politics of this trend toward personal narrative, as well as to analyze specific compelling characteristics of each volume, we discuss and situate each book, contextualizing the content and style of each in relation to the editor, contributors, and reader. We begin with two books that contain both explicit and implicit dialogue between their editors and contributors, and serve to draw the reader into their compelling discourse.

**The Books**

**Wish I Were**

**Wish I Were: Felt Pathways of the Self** by Linda J. Rogers is a collection of intimate stories and essays which explore the generation and functions of symbols and narratives that individuals create in making sense of lives lived outside ordinary categories. In this volume, Rogers is joined by seven other contributors who share their personal interpretations of individual experiences. The book as a whole implies trajectories for redefinitions of the self. This happens in at least two ways. First, it occurs in an interplay between the author/editor and other contributors, in which the same incident is narrated by two different participants in a shared academic community/work place. Secondly, implicit archetypal and semiotic themes are placed in juxtaposition between and among the chapters.

These recreations, acts of remembering, and repositioning of both public and private selves allow for the creation of new categories which, like Soja’s (1996) notion of a “thinspace,” are spaces of possibility that transcend more typical oppositional and narrowly proscribed categories of being, knowing, and developmental growing.

To quote Marcel Danesi’s epilogue, this volume is a “veritable case study manual of the ‘educator-as-semiotician,’ who seeks solutions to human problems in and through forms of representation and communication that people utilize as means of regulating the Self-Other relation in society” (p. 199-200).

We found this book to be an engaging text on both a personal and professional level. Rogers’ writing is too often lost in conventional psychoanalytic interpretation. In other words, although framed within applied semiotic theory, Rogers allows the contributors to tell their own stories and make their own interpretations of their unique experiences.

This volume is a collection of 11 chapters, 5 of which were written by Rogers, with a preface by critical theorist Peter McLaren and an epilogue by semiotician, Marcel Danesi. In the foreword, Rogers describes her process of coming to grips with what might be described as postmodern ambiguities, contradictions, and incoherence, as experienced and reflected through a variety of roles she has played out in her journeys as woman, wife, mother, and researcher. In some respects, Rogers could be described as employing a sort of “hyper-listening” to the stories that surround her. Readers must do as she does to gain the full value of this text—read between the lines, listen carefully for the clues, and decode the subtexts of each story, in a postmodern fashion.

The organization of this volume presents side-by-side narratives in a rich, collaborative interaction, which foregrounds the contributors’ relationships with signs, symbols, and opportunities for redefinitions of the self. This happens in at least two ways. First, it occurs in an interplay between the author/editor and other contributors, in which the same incident is narrated by two different participants in a shared academic community/work place. Secondly, implicit archetypal and semiotic themes are placed in juxtaposition between and among the chapters.
compelling, provocative, and actively engages the reader. We recommend its use in developmental and educational psychology courses, particularly life span or adult development, as well as in qualitative research methods and applied semiotics graduate courses.

_Education, Power, and Personal Biography_

_Education, Power, and Personal Biography_ by Carlos Alberto Torres also positions the reader as a participant in a conversation, in this case a series of dialogues between the editor/interviewer and critical colleagues. In a more explicitly political manner, this collection of interviews offers representations of how founding critical educators connect theory to the practice of their everyday lives and scholarship. For those readers who have been influenced by the scholarship of critical educators, including Michael Apple, Maxine Green, Henry Giroux, Geoff Whitley, and Samuel Bowles, this book offers the reader compelling glimpses into their more personal and intimate ways of explaining the sense they make of their work, their dilemmas, and their hopes.

The book is organized as dialogic conversations with the author that illuminate the social, cultural, and intellectual “milieu” of these educators’ work. As Torres (1998) states, “The dialogues in this book document the struggles, joys and sorrows of Left and progressive academics fighting to establish a new critical tradition (p. 2).” It could be argued that Torres continues in the Latin American genre of _testimonio_, or bearing witness, an autobiographical form of radical narrative originating in the 1960s and also widely used in refugee politics in the U.S. (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1998). “Its key feature, as the name _testimonio_ indicates, is as a secular spiritual testimony, telling a life as a left-wing moral with the overt intention of raising consciousness.” (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1997, p. 6). As Reed-Danahay (1997) states, “This movement has sought to transcend the binary split between the self and the social through genres of writing that provide collective representations” (p. 10). The Torres volume provides a space for collective representation found in the _testimonio_ genre, which can move and inspire the reader.

Torres acknowledges that his selection of contributors arose from the powerful influence many educational theorists had upon him when he first encountered their work, and pays tribute to leaders in the field, several of whom are his mentors. Torres invited these academics, now his colleagues and friends, to dialogue with him about their academic work and personal experience. Although their theoretical approaches, research agendas, and strategies differ (e.g., critical theory, Marxism, neo-Marxism, game theory, positivism, and theories of race/ethnicity, class, and gender), all share a commitment to political activism and do not fully abandon a structural analysis in their critiques of prevailing social relations. The narratives document how and, more importantly, why, this tradition evolved through the recollections of those who developed it in the early 1970s and who continue to contribute to it today (e.g., Gloria Ladson-Billings). Torres’ intent is to show how these thinkers developed academic careers in the midst of the challenges facing them, the kinds of questions that anchor their work, and the configuration of challenges in today’s academic context. The fact that each chapter is drawn from an interview which Torres conducted with the author makes another type of “side-by-side narrative” quite accessible to the reader, and the interplay among the stories and parallel themes of a number of the chapters make this an excellent choice for curriculum theory, history, educational policy, and cultural foundations courses.

The other two volumes we consider in this essay/review share a focus on the student/reader in an effort to make researchers’ lives, methodological dilemmas, power relations, theories, and politics more transparent and accessible. As Grant (1999) writes,

> We teach and learn in a time when human agency and authentic voice, diversity and multicultural education are receiving attention like no other time in the history. . . . Simultaneously we teach in a time when the elementary to college age students are not beholden to, or impressed by, academic tradition and professional mystique. (p.1)

One purpose of such volumes, to paraphrase Grant, is to demystify systems of reasoning and the role of life history for educators and within the scholarly/research process.

**Inside Stories**

_Inside Stories: Qualitative Research Reflections_ by Kathleen Bennett deMarrais uses stories ethnographers and other qualitative researchers tell—in order to raise ethical issues and examine power relations in “the field.” This book, in particular, is closely linked to the genre of autoethnography, or autobiographical ethnography, as all the contributors are involved in “doing” ethnography and situate their tales from the field within personal narratives. As is the case here, and as Okeley and Callaway (in Reed-Danahay, 1997) observe, “[Qualitative researchers] are increasingly explicit in their exploration of links between their own autobiography and their ethnographic practices” (p. 2).

**Inside Stories** also reminded us of Rogers’ statement that her book represented an “attempt to come to grips with what research usually leaves out—the messy variables that lie on the edges or outside formal measurement, and the often inchoate, intangible, difficult aspects of human life . . .” (1998, p. i). Kathleen deMarrais’ edited volume takes readers, clearly framed as students of qualitative research, into the messy process of research and the complexities faced by 19 researchers contributing to the book. This conversation is facilitated by discussion questions and issues provided for each chapter or story.

Turning to the structure of this volume, deMarrais’ introduction takes the reader through an analysis of the issues raised in each chapter in both a personalized and very systematic way. The editor provides a table that outlines the themes or “key issues” of each chapter. It is clear at the outset that this book is a teaching tool, primarily for the growing number of university courses related to qualitative research. Each chapter begins with a brief biography of the contributing author, followed by focus questions which script or scaffold the reader, and an essay unpacking a particular theme, critical incident, dilemma, or issue encountered by the author(s). All of the 18 chapters in this volume offer brief stories which provide an array of entry points into issues which deMarrais argues should be considered in the preparation of qualitative researchers. The book could be described as using case study method, in that the reader
(and student) is encouraged to engage in a critical problem-solving process with each narrative.

Of particular relevance to the theme of genre is Margaret LeCompte’s chapter, which focuses on the development of an “intellectual autobiography.” In this chapter, as in others, LeCompte retraces her development as a researcher and reveals ways in which her autobiography influenced her career and research interests. She refers to her “theoretical home,” a relevant issue for many of the chapter contributors across all the books considered in this review.

Other narratives of interest in the deMarrais book include Loida C. Velizquez’s chapter, “Personal Reflections on the Process: The Role of Researcher and Transformative Research,” which provides a reflective reconstruction of an event during the author’s graduate study. Jan Gamradt’s chapter on “studying up” in anthropology also offers insights into the challenges of doing ethnography with privileged and elite groups, in her case, highly specialized surgeons. Among the many other issues that Inside Stories explores, according to deMarrais, are “gaining entry; overlapping, conflicting roles and the boundaries of these roles; differential power relationships; who tells the story and whose story is told; ethical concerns related to confidentiality; and the influence of a researcher’s particular philosophy or theoretical framework on his or her research.” Of the books reviewed, this one is more of a textbook in format. It complements a qualitative methods textbook written by the same authors and extends the discourse beyond that text and into the more challenging ethical dilemmas and issues faced in “the field” by researchers at various stages of their careers.

**Multicultural Research: A Reflective Engagement**

In Multicultural Research: A Reflective Engagement with Race, Class, Gender and Sexual Orientation, Carl Grant invites the reader into his process of conceptualizing this edited volume by including the full text of his letter of invitation to contributors, which is found in the Introduction. This volume, similar to Torres’ (1998), can be viewed as using a form of testimonio, framed within the more applied arena of multicultural research and praxis. Grant invited colleagues to respond to specific questions regarding what guided the authors during “research and writing in the areas of social justice and power and/or the interrelationship between [their] life experience and the theoretical underpinnings of [their] scholarship” (p. 2). The authors describe ways in which their life histories, political involvement, moments of insight, and desire to work in alliances for social change made an impact on their research agenda and professional growth.

Grant selected the 18 contributors for their identification with social justice work and critical multicultural scholarship, sharing Torres’ focus on critical theory. A characteristic of multicultural scholarship, echoed in this volume, is its deliberate foregrounding of the voices of persons who have historically been at the margins of dominant culture and education discourse. Thus, a number of contributors in the Grant volume discuss their experience at the margins and various issues they have confronted in the academy, in schools, and in other settings as activist multicultural scholars. Grant’s text joins a growing body of narratives that includes the work of bell hooks (1994), Michele Foster and Lisa Delpit (1997), Maria de la Luz Reyes (1997), Audre Lorde (1984), Chandra Mohanty (1991), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), and Cameron McCarthy (1998). Multicultural education scholars attempt to do similarly critically and self-reflexive work, within the boundaries and realities of school curricula and policy, teaching practice, and teacher education. Their work is often informed by both ethnography and identity development theory. Given Carl Grant’s lifetime leadership in education that is multicultural, as well as his extensive mentorship of newer scholars in related fields, we were not surprised that one of the notable aspects of this volume was the diversity of contributing authors and the differences in the ways in which they chose to respond to his invitation. Grant has long been known for creating discursive spaces in which relevant dialogue can occur and new voices are included in the dialogue.

Grant’s collection of reflective essays offers a wide range of writing styles, theoretical frameworks, and subject matter. It was particularly interesting to contrast some of the more highly theoretical and politically passionate, if personally distanced, chapters with the more accessible and experientially connected chapters. Other chapters offer glimpses into the more personal side of critical and postmodern theorists of education, including those chapters by Grant’s colleagues, Michael Apple and Thomas Popkewitz. Thus, we would recommend this book for courses in curriculum theory, multicultural education, teacher education, and research methods.

One of the distinctive contributions of this book is its interrogation of categories of difference and the role that these differences played in constructing the life of a researcher or theorist. In fact, this volume encourages readers to take a more inclusive view of power relations and multicultural categories, transcending persistent boundaries of race, class, and gender to include sexual orientation. For example, Liz Ellsworth tells in a compelling way how the historical and cultural context of the Women’s Movement shaped her dissertation. In an excited moment, her writing moved from rational to passionate when the analysis of Personal Best became her point connection of theory to personal desire and dreams. This excitement was suddenly deadened, however, when she came to realize through the critique of a committee member that she had unintentionally reduced the lesbian view to a single, unified community giving no thought to racial, class, and other social differences. Ellsworth states,

What blew my mind even more . . . was the deepening realization of how completely I had managed to unconsciously separate ‘what I knew,’ however partially, as a lesbian . . . from ‘what I knew’ as a graduate student writing a dissertation. (p.27)

Both Carl Grant and Kathleen Bennett deMarrais share a concern about the student/reader—whether the student of a research methods course, multicultural theory and research, or curriculum studies. Specifically, both authors seek to make the research process more transparent, with emphasis on the role of personal history and ethical dilemmas. Grant and deMarrais share a commitment to the mentorship of newer scholars, whether framed within multicultural, critical, or ethnographic lenses.
Connections and Contradictions

The narratives and essays in these volumes move between private histories and more public examinations of both political and theoretical issues directly experienced by the authors. Additionally, these books implicitly and explicitly address issues of power, social justice, and voice—at times through the authors’ analyses of events in their lives and work. The emergence of these volumes signals the importance of a contemporary genre in education theory which foregrounds the personal, while not evading the complex and contradictory nature of theory and research. The need to move toward a theory for understanding praxis, combined with the need to “de-mystify” theory across a variety of education discourses, has set the stage for an outpouring of books of this nature. The personal narratives found in these books, although specifically related to the work of educators, cross disciplines and theoretical frameworks. Their interdisciplinary nature demonstrates the increasingly reflexive and theoretically-grounded nature of much contemporary education scholarship. In distinctive ways, the contributors to these volumes engage in a critical analysis of their own positioning within various contexts, including gender, race, class, sexuality, and identity politics.

The content of these books focuses on contemporary educational discourses and problematizes curriculum, pedagogy, and qualitative research in ways that inform everyday projects in colleges of education. A key characteristic of this genre is the degree to which each editor’s own personal, political project and role in education shape the very nature of the genre. For example, Torres serves as critical ethnographic interviewer and provocateur in relation to his contributors. Grant and deMarrais embody the persona of invitational mentor of educational researchers. Rogers weaves intricate narratives that reminded us of Munt’s (1994) analysis of the psychoanalytic detective story, serving the role of storyteller as healer. As opposed to taking on the role of the more distanced view of the “neutral outsider,” the editors each reveal their vulnerabilities and interrogate their experiences, even as they orchestrate the conversations with contributing authors. One characteristic shared by all the books is that individual authors serve to redefine the role of the academic, in a way that moves beyond making claims of objective reality, or finding “the truth.” In this sense, this genre models a way of thinking that we have found consistent with our teaching and research praxis.

This genre, like any other, is not without contradictions. The books we have reviewed are also tied together through their display of the lives of academics, and related others, in education. Personal narrative and autobiography are dependent on notions of “self” and “identity,” which are both sites of contestation and reproduction of hegemonic relations. Within the humanities, and increasingly within education, the autonomous, rational, and unified Enlightenment self is viewed as problematic and contradictory. The notion of the self has been limited until recently by the available narratives or “provided subjectivities” (Walkerdine, in Smith, 1993) and dominant discourses. This legacy is embedded in the very form of personal narrative, a genre born in a discourse of individualism, heroics, and “star” worship.

Thus, it remains of critical importance to ask, “whose interests are being served?” by particular narratives or framings. Clearly, even collaborative endeavors such as those in these volumes raise complex questions about power and voice, much as deMarrais and Grant allude to in their books. We would join Michael Apple and others in using this genre with some deliberation, caution, questioning its limits, and realizing its tendency toward possessive individualism or even narcissism. As Apple (1996) warns, “such writing can serve the chilling function of simply saying, ‘but enough about you, let me tell you about me,’” which “wind[s] up privileging the white, middle class woman’s or man’s need for self display” (p. xiv). We would return to such questions long posed within critical curriculum theory, including whose perspective or voice is represented, who is writing the narrative, and what are the material limits on individual agency and expression? In other words, no genre is a panacea and the challenges to any postcolonial project are many.

Closing Observations and Possibilities

Despite the cautions above, the strength of the more personal nature of the narratives we have reviewed is that within education, we are working with individual children and youth who are attempting to write their identity. Indeed, personal narratives, whether through autobiography, autobiographical fiction, drama, films, or poetry, have long been used in education to evoke perspective taking, compassion, and critique of prevailing “common sense” assumptions and to problematize categories of difference. We would argue that the personal can evoke the political over time. Among the strengths of personal narratives is their potential to fracture the artificial closure of discourse in education-related disciplines. The ongoing and dynamic process of identity construction, in opposition to existing definitions and categories, is reflected across these volumes in powerful ways. Through their stories, the authors defy static, predetermined categories and proscribed boundaries and convey the dialectical tensions and trialectic possibilities (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) of those who are constructing a life in the postmodern academy. These narratives can create a space for conversation, reflection, and critique.

As this genre expands, it is important to notice who gets to speak, who is invited to contribute, and the nature of the stories. Hopefully, rather than careless slippage into individualistic self promotion, we will see a continued and powerful use of what have been termed “outlaw genres” (Kaplan, 1998, p. 208) and “autobiographical Manifestos” (Smith, 1998, p. 437), where the rhetorical ground of appeal is collective rather than individual. For, as Bakhtin (1973) asserts, when a subject speaks in “social dialect,” new spaces for subjectivity are created. We find that Torres’ use of testimonio provides an example of such social dialect in service of a liberatory project, as do some of the chapters in Rogers’ book, particularly her framing of John Rossiter’s story of navigating the restrictions, misinterpretations, and limitations imposed on him as a graduate student with physical disabilities.

In working with this genre, we can continue to work collectively both inside and outside the academy to forge a liberatory, postcolonial praxis. To quote bell hooks (1994), “It is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practice talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a
space for intervention” (p. 129). Available critical narratives and auto-ethnographic texts provide vehicles for talking to each other, often across the borders of discipline and identity locations. For those of us located inside pragmatic, credential-oriented, and technology-driven corporate university settings, opening such spaces for dialogue creates possibilities for re-engagement, resistance, and reading ourselves into the process of educational and social change.

References


