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What We Talk about When We Talk about Love: A Duoethnographic Exploration of the Dissertation Relationship

Robert J. Helfenbein and Susan R. Adams

Abstract

In the aftermath and mop-up following a successful dissertation defense, an unintended and unexpected data source remained unexplored and unanalyzed: 32 audio recorded discussions and work sessions documenting the processes, approaches, and decisions made by a dissertation director and his doctoral candidate. What might those conversations reveal about the dissertation relationship? Taking a page from Raymond Carver's short story, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love," we wondered what we might have been talking about when we were talking about dissertation writing. Inspired and shaped by Norris, Sawyer, and Lund's (2012) duoethnographic methods, this study provides opportunity for us to not just look back on the journey, but pushes us into the messiness of "recalling and reconceptualizing" (p. 10). As we each "become the foil for the Other, challenging the Other to reflect on their own life in a deeper, more relational, and authentic manner" (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012, p. 10) we also interrogate and trouble our own simplistic categories of analysis.

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Introduction

Framed and composed as a series of letters written to one another, this paper takes seriously the notion of *currere* in curriculum theorizing as more than a cursory circling of the track. This paper is a representation of a recursive analysis of where we were a year ago, a listening in on our former selves trying to wrestle with competing demands during a vulnerable moment in a critical intersection of the journey. In a synoptic move, (Pinar, 2006), the paper concludes with a turn to locate the work within a broader curricular context of the messy entanglements of love, eroticism, identity, and desire located with/in a teaching relationship.

Susan was writing the final pages of her dissertation. Rob served as her dissertation director. It was Susan's habit to record their meetings and conversations as a memory device to assist her in her writing. Transcription excerpts are provided at regular intervals throughout to provide context for the reader. What follows is a series of exchange as each reflects on the transcription of a phone meeting that took place less than a week before the dissertation was submitted to the committee just prior to the defense. Rob, the dissertation director, was on sabbatical and had been traveling for several months which meant communication had been limited to email and phone meetings. This particular phone conversation came at a crisis point in Susan's writing in which she feels she is trapped in a game scenario with the committee.

Rob: Yeah, yeah I think that's worth writing about. That's a question for me, so it will certainly pop up for the rest of the committee, is when you are talking about this game, you know, are you talking about me? You know, so, I mean, I had that thought, and so that means everyone else is going to have that thought, too.

Susan: Well, of course I'm talking about you (Susan laughs, Rob laughs a second later with her).

Rob: Well, but then, and in what way? And you know, what role *am* I playing in that, and then, you know, the natural kind of defensiveness, and what do you do with this?

Susan: Yeah, yeah. And,

Rob: And part of what I want to say to you, though, Susan, is, you kind of, you tend to point externally, and then go back to the internal.

Susan: But that's kind of consistent, that's what the data does, too, though, so. I mean this inside and outside, um,

Rob: I think you could write about that with a little more savvy.

Susan: ok, yeah.

Rob: Because, I mean, you know, when you think about libidinous desire, is um, that's *you*, sister! (laughs)

Susan: Yeah

Rob: Now we're [the committee] factors in that, we do play a role, but at the end of the day, that's you.

Susan: Right, right, and that's

Rob: So, you

Susan: That's the portion that got censored yesterday, um, that, that I, you know I felt like the, you know, the burlesque dance that? That portion? There was a whole portion of that that was in there, and, and I, you know, I have to decide...how much of my, of my desire, *can* I entrust, display, without being punished for it? (Rob: hmm) And so, part of that darkness is, you know, um, when people listen to Patti [Lather] talk like this, when they, when they listen to her tell stories about her conflicted desires here, they do it with a vicarious, voyeuristic pleasure. And there is always, um, that awareness of audience when you display yourself. (Rob: umhm). Even if the audience, um, enjoys it, they can still simultaneously reject it.

Rob: Yeah, yeah.

Susan: And so, to what extent am I allowed to *have* desires, and to what extent am I allowed to control, I, I can't control the way they are received.

Rob: That's true.

Susan: And that's, that's a lot of that really dark frustration underneath this is that you know, um, to go back to the dance metaphor that keeps kind of popping up over this, it's not that I am dancing because I want to dance; it's a command, you know, it's a command performance, but it's a command performance that I scheduled. (laughs)

Rob: (laughs) Right, right!

Susan: That first email that I sent to you yesterday where I was like, uh, “You are asking me to go to a place that I *let* you ask me to go to.” And to think about the power all over, um, my relationship specifically with you, and then my relationship with the committee, and then my relationship with every teacher I’ve ever had...

Letter One

From Rob:

Childers, Rhee, & Daza (2013) recently published a special issue of the *IQSE* on feminist methodology where they take up the terms “promiscuous,” “dirty theory,” and “messy practice” in the effort to keep wrestling with the constraints put on them in the academic world—both within and without the circles that share their commitments. It seems to me that this project of ours is cut from the same cloth. I would think that the word promiscuous applies here in particular as to talk (out loud at least) about the lived dissertation process seems more than a little transgressive; we don’t talk about it. In fact, what we often say are things like “the best dissertation is a done dissertation,” “you’ll never have to write anything like this again,” and refer to hoops and hurdles, checklists and deadlines. And yet, I find myself also saying “in a good PhD program, you come out different” usually in reference to some tepid explanation of the personal toll paid by many students in terms of their relationships outside of school. Paradoxical, yes? Both saying something akin to “just get it done” while recognizing that deep identity work is happening.

Susan’s Response:

Maybe you and I find a lascivious pleasure in taking up such terms as “promiscuous” or “dirty” like two kids giggling in the corner because we know we are not supposed to admit that anything other than professional advancement could be driving us. Why did we want to become Ph.D. ’s? Unless you tell people you want to become a university professor, no other explanation makes any sense to them. Saying what you really want and why you want it is strictly verboten. Explaining that you enjoy the work, the thinking, and the intellectual wrestling of Qualitative

Research Methods can make you a pariah even in your own cohort. Everyone did not love our class, but for me it was exhilarating to lock horns with you in front of a live audience. I was determined to win your respect for my mind and for my work by meeting you on the field as a combatant rather than meekly taking your word for everything. My classmates teased me unmercifully for the unmistakable joy it was to engage with you in class each week. One person said with disgust that it was like watching the two of us make out intellectually each week. I laughed and owned it rather proudly on the outside, but winced inwardly and wondered if I should rein my excitement and pleasure in a bit. But I didn't want to. Duly noted: this classroom performance was not supposed to be edgy, highly charged fun, but it was. I was hooked, even that long ago.

I look back now at what drew me into a doc program and the me I was then was blithely ignorant, even innocent of the perils and pain waiting where I least expected them. The entire phone call we are analyzing is further evidence of how we have exceeded the bounds of the civilized and traditional academic roles we have consistently resisted embodying. I revealed more of myself and the pain of the double bind in the writing than is de rigueur as I tried to challenge the integrity and efficacy of the dissertation process. You were probably obliged to tell me this was a transgression, but instead you told me it was good work, worthy work, and certainly not crazy. I was not supposed to reveal how much I needed to talk to you, but I felt urgent to make this contact with you and I knew you would understand. You wielded the power necessary to put me in such a vulnerable position, but I was only too glad to delve deeper because we both believed it would be productive pain.

Rob's Response:

You've asked me to think about what it was like to be me in this process. I remember talking a lot about my own experience with the dissertation. I don't know if other faculty do this or not but my suspicion is that it isn't likely. The relevance here for me and thinking about your particular work is the role of desire as I see in you much of what I think now about that time for me. To ignore how one was/is becoming and how desire and identity wrap and roll up together feels insufficient. So then, part of what I tried to do in this relationship was talk about what we don't talk about: the insecurity, the disappointment, the messy (Lather, 2012). Ultimately we talked about, "the work and what it does to you." But I still wonder, was this really about you...or was it about me? I would be curious to hear if this is how you remember it and/or if this is what you thought I was doing.

Susan's Response:

I was honored that you told me your stories. I felt some of our process was your way of working through your own unresolved pain and remaining disappointments. How could it not be also about you? As you say, you only write one dissertation, so of course you could only frame my experiences through your own. It took me a long time to understand how the experience of the program was changing me, how these changes made returning to a high school teach position nearly unthinkable after the dissertation. I knew you understood this and respected my struggle to craft a new professional identity that was not simply a rejection of my teacher identity. We laughingly spoke of the medieval rituals of torture and humiliation meant to test my worthiness, but we never saw our roles as adversarial. Maybe we thought if we named the process for the warped head game it is, we could avoid getting snagged by it. The phone call represents the moment I came face to face with the double bind created by medieval humiliation awaiting me in the defense.

Transcript:

Rob: Well, I can hear the struggle, and I, I, I definitely can. Um.

Susan: My, um, I've become aware of my, my own infidelity to the group by maintaining this distanced stance with them, by letting them make me their priest or their, um the holder of their stories, their confessions, um, you know, so.

Rob: Yeah, and that's the right way to say that. I think "letting them make me their therapist."

Susan: (interrupts) But again I, I put myself in that position by being the researcher.

Rob: Yeah

Susan: So, when I push out it's often so I can look back in, and I look at what's being done to me. I look at what I am telling people to do to me. Um, you know, the writing of a dissertation is actually a very selfish act.

Rob: Hmm

Susan: And so, you know, if you don't, if I can't get clear about to what extent am I manipulating this whole thing, then I can't, I mean, and that's, to what extent have I manipulated the study? I am trying to get honest about that. To what extent have I, I mean, the study IS the culmination of my desire.

Rob: yeah

Susan: So, I have to, the tension for me this week is I have to show the committee that I understand that, (Rob: right) and I have to do it in particular ways and I have to do it with sophistication and delicacy and nuance, when what I kind of want to do is stand up on the table and scream, you know? And say, "Do we not understand? This does not actually work?"

Rob: Umhum

Susan: It doesn't work, and everything in the study says it doesn't work, but here I am, trying to make it work, 'cause I need it to work.

Brief silence

Rob: Right.

Brief silence.

Rob: Hmm

Susan: I am just not sure how much of that I am allowed to say. And I know it really depends on how I-

Rob: Well, I, you know uh, uh, I think there's a way, so I don't know. I'm in a bind in a way, because part of what I want to say to you is, "Ok, let's keep struggling with that, but let's finish this fucking thing."

Susan: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. (Rob laughing)

Rob: is part of what I want to say to you, (Susan: Yeah!) but I don't want to be dismissive of the struggle, um, and I really don't, um, and I think you can do some, I think there's powerful stuff in this last sentence, that I think, like I said, is more honest to, is in putting Patti [Lather] to work that you say you are going to do in the beginning. I mean, it feels incomplete without that part in there. Um, I think we can tighten it up, um, I think there are places where it is a little self-indulgent and a little, um, less focused. So,

Susan: When you are making confessions it is hard to know what the important details are and where you are letting yourself off the hook.

Rob: Right, yeah.

Susan: So, that's, that's a tension.

Rob:

In particular, there were limits and constraints at work on us. I was directing the dissertation in place of the dissertation chair for departmental reasons and we knew there were difficult feelings about this held by other members of the committee. I remember joking about this, but in the way one laughs about what is, at its core, scary. There was a rumbling that, at least I heard this way, you had left literacy for curriculum—hinted language of betrayal or even seduction. Did you go down the garden path of curriculum theory?

Then of course, I turn to my own desire at work in dissertation projects. What do I get out of it? Ultimately, this seems to be what you're asking. As the field of teacher education is currently under attack, both in terms of resources but also in a devaluing of the intellectual work, being involved in producing a new generation of doctoral students feels like validation of both my own scholarly work and of scholarship itself. And yet, if the broader educational world

devalues it, what good does producing more teachers do? It would seem that the meaning one might ascribe to the work transcends possibility; does this leave us with fetish or *jouissance*'?

Transcript:

Rob: And I am worried there are places where you are letting yourself off the hook, too, so there's the other side, which I am pushing you to go a little deeper, um, I mean particularly about that idea of, of the desire, and you have to own that desire. Not to say we're not in it, but, as committees and faculty and teachers, whatnot.

Susan: Part of what I let myself rant about was, um, you know, that, that, I am supposed to be delicate about the desire, and I am not supposed to, um, enjoy the desire, and I am not supposed to, um, desire inappropriately and when I am asked to speak about it, then, I mean, I make myself very vulnerable for judgment. But if I don't speak about it, then I am not being honest, or I am not doing the hard work.

Rob: And, and I put this comment in there this morning, is, remember that those jagged, there's a reason to expose the jagged edges, to get lost, to get messy, because it's productive. It opens up new space for you. That's Patti's whole thing.

Susan: Yeah, yeah.

Rob: You know, this isn't um, masochism, you know. We don't just go to the jagged edges, you know, for some other reason. We're, we're going there to do something, to open up some kind of possibility.

Susan: Yeah, yeah, I played for a while with the idea of limit.

Rob: But you know this!

Susan: What Patti talks a lot about is opening yourself to the limit, and um, and I sat and thought for a while about how you even know when you are AT the limit, whether that is slamming into something invisible, or um, you know, being electrocuted by (laughs) you know, a wire that's there, or (laughs) being punished for having crossed over a line you couldn't see, but sometimes rubbing up against the limit is ok, it's kind of pleasurable in its own way, and I feel like that's sort of where I might be, that, that I have found it and um, and that being at that place is its own kind of pleasure, a rebellious one.

Rob: Hmm, yeah.

Susan: Or even just sort of, you know, sort of thumbing my nose at it. I see, I see where the limit is, and I can put my foot over it if I want to.

Susan:

At first I worried that working with me was a burden to you, an imposition on top of an already impossible work load. Over time I began to wonder, even hope, that the quality of our rambling conversations satisfied some intellectual need in you, but I could not ask; it would just be too humiliating if I were wrong. But what is it we are not saying in all this talk? You ask if we are left with fetish or jouissance', but this is still only a veiled, careful academic gesture at a level of desire so dangerous you don't dare name the sources. I believe our talk is both fetish and jouissance'. Our flood of talking always spills over the parameters of whatever task is before us, seeping into dry crevices that don't get filled elsewhere. We return again and again because this talk satisfies a deep need, but only temporarily; we know we will need to talk again soon. Do you/do we have the courage to delve into the messiness of how you and I might experience jouissance' differently as gendered people, as male and as female? This is one of the things we don't talk about when we talk about love.

Rob:

I also want to return to something said in our early conversations about this project: "we're not *not* talking about school." At the root of our exploration here, while arguably at the rarefied point of doctoral study, lies the *difference* inherent in the relationships between teacher and student. What it does to each of us shouldn't be assumed to be the same, right? Certainly, the tensions around other faculty and their desires were felt by both of us; but they come from different directions, played out in different ways; the tools with which we each could resist the tension vary by position. To speak of the power of relationships in education has become cliché but we rarely take this seriously. After all, relationships are hard, people get hurt in

relationships, they break and fall apart and— perhaps most vitally—there are at least two actors in the mix. The question itself of my experience in this relationship feels risky (messy? promiscuous?) but don't we ask future teachers every day to take up relationships with students without a discussion of what is at stake? And by this, I mean what is at stake for the teacher. Of course, we do this in the effort of humanizing students within an audit culture in education, of bringing an ethic of care back to “the place where we hear the call of teaching” (Pinar 2007, p.42); but, returning to performance theory as this inquiry has made me do, I cannot not wonder “to what extent, in our fear of pathologizing, do we pathologize—and create the very suffering we want to avoid?” (Pollock, 1999, p.7).

Susan:

Of course we are “not not talking about school;” you and I share a passion for K-12 students, for teachers, and for public education. At the root of our shared commitments is a conviction that our intellectual and scholarly pursuits must be more than a sort of self-pleasuring or scholarly masturbation that provides momentary relief, but produces nothing that lives, grows and changes the realities of schools and schooling. The language dork in me knows that as long as we are tossing about elegant French terms, we are skirting the grittier, more embarrassing, but more honest, Latin terms of our embodiment. Let's be honest: this is a terrifying time of sweeping and dangerous change in education. Neither of us believes for a moment that we can spend all of our time playing with esoteric philosophies without connecting philosophy directly to kids, teachers, and teacher education. But you and I both believe theory and philosophy can help us enrich our work and make sense of this time.

Reaching toward performance theory only makes sense given the phone conversation we selected for this dialogic retrospective into who and where we were almost exactly one year ago.

It is more than just cathartic to write my way now out of the painful double bind of the dissertation performance; I hope we are writing our way toward something.

You were the only one of my teachers who understood how those commitments could and should be integrated, rather than siloed. If there is any truth to my being led down a garden path, it was because I was looking for a place, a space that made sense for the study I felt compelled to pursue. But honestly, I think we were already in trouble before you agreed to direct the dissertation and probably everyone knew it but us. There were danger signs; warnings were called out, but were left unheeded. If there was a seduction, are we sure which of us was seducing the other?

So what is the point of returning, as you say, to a project I am just supposed to be relieved is over? Sumara says that when we remember, we engage in the “process of recreating images and narratives that give shape to what we consider to be our pasts” and that “each time an event is remembered it must be interpreted within the current situation of recollection.” (Sumara, 2002, p. 63). It is as we write that, we experience what Michaels (1996) has called the “gradual instant,” which happens when “[t]he memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens” (p. 213). As we return in memory to refine the focus under a microscope, what gradual instant is revealed to you now?

Rob:

Folks have written about the performance of writing a dissertation (Hatt, Quach, Brown, & Anderson, 2009; Garman & Piantanida, 2006) but it would seem that the performance of directing a dissertation is new territory; perhaps this is the hair on the lens for me? It certainly feels risky as I *want* to say that professors talk about it but I’m not really sure that’s true. If so,

for me, these seem to be hushed conversations with trusted confidants, which makes me think there is a sense that the stakes are high. I struggled over an answer to this implied question regarding the self that I write. Upon some reflection, I think I got hung up on the *what do we want to do* versus the *what do we want to be* aspect of the question. I have been thinking a lot about ontology lately and some of the new work there that—taking from Deleuze and Guattari—turns the focus to becoming. We see this move in curriculum theory as well and it has always resonated with me (i.e. Miller (2005)) “curriculum in the making”; Reynolds & Webber (2004) and Roy’s (2003) exploration of “lines of flight,” and even my own “spaces of possibility” (Helfenbein, 2010). Certainly I thought your work was following—whether consciously or not—those traces and thought there was some possibility within that work for an exploration that played out in generative ways—not fixed, not binding (at least in the same ways) on the subject categories of either researchers or participants, or for that matter student and advisor. Perhaps too, for me, the privileging of the political pushes me into this trap of “what do we want the work to do?”. It seems to me that we need to think of scholarly practices as well as political efficacy. All of this is to say that some of the tensions you describe here could be about the desire for *doing* something in a time where we find ourselves saying “there’s nothing we can do.” Literacy is safer (at the moment); teacher education is safer (at the moment) and I’m sure you put those pieces of your academic self to work as you applied for jobs. But, for me, in this gradual instant, I find those fields of inquiry stale and too often fail to see teachers/selves/knowledge-in-the-making. I suppose I wanted to see something otherwise.

Transcript:

Susan: I can’t thank you enough for taking time with me this morning and I, um, it really is going to make the rest of my day a lot more productive because I got to hear your voice (Rob laughs) and I got to hear what you thought, you know, because this, this is such a head game, that, that you send (Rob: yeah) you know,

you make yourself vulnerable, you send it out, and then you just don't know how it's being received always, so.

Rob: Yeah, I know.

Susan: Especially in this risky stuff, so...I appreciate it.

Rob: Ok, well, I appreciate your work and I, it's kind of like saying, you know, this is good for you. You don't know it yet, but it's good for you!

Susan: (laughs)

Rob: (laughs) Um,

Susan: It is already changing the way I think about my work here, of course, so.

Rob: Yeah, well, I, I'm proud of you and I am proud of what you have taken up and you have taken it up out loud, so I couldn't be happier with that.

Susan: Thank you! Thank you!

Rob: Ok, now back to work! (both laugh)

Letter 2

Rob

Over and over again in our conversations we used the phrase “taking Patti [Lather] seriously” and I think another way to say that may be privileging the question “what is at stake?” Cultural Studies scholars reinforced this idea for me over and over again, pushing me to think about the implications of these constructs that seem to get bandied around. I think that this is what we tried to do with your dissertation. But, to be clear, some of the struggle as evidenced here comes with the territory. As I look at the transcripts of our conversations, one the messages I was trying to get across the whole thing is summed up in the phrase “Do the struggle out loud.” To me that's what makes this research—not journalism, not a memoir—but it is research in the posts, one that recognizes this as creative, generative act in which the author can't distance herself

from. Lather's new work notes this pretty clearly in saying that the project is in "moving toward glimmers of alternative understandings and practices that give coherence and imaginary to whatever "post-qualitative" might mean, it explores a new culture of method of breaking methodological routine by savoring our critical edges, aporias, and discontents" (Lather, 2013, p.642). Our phone conversation takes a similar tack:

Rob: There's a reason to expose the jagged edges, to get lost, to get messy *because it's productive*. It opens up new space for you. That's Patti's whole thing. This isn't masochism. We (don't) just go to the jagged edges for some other reason; we are going there to do something, to open up some kind of possibility. I think you know that.

I don't think this is just smarty-pants musing, just elegant French terms. I think it is an attempt to take these ideas seriously and struggle with the implications. At its heart of course is the coming up the limits of being able to say something and, in this case, to say something about work that is deeply and personally meaningful, with people that matter to you. It is the impossibility of that task that haunts all of these conversations and the context of a doctoral dissertation with all its attendant conditions only draws those lines deeper. Perhaps this is summed up by my saying, "I am in a bind: I want to say 'let's keep struggling with that', but let's finish the fucking thing. I don't want to be dismissive of the struggle..." I'm contradicting myself. I'm up against the impossibility as well.

Susan's Response

We chose this particular recording as our focus, not because it was easy, but because the conversation was itself an exposure, a moment in our working relationship where the jagged edges cut deeply to reveal the gushing frustration, pain, and disillusion that could no longer be

contained. I came face to face with the impossible contradictions and competing demands I could not simultaneously meet and also maintain any sense of integrity. For me, the study itself was profoundly meaningful, not only in the counternarrative of teachers and professional development I hoped to tell, but even more importantly in the relationships I developed with my study participants over the two years we worked together. To quote Lather (2000), "I remain haunted by the task of doing justice to the [participants'] words" (p. 302) and to their work. I worried I might hurt them or misrepresent them in my quest to "finish the fucking thing."

But there was another group of people that matter to me: the individual members of the committee. My relationships with each are messy, multidimensional, and conflicted. I am simultaneously student, colleague, and in some ways, truly friends with the members of this group, though certainly some more than others. My identity shifts wildly depending upon the nature of the work before us in any given situation. But underneath it all, I am always a student, someone running to catch up, deeply desirous of being found worthy, hoping to be granted entrance into this exalted community of scholars and teachers who have touched me and taught me profoundly. I went through my classes in an unconscious denial of the limits and of the fixed, yet fuzzy, boundaries of these relationships. The process of finishing the writing and of preparing for the defense was doing something to me; you urged me to "struggle out loud," though choosing to embrace the struggle and to name it put me in significant danger during the defense.

Like you, I was caught in the contradictions: I wanted to simultaneously please and impress the committee, but I also wanted to rage against the dissertation process which contradicts the stated philosophy of collaborative learning allegedly embraced by most of the faculty. I wanted you all to know that I could see and name this messy web of contradictions in which we were all stuck, implicated, and revealed, yet I also hoped to demonstrate my ability to

successfully manipulate the web for my purposes. I wanted to dazzle the committee with my insights and also wound each of you just a little, to strike back at you out of my own pain as I finally recognized the crushing vulnerability of my posture and position before the committee: my gatekeepers, and always ultimately, my beloved teachers.

*Even now, one year later on the “other side” of the defense and the degree, I keep waiting for some sense of **jouissance**, but the dénouement produced no shout of victory and little release from the anguish of the desire to please.*

And this is not because you withheld praise, approval, or confirmation. You have stated repeatedly that the study and the dissertation resulted in good work, important work, and that you were proud of me both for what I produced and for the way I produced it. The rub for us is that your identity was entangled in my performance. It took me a long time to see that what I initially thought was my performance was also your performance, and that any shortcomings or successes would be traced back to you directly. We went into my defense together, determined to win the approval of the others; there was a lot on the line for both of us. Understanding your positionality within the group was the hair on my lens both times we met with the committee. The intimacy of our work and of our particular process was a defiant challenge to the existing paradigm; but, in the end, while we won the defense, we were not congratulated for our courage. In fact, there was a resounding silence around the riskiest portions of the dissertation and some not so subtle punishment during the defense to remind us that our relationship had transgressed disciplinary boundaries, among other things. This is what we talk about when we talk about love.

Letter 3

Susan:

What is this power that animates our relationships with our students and with each other? To this point, I feel we have been rather carelessly tossing around the term “love,” but so far have relegated love to a sort of romantic or sexual desire for gratification. You asked a question early on about the sort of love we implicitly and explicitly urge our preservice teachers to bring into their future classrooms and about the dangers inherent in our failure to acknowledge what is at stake when we choose to embody love in the teaching relationship.

When I think back to the beginning of our teacher/student relationship, I believe I first experienced cathexis, the dizzying excitement of a prolonged psychic focus on an object or a person. Freud’s German term, Besetzung, carries the image of occupying something or someone intensely, like protestors might occupy a building. The joy and creative energy I found in the classroom with you was powerful, potentially addictive, even. M. Scott Peck claims most of us “confuse cathecting with loving” which is understandable due to the intensity of emotion attached to the experience. Perhaps cathexis is a necessary first step toward what hooks calls “genuine love (a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect” (2000, pp. 7-8). While I might miss the seductive quality of those early cathexis feelings, our continued work over time took us to a shared space in which our true work culminated in something far more significant than just finishing a dissertation.

In our dissertation relationship, I was able to take risks and do the hard work of excavating my deep desires because we did not confine our talk to the task at hand, but instead acknowledged one another’s need for wholeness. You allowed me to extend “genuine love” (hooks, 2000, pp. 7-8) to you, too. John Welwood claims,

When we reveal ourselves to our partner and find that this brings healing rather than harm, we make an important discovery—that intimate relationship can make a

sanctuary from the world of facades, a sacred space where we can be ourselves, as we are... This kind of unmasking-speaking our truth, sharing our inner struggles, and revealing our raw edges-is sacred activity, which allows two souls to meet and touch more deeply” (cited in All about Love, hooks, 2000, p. 31).

We located my dissertation study within this sacred space; we are both changed by the experience. I am a different teacher now than I was before. I think you are, too. Thomas Merton, in his essay “Love and Need” says:

Love is, in fact an intensification of life... Life curves upward to a peak of intensity, a high point of value and meaning, at which all its latent creative possibility go into action and the person transcends himself or herself in encounter, response, and communion with another. It is for this that we came into the world-this communion and self-transcendence. We do not become fully human until we give ourselves to each other in love (1979, p. 27).

You pushed me down into my desires, into a “dark place” I both feared and resisted as I tunneled alone and in shame into the lonely, low pit within myself to confront my own raw, ugly, and pitiful need. Desire can be dark, destructive, and aggressive, but when it is excavated and brought into the light with “care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect” (hooks, 2000, pp. 7-8), it can lead us closer to one another, to wholeness, and to love. Our phone call reframed my excavation, gave it value, respect, and meaning, and then pulled me out of a pit, encouraged and strengthened to finish my task. This is sacred work, which reminds me of Tom Stoppard’s statement: “Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.” We might have only nudged our own small

world a little, but I think the idea that the teacher/student relationship is capable of such power is what we have really been talking about all along.

Rob's Conclusion

I'm not certain at all that we've (as you say) "relegated love to a sort of romantic or sexual desire for gratification". There are interesting word choices here: the sacred, fear, power, and yes, love. This kind of excavation is precisely what I mean when we say that we so rarely deal with "what is at stake" as we call out to the power of relationships in teaching, what we in practice often do in the invocation of loving our students. Located within the tension you describe so well is the turn to ethics, to fully take on the burden of seeing the world relationally. I hear other scholars in this too, as Molly Quinn says "[n]ow, more than ever, curriculum studies has taken up the call to address the ethical questions central to the work of education – the heart of which is the encounter with an other" (2010, p. 102). You do this here too. Your dissertation was on anti-racist work, ethical by definition, which turned your eye to a research method that would strive to honor those that chose to spend time with you as you explored. The method rubbed up against the constraints of what a dissertation is and brought up the ties you felt with your committee members, all who, in one way or another, helped you along the way: you wanted to honor them too. And then we had to think of a defense (is being defensive the enemy of love?) and I at least thought hard in adversarial terms and think I even said once "it may be a fight... but we'll win." And then we won—but at what cost? The impetus for these letters is in the aftermath, the swath left after we got it done (defense, degree, job in the field). But while deeply rooted in desire—yours, mine, the committee's—this isn't about the sexual. It lies in that sometimes "dark place" that calls for something more, excess, a spilling over of the bounds, transcendence, *jouissance*'.

I like the quote given by Merton—“love is, an intensification of life”—as it speaks to the desire for transcendence in education, whether it be in the training of teachers or advising a dissertation. Bill Pinar (1999) collected the works of Dwayne Huebner and titled it “the lure of the transcendent.” In it, Huebner speaks in voice both near and far; near in the sense of so many curriculum theorists who continue on a path inspired by his work, and far in that this conversation seems so sadly distant from the broader discourse on the work of teaching today. But Huebner says two things that seem relevant to our exchange: 1) “all educators attempt to shape the world; theorists should call attention to the tools used for the shaping in order that the world being shaped can be more beautiful and just” (p.228); and 2) on the slipping back to the search for certainty, “it is a ‘moreness’ that takes us by surprise when we are at the edge and end of our knowing” (p.xxiii). I think this brings us back to “taking Patti Lather seriously” in that “the moreness” and the desire for it, at the end of the day, does something to us (and I mean us). That not only has to be OK; we have to be able to talk about it—even when we talk about love.

Susan’s Conclusion

We have moved back and forth through time, listening in on a conversation in which our voices reveal how close to the edges of uncertainty we were. This was, without question, our most awkward, uncomfortable conversation ever, and while we found ways to break the tension and laugh, I can hear in our voices how the moreness of this moment revealed just how far down the garden path we had wandered. As I wrestled alone in my writing that week, I was struck by the lunacy and loneliness of dissertation writing, when paradoxically what had been most rich and engaging about the process was working with you, thinking through possibilities with you, and having my thinking sharpened by your perspectives. So in this moment of crisis, when fear

and pride insisted it was madness to reveal my need so vulnerably, love believed we could talk about it.

So we haltingly and fumblingly spoke and we listened, carefully reaching for words that would transcend the prescribed boundaries of an academic task and lift us to a plane on which what mattered most was what the learning was doing to me, to you, and to us. The dissertation itself, an academic task, is not the thing; the academic task merely provides a framework in which teachers and learners might learn to trust each other, speak truthfully, listen deeply, and courageously choose to navigate uncharted territory together so we can become new versions of ourselves, unafraid to talk about whatever we need to talk about so we can talk about love.

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