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Reinterpreting Laura Bragg: How Deafness, Feminism, and Maternalism Defined Her Actions as a Progressive Educator and Curriculum Worker

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People disappear when they die. Their voice, their laughter, the warmth of their breath. Their flesh. Eventually their bones. All living memory of them ceases. This is both dreadful and natural. Yet for some, there is an exception to this annihilation. For in books—in biographies, they continue to exist. We can rediscover them. Their humor, their tone of voice, their moods. Through the written word....they can perplex you. They can alter you. All this even though they are dead. Like an [insect caught] in amber, they are preserved by the miracle of ink on paper. It is a kind of magic. (Setterfield, 2006, p. 17.)

Setterfield reminds us of the importance and real power that biographies have not only for the subjects but also for the authors. Writing lives is a kind of magic and my biography on Laura Bragg (Allen, 2001) altered my life in many ways. I offer my thanks to my colleagues and my respect for their reading of my Bragg biography and for their comments. Indeed, I am humbled by their papers presented here—and honored by these scholars for offering me another opportunity to revisit my work on Laura Bragg. She was in life, and remains even now, a complex and perplexing woman.

Just as I offer my respect and humility to the panel, I must also offer the same to Laura Bragg. This work began its life as my dissertation (Allen, 1997), which I wrote ten years ago. When I first was introduced to her, I vividly recall my eyes narrowing and thinking to myself, “Humph—how did she do that in early 20th century Charleston?” I was quite suspicious of her, a female leader who moved in the highest social and cultural circles—as a Yankee, if you will, in the most Southern of cities, where we do still continue to fight the Civil War every day.

I maintained that skepticism throughout the research for the dissertation—and I think, I hope I am fairly objective in my presentation of her, even into polishing that work into this book. Thankfully, Dr. McKnight acknowledges my “not falling into the trap of creating a heroic caricature” (McKnight, 2007, p.3). Even at my oral defense, I told my committee, that while I surely did admire and respect her, I was not sure if I liked her, and I was pretty sure we would not have been friends. I said then and I can say now that I

admire her—but my respect for her has grown tremendously over these last ten years. And I have revised my suspicion of her. I believe now that her actions as a Progressive were more about social justice than about social control. How did my opinion of her improve and what experiences altered my perspective?

I was fortunate to receive the post-doctoral fellowship granted by Avery African American Research Center and a Scholar in-Residence Grant from the SC Humanities Council in 1999. Both of these grants allowed me to view Bragg in a broader perspective—as a visionary in her work with the African-American community—with the traveling school exhibits, class sessions for black students at the Museum, and with her work on preservation of Charleston’s heritage. Both grants tremendously enriched my telling of Bragg’s story.

In the six years that have followed the book’s publication, I have also written two book chapters (see Allen, 2002 and Allen & Sears, 2003) and three journal articles on Laura Bragg (see Allen, 2002; Sears & Allen, 2000; and Allen, 2000a and 2000b)—and I have talked about her at scholarly meetings from Canada to California and at libraries in more than a few Southern states. It is in these sessions, where questions from the audience continue to nudge me to think again—to review—to revisit and revise my assessment of her.

Of course, my colleagues also push me in my thinking about Bragg and they have helped me to see Bragg even more clearly through their reading of her life. I would like to share a few comments and offer my own nudge to them. Bragg, just like most humans, is a complicated woman—and as well I think I knew her, I have now come to realize that perhaps I missed an important key to that cool, elegant, distant personality—her deafness. As I grow even more hard of hearing in my late middle-age years, I wonder how mis-perceived she may have been because of her hearing loss? How much more respect would have been given to her in certain circles if she had really been able to hear? How much more good work in the museum field could she have accomplished? Would the SC State Superintendent of Education have paid more attention to her and finally come forward with financial support for the traveling school exhibits to be sent across the state, if she had not been deaf?

That is the impetus I offer to my colleagues and other readers as they ponder Bragg’s life and now allow me to share my comments about the papers. Since each of the papers present Bragg from a different viewpoint, I have a veritable field from which to choose. In order to do that, allow me to provide some historical context of Bragg’s story which is so particular to her place and time.

One hundred years ago the South was illiterate, isolated and insulated, and most Southerners were very, very poor. Scholars such as Link (1992), Grantham (1983) and Kett (1985) among others have well illustrated both the region’s plight and contours of its social, political, and landscapes. As non-industrialized and rural as the South was, the region did share two attributes with the immigrants flooding the cities in the Northeast and Midwest: poverty and illiteracy.

So when Bragg arrived in Charleston almost 100 years ago, the city and the state were really poverty-stricken, with no real industry, certainly few immigrants, and few common schools. Those whites (both the middle and upper classes) who received any kind of education went to private schools—even those outside of Charleston

attended private academies. Only the very poorest whites and blacks attended whatever public schools there were.

An educated black was greatly feared by white supremacists who controlled the political arena and who continued to prevent blacks from gaining full access to equal educational opportunities. These elite men understood that knowledge and learning would have provided an escape from the servitude under which many blacks still lived. In actuality, schooling was the key to the maintenance of the white race's dominance over blacks. While education offered the poor white masses deliverance from apathy and ignorance, the major problem was how to make sure that blacks did not share equally in the educational system.

Attending college was only for the wealthy, the elite—and even then, if the family did not value education, the children may not have gone to college. Many men became gentlemen farmers and their wives were churchwomen. It sounds so stereotypical---but it was so true in Charleston. An educated woman with a degree in library science, Bragg was a product of the Progressive Era and Boston museums, art galleries and Simmons College. When she arrived in Charleston, she found a region bereft of all but a few educated people and so she set herself the task of Americanizing Charlestonians, both black and white—through her classes at the museum, her programs, lectures, and her Bragg boxes—all to teach these folks about the wonderful place they lived in and about what it meant to be an American.

Several scholars now hold opposing viewpoints on the intents and purposes of progressives and their era. For example, Kliebard's 2004 edition of the classic

The Struggle for the American Curriculum acknowledges that the radical revisionists see progressive education as an instrument of social control. The work of notable educators such as Bobbitt, Charters, and Snedden are easily labeled as socially repressive. Radical revisionists even insist that the progressive educators Dewey, Counts, and Rugg restricted educational opportunity, inhibited social mobility, and maintained an unequal and unfair distribution of political power (see Kliebard, 2004, p. 279).

The most startling contrast to any viewpoint about the Progressive Era is Peter Filene's (1970) assertion that there was not a Progressive movement because there was no single collective group of people with a coherent program of reform. In fact, Filene maintains that progressives worked in shifting coalitions and actually lacked any ideological and political convictions. Rather than being dictated to by a consistent ideology, they were prompted by opportunism or improvisation. Bragg was certainly an opportunist and she improvised her way through the early years as the museum's curator for books and public instruction. She did work alone on her museum educational program in Charleston and much like a novice teacher left to their own devices, she learned how to be a curriculum worker in creating her traveling school exhibits, "Bragg Boxes" and curriculum guides.

Dr. Pinar offers us such a rich interpretation of Bragg and her motives. He is correct in so many of his assertions that I will respond to only three. The first point is where he reminds us that Trohler (2006) and McKnight (2003) contend that for progressives democracy was social redemption. Dr. Pinar also connects Whitman's three "greatnesses" - love, democracy, and religion with the design and development of Laura Bragg's Boxes.

Certainly the aims of democracy are present in Bragg's work. Lawrence Cremin reminds us in his *Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957*, that progressive reformers such as John Dewey, sought to "democratize intellectual culture to the point where it could be made available to all." Bragg's goals for the Museum's educational program with the traveling school exhibits, Bragg Boxes, meshed with those of Dewey.

Dr. Pinar also re-examines Bragg's interest in avant-garde art at The Berkshire Museum "as not only an expression of her artistic savvy, but also as a kind of symbolic activism on behalf of marginalized groups," but one must also remember her work with artists in Charleston. She supported Edward "Ned" Jennings, a brilliant artist from a socially prominent family who had a cleft palate and was also gay. She also offered the Museum's support to the Charleston Etchers Club, befriending so many artists who portrayed Charleston and the lowcountry (Allen, 2001, p. 86). Marginalized and unappreciated by most Charlestonians at the time, Bragg gave them a home and also encouraged the Museum's Trustees to support their work and by extension, their vision of Charleston.

Their works are now recognized by historians, such as Stephanie Yuhl (2006) who claims in *A Golden Haze of Memory* that these artists were the creators of Charleston's landmark image as "America's Most Historic City." By crafting a collective identity for the city through their artwork, poetry and preservation projects in the 20s and 30s, they determined Charleston's future well into and beyond the twentieth century as one of the most popular vacation destinations in the country.

Finally, Dr. Pinar offers a definitive explanation for her motives when he states that the Bragg's Boxes "were symbolic expressions of maternal care *and* patriarchal power, the former disguising Bragg's non-reproductive sexuality and career-focused, paternally-identified life. The boxes extending the "maternal museum" - to children trapped in the public places of schools where they were away from their mothers. These traveling exhibits allowed Bragg to promote not only the museum and the education of children but, at the same time, represent herself as mythically maternal (and hence heteronormative)." In retrospect, I believe she was well aware of what she was doing in terms of her museum work with the children and the Bragg Boxes.

Now, I will turn to Dr. McKnight's paper who reminds us that we do see the Progressive era writ large in Bragg's life—a second generation New Woman with a classical college education. She crossed boundaries for women, helping to create a new profession of museum curator. Really, she was a pathbreaker, as a visionary for education and preservation in South Carolina, Massachusetts, and Virginia. She did the same for modern art in Massachusetts. There is no doubt that Bragg was a remarkable woman, a leader who triumphed in so many areas of her life.

Joyce Antler's fine 1987 biography of Lucy Sprague Mitchell (the founder of Bank Street College of Education) defines feminism as a life process used by women like her, Bragg and others to mold their world and at the same time to achieve a measure of independence. Bragg fought Charleston mores, the political power structure and grappled with her deafness to define herself, to take chances and to risk failure while developing her career. This did not come without

costs in both her personal and professional lives. But they were her choices and her path, as she defined them. They were not the prescribed passive, subservient ones that society saw as appropriate for women at that time, especially Southern women. Bragg lived her life, and by doing so, she challenged and in many instances, overcame many of the restrictions that limited women's options during these first decades of the 20th century (Allen, 2001).

By contrast to Antler's feminism as life process, Dr. McKnight asserts that Bragg used "a discourse that privileged "male" rationalism and impulses toward technocratic control to be applied to all aspects of public, institutional life. All who entered into public educational spaces beginning in the early 20th century had to go through a rationalized legitimating process that included an adherence to male dispositions. The Progressive, professionalistic dispositions and discourse that women, and in this case Laura Bragg, had to embody to succeed in getting a foothold in public life certainly created public spaces by which to enjoy a career."

We must not forget that central to Bragg's behavior and how she was perceived is her deafness. She walked a tightrope in so many areas of her life—being from "off," deaf, a lesbian—and an educated woman in a powerful leadership position. One can only imagine the jealousy, resentment and ignorance that surrounded her.

Dr. Grumet contends, correctly so I think, that Bragg's odyssey, from "botanist to librarian, to curator and educator seems to perform this passage from a survey of the natural world bent on its naming and classification to practices which challenge this correspondence between category and thing, requiring an interpretation of context to generate meaning' This queering of the categories is the project of curriculum theory, always questioning the ways the life world is represented in school curricula, recognizing the capacity of the category to include and exclude matter that matters. Bragg was always reexamining and re-categorizing—in fact, her mantra about museum exhibits was that must be ever-changing or the museum would die (Allen, 2001, pp.144-145).

Taking this idea further, I believe that Bragg is the epitome of what we call a curriculum worker in *Turning Points in Curriculum* (Marshall, Sears, Allen, Roberts & Schubert, 2007). We use the term "curriculum work" to refer to curriculum studies, theory, and development. "To us, the broader notion of work allows for variations that include reflection, study, theorizing, construction, inquiry, and deliberation" (Marshall, et al, p.ix). Bragg did all of those and more.

I also see Bragg in James Henderson's statement (2004?) that "envision[s] a future where curriculum workers will make three commitments that will serve as their professional and political response to pressures for public accountability:

- They will undertake a lifelong, disciplined understanding of educational experience as democratization.
- They will courageously embrace the current implications of their emergent, disciplined understandings.
- They will creatively enact these current implications in an interrelated set of curriculum and pedagogy contexts: designing, planning, teaching, evaluating, organizing instruction, and communicating with diverse curriculum

Pinar (2004) has refined his notion of currere to now be “an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action – as a private-and-public individual – with others in the social reconstruction of the public sphere” (p.37). How better can Bragg and her work be described? Bragg’s life and her educational choices and plans were all about self-understanding, public engagement as an intellectual---she represents the essence of currere and the essence of a curriculum worker.

In conclusion, I offer my gratitude to my colleagues and to the editor —Bragg is so worthy of these papers. She was ahead of her time in the early years of the last century, and I am sure that if she lived today, she would be helping us to see into the future as she did so many years ago in Charleston. Unfortunately, I fear that she would find few curriculum workers, as today even museum education programs are framed by the state standards, scripted lessons and the test-taking mania that engulf public schools.

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