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Volume 3

June 2007

Religion, Love, and Democracy in Laura Bragg's Boxes

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What does it mean to do curriculum history at this particular juncture?

Petra Munro (1998, 263)

Born in Massachusetts on October 9, 1881, the eldest daughter of a Protestant minister, Laura Bragg spent a year of her childhood in Holly Springs, Mississippi, the birthplace of Ida B. Wells, elementary-school teacher, journalist and, most famously, anti-lynching activist. When Braggs lived in Holly Springs (1890), Wells had already moved to Memphis and was no longer a teacher but a journalist, soon to be mobilized into activism by the lynching of one her friends (see Pinar 2001). After briefly (the Bragg family remained in Mississippi for two years: see Allen 2002, 180) teaching mathematics at Rust University (where Ida B. Wells had studied), a black school in Holly Springs founded in 1866 by the Freedman's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Reverend Lyman Bragg returned to New England, where Laura Bragg would study first in her father's library¹ – as did Jane Addams (see Knight 2005, 50) – and then at Simmons College, where she studied the liberal arts and became a librarian.

Bragg worked as librarian after her graduation in 1906, first on Ore Island off the coast of Maine, then in Charleston, South Carolina, where she also taught science, both at the Museum and at a local private girls' school.² At the Museum she created traveling school exhibits – later known as Bragg's Boxes - that became the major focus of the Museum's educational program. They were a key element of her responsibilities³ (see Allen 2001, 36).

In 1920, Laura Bragg was appointed Director of the Charleston Museum, the first woman so appointed. After serving eleven years, Bragg took up the directorship of the Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Museum, where she introduced to the often artistically conservative local patrons not only the avant-garde – among them the sculptor Alexander Calder (1898-1976) – but socially progressive exhibits focused on contemporary social problems. Bragg retired after one such exhibit – the "World of Today," staged in 1939 (see endnote 15) – and returned to Charleston, where she lived a long life, still teaching, not only classes, but informally, at her evening salons, held nearly every night before her illness and death (see Allen 2001, 201). Outliving all of her immediate family and her closest friends, Bragg was almost 97 when she died on May 16, 1978 (Allen 2001, 212; 2001, 199).

These are, of course, only the main points in the life of Laura Bragg, points discussed in detail in Louise Allen's (2001) fine biography. Today I focus on the educational expression of her homoeroticism through her progressive pedagogical politics materialized in the traveling school exhibits. Informing my sense of the interrelatedness of her private desire and public pedagogy is the poetic political sense of American democracy expressed by Walt Whitman, whose work Harold Bloom (1994; see Tröhler 2006, 94) declared as central to the American canon of literature and poetry. In one of his later dedicatory poems, "Staring From Paumanok," Whitman wrote: My comrade! For you to share with me two greatneses, and a third one rising inclusive and more resplendent, The greatneses of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of Religion.(1881, 23; quoted in Tröhler 2006, 95)

Like other progressives (see Tröhler 2006), John Dewey was taken with Whitman's democratic vision.⁴ These three interconnected "greatneses" - love, democracy, and religion - structured, I suggest, Laura Bragg's Boxes.

Protestantism and Progressivism

Bragg was always the teacher.
Louise A. Allen (2001, 202)

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Daniel Tröhler (2006, 92) explains, liberal movements in American theology encouraged "worldly redemption," translating Christianity⁵ into a "secular religion." Protestantism, Tröhler (2006, 99) argues, comprised "a fundamental part of the American mentality" during the Progressive Era (1890 - 1920). Tröhler stresses the undogmatic character of this religious understanding, not specific to any denomination or church; it is best understood, he suggests, as an "all-encompassing certainty rather than as a sect" (2006, 99).

Reacting to modernization (especially industrialization) and inspired by Protestantism, early progressives committed themselves to building - through education - the kingdom of God on earth. To personify the point, Tröhler (2006, 105) quotes Dewey: "I believe that in this way the teacher is always the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God." For progressives, then, democracy was social redemption (see Tröhler 2006, 102), an idea not entirely unique to the nineteenth century, as Doug McKnight (2003) makes clear.

As Freud appreciated, the distinction between earthly and heavenly fathers often blurs in the psychic lives of children. Laura Bragg was never especially devoted her heavenly father (see Allen 2001, 48); it was her earthly father who was the primary male figure in her life, Bragg's confidant until his death in April 1927. Allen (see 2001, 12) points out that Bragg's intimacy with her father mirrors other early twentieth-century progressive women's relationships with their fathers, recalling Grumet's (1988) argument that late nineteenth-century women teachers were rejecting domesticity when they embraced the independence and worldliness associated with public school teaching. While hardly a prerequisite for social service, did the rejection of women's (and some men's, as Kevin Murphy points out, as we see later) traditional gender and sex roles prove helpful to these fin-de-siecle activists in appreciating the plight of "others"?

Like her minister father, Laura Bragg moved to the American South, in Allen's (2001, 26) phrase, "to do missionary work." Allen (2001,

35) characterizes Bragg as “a self-proclaimed social missionary and reformer” who saw in museums institutional opportunities for self-improvement. While Allen says “self” and not “social,” the two were, I suspect, interrelated, if not conflated. If wealth was the sign of salvation in certain strands of Protestantism, social welfare work was the secular sign of self-improvement.

Bragg was, Allen (2001, 205) tells us, “always learning, studying intensely.” For Bragg, learning was a “continuous process” (Allen 2001, 205). For Bragg, “life was always under construction,” Allen (2001, 205) continues, “and so was understanding.” The constructed character of Bragg’s understanding is literalized in her traveling school exhibits.

Bragg’s Boxes

Bragg boxes were unique.
Louise A. Allen (2001, 171)

Upon Bragg’s arrival in Charleston, the Museum’s educational program included one traveling school exhibit. It was, Allen (2001, 41) tells us, an “unimaginative exhibit of loose items.” In addition to increasing the number of exhibits - by the close of 1914, under Bragg’s leadership, the Museum’s Department of Public Instruction had constructed sixty-three traveling school exhibits - Bragg added a story for teachers to read to students. Housed in green wooden boxes with handles and hinged doors, when opened the exhibits displayed staged scenes affording children glimpses, for example, of the wildlife within their region, or of the people and their customs in other countries.

Rather than waiting for requests, Bragg sent out the exhibits on a circulating basis, enabling more of the exhibits to be shipped. Beginning in 1913, Bragg sent the exhibits to both white and black schools (see Allen 2002, 185). Providing the same educational services to both black and white children during the second decade of the twentieth century in Charleston, South Carolina, was “both fearless and brazen” (Allen 2001, 42). Allen (see 2001, 50) suggests that Bragg recognized that the ignorance and apathy of Charleston’s population resulted from the political and social forces that controlled the city and state. Rather than confront this state apparatus directly, Bragg focused on teaching, realizing, as many social progressives did, that “it is absurd to expect the public ... to rise above the intellectual level of its average constituents” (Dewey 1991 [1927], 60).

Tireless (she fell ill regularly, evidently due to overwork), Bragg taught nature study courses for first-, second-, and third-grade public school teachers. Later, (see Allen 2001, 56), Bragg taught summer school for teachers at the Museum, offering courses on geography, nature study, and local history. Bragg’s classroom teaching was extended through the traveling school exhibits. The natural history exhibits were regularly used in the elementary grades while the industrial exhibits were typically used in the sixth and seventh grades. There were several public schools, however, wherein the principals directed that the exhibits be used in all the grades. Fourteen private schools in Charleston borrowed them (see Allen 2001, 50).

Not only Bragg appreciated the exhibits’ “drawing power” (Allen 2001, 50). The Museum’s work with the public schools so impressed the Board of Public School Commissioners, Allen (see 2001, 50) reports, that they passed a special resolution on 26 January 1914

requesting extension of the Museum's work with the city schools and seeking formal affiliation with the Museum.

By 1916, every primary teacher was directed to use Bragg's Nature Study curriculum. The traveling school exhibits were aligned with Bragg's curriculum; teachers also brought their students to the Museum for classes. At the Museum, Bragg taught summer school for teachers on subjects, with credit given as if the course had been provided by a normal school or a university summer school (see Allen 2002, 184).

By the fall of 1919 (see Allen 2001, 57), Bragg had increased the circulation of the traveling school exhibits to all the white schools in the county, with the parcel-post costs assumed by the county school commissioners. Seven of the city's public schools (both black and white) received the exhibits, as did ten of the private schools.

Additionally, the Museum was shipping the exhibits to more distant places across the state, among them the Greenville Woman's College, where it was employed as a demonstration of grammar-school teaching methods (Allen 2001).

During the period 1925-1930, every school in the city was involved in the educational program at the Museum to some degree (see Allen 2001, 118). In 1926, for instance (see Allen 2001, 120), Bragg was shipping 147 exhibits to thirty city and county public schools and nine private schools. Accompanying the exhibits were one hundred traveling school libraries.

By 1927, Bragg's traveling school exhibits were being shipped to all the schools in the city and the county, and, for the first time, they were systematically circulated to the county's black schools as well. In 1928 Bragg worked to become directly involved with the black community by securing books for use in the Negro schools (see Allen 2001, 122). By 1928 (see Allen 2001, 123), there were 160 traveling exhibits circulating regularly in the city schools (white, black, and private) and in the country schools.

Despite white resistance, Bragg continued to press against the color line: in 1917 the Museum's trustees agreed to allow classes of black students to visit the Museum when accompanied by a teacher. (They disallowed admission to black adults, however, even to black maids accompanying white children under the age of five [see Allen 2001, 63]). During her first year as director, however, with the mayor's support, Bragg succeeded in opening the Museum to black patrons, if only on Saturday afternoons.⁶ "Crossing the color line was beyond the pale," Allen (2001, 80) comments, "and her conduct provoked many Charlestonians."

African Americans were not the only minority in whom Bragg took an interest.⁷ For a time, Bragg became interested in Indians native to South Carolina and, specifically, to the "low country." She participated in excavating various Indian mounds around the area, and planned to publish a survey of them (see Allen 2001, 99).

As noted (in footnote 1), Bragg also took an interest in Chinese culture and religion through her "China Boy" (quoted Allen 2001, 111). Despite the patronizing phrase, Chia Mei became important to Bragg.⁸ In the fall of 1927, just after the arrival of the other five Chinese students, it was rumored around town that Bragg had applied for Poetry Society membership for all her "babies" (Allen 2001, 113). Unsurprisingly, there was resistance among whites. In response, Bragg formed the Ta Tung Club. When Bragg invited "respectable

young ladies” to meet the Chinese cadets at her home or at picnics, she “set many tongues wagging.” Whites in Charleston considering the Chinese “colored” (Allen 2001, 114).⁹

The traveling school exhibits did not rely on visuality alone. Perhaps sensitized by her own deafness (Allen 2001, 123), Bragg appreciated the significance of touch as “a real asset in teaching.” In an interview conducted much later, Bragg spoke of the importance of children touching, even handling, the items in the exhibits. Birds and other animals had to be replaced regularly in the exhibits as they were “petted to death” (Allen 2001, 123). Her work was recognized by the Rosenwald Fund,¹⁰ which granted Bragg five thousand dollars for the traveling school exhibits (see Allen 2001, 126).

Bragg also focused on exhibits at the Museum. During 1915, Bragg planned for a history of man exhibit, illustrating the “development of civilization from the most primitive peoples through the Egyptians and Assyrians to modern times” (quoted in Allen 2001, 59), including large casts of Egyptian and Assyrian sculpture. While the scheme seemed to echo the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair – in which the summit of civilization (The White City) was located at the opposite end of the fairway from those exhibitions of presumably primitive societies (see Pinar 2001, 487ff.) – Bragg, as Allen (2001, 94) points out, held “no brief for the Nordic race theory. Indeed, Bragg felt that culture museums can “change our supercilious attitude toward the rest of the world” (quoted in Allen, 2001, 95).

After moving to Pittsfield in 1931, Bragg continued this educational work. While Bragg’s educational work did not prove controversial in Pittsfield, her art exhibitions did. Despite favorable publicity in *The New Yorker* and *Art News*, many local patrons found the modern art Bragg exhibited distasteful, even objectionable (see Allen 2001, 167).

In 1933 (see Allen 2001, 177), Bragg exhibited the work of Alexander Calder, his first exhibit in the United States. The first American museum director to recognize Calder’s genius, Bragg purchased for the Museum two motorized sculptures, *The Arc* and *the Quadrant and Dancing Torpedo Shape*. In 1934, Gertrude Stein lectured at the Museum during her two-and-a-half-month tour of the United States. Stein praised Picasso and dismissed Thomas Hart, Diego Rivera, and James Whistler. Local patrons admired Hart and Whistler, and Stein’s dismissal of them was not well received (see Allen 2001, 184).

Demonstrating that her progressive vision for the Berkshire Museum extended beyond challenging exhibits, Bragg invited Richard Lull, Professor of Paleontology at Yale, to lecture on evolution (see Allen 2001, 182). The lectures and the exhibits would lead to intensifying controversy over Bragg and her leadership (see Allen 2001, 184). It was in Pittsfield, Allen (see 2001, 171) reports, that the traveling school exhibits became known as Bragg’s Boxes. Built in boxes, the exhibits opened “like stage sets” (Allen 2001, 171). Now on display were the various subjects in the curriculum, among them cultural history, geography, natural history, industrial subjects, as well as topics specific to Berkshire County. Exhibits included pictures (often from a government bulletin or an issue of *National Geographic*), as well as other items related to the topic of the exhibit (such as stamps or post cards: see Allen 2002, 185). As in Charleston, each exhibit included a teacher’s story and items for students to touch (Allen 2001).

For children who rarely came to the Museum, Bragg’s Boxes represented “windows on the world” (Allen’s phrase: see 2001, 171).

They functioned as well to socialize rural and immigrant families to the “prevailing American values,” Allen (2001, 171) suggests. Given that Bragg was invited to speak to the national Progressive Education Association (PEA) meeting in Baltimore in February 1932, it seems the American values to which Bragg’s Boxes socialized students were leftist values associated with social reconstruction rather than right-wing values associated with social efficiency.¹¹

Traveling school exhibits were the major focus of the museum’s educational activities during this period, as indicated in Bragg’s 1934 report (see Allen 2001, 173). In 1936 *The New York Times* reported on the boxes, citing Bragg’s conviction that if the people cannot come to the museum, the museum must go to the people. Adopted by museums in several sections of the country, Bragg boxes were now nationally known.

The success of the traveling school exhibits and the Berkshire Museum’s other educational opportunities affirmed Bragg’s conviction that museums could contribute to social change. Indeed, Bragg called museum work “the work of the people” (quoted in Allen 2002, 188), asserting that “Museum exhibits are for the purpose of creating understanding, not teaching facts” (quoted in Allen 2001, 104).¹² Bragg believed education to be the primary point of the museum, functioning to equalize “opportunities between the rich and poor” (quoted in Allen 2001, 74). That fantasy persists, now among conservatives.¹³

Romantic Mentorship

Romantic friendships offered women an alternative to be married without replicating their mothers’ domestic roles.

Louise Allen (2001, 47)

Bragg believed that one should “Be an opener of doors for those who come after you” (quoted in Allen 2001, 205). While the emphasis in that sentence is on the agency of the actor, there is acknowledgement that the agency of the actor is in service to those just now appearing: the young. This generational sense is evident in her pedagogical and affectional relationships with younger women whom she mentored.

Soon after arriving in Charleston, Bragg befriended two young women: Anita Pollitzer (who later became a leader of the National Woman’s Party: see Allen 2001, 54) and Josephine Pinckney. Anita Pollitzer had attended the first Natural History Society meeting in October 1909, forming a friendship with Bragg that lasted until Pollitzer’s death in 1975. Josephine Pinckney’s father was president of the trustees. Josephine Pinckney and Bragg became lifelong friends as well as next-door neighbors on Chalmers Street, where Bragg bought a house in 1927 (see Allen 2001, 37).

Allen (2001, 47) describes Bragg’s relationship with Hester Gaillard and her subsequent relationship with Belle Heyward as romantic friendships (see Pinar 2001, 332ff.), also known as “Boston marriages.” In an interview many years later, Bragg identified Belle as a lesbian and recalled that lots of women were lesbians when I came to Charleston. It was all very innocent. I had at least five friends who were... There was just a shortage of men and it was though the women were married. (quoted in Allen 2001, 57)

I suspect “shortage of men” had little to do with it. Even in prisons, “situational homosexuality” has proven to be an insubstantial concept

(see Pinar 2001, 1049).

In February 1915, Bragg moved into Belle Heyward's home. Among the reasons Bragg chose to leave Hester Gaillard for Heyward were financial and psychological ones: the Gaillard family dairy had gone into bankruptcy. This financial disaster, Allen (see 2001, 55) tells us, meant that the "atmosphere" was more pleasant in the Heyward house. Belle Heyward became, Allen continues (2001, 55), "Bragg's supporter, protector, and partner who provided Bragg with a warm, loving, and emotionally supportive home."

While still involved with Heyward, Bragg met Helen McCormick, a woman even younger than the other "bright young things" (quoted in Allen 2001, 102) Bragg befriended. McCormick first worked at the Museum as a volunteer in 1923, while still a student at the College of Charleston, from which she graduated with a degree in English. By August 1925 McCormick was working at the Museum, the replacement for the curator of children's work, Anne Porcher, who was ill. Helen McCormick and Bragg became increasingly close while Belle Heyward was in Europe. By the time Heyward returned from a six-month trip to Europe (in January 1926), McCormick was on staff at the Museum and very much a part of Bragg's world (see Allen 2001, 102). In response, Heyward appears to have committed suicide (see Allen 2001, 106).

Helen McCormick fell in love with her mentor (see Allen 2001, 112). After leaving Charleston for Pittsfield, she wrote to Bragg:

Though I haven't my arms about you as I have so often in reality – my love is there like a warm mantle around you. Can't you feel it dear? I have loved you, dear, as I have loved no one else.... Remember that I love you always and always – your Helen. (quoted in Allen 2001, 162)

Allen (2001, 211) describes McCormick as Bragg's "most successful student." She was also Bragg's confidant and nurturer. "In times of sorrow," Allen (2001, 187) points out, "Bragg sought solace from Helen, who was always there, waiting to fill the role of Bragg's admirer and supporter." In retirement, living alone in Charleston, McCormick's photograph was the only one on Bragg's desk, "placed where she could see it from her bed" (Allen 2001, 202).

To what extent we can accept Bragg's assertion that "I am deeply tender, but I have never been much interested in sex" (quoted Allen 2001, 57)? Allen (see 2001, 57) characterizes Bragg's statement as "paradoxical," perhaps an "unconscious denial of her own sexuality." Despite Bragg's self-description as a person, not a woman, the truth is, in Allen's (2001, 57) words, that Bragg chose to be "supported by and nurtured [by], and loved and [was] loved [by] women exclusively."

There were other young women – and young men – Bragg mentored. Prominent among "Bragg's boys," as Allen (2001, 112) terms them, was Ned Jennings who had appeared at the Museum in 1911. Jennings shared Bragg's passions for culture and same-sex affection (see Allen 2001, 112). After becoming the curator of art, Jennings conducted handwork classes and assisted students in the illustration of geography projects. Years later, Jennings was found dead from a gunshot wound to the head. The official ruling was death by suicide, but Bragg recalled in 1976 that a "detective had told her that Ned's boy had been moved, and so he could not have shot himself," and she was "completely convinced that Ned's male lover had murdered him"

(quoted in Allen 2001, 154). Bragg honored her protégé in Pittsfield, mounting a memorial exhibit of Ned Jennings' paintings and masks (Allen 2001, 168).

The Homoerotics of Progressivism

In the long view, she [Bragg] could be viewed ... as attempting an intellectual revolution through the traveling school exhibits, libraries, art classes, lectures, films, music, and other aspects of the educational programs she instituted.

Louise Allen (2001, 216)

Laura Bragg was one among many progressive women working to reform American institutions during the first decades of the twentieth century. Like other progressive women who were feminists, Allen (see 2001, 214) suggests, Bragg chose to act as an individual rather than through collective organizations. In this regard, she would seem to anticipate the later twentieth-century feminist view that the personal is political (see Allen 2001, 217). Be that as it may, Bragg worked through institutions – the museum, the school – to educate a citizenry suspicious of experimentation.

Progressives were convinced that the very character and function of museums must change. Museums ought not to be, as Allen (2001, 214) nicely phrases it, “mausoleums of preserved relics,” reserved for the elite. Allen attributes the progressive reconceptualization of the museum from mausoleums to educational institutions to the arrival of immigrants, requiring them to join the public school in Americanizing the new citizens.¹⁴

Bragg first came to appreciate relation between immigration and the reconstruction of the museum as educational institution when she visited Boston-area museums during time at Simmons. Allen (2001, 215) reports that at that time Bragg saw firsthand how museum personnel responded to immigrants by writing new exhibition labels in everyday English, “words that would both illuminate and instruct.” It was this challenge, Allen continues, that provoked the professionalism of museum work.

Such professionalism was not only instructional but curricular, and it required courage. As Allen suggests, Bragg's risk-taking in making the Boxes available to black students recalls her father's post-bellum educational work in Mississippi at Rust. This same legacy of social reconstruction (a term borrowed, possibly, from the post-bellum Reconstruction) must have been in play in exhibits like the 1939 “World of Today” exhibit.¹⁵ Might we understand Bragg's interest in avant-garde art as not only an expression of her artistic savvy, but also as a kind of symbolic activism on behalf of marginalized groups, including sexual minorities, of which, as Allen points out at several points in the book, the public was becoming increasingly conscious?

Bragg's educational programs were designed, Allen (2001, 215) emphasizes, for “ordinary citizens,” animated by progressives' devotion to “uplift and progress.” Committed to the museum as an “engine for social change,” Allen (2001, 215) continues, “Bragg turned both museums into social settlement houses by offering plays, lectures, art classes, and educational programs.” The settlement house claim may not be entirely mistaken, but it does seem exaggerated. Certainly Bragg did not live with the underclass, as did Jane Addams, for instance, and her penchant for the privileged classes seems more than shrewd choice of affiliation for fund raising purposes.¹⁶ The choice of “bluestocking” in the book's title recalls

ladies of leisure, not street activists, as Addams sometimes was (see, for instance, Elshtain 2002, 173).

Describing her as a missionary and social worker, Allen (2001, 215) argues that Bragg was committed to “social change, even though she had come to the city intending to be a librarian and botanist.” The traveling school exhibits were, Allen (2001, 216) concludes, “among her greatest accomplishments.” Bragg’s Boxes represented “an attempt to end the apathy and ignorance of schoolchildren” (2001, 216). An educated citizenry, she hoped, would bring their children to the museum.

In addition to the pragmatism-as-Protestantism thesis advanced so persuasively by Daniel Tröhler, I want to suggest that for some progressives like Bragg, gendered, and specifically homoerotic, elements were also in play in their social humanitarianism and activism. Louise Allen accords gender almost definitive status in her concluding remarks:

Bragg’s story is about gender, as all stories about women are; it is about race, racism, and class and how this early feminist confronted those issues; and it is about Bragg’s sexuality and her ambivalence about it. (2001, 214)

My question is: were these elements interrelated, and how did Bragg’s boxes enable her to confront and disguise these elements?

I will suggest a general answer to that specific question first. I will point to two scholarly narratives that suggest, if not an interrelation among sexuality, social activism, and religion, at least that sexuality was also an element in the “mentality” that bound many progressives in the common cause of social redemption through democracy. Recall that Allen characterizes Bragg’s progressive education as converting the museum into a settlement house. The first narrative – that of historian Kevin P. Murphy - concerns the settlement house movement. While women – Jane Addams, most conspicuously, and her lifelong partnerships with Ellen Starr Gates and Mary Rozet Smith are well known - were the leaders in that movement, many men also lived and worked in urban settlement houses. Murphy (1998) focuses on two: Charles B. Stover, head of the University Settlement on New York’s Lower East Side (where Eleanor Roosevelt worked when she was 17), and John Lovejoy Elliott of the Hudson Guild, located on Manhattan’s West Side. Stover and Elliott drew on the same intellectual traditions Addams did, embracing social democratic ideas of cross-class “human brotherhood” grounded in humanist ethical theory. Also like Addams, Stover and Elliott became involved in national politics (Murphy, 1998).

Like Addams, Lillian Wald and other settlement women, Elliott and Stover included a critique of middle-class gender roles within their ideal of human brotherhood. Like many settlement women, these men created their primary emotional and erotic relationships with members of the same sex. Stover and Elliott regarded settlement houses as experiments in alternative families wherein sexuality was not necessarily linked to reproduction. In so doing, Murphy (1998) points out, the two men performed a cultural and pedagogical politics of same-sex eroticism very different from emerging medical models of homosexual pathology and heterosexual normativity.

While the historical moment (the 1960s) and geographical place (Mississippi) are quite different in the second narrative, the

interrelation of social activism and same-sex desire remains the same. Mississippi's best-known black leader, Aaron Henry, and liberal white attorney Bill Higgs were often present in gay settings, and this fact was seized upon by white supremacists committed to discrediting the civil rights movement. "By 1965," historian John Howard (1999, xvii) concludes, "homosexuality was linked to the specter of racial justice." This is a negative formulation of the interrelated elements of love and democracy – in Howard's account we are minus the third element: religion – on which I focused in Bragg's life and work.

As civil rights activists questioned white racist assumptions about justice and equality, Howard (1999, 118) argues, an "atmosphere" – Tröhler (2006, 99) would term it a "mentality" – was created that was "conducive to queer thought and, sometimes, queer desire." More than a few of those activists who fought for racial justice – most visibly Aaron Henry and Bill Higgs – expressed "queer thought" and "queer desire," reports Howard (1999, 118).

Among those white volunteers who came to Mississippi for 1964's "freedom summer" was Amber Hollibaugh. A lesbian, Hollibaugh later realized that she and her college student friends "put the Black community in even more danger because of that heterosexual racism" (Howard 1999, 119). During "freedom summer," straight white college men were among those who experimented while sharing beds with young black men (see Howard 1999, 119).

The white supremacist conflation of racial justice with sexual deviance was most dramatically expressed by the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, who added communism to the mix. In a public letter to President Lyndon Johnson, the Klan described his "Great Society" programs as "full of treason, blood, and perversion." They attacked his "homosexual associates," the "sex perverts and atheistic murderers ... engaged in the deliberate, criminal destruction of this Nation under color of unConstitutional, unLawful [sic] statutes and decrees." Johnson's proxies – those northern college-student volunteers pouring into the state in 1964 – were dismissed as "commies" and queers. As Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers put it:

The heretics, the enemies of Christ in the early spring of 1964 [were the] false prophets ... from the pagan academies, with "the whores of the media" in tow. Communists, homosexuals, and Jews, fornicators and liberals and angry blacks – infidels all. (quoted passages in Howard 1999, 149)

While overstating the presence of Communists in the civil rights movement, Bowers understood precisely, if negatively, the interrelatedness of love, democracy, and religion in progressive racial politics.

While communism and a Jewish conspiracy (themselves conflated by many, especially during the decades following 1917: for an autobiographical account [see Mosse 2000]) were fantasies of the racist right wing, Howard (1999, 150) points out that homosexual civil rights activists were "not simply figments of a paranoid white Mississippi imagination." He reports that:

Queer sexuality was not an import, brought into the region by an invading army of misfits. Support for sexual difference existed alongside varied reformist

tendencies within the movement. And in the heart of the lynching and Bible Belt, queer Mississippians were at the forefront of the civil rights struggle. (Howard 1999, 150)

Racism now taboo as a public political discourse even in the South; it is now expressed indirectly as anti-gay hysteria. That's not all the contemporary anti-gay movement is – there are other ingredients such as a contemporary crisis of masculinity (see Pinar 2001, 1139ff.), including, of course, homophobia – but it cannot be understood apart from the convoluted conflation of racialized and sexualized hatreds Sam Bowers articulated forty years ago.

The Bragg Box as Fetish

The fetish is compensation for this lost female body, making sexual access to (other) women's bodies possible.

Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 291)

In his 1927 essay "Fetishism," Freud theorized that men, traumatized by the sight of female anatomical difference (by what they perceive as castration), devise a fetish (a surrogate penis) and project it onto women's bodies as a substitute object (see Eng 2001, 2). Freud limits his best-known discussion of fetishism to its role in sustaining a "disavowal" of castration (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 118-119). The fetish (usually an unremarkable quotidian object invested, by the fetishist, with an extraordinary quotient of libidinal cathexis) is defined as a substitute for the missing maternal phallus (see Johnston 2004, 265). Without this prosthetic defense, Johnston (see 2004, 265) suggests, the fetishist's very sense of reality itself collapses.

While Freud limited fetishism to masculine development (see Grosz 1995, 147), given Laura Bragg's identification with her own father, we cannot judge her ineligible to participate in this general psychic formation. Certainly the concept has been used widely and not necessarily in gender-specific ways,¹⁷ most famously in the Marxian concept of "commodity fetishism," and, more recently, as racial fetishism (see Eng 2001, 32; Stoler 1995, 124).

The "essence" of commodity fetishism, Jonathan Flatley (1996, 117) explains (in his discussion of Andy Warhol, an artist Bragg might have exhibited if their generations had more closely coincided), is the "ascription to objects of the characteristics of persons," a "transformation of human social relations into an abstract thing." Commodity fetishism endows specific objects – money, works of art, traveling school exhibits – with sometimes considerable significance, and it does so by disguising the social nexus in which the object comes to form. For Flatley (1996, 117), "the personification of exchange value is literalized most clearly perhaps in the portraits that adorn our money, one of the many forms of everyday portraiture that made its way into Warhol's art." The everyday forms of natural history and other subjects found their way to – were exhibited in – Bragg's Boxes.

Commodity fetishism not only disguises the social nexus in which the objects come to form; it also disguises the psychic processes that structure its specific materialization. This function of the fetish

recalls what D. W. Winnicott calls a “transitional object,” which, he suggests, may in later life become a fetish object. Winnicott (1990, 9; see Derrick 1997, 229 n. 20) suggested that “the transitional object stands for the breast, or the object of the first relationship.” The fetish thus is constructed from the maternal body against loss, rather than given to the mother to defend against the spectacle of “lack.”¹⁸

Fetishism, as Kobena Mercer (1994, 190) observes in a different context, is not necessarily “a bad thing.” No simple reproduction of the maternal breast (or paternal phallus), fetishism invites, Mercer (1994, 190) imagines, “a deconstructive strategy which begins to lay bare the psychic and social relations of ambivalence at play in cultural representations.” Not having viewed the Boxes that remain, I am unable to specify how Bragg’s choice of objects for display inside them may have expressed those “psychic and social relations of ambivalence” that were “at play” in the “cultural representations” school children viewed when the boxes were opened. What I can suggest – contrary to Freud’s initial formulation¹⁹ – is that the boxes represented two organs of gendered significance: the breast and the penis, themselves conflated at various historical moments (see Pinar 2006a, 34ff.).

In this fetishistic sense, then, 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 latter contradicting her “castration” (or lack or vulnerability) as a progressive woman from the North in the Deep South. By extending the “maternal museum” – in which objects are, in a sense, nurtured as they are archived, shown to the world as they are shielded from it – to children trapped in public places away from their mothers, did Bragg promote not only the museum and the education of children but, at the same time, represent herself as mythically maternal (and hence heteronormative) and with a “phallus” (with patriarchal power)? Revising David Eng’s (2001, 157) question (itself revising Freud), I ask: “Can the fetish serve to deny [fe-]male homosexuality rather than female castration?”

The Boxes – substituting for pieces of Bragg’s psychic (if not anatomical) terrain – not only afforded school children a visual experience of the displaced and disguised maternal object. Recall that Bragg wanted children to touch “parts” of the exhibit. Not only compensations for lost objects – the breast symbolizing maternal love, the phallus symbolizing patriarchal power – Laura Bragg’s Boxes functioned as material contradictions of her own vulnerability and lack as a woman working in a gendered and racialized society inhospitable to progressive women. Bragg’s Boxes afforded, as Kaja Silverman (1988, 5) suggests in a different context, a “simulated real” of the “absent real.” Silverman (1988, 20) reminds us that “the fetish classically functions not so much to conceal woman’s castration as to deny man’s,” making historical as well as gendered sense given the simultaneity of a late nineteenth-century Western “crisis of masculinity” (see Pinar 2001, 321ff.) with the primacy (since the 1870s) of fetishism as the “preeminent example of all the perversions” (Crary 1999, 12), a decade associated with the birth of progressivism (see Pinar et al. 1995, 103ff.).

Like the appearance of the figure of the “homosexual” in late nineteenth-century Europe (sensationalized in the person of Oscar Wilde), the appearance of the fetish functioned to release sexuality from its embeddedness in reproduction, and thus demonstrates that reproduction is not a feature of sexuality as such, but rather an effect

of the construction of sexuality in modern Western cultures. (de Lauretis 1994, 309)

Not only in Western cultures, of course (see Gilmore 1990), but sexuality became politicized in the West with the emergence of sexualized identity politics over a century ago.

My point is not historical but educational, and, specifically, curricular. I am not reducing Bragg's Boxes to their fetishistic functions. So conceived, however, they shed their quaint and archaic status – indeed, as items to be stored in a museum – and display another and still relevant view of enduring and vital questions of our field, among them: What is the educational significance of curiosity? What are the relations among attention, arousal and study? What is the relation between study and subjective formation? What are the relations between understanding and the intersubjective bonds (the transference and counter-transference relationships) between teacher and student, between students and those absent ones whose objects (books or boxes) students touch and visually examine as they study?

While failing to provide specific answers to these questions, the concept of the fetish (and of the fetishist) enables us to discern the displaced and deferred status of curricular artifacts and the libidinal status of our attention to them. Structured around interest, arousal, and shared passions, academic knowledge enchants as it complicates, and thereby contributes, to changing the world. Substitute “student” or “teacher” for “fetishist” in the following passage, and what is at stake in expressing one's subjectivity through the school curriculum becomes obvious:

[T]he fetishist enters a universe of the animated, intensified object as rich and complex as any sexual relation (perhaps more so than). The point is that both a world and a body are opened up for redistribution, disorganization, transformation; each is metamorphosed in the encounter, both become something other, something incapable of being determined in advance, and perhaps even in retrospect, but which nonetheless have perceptibly shifted and realigned. The sexual encounter cannot be regarded as an expedition, an adventure, a goal, or an investment, for it is a directionless mobilization of excitations with no guaranteed outcomes or “results” (not even orgasm). (Grosz 1995, 200)

Certainly not test scores.

To suggest, then, that Laura Bragg's Boxes were fetishized objects is to invoke an image of education as erotic,²⁰ as excitation, without direction (at least at the outset), as stimulating metamorphosis. Using language evocative of complexity theory (Doll et al. 2005) – specifically, the terms “disorganization” and “transformation” – Grosz's depiction of the fetishist reminds us not only of students set free to study where desire takes them (guided by teachers, of course), it reminds us of Laura Bragg and her remarkable Boxes.

Conclusion

I do not trust thought that liberates itself from sex.
Witold Gombrowicz (1989, 201).

I never see what I want or exhibit what is desired in the

Laura Bragg was a courageous and committed progressive woman driven by personal ambition, same-sex desire, and a secular faith in social redemption. In her life and accomplishment we see Whitman's triumvirate - love, democracy, and religion - intertwined and materialized in those traveling school exhibits. Combining sight and touch – the twin modes of fetishistic satisfaction – the exhibitionism of the boxes enabled Bragg to penetrate the public through maternal nurturance of their children. There is the additional kinky element of telling teachers what to say, a fetishistic fantasy of substitution (of self) through ventriloquism, staff development through lesbian love. Published in 1855, *Leaves of Grass* suggested a utopia of masculine comradeship that would bind American men together in a democratic society. (Whitman lost his job at the U.S. Interior Department when *Leaves of Grass* was published [see Greenberg 1988].) In the "Calamus" poems, Whitman sexualized those bonds, making himself, Murphy (1998, 279) suggests, both "the poet of homosexual love and the bard of democracy." Whitman himself appreciated the political significance of his "Calamus" poems:

Important as they are in my purpose as emotional expression for humanity, the special meaning of Calamus cluster of *Leaves of Grass* ... mainly resides in its Political significance. In my opinion it is by a fervent, accepted development of Comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, North and South, East and West - it is by this, I say ... that the United States of the future (I cannot too often repeat), are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, anneal'd into a Living Union. (quoted in Murphy 1998, 279-280)

For Bragg, it was the love of women for women and the secularization of religion in social redemption that animated her political activism, materialized in those Boxes. For Bragg, as for Whitman, private desire and public pedagogy were "welded together ... into a Living Union."

Notes

1. As an adult, Bragg built her own library; at her death she owned five thousand books (see Allen 2001, 11), filling every "corner and nook" (Allen 2001, 202) of her modest living quarters. Focused on books (and money), twenty-five years of correspondence between Bragg and her father have survived (see Allen 2001, 33). Still, her father's influence was not complete: Bragg rejected her father's organized religion. In its place she explored Chinese culture and religion, an interest animated by her relationship with a young Chinese man named Chia Mei who, Allen (2001, 111) reports, "became increasingly important in Bragg's life, as she did in his."
2. As Allen (see 2001, 33) points out, at this time it was not uncommon for libraries and museums to operate as single institutions and "with a freer atmosphere than existed in the public schools of the day." The latter is not difficult to imagine.
3. "This shift in emphasis [for museums] from an exhibitionist to an educational function," Allen (2001, 35) explains, "brought with it social implications." In Charleston, for instance, Bragg worked to extend the reach of the Museum into the community, seeking patrons not known before. While this progressive reformulation of the

museum as educational (as well as exhibitionistic and archival) was new to museums in the Northeast, it was, Allen (2001, 35) acknowledges, “almost unheard of in the South, due to the poverty, isolation, and racism that predominated in the region.”

4. In his insightful discussion of early Chicago pragmatism, Daniel Tröhler (2006, 95) points to the influence that Whitman had on Dewey by quoting a letter that he wrote to his wife, Alice Chipman Dewey, on April 16, 1887: “I have been reading Walt Whitman more and find that he has a pretty definite philosophy. His philosophy of democracy and its relation to religion strikes me as the thing.” “Dewey’s deep trust in Whitman continued throughout his life,” Tröhler (2006, 95) writes. That trust, Tröhler continues, “is an expression of the dominant discourse in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century that bound together the chief architects of the Pragmatism.” How important were homoerotic elements in this discourse? For Whitman, they were important.

5. While never becoming secular (as Tröhler argues liberal Christianity did), even conservative Christianity exhibited socially progressive elements during the late nineteenth century (see Haynes 1998).

6. In addition to opening the Museum to black patrons, Bragg wanted a free library open to all of Charleston’s citizens (see Allen 2001, 127). She and other community leaders obtained several thousand signatures, including those of prominent Charlestonians and educators who supported the funding of such a library. On January 1, 1931, the Charleston Free Library opened (see Allen 2001, 128).

7. A multiculturalist *avant la lettre*, at least during the Charleston years Bragg was focused especially upon African Americans. In addition to the sending the traveling school exhibits to both black and white schools and working for a free library open to all citizens, Bragg introduced African American art to the Museum, exhibiting the pottery of a slave named Dave, now recognized, Allen (see 2001, 140) tells us, as the “outstanding African American potter of his time.” His very large jars remain among the largest utilitarian vessels made in the United States. Allen (2001, 140) credits Bragg as a “preservationist,” but her progressive racial views (at least for the time) must have been in play as well. Nor did her racial views disappear when she moved to Massachusetts. Just before her retirement in 1939, Bragg told an interviewer: “Let’s not have one more lynching!!” (quoted Allen 2001, 196)

8. Chia Mei was like Bragg’s son, Allen (see 2001, 114) tells us. During the summer of 1930, while training at Kelly Air Field in San Antonio, Chia Mei was involved in a plane accident. In Washington at the time, Bragg took a train to his bedside, spending her month’s vacation nursing him back to health. Bragg wrote many letters from the hospital, writing to, among others, Robert Marks, another of “her boys” (Allen 2001, 115). Chia Mei was, Allen (2001, 115) tells us, “one of the few people in her life for whom she expressed her compassion and sympathy.”

9. By today’s standards, Bragg was not entirely progressive in her multiculturalism. “Among the most perplexing paradoxes” of Bragg’s character, Allen (2001, 114) suggests, was her opposition to mixed-race relationships and marriages.

10. The Rosenwald Fund was established in 1917 by Julius Rosenwald, part-owner and later President of Sears, Roebuck and Company. Committed to the education for African Americans, Rosenwald Fund financed the building of over 5000 schools in Southern states. After obtaining his Ph.D., Horace Mann Bond represented the Fund (see Pinar 2001, 659).

11. Allen (2001, 171) interprets Bragg’s invitation to speak before the PEA as “acceptance” that her educational programs – the Boxes

prominently among them – “as examples of progressive educational reform,” providing further support for situating Allen on the Left.

12. For me (Pinar 2006a), one teaches understanding through facts.
13. Many political conservatives cynically exploit Americans’ faith in education to displace accountability for the fate of the poor from themselves and their anti-poor, anti-working class policies of the past 25 years (Pinar 2006b). To my knowledge, there is no empirical proof for a direct causal relationship between education and national prosperity.

14. Evidently, “Americanization” was not a cause limited to newly arrived immigrants only. Allen (2001, 216) tells us that Bragg wanted to “Americanize the southerners who did ‘not know even the heroes and myths of our culture, as she wrote Mayor Grace [of Charleston] on one occasion.” The Confederacy has never wanted to be Americanized, of course, repudiating Washington’s efforts at Reconstruction after the Civil War, then occupying Washington with a series of increasingly conservative Southern presidents since 1976 (see Pinar 2006b).

15. The last exhibit before her retirement - “The World of Today” - portrayed “the problems, ideas, creative forces, and crises of the real world” (Allen 2001, 195). Dedicated to Bragg - “Because she has the vision to perceive art’s function and the courage to act on her vision, this exhibit is dedicated to Laura M. Bragg: a fearless progressive and humane museum director” (quoted in Allen 2001, 196) – the exhibit was judged by the public as “frightful” and contained labels presumably “criticizing government and the capitalists for the treatment of the poor.” In response, the trustees became “violently opposed to the use of the name of the Berkshire Museum in connection with the circulation of the ‘World of Today.’ The labeling of this exhibit, as you know, refers to matters other than Art alone” (quoted passages in Allen 2001, 196). The “World of Today” went next to Vassar, where museum goers also judged it as too radical; it was not shown anywhere else (see Allen 2001, 197).

16. Funding was a perennial problem for Bragg. Bragg’s Boxes could have reached more children “if the power structure had not chosen to stonewall every effort to seek state funding” (Allen 2001, 218). Even when the General Assembly passed a resolution praising the traveling school exhibits, the state’s financial support “never materialized.” No doubt, Allen (2001, 218) points out, “Bragg’s gender also played a role in her inability to gain funding.”

17. “The fetishization of objects,” Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 118) reports, “can be one way of negotiating the cultural dislocation produced by immigration.” Related to trauma generally, then, we can appreciate that Freud considered fetishism to be “one of the chief modes of reparation” (Young-Bruehl 1996, 284).

18. Behind Winnicott’s formulation, Derrick (1997, 229 n. 20) points out, is the work of Melanie Klein. Klein’s work suggests that the child’s first object relations involve the internalization of gendered objects such as the breast, and that such internalizations involve crucial subsidiary processes such as splitting, projection, reparation, and mania.

19. In Freud’s initial formulation, as David Eng (2001, 152) succinctly summarizes the matter, “fetishism functions to normalize the white heterosexual relations on which the paternal legacy is built through the management of female sexual difference and the simultaneous denial of female castration and lack.”

20. Joseph Schwab (1978, 109), too, linked Eros with education, with liberal education more specifically: “Not only the means, however, but also the ends of liberal education involve Eros. For the end includes not only knowledge gained but knowledge desired and knowledge sought.” See Block (2004, 131).

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