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## **Muse, Mind and Memory: Meditating on Louise Allen's Biography of Laura Bragg**

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I have always been fascinated by Wallace Stevens, poem, "Anecdote of the Jar." It helps me to think about things and the ways that they assume meaning in our lives:

### **Anecdote of the Jar, by Wallace Stevens**

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.  
The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.  
It took dominion every where.  
The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Louise Allen's study of Laura Bragg reminded me of this jar in Tennessee, for in her account of this Bragg's work as a botanist, a librarian, a museum administrator and educator, we read a history of her work: the presentation of things. This process of gathering objects together so that they will draw the attention of others is one of the processes of curriculum, as we gather together the stuff of the world that we deem worthy of our children's notice. Look, look, the pointing finger is the pedagogical gesture embodied in the work of Laura Bragg and in educators' efforts to share the worlds they care about with children.

### **MUSE, MIND, and MEMORY**

In Steven's poem culture radiates from the homely jar placed on a hill in Tennessee. Its very presence cancels the autonomy of the wilderness, making its particular order into disorder that contradicts the arrangement of domesticity. Stevens often expressed this irony in his poetry, recognizing, often regretfully, the power of culture to drape nature in its conventions, removing it from our perception and inquiry.

For a very long time I have been fascinated with the ways that culture takes up its objects, saturating them with human interest. That

fascination often leads me to the OED, seeking the object that is hidden in the folds of the word. So I turn to the OED to uncover the object shelved in the word museum. I realize of course that the term includes the word *muse*, the female spirits inspiring the arts and humanities. But the OED tells me that the word for muse shares an Indo-European root with the word *mind*, both strongly signifying *memory*, although it also offers citations showing that in addition to memory, mind is also used to indicate intention.

So here we have a triad, muse, memory and mind, incorporating both memory, mind you, and intention. Art, like curriculum, encompasses all these temporalities. A construction of the present moment, it, especially before photography, preserves the past, but may also challenge habitual perception bringing to the surface ideas, feelings and perceptions that are intuited but have yet to grow into categories of our quotidian culture. Here Bragg's work, stretching from the preservation of the grand homes and tenements of Charleston's history to the acquisition of works by Picasso and Calder becomes instructive for our curriculum warriors, lined up on their respective sides of preservation and innovation.

## **WORLD**

Greek mythology spawned nine sister-goddesses, progeny of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of Memory and inventor of words. Museum, mind, memory, are all words that designate the processes of human cognition and spirit. So where is the jar? I am still seeking the thing. Perhaps it is hidden in the common Indo-European root which also seems to be the root of the word mundane, the French word *monde*, linking memory and mind to world.

But what is the world? This is a question for us and for Bragg. I imagine that she pursued her long treks in the wilderness for the relief it brought to the relentless categorical packaging that brings us the world we know. How hard it is to catch a glimpse of creation that is not completely saturated with our systems. It is the difference I seek every day when I walk my dog through the woods, choosing its tortuous trails, menaced by stones and obtruding roots, instead of the parks pathways. Who wants to live in a world already made, signed, sealed and delivered?

Currently, in our media drenched consciousness, images bring us even further away from worlds that we do not know and do not understand. Our imagination for difference is collapsed into images that are cut and spliced into familiar formats that strip them of their smell, their sound. Is there a jar in Kabul, in Basra? What would we imagine about these places if our interest were extended through words rather than the pictures projected 24/7 on our screens? Have the realities of Iraq, its communities and their ways of life, sifted and ordered for the evening news, been domesticated to US culture and conventions so that we fail to see its differences from our ways, blundering into fatally inappropriate policies?

During the era of this Bragg's biography there are two world wars and the Great Depression. They drift into these pages occasionally. Friends lost, banks failing, cutbacks. There is one explicit piece about Bragg's eagerness to challenge the Aryan eugenics of Hitler's Germany in an exhibit emphasizing cultural diversity, but on the whole, the unthematized realities of chaos and conflict enter only in collections.

I read this part of the analogy between Bragg's work as curator and ours as curriculum scholars as a caution, especially at this moment of

scripted teaching, standards based curriculum, the general lock down. Where can we find a bit of wilderness?

### CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Well, not on campus, it appears. With my etymological yearning only partially satisfied, I look up the word museum again in the OED and am surprised find that this repository for memory was initially associated with “the university building erected in the beginning of the third century BC by Ptolemy Soter, the Macedonian who became a Pharaoh of Egypt, historian of Alexander’s campaigns.” Ptolemy I erected the temple of the Muses, the Musaeum, and thus became the founder of the library and museum at Alexandria, later developed by his son, Ptolemy II. One account suggests that the original collection contained Aristotle’s own private collection. We also learn that Ptolemy III required all visitors to Alexandria to surrender all books and scrolls which were then copied by scribes, the originals kept for the museum and the copies returned to the perhaps involuntary donors.

The writings of Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, book 12, translated by William Whiston, 1737, provides an another account of how the library at Alexandria built its collection. Joseph Ben Mattathias, born 37 CE, was captured defending his town from the Roman troops and their commander Vespasian. Spared from death by Vespasian, and brought with him to Rome when he became Emperor, Josephus joined his household, was renamed Flavius Josephus, and took up the task of providing an account of Jewish history for Judaism’s conquerors, published as Jewish Antiquities in 93 or 94 CE. In Book 12, Flavius Josephus provides this account of the efforts of Demetrious Phalereus, the governor of Athens who fled to Egypt when deposed, to build the collection for the museum and library of Alexandria. Demetrious Phalereus advised Ptolomy II that it would be advantageous to bring the literature of the Jews into the library, extolling their extensive books of laws. Nevertheless, it was necessary to translate these Hebrew texts into Greek, and Demetrious pointed out that this was an awkward process to accomplish given the great number of Jews brought into slavery by Alexander’s soldiers. Then Josephus provides a detailed account of the edict requiring soldiers to free their slaves, the compensation that each would receive for their release, the gifts sent to Jerusalem to secure the texts as well as those prepared to translate them from Hebrew to Greek. **(G.J. Goldberg, 1998)**

Maybe Wallace Stevens knew nothing of this story of slavery and freedom, war and compulsion that framed this history of the cultural institutions we now call libraries and museums. Maybe it was just an accident that the jar in Tennessee that provoked Wallace Steven’s poetry was a glass jar with the word ***Dominion*** in raised script. (Macleod, 1993) It looks like a canning jar, and dominion, indeed appears in the last stanza of the poem, as the presence of this domestic jar interrupts the natural environment. The jar literally transforms the ground with its own roundness, so that wilderness has now become slovenly, an insult to any conscientious housekeeper. The placement of the jar has subordinated nature, positioning wilderness as the ground for its figure, dominating nature, making it subject to the order that emanates from the object.

This treasure hunt has revealed themes that appear in Allen’s account of Bragg’s career as well. Louise Allen describes Bragg’s passion for order and gives us a portrait of Bragg’s intense commitment and energy, as she gathers and orders and orders and gathers. And we



see, through Allen's account, how Bragg's work is a gesture of extension, sending the boxes out to the schools, working with teachers in the field, making the museum accessible to African Americans, extending a global perspective to counter theories of Aryan supremacy; as well as how she pulls the world into her museum, seeking donations, finding exhibits, preserving and conserving.

But we also see, as we must, in the confiscation policies of Ptolemy III the essence of cultural capital. And even bringing in the Jewish scrolls, or in Bragg's case, mammoth pottery jars of Dave Edgefield, an African American potter, becomes simultaneously inclusion and cooptation. For all of Bragg's courage, and generosity, for all of her ingenuity and interest in modern art and contemporary science, the daughters of Mnemosyne refuse to relinquish the past. Literally conservators, museums are the repositories of memory, enshrining custom.

Bourdieu's word *habitus* captures this taken for granted familiarity before it is interrupted by an errant object, like a jar in Tennessee. (Bourdieu, 1984) The presence of Aristotle's writings as the original holdings of the library at Alexandria reminds us that the categories he celebrates saturate our consciousness and sense of things. Bragg's recognition of context appears to have been central to the Bragg boxes, carrying objects in context into the classrooms of the South. How interesting it would be to see one of those boxes. How interesting it would be to see two of those boxes from different collections, to move an object from one into another, to play with meanings generated when the object is out of context.

And so the gathering of things that goes on in libraries and museums can be occasions to celebrate the categories of our shared worlds or to interrupt them. As a kid, spending many Saturdays at the old MOMA, I was always fascinated by Dali's fur covered bowl, imaging it with horror as the container of my morning's boiled egg or oatmeal. 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. Louise Allen's biography of Laura Bragg reminds me that as curriculum scholars we all work in universities/museums where we participate in the project to educate new generations of children and citizens to the common culture. To some degree, we are all sending out Bragg boxes. But Allen's book also returns me to this queering of the categories that 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.

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