

Foreword¹

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Who would guess this book represents a debut? Such a sophisticated synoptic text - surely the text was composed by a seasoned scholar, certainly an exceptional theoretician, maybe even at the end of his career. But no: Allan Michel Jales Coutinho is a junior scholar, but – as you will see - a sage well beyond his years. In this text he may have midwived a new era of curriculum studies: the field as a collective public moral enterprise.

Such a collective public moral enterprise – that curriculum studies can become - represents the delicate determined labor of “nexus and proximity”² from which emerge “critical possibilities for curriculum work in this divisive post-reconceptualist era,” an era marred by “structural inequalities, egregious social disparities, and malicious discrimination.” These crimes continue to leave scars in the “torn lived experiences of students and teachers,” as they – all of us, actually - struggle to survive “under the oppressive capitalist systems,” systems structured by “racialization and subjugation.” Coutinho confronts both racialization and subjugation, his vision vividly *bifocal*, a concept that allows him to keep his feet on the ground while his heart and mind remain focused on the sky, a set of panoramic ideals leading affirming our “learning to become.” Coutinho knows that “autobiographical inquiry *is* the heart of education,” that “it is the organ which bumps the necessary oxygen to the body so that we can ‘do,’ ‘live’ and ‘learn’ with *and* from others throughout the course.” That italicized conjunction is crucial: “Autobiography, when departing from a nexus of love towards love and justice, can provide the reoxygenation of democracy itself.”

How so? For starters, autobiography is one way “to set free our critical tongues, minds, and hearts in the pursuit of justice.” But – Coutinho qualifies - “instead of analyzing lives in a vacuum, as if lives are only conditioned to the free will of individuals, critical bifocality induces researchers to

see lives within the contexts of history, structure, and institutions, and to uncover circuits of privilege and power.” This is a praxis of *conscientização*, a bifocality that brings into focus a “nexus of love, hospitality, and solidarity.” From this exhilarating zone of convergence we are encouraged to “analyze our ‘selves’ and our ‘work’ within and across contexts, uncovering circuits of privilege and oppression while locating these elements in more expansive, liberating, and veracious perspectives.”

Being bifocal means making “fearless interpretations and negotiations” that support an ongoing “commitment to alterity from a standpoint of love, hospitality, and solidarity, and justice — a liberating project of knowing, doing and becoming in the world.” What blocks us from such a commitment? Coutinho perceptively appreciates that what threatens us is not only external oppression – certainly it is capitalism - but also that which is “*within* our ‘selves,’ that is, within humanity.” He emphasizes this crucial point: “The threat is not only ‘out there,’ it resides and exists inside each one of us.” Subjective and social reconstruction are reciprocally related.

In Coutinho’s provocative conception, the “running of the course” becomes an opportunity to understand our human experiences and achieve agency. Conceptualizing “curriculum as nexus” enables Coutinho to emphasize relationship: ethical commitments to oneself and others that structure curriculum work as a collective public moral enterprise. When bifocalizing “self” and “work” – keeping them distinct but juxtaposed and connected - one engenders “*critical agency*,” self-study in service to collective struggle towards justice.

Such self-study triggers what Coutinho calls the “quest” – enacted through inter and intragenerational conversations – that is “learning to become.” He not only affirms such a running of the course, he also enacts it, providing us searing autobiographical vignettes that constitute a “dialogical encounter with readers.” He reports that it was “longing to engage in this complicated conversation of curriculum work as a public moral enterprise [that] galvanized me to get liberated in the unknown and become vulnerable.” To this profound self-reflexive process – one of self-

awakening while running the course - he testifies in this text, enabling him to envision “futures of radical hope for this troubling post-reconceptualist era.”

Such testimony is structured by several scenarios, including school uniforms, school cameras, school doors and school soccer courts, through which he portrays how “policymakers, social justice educators and curricularists can think about schooling and curricula.” Coutinho’s analysis of these scenarios become propositions that “turn the relationship between policy studies and curriculum work less contentious and colonial and more relational and dialectical,” determined to “dismantle schooling’s obliterating circuits of privilege and oppression in our neoliberal democracies, circuits whose *modus operandi* promotes self-aggrandizing absorptivity while burying racialized, non-conforming, disabled bodies in life-threatening limbos of precarity and dispossession.”

Attentive to his own lived experience, Coutinho acknowledges that his home country - Brazil – continues to face “challenges” in combatting Covid-19, challenges exacerbated by the “ignoble policies under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro.” Bolsonaro’s policies have also “precluded the inclusion of topics such as gender and racism in textbooks,” policies that miseducate as they ensure injustice. Recent anti-Black and anti-Asian racist hate crimes leave Coutinho wondering whether we as a species even have a future, wondering whether the tragedy of History is in fact an “irreversible event.” His – our - hope is rekindled by Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, a text that proves “love, hospitality, and solidarity are possible.” Love, hospitality, and solidarity he actualizes by casting curriculum theory and practice as a “collective public moral enterprise within the nexus of theory, policy, and practice.”

“Bifocalization” is both a “yearning *and* a move that allows us to find new situated and relational meanings for ‘self’ and ‘work’ in one’s autobiographical lexis so that bonds of friendship and companionship across differences become possible.” Bifocalization, then, requires us to “seek

multiple discursive and material contexts, even those that are not conspicuously a part of one's own," affirming the "unfolding of the relational and contextual 'self,' an 'attunement' with "what is beyond [us]." Bifocalization encourages "the seeking and unfolding of a 'multi-dimensional' consciousness, one that surpasses the present and the past, the concrete and the abstract," thereby supporting collective curriculum work as "a locus for seekers, people who continuously strive to disrupt single thoughts and set the tone for this post-reconceptualist conversation towards justice." Bifocalization calls upon curriculum scholars to "embrace criticality and name the circuits of privilege and oppression that have led them to engage in the complicated conversation in the first place." Bifocalization "may support novel contextual and relational conceptualizations of agency across spectrums of diversity," affirming "the forging of relationships." Bifocalization may be the key concept in understanding curriculum as a collective public moral enterprise.

Given the primacy of relationships across difference, statements of self-positioning are welcome but insufficient, as they fail to "dismantle asymmetrical circuits of power constituted of oppressive and privileged realities," realities that undermine "relations of trust with those with whom one does not, consciously or unconsciously, relate." Moreover, "contextual and relational autobiographical understandings of/for/about 'self' and 'work' are necessary if we are to become *consciente*." Coutinho knows that, "as a white-passing cis-male curricularist who is now engaged in ongoing relations of becoming, I too have to look at my past in order to make sense of my present moment." Coutinho confides that, at first, he felt "ambivalent feelings" concerning his "agency, maleness, whiteness, queerness, spirituality, rationality." In fact, "it took me a while to look regressively in my autobiography to see my 'self' and my 'work' within and across circuits of privilege and oppression, and to question and disrupt hegemonic rationalities about the person I had become, the path I had walked, and the work I had produced." "It took time," Coutinho continues,

to understand that I could embody different positions other than the ones that I thought were made available, entitled, or forced upon me, or the positions I thought were expected of me: the person(s) who I could *become* as a result of new understanding(s) emerging from novel relational and contextual autobiographical encounters.

Allan knows such “labor that requires courage, but, above all, a yearning for justice.” It requires as it affirms love, what he defines as “love-as-genesis, a type of love encountered in, for example, relationships between parents and their offspring and between lifelong friends,” characterized by “an *openness to give* regardless of whether they receive something in return.” He continues: “it is by forging these standpoints — love, hospitality, and solidarity — into a nexus that curriculum work as public-moral-enterprise (can) be actualized.”

Coutinho has run the course literally as well as conceptually. While at university he joined a group of cross-country runners — running remains his “most beloved sport” — enabling him to not only enjoy the solitude intrinsic to that sport, but also the companionship of those who ran the course with him. Conceptually too: to run the course means, he appreciates, to “be in solitude *and* in companionship with others.” Such educational experience is embedded in Coutinho’s conceptualization of curriculum studies as “nexus,” by which he means “bring[ing] together the differences produced by the porous boundaries of this interdisciplinary field so that they can intersect, forging something aesthetically coherent, new, different, and yet common.”

Coutinho focuses on the “standpoint from which to depart, a standpoint from which I can invite curricularists to set the tone for complicated conversation(s) towards justice while striving to position curriculum work as a public moral enterprise.” The “nexus of love, hospitality and solidarity stands as a normative standpoint for runners, one which we can continuously build within our ‘selves,’ in solitude and with others, for running the course of complicated conversations.” Likening this “normative standpoint” to “stretching” before he runs, Coutinho calls for ongoing

“confrontation with our privileged and oppressed realities, for (re)conciliation, and for the forging of a new tomorrow.” From such a standpoint, he continues, “we can bifocalize ‘self’ and ‘work’ ... to forge another ‘nexus’ from which we can seek ‘the whole.’”

Coutinho appreciates that, by itself, criticality can “knock down the very standpoint from which I could relate and produce curriculum work across differences,” that “relationality could be forever eclipsed if I did not depart from a strong standpoint of love, hospitality, and solidarity in running the course.” He reminds that “in order to be critical and still position curriculum as a public moral enterprise,” he “must fortify the standpoint,” a “standpoint that I could hold tight to whenever all I could see and feel was hurt and suffering.” “Deep within me,” he continues, “I knew that the love I had nurtured ... was real. It could *not* be deconstructed and negotiated.” The truth is that “love is indispensable to justice and to a new becoming; it should be indispensable for education institutions.”

“Because place and voice mutually-constitute each other,” Coutinho cautions: “the latter can be (un)wittingly commodified and colonized as much as the physical spaces we live in.” It is from his own experience that Coutinho knows that the “colonization of space *is* tantamount to colonization of voice and, to that extent, to colonization of experience.” He wonders “how can one study to become subjective and build a cosmopolitan character *with others* if the knowledge and the subjects which I desire/need to know and with whom I wish to relate are constantly streamed (and acculturated to fit in) with(in) the hierarchies (not because of ‘worth,’ but because of power)?” He admits that “the knowledge I currently possess from my study is pretty much grounded on ‘historical facts’ *about* Indigenous peoples which have been collected and disseminated throughout the course of development,” leaving him “unable to bifocalize my ‘self’ and my ‘work’ as much as I think I should because the context of indigeneity has been erased in Brazil (and beyond).” He is

clear that “this is a labor that I now *have* to do as a scholar, as a settler, curricularists and citizen.” He understands exactly what is at stake:

If settlers and those who come after them (my ‘self’ included) are not open to love and critically evaluate their own positions in the complex, constructed, and erased contexts of history — choosing to only offer “recognition” as an *obligation* to fulfill democratic ideals in the form of mere quotas — the talking-with scheme may never be actualized. Rather, we might continue to see the distinct and contentious battle between “talking-on-behalf-and-about” and “talking-back,” which further crystalizes antagonistic positions while denying the possibility of nexus and proximity.

Nexus enables proximity, however “elusive ... “talking-with” is, requiring the “voices of marginalized communities to constitute the epicenter of hierarchies.” Indeed: “Democracy itself cannot be sustained unless we (our privileged identities) start to evaluate our social positions relationally within these hierarchies (from a nexus of love) as we attain greater levels of *conscientização* and begin to ‘talk-with,’ thus making this complicated conversation of curriculum work *our* complicated conversation.”

Who is designated by the italicized “our” in that last sentence? The question invites the self-questioning *currere* encourages: “The forging of reconciliation and the actualization of our collective struggle towards *conscientização* and justice are contingent upon our autobiographical understandings and the relationalities that the written, performed, and/or spoken autobiography lexis can elicit.” In his autobiographical accounts it becomes clear where Coutinho is coming from: he was a “*have-not* ... not well educated, not financially well-off, and not well connected,” adding that then “all I tried to do was to *hide*,” but, nonetheless, always “someone who was *striving to become*.” It was at school he began “to consciously negotiate my queer identity in a predominantly patriarchal society engulfed by Christian values.” School was also where he “worked tirelessly to learn English, my first second

language, hopeful that one day I would walk unimaginable paths.” This book testifies that learn English Coutinho did. But this accomplishment also risked colonialization: “I worked sedulously to perfect my accent and hone my writing skills to *resemble* one of them.” Through “hiding” and “avoiding,” however, he was able “to protect myself from toxic environments and trauma.”

Not only did English instruction risk colonization, so did sexual socialization, as heteronormativity became internalized. “Whenever my body denounced my sexuality,” Coutinho tells us, “I consciously observed my manners to ‘walk, talk and act straight,’ bending my complex personhood into a category, turning my ‘identity’ into a noun rather than a verb.” In school, race too became colonized: “my intersectional identities ... converge[d] into a single variable: *whiteness*.” Becoming became for him “a process of whitening the self.” Despite the damage, the hardship, Coutinho allows he “*still* enjoyed psychological and, by default, material advantages from the production of historical inequalities due to my maleness and, most importantly, my white phenotype.” Passing as white “protected me from experiencing *and* internalizing ‘racial trauma’ and ‘institutional racial oppression,’” protection his “racialized friends” did not enjoy.

Coutinho’s experience of colonization prompted him to “engage in a reflexive journey where I explored my own relationship to historization, racialization, and erasures of subjects in our neoliberal democracies.” That exploration leaves him even more “aghast at the ever-widening gap between the actualization of *conscientização* in schools and the discourses and practices promoted by educational policies and programs that continuously objectify knowledge, people, and everything in education (and beyond).” Curricularists,” Coutinho points out, “need to seek much more than ‘effects on outcomes’ to acquire in-depth, intersectional understanding(s) of phenomena such as ableism, racism, and other forms of oppression.” What is “required of us to embrace social justice, to exert critical agency, and to care for/about the population is indeed a ‘complicated conversation’: ongoing, deliberative, and autobiographical.” In fact it has been the “opportunity to study and

bifocalize is what brings me to this present moment as I tenderly unfold my lexis towards *conscientização* and justice.” Moreover, it is “the study of educational experience as lived [that] can support policymaking,” albeit “support” but not determine, as “ends represent nothing but meanings, and meanings can never be fixed, standardized within the contours and frames of an object.” He concludes:

In sum, because subjects are complicated conversations, each and every student will ascribe different meanings to policy objects as they run the course. Likewise, each and one of them will describe their experiences with phenomena in a different light, pointing to diverse aspects of lived experience which may be “hidden” to ‘outsiders’ and which may impact individuals differently across the spectrum of diversity too. The complexity of phenomena and their particularities are grounded on the intersectionality of one’s lived circumstances. Policymakers can only hope to subsume such complexity under their theories of change. Of course, schooling practices can always be informed by evidence (it should be), but, even though, we should always remind our complicated “selves” that the course will never be fixed and standardized; it will always constitute a complicated conversation: complicated because, unlike objects, we are working *with* and *for* subjects, people who breath, feel, fear, suffer, avoid, relate, think, fight, resist, love, run...*and become*.

This is work of “learning to become,” a “process of threading our subjectivity in autobiography” as “we elicit and unfold our complicated conversations *with others* in the world,” attaining “greater levels of *conscientização* as we uncover the ‘hidden’ circuits of privilege and oppression that undergird/constitute the hierarchies and lived experiences of our complex social realities.” Such “threading of subjectivity” becomes “both the means *and* ends to justice: the fostering of *conscientização* and the realization of critical agency in the world.”

Coutinho calls upon us to reconstruct ourselves, shedding internalized racism, classism, sexism, encouraging us to reach out, to join hands with brothers and sisters, each of us struggling toward justice for all. That constitutes curriculum work as collective, as public, as moral. It is curriculum work as also private even solitary: each of us becomes “bifocal,” seeing what is, what can and must be, a generative tension within and among us that animates our intellectual, interpersonal, institutional labor. Coutinho has reactivated the past as he critiques the present, this wretched era of avarice, cynicism, and deception. Repudiating these, he calls upon us to unfold a future of love, hospitality, and solidarity, a nexus of ideals that positions us in proximity. *That* is curriculum work as collective public moral enterprise.

Endnotes

¹ Foreword to *Curriculum Work and Social Justice Leadership in a Post-Reconceptualist Era: Attaining Critical Consciousness and Learning to Become* by Allan Michel Jales Coutinho. Routledge, 2022.

² All quoted passages are from this text.