

Serpents and Sites

Contradictions in Self and Others

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And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. (Mark 16:17-18)

WHEN MAMA LOOKED DOWN at me and my brother playing on the floor between the pews, I knew something had happened. Her facial expression hid nothing. She looked angry and horrified and helpless. When I looked up into her face, I saw her fear and behind it her need to protect us. She quickly grabbed our hands to lift us off the ground and then dragged us down the aisle towards the exit. I looked back to see what was happening but couldn't figure it out. It all seemed strangely unfamiliar. Just before leaving, Mama turned in the direction of my dad standing behind the pulpit and yelled across the church to let him know that we would be waiting in the car.

On that day, my family and I attended, by mistake and with regret, a snake-handling church service. My dad was a traveling evangelist and had been invited to preach a two-day revival meeting at this small Pentecostal church deep in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. He was not aware that they were snake-handling Pentecostals. We were non-denominational Pentecostals, remaining autonomous as a matter of principle so that we could express ourselves in the way we wanted and be free of interference from formal organizations. There are many different sects of the Pentecostal faith, with some sects taking a more literalist approach to interpreting the Bible than other ones. Most sects though adhere to the doctrine that the Bible has definitive authority in matters of faith. Although my dad preached at different types of Pentecostal churches, he avoided the snake-handlers at all cost. Dad referred to them as *spiritually ignorant* in their reading and understanding of the Bible and in their relationship with God and the Holy Spirit. *Our* family wanted nothing to do with *them*.

The tradition of snake handling allegedly began at a small Pentecostal church in Tennessee around 1910. While George Hensley, a former bootlegger turned Pentecostal minister, was preaching a fiery sermon, some of the congregation dumped a large box of rattlesnakes onto the pulpit. Without missing a beat, Hensley bent down to pick up one of the venomous snakes and held it wriggling above his head. Unharmed, he urged his congregation to follow suit quoting the Bible verse that prefaces this editorial. News of Hensley's sermon spread fast, and the practice caught on in several churches throughout the Appalachian Region.

There have since been around 120 deaths from snakebites in these churches. And that number includes Hensley himself. It has been estimated that Hensley had been bitten over 400 times before his death in 1955. While some might consider these deaths as strong reasons for halting the practice of handling poisonous snakes during religious services, devout snake handlers have argued that it is a good thing that one of their members occasionally dies as a result of a snake bite. Such fatalities only prove to skeptics and nonbelievers that they are truly using dangerous snakes in their worship services. When bitten, most snake-handlers refuse medical treatment—believing that divine intervention will save them (Winston, 2008).

Today, snake-handling continues mostly in small communities in rural areas in the Appalachian Mountains.¹ Participants believe that the spirit of God comes upon them as they open the boxes containing the snakes. The snakes are symbolic of Satan (Genesis 3:15; Luke 10:19). One demonstrates her/his power and authority over the enemy by picking up snakes. Lifting several of the serpents up simultaneously above their heads and allowing the creatures to wind around their arms, they praise God with intense spiritual excitement. Usually the snake-handling members slip into altered states of consciousness during such episodes. Their eyes roll back, and they twirl or dance in the Spirit and speak in tongues. However, not all are expected to handle snakes; only those filled with the Holy Spirit.

In the sixteenth chapter of the book of Mark, serpent handling is considered one of the “signs” that true believers must follow. There are four other signs mentioned in these verses: to cast out demons, to speak in new tongues, to lay hands on the sick so they recover from illness, and to drink deadly poison without harm. Snake-handling Pentecostals view four of these five signs as unconditional mandates and one—the drinking of deadly substances—as optional because of the conditional word “if” in the passage: “...if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them ...” (Mark 16:18). Snake-handling Pentecostals practice the four signs (and some practice all five) simply because they conclude that the Bible tells them to do so (Tidball & Toumey, 2007; Williamson, Pollio, & Hood, 2000). Adopting a literalist approach to their reading of the Bible, this passage holds no symbolism for them—these words are the expressed commands of God.

Snake handling in the Appalachian Pentecostal faith has received a great deal of attention in popular and scholarly presses. One small church in Tennessee with less than fifty members, for example, has appeared in three documentary films, two documentary videos, and three shorter television stories, as well as two popular books, a volume of photos of Appalachia, a doctoral dissertation, seventy-five newspaper stories, various national magazine stories, and chapters in several books (Birckhead, 1993). Most snake-handling churches haven't received this kind of attention; in reality, there is little known about this sect of the Pentecostal faith because most of these churches cannot be easily located or identified.

Like many others, we knew little about the snake-handlers but also knew everything about them. One thing we knew for certain was that *they* were different from *ourselves*. Dad was all too comfortable with using harsh words in describing people different from *ourselves*. Dad often

spoke about *those* people who were not *us*. The people who he considered *they* changed from time to time: poor people, people of color, non-churchgoers, Catholics, and Christians who didn't follow Pentecostal faith, to name a few. However, many of *them*, who he established as different, were actually a lot like *us*. We were even similar to the snake handlers—like them, we followed the Pentecostal faith and were also White, poor, and Appalachian. We shared not only similar religious beliefs but also taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves, others, and the world around us. There weren't too many differences between us and the snake-handlers. In fact, there were a lot of contradictions in the binary distinctions my dad established between us and them. I had to leave my childhood home and community to begin the process of becoming aware of these contradictions; the context around me was too defined by them.²

It's difficult to explain the extent to which Appalachian culture, region, and people are imbued with contradictions. The beauty of the oldest mountain range in North America with lush mountains, old growth forests, small towns, and isolated mountain communities is juxtaposed with long-term poverty, some of the most environmentally denuded places in the country, lack of health care, inadequate educational systems, and political corruption. It is a region so rich in natural resources and home for many of the poorest people in the United States.

This place and context of extreme contradictions played a significant role in shaping our understandings of self and others. In this context, my dad's binary distinctions allowed us to maintain a sense of superiority over *those* people who are not *us*. These distinctions established boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable. By avoiding the unacceptable—for example, staying away from snake-handling church service—and keeping evidence contrary to our assertions at a distance, the fragile dichotomous relationship *we* had with *them* could be unbothered; contradictions in our understandings of *self* and *others* resolved. In so doing, stability was brought to our unstable sense of *self* and certainty to our unfamiliarity of *others*.

In many ways, those of us in the curriculum studies field find ourselves in a similar context situated within contradictions. At the moment, there's much standing in the way of us opening up theoretical spaces to further redefine, challenge, and resist limited and uncomplicated conceptions of curriculum. The challenges posed by external pressures for educational standardization and the internalized expectations for curriculum instrumentalism, for example, not only present difficult problems for us and demand a profoundly committed sense of resistance, as many have argued (e.g., Giroux, 2006), but they also situate us within a network of dichotomous relationships from which it's difficult to escape; in fact, only a few escape valves exist. There have been and continues to be important sites for the curriculum studies field—some within and others outside the field—where individuals in these sites take on the immense task of trying, in the words of Alain Badiou (2002),

to propose a few possibilities, in the plural—a few possibilities other than what we are told is possible. It is a matter of showing how the space of the possible is larger than the one assigned—that something else is possible ...” (as quoted in Giroux, 2006, p. 76)

The authors in this issue³ of JCT individually and collectively propose some of these possibilities.

In their autoethnographies, Morawski and Palulis (un)settle their teaching selves as a transformative process at-work with students in the aesthetics of a pre-service language arts classroom. Christou also uses autoethnography to investigate memories of the thoughts, feelings, and coping strategies employed while in the grips of an eating disorder. Springgay and Freedman re-

conceptualize m/othering as a bodied curriculum to open up maternity to the in-between of corporeality, materiality, and difference and to conceive of a curriculum that leaves open the possibilities of ethical interactions between self and other. Swiffen explores anxiety in the context of the pedagogical relation and its connection to dialogue as a progressive pedagogical strategy. Gunckel applies queer theory to science education to surface and explore the kinds of questions that disrupt binary gender and sexuality constructions, collapse heteronormativity, and open spaces within science education.

Hobbel and Chapman offer a textual analysis to explore the intersectional accounts of race, gender, and class in student experience. Drawing on an ethnographic study of prominent approaches to social justice education, Sonu questions how social justice is defined and what social justice actually means to individual experience in the schooling context. Kress constructs a poetic portrait that explores several important issues including forms of commercialization in the schooling context. In the *Studies in Philosophy, Ethics, and Education* section, Trifonas introduces the section with a discussion of the concept of difference within and across various heterological discourses—diverse discourses of difference—of postcolonialism with a view to the future directions of postcolonial thought. Also in that section, White draws from two case studies to explore patterns emerging in schools that reflect the current trend towards a more globalized economy.

Although the authors in this issue address a wide range of topics and explore them from/through/with different theoretical perspectives, these pieces reflect a similar commitment to engage in complicated discussions of various topics and subjects and to offer some possibilities that advance our thinking and understanding.

NOTES

1. Snake-handling churches are also located in rural pockets throughout the southeastern United States (Williamson, Pollio, & Hood, 2000). The majority of these churches, however, are concentrated in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee and Kentucky (Winton, 2008).
2. Brian Casemore's (2008) work on the significance of place is helpful here in understanding the complex role of place in our experiences, lives, and understandings of self.
3. We would like to acknowledge Peter Appelbaum, Marla Morris, and Mary Doll for their important editorial contributions to this issue. Most of the articles were originally accepted before the tenure of the current editorial team; therefore, Marla along with Peter, Mary, and other section editors played an extremely important role in shaping the content of this issue.

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