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Remembering in Order to Forget

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Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
history of education

Notes

¹ Sol Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies: Toward a New Cultural History of Education*, Counterpoints: Vol. 76 (New York: P. Lang, 1999), xiii.

² Ibid.

³ Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts*, Reflective History Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001); Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (Basic Books, 1983).

⁴ Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform*, 17.

Remembering In Order to Forget

Sara Clark

What is the purpose of remembering? Should education historians work together to remember a shared past? In 1999, Sol Cohen suggested “historians of American education (and their students and anyone interested in the history of education as a field of study) have to be reminded of this past because published work is situated within the context of this body of preexisting debates, its participants, and its canon of texts.”¹ Cohen’s *Challenging Orthodoxies* envisioned a new frame for education history but not before he remembered the field’s origins: “the debates of the past anticipate to a great extent the terms and debates of the present. But as the past recedes, so does memory. These chapters are written *against forgetting*.”² (Italics added.)

In 1968, Michael Katz, lead among a group of scholars Diane Ravitch collected as radical revisionists, wrote in favor of forgetting.³ By this time and three years after the publication of Lawrence Cremin’s *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley*, Katz argued the field (and thus its historians and its students and anyone interested in the history of education as a field of study) needed to move on, to write new histories without rehashing or belaboring old critiques. He wrote carefully at the close of his original introduction to *The Irony of Early School Reform*: “It seemed, rather, more to the point to concentrate on presenting a new version.”⁴ As Cohen advised, Katz’s work stems from a rich disciplinary heritage. The difference in the type of work Katz

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conceptualizes is that memory does not prevent the formation of new education histories. He has remembered and allowed himself to forget. This tension between the danger of forgetting and the need to move beyond old critiques haunts historians of education. Must we remember in order to forget? We must. We must release ourselves from the boundaries of old critiques or risk a continued, paralyzing response permeating the field of education history. Without permitting this forgiveness, new versions are halted from the start as they wade through the aftermath of Bailyn and Cremin. How do we find freedom from entrenched critiques and the debates they sparked? Simply, we must be willing to forget. By engaging in this suspension of memory, we rewrite our field's historiography and permit an alternate future for education's histories, reimagined as the intimate interconnection among method, prose, and topic. Donald Warren first identified this "string ensemble" in his "[Waging War on Education](#)" earlier this year.⁵ Since then, [Charles Tesconi's](#) and [Adrea Lawrence's](#)

⁵ Donald Warren, "Waging War on Education: American Indian Versions," *Education's Histories* 2 (January 29, 2015), <http://www.educationshistories.org/waging-war-education-american-indian-versions/>.

⁶ Charles Tesconi, “Time for a New Revisionism,” *Education’s Histories* 2 (February 20, 2015), <http://www.educationshistories.org/time-for-a-new-revisionism/>; Adrea Lawrence, “Remedying Our Amnesia,” *Education’s Histories* 2 (June 12, 2015), <http://www.educationshistories.org/remedying-amnesia/>.

⁷ Milton Gaither, *American Educational History Revisited: A Critique of Progress* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 164.

⁸ Rubén Donato, *The Other Struggle for Equal Schools: Mexican Americans During the Civil Rights Era* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997); Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁹ Carl Kaestle’s *Pillars of the Republic* and V.P. Franklin’s *The Education of Black Philadelphia* offer distinct early evidence of work completed in a mode of remembering. This cycle of remembering and forgetting offers a potential model to be tested on education history broadly. Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (Macmillan, 1983); V.P. Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Educational History of a Minority Community, 1900-1950* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979).

multilogues with Warren have expanded the project beyond his intimate meditation.⁶ Prose is the forgotten “other” in this trio, and education historians need to recognize themselves as storytellers as we rewrite our historiography. One possible storyline is presented here; the plot is alarmingly simple. Education history must remember in order to forget.

The State of Remembering

Because of and in spite of the revisionism sparked by Bailyn and Cremin, education historians today still mostly reside in schools of education, and they mostly study schools. Milton Gaither concluded that “despite the rhetoric of historiographical mainstreaming, today just as in the 1950s the great bulk of books and articles written by educational historians are about school, often with an eye on issues of contemporary relevance.”⁷ For education historians who primarily focus their scholarship on schooling the last two decades have not been without innovation. To name a few, significant works by Vanessa Siddle Walker, Rubén Donato, Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., and Jack Dougherty mark a period of forgetting made way for by the revisions of the predecessors.⁸ These authors stand together because they model careful archival and qualitative research grounded in complex understandings of how race and identity intersect with schooling. Also significant here, however, is this groups’ history writing—specifically the ways they conceptualized their works—exclusive of historiographical discussions of Bailyn and Cremin. Their individual choices gain significance when repeated examples are gathered: These historians wrote new versions of education history in a mode of forgetting.⁹

Contemporary education histories are also marked by the shadow of Bailyn and Cremin. Karen Graves, Nancy Beadie, and Kim Tolley, have recently suggested Bailyn’s and Cremin’s critiques do not fit their historical inquiries. In 2012 Karen Graves suggested LGBTQ history as a counterexample to Bailyn’s and Cremin’s critiques of education history. Because lesbian and gay history “has focused on education writ large in the broader culture, such as work related to film, music, literature, social and political organizations, and the military,” Graves argues for needed focus

¹⁰ Karen Graves, “‘So, You Think You Have a History?’: Taking a Q from Lesbian and Gay Studies in Writing Education History,” *History of Education Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2012): 469, doi:10.1111/j.1748-5959.2012.00416.x.

¹¹ Ibid., 470.

¹² Nancy Beadie and Kim Tolley, eds., *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States, 1727-1925*, First Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

¹³ Ibid.

on schooling.¹⁰ “What does it mean if we know more about the celluloid closet, the lavender scare, and coming out under fire than, say, the children of the rainbow, the Johns Committee, and the Society for Homosexual Freedom at Sacramento State?” Graves questions.¹¹ Her work utilizes the school as an access point for LGBTQ histories often muddled by unseeing eyes and unhearing ears.

In *Chartered Schools*, Nancy Beadie and Kim Tolley intentionally or inadvertently brushed past the difficulty of the 1960s critique they raised, specifically writing that “several scholars reproached historians of education for their uncritical depiction of schooling and for failing to consider the many influences upon children’s learning apart from formal institutions.”¹² Alas, their work is still situated in schools: “While we agree with this critique, we believe that it is important to analyze the development of public schools in order to understand the formal and deliberate choices a society makes for the education of its young.”¹³ Their explanation might alternately be understood with the following implications: “we believe that it is [more] important” or at least, “we believe it is [also] important” to focus on institutional teaching and learning.

In the case that all of these authors intended readers to conclude historians of education should follow Bailyn’s and Cremin’s critiques and continue to research “formal and deliberate” schooling, they have failed. Despite these feelings these authors remain bound by disciplinary obligation to frame their work within this old critique.

How We Alter Our Memories

In “Waging War,” Donald Warren does not underestimate Bailyn and Cremin. He credits them fully aware of the ongoing revisionism of which they too must eventually succumb. Warren has remembered but not yet forgotten. A hypothesis building for much of his career, Warren proposes a revision to our field that stands once old memories are omitted: “Education history’s intrinsic and most inviting contributions begin as research methods.”¹⁴ An equally important conclusion follows Warren’s methods hypothesis: “any topic can be approached” by education historians when the field

¹⁴ Tesconi, “Time for a New Revisionism”; Warren, “Waging War on Education.”

¹⁵ Warren, “Waging War on Education.”

¹⁶ Jurgen Herbst, “Cremin’s American *Paideia*,” *The American Scholar*, no. 1 (1991): 128–40.

¹⁷ Lawrence, “Remedying Our Amnesia.”

is driven by its methods and not its topical domain.¹⁵ This conclusion is a long way from the disciplinary fear sparked by Jurgen Herbst and other critiques of Cremin’s ever-expanding definition of education.¹⁶ Adrea Lawrence perceptively detects the foundational assumptions within education history through Warren’s methods hypothesis, and she guides readers clearly to problems with periodization, definitional approaches, inscribed texts, and what she labels “the absence of memory” of indigeneity.¹⁷ Warren has started more than once with time-bending ideas of modern fiction-writer Julian Barnes to help find the courage to move past the issues Lawrence collected:

British novelist Julian Barnes helps readers perceive the more twisted chronologies charting the lives of real people, where past and present mingle and memory functions as more of a solvent than a fixative unless regularly exercised. In lived chronologies *people forget and alter past events*; time and memory neither recur purely nor cohere upwardly. They emerge as tools for organizing personal and communal experiences, constructed realities that come and go in relation to equally mobile signposts and other triggers.¹⁸ (Italics added.)

If memory is not certain, and if time is not always forward, these tools may be used to our field’s collective advantage. Historians of education may choose their present. We may choose to forget. We may make alterations to a shared past by actively selecting a new historiography that looks out across disciplinary boundaries, method, and conceptual frame, instead of in on painful worn out memories.

Philosopher of education Charles Tesconi, a self-identified outsider to education history, gave us the recent benefit of peering inside. Tesconi easily overlooks Bailyn and Cremin not only because of his background as a philosopher but more importantly because he believes “the methodological legacy Warren attributes to Bailyn and Cremin is incidental to the major contribution” he makes.¹⁹ Tesconi is correct; Warren’s methodological hypothesis stands alone and needs no support from Bailyn and Cremin. Warren proposes education history as a set of methods, a framework for undertaking any

¹⁸ Warren, “Waging War on Education”; see also Donald Warren, “American Indian Histories as Education History,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (August 1, 2014): 255–85, doi:10.1111/hoeq.12067, 256–7.

¹⁹ Tesconi, “Time for a New Revisionism.”

topical examination. The crux of the proposal, which he tests on American Indian histories as “analytical levers,” takes the shape of a new historiography brought together by ten unifying methodological features.²⁰ Education histories under this framework:

1. do not pay “much attention to schools”
2. treat education as “the fraught process of cultural formation”
3. embrace multi-disciplinary research designs
4. rely on “extensive sources” (e.g. archaeology, film, correspondence, fiction, government records, news reports, oral history, photography, and statistics)
5. is not ethnocentric (including across precolonial times)
6. “consider oral traditions and storytelling to be historically reliable”
7. do not presume a progressive arc
8. remember “Decisions, like all other actions, have consequences”
9. “choose words carefully, demonstrating the importance of history writing”
10. imply the field “is again due for revision”²¹

Warren’s list is not intended to be complete. To him and others joining this project, I suggest a return to Michael Katz’s 2001 introduction to *Irony*. Most important to this reflection is his persistent evaluation of the relevance of history. He asks implicitly throughout his new introduction and explicitly, “Would I, as a historian, have anything to contribute?”²² By asking this question, he permits the possibility that historical inquiry may not be best suited for all questions. Methods must be modified or at least reimagined. A less obvious consequence of this question is Katz’s willful vulnerability. Katz’s identity—not just his historical methodology—is open to critique. His question contains at least 7 possible claims:

²⁰ Warren, “Waging War on Education”; Tesconi, “Time for a New Revisionism.”

²¹ Warren, “Waging War on Education” Liberty has been taken in both the numerical presentation and paraphrasing of this list.

²² Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform*, xxxi.

*I am an historian AND/OR I have [something/nothing/everything] to contribute AND/OR historians can make contributions AND/OR historians should do more than question the relevance of their methods AND/OR historians should probe the identity claims made by the historian.*²³

²³ For more on analysis of meaning, see Phil Francis Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

The reimaged education historian emerges from this look in the mirror: Her historical inquiry is driven by method, not topic, and she recognizes her identity as central to knowledge production. Both claims merit further exploration, and point to a viable future for education historians.

One possible start, a suggestion embraced by this new framework, points outside of education (and outside of history altogether) to find promising education history. Two folklorists provide examples of my proposed eleventh method: education histories are written by the self-knowing. Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* is considered a classic among folklorists. *Wisdom*, which may be categorized as creative non-fiction because of its reliance on metaphor to decode Western Apache place-names, also exposes a new education history in which the ethnographer is a participant in the ongoing process of cultural formation. From Basso the ethnographer we recognize the utility of humbling oneself as the constant learner. Alongside an eleven-year-old Western Apache boy who is still discovering his own culture, Basso remarks, "he and I can learn together."²⁴ In this education history "I" must be written and heard.

²⁴ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, 1st edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 18.

²⁵ Frank de Caro, *Stories of Our Lives: Memory, History, Narrative* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013).

²⁶ See, for example, H. Lloyd Goodall, *Writing the New Ethnography, Ethnographic Alternatives Book Series* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000); Kirin Narayan, *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

²⁷ See, for example, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, 1st Ballantine Books ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989); Sara Alpern et al., eds., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing About Twentieth-Century American Women, Women in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

A more recent work by Frank de Caro, *Stories of Our Lives*, will be read by most as autoethnography. Education history as method perceives memory as a curriculum in education of the community. The subject at stake here is not a culture but rather stories themselves. The value of this text is the reader's choice; *Stories* can be read for de Caro's memoir, as well as for its formative argument on the role that oral stories play in memory.²⁵ These ideas are more familiar to ethnographers and qualitative researchers in education, to name only a few.²⁶ Should the author announce herself?²⁷ As much as the two can be distinguished, this is both a question of research methodology in the "field" and a discussion of how education history should be written.

The kind of forgetting suggested here is unfortunately not a panacea but akin to calisthenics. Education historians have shown themselves to be obligated and possibly anxious as a result of the critiques raised in the 1960s by Bailyn and Cremin. The work that sprang from their proposed revision—including work by Bailyn and Cremin—fell to many of the same sins as before, with one constant companion: education historians carried the weight of revisionism. A field already on the sidelines to academic history departments continues to feel the added strain of internal justification for its work. The resulting rehashing and belaboring has done more harm than good. The history of education has been held back.



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