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Studying in the Dark: Notes on Poetic Historiography for Art Education

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Studying in the Dark: Notes on Poetic Historiography for Art Education

Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course,
there is Boundlessness--

--Emily Dickinson, in a letter to Susan Gilbert-Dickinson¹

Without further dwelling on the nuances of the term, the late art education historian Peter Smith (1996) once called the history of American art education “tragic” (p. 2). The *tragedy* of art education was, for him, that while art educators have been eager to hold others accountable for their failed attempts to secure the position of art in American schools for good, the precariousness of their profession has never been entirely someone else’s fault: art educators themselves are also to blame for their Sisyphean struggle for recognition. Such self-induced suffering certainly assigns a “tragic element” to Smith’s historiography that presents “high hopes and lofty ideals ruined because of a refusal to examine fully the world in which art education must exist” (p. 2).

Smith’s noble aim was to overcome this tragedy and help art educators take the course of history into their own hands. It is important to note that, for Smith, it was not only the history of the field that was to be understood as tragic, but also the very present where history was written. Calling his current historical condition “admittedly dark, or at least troublesome” (1996, p. 3), Smith saw that “no research is worthwhile unless its aim is the correction of current practical problems” (p. 4). If one was to write a *proper* history of the field, it needs to be done in the darkness of the present.

Smith's passing yet constitutive remark on the tragedy of art education's history (or, to be more precise, history of its tragedy) echoes an approach to historiography that philosopher Sarah Clift (2014) calls an "ethics of memory" where "remembering recuperates the past, . . . the subject resists an indeterminate future through recourse to it and . . . the more memory we possess of the past, the better equipped we will be to confront the challenges that lie ahead" (p. 4). What is striking about this characterization is that *memory* as an ethical demand toward the present takes up a function usually assigned to *learning*: they both help us grasp the present while simultaneously leading us toward a better, hopefully non-tragic future. Putting it differently, the past--as a mutual object of memory and learning--paves the way for a brighter future. The darkness of the present where history is written is, then, always opposed to the dawning light of memory and learning.

The purpose of this article is to examine how to approach such writing in the dark without a temporal recourse to a past embedded in a future and what kind of historiographical language this would entail. Rather than presenting a case of historical research, I enter this question through educational philosophy of history with an intention to map the dark terrain where such writing might take place. As a piece of writing, this article, too, stumbles in the dark: it proceeds toward what I will call poetic historiography without, however, properly reaching it--at least not *yet*. To use terminology that I will discuss later, it presents a *study* of art education historiography that remains to be written.

Writing History, Now

Giorgio Agamben (2009), when writing about contemporaneity, states that "the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are

obscure” (p. 44). For Agamben, being *fully* present in the present (which, for Smith, was the primary goal of counter-tragic research) always involves a non-presence: the *now* is always “not yet” and “no more” (p. 48). This has important implications for historical research, since it challenges any notion of past, present, or future based on transparency, identity, and ownership (e.g., currently manifested in slogans such as “Make America Great Again”). Writing in the dark, the contemporary

is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to “cite it” according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond. It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present cast its shadow on the past, so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now. (p. 53)

Agamben’s characterization of contemporaneity resonates with Clift’s (2014) suspicion toward the ethics of memory discussed above. According to Clift, such ethics rests on an assumption that language--as the primary medium of memory and learning--transparently transmits knowledge from the past to the future, thus creating pre-conditions for historical (self-)reflection where past, present, and future are aligned in a causal continuum of linear time. Memory has, then, merely a preservative function: it makes sure that the past is transmitted to the future. Such ethics of memory cannot challenge the transmission of the past as such, since it creates its very conditions of possibility.

There is, however, another kind of ethics of memory that Clift traces: ethics that rest on

a singular encounter of confrontation with the past as a kind of *instant de passage* or moment of discontinuity, moments at which those aspects of the past that resist incorporation into a self-understanding come into stark relief.

Resisting self-understanding, these aspects of the past are nonetheless still there;

they remain as remnants that have yet *to be read*. (Clift, 2014, p. 6)

Agamben and Clift open up an approach to historiography where neither the past nor the future light up the present, but render it inoperative as a site of transparent transmission between the past and the future. In educational terms, such historiography presents a kind of pedagogy of memory *within* the darkness of the present--a pedagogy where memory and learning both suspend the past rather than transmit it to and preserve it in the present. Drawing from Tyson E. Lewis's (2013) conceptualization of Agambenian educational thought, rather than asking what art educators ought to *learn* from the past, this approach asks art educators to study it.

As a suspension of the past, studying in the dark challenges the seeming transparency of language, pedagogy, and memory. The close affinities Agamben (2005b) constructs between messianic *time of the now* and the time of poetry as well as Lewis's (2013) remark that "like the poem, studying resists its own end" (p. 58) point to the possibility that a *study* of the past can be understood as *poetic historiography* that approaches history aside from simply transmitting information between two (or more) points in time. Not only a question of form, poetic historiography ought to be understood as writing where the *time and narrative* of history are at stake--writing where memory and learning are both suspended from a linear narrative of origins and ends, thus asking us to rethink the very transmissibility of the histories we write. The *end* that a poetic historiography *qua* a study of the past resists is narrative coherence, an idea that narratives--historical or not--always give a coherent and clearly communicable form to the experience they represent (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010). For art education, this opens up possibilities to mobilize the education of art in historical research to challenge historiographical closures that keep the narrated chronology between past, present,

and future intact.

Like the boats Emily Dickinson writes about, we are already entering darkness without a course. What are, then, the bounds that mark the boundlessness of this movement?

Learning From the Past

A recent special issue of *Studies in Art Education* on historical research opens with art education historian Mary Ann Stankiewicz's (2017) question "Why is historical research significant to art education?" (p. 3). Echoing many other historians of art education (Chalmers, 2004), this question, coupled with Stankiewicz's own answer-- "an interpreted past enables us to make sense of the present, helps mold identity, and enriches understandings of the field" (Stankiewicz, 2017, p. 6)--unfolds a call for a timely use of history, or to be more precisely, of the past. A timely past, represented in history, saves the present from itself by responding to its current practical problems. But what constitutes the timeliness of the past? And how does it relate to how educational character of history itself is understood?

In the past few decades, art education historians have put a lot of effort into mapping their own historical situatedness and the challenges it poses to any inquiry of the past. They have also debated about the form and content of their historiographies when searching for new ways of writing history (Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon, 2000; Daichendt, Funk, Holt, & Kantawala, 2013; Garnet, 2017; Stankiewicz, 1997). Despite the breadth of these analyses, questions concerning the temporal arrangements of art education histories have rarely been raised (Tervo, 2017). This is not to say that timeliness of historical research (or, generally, any research) has not been a contested topic among art educators. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, historians of art education were part of the more general move toward post-positivist

and qualitative approaches to research, pointing to the limits and partiality of objective interpretation as well as challenging dominant discourses through previously silenced lives and stories (Amburgy, Soucy, Stankiewicz, Wilson, & Wilson, 1992; Erickson, 1984; Freedman & Popkewitz, 1985; Soucy, 1990). In terms of timeliness, positivist and universalist histories could not respond to the social realities of the time (if they ever really did), which meant that they had to give way to *timelier* histories.

An important framework for these new histories was the so-called linguistic turn in historical research, exemplified in works such as Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), which prioritized the very acts of *reading* and *writing* history over its objective documentation (Macfie, 2015; Pihlainen, 2015). The truthfulness and, subsequently, the timeliness of historical research were not contingent on one's abilities to gather data and organize it objectively, but on the representation of history itself. Following this approach, art education historian Karen Hamblen (1985) noted that "just as Magritte's painting of a pipe is not the pipe, a history of an event is not the event. Rather, a history is the creation of yet another event that results from an attempt to grapple with the nature of meaning, multiple truths, and levels of interpretation" (p. 8). Dustin Garnet (2017) has recently traced the influence of linguistic turn in art education historiography. Arguing that such histories "have begun to bring forward meaningful stories and inventive ways of showing and telling our pasts" (p. 48), Garnet promotes "artful" ways of "historizing" and "rendering the past" (p. 40).

Not all art education historians were happy about this turn of events. Smith (1995) scolded art educators who wanted to "ape" academic historians by adopting "fashionable approaches" such as "metahistory and historiography" (p. iv). For him,

these approaches, when separated from the “actual content” of history, “may or may not produce anything more than the desiccated corpse of history” (p. iv).

Despite the epistemological and methodological differences between Smith’s emphasis on the *actual content* of history and the *artful* freedom provided by the linguistic turn, in both cases, the timeliness of historical research is rooted in its functionality in the present. When the past has to *make sense* of the present or *solve its problems*, it easily turns into an object of learning that historians use to light the way out from the present into a better future.

But how do historians make the past do what it is supposed to do? What is the light that it sparks in the present? Mary Hafeli (2009) has argued that history plays an important part of the development of the field, since it helps to see the fundamental continuity between past and present. As she put it,

our custom of not explicitly acknowledging, connecting to, and building upon the work of other art education scholars, particularly those from the more-than-recent-decade past, results in a fragmented, incoherent disciplinary knowledge base—a condition that ultimately may slow the deepening of our collective insight and deter substantive refinements to the field's evolving theories and practices of art teaching and learning. (p. 370)

Another, less linear, approach was taken by Diane Korzenik (1986), who, arguing that “history, by definition, is what is not now,” saw that “if we focussed [sic] *not* on precedents for what we are doing, but instead upon what is lost, we then acquire a handle for seeing the strangeness of our present practices, enabling us to recognize the motives for why our work or our homes or whatever have taken the shape they have and to accept that some things are gone and lost” (p. 39).

While Hafeli and Korzenik seem to offer two competing conceptualizations of the time between past and future--one embedded in continuity and another in

discontinuity--they both rest on an understanding of past that, paraphrasing Korzenik, *is not now*. To understand the present historically means to understand its absent past. For Hafeli, ignoring this absence leads to “fragmented” and “incoherent” knowledge of the present, while for Korzenik, the present is not incoherent *enough*, which is why the past “offers us exercises in de-centering ourselves, distancing ourselves from the egocentric conditions we know, enabling us to accept conditions that are ‘other’ and not self-referential” (1986, p. 38). This mutual emphasis on absence eventually means that there is not much difference between continuous and discontinuous history: they both rest on an understanding of historical time where an absent past casts its light in the present and leads us out from its “self-referential” presence.

It is here where Stankiewicz’s (2017) question concerning the timely significance of historical research in art education and the ethics of memory that Clift (2014) critiques can be grasped in educational terms. A pedagogy of memory that sees the past as an absent object of learning that the present lacks establishes what Jacques Rancière (1991) calls an explicative order of education: the past needs to be absent in order for it to become a source of knowledge that historians can first conjure in the present and then explain to those who are trapped in its darkness. It is important to underline that this order is justified not necessarily in terms of subject positions (e.g., teacher vs. student or historian vs. layperson), but through a chronological arrangement of historical transmissibility that, to paraphrase Clift (2014), commits the future to memory. It goes something like this: Since what precedes us makes us who we are, we are obligated to learn from the past in order to understand ourselves. For such learning to happen, we need to bring this absent past to the present. Only then are we truly able to make sense of ourselves as dwellers in the present and, eventually, leave the present behind. Following historian Martin L. Davies (2006),

this rationale presents “an already historicized world” where “experience cannot be conceived *except* in the shape of past events--except as knowledge already known, as the same old thing” (p. 3).

To paraphrase Smith (1996), this might present an admittedly dark, or at least troublesome image of historical research. While this might be true, I see that historians of art education could actually benefit from a bit of darkness, though not the kind of tragic darkness à la Smith (i.e., darkness that is opposed to the light of learning) but one that, as Agamben (2009) put it, “cast its shadow on the past” (p. 53) so that history, like Magritte’s pipe in Hamblen’s (1985) example, is opened up to a play of words, images, and events in the present. Following Agamben (2007),

true historical continuity cannot pretend to discard the signifiers of discontinuity by confining them to . . . a museum of ghosts (which now often coincide with a single place: the university), but by ‘playing’ with them, accepts them so as to restore them to the past and transmit them to the future. (p. 95)

This allows historians to experiment with the boundlessness of the dark in which they write, like Dickinson’s boats without a course. But what does this mean in terms of pedagogy of memory? What kind of education does a historiography without a course entail?

Studying the Past

In his short essay “The Idea of Study,” Agamben (1995) writes that “the end of study may never come--and, in this case, the work is stuck forever in the fragmentary or note stage--or coincides with the moment of death, when what had seemed a finished work reveals itself as mere study” (p. 65). By leaving the end of study open--an openness revealed, perhaps, only on one’s deathbed--Agamben seems, at first, to understand study as an essentially *tragic* endeavor. While a “long dwelling in

potential” explains “the sadness of the scholar” (p. 65), the sadness Agamben describes does not find its manifestation in a Sisyphean character stuck in an infinite present (sadness that characterizes Smith’s reading of art education’s tragic history). Rather, his “most extreme exemplar” of a student is Melville’s Bartleby, whose *I prefer not to* “shakes off the sadness that disfigured [study] and returns to its truest nature: not work, but inspiration, the self-nourishment of the soul” (p. 65). Why is that?

Agamben’s reading of Bartleby, rooted in his Aristotelian understanding of potentiality as potentiality to be/do *and* not to be/do, focuses on the very act of Bartleby’s non-doing. Being a scrivener who does not write, he enacts both sides of his potentiality, the potential and the im-potential (Agamben, 1999). For educational thought, Agamben’s Bartleby offers a reconceptualization of the very temporal arrangement of education. As a studier, Bartleby brings forward a mode of study where, as Lewis (2013) puts it, “studying emerges as a kind of im-potential state of educational being that interrupts any notion of educational ‘growth’ or educational ‘realization’ of latent potentialities” (p. 12). The event of study is an event where education *acts in the present* without recourse to the past or future. This certainly does not mean that past and future are completely shut off from this event. On the contrary, they are exposed to their contingency in the present, which, following Lewis, points to “the indistinction of past, present, and future, suspending our ontological vocation, thus freeing the student *right now* to experience his or her im-potentiality as a form of immanent freedom” (p. 104).

This is the messianic kernel of Agamben’s concept of time, developed through his reading of Walter Benjamin and the apostle Paul. The messianic “time of the now,” *Jetztzeit* in Benjamin and *ho nyn kairos* in Paul, is the very time of study, a

kairoitic time “*that* we ourselves are” (Agamben, 2005b, p. 68). Rather than a passage from incompleteness to completion, from potential to actual, or from a past to a future, study stays *within* the very event of education, seeing its darkness not as a lack of light, but as darkness as such. The contemporaneity of study, its timeliness, stems from attentiveness to this darkness. As an example of this attentiveness, Bartleby points to a presence in the present that suspends the time between past and future, eventually rendering the distinction inoperative.

Here, it is possible to draw some differences between two pedagogies of memory, one based on learning from the past and the other as a study of the past. As discussed above, the former actualizes the educational potential of the past in the present by granting memory a future tense. This is why Stankiewicz’s question about the significance of historical research in art education is basically a question concerning what histories of art education *can do* in the present. The past is effectively transmitted to the present as a lesson so that we can learn something. The latter, on the contrary, restores the im-potential character of the past as the object of memory and learning. This means that rather than asking what historical research can do in the present, studying the past pays attention to what history *cannot do*; that is, how historiography puts the past together with the present aside from the ethics of memory where the past appears as a future corrective in the present. Following Agamben (1999):

Remembrance restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again. It is in this sense Bartleby calls the past into question, re-calling it--not simply to redeem what was, to make it exist again but, more precisely, to consign it once again to potentiality. (p. 267)

What Agamben calls “potentialization” of “what happened” and “what did not happen” not only distances history *qua* study of the past from its Rankean heritage, but also poses a challenge for histories that, along with the linguistic turn in historical research, try to make the past more *meaningful* through narrative coherence. As an attentiveness to the darkness of the present, a study of the past approaches the im-potential side of history and its pedagogical function, thus complicating the seemingly direct relation between representing and transmitting the past. Indeed, it is the very resistance to representation and transmission that serves as the grounding element of potentialization and the challenge it poses to narrativity of history. As Clift (2014), reading Benjamin, argues, it is “*because* language does not signify in any direct or natural way . . . it is able to generate any history at all” (p. 33). It is this same resistance that makes Bartleby a non-Sisyphean figure. As the contemporary’s ability to “cite” the past “does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond” (Agamben, 2009, p. 53), Bartleby transmits neither a will nor a failure of a will but, on the contrary, a radical absence of will. In this absence, the question of representation--history as an objective, subjective, relativistic, or fictional truth--becomes secondary: what is at stake is the very event that history creates in the present. Uncoupled from an individual will to an *arche* or *telos*, the event of historiography “restore[s] to history the potential of its own finitude” (Clift, 2014, p. 11), reminding us that “a historical moment is never entirely at one itself, and that the time for its futurity is, literally, ‘now’” (p. 40).

If the pedagogical force embedded in learning from the past is based on a chronological as well as epistemological absence of the past--an absence that establishes the explicative order of history--what is it that educates in Agambenian study of the past? An answer can be found in Agamben’s political philosophy. In

State of Exception (2005a), Agamben writes that “law which is studied but is no longer practiced is the gate to justice” (p. 63). Here, studying stands for “another use of the law” (p. 63) that deactivates rather than negates the functionality of the law. This messianic deactivation of the law—one that both confirms and destroys it—has close ties to Benjamin’s writings on redemption. Agamben (1999) writes:

To redeem the past is not to restore its true dignity, to transmit it anew as an inheritance for future generations. . . . For Benjamin, what is at issue is an interruption of tradition in which the past is fulfilled and thereby brought to its end once and for all. For humanity as for the individual human, to redeem the past is to put an end to it, to cast upon it a gaze that fulfills it. (p. 153)

From this perspective, the pedagogical force of the study of the past is located in its capability to *not* transmit the past as an original image of the present, thus deactivating the causality of chronological time. Simply stated, what is at stake here is a shift from the transmission of the past as a lesson to be learned to the study of transmissibility itself, to the very im-potentiality of history to transmit anything at all. It is worth emphasizing that this does not mean that we ought to forget the past or deny its factual existence. When read together with Hamblen’s claim that history always creates an event that is not the event it represents, a study of the past creates an event of memory and learning where the contingency and finitude of the now is at stake. Rejecting a binary between continuity and discontinuity, this opens up a possibility for an ethics of memory that resists its own reduction to an immemorial law that we are to obey to the end of days. Agambenian study of the past offers, then, a form of radical presentism that keeps the present, together with the past, in question.

Poetics in the Dark

While staying true to Smith’s (1996) characterization of the present as a dark

condition, my intention has been, paraphrasing Agamben (1995), to shake off the tragedy that characterized it and explore historiography *qua* study of the past as a possibility to experiment with its boundlessness. But have I produced anything more than, to use Smith's (1995) words, a "desiccated corpse of history" that "mask[s] a lack of worthwhile content and lack of regard for a balance that will wear well over time" (p. iv)? Why would art educators *need* this kind of historiography?

Lacking a clearly delineated course, a study of the past does raise some critical questions concerning the intersection between historiography, art, and education. Is it too local, too dependent on singular figures like Bartleby who exercise their potential to not do because they are guided by an obscure exigency that resists communication? Also, does a deactivation of the transmission of the lessons of the past also prevent us from constructing alternative histories that provide much-needed hope for futures aside from what already exists? Echoing these sentiments, Rachel Smith (2006) has argued that there is always a "temporal dark side to potentiality" where the liberating openness that potentiality assigns to the present also involves a "grief in the face of loss" since "life itself can no longer be imagined as safe, predictable, and continuous" (p. 99). Are we, then, despite the efforts to understand studying as an inherently playful activity, stuck in darkness with a tragic figure of the scholar lost in the endlessness of study?

While these questions certainly help to map some of the possible shortcomings of my argument, it is worth emphasizing that the very event of education, not the student, teacher, or the outcomes of their actions, is what is at stake here. This event, I believe, includes both learning and unlearning, drawing oneself nearer to something and distancing from something else. It is not some kind of a relativistic or ambiguous opening to the world where the world becomes whatever I personally desire it to be.

On the contrary, it always involves a resistance to its own affirmation as a determining moment between past and future. When this event of education is placed alongside with reading and writing history, two practices that, *together*, form what I call a study of the past, what we have is an educational mobilization of the very aporia of history, namely, the irresolvable tension between past and present, *in memory*.

This presents a critical task for historiographers who, responding to “current, practical problems” (Smith, 1996, p. 4), acknowledge that in an “already historicized world” (Davies, 2006, p. 1), those who historicize are those who are first to take credit for the very progression of historical time. Drawing from Lewis’s (2013) claim, “like the poem, studying resists its own end” (p. 58), one way to work through this task is to posit a *poetic historiography* that, akin to poetry that arrests language by putting its communicative aspects in question, deactivates its own functionality as a (hi)story. Such a resistance to an end does not mean a dwelling in the infinite ways to narrate the past--an approach that conflates representation with transmission--but precisely the kind of resistance found in the event of education and memory. Instead of circling around meanings transmitted, a poetic historiography mobilizes its own im-potentiality to be narrated, its capability for transmissibility.

In art education, such poetic historiography offers a productive critique of Garnet’s (2017) suggestion that “art educators may be well suited to produce new histories due to the creativity and aesthetic judgments needed to construct artful renderings of the past” (p. 43). Going back to his claim that such renderings “bring forward meaningful stories and inventive ways of showing and telling our pasts” (p. 48), the problem with Garnet’s account is that he does not envision art aside from its communicative aspects (manifested in his emphasis on “showing and telling”), which reduces the educative dimensions of art into mere transmission of historical (or,

better, historicized) knowledge. Symptomatic to this approach, Garnet utilizes a “polyptych framework” (p. 44) to author a “new history” for the Central Technical School in Toronto, Canada, that brings together a “plurality of stories that construct a holistic account of art education” (p. 43), but he never discusses why history (especially a “holistic” one) needs to take up a form of a *story*--a narrated closure constructed by “creativity and aesthetic judgments” (p. 43)--in the first place.

Poetic historiography, by challenging the very premise of transmission in historical narratives, allows another kind of artfulness to emerge, one whose ethics is sensitive to “those aspects of the past that resist incorporation into a self-understanding” (Clift, 2014, p. 6) and puts the very narrativity of education and history in question. Following recent critical reconfigurations of narratives in the wake of linguistic turn (Hyvärinen et al., 2010; Meretoja, 2014), poetic historiography for art education studies the past in ways that allow non-developmental and non-linear pedagogies of memory to emerge. It questions historiography not only in terms of how it renders the past, but also how it renders the time in which art and education, as practices in the present, unfold.

Where to begin? Judith Balso (2014) writes about reading poetry:

The poem is at once what it thinks and the dense, more or less compact, presentation of what it thinks. The poem is irreducible to its own presentation. This is the reason why we are never finished with a poem. Not because it offers up a polysemy of significations, or because it leaves a place for ambiguity and multiple meanings (except, of course, when it strives to do this deliberately), but because it says only one thing in the most precise manner available. (p. 98)

To study the past in the dark is, then, to write and read with a poetic *precision*, a precision that potentializes the very event that history creates and makes sure that we are never finished with the present. Here, art plays an important role: it offers a form

of precision that does not merely structure the past as a set of objective facts or narratives, but allows an interruption in the narrativity of the present.

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¹Quoted by Susan Howe (2008, p. 179).