
**Novel Identities:
Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*
as a Mentoring Framework
for Curriculum Studies and Life Journeys**

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The whole idea of the journey is basic to humanity...[but] the really significant journey is the interior journey. (DeWaal, 1998)

Prevalent in both archetypal and religious literature, the journey motif weaves its way through tales of human growth—stories which grapple with the processes of how people come to be and to know. Such images of identity formation and knowledge construction hold significant implications for the field of education. As Huebner (1993) suggests, “the question educators need to ask is not how people learn and develop, but what gets in the way of the great journey—the journey of the self or soul.” Huebner is not saying that knowledge of human development is without importance, but instead he is asking educational scholars to be willing to look at knowledge construction through a more contextualized and holistic lens—to risk an exploration of students’ journeys from alternative standpoints. His statement demands much from the educational community, in that it calls for an enormous paradigm shift.

Accustomed to a cultural environment with a reductionist tendency to describe education in terms of attaining and measuring de-contextualized skills, the journey metaphor requires us to look at learning through a “new” lens, in which knowing becomes something that is inextricably linked to our unfolding life contexts. Exploring the problems and possibilities inherent to such a paradigm shift makes it necessary for educators to revisit questions regarding the nature of educational research. What does education “as a means of caring for the journey” look like? And in what ways might it be implemented within pedagogy and research?

In our own lives, we have discovered that examining specific life stories—both on an individual basis and communally with students—often provides important clues concerning the ways in which people learn, in which they have traveled through obstacles within their unique journeys of “the self or soul.” In particular, narrative examinations have proved helpful at a multiplicity of levels in terms of exploring the identity formation and knowledge construction of forgotten or marginalized people. As Pinar (1993) explains:

We are what we know. We are, however, also what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves—our history, our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials, incompleteness, then our identity—both as individuals and as Americans is fragmented.. (p. 61)

When viewed from this standpoint, locating forgotten journeys moves beyond an act of altruism or of social justice (as important as such motivations are) to one of educational necessity. When another’s story is missing from collective American lore, then my own story—both individually and communally—is also incomplete.

If examining life journeys is regarded as a necessary part of educational scholarship, then it follows that pervasive assumptions concerning *which narrative formats* are appropriate sources for educational research should be re-examined and replaced by more expansive notions (Gilbert, 1994). It also follows that as researchers seek new narrative spaces from which to explore and uncover marginalized journeys and ways of knowing, that we must also seek narrative sources that provide us with potential guideposts or mentoring clues for locating “new” ideas with the potential to inform current curriculum theory. One such neglected, yet promising narrative research genre for the education field is that of 19th-century American women’s novels.

Therefore, our purposes for writing this paper are two-fold. Firstly, we will demonstrate the viability of exploring a “new” source for curriculum studies research, that of 19th-century women’s novels. And we will do so, for the most part, through the context of the now marginalized, but once highly acclaimed 19th-century novelist, Catharine Maria Sedgwick. Secondly, it is our purpose to describe some of the specific contributions that Sedgwick’s life and most popular novel, *Hope Leslie*, or *Early Times in the Massachusetts* (Sedgwick, 1827), can offer to the field of curriculum studies. In particular, we will demonstrate how she used her novel as a creative space from which to mentor herself and others towards constructing life journeys that both exhibited and promoted the construction of counter cultural knowledge.

Due to the fact that we will contextualize the majority of our dis-

cussion within Sedgwick's life and novel, *Hope Leslie*, we will provide a short biography of Sedgwick's life. Following this description, we will utilize the specificity of Sedgwick's life and novel as a framework from which to discuss the notion that many 19th-century women writers used the novel format as a vehicle for "safely" voicing their views on culture and education and for unpacking alternative life journey patterns. A discussion demonstrating how she used her novel as a creative space from which to mentor herself and others towards constructing life journeys and views towards counter cultural knowledge construction will follow. In addition, we will tease out her views (or potential curriculum theory) concerning the roles that the imagination and sacrificial love can play within knowledge construction and her use of the imagination to diffuse false dichotomies within human thought and culture. After discussing some of Sedgwick's novel contributions to the field of curriculum studies, we will explore some of the ways in which ideas drawn from *Hope Leslie* can inform today's schooling contexts. However, we will first provide an overview of the methodology we employed within this research.

Methodology

The lens through which we gathered and analyzed data from Sedgwick's novel was built around Sally's (author one) understanding of a narrative strategy that was utilized by many 19th-century women writers. In *Palimpsest: (Re)Reading Women's Lives*, Jacobs, Munro, & Adams (1995) label and describe this once pervasive strategy through their construction of a metaphor, *palimpsest*, which is a term they borrow from art and literary history. An understanding of the literal meaning of palimpsest provides insight regarding a way that many early women writers explored and expressed their conflicted identities and ways of knowing. Palimpsest was known as a wax covered manuscript page that has been written on, scraped off, and written on again (Merriam-Webster, 2001). Although surface level words are clearly evident to readers, there remain behind those words the faint indentations of the scraped, original words. A type of "double voicedness" is present; a call to literally "read between the lines" can be heard. If audiences (or researchers) are to benefit from a creator's multi-dimensional "narrative," then they must be ready to look closely for "indentations." Palimpsest as a metaphor, then, serves as a potentially helpful tool for locating curriculum and cultural theory within 19-century women's novels that would otherwise be simply scraped away.

In addition to incorporating the metaphorical palimpsest into our investigative lens, our views were also informed by a large body of

literary theory pointing to both women fiction writers' common use of this "double voiced" narrative strategy and to the ways, in which their cultural perceptions tended to differ from their male counterparts (Dobson, 1986; Gould, 1994; Kalayjian, 1993; Madison, 1993; Pratt, 1981; Warren, 1984). Merging ethnographic approaches with reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978; Holland, 1975), we gathered clues to Sedgwick's educational viewpoints through several close readings of *Hope Leslie*. The themes that emerged from *Hope Leslie* were constructed through a grounded theory approach (Strauss, & Corbin, 1994) and triangulated with historical and literary data gathered by two key Sedgwick biographers: Mary Kelly (1993) and E. H. Foster (1974). Understandings drawn from feminist literary and social theorists such as Joanne Dobson (1986), Joanne Frye (1986), Leigh Gilmore (1995), and Petra Munro (1998) regarding the ways, in which women approach constructing novels and life narratives were also used to test recurring themes and our subsequent interpretations.

Overall questions guiding our exploration of *Hope Leslie* involved the following:

- What implications can be drawn from Sedgwick's life and historical novel *Hope Leslie* in terms of informing curriculum?
- What does the now marginalized Sedgwick's use of the novel format for curricular theorizing imply about the use of alternative narrative sources for current research purposes?

Nothing New under the Sun

That potentially useful curriculum theory would be encapsulated within unconventional niches such as a historical novel should not be surprising. Clues gathered from historical patterns offer today's educational researchers' guideposts—a type of mentoring—for uncovering lost voices and knowledge. Historically, groups that have not been able to express their views about culture, education, or identity *directly*, have constructed more *indirect* routes to voice their life knowledge. Therefore, curriculum study researchers must be willing to look for and to listen to educational theory in less traditional or "unorthodox" places. While increased attention to uncovering forgotten journeys within content areas such as language arts and social studies is promoted by many teacher educators for their pre-service teachers, there has been a pervasive neglect among generalists and within curriculum studies programs in terms of listening for the forgotten voices of curriculum theorists in those unexpected and unconventional places where they just might be found.

Searching for overlooked life narratives and ideas in unconventional places is not new. The history of the underground railroad, of World War II, and countless other oppressive sites contain narratives of oppressed people who used art, coded messages, music, and other non-verbal communications to testify to the truth of what they were experiencing, the life knowledge of which they were then becoming aware (Simon & Eppert, 1996). It was, however, always for those who had “ears to hear” and “eyes to see” (Ann Trousdale, personal communication, August, 2000). For those lacking in connection, interest, or expectancy, such unconventional communications were lost.

Striking, albeit less recognized, similarities exist within historical women’s literature, in that it has been little valued as a venue for uncovering overlooked curriculum/cultural theory.

Biographical Lines: 19th-Century American Cultural Contexts and Catharine Sedgwick’s Background

Cultural Contexts

However, before establishing why and in what ways 19th-century American women writers—and Sedgwick in particular—used the novel format as a means for communicating their ideas about education and culture, it is necessary to provide a brief review of Sedgwick’s (December 28, 1789 to July 31, 1867) cultural context and personal background. The early and mid-19th-century was a time when the United States was desperately trying to establish a unique culture, independent of European conventions. Scholars and the popular press alike sought to generate sustaining American myths for the young and experimental republic. As many Americans attributed almost mystical qualities to their emerging culture and the American landscape, the world watched with a critical eye (Lewis, 1955; Warren, 1984).

In 1820 the British critic Sidney Smith queried “In the four corners of the globe, who reads an American book?” (Kelley, 1993). Less than a decade later, four American authors were heralded internationally: Bryant, Cooper, Irving, and Sedgwick (Kelley, 1995). And after the successful introduction of *Hope Leslie* in 1827, *The American Ladies Magazine* declared “a hundred years hence, when other and gifted competitors have crowded into the field, our country will still be proud of her name” (Kelly, 1987). Sedgwick’s life and work were clearly influential to the growth of American literature; however, unlike her three male contemporaries’ cultural visions, her representations of diverse American journeys have long been forgotten. In contrast to canonized

portrayals of American culture that celebrate rugged individualism, Westward expansion, and White male leadership,¹ Sedgwick's hope for the United States involved community inter-dependence, interracial collaboration, and both female and male leadership.

Although puzzling, it is perhaps less surprising that the once internationally-renowned Sedgwick should have been forgotten, than it is that an upper class woman coming of age in Jacksonian America should have had such alternative cultural and political views. However, in her emphasis on honoring diverse voices and collaboration, Sedgwick was not alone. As "secondary characters in the drama of the American individualist," women constituted what Warren (1984) describes as a distinct culture, a culture separate from the national culture. They were a part of, but apart from, the competitive world of business and industry and the adventure of Jacksonian individualism (p. 8).

Separate Spheres

The increased popularity of a "separate spheres" ideology, which taught that women and men were naturally suited for different domains of influence, also contributed to the development of a distinct women's culture. Women were to influence moral and domestic matters within the home, while men were charged with the economic and political concerns of the public sphere; for "true women"—or so the story went—should be happy to keep the home pure for the benefit of "toil worn" men.

Nineteenth-century women often lived paradoxical lives, in which community was forged from exile. Separated from the power and benefits of the public domain, women formed their own culture based on experiences that they shared in common (Warren, 1984). Therefore, it is no wonder that the cultural visions and personal journeys encapsulated within their novels should differ from the canonical picture of rugged individualism and exclusive white male leadership that is still promoted as the quintessential American experience within today's classrooms. Relational identity formation and community cooperation were emphasized as key characteristics of a healthy American cultural identity.

A Life Informed by Multiple Storylines

For Sedgwick, an acknowledgement of the importance of community also included interracial collaboration. Within *Hope Leslie*, not only are two of her three female protagonists Pequod women, but Sedgwick also re-christens the accepted puritanical account of the "Pequod War" as "the Massacre at Mystic," and describes what happened when a Puritan group annihilated all the women and children within a Pequod community when the warriors were absent from their village. Sedgwick ac-

completes this through the voice of her character, Magawisca, a young Pequot Woman. In addition, she also portrays the only happy interracial marriage within 19th-century American Literature. What was it about Sedgwick's life experiences—her education—that equipped her to arrive at the conviction that the active inclusion of diverse perspectives and storylines are necessary for the identity formation of both individuals and nations? Relationship seems to have been key.

Mumbet: Relationship as key to Sedgwick's Education

It is likely that Catharine's close relationship with Elizabeth Freeman, often known in historical references as "Mumbet," also contributed to her conviction regarding the importance of recognizing the reality that diverse voices were woven into the fabric of American culture. Freeman was formerly enslaved by one of Catharine's father's associates, John Ashley. In 1781, after being hit on the head with a shovel by Ashley's wife, Alice, Elizabeth appealed to Theodore Sedgwick (a renowned lawyer) for her release from slavery. She had listened to discussions of the Declaration of Independence at a town meeting in Sheffield, Massachusetts, and she had overheard similar conversations among Sedgwick, Ashley, and their political associates. From this information, Freeman drew the conclusion that her slavery was unlawful. Theodore Sedgwick took up her case, and in 1783 they won, which resulted in Massachusetts becoming the first state to outlaw slavery.

Freeman then became employed within the Sedgwick home. As Catharine's mother, Pamela Sedgwick, was often bedridden with depression and related illnesses, and her father was frequently away on government business, the strong-willed and judicious Elizabeth became Catharine's mother figure and strongest female example.

A Patriarchal Survivalist: Re-shaping Cultural "Norms"

Catharine's inclusive and egalitarian views were, however, much more than her conservative family had intended when they promoted her education and taught her to value the new republic. Her mother Pamela was descended from a highly elite social group sometimes referred to as "the River gods," and while her father Theodore's family was not as highly placed, he managed to become the Speaker of the House under George Washington and a Massachusetts Supreme Court Judge. As the daughter of a leading family, it was considered desirable for Catharine to receive a much better education than the vast majority of American women since it was assumed that she would one day step into the role of acting as a suitable wife for an educated and hopefully influential gentleman.

While dutiful towards and concerned about her family's values,

Catharine apparently developed other ideas. In a time when nine out of ten American women married, she chose to remain single throughout her life. Even as a child she expressed displeasure over the limited expectations placed on women, in that she once wrote that within the confines of the many girls' schools and academies that she attended, her mind "was not weakened by too much study" (Kelley, 1987). It was within her family home that she received her "only education."

When her father was present, she would join him and her brothers each evening for readings, which were followed by lively discussions. In addition, her father encouraged her to make in-depth, independent reading time, a daily priority. Like many of her female contemporaries, Catharine longed to influence her culture in a direct manner. However, rather than risk familial and social censure (and for some women economic deprivation), she, like many other 19th-century American women, embraced her culture's limitations for the purpose of reshaping them (Tyler, 2001).

Based upon Warren's (1984) observation that 19th-century women often lived paradoxical lives, in which community was forged from exile, it should not be surprising that within such a cultural climate, the journeys of many women would exemplify an ability to creatively handle contradictions. For example, in keeping with the socially pervasive "separate spheres" emphasis, Sedgwick claimed to fully embrace the "limited" domestic realm relegated to women, but she and others did so to expand their gender's influence. Reform-minded women writers reasoned that if women were naturally predisposed towards guarding the morality of the home, then they were also especially qualified to guard the morality of American culture at large.

Therefore, by embracing the culturally common ideal—often called "the cult of domesticity"—that women were innately morally superior to men and therefore suited to purify their homes, Sedgwick and others built a rationale for women's active involvement in "public" concerns that impacted the development of American culture. Sedgwick's ability to re-shape cultural realities for the purpose of creating new possibilities for herself and her reader informed all of her unique theoretical contributions.

The Why and the Wherefore of Novel Spaces

Novels as Safe Experimental Ground: A Mentoring Site

While unique in many ways, Sedgwick's life journey is also paradoxically well-suited to act as a type of microcosm of *why* and *in what ways* many 19th-century women used the novel format as a means to construct knowledge, which holds the potential to inform current cultural

and curricular theory. One obvious advantage to masking alternative ways of knowing and perceiving the world within fiction was that it provided women with a socially acceptable—and therefore safe—means of contributing to their culture. Whereas, dominant “interpretive frames make autobiography knowable as a truth script” (Gilmore, 1995), writing viewed entirely as “fiction” is less authoritative and therefore a part of that socially acceptable, “homelier” realm to which women were relegated.

***Novels as Alternative Journey Patterns:
Another Mentoring Site for Women***

The argument that 19th-century women’s novels encapsulate alternative life journeys to which current curriculum scholars would be wise to attend, gains additional credence when one considers that women’s life narratives have a tendency to be in opposition to accepted autobiographical literary conventions. Telling their stories within fiction, then, enabled women to relate their journeys in ways that were more authentically aligned with *their* experiences of identity and knowledge construction. While American male autobiographers (i.e., Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson) presented the self as moving towards separation and individuation (Kelley, 1995), women’s life narratives have historically tended towards “sanction[ing] connection” and “reciprocal commitment.” Although Sedgwick did eventually write a type of autobiographical narrative in 1851 at the request of a family member,² which she modestly described as “a short, pleasant *story*” and a mere “collection of memories,” her most experimental and socially “risky” autobiographical work took place years earlier within the characters and subplots of a novel, *Hope Leslie*. In both cases, her identity formation and knowledge construction are portrayed as emerging from within the workings of relationships with self.

**Uncovered Theory:
Multiple Storylines and History as Memory Work**

Reminiscent of the work of present-day narrative theorists, Sedgwick recognized the potential power of exposure to multiple perspectives or journeys to disrupt negative cultural storylines. In particular, her novel demonstrates the suitability and effectiveness of fictional formats—and in particular, historical novels—for challenging negative “norms.” Equally important, she uses her novel to demonstrate that when paradigms regarding the purposes of history are altered, diverse historical narratives heighten their power to inform personal and cultural identity formation. Insights gleaned from the writing strategies Sedgwick used within her

historical novel, *Hope Leslie*, to scaffold her readers towards engaging with “new” historical perspectives are relevant to today’s classrooms, in that they suggest that fictional formats are a powerful tool for implementing education that connects content with students’ lives because learning works in concert with their lives. It is an example of education that cares for the journey of the self or soul.

Hope Leslie not only provides a record of Sedgwick’s resistance to the dominant cultural and historical understandings of her day, but it is also credited by current scholars as containing one of the United States’ earliest pieces of revisionist history (Gould, 1994; Kelley, 1995). Written during a time when 19th century America was demanding more and more of indigenous peoples’ land, Sedgwick’s portrayal of the Pequod Wars as a massacre led by Puritans, was a “direct challenge to the morality of [her] nation” (Kelley, 1995). Present-day narrative theorists such as Pam Gilbert (1994) and Jerome Bruner (1986) cite the tenacity with which individuals and communities often deny storylines that are in conflict with already entrenched cultural values, so it is astonishing that Sedgwick’s cultural critique received widespread acceptance, popularity, and critical acclaim within 19th century America. One thing that can be learned from Sedgwick’s success at communicating her alternative perspective is that she did so by creating an environment of safety for her readers.

Concluding Thoughts

Sedgwick’s life and historical novel *Hope Leslie* hold the potential to inform current curriculum in specifically powerful ways and to imply the usefulness of the novel format for current curriculum theorizing. By providing readers with engaging (both affectively and cognitively) contextualized life examples, she potentially equips readers to be better able to recognize and to transcend false dichotomies in caring for their own lives.

That Sedgwick’s novel approach to communicating her diverse vision won a widespread audience within Jacksonian America implies that a greater emphasis on exploring the roles of context and the affect—and therefore narrative—when seeking to diffuse false dichotomies and to communicate alternative storylines should be considered.

Notes

¹ Due to the work of L. A. Fielder (1966), R. W. B. Lewis (1955), and F. O. Matthiesson (1941), the individualistic male literary protagonist of the 19th and 20th centuries is regarded as ‘the New American Adam.’ While some novels found in the canon do explicitly support this label, for the most part the Adamic

tradition is a descriptor constructed by 20th-century scholars to support a prototype character as the quintessential American. Ironically, 19th-century novels outside the canon make direct references to the *Genesis* story for the purpose of constructing American protagonists who differ from the extreme individualism now associated with the American Adam tradition. In other words, women novelists who are now excluded from the canon supported a New Eve and a New Adam tradition much earlier and more explicitly than did those credited with the convention. Significantly, writers such as Sedgwick and E. D. E. N. Southworth incorporated the culturally influential Adam and Eve story in order to characterize the ideal Americans as interdependent and community oriented rather than wholly individualistic.

² “Perhaps I might tell a short and pleasant story to my darling Alice,” wrote Catharine Maria Sedgwick in an 1851 letter to her namesake niece Kate’s husband, William Minot. Aware of her extreme modesty, Minot persuaded Sedgwick to write her autobiography, not on the basis of her international renown as an author, but for the sake of his daughter (and her beloved great niece) Alice. However, what Sedgwick described as a “short and pleasant,” story and later as her “collection of memories,” not only incorporated important historical details of social and political growth in antebellum America, but also stepped away from the literary traditions of notable male autobiographers (such as Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson) who presented the self as moving towards separation and individuation (Kelley, 1993, p.5).

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