

# ‘Something that wants me to find it’: Hauntology, race, and curricular disturbances in Updike’s “rabbit” tetralogy

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## Abstract

This paper interrogates the epistemic and pedagogical significance of literature and philosophy within the field of curriculum theory through a reading of John Updike’s Rabbit tetralogy. Following the reconceptualist turn, which foregrounds subjective and aesthetic experience over technocratic outcomes, I position the novel as a site for moral imagination and curricular disruption. Engaging Derrida’s (1993/2011) notion of hauntology, I examine the novel’s protagonist, Harry Angstrom, as haunted by crises of faith over temporal existence as well as racialized violence. Literature, I argue, is a site of study for curriculum theorists to begin reimagining teacher and student subjectivity and alterity as a spectral shaping of educational experience.

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## Introduction

The question must be asked with a certain amount of caution and trepidation, what can a novel do? Can it offer us anything more than the elaborate fantasies of its author? More particularly, can the novel help us understand curriculum? An often-neglected discipline in educational research, literary studies is an important site for the study of education. Short stories, novels, and poems provide the capacity for thinking through a variety of education-related issues including existential, political, theological, and aesthetic aspects of experience (Kline & Abowitz, 2020; Leggo, 2005). Engaging in various forms of literature, novels invite readers into a contemplative practice of self-reflection that coerces their imaginations (Quinn, 2019). Thinking in such a cosmopolitan fashion within the curriculum studies field, which has already made use of literature as a site of study, I draw on fiction as a “principal vehicle” for moral and social change (Rorty, 1989/2009, p. xvi; Spector, 2011). More particularly, the novel invites “complicated conversations” to curriculum theorizing as a disruptive force to the linearity of traditional curriculum design, organization, and implementation (Pinar, 2004, p. xiii). Due to the curriculum field’s reconceptualization during the 1970s, which reversed the focus of curriculum away from the objects of curriculum, such as assessments and lesson plans, toward the subject’s educational experience, curriculum necessarily is an aesthetic enterprise. Greene’s (2001) unification between education and aesthetic experience reinforces the reconceptualists’ reversal, arguing that education provides the possibility of subjective and social reconstruction. At root, however, is the necessity to understand that “our lives”

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constitute our engagement with works of art, and that an aesthetic education is to “make people see” (Greene, 1973, p. 16). The significance of literature for the field of curriculum studies is to “restore vision” to a world which has, borrowing from Greene (1973) again, lost its anchorage (p. 20). It helps us to reconsider the world, to seek, sense, and see, what Rocha (2015) calls “imagining the real” (p. 110). The *nightmare* of the present, which relates to the current U.S. political and economic authoritarianism, attempts to rob people of their imaginative potentiality by foreclosing experience to solely the economic and transactional (Pinar, 2004). Such a foreclosure constitutes the current educational apparatus’s failure to gesture toward study as a subjective reckoning with human experience. Part of my claim, while providing a closer reading into John Updike’s “Rabbit” novels, is to suggest that not only should more students, teachers, and teacher educators read novels, but that literary and philosophical study itself makes up an important site for the study of education. Given Updike’s insistence that the novels make up an “education” for Harry Angstrom<sup>2</sup>, the protagonist of the series, it stands to reason that more thinking needs to occur to consider the way novels function to shift individual and public consciousness.

The four novels that make up Updike’s tetralogy are *Rabbit, Run* (1960/1996); *Rabbit, Redux* (1971/2010); *Rabbit is Rich* (1981/2010); and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990/2010). In this paper, I offer a reading of Updike’s “Rabbit” tetralogy using the concept of “hauntology” in Derrida’s (1993) *Specters of Marx*, in which he notes, referring to the theatricality of spectral haunting, that “the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name...for it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition” (p. 5). The importance of Derrida’s definition cannot be overstated as it does not describe just what’s not there, but also the incarnation of what has not been properly named *as such*. In Derridean form, as I will explain below, presence and absence do not function as such, which is another way to say that there is always a spectral other who goes unnamed, unnoticed, or unthought. Thus, in my reading of Updike’s “Rabbit” novels, I point to the “crisis” of reason in a world seemingly gone awry, which is ultimately a crisis of faith for the protagonist, Harry, who is often referred to as “Rabbit” due to his former basketball small town glory. Harry’s crisis of faith, his journey, remains called toward the spectral justice which feels like it is coming, even at the very end of the novel series. However, that justice remains deferred, just as life seems to be. According to Derrida (1993), who quotes from Shakespeare (1603/2012), “the time is out of joint” (p. 69). If Huebner’s (1967) thesis is that curriculum is human concern for temporality, Updike’s novel expresses that education’s concern is also what exceeds the temporal. Namely, that despite the formal limits of existence, education, like the novel itself, reaches for something beyond the limits of its enclosure, such as the final page or assessment. In this sense, curriculum remains haunted by what cannot be fully captured within the linear flow of time, especially in its ethical, intellectual, and spiritual horizons. Updike’s fiction suggests that education’s aspiration may be haunted by what seems impossible within those limits—the eternal, the sacred, or the good which gives time its meaning. Only in the extension toward the limits of existence, and the rupture of our horizon of what exceeds those limits, can we imagine a future otherwise.

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<sup>2</sup> For the rest of the paper, I will refer to him as Harry. I do this because there are other times when I refer to his wife, Janice, and his children who share his last name.

My reading revolves around the disjointed nature of Harry's experience, which flows along the current of time—through the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and finally ending in 1990. I aim to show how Updike represents the disruption of linearity and reinscribes the desire for the messianic (the coming, but not yet) event of justice, an ineffaceable mark which Derrida (1993) cautions us not to reduce, for it would reduce the “singularity and the alterity of the other” (p. 33). It would likewise reduce justice, and thus, injustice, to a setting of juridical-moral rules, which Updike rejects. It is in the disjointed, anachronistic narration of Harry's life that one can see “possibility” laden in what often is harmful. A question that is laden with possibility is the following: where are you? I find this to be one of the central questions of curriculum. One may recall the question emergent in the story of Genesis in which God asks Adam the same question. The importance of that mythic question and call to find one's location, to determine one's position, is precisely disrupted in the call itself by God, that spectral “thing” which calls from nowhere in particular. Updike, without plainly stating it as such, attends to the call coming from nowhere in particular—his own thoughts, other people's words, and his dreams—which upends Harry's life until the very end. Following these themes, I read the concept of “hauntology” into two scenes from the Updike novels and offer a connection to the field of curriculum theory. Rather than use social science to consider questions of curriculum, I use literature and philosophy to help me best consider them.

### Hauntology and “Crisis”

Deconstruction for Derrida cannot be defined as such, either as a method or as a mode of inquiry. Derrida looked upon “the instance of *krinein* or *krisis* (decision, choice, judgment, discernment)” as one of the themes of deconstruction (Biesta, 2009, p. 1). It is much more accurate, if such a thing exists, to refer to deconstruction as the resistance to critical dogmatism (Derrida, 1995). Many of the postmodern critics of phenomenology sometimes place Derrida outside of phenomenology to position him as a poststructuralist, indicating that he moved beyond the supposed objectivity of a phenomenon. It is not my impression of Derrida's works that he seeks to “leave” the phenomenological reduction behind to remove the question of the real in totality. More accurately, the *event* of deconstruction “for us<sup>3</sup>” requires us to return to the phenomenon again. Being undone by the play of difference, the reduction's eruption calls the subject to return to the phenomenon once more (and then, perhaps, again and again). The movement of deconstruction is never fulfilled because the “presence” of an object is never absolute; it is likewise absent even in its presence (Derrida & Bass, 1978, p. 279). Existence is exposed by the absence, which signifies our finitude, which likewise exposes our inability to thematize the real.

One of the elements of Derrida's work, drawing on the phenomenological tradition, is that the subject and the object distinction is always already destabilized (Reynolds, 2001). By eluding fixed distances of alterity through the relation between the “same” and the “other,” Derrida highlights the alterity of ourselves because of the chasm between my own pure singularity. Because of such a distance, we are condemned to testimony, the secret experience of an event (Morin, 2007). The moment of “crisis” haunts us through our experience in the world. Our autobiography highlights this unstable notion of “reading,” or interpreting the memories of our experiences. Derrida's (1993) hauntology, a play on the word ontology, reconfigures the Western ontological stance on presence and reason that creates a world of stasis. In the realm

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<sup>3</sup> This *for us* is important, because things appear at the point at which they give themselves to us and we are ready to receive them.

of academic abstractions, such a stance is commonplace, particularly in the domain of educational research. The totalization of knowledge in academia is not only plagued by a delusion, according to Derrida (1993), it is precisely this haunting to which one must respond, for it meets us in the classroom as well as in our study. And yet, not only there, in classrooms, where “curriculum” is most expected to be found.

Curricular spaces are to be found in the material and imaginative worlds I inhabit and study, finding out the “limits and liminality” of such realities (Casemore, 2008, p. 123). The simple act of reading is ghost-laden (one can exchange the word ghost for *geist*, or, spirit, making the act *inspired*) as one conjures up from the memory the trace of others whose “eyes can never be met” (Derrida, 1995, p. 85). It is in the memory that those who have gone before us are drawn back from the dead into our consciousness. They continue to live even in their death. The interplay of presence and absence functions through the aporetic of memory which re-calls, re-inscribes, re-presents, and re-surrects. Despite this “conjuring,” the memory recalls in ways that are themselves not fully present, but are re-presented, and thus forgotten as subjects try to keep them alive in their consciousness. Yet, even in a material sense, the living and dead are necessarily bound to one another, because the “living cannot be fully alive without the dead” (Laubscher, 2010, p. 52). As one moves toward death, it is in our testimony that we do not see the vanishing of our wounds, but the resurrection of the violence of the past which already left their traces. While I will continue this discussion of “re-call” later as I engage Updike’s texts, it is worth bearing witness to the silent *yes* which corresponds in the work of memory, of welcoming what does not immediately make itself present to us at any given time. One does not simply recollect from “nowhere,” but rather accepts the responsibility for the dead and for those who are not yet here, the ones who are to come. The work of thinking about haunting is a curricular issue. Thus, how do we think through the re-presentations of haunting among the living and the dead? In the section that follows, I will provide a summary of the novels in order to delve deeper into scenes which might help connect to my conceptual understanding of “hauntology” in the tetralogy, and to later connect it to the field of curriculum studies.

### “You Can’t Run Enough”

John Updike’s “Rabbit” tetralogy expresses the changing American post-World War II landscape across decades following the 1950s national economic expansion. The novel already begins with a sense of loss. Namely, the loss of Harry’s stardom in the small town of Brewer. For years, Harry was a former high school basketball star who could score with ease. The acclaim he received as he played the game allowed him the ability to navigate his social and personal experiences. In *Rabbit, Run* (1960/1996), Harry feels trapped by his marriage and his job, and impulsively abandons his pregnant wife, Janice, trying to recover a restlessness and spiritual emptiness he feels, very much like the sort of restlessness which captivated Augustine (2006) in his *Confessions*.

In *Rabbit, Redux* (1971/2010), Harry is now working a dead-end job and estranged from Janice in the late 1960s, especially following the death of their child at the end of *Rabbit, Run*. Harry becomes involved with a runaway named Jill and a Black Vietnam veteran named Skeeter. The experience they share becomes an allegory for the turmoil in American political and social life.

Harry becomes affluent in the 1970s, the time period in which *Rabbit is Rich* (1981/2010) is set. He inherits his father-in-law's car dealership and achieves the financial success which eluded him for so long. Despite Harry and Janice's financial success, they both remain dissatisfied, and struggle to get their son, Nelson, onto the "right path" they feel is a good one. There is a very clear generational divide between them, especially when Nelson describes his parents as vapid and empty due to their newly gained wealth.

Finally, in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990/2010), Harry retires to Florida amid Reagan's leadership during 1980s. Harry is overweight and suffering from heart disease. In this final novel, he faces his mortality and family failures, making the novel a sustained meditation on aging, decline, and death. In the end, he dies from a heart attack, with the final word, "enough," concluding the long saga.

Harry's journey through the novels reflects the educational experience spoken about by Pinar (2004) in his reflection on the concept of *currere*. The importance of the concept of *currere* as a shift from the syllabus, or objectives, or outcomes, to the notion of curriculum conceived as educational experience occurs in narrative form as opposed to quantifying it in some assessment matter. Pinar (2015) goes further to suggest that the quantification of educational experience works to "end" educational experience (p. 30). Rather than "end" things, which is really an apocalyptic metaphor for the enclosure of curriculum, the reconceptualists adopted metaphors to open up new understanding, especially from fiction. Kincheloe et al. (2006) expressed how "literary understanding," for instance, helped permit curriculum scholars to move into "unexplored realms of consciousness, in some cases altered states of consciousness," by which he meant in the imagination (p. 148). The unleashing of the imagination in one's thinking about curriculum became encouraged by scholars such as Grumet (1988), who, for instance, argued that thinking about curriculum should cause us to consider one's own existential situation, one which is historically and symbolically constituted.

One's situation, while historically and materially constituted, are marked by allegory. They are symbols which do not confine themselves to a particular present moment but shifting signifiers that "testify to the reality within and around us" (Pinar, 2015, p. 28). The shift of an allegory is that, as Pinar (2015) reminds us, they tell "a specific story that hints at a more general significance" (p. 27). In this rearticulation of the presence of allegory in curriculum scholarship is the disruption already expressed in one's own existential situation, especially in the way allegory confronts fixed senses of meaning and truth. The histories in which we understand epochal situations become reflected in rhetorical and narrative structures which, in and of themselves are not self-referential as things-in-themselves to which we must attune ourselves. They are situated poetically by our attention in fragmentary narrations of understanding. Who "I" am reflects the character of a text as much as the words on a page do. The character's actions, likewise, are interdependent to my subjective experience of them as well. Thus, a text may render a meaning in high school which carries new meaning in my 20s and then something new in my 30s.

My reading does not neatly end with the "I," which is a fictionalization of what I call myself in relation to what's constituting me at any given time. Everywhere there is the "trace," as Derrida (1967/1997) reminds us, signifying the world to me, another "I" which I must continually put up for question. The trace of myself; the trace of my mother; the trace of my father. The questioning of deconstruction is not a matter of stasis in thinking, but rather is

precisely the restlessness which is what Jean-Luc Nancy (2008) called the “experience of the heart,” which is the experience of restlessness, of dislocation, of the everywhere and nowhere by which “educational experience” is constituted (p. 76). My intervention of “hauntology” in this paper is not simply a theoretical tool for analysis, but the “mystical character” of the “conjuring” of curriculum studies itself (Derrida, 1993, p. 202). What exists within the field of curriculum studies, with its programs, departments, tenure lines, publications, archival histories, and commodification is the untimeliness of its conceptualization. In fact, prior to the concept of curriculum, prior, even, to its reconceptualization, there is what lies behind the name of curriculum, of what scholars continually try to name but eludes their grasp. One must study to attune oneself to the matter of what exceeds even the signifier and metaphor of curriculum. Derrida (1993) states that one must speak to “speak to the specter,” to “let a spirit speak” (p. 11). This dialogical relationship is the reader, the student, who acts as a spectator for the specter.

“Speaking” to the specter which haunts our field is the responsibility of the scholars who remain in the ideological apparatuses that are passing away, and, perhaps, whose time have come and gone. It is our responsibility to continue to “visit” and conjure the memory of those who, in our field, speak to the importance of the literary and symbolic. Just as Derrida (1993) notes that “there will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx,” and certainly no future without the many different spirits of Marx conjured in the minds of scholars who read him, the same charge holds true for us curriculum scholars “post” the reconceptualization who must carry thinking toward the future, a future which is indeterminate and strange (p. 14).

Nevertheless, curriculum’s hauntological narration of the “I” features heavily in Updike’s inscribed relation to the monotony of everyday life and the educational experience of Harry Angstrom. Harry’s life is not necessarily an admirable one, as one might want for their adjustable and learned hero. Harry cannot seem to escape the restlessness he feels from a past which continually haunts him. It is through this haunting, which refers to the persistence of the return of elements of the past, that we encounter Harry, possessed by the memory of his basketball playing days in Mt. Judge High School. Indeed, the first scene of *Rabbit, Run* (1960/2010) is one where boys are playing basketball at a light pole, running around with scraped knees and Keds. Harry watches in his business suit. Immediately we are drawn into the crisis of Harry’s life. Having been a high school basketball legend (“23 points!!”), he yearns for his former glory as a record-setting scorer for his team (Updike, 1960/2010, p. 66). Even as he plays basketball with the boys he meets at the beginning of the series, he becomes “elated” that he can still score with ease, but already feels his energy begin to fade: “his body is weighty, and his breath grows short. It annoys him, that he gets winded” (Updike, 1960/2010, p. 7). His sense of himself begins to fade just the same. He is *a suit*. He works selling a kitchen gadget called MagiPeeler in *Rabbit, Run* (1960/2010), a job from which he will eventually move on to work as a Linotype operator in *Rabbit, Redux* (1971/2010). Both jobs are described by Harry as “deadend,” of course, because they describe a life that has dwindled even at the young age of twenty-six; he is a dying star.

In the first novel, Harry runs away from his pregnant, alcoholic wife, Janice, whose parents run a car dealership, Springer Motors. He is in a loveless marriage (“once a Springer always a Springer”), in which all his frustration with his mediocre life becomes projected onto her and

their child, Nelson. Harry's "running" away from his responsibilities can be foreshadowed in an exchange between Harry and his high school coach, a mentor to Harry, Marty Tothero. He states in *Rabbit, Run* (1960/2010):

Work the boys into condition. Make their legs hard." He clenches his fist on the slick table. "Hard. Run, run, run. Run every minute their feet are on the floor. You can't run enough (p. 65).

Tothero speaks about how to coach a basketball team, but the novel suggests that his demanding and critical tone is all Harry hears and can absorb about how he should live. Tothero extolls the virtues of achievement, but the reader can plainly see that the *will to achieve* is only followed by the hollowness of the achievement itself. What has it produced? Who has Harry become? Indeed, Tothero's suggestion that running makes the boys—and here one might read, Harry—hardened, unable to give themselves over to anything else. It is not solely Harry's running that hardens him, but his distaste for facing what might be the difficult consequences of his actions. In another part of the novel, when a woman, Ruth, asks him about his marriage despite Harry's lack of desire to talk about it after bringing it up, he immediately regrets it, the feeling of an ever-growing "bubble" begins to "crowd his heart" (Updike, 1960/2010, p. 55). The bubble which crowds his heart is already a foreshadow of the end of the series, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990/2010), when he passes from a heart attack. However, in the first novel, he ignores it, hoping it will go away. The feeling he gets when finally facing the consequences of his actions at the end of the first novel, when he returns to his wife and child, is described as a disappointment, a static life he returns to on a Saturday only to realize that his driveway, the trees around his house were "[his] life—the real and only thing" (p. 190).

The allegory of the bubble does not go away. The sum of Harry's actions, his inability to turn away from the subject of his many desires—this time, his sweet tooth—gives him a heart attack. In the fourth installment of the series, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990/2010), he saves his granddaughter Judy from drowning as their canoe begins to turn over in Florida, where *Rabbit* is now semi-retired. He begins to feel a pain, like "a red internal blaze," which he squeezes his eyes together to extinguish (Updike, 1990/2010, p. 111). He cannot move, for the first time. He is physically incapable of running, and he must face the real, this moment, which now seeped its way into his arms and up his jaw. Judy's concern for her grandfather dislocates his sense of scale. "Young people," despite their naivete, their smaller bodies, he thinks, are "subcompact people made for a better" world (Updike, 1990/2010, p. 112). What makes this scene a redemptive scene for Harry is not that he recovers. He feels himself, his body, becoming nothing more than a "piece of physical luggage to be delivered into the hands of others" (p. 114). The chickens have come home to roost, to use the phrase. He feels his credit is beginning to run dry, echoing the dying America that continues to fall "apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of nobody minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God" (Updike, 1990/2010, p. 6). The redemption of this scene is not a salvific one, as everything gets resolved in the end. Rather, it is that Harry has come face-to-face with his own finitude, and cannot stop thinking about his family, those others who love him. I am, of course, talking about Janice, his wife, and Nelson, his son, but I also refer to Harry's recollection of the "dead child" who passed away at the end of *Rabbit, Run* (1960/2010) and lives on "with them as a silent glue of guilt and shame" (Updike, 1990/2010, p. 21).

Their dead daughter, Rebecca, who drowned in *Rabbit, Run* (1960/2010), continues to haunt Harry with the sort of cruelty that only "Nature" can supply. He thinks of Rebecca on a run

through the forest, where he sees grass grow wildly and with multiplicity despite his desire to grow grass on his front lawn. He thinks of how cruel it is for things to die. He thinks of the dead (his child, Rebecca, is in the background of these thoughts), and yet cannot summon paternal grace and love for his living son, Nelson. He thinks of memories to show this affection, but comes up short of even producing memories: "our lives fade behind us before we die" (Updike, 1981/2010, p. 43). Among the grass as he runs; he begins to commune with the dead, including the "pale seedling," Rebecca, barely even sprouted. Yet, not only Rebecca, also Ma and Pa Springer, Tothero, "whose eyes and tongues search for words" (Updike, 1981/2010, p. 161).

"The dead stare upwards" at Harry, unable to let him go, and yet he feels drawn to them, like the feeling of liability one gets when one has made an appointment (Updike, 1981/2010, p. 131). Unable to impress upon them the "sacredness of achievement," according to Tothero, or at least his own achievement, he testifies to us (the readers) the shame of his lack of achievement, his inability to fulfill a standard that has been set by the society in which Harry lives. The construction of American society is always in some kind of decay, according to Harry. This decay is highlighted by Harry's thought that by the time he *has* money (being born of very modest means as a child), someone, somewhere is clamoring to take it. By the end of the series, when he has lost his "cash cow," Springer Motors (whose name is assigned to Janice and Nelson, because they are truly "Springers") due to his son stealing money from the company, and Toyota deciding to part ways with them, Harry recognizes the comedy of these achievements. They really amount to nothing more than the relationships from which they emerge. "We are each of us like our little blue planet, hung in black space, upheld by nothing but our mutual reassurances," Harry thinks at the end of the series, "our loving lies" (Updike, 1990/2010, p. 264). That is, the myths we choose to believe about human experience, the value we prioritize over against relationships.

I want to make a return to curriculum and hauntology. The tales I have told from Updike's novels have together formed a picture of Harry as one whose self-architecture is displaced by the past. It is from this lack he feels he must retreat. Yet even in his retreat, he is not given the satisfaction of his desires. He is still haunted. Here again is the curricular question: where are you? But when this question is posed, the instinct is for Harry to run, to not respond to the call. Harry's concern for his own situation, the life that is given to him, is not the one he seeks, or at the very least imagines. Imagines is perhaps the wrong word, for imagination would assume a kind of "confrontation" with the real before him. His flight is a miseducation, a lie he must cling to. Even when he is not physically running, two things occur: he is shocked to be revealed that his actions in *Rabbit, Run* (1960/2010) have consequences in the upcoming stages of his life; his wife runs away, then his son. He is also shocked by the notion that achievements of the standards set by a "normalized" culture of compliance and discipline is nothing more than testimony, our "mutual assurances" that the only thing worth living for is the faith we put in standardized achievements. The link to the "school" can be drawn from this "faith" in standardized achievement, a faith placed in the practices of schooling which require little thought of the educator. This may, perhaps, be one of the reasons why it is so encouraged by stakeholders, to control the processes of what we conceive as formal "education." But this schooling lacks the reflective energy of thinking bigger than simply a productive task. Real academic study is more than just what one does. It is much more excessive than that. One might describe this in Harry's vision of love, or *eros*, as the action of the sexual encounter. Certainly, Harry abstracts love as more than sex, but he clings to it as

the thematization of it. By the time his heart attack occurs, he becomes conscious of a statement he made to a “prying clergyman” in *Rabbit, Run* (1960/2010), that somewhere, “behind all this, there’s something that wants me to find it” (Updike, 1990/2010, p. 112).

Judging from Updike’s biography, Harry’s abstraction of “something” unnamable is a divine reference. Updike’s demand, for us, is to see an unnamable otherness which is ultimately free but desiring as well. Well-known for his allegiance to the theology of Karl Barth, whose characterization of God is “wholly other,” Updike adds this statement to bring into focus human concern for the mystery of divine grace as opposed to deified aloofness (Hart, 1999, p. 96). The importance of Barth’s theological considerations is important as they play upon a kind of haunting I am attempting to analyze. Huebner’s (1999) notion of the “lure” of transcendence speaks precisely to Updike’s concern, and, I believe, provides a measure of connection to the field of curriculum studies. The human concern for temporality, as Huebner (1967) situates it, is a concern for what exceeds life, namely, death. Death becomes the great beyond which disjoins how we perceive life here. Life takes on new significance in the midst of human finitude. Yet, in narration, in poetics, we experience what we never really grasp, which is that time, in memory and the imagination, cannot hold what exceeds it. Such a rendering of time should strike us as a haunting of the way we choose to live and choose to treat others. As Barth put it, even in the deep haunting of social and political relations, which I will expound upon in the next section. Updike reflects as much in an interview in *Conversations* (Plath, 1994): “Barth was with resounding definiteness and learning [and was] saying what I needed to hear, which was that it really was so, there was something within us that would not die” (p. 102). Updike’s reflection relates to the divine mystery present in and around us, in our educational experiences where we are confronted not only by external objects as such, but what lies beyond, behind, within those objects as well. The confrontation of what remains hidden and conjured in the world before us does not simply pass away but embedded in the very materiality of things. Those ghosts re-emerge and are inscribed in how we pass along and initiate others into the mystery of a world worthy of notice and attention.

### **The Haunting of “Race”**

In the following section, I seek to read through Harry’s engagement with otherness in the novels. Harry’s engagement with otherness, especially among those who have been racialized and gendered in the novels, reflect a deep anxiety in his own fragmented subjectivity. Harry’s confrontation with difference is precisely a responsibility he chooses to run away from, either physically, emotionally, or psychically. Despite his desire to run, as he does in the first novel of the series, he also desires the comforts of the present. When Harry does remain in a place, as he does in the second novel while his wife Janice runs away, he promotes a very presentistic, abstract, and ahistorical understanding of history and the world; he promotes it as a performance of his whiteness, and his disinclination to be known (Warren, 2001). The fragmentary readings I offer provide “hauntings” for Harry’s reactionary whiteness in relation to otherness and provide justification for my analysis of “hauntology” to feature the responsibility and welcome of the other as a curricular issue. It is in this movement that I highlight testimony as a response to the other with the recognition that my knowledge of the other is “wholly” other. That is to say that, as both a teacher and a student, my relation to my students, my classroom, and even the world, is one that is qualitatively distinct. Yet, our bondedness through the mediation of the world—language, sounds, images, stories—draw human persons in relationship.

Updike's concern is about embodiment, one that is enmeshed in the relational practices of being and becoming. It is through an embodied history that we regress to the past and project our imaginations of the future. Yet, this embodiment is not static, solid bodies which move around as blocks around the earth, but amorphous, slippery materiality which testifies to the excess of our naturalizations. There is, of course, a risk from Updike of spiritualizing the flesh into an abstraction, an obscuring of the flesh. The rejoinder is to en flesh these characters in fiction where one's risk of over spiritualizing the material loses its grip. In fiction, in the creative imagination of consciousness, materiality becomes irreducible and does not fall victim to subsumption of the other. Mayra Rivera (2015) notes, speaking of the flesh's poetic renderings, that the excess of flesh points to "the indeterminacy of carnal knowing and becoming, and to the irreducible otherness that marks all flesh" (p. 158). Updike's novels, especially in his second installment of the series, *Rabbit, Redux* (1971/2010), expound upon the irreducible otherness which becomes fictionalized and dynamically constructed to lead to oppression and suffering. Harry's organization of the "white" and "Black" worlds involved curricular orientations, which William Watkins (1993) states, is "inextricably tied to the history of the Black experience in the United States" (p. 322). Thus, the consideration of race as a poetic metaphor suggests, to some, that the material is not being accounted for when as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (1985) noted, to speak of race is to speak "in metaphors" (p. 4). The metaphors do not "cause" the material, but are interrelated with the material in our conceptualization, and relate to our understanding of the world. It is no different in Updike's texts, in which the form of metaphors between race and gender shifts and reformulates based on the way he views an event. Harry thinks about flesh as the thing which separates him from others, while also being something that must be overcome ("undress her of her flesh"), and yet also something mysterious, a relation but something altogether distant (Updike, 1960/2010, p. 193). Harry's concern with otherness is not simply sexual, although there is something erotic about his desire for others. His confrontation is racialized and gendered, the movement of a man who knows the world was made for him but feels it slipping between his closed fingers.

In the work of Updike, Harry comes-of-age in the midst of the late 60s prior to the Vietnam War, the exhaustive change of higher education, social advancements and oppositions such as the fallout of the civil rights legislation, and the embodied "discourses of return to 1950s domesticity" on television (Burns, 2018, p. 110). Harry falls toward and away from a past which never truly existed. It is much more like a myth which he will not yield. In fact, the myth is so real to Harry that it manifests as an ontology to him in racialized form. Gordon (2000) picks this up by stating "whiteness is regarded as presence, as being" (p. 125). Blackness, then, on the other hand, would be regarded by Harry as the absence of being. Rather than a person, in Updike's world, Black people become a fascination, a thing to expose as opposed to a person with which to enter relation. For Harry, Blackness carries the totalizing pressure of History along with difference. Racializations carry the sum of history in the subjectivity of the "white" world, as Du Bois (2007) suggests in his autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*. He notes that the history of the "white" world is a "mockery and contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction" precisely because it carries the history of exclusion of the Black people, but also "Indians in Asia, mulattoes and mestizoes in the West Indies, Central and South America," whose treatment help explain the attitude of the "white" world (p. 86). In this way, just as Du Bois notes, those racialized as other are dehumanized, subject to whatever classification is made, and transfixed as qualitatively distinct from those conceived as the standard.

Harry's transformation from a restless twenty-six-year-old to a thirty-six year old conservative occurs in the second novel, *Rabbit, Redux* (1971/2010). The turmoil of the novel has moved from inside himself to the outside world. Updike authors a form of curriculum orientation which now Harry must confront in the person of Skeeter, a Vietnam veteran who resides in Harry's house. After returning from Vietnam, Skeeter got himself engrossed in the Black Power movement, one which troubled Harry. Harry states, "I think they're minorities trying to bring down everything that halfway works. Halfway isn't all the way but it's better than no way" (p. 138). In this way, Harry presents himself as an everyman, a working-class pragmatist. Even in the midst of war, he believes in the U.S.'s role in Vietnam as well as the riots of the late 60s and early 70s were all "racist rap," feeling America is "beyond power"; it "acts as in a dream, as a face of God" (p. 49). In fact, the riots are not a result of a spiritual battle, the sin of racism which operates deeper than simply this or that material practice, but about a country which has "sunk so deep in its own fat and babble and laziness, it would take H-bombs on every city from Detroit to Atlanta to wake us up" (p. 50). This is a man who has already narrated the country into decline. The greatest generation passed, and "we"—Harry's generation, their inclusion, their "weakness"—are the ones who have ruined everything.

It is precisely this *way of being and living* which is confronted when Skeeter and Jill move in with Harry and Nelson. Left unspoken throughout the novel is Harry's wife, Janice, who has left just as Harry did in the first novel. Jill is an eighteen-year-old white girl (her own racialization proves to be a theme of the story), a liberal, who has run from her parents and becomes a drug attic in Harry's house. Skeeter, Jill, and Harry enter a sexual relationship between each other. But sex cannot erase the chasm which exists between Harry and Skeeter, even as it is horribly traversed through Jill. One can see this in an exchange about Nixon, who Harry believes cannot fix everything in the black community—"he's just a typical flatfooted Chamber of Commerce type who lucked his way into the hot seat" (p. 241). Not true for Skeeter, who states the "honky" was put there by the "cracker vote" (p. 241). Skeeter takes on a pessimistic position, stating Nixon "is Herod, man, and all us black babies better believe it," with Skeeter comparing Nixon's ambition, paranoia, and cruelty to the Roman ruler. This comparison angers Harry, not because of the perception of hostility, but of the disruption of a pretend colorblindness in Harry. "Black babies, black leaders, Jesus am I sick of the word black," he retorts, suggesting that he does not use the word "black" or "white" nearly as much as Skeeter: "For Chrissake, forget your skin" (p. 241). To which Skeeter replies, "I'll forget it when you forget it, right?" This is a moment of clarity for Harry, who sees this discussion abstracted from the power relations that exist between the three of them. For Harry, such an imaginary is abstracted from his relationship to materiality, and his body, and ultimately, autonomous to the Harry that exists in history. The "silence" of the cosmos, of time, does not bend toward something; it has no *telos*, for Harry, who feels confirmed in his whiteness. What Harry is confronted by, however, is his confrontation with the materiality of the world, and the uncomfortable social and political cry of freedom (Carter, 2008).

The turning of this novel from an educational and curricular standpoint is a "structured discussion" he begins to have following this exchange between the three of them and books that "makes Rabbit feel sick," such as the writing of W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Eldridge Cleaver, Frederick Douglass, history, economics, and Marx (p. 243). Jill can "read" Harry. The communication of the "racial problem," for Jill, is one of unreflective pragmatism. The "problem is that you've never been given a chance to formulate your views" (p. 244). In this way, Jill shows her own whiteness, as though race and racism were nothing more than a

pragmatic issue. This is precisely because of the competitive American context, the rapid movement, changing technology, the constant pressure to keep up with the rising cost of living with stagnant wages. Everything has had to move into action because if you do not act, you are left behind. "Your life has no reflective content; it's all instinct, and when your instincts let you down, you have nothing to trust" (p. 244). Thus, for Jill, Harry's cynicism, and here you can read the country's, is "tired pragmatism," exactly because it no longer works for our world (p. 244). That is to say that it worked immorally and ruthlessly at one point, but Americans forget that the first exploitation is the self, the one who never serves an "old patriotism" and an "old God," not out of love or faith, but fear (p. 245). Morrison's (1989) reflection on racism holds true for Harry as much as it does for Skeeter, that there is a "severe fragmentation of the self" (p. 16). As Harry learns from Skeeter what truly occurred post-slavery, he learns about the history of Black men and women who worked tirelessly to gain literacy, and worked hard to "make men of themselves," only to move into the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the new one exploiting former enslaved, lynchings, making capital back at half the cost, enslaving incarcerated men and women, and regaining political capital for control of Congress (p. 249; Blackmon, 2008). In the wake of these curricular revelations, Harry admits he agrees that Black people have had it horribly and can engage in a real dialogue, one by which he—along with his son who is sitting near him as Skeeter's lecture is occurring—begins to feel cornered. He runs, once again, with a profound deflection. Harry deflects on Skeeter, stating he is filled with "pure self-pity," asking "where do you go from here? We all got here on a bad boat" (Updike, 1971/2010, p. 251). Harry still does not want to be tied to the responsibility he has to Skeeter, who takes on the personification of "blackness," what Morrison (1993) called the "theatrical presence of black surrogacy" because of the stabilizing and disturbing confrontation Skeeter brings into his household (p. 13). Although Harry sees what Skeeter offers, he does not seek to understand and be in solidarity with him.

Updike's description of racialized otherness conjures ghosts into the narrative, just as it did in the previous section of this article. The ghosts of racialization, socially constituting the scenes of the novels, both from Harry's characterization and the surrounding witness of the racial situation in American life, spectrally emerges in the meeting place by which Harry must be confronted. He cannot look away and cannot cover over what ultimately claims his responsibility. He might have been able to push off his responsibility up to that point in *Rabbit, Redux* (1971/2010), especially when running away from his wife, Janice, in *Rabbit, Run* (1960/1996). He cannot do that to Skeeter and Jill, two allegories of the social and political movements of the late 1960s. The claim over Harry's responsibility relates to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1969), from whom Derrida (1995) learned. Levinas (1969) asserted that, ultimately, the only way to attend to myself is "approaching the other" (p. 178). By approaching the other, I am confronted by the alterity of the other, and, thus, cannot subsume or lay claim over the other. The "otherness" of the other exposes myself and "engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality" (p. 178). The responsibility Levinas states is engendered in us is inscribed by what is other to me, by the ghostly lure of the infinite in the other in the ethical encounter. As Bergo (2005) puts it, transcendence, for Levinas, is the human urge "to get out of being" (p. 147). Derrida (1967/1997) later picks up Levinas' notion of transcendence as not existent in or out of being, but as a quasi-transcendence which is the condition of possibility for existence at all. The quasi becomes transformed into his concept of the trace, which is, for Derrida, not a concept at all, or a

replacement term for “things.” The trace is the resistance of the “as such” of enclosure, the play of difference along the border of concepts. Derrida refers to this quasi-transcendence as the trace of what never presents itself as such, as what transfigures itself poetically in the real. And yet, nothing seems more real than this play without which I could not be at all. In other words, what’s not possible is the oneness of living, of learning to live and to be by yourself. To live at all, to be, is “not something one learns...only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life” (Derrida, 1993, p. xvii).

Derrida draws upon the specter once more, playing along the border between oneself and the other, always demanding our responsibility to learn to live with each other between life and death itself. No concept can encapsulate such a responsibility; it must be revealed, as Barth might put it (Ward, 1995). Yet, if no concept can encapsulate that revelation, then the revelation remains called into question, for it remains mysteriously and poetically reserved, yet hauntingly, in our encounters with the other. Harry’s encounter with himself in the others whom he encounters, Janice, Nelson, his son, Jill, and Skeeter, among others, reflect this calling into question and restlessness which draws the novel into a frenzy of situations and heartbreaks. Ultimately, the ghostly unconditional call of the others to whom Harry is responsible, draws the narrative further. The same unconditional call is reflected in the reconceptualists concept of *currere*, which carries an autobiographical conceptualization of curriculum. It’s important to note that what Pinar (2019) thinks of as autobiographical, with its conception of selfhood and subjectivity, are always engaged in scenes of address, as confrontation with otherness, and, therefore, responsibility. The responsibility of study in the curriculum field is the responsibility of what calls us along the enclosure of what we might call selfhood.

### Conclusion: A Haunted Curriculum Reversal

Harry’s wrestling with the specters of the others with whom he becomes confronted along with his decision making to not follow the call of responsibility of the other is a paradox set up in the story by Updike. That Harry chooses not to adhere to the call of responsibility is not to set up Harry as a moral figure, a sentiment which reflects a poor reading of the novels. Harry teaches us as he is being educated throughout his life, and part of what I am attempting to articulate in Harry’s example is that his foibles and failings can present to us opportunities for reflection, study, and transformation. In Harry’s own educational experience, his life does not offer analyses to readers in the hopes that it will alter our thinking about a subject, or conceptually enrich our understanding. Updike’s hopes, I think, are more material, yet contain no less plasticity than the aims of scholarly production in the curriculum field. Poetter et al. (2020) offers us scholars a way to think about Harry’s life. In Poetter’s *Curriculum Windows* series focusing on the 1950s, he reflects on the pieces opening new windows to new ideas about curriculum, which nonetheless represent a continuum of “quality, reach, and value” (p. xx). This is not a critique by Poetter, but an important pedagogical moment for the reader, for the point illuminates the reversal of the curriculum field itself in the reconceptualization. He goes on to say that the continuum reflects the “inevitable given that we all start and end in different places as students of the field” (p. xx). Literature is not just about the subject (or object, from the reader’s point of view) of a narrative, but about how the distinction between subject and object slips and dislocates from its proper positions as one encounters a world which calls us to itself. Curriculum theorizing pays special attention to the way otherness constitutes the subjective place which is curriculum which does not confess itself in the

modalities of totality embedded in the material practices of schooling and curriculum development today.

The attention of the reconceptualists to the subject of curriculum is a reversal highlighting the passage and eruption of subjectivity in literary study, between oneself and the other. Narratives, such as the one Updike wrote in his tetralogy, reflect both the way that literature speaks to our sense of the world, while at the same time haunting us with the incommensurability we feel in the world. As I mentioned earlier, quoting from Hamlet, the time is out of joint, and the place of technological and cultural authoritarianism brings risk and even threatens the realm of the human. This is true even as some work to join new groups of social, political, and aesthetic practices. A small example of this is a poetry collective begun at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), formed out of an English class as an assertive and organic rejoinder against the onslaught of generative artificial intelligence technologies (Bennett, 2025). Living, which is to say, education, is the scene of address, of encounter, conflict, containing the conditions of confrontation that resist totalization. Casmore (2024) reflects on the role of curriculum as subjective place, by stating “curriculum can disclose not only our capacities for symbolizing experience but also and, importantly, as Smith’s writing reveals, our failures of symbolization as constitutive of subjectivity — offering us a provisional yet potentially consequential sense of emplacement in the world” (p. 15). Ultimately, Updike narrates the manifestation of Harry’s inner life’s turmoil in the other’s representation.

As the reader, in this case, me, works to understand Harry, I recognize both that I act as a ghostly presence in the scenes that play out in the story. The reader watches and observes these scenes, much like a teacher watching students learn, or a student watching the teacher’s pedagogy. In the process of watching, one might imagine that a form of voyeurism takes place, but it does not. The reader is not passively waiting for something to happen but is actively involved while also remaining absent from the scene. While I read Updike’s tetralogy, as a ghostly presence, haunting the scenes with my own presuppositions, values, orientations, desires, reconstitute Harry in new ways with each passing page. Barthes’ (1977) famous literary phrase that the death of the author is the ransom for the birth of the reader remains a sort of post-structuralist negative turn. Yet, respectfully, the dichotomy between life and death is reflective of the literary constitution of limits, of the limits of my understanding, and the limits of the borders as well as what passes by, over, and underneath those borders. While reading Harry’s life, I am sometimes unaware of what is happening to me in the text, or whether it is Updike’s intention that I feel something at a particular moment. Is it him, or is it me? Is Harry’s life sad, or am I sad? Do I feel the sting of responsibility I feel he neglects, or is Updike trying to communicate to me, seemingly, from beyond the grave? I often, in the process of reading, felt things in my own consciousness that I did not know until I encountered them in Harry. Thus, what do we make of these things? My description of Derrida’s (1993) notion of “hauntology” in Updike’s novels is not simply a tool of analysis for what I seek to add onto the novel, but as the condition for the possibility of reading, and, as such, for how we might think about understanding curriculum.

In the wake of Pinar’s (2019) metaphorical use of “complicated conversation,” philosophically undergirding his conceptualization is that the unacknowledged “I” in curriculum always contains someone else, the unthought, the excluded, or the absent. One must make space for

such an “intense inter-personal encounter,” to fight for the possibility of solitude, reflection, and study of what goes unthought (Pinar, 1974, p. 15). Curriculum functions as “discursive practices” of “formation, sense-making, historical awareness” which does not provide illusions or authenticity (Hwu, 1993, p. 198). The complication of the unacknowledged “I” situates the critic, an often-absent figuration of the distanced observer and theorist, into the field in which they are critiquing. As a result, the presupposition of neutrality and objectivity becomes erupted from its linearity, as if the critique emerges free from the form and finitude of life itself. However, paradoxically, by pointing to the subject into the often-strict governance of educational thought, the theorist likewise re-inscribes and erupts our notions of formation precisely because the scope of study moves out of joint from the traditionalist framing of sequence in learning outcomes and objectives to the complicated process of study. Study moves toward what we may not even be able to name at this moment. Just as likely, what we already have a name for is not really what we always thought; perhaps it is something else. Perhaps we could not see it all along. Curriculum, in many ways we cannot necessarily see, is an ever-moving task of self-formation, reformation, learning, and unlearning, understanding that there is always something—or someone else—which we may not even see, a ghostly presence.

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