Consuming Identities/Global Culture: Theorizing Difference and Identity

An Introduction to a Special Issue of *JCACS*

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> Of course, when I pay attention to the possible breaks in identity I don't mean that we should not reaffirm, *as much as possible*, the identity, the self-identity which is the condition of responsibility…Nevertheless, this phenomenon 'I think'—this 'I am the same'—is not something natural or given. It is precisely the product of the oath, or the product of the commitment, and it is a stabilized artefact; and *'we'* as a society need such artefacts—such reliable, stable, civilized identities; they are very strong. (Jacques Derrida, 2003)

As an aspect of its participation at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE), the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (CACS) has, since 2003, hosted one day pre-conferences. The pre-conference format is intended to provide participants a more extended and interactive opportunity to explore curriculum questions in greater depth than sometimes possible in regular CSSE presentations, offering the opportunity for greater conversation about critical issues and questions in the field of curriculum in Canada. Since the initial pre-conference in 2003, the topic of each pre-conference creates spaces for "complicated conversations" (Pinar, 2004) inherent in curriculum work—the nature of citizenship, identity and subjectivity, the challenges of representation, and the issues of historical and spatial dimensions of educational experience.

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The papers presented in this special issue derive from one of the pre-conferences which dealt specifically with questions of identity and the complex ways that identity lives in the world. Each of the papers exemplify ways that curriculum researchers in Canada are theorizing experiences and understandings of identity, complicating their meaning through diverse forms of theory and contexts of practice.

The papers included in this edition are also representative of theoretical perspectives articulated in a growing body of contemporary literature dealing with identity, subjectivity and the nature of the self. At the risk of oversimplifying such complex perspectives, it is possible to discern significant transitions away from simply asserting difference and celebrating the existence of multiple identities in multicultural societies (or rueing such pluralistic views, depending on perspective), to philosophically oriented views which question the very possibility of identity in the absence of relationships based on some reciprocal practices of responsibility and ethics. For example, in a recent discussion, Judith Butler (2005) asks the question of what constitutes identity as a "moral" question, that is, how it is produced in relation to the responsibilities we have to other than the immediacy of self. As she emphasizes, the "struggle or primary dilemma" faced by the self, "is to be produced by the world, even as one must produce oneself in some way" (p. 19). And such "production" is developed in contexts of our relationships, which may be tenuous and contested but nonetheless real, urgent, and ethically textured.

The notion that identities are "produced", echoes our theme for this issue, namely the idea of "consuming" identities, which is intended to refer to how the resources for self, subjectivity and identity are found in the intricate relations between self and other, between self and the cultures and societies we live in, and within the dynamics of self understanding posited by psychoanalytic theorists. A recent discussion of the meaning of subjectivity—which is perhaps a more productive word term than identity—reminds us that "subject" can mean both subject to and subject over; this reminds us of the complex tension in identity that one can be both subjected to forms of authority and responsibility, and experience oneself as a sovereign subject (Balibar, et.al., 2006). Though extremes of that tension can carry the dangers either of solipsism or authoritarianism, the space itself may be a productive one for understanding self and other. Hence as the lead quotation from Jacques Derrida suggests, the question of identity is a central one in contemporary life and theory, but contradictory, complex, and contested. Such difficulty might even be said to be heightened in the context of global and globalizing forces and movements, which could be said to both constrain and open new possibilities for identity. Perhaps a fitting metonym for globalization is the phenomenon of Wal-Mart, which

places us, wherever we are in the world now, in the precarious relationship of consumer and/or producer, but in increasingly limited and fragmented ways (Lanchester, 2006). Yet, as is evident from recent experiences of Wal-Mart in some parts of the world, resistances to such forms of consumption are also possible.

For curriculum scholars, it seems that our work is necessarily and inextricably intertwined with questions of identity in the places where we practice. Such work requires interpretive and critical inquiry into the meaning and implications for curriculum work in a world where the markers of identity are seemingly de-stabilized and in flux. It is significant for thinking about the question of identity, that recently, writers with diverse philosophical perspectives have started to move beyond the limits of post-structural and post-modern views of the fragmented and unconnected self or subject, *and* liberal assertions of autonomous individuality, to ones that acknowledge historical, cultural, and narrative complexities and embeddedness. Such complexities—and particularities of place and practice, historical, cultural and subjective—are reflected in the papers presented in this issue, and oriented by questions of ethics and responsibility.

There is noteworthy recent literature in which authors respond to questions of identity and difference with a demand for an ethical response or stance which support the overall theme of this special issue of *JCACS*. Seyla Benhabib (2002), for example, makes an argument for an understanding of what is common and universal in identity in terms of both the need and possibilities for shared narrative and communication; Judith Butler (2003, 2005) calls on the ethical stance of Levinas in recognizing our obligations to the other, and the ethical demand to reject categories which frame others in certain ways; Jurgen Habermas (2003) questions what it means to be human as challenged by bio-technical advances in science, as our very bodies are subjected to innovations in medical science; Anthony Appiah (2005) appeals to the idea of cosmopolitanism as possibility for identification in pluralistic societies—cosmopolitanism expressed as form of identity that is founded on an ethical respect for others; Slavoj Žižek (2005), questions the meaning of "neighbourliness" from a critical psychoanalytic perspective, arguing that being a neighbour requires a position of critique; and Martha Nussbaum (2006) asserts the idea of "capabilities" as a form of recognition which cannot be accounted for by an abstract idea of rights in terms of "social contract" theory.

It would require extensive time, space and intensely thoughtful effort to attempt to develop coherent positions which can acknowledge the similarities and differences in such diverse perspectives as noted above, and apply what they might mean for understanding curriculum. But it

is important in the context of the introduction to this issue of *JCACS* to assert the sources for understanding identity, subjectivity and the theme of "consuming." And while the above perspectives and authors are not necessarily cited in the following papers, the various possibilities for understanding identity are echoed in them. What is common to all the views alluded to above—and the papers we have included in this special edition—are the relationships which are theorized between identity and responsibility, and in the case of the papers presented here, particularly pedagogic responsibility in our work with children and students in teacher education. As a group, the authors pose the question, as Derrida does, of what constitutes "the condition of responsibility" and how responsibility may be constituted in and through curriculum and our work with students in our classrooms. It is the pedagogic impulse that is strong in these papers: that how we think about and enact our understandings is particularly urgent in the context of globalization and contemporary culture, where many certainties have come into question. Yet our responsibilities to teaching, learning, and the supporting the hopes of young people are not diminished. The link between identity and responsibility has indeed become more urgent.

Thus the term "consuming identities" may refer to how identity is created, enacted, performed and understood in everyday life—everyday life considered in terms of globalizing forces, which are nonetheless locally experienced as part of everyday life—whether it is in schools, teacher education, or how curriculum concepts and practices are developed and implemented. The notion of consuming identities also speaks to certain material practices, and the way that language both constrains and opens up possibilities for difference. It is to speak of how we may be both consumed by and be consumers of identity in multiple and contested ways.

To use the term "consumption" is not to suggest that the process of coming into or contesting identities and subjectivities is either simply a matter of choice or a neutral process. As several of the authors of the ensuing articles suggest, the understanding of identity is indeed contested, difficult and infused and complicit in historical and current regimes of power, experiences of hegemony, resistances to marginalization, and psychic conflicts. And if we take "globalization" on one level as the dominance of neo-liberalism, consumption may refer to the human body itself as it has become a site for consumption, literally speaking, and literally, consumable, restricting the options for instance, of more localized differences (Anderson, 2006), another way to understand the impact of globalization.

The dominance of market and technological forces may limit the alternatives to how we might celebrate legitimate differences and expressions of identity, whether cultural, sexual, approaches to learning or

teaching practices, issues identified by the authors in this issue. The space for resistances to and for alternatives to a global, diffused, and homogenized identities as global consumers (Žižek, 2005) may be sacrificed to literal consumption, at least for those who can afford it, which even then places the discussion of identity—and its relation to issues of participation and equity in the domain of a few, globally speaking, who still have access to material, cultural and political capital, which for example, the growing masses of urban poor around the world critically lack. (Davis, 2004).

It is a credit to each of the authors in this special issue that they at once raise important questions about the complexity of identities, the spaces where identity is lived and formed, and questions of agency and resistance. In other words, each of the papers take up the notion of "consuming identities" in unique fashion, but in terms of the underlying theme which we have attempted to articulate in this introduction, oriented by a deep respect for the "other" and the sense of responsibility that inheres in the question of how identity might live in productive and meaningful ways in relation to both the self and others.

Terry Carson's article, *Beyond Instrumentalism: The Significance of Teacher Identity in Educational Change*, inquires into the meaning of "change" for teachers in educational reform movements. He takes up the notion of change as a question of teacher identity with a focus on anti-racist and multi-cultural education. His paper discusses how current theoretical conceptions of change do not take into account how gender, cultural diversity and class divisions factor into education and identity formation. Carson illustrates how psychoanalytical theory can be applied as a framework for understanding "resistance" in anti-racist education and how social transformation involves negotiating new identities which are constituted and reconstituted intrasubjectively. His discussion helps us see why the discourses on teacher development and change are hollow and ineffective in the absence of a stronger theory of the "subject."

In her *Contemporary Productions of Colonial Identities through Liberal Discourses of Educational Reform*, Lisa Comeau takes up the notion of "consumption" in relation to racial and cultural difference and moral education. She outlines how historically the consumption of cultural difference in education has served to maintain dominant normative white Anglo values. Her discussion focuses around the way in which "character education" was applied to immigrants and First Nations people, and how the current resurgence of character education in schools continues to maintain white middle class norms and to reinforce a "moral high ground." Comeau's paper reminds us that we cannot understand the production of identity with reference to historically constituted forms of power, and without attending to broadening and opening to alternative narratives.

Complicating the "understandings experience, power and language", Lisa Loutzenheiser's paper, *Working fluidity, materiality and the educational imaginary: A case for contingent primacy,* calls into question categories of identity, such as diversity and difference. She utilizes poststructural and queered theories to interrogate and "rewrite" how identity is theorized and understood. She argues that queered theories not only apply to issues of sexuality, but also race and class. She explains how these theories "disrupt" the power of heteronormativity and outlines the ways in which they offer an approach for critical analysis of identity in schools. Arguing for an epistemology that concerns both the body and the contingent nature of our experiences, she shows hope and possibility in the "fluidity" of identities and boundary crossings.

Kelly's Young's article, *Curriculum of Imperialism: Good Girl Citizens and the Making of the Literary Educated Imagination*, is a hermeneutic inquiry into the Girl Guide movement in the construction of the "good girl" identity in making "good" Canadian citizens. Drawing on the author's own lived experiences of guiding, as well as conversations with teachers who participated in the Girl Guide movement, Young uncovers the ways in which *The Brownie Story* embodies a "curriculum of imperialism." She examines the way in which Girl Guide handbooks, practices, songs and rhymes are socializing agents. Her paper draws on Lacanian-Marxist theories in her analysis of imperialism and ideology. She asks us to consider how the Girl Guide movement contributes to questions of identity-formation and a twenty-first century discussion of pedagogy. Young's discussion illustrates possibilities for working with student teachers for example, in the examination of aesthetic texts and how identity may be construed—and challenged.

Focusing very concretely on children's experiences of place in the classroom, Julia Ellis' paper, *Place and identity for children in classrooms and schools*, explores the concept of "place" as a question—and source—of identity in classrooms. She examines the ways in which identities, including identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and class are constructed through place. In keeping with the theme of this special issue, her paper discusses the ways in which globalization commodifies place, both shaping and limiting identity in the lives of children, and relates this to the condition of responsibility in education. Ellis's discussion of identity and place in classrooms is framed within the context of her own teaching experiences. As such she provides concrete examples of teaching as "place-making" with recommendations and activities for fostering a sense of belongingness and meaningfulness. Her paper provided a compelling example of how the issues of identity, place, and broader culture are inherent in classroom experience, and at the same time, given certain pedagogic approaches,

can become a place of "consumption" as we have used the term in this introduction.

Andrejs Kulnieks' article, *Reinterpreting Ancestral Stories: Tracing Language Learning Through the Latvian Scout Movement,* investigates the interrelationship between pedagogy of landscape and identity formation. In an interpretive recounting of his journey to Australia, Kulnieks' documents how the Latvian Scouting movement is informed by Aboriginal cultures and traditions. His analysis focuses on the meaning and significance of ritual and place in environmental education and on how identity is formed through the interpretations and reinterpretations of texts (esp. songs and oral storytelling). He emphasizes how "scouting", used as a framework for constructing and reconstructing ancestral learning and teaching, "resists" globalization.

Basing her discussion in literature and psychoanalytic theory, Susan Moore's paper, *Mourning, Melancholia, and Death Drive Pedagogy: Atwood, Klein, Woolf,* seeks to examine the ways in which "identity is created, enacted, used and understood" by applying the theory of Melanie Klein in an analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. This paper discusses how, in a Kleinian view, subject identity is founded upon loss and how mourning and melancholia may give rise to transformation, artistic production, and the condition of responsibility in education. Her paper describes how loss and trauma figure in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as well as contemporary youth culture. Moore relates the theme of "consuming" to Kleinian notions of *orality* and *introjection* as well as to "consumption" as an expression of contemporary waste, decay, illness, in the "age of the epidemic." Echoing Terry Carson's problematizing of subjectivity, Moore affirms the requirement to attend to both intrasubjective conflicts as well as responding to the larger social and cultural malaise.

We placed Anne Phelan's et.al. paper, *At the Edge of Language: Truth, Falsity and Responsibility in Teacher Education,* as the end piece in this special edition, because it nicely picks up on both the overall theme of the issue, and by focusing on issues of language and its limits, and the possibilities for understanding "truthful" practice, reverberates the questions posed in the other papers. Phelan et.al. inquire into the problem of a lack of knowledge in educating for difference in teacher education. Their analysis provides a case study of how one student teacher's identity was constituted through 'deception'. They utilize poststructural theory and discourse analysis to investigate how truth and lying are implicated in teacher education and maintain that the space of difference is "wiped-out" in pedagogical relations in favour of "sameness." Yet hope and more truthful ways of asserting and recognizing identities, as we have attempted to articulate as a motif in this special issue of *JCACS*, can be found in rethinking the relationship between

identity and responsibility. To quote Phelan et.al., "*difference, conceived as a relation between self and other rather than a quality of either, can then be lived as the site of responsibility*."

In summary, then, we would make three key points which we think readers might take from the above papers. Taken as a whole, the ensuing articles demonstrate how various discourses, whether post-structural, psychoanalytic, hermeneutic, critical theory, queer or feminist theory may work not just as abstract theory but indeed as "sources" for how we interpret both the particular and concrete, places in which we work, and students for whom we have responsibility. We think that, in exemplary ways, each of the authors demonstrate the kinds of normative and narrative thrust of curriculum theorizing, advocated for example, by William Pinar (2004), and while situated historically and locally, nonetheless are responding to issues that are global in nature.

The second main point is that in the ways that the authors address questions of identity, we can see a deeper concern for the person or the human, but again in ways that delve more deeply into the question not only of how we can be knowing beings, but live experience and understanding more deeply through the body, and through our relationships to others. Foucault (2001) explored the notion of "the care of the self" as this kind of idea—which implies that one must become open to other, open to learning, to become prepared in a sense, before one can fully know well, or know truthfully as Phelan et.al. suggested. The kinds of "practices of subjectivization" suggested by Foucault is also reflected in the papers here, as they explore the complexities and resources for "consuming" identities.

The final main point is that individually and as a group, the papers illustrate the necessary work of "critique" required for inquiry into identity, for understanding self and other, and for taking up issues of responsibility. Stating it more dramatically, Žižek writes of the difficulty of such work but also the necessity of "negativity":

> … I cannot penetrate the opaque background of my being; but what I can do is, in an act of negativity, "cleanse the plate," draw a line, exempt myself, step out of the symbolic in a "suicidal" gesture of a radical act—what Freud called the "death drive" and what German Idealism called "radical negativity." (2006, p. 140)

This is what Žižek seems to mean by "ethical violence" and the responsibility of the neighbour, but it confirms what collectivity the authors included in this issue are enacting, namely the kinds of questioning that does not take for granted established meanings, and the kinds of questioning that is oriented by responsibility.

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