

Homi Bhabha and Canadian Curriculum Studies: Beyond the Comforts of the Dialectic

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When researchers and teachers are asked to reflect on the significance of the work of the postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, they often express a reluctance to engage with someone whose writing is so dense and whose theoretical perspectives are so complex. In this article, we consider why we believe that Bhabha's admittedly complex and sometimes obscure theories are so valuable for helping us engage with contemporary curriculum studies in Canada.

WJT Mitchell (1995) in an interview with Homi Bhabha explains his reasons for paying attention to what Bhabha writes:

Bhabha's writing has been so important, I suspect, because he has made it difficult to use those words thoughtlessly or complacently. His concepts of ambivalence and hybridity have made it clear that cultures must be understood as complex intersections of multiple places, historical temporalities, and subject positions. When it appeared that liberal notions of "diversity" and post-

structuralist homilies about "difference" might provide final vocabularies for adjudicating cultural conflict, Bhabha raised profound questions about the adequacy of pluralist models of tolerance and "civility" to narrate histories of ferocious intolerance and incivility. At the same time, he identified the ethnocentric blind spots and voluntarist rhetoric in what were regarded as the most radical critiques of liberal models of culture. (p. 80)

Here, Mitchell proposes that Bhabha's ideas and questions have been highly influential in moving us away from simplistic notions of multiculturalism as enhancing "tolerance and understanding" in a liberal humanist view of education, towards a much deeper engagement with the difficulties and complexities of addressing difference in today's schools. Simply being accepting of the diverse backgrounds and experiences that students bring to the classroom fails to address the underlying power relations that maintain a system of inequity and marginalization that many immigrant and Aboriginal students still encounter today.

Mitchell goes on to question Bhabha about some of the criticism he had received about his 1994 text *The Location of Culture*, asking him, "I think it's fair to say that in some quarters your book has been controversial; I've heard it characterized as too difficult, as too political, as not political enough and just not accessible".

In the interview Homi Bhabha responds:

I take the question of accessibility very seriously. That a book should be impaired by a lack of clarity, so that people cannot respond to it and meditate on it and use it, must be a major indictment of anybody who wants to do serious work. But I also feel that the more difficult bits of

my work are in many cases the places where I am trying to think hardest, and in a futuristic kind of way – not always, I'm afraid, there may be many examples of simple stylistic failure, but generally I find that the passages pointed out to me as difficult are places where I am trying to fight a battle with myself. That moment of obscurity contains, in some enigmatic way, the limit of what I have thought, the horizon that has not as yet been reached, yet it brings with it an emergent move in the development of a concept that must be marked, even if it can't be elegantly or adequately realized.

Despite Bhabha's explanations here about the need for such places of difficulty in his writing, controversy about his writing has continued to appear in the press. A *New York Times* article (Eakin, 2001), written at the time Bhabha was hired at Harvard University, inflamed the controversy further:

In the field of postcolonial studies he is a leading light, frequently cited in the same breath as Edward Said. He is credited with charting a new way of thinking about identity and cultural conflict. His name merits an entry in the new Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. And he is one of the most-sought-after speakers on the academic lecture circuit. Yet at the same time, Mr. Bhabha is dogged by critics who say his followers have been bewitched by his indecipherable jargon. In 1998, Mr. Bhabha won second place ... in the annual Bad Writing Contest sponsored by the journal "Philosophy and Literature" for this passage from an essay on mimicry: "If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of

discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to 'normalize' formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality." Such convolution is not unusual for Mr. Bhabha.

Despite such criticism, we are of the opinion (with countless other researchers) that Bhabha's writings and ideas are significant and ground-breaking and that it is worth our while to read and to reflect on these. For this article, we propose to explore the following three of Bhabha's major ideas reflected in his writing in the context of English language arts education, social studies education, and teacher education:

1. Cultural difference
2. The concept of hybridity
3. The third space.

Cultural Difference

At a time when many critical theorists and proponents of official multiculturalism in Canada were describing the concept of "cultural diversity" as crucial for coming to new understandings and acceptance of the country's increasingly diverse population, Homi Bhabha responded with his critique of the term 'cultural diversity' in favour of the concept of "cultural difference." His contention is that the difference of culture cannot be accommodated within a Universalist framework that assumes all differences can be "acknowledged" within an existing Eurocentric context. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford about his work, Bhabha (1990) explains his understandings of the distinction between the two concepts and his use of a psychoanalytic framework:

It is a commonplace of plural, democratic societies to say that they can encourage and accommodate cultural diversity ...the endorsement of cultural diversity becomes a bedrock of multicultural education policy. There are two problems with it: one is that although there is always an encouragement of cultural diversity, there is also a corresponding containment of it. A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture which says that "these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid."... The second problem is that in societies where multiculturalism is encouraged, racism is still rampant in various forms. This is because the universalism that paradoxically permits diversity masks ethnocentric norms, values and interests.... My purpose in talking about cultural difference rather than cultural diversity is to acknowledge that this kind of liberal relativist perspective is inadequate in itself... With the concept of difference, which has its theoretical history in poststructuralist thinking and psychoanalysis... I try to place myself in that space of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference in the spirit of otherness. (pp. 208-209)

Cultural difference, he suggests, moves beyond thinking that cultural authority resides in a series of fixed and unchanging objects and stresses the process by which we come to know these objects and bring them into being. For Bhabha, the concept of cultural difference is linked with the radical ambivalence that he sees in all colonial discourse. This ambivalence, he argues, is evident in any act of cultural interpretation, which is never static but is always changing and open to further possible

interpretations. As Bhabha elaborates in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994):

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object – culture as an object of empirical knowledge – whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowedgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification....Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs; held in a time-frame of relativism it gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism.... The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority. (p. 34)

Bhabha’s deeper and more complex understandings of cultural difference resonate for teachers in their interactions with students whose lives and experiences have often been radically different from the mainstream students of European backgrounds. The values and belief systems of many immigrant and refugee students and of those from Aboriginal heritage cannot and should not be assimilated into a norm of Eurocentric ways of being and doing.

Hybridity

The postcolonial concept of hybridity has been defined and debated by many scholars, including Robert Young (1995) and Stuart Hall (1992), but it is Bhabha’s definition and refinement of the concept that has perhaps been the most prominent. Jenni Ramone (2011) explains:

Hybridity is a response that destabilized colonial fixity and rigidity. Bhabha insists that hybridity does not assume a comfortable coming together of colonizer and colonized or any other binary oppositions. The concept is not employed in order to reduce tension, which might have the effect of justifying colonial interventions, but instead it intends to increase tension. This increase in tension is required in order to create a crisis for systems of authority which depend upon their ability to ascribe a kind of sense to colonialism. (p. 112)

An image that Bhabha frequently employs to represent hybrid spaces is the stairwell, which connects two supposed opposites of upstairs and downstairs, and, by extension, other potential opposites of class and race. And, as Ramone suggests, “where they are connected necessitates that they are made a part of each other. Thus notions of ‘purity’ in any context are rendered untenable by hybridity” (2011, p. 114). In *The Location of Culture* (2004), Bhabha explains how hybridity has an impact both on the subjects of formerly colonized societies and most visibly when these subjects migrate towards the metropolitan centre. Once migrants settle into the new diaspora, a different kind of challenge to authority emerges. Bhabha explains:

The migrant culture of the ‘in-between’, the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture’s appropriation beyond the assimilationist’s dream, or the racist’s nightmare...and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture’s difference. (2004, p. 321)

In migration, then, according to Bhabha, a 'cultural translation' takes place, comparable to a translated text that reveals the traces of both the original language source and the translated language. Similarly, as Ramone contends, "the individual who migrates is translated into a new place and operates through a new language, becoming a translated individual bearing traces of both locations and languages" (2011, p. 115). Such understandings of hybridity may serve us well as teachers faced with the challenges and opportunities afforded by classrooms of students whose lives and minority positions are similarly defined by this migrant culture of the 'in-between.'

The Third Space

In considering how Bhabha's notions of hybridity connect to his use of the term "the third space," we can see how Bhabha himself, in a 1990 interview with Jonathan Rutherford makes these connections explicit:

... hybridity to me is the third space that enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives... I try to talk about hybridity through a psychoanalytic analogy... it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses.... The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (p. 211)

So, for Bhabha, this is an ambivalent space that opens up a cultural space of tension for the negotiation of incommensurable differences. "Third" is

used to denote the place where negotiation takes place, where identity in all its ambiguities is constructed and reconstructed.

Teaching 'in the hyphen' in English Language Arts

For secondary English language teachers in Canada, Bhabha's notions of hybridity and the third space offer opportunities to rethink how we might move beyond teaching the dominant canon of British and American literary texts that are entrenched in a Eurocentric framework. His ideas challenge us to consider possibilities for the classroom of bringing in texts written by Canadian immigrant writers such as Neil Bissoondath, Anita Rau Badami, Michael Ondaatje, Austin Clarke and Cecil Foster, who are living in the culture of 'in between', and whose translated lives carry with them traces of their past lives and the cultures, languages and experiences they have left behind.

Shyem Selvadurai describes the experiences of living 'in the hyphen' as a Sri Lankan Canadian. In his introduction to *Storywallah: A celebration of South Asian Fiction*, he speaks about the power of his creativity:

My creativity comes not from "Sri Lankan" or "Canadian" but precisely from the space between, that marvellous open space represented by the hyphen, in which the two parts of my identity jostle and rub up against each other like tectonic plates, pushing upwards the eruption that is my work. It is from this space the novels come. (2004, p. 1)

Selvadurai's notion of the tectonic plates pushing upward in a renegotiation of his cultural identity is strongly reminiscent of Bhabha's notions of the stairwell in which the connectedness of identities denies any sense of 'purity' but allows for new forms of creativity to emerge.

The writing of prize-winning Canadian immigrant authors has torn apart what we have traditionally understood to be 'Canadian literature,' As M.G. Vassanji, another Canadian immigrant writer explains,

Much contemporary Canadian literature is written by new Canadians who bring their stories with them, and these stories then become Canadian stories.... Canada's past lies not only in the native stories of the land itself, but also in Europe, and now in Africa and Asia. (2006, p.12)

In a similar vein, in a recent article in *The Globe and Mail*, (October 29, 2011) Barber comments on the changing scene of award-winning Canadian literature:

Of the six books nominated for the influential Giller Prize, only two are set in Canada or have anything to do with the country or its citizens. But the Giller jury is hardly alone. Only one of the five books nominated this year for the Rogers Writers' Trust Prize ... contains any recognizable Canadian content. Even the jury for the Governor-General's Literary Award, traditional bastion of national literary taste, could only find two identifiably Canadian novels to recommend on a short list of five contenders.

As our students become more hybridized and hyphenated in their identities, so might the literature we introduce in English language arts in high school. Prize-winning immigrant writers whose works have been acclaimed and celebrated at home and elsewhere may provide opportunities for rethinking our static notions of the nation-state and of ourselves as Canadians. As Gillian Roberts (2011) comments:

A reading of works by prize-winning writers in relation to discourses of national celebration and corresponding issues of hospitality and citizenship effectively demonstrates the negotiations entered into by these celebratory projects and the frameworks through which we, the readers, are encouraged to approach these texts. Further, moments when texts resist or complicate recuperation into national discourses offer fruitful points for exploring the relationships between text and celebratory context. We are reminded that artists are 'licensed transgressors of liberal democratic nations' (Hunter, 22), and that prize winning writers may both contest the nation-state and be celebrated for doing so. (p. 6)

Together with our students, we can share in these competing discourses of celebration and resistance and consider where and when we too can be transgressors of the status quo.

Cultural Difference, Hybridity and the Third Space in the Social Studies

As is the case with English Language Arts, social studies is a curricular location where multiple narrative constructions (and in the case of social studies these include national identity, citizenship, and multiculturalism) make Bhabha's theories particularly relevant and provide us with rich possibilities for challenging and reframing the existing liberal, universalist thrust of the discipline.

Although his work has not focused specifically on education, Bhabha has, by implication, acknowledged the key role that schools and curriculum play in national identity formation. Writing of this function,

Bhabha notes, “the first duty of the state is to ‘give’ the nation its cultural identity and above all to develop it” (Bhabha, 1995, p. 48). For Bhabha, curriculum and pedagogy lie at the very heart of national identity construction in modern states, and are both central to a process through which the people become “the historical ‘objects’ of nationalist pedagogy” (Bhabha, 1990a, p. 178) which is carefully designed to present the nation as a closed and timeless narrative.

As Bhabha has clearly indicated, the nationalist pedagogy to which he refers is fundamentally ‘modernist’ in nature and has, as its end, the desire to mold the nation’s peoples into a singular and commonly held identity. From this perspective, curriculum becomes what Bhabha terms a “fixed tablet of tradition” (Bhabha, 1990b, p. 2) constructed by the nation’s elites and closed to those (minorities, immigrants, women) whose own narratives do not match the narrative of the dominant group.

These representations of schooling, pedagogy and curriculum as part of a modernist attempt to manufacture national identity for the purposes of social control and cohesion have their roots in a 19th century nation-building ethos that has been identified and discussed by a wide range of scholars (Anderson, 1991; Smith, 1999; Hutchinson, 2004; Author, 2006). Again, although not writing specifically or extensively about curriculum, Bhabha’s singular contribution to discussions about curriculum—and specifically curriculum related to national identity construction—has been to offer ways of understanding, interpreting and disrupting the process through which the nation writes its own narrative. In what follows, we focus on Bhabha’s concepts of cultural difference, hybridity and the Third Space in the context of their implications for social studies curriculum

Cultural Diversity or Cultural Difference: A Different Narrative of Multicultural Education

In most industrialized nations, multicultural education has been seen as a way of responding to the changing demographic face of the nation while building a climate of understanding, acceptance and respect for the diverse cultures that make up the social fabric of the nation (Author, Carson and Author, 2004; Joshee, 2009; Banks, 2009). In Canada, this particular approach to multicultural education has resulted in social studies curriculum that have, since the 1970's, become more open and accepting of cultural diversity. For example, in Alberta, social studies has moved from stipulating that the province's students were to be aware of the "assimilation of other minorities in either the English or French linguistic groups" (Government of Alberta, 1971, p. 15) to the much more inclusive assertion that, "the [social studies] fosters the building of a society that is pluralistic, bilingual, multicultural, inclusive and democratic" (Government of Alberta, 2005. p. 1). Grade 11 social studies students in Newfoundland, are reminded that "the society of Newfoundland and Labrador, like all provinces of Canada, reflects a diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, values, lifestyles, and languages" and that "schools should foster the understanding of such diversity" (Government of Newfoundland, 2011, p. 14).

While the focus on cultural diversity embedded in multicultural education curriculum in Canada has long been praised for its attempt to foster empathy and understanding, for Bhabha, the notion of culture diversity—and by extension the entire project of multicultural education—must be seen as a product of the modernist structures through which the education systems of the nation reinforce and reproduce the existing narrative of the nation. As he notes, "cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural 'contents' and customs, held in a time frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity" (Bhabha, 2006, p. 155).

On the other hand, a focus on cultural difference tends to question and disrupt notions of social cohesion and cultural harmony implicit in the concept of cultural diversity and multicultural education. As Bhabha observes, “the enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address.... It undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons, by questioning our sense of the authority of cultural synthesis in general” (Bhabha, 2006, p. 156).

For Bhabha, then, an emphasis on diversity in multicultural education can be seen as a curriculum vehicle for constraining and limiting difference. From this perspective, cultural diversity becomes “a norm given by the host society or dominant culture that says that these or other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid” (Bhabha, 1990c 208). In concentrating on cultural diversity to the detriment of cultural difference it is fair to say that social studies curricula, in particular, have attempted to neutralize the problematic aspects of living together in difference while they maintain the comforting image of the nation as the willing recipient of the “gift” of diversity from its minority peoples.

Hybridity as Difficulty

If Bhabha’s concept of cultural difference challenges some of the basic assumptions of multicultural education within the discipline of social studies, his notion of *hybridity* is equally challenging. According to Bhabha, the development of national and cultural identity in post-colonial societies involved a process through which traditional binary positions (colonizer/colonized, majority/minority, European/non-European) were disrupted and new forms of identity were generated in the interstitial space between these essentialist positions. But as he notes

in introduction to *The Location of Culture*, this process is no comfortable modernist dialectic.

It is in the emergence of the interstices--the overlap and displacement of domains of difference--that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (1994, p. 2)

With his emphasis that the negotiation of identity in post-colonial societies is framed within difficulty and may well produce conflict and antagonism, Bhabha questions the Habermasian logic that suggests that identity construction in democratic societies is fundamentally a matter of reasoned discourse, compromise and consensus. By implication, he also asks us to interrogate curriculum that retain this perspective.

Within Canadian social studies curriculum, the rhetoric of multicultural education maintains the same, essentially unproblematic, narrative of compromise, consensus and peaceful resolution of difference in pursuit of social cohesion and national unity that Bhabha criticizes. For example, in Ontario, students in the Grades 9 and 10 Canadian and World Studies course are asked to explain the "objectives of the official policy of multiculturalism, its relationship to bilingualism and

biculturalism, and how support for and opposition to this policy has changed over time [and] assess the difficulties involved in maintaining a united country while promoting diversity through multiculturalism” (Government of Ontario, 2005, 187).

The Third Space: The Location of Culture and (Possibly) Social Studies Curriculum

Bhabha has labeled the “interstitial” location in which national and cultural identities are negotiated as the Third Space. As he notes

... all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity —this third space ... [between two originary moments,] displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhabha, 1990c, p. 211)

In the sense that Bhabha uses it, is important to understand that the hybridity, and the negotiation that distinguishes the Third Space, should not be confused with liberal notions of consensus and compromise. From a postcolonial perspective, national identity formation is characterized by cultural dislocation and displacement and is perhaps best seen as what cultural theorist Joan Scott has termed, a “process of enunciation of cultural difference” (Scott, 1995, p. 14). For Bhabha and others, this process makes it “very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist” (Bhabha, 1990c, p. 210). The Third Space, then, asserts the challenging notion that the dense particularities specific to each group making up the nation dislocates the intellectual geography of national identity in such a way that “we see ourselves as

living—and having lived—in entirely heterogeneous and discrete places” (Mohanty, 1989, p. 10).

From a curricular perspective, the concept of the Third Space offers a location that is both a challenge and an opportunity to reimagine how social studies might approach the accelerating diversity that characterizes Canada’s classroom. The challenge emerges from what Bhabha has termed the displacement of the “originary histories” (Bhabha, 1990b) that are brought together in contemporary societies. The notion of displacement suggests that the narratives—either dominant, minority, or marginalized—that typically constitute the content of the social studies curriculum cannot be essentialized, normed or idealized. Instead, the constant displacement of those narratives as they are brought together in the Third Space continually produces new, challenging and difficult narratives, and the formation of national identity is more closely aligned to hybridity and change than it is to the creation of the timeless text of the nation.

But the same displacement, sense of hybridity, and acknowledgement of the cultural difference that characterizes the Third Space and challenges modernist notions of the essential nation can also be an opportunity to reimagine social studies curriculum as a discipline that allows students to engage with the difficulty of living together in a plural society. In reviewing provincial social studies curriculum, it is apparent that there are emerging possibilities for such a reimagining. In Quebec, for example, the Ministry guide for the History and Citizenship curriculum notes that,

One of the challenges facing a pluralistic society like that of Québec is to reconcile the diversity of identities with shared membership in a community. All students must develop a sense of who they are relative to other individuals characterized by numerous differences and

must define themselves in relation to others, by relating to others. Taking otherness into account is thus an essential element of identity development. This process enables students to observe that the diversity of identities is not incompatible with the sharing of values, such as those related to democracy (Government of Quebec, 2005, p. 22).

While a social studies curriculum that acknowledges the challenges of pluralism, "otherness," and the difficult intersection of individual and social identity may not fully realize all aspects of Bhabha's theories, it is a promising start.

What Bhabha offers us through his writing is a way to move beyond modernist curricula that constrain and limit the full expression of the complexity of cultural and national identity formation under the guise of promoting and celebrating cultural diversity, consensus and, compromise.

In a curricular sense, the Bhabha's work is a call to acknowledge the importance of cultural difference and avoid the homogenizing and marginalizing tendencies of cultural diversity. In 1995, curriculum theorist Ted Aoki, acknowledging this call noted, "What is needed, then, is a disruption, a displacement that relocates us away from the space of demographic plurality inscribed in diversity to a borderline space that permits 'negotiations of cultural translation.'" (Aoki in Pinar and Irwin, 2005, p. 308). It is in Bhabha's call for constructive disruption that we see his greatest contribution to curriculum studies in general and social studies curriculum in particular.

Teacher Education as a Third Space

Lastly, to bring these ideas to our research on teacher education, we consider how Bhabha's writings have influenced our efforts at the

University of Alberta to prepare preservice teachers for teaching in diverse classrooms. Working with Terry Carson, Dwayne Donald and others at the University of Alberta, we came to a realization that simply offering our student teachers more information about historical inequities and marginalization is ineffectual in changing their worldviews and deeply held beliefs about issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and power relations. We moved to consider Bhabha's work on cultural difference, trying to see how our work can be informed by the problematics of representing difference and thinking about culture as the play of differences, rather than the objectification of the "cultural other," as suggested by Bhabha (1995), Hall (1992) and Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997).

We recognized that for most white mainstream teachers, culture remains a "concern of the Other" and they fail to see their own implications in the relations of power and privilege. As Ellsworth (1997) reminds us, "The gaps between self and other, inside and outside, that dialogue supposedly bridges, smoothes, alleviates, and ultimately crosses, are scenes troubled by cognitive uncertainty, forbidden thoughts, unreliable and unstable perceptions" (p. 42).

Through hermeneutic conversations with these new teachers, we hoped to move toward recognizing the role of the unconscious in their encounter with "the Other" and with the difficult knowledge of racism and injustice. Our intents were to explore the space that is opened up between the conscious and unconscious responses that students and teachers make to educational appeals. Using Bhabha's ideas and those of Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), we considered the idea of "another locality, another space, another scene, *the between perception and consciousness*. This other space is the gap, the lack of fit, the difference between, for example, the address of multicultural educational materials and the actual "psychological effect of *feeling*" of a student who encounters them" (p. 42). We don't pretend that our efforts to engage student teachings in this

complex way were always successful but we believe they have been a step forward in engaging them in the complexities of what it means for them to encounter difference in their own teaching.

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