Imago, Imago, Imago

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It was easier to think of myself as almost Canadian when I lived in Rochester, New York. Toronto was across the lake, and for a while there was a hovercraft making the crossing in an hour or two. Exiled from New York City, where I had grown up, I sometimes made the drive to Toronto, the most cosmopolitan city in driving distance from Rochester, there and back in a day. I would hang around OISE, visiting with Roger Simon, and Don Dippo, Phillip Corrigan, Michael Connelly and the incandescent Mary O'Brien. Visits to Mary and Cath McNaughton fused sense memories of the whitest sheets and softest scones, of tea and strawberry rhubarb pie with the smoke of Mary's cigarillos, her ebullient laughter and scathing critiques of patriarchy. I was never sure whether the exquisite domesticity of the home she shared with Cath was Scottish, or Irish, although curve and lilt of her political critiques seemed to sing the latter.

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Later on, when I was working at Brooklyn College, CUNY, and travelling to teach in the summers at the University of Alberta or Calgary, it was the lightness of the air, and the brilliant sunlight that dimmed only when the sky turned violet at around 11 that I recall. I remember reading Margaret Hunsberger's compelling phenomenology of literacy one October, in one of the dormers at the top of the Banff Springs hotel as an early snow swirled outside. Teaching curriculum theory and phenomenology in Edmonton connected me to Max van Manen, and Ted Aoki, to Vangie Bergum, Dennis Sumara, Brent Davis, Hans Smits, Victoria Kessi, Mahn Oh, Sook Hur, and it was there that I met Paulo Freire. On the highway that runs between Edmonton and Jasper, there used to be an intersection with an arrow that said Alaska. I never made that turn, but a license plate from the Northwest Territories shaped like a grizzly hangs on the wall in my North Carolina home, an icon of what lies beyond.

Was this Canada? Today I work with Bill Pinar and his colleagues at UBC, and with Kathleen Gallagher, Stephanie Springgay, Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman in Toronto, but these friendships, tethered to the memory of a woman raised in Brooklyn, now living in the South, clearly do not qualify me to comment on the idea of Canada. And I suspect that I am no more qualified to comment on the idea of the United States, even though I occasionally teach and write about our cultural mythologies. Nations as large and diverse as ours resist coherence, and that is fine with me. Wallace Steven's poem, Imago (1990), has always been one of my favorites, as he refuses to accept the objectification of spirit and identity that nationalism suggests. Here is its first stanza:

> Who can pick up the weight of Britain,
> Who can move the German load
> Or say to French, here is France again?
> Imago. Imago. Imago.

For many years I have been drawn to the thoughtfulness of Canadian curriculum studies. Less splintered by the politics that fragment curriculum studies in the U.S., enriched by your interests in philosophy, and by the dignity enjoyed by public school teachers, Canadian curriculum theory is a discursive community where I have so often felt at home. Imago, imago, imago…

If nations are our collective fantasies, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook's essay has provoked me to wonder what interests and desires we share as people who call one nation or another home. As a child of the 20th century and its endless wars, I worry about nationalism teetering on the brink of fascism. Attachment to the motherland and her history fuels defensiveness and envy – internecine resentments that refuse to dwindle over time, as Žižek (1993) has argued – situating nationalism in the enjoyment we relish in our own affiliations, and resentment when we imagine it to reside in the culture of other peoples.

And so, my first response to Professor Ng-A-Fook's essay was that it is possible to consider what constitutes Canadian curriculum studies and to leave Canada out of it, or at least the idea of Canada out of it. Curriculum is an event. It takes place in classrooms from Newfoundland to British Columbia and is experienced by all kinds of kids, their teachers, and their parents as well.

What so many of us who were K–12 teachers loved about this work was its liveliness. If the curriculum was our script, it was in perpetual revision as legislators, families, school boards, principals, and colleagues asserted their understandings and preferences. But curriculum cannot be contained in these documents or their rule-oriented practices. It inevitably slips the bonds of legacies and laws in the conversations, grimaces, winks, and refusals of teachers and students. That is where the action is, and so I argue that curriculum is an event that takes place in time, and that our studies must grasp its specificity without getting stuck in it. We are slogging through it when we approach curriculum as a world unto itself, like that traditionalist that Bill Pinar (1975) rebuked in his approach to reconceptualization in the 70s. Subordinate to schooling with all its codes, assumptions, ideologies and ambitions, traditionalists flatten the action by refusing to consider its alternatives. But we are also mired in it when we approach curriculum as a foreign territory to be explored, like the surface of the moon, or an exotic culture situated in a distant continent. When curriculum studies collapse into ethnography, they swap the deadly detail of the normative for grounded theory, eyes lowered, groping.

What has always fascinated me in the project of curriculum theory is its scope: its capacity to comprehend both the event and the ideas that frame it and unravel it, but I am more interested in the counterpoint of idea and event than I am in the interpellation of theorizing perspectives.

The diversity of the intellectual and imaginative resources that we may bring to curriculum is an ambitious and antic repertoire, and each of us will be drawn to disciplinary, aesthetic, and political perspectives that compel us. What might constitute the coherence of any nation's curriculum theory would be its curriculum, not its theory.

But sometimes it is hard to find curriculum in curriculum theory. Professor Ng-A-Fook makes some mention of curriculum events in his essay: for example, the development of curricular programs in the name of economic and social innovation for the 21st century that involve digital technologies; and the "rewriting (re/righting)" of multicultural policies in Quebec, following its Charter of Values.

In the States we are struggling with the project of coherence. There is no national curriculum, per se, as the determination of what is taught in schools is reserved for the states and denied to the federal government. But this new set of standards, "the common core," has been generated by the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, and private interests, and many states have rushed to adopt it. Some of my colleagues celebrate its rigor. Some on the left repudiate it for promoting the neoliberal agenda of globalization and competition. Others on the right repudiate it for undermining local control. It is big business, generating new texts, new tests, new professional development programs, new coaches, new experts. But as neoliberal arguments that justify the new standards appeal to the cognitive gains that international economic competitiveness requires, I find myself longing, with some nostalgia, for the nationalism, however chimerical, that my own postwar schooling offered. Then the "idea" of America, land of the free and brave, home to immigrants, champion of democracy, filled my child's heart with hope and pride. Those ideas still persist despite the histories that have corrected it, like Stephen Kinzer's study of the manipulation of international relations for corporate gain that the Dulles brothers accomplished as they worked for the State Department and the CIA in the 50s. Even though I recognize that the idea of the nation, or the idea of curriculum studies that coheres around national identity, is saturated with personal histories, ideologies, and contradictions, I also recognize that nation provides the place, for both the curriculum and the intellectual discourse that addresses it, to express our hopes for our children and our citizens.

The sections in the Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies that Nicholas Ng-A-Fook describes, may be sufficient to capture this complexity: curriculum genealogies, lives, forum, and pedagogies. But rather than seeing each approach as constituting a separate section, I would like to see them brought together in curriculum research and scholarship. I made a similar argument in an essay that Amy Anderson, Christopher Osmond, and I wrote for Kathleen Gallagher's collection, *The Methodological Dilemma*. In our essay, "Finding Form for Curriculum Research," we proposed that curriculum scholarship should contain these three themes: curriculum as autobiography, because we are all implicated in the curriculum that has shaped us, and that we in turn, would shape; curriculum as phenomenon, because there is no neutral knowledge and every discipline is saturated with its cultural history; and curriculum as event, because curriculum, as I have argued earlier is not at state of things, but a happening.

And because curriculum is an event, it does fall away from the metaphor of counterpoint in musical composition. For all their discrepancies, the voices in counterpoint are contained in an aesthetic unit that begins and ends. I was able to download a fragment of *Idea of the North*, and found that even though Glenn Gould interrupts melody with dialogue and sound effects, the sliding in and out of voices made it hard to grasp and engage their opinions. The politics of curriculum theory would be lost if the scholarship that provides explicit references to and analysis of events and actions, persons, documents, and practices merely slips in and out of the composition of our work. Gould was striving to anchor an ideal form in the materials of everyday life, to interrupt the tonalities with the energies and politics of existence. But curriculum studies are already located right there in the middle of classroom life, and while our theories frame its cacophony in geopolitical, historical, and aesthetic understandings, we live in this noise.

So let the noise provide a center for Curriculum Conversations, inviting curriculum scholars to meet in the mess of it.

References

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