

A CURRICULUM THEORY PROJECT IN ONTARIO, A POLE CARVING COURSE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, TREATY EDUCATION IN SASKATCHEWAN

Bryan Smith, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, Sara Berry and Kevin Spence write to redress absences in the curriculum, characterizing their research as a Canadian curriculum theory project.¹ Through an “assemblage” of absent narratives, employing a methodology of *métissage*,² the four researchers conducted (1) textual analysis of textbooks (Bryan Smith), (2) film analysis (Sara Berry), (3) reflections on educational interactions (Kevin Spence), and (4) reconsideration of what constitutes history (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook), each in the service of reconfiguring “our relationships with colonial histories.”³

Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence found that the representation of residential schooling in textbooks tends to “minimize” its importance, devoting too few pages to the topic, understating its relation to cultural genocide more generally, thereby sanitizing the subject for high-school students,⁴ as they inadequately register the violence Aboriginal peoples have suffered.⁵ Even adults, and specifically Aboriginal adults for whom study of residential schooling represents a “re/engagement” with the “symbolic and pedagogical violence of exclusion and displacement perpetuated by colonial frontier logics,”⁶ face psychologically complex challenges, requiring educators to be “culturally sensitive,” “self-reflective,” and committed to “mitigate feelings of inadequacy or inferiority”⁷ that Aboriginal students might experience.

“Re/engagement” is embedded in ongoing engagement, as Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence point out that past “cultural dominance” is not past, but that it “continues unabated,” evident in “exclusions in curricular materials” as well as in “filmic media,” representing and enacting “continued symbolic violence.”⁸ While the appearance of “alter/native narratives” that contest “grand narratives” are welcome, they represent no “ultimate solution.”⁹ They – including knowledge, experience, commitments, and relationship – fuse to enable educators and students to convert a “curriculum of dominance into a relational curriculum of intellectual and cultural reciprocity.”¹⁰

Michelle Tanaka, Lorna Williams, Yvonne Benoit, Robyn Duggan, Laura Moir, and Jillian Scarrow testify to the “personal changes” they underwent while participating in a course on Lekwungen and Liekwelthout pole carving, taught by Fabian Quocksister, a carver artist-in-residence, who characterized the course as “weaving real life into the curriculum.”¹¹ Tanaka et al. thematize their experience with terms from Lil’wat, the ancestral language of one of the authors (Lorna): (1) *Celhcelh* — affirming one’s responsibility for personal learning within a learning community; (2) *Kat’il’a* — becoming still, slowing down, despite busy-ness; (3) *Cwelelep* — the discomfort of dissonance and uncertainty; and (4) *Kamucwkalba* — energy indicating the emergence of

a communal sense of purpose.¹² Entitled “Thunderbird/Whale Protection and Welcoming Pole: Learning and Teaching in an Indigenous World,” the course enabled undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty to construct and install a Lekwungen and Liekwelthout Thunderbird/Whale house pole in the lobby of the MacLaurin Building (which houses the University of Victoria Faculty of Education).¹³

During the semester-long course “hands practical activities” were “integrated with theoretical and academic goals.”¹⁴ The authors confess to over-relying on “transmission,” at first unable to “find our own way, and yet that is exactly what we were expected to do.”¹⁵ “Keeping busy” (animated by a “need to know”) complicated the authors’ “difficulties with finding our own way as learners and teachers.”¹⁶ Over time, however, the authors learned to share their difficulties with others, something they hadn’t tended to do in their other university courses; they were unaccustomed “to letting things unfold in their own time.”¹⁷ While the “common goal of the class at large was to carve a pole and to share the experience with others through a web site, fieldtrips for local primary students, a video, an information bulletin board, community ceremonies and academic papers,” the authors report: “We have done all that, and more. But there was a subtle change that took place—seeping in between the cracks and connections of our expanding relationships—that affected us all. We became an active and connected community of practice,”¹⁸ producing changes in “each of us in ways that are deep and, we expect, long lasting.”¹⁹

What should one teach about treaties to students living in a province entirely ceded through treaty? Jennifer Tupper and Michael Cappello answer that question by exploring teachers’ use of a treaty resource kit - commissioned by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan - in six classrooms representing a mix of rural, urban and First Nations students.²⁰ “Largely missing” from the curriculum²¹ students encounter in Saskatchewan, knowledge about treaties can “interrupt the commonsense story” of the history of province.²² Sent to all schools in Saskatchewan, “The Treaty Resource Kit” (e.g. Kit or Teaching Treaties)²³ was also the subject of extensive in-service training for grades 7-12 teachers.²⁴ Before studying these treaties, 50% of the 168 students surveyed were unaware of – or misunderstood -what a treaty was; among the other 50% a majority understood the agreement as existing between nation-states.²⁵ Thirty-eight percent could not recall who signed the treaties and 60% of students did not appreciate treaties’ significance for them, their families, friends and neighbours.²⁶ Tupper and Cappello concluded that there was “little historical or contemporary understanding of treaties”²⁷ among the (admittedly small number of) students surveyed. Such ignorance of the past, they suggest, produces the “dominant culture;”²⁸ studying that past – specifically the historic relationship between First Nations and the Crown – students’ lack of understanding can be redressed.²⁹ Study such a curriculum could enable students to appreciate “how racism is supported, what it looks like in society through the conscious choices that people have made throughout history.”³⁰

Four years later Tupper focused on treaties as agreements among “brothers,” implying a “kinship relation” and an “equality of persons,” characterizing them as a “covenant, an agreement involving the Great Spirit,” thereby eternal, an understanding, she notes, the Canadian Government did not honour.³¹ The Indian Act “forever changed the relationship,” as created a “hierarchical and paternalistic relationship that remains to this day,”³² a fact that has “serious implications for citizenship education and the ways that Canadians are able to think of themselves as citizens of this country.”³³ Tupper imagines “treaty education for reconciliation with First Nations people” as a “means of fostering ethically engaged citizenship,”³⁴ as treaty education “requires all students to consider how their own lives and privileges are connected to and may be traced through, treaties and the treaty relationship.”³⁵ That relationship is not equal, as “the collective rights of Aboriginal peoples ... are necessarily different from the rights of non-Aboriginal people.”³⁶

Recasting their “historical consciousness,”³⁷ non-Aboriginal students can study Indigenous worldviews “alongside: European worldviews, focusing specifically on the significance of “symbols in the treaty-making process,” as they face the “treaty failures on the part of the Canadian Government,” necessitating reconsideration of “contemporary treaty issues (including treaty land entitlements)” and thinking through the significance of treaties for all Canadians, historically and today.”³⁸ “How students think about the past,” Tupper concludes, contributes to “how they imagine themselves as citizens,”³⁹ and “ethically engaged citizenship, necessary to the project of reconciliation and social transformation, must be forged through the pedagogical and curricular imperatives of treaty education.”⁴⁰

COMMENTARY

Bryan Smith, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, Sara Berry and Kevin Spence write to redress absences in the curriculum, a Canadian curriculum theory project focused on absent narratives, employing a methodology of *métissage*, in service of reconfiguring “our relationships with colonial histories.” They suggest that “alter/native narratives” fuse with knowledge, experience, commitments, and relationship to convert a “curriculum of dominance into a relational curriculum of intellectual and cultural reciprocity.” Such reciprocity is evident in the report by Michelle Tanaka, Lorna Williams, Yvonne Benoit, Robyn Duggan, Laura Moir, and Jillian Scarrow of the “personal changes” they underwent while participating in a course on Lekwungen and Liekwelthout pole carving, taught by Fabian Quocksister, a carver artist-in-residence, who characterized the course as “weaving real life into the curriculum.” During the semester-long course “hands practical activities” were “integrated with theoretical and

academic goals,” a curricular version of Verna Kirkness’ “marriage of past and present” (see research brief #15). Past and present are juxtaposed in the treaty education Jennifer Tupper and Michael Cappello studied, surveying six classrooms, representing a mix of rural, urban and First Nations students, concluding that there was “little historical or contemporary understanding of treaties.” Later, Tupper focused on treaties as agreements among “brothers,” implying “kinship relation” and an “equality of persons,” characterizing them as a “covenant, an agreement involving the Great Spirit.” Recasting their “historical consciousness,” non-Aboriginal students can study Indigenous worldviews “alongside: European worldviews, focusing specifically on the significance of “symbols in the treaty-making process,” again invoking Kirkness’s marriage metaphor, if in this instance a bad marriage Teaching about treaties, then, encourages historical consciousness, subjective (deep and long-lasting personal changes, as the course on pole carving engendered) and social (recasting relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples) reconstruction: creating a relational curriculum of intellectual and cultural reciprocity.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 54.

² Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence (2011, 55) define “narrative métissage as a life writing methodology [that] provides a curricular method through which we might develop empathy with others who have experienced education as trauma. Our radical hope is that such work, at least for us as educators, can begin to redress the detrimental and traumatic effects of a curriculum of colonial dominance, yet without any predetermined promise.” Radical hope is a phrase associated with the work of Jonathan Lear, who defines it as “directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it” (Lear 2006, 103).

³ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 55.

⁴ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 56.

⁵ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 57.

⁶ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 61.

⁷ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 61-62.

⁸ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 66.

⁹ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 66.

¹⁰ Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence 2011, 66.

¹¹ Tanaka et al. 2007, 100.

¹² Tanaka et al. 2007, 100.

¹³ Tanaka et al. 2007, 100-101.

¹⁴ Tanaka et al. 2007, 101.

¹⁵ Tanaka et al 2007, 103.

¹⁶ Tanaka et al. 2007, 103.

¹⁷ Tanaka et al. 2007, 104.

¹⁸ Tanaka et al. 2007, 106.

¹⁹ Tanaka et al. 2007, 107.

²⁰ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 559.

²¹ “The vault of commonsense,” Tupper and Cappello (2008, 567) characterize it.

²² Tupper and Cappello 2008, 560.

²³ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 562.

²⁴ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 563.

²⁵ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 565.

²⁶ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 565.

²⁷ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 566.

²⁸ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 566.

²⁹ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 567. “More than facts and dates and names,” Tupper and

Cappello (2008, 567) point out, “teaching treaties can be a visceral lesson in the partiality of knowledge; the social construction of understanding these events is made available in powerful ways.”

³⁰ Tupper and Cappello 2008, 570.

³¹ Tupper 2012, 144.

³² Tupper 2012, 144.

³³ Tupper 2012, 146.

³⁴ Tupper 2012, 146-147.

³⁵ Tupper 2012, 147.

³⁶ Tupper 2012, 148.

³⁷ See Seixas 2004.

³⁸ Tupper 2012, 150-151.

³⁹ Tupper 2012, 152.

⁴⁰ Tupper 2012, 153.