Trans/formational Spectral Narrative: Not Giving up the Ghost!

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> *"Its only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted"*
>
> – Birney (1964, p. 37)

Earle Birney's line from his poem "Can. Lit" ostensibly speaks something valuable about the relationship between ghost stories and keeping alive past hope. *City of Gold* (Low & Koenig, 1957) is an award winning NFB production, which reminisces amongst stories of relics. The film remembers, from the apparent ghost town of "modern" Dawson City, the Gold Rush of 1897. Narrator Pierre Berton recounts that—as a child playing among the ruins of abandoned hotels, dance halls, and riverboats—he never imagined any of them meant anything. He ponders: "No ghosts of the past return to haunt us, here in these silent rooms." However, I do not agree with Berton's assessment. In my own history, I recently learned that my childhood neighbourhood, an old army base, was to be demolished. I set about meandering the neglected fields and derelict structures, taking pictures, and whispering good-bye. I realized, with camera in hand, standing before dusty windows and kicked-in walls, that I was making meaning. I was making stories, narratives by which this place would live on within me. Through these stories of place, I shook hands with its ghosts. In the present paper, I argue that by weaving spectral stories of people, places, ideas, and dreams no longer among us, we can help keep past hope(s) alive—and not give up the ghost!

Official curriculum documents are typically clear, present, scientific, and in their moments of evaluation, ordered according to rigourous behavioral analysis. However, what is it that evades, exceeds, and remains ever beyond the letter of the official document?

I present an example from the Ontario Media Arts curriculum:

> Media arts is an emerging arts subject area that represents a new aesthetic model and extends traditional art forms. It may involve new ways of creating traditional art forms or innovative ways of using traditional arts to create what can be called "hybrid" forms of art. In fact, hybridization is a characteristic of many forms of media art. Media art works may also involve interaction with the viewer and include, for example, interactive installations, robosculpture, performance art, simulations, and network art (e.g., art transmitted over the Internet). Some forms of media art involve virtual environments, and these include art produced with laser projections and holography. Other forms include video art, photocopy art, neon art, and computer graphics. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000)

This brief statement represents a laudable effort to incorporate media into the curriculum. It situates media within the arts—an apparently natural placement. After all, many mediums are art and works of aesthetic achievement. For example, *City of Gold*, as a film, is many things. It is an historical meditation. Today, in 2005, the 1957 film is an historical document in its own right. It is a biopic. It is a family genealogy. It is a documentary. However, the film is also a beautiful work of art. An art-based approach, informed by an understanding of visual culture is an appropriate entryway into the film.

However, there is much more to an effective reading of *City of Gold* than that. The film's opening and closing sequences, shot in the Dawson City of 1957 are haunting and evocative. Soaked in sunshine, the air rich with floating pollen suggests a fertile environment. The fecundity seems to contradict the apparent barrenness of the town. Modern Dawson, despite the children playing baseball, folks in the café, and old-timers chatting on the sidewalk is in many respects a *ghost town*. The haunting evocations of empty hotels, grounded riverboats, and deserted saloons ensure that. The centre of the film, that part book ended by the contemporary Dawson sequences proceeds with music, the voiceover narration of Pierre Berton, and use of still photographs. The pictures, moments frozen in time, seem animated and brought to life. Erstwhile silent ghosts haunting the stills are exorcized by the filmmakers' craft. To read this town and this film, to illuminate them with a counter narrative, one finds usefulness in ghost story.

I argue for a particular kind of a ghost story. I proffer a "trans/formational spectral narrative," which I define as narrative told about persistent yet elusive characteristics of the world with a view to facilitating progres-

sive change. I fear such a definition may both say too much and not enough. Nonetheless, I elaborate. First, trans/formational spectral narrative involves telling stories about the world and one's place in it. These are stories about hopes for a better world. I do not mean "crusading" hopes for a better world such as of 20ᵗʰ century State Socialism in the former Eastern Bloc or contemporary efforts to bring "freedom" to the Middle East. This avoidance of crusading is one characteristic of my approach to ghost story. I admits its objects as ephemeral, persistent, yes, but light and fleeting. Stories of ghosts are real in the sense of the power they have to evoke response. However, one must remember, even when in the grasp of the tale *there's no such thing as ghosts!* This proposed narrative locates its germ of transformationality in its genealogical indebtedness to classical critical theory and its more contemporary permutations and their persistent hopes for a better world. Trans/formational spectral narrative haunts from the corridors of Marxian ideology (Marx and Engels, 1964) and exchange value (Marx, 1992), Gramscian hegemony (1971) and Barthian mythology (1972). It follows echoes of the Freudian unconscious (1913/1988), Lacanian Imaginary (1993), and Zizekian fantasy (1989). It moves forward through from Foucauldian genealogy (1971/1984) and Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology (1987). Those are the sources. Those are the dead. However, trans/formational spectral narrative haunts on through language provided by Jacques Derrida (1994). My approach seeks to transform, but not with the brute force of the living. Nor, however, does it pursue transformation through the silence of the dead. Rather, it seeks to transform through recognizing haunting, the revenance of specters and through remembering past hopes reported dead or missing.

Trans/formational spectral narrative begins with the work of Jodey Castricano (2001). In *Cryptomimeses: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing,* she studies the ghostly, the phantasmal, and the spectral in Derrida's work. Castricano puts forth the term "cryptomimesis," as writing attuned to the ghostly in Derrida's texts. Cryptomimesis is "a writing practice that, like certain Gothic conventions, generates its uncanny effects through… a 'contradictory 'topography of inside outside'" (Nicholas Rand, Cited in Castricano, 2001, p. 6)… The term cryptomimesis draws attention to a writing predicated upon encryption: the play of revelation and concealment lodged within *parts* of individual words" (6). I argue that ghostly writing can illuminate what haunts texts in terms of those things left behind as well as potential promise. What is it that lurks in the dark corners, in the interstices of a text? What is it we don't see in the text yet perhaps sees us?

To explore this, I present some backgrounder into the work of Jacques Derrida. To some, it may sound surprising to invoke the recently passed French philosopher. His work would seem to have little direct bearing upon curriculum, although he has written on the teaching of philosophy (Derrida, 2002).

As is well known, in classic works such as *Of Grammatology* (1967/1976), Derrida initiated an approach to philosophy known as "deconstruction." Depending upon the reader's epistemological commitments, deconstruction either irreparably destabilizes the metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy, or, alternately, announces Derrida as a charlatan. Resistance to even his name in some quarters is so pronounced that when uttered, some listeners hear no more. One criticism of Derrida's work is that it is endlessly relativistic. Indeed, the work suggests that textual meaning resists closure. It defers endlessly. Meaning becomes lost in an endless play of language. Nothing exists "outside" a text, exterior to it, as it were, holding its meaning in place. There would exist no concept that is true absolutely, that one could associate, with absolute certainty, a text to fix for all time a singular interpretation.

I consider sailing upon a ship of language. In the search for conclusive meaning, one may toss the anchor aside and believe to moor the vessel to the seafloor beneath. One may believe the ship as then secure and safe from drifting. The craft would have stopped sailing, and the meaning of a text, a statement, be thus established, a signifier be indissolubly linked to a signified. However, I regard the anchor as not hooked upon the seabed, something outside the text—some transcendental signified. Rather, I see the anchor as *hooked to the bottom of the ship*. Passengers upon the boat may believe it resting securely hooked. However, the ship continues to sail endlessly—language anchoring only to itself, to language, words latching to other words, signifiers sliding off signifiers.

A key term from Derrida's work that informs my sense of trans/formational spectral narrative is that of the "trace," (1967/1976) which is related to another important Derridean conception: differance (1982). Derrida's use of "differance" employs a pun, a double meaning. It relates to my description of language anchoring to itself, words latching to other words, but never ending in a conclusive statement of meaning. One never follows the chain of words so far as to arrive at the one word that fixes the meaning of all that came before it. Differance suggests the differences between signifiers necessary to have a system of language. Difference also suggests different meanings possible for words and strings of words. Each word as well as each cumulative chain of words suggests multiple meanings. However, another sense of differance employs a pun in French. It means to *defer*. Meaning of a word or chain of words always defers until another word can be added. However, the cumulative word that would end the deferral never arrives.

The "trace" refers to the other possible meanings of words or texts save those employed or inferred in a chain. In supporting my view of spectral narrative, I argue that these other meanings haunt the text. In a sense, the other meanings, the traces strangely sticking to it are "absences." They are absences of meaning, absent, yet elusively present. It is crucial to note that

I do not invoke and continue the assumed binary of present/absent. It is precisely Derrida's aim to undermine that and for that matter all such binaric, metaphysical assumptions, of which presence and absence is perhaps the most basic. That is why reading Derrida becomes a required exercise in dealing with elusiveness and ambiguity. Derrida seems not to come out and say anything. To some observers—such as the 20 eminent philosophers, including W.V. Quine and Ruth Barcan Marcus who wrote a letter to The Times of London on Saturday, May 9, 1992 protesting plans for Cambridge to award Derrida a honourary doctorate ("Differance in the Ranks"), which he eventually received—Derrida's writing style infuriatingly announces him as a an intellectual confidence man. Nonetheless, Derrida's ambiguity is precisely the point. It is not what Derrida says. It is what he does, and what he does is frustrate the metaphysical assumptions of Western Philosophy, especially at the site of the binary presence/absence.

A note must be made about people who write of Derrida, including, here, myself. Derrida undermines the rational dictate of pointing and identifying. So then, why do many writers of Derrida, including myself in this paper, do so? How do we point and say, "this is what Derrida says?" We are working in a certain institutional setting that demands conventions of reason, evidence, and epistemology. I will never attain the reputation and discursive authority of Derrida. I will unlikely be able to get away with doing what Derrida does. Therefore, I precisely do not attempt to "do a Derrida." I do not have the authority to do that. Thus, where, with Derrida, it is somewhat the case of "don't attend to what he says, but what he does"; with me it is "don't attend to what I do (which is continue the metaphysical assumptions of Western rationality), attend to what I say (disrupt the metaphysical assumptions of Western rationality)."

This tactical play admittedly opens my statements to some obvious criticisms. Most notably, they take the form of "If I am saying there is no Absolute Truth, does that not contradict the purported truth of the statement I make?" "If I say there is nothing outside the text, then there must be nothing outside the text of my statement." Yes, those critiques are fair. However, the criticisms says less about what I am trying to communicate than the setting in which I am trying to communicate it. Derrida's texts do not precisely run into that problem because they do not appeal to traditional Western rationality. My statement suffers a knockout precisely because I chose to place it is in the ring. Derrida's work, however, does not walk into the ring. The knockout identifies a contradiction, that I claim there is no signifier that closes all meaning, some nameable, containable transcendental presence, that there is no Absolute Truth within Western metaphysics; yet I wish my statement to be considered true. However, the contradiction resonates only according to the measure I hope to undermine.

Another associated form of critique toward a Derridean conception of social or curriculum theory is from a sort of "critical realist" position. For example, statements such as "suffering in the world exists" are put forth against deconstruction. Few would argue against a statement like that for both commonsense and ethical reasons. According to a Derridean methodology, one can deconstruct such statements, presuming nothing outside the text, no transcendental signified holding the statements in place. Nonetheless, there still exists suffering in the world. Such an observation would paint deconstruction as both epistemologically wanting and ethically bankrupt. However, "suffering in the world" is a true statement. It is just not transcendentally True. Actual suffering in the world does not constitute a transcendental signified to statements about the suffering. It is true, but the anchor does not hook to the sea floor. The text itself still floats upon language. Its words still hook to other words. Indeed, the statement is intelligible only in relation to other signifiers and chains of signifiers. Thus, suffering in the world neither gives the epistemological lie to deconstruction nor illustrates its purported inability to take up ethical concerns. Actual suffering in the world is not a hindrance to deconstruction. It is a reason for deconstruction.

I illustrate the bringing of deconstruction to ethical work by recounting a scene from Oliver Stone's (1986) Academy Award winning film *Platoon*. Near the end of the movie, the US Marines dig into their position. They create a perimeter with sentries guarding in darkness and mist. Nonetheless, their enemy breaks the perimeter and completely infiltrates the American compound. As the fighting ensues, the movies' heroes cannot tell friend from foe. For one reason, their enemies are all around them, and, in the confusion, they cannot tell each other apart. Secondly, Taylor (Charlie Sheen) engages in a life or death battle with his own Sgt. Barnes (Tom Berenger). Not only does the cause appear hopeless, but also they can no longer tell who the enemy is. It reminds me of the state of critical theory and emancipatory projects at the epoch of late capitalism. Even those who should be on the same side are fighting amongst themselves. In the film, the situation is hopeless. The commander does the only thing left to do: he calls in an air strike onto his own position. He clears the board and levels the playing field. Everything stops. When the characters regain consciousness, they are disoriented. They do not know where they are. They must reorient themselves to the situation afresh.

This is somewhat how I read Derrida's (1994) foray into the ethical/political domain with *Specters of Marx*. He clears the board and levels the playing field. Everything stops. He clears the debates of their metaphysical assumptions. Here, Marx is neither alive nor is he dead. Derrida inverts that binary and reworks it. He presents another theoretical possibility. Marx becomes spectral.

As an educator, I admit one problem with this view is the apparent loss of a normative stance. If there exists no truth outside the text, then how can one speak of suffering in the world, never mind how to condemn it and begin working for change? What would be ethical truth in curriculum? The problem suggests an ethical bankruptcy in deconstruction.

However, in a hopeful reprieve and transition to the ghostly in his writing, in 1994, Jacques Derrida published *Specters of Marx*. The work is a key entry into Derrida's focus upon ghosts, spirits, specters, and revenants. It emerged as a plenary address for a conference entitled "Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective." The Center of Ideas and Society, University of California at Riverside organized the meeting as a response to early 1990s neo-liberal triumphalism. Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* had spread, the Berlin Wall came down, and Eastern Bloc Communism was collapsing. American author Francis Fukuyama boasted in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1993) that capitalism and its supporting State institutions had triumphed over competing configurations (the left project), fulfilling liberalism's telos of progress. Apparently, a New World Order was born. George Herbert Bush's "thousand points of light" shone, reputedly blinding the traditionally constituted left project. The first US war in Iraq initiated new struggles for the terrain of an emerging geo-political landscape. In this context, Derrida wrote substantively for the first time of Marx. Why only then? Why had Derrida held his silence during the struggles and conflicts of the late Cold War? Commentators (Derrida, 1994) hold that Derrida did not want to deconstruct Marx earlier for fear of implication in the neo-liberal agenda of the time. He did not wish to serve implicitly the agendas of Thatcher and Reagan nor Eastern Bloc State apparatuses as they existed then.

Derrida contends that there haunt multiple ghosts of Marx. As Marx and Engels (1998) famously wrote, "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre" (p. 33). The original trajectory of that sprit may be ostensibly curtailed, yet its own revenant returns to haunt on. For Derrida, ghosts remain awaiting recognition, like that of Hamlet's father:

Though art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio. (cited in Derrida, 1994, p. 176)

Ghosts stand there to talk with. Marx often wrote of ghosts and specters. Now, as I read Derrida, the ghosts "write" of Marx. Efforts of commentators like Fukuyama to proclaim Marx dead function as attempts to exorcise Marx's ghost—tacit recognition that the ghosts haunt on. The louder proclaimers announce Marx's death, the surer phantoms gather.

With little doubt, reading Derrida is an exercise in required generosity, imagination, and tolerance for ambiguity. As I have said, my sense is that

he doesn't clearly say anything. Nonetheless, I read into the work implications of a way to speak of Marx after the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Specters of Marx* provides a valuable way to converse of and with someone after their proclaimed passing. Marx may be a figure of the past, but his spectre lingers on.

Ghosts may haunt, but I believe they harm mostly when not recognized. If a person insists on living in a mansion yet denies the ghosts that haunt it, then one becomes surprised, terrified by the creaking of corners and the slamming of doors. If one accepts the ghosts that haunt, they may cease to be a terror. Instead, they can become one's ephemeral partners. Do I wish to live at peace with something not present except—say— in my anxieties? Then, I ought to shake hands with its ghost. I ought to hear what the ghost has to say about contemporary problems.

Thus, trans/formational spectral narrative becomes a form of ghost story one may tell about persistent if elusive characteristics of the past (passed?) with a view to facilitating progressive change. This can concern media, curriculum, people, places, and ideas. This form of narrative addresses what evades, exceeds, and remains beyond the literality of a text. In *City of Gold*, Pierre Berton remarks that "No ghosts of the past return to haunt us here in these silent rooms" (Low & Koenig, 1957). With deep respect, I disagree. I believe ghosts do haunt on, only one requires a ghost story to comprehend them. I build this theory through my readings of Castricano's (2001) "cryptomimesis;" some of Derrida's views on language; and the themes of ghosts, spirits, and revenants in his, especially later, work. My application of deconstruction provides a useful and supple way to take up ethical intellectual work in a time when the desperate need for an ethical stance is counterweighed by the erosion and decentring of traditionally constituted bases for ethical work. Trans/formational spectral narrative provides a way to engage old hopes and new problems; it provides a way to not give up the ghost!

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