"Art in Times of Conflict"

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This special issue is the culmination of a conversation that began over a year ago, when the three of us sat down to map out the intellectual trajectory for the 2012 Pre-Conference of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (CACS). Our theme, "Art in Times of Conflict", explores the significance of the aesthetic realm for teaching and learning about conflict. Following on the tradition of previous CACS pre-conferences, we imagined an intimate gathering that would bring together a community of educational scholars for intense thought, debate and dialogue. In this regard, the conference did not disappoint, and it is our hope that the papers gathered together in this issue, many of which were presented at that meeting, reflect the depth and breadth of these explorations.

By way of contributing to the debates in curriculum studies in Canada, we have two desires for this issue. The first revolves around a curiosity about the relevance of aesthetics to educational theory and curriculum studies. When considering aesthetics, what often comes to mind are questions about the nature of creativity, of beauty and the sublime, and of the transformative effects of creative expression. But there are also the more painful dimensions of human experience, such as melancholy, dread and perhaps even terror. For Donald Meltzer (2008), the foundation of art is this tension. Through the artist's chosen medium, writes Meltzer, "the pained perception of the inhumanities daily in force about them" are brought together with "a vision of the beauty of the world being vandalized by these primitive social processes" (p. 15). This "aesthetic conflict" thus responds both to conflicts in the outside world—social displacement, violence, war and loss—and to conflicts on the inside: those engendered via the difficult vicissitudes of learning to be a self in relation to this world. These dynamics, we submit, are also curriculum studies. Over ten years ago, Deborah Britzman (1998) made precisely this point in her discussion of "difficult knowledge," a term meant to denote the charged and complicated meeting of internal and external conflicts in a place called education (p. 118). Recognizing "the aesthetic" itself as an inter-disciplinary concept, the papers in this issue work across a range of theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalytic, ecological, linguistic and visual perspectives, to highlight the difficult qualities of knowledge and humanity that are at once beautiful and subject to breakdown.

Our second desire with this collection is to provoke conversation about conflict as both a dynamic of war and social violence and a structure of teaching and learning. The papers in this issue explore aesthetics as an opening toward thought when thinking itself is in conflict. The historical and contemporary conflicts that the authors explore are as diverse as their objects of analysis; as readers we are brought into contact with the aesthetic quality of representation through encounters with visual art, photography, film, digital media, narrative and pedagogy itself. Each of the authors' papers in this volume take up this discussion in different ways, but all of them, we believe, open questions about education as a profoundly aesthetic relation that holds the potential to renew common understandings of the world as we know it.

Karen Espiritu's paper highlights the power of film to project onto the screen the conflicts of Britzman's (1998) concept, mentioned above, "difficult knowledge." Drawing on Samira Makhmalbaf's (2002) film, *God, Construction and Deconstruction*, Espiritu shows how one teacher's pedagogical effort to teach of the 9-11 attacks in an Afghan refugee camp in Iran is itself touched by the traumatic content it tries to represent. Espiritu shows how, in the face of difficult knowledge, the teacher can resort to old scripts and repeat dominant paradigms that are out of step with the cultural context and resistances of students before her. A key feature of this paper brings Britzman's concept into conversation with 9-11 memorial practices, and asks readers to consider how certain forms of remembrance also involve a forgetting of the conflicts and struggles that complicate any single rendering of an event. Espiritu's point is not that there is a right way to remember, but rather that in screening the failure of memorial practices, as Makhmalbaf's film does, we can return to constructions of pedagogy and memory the myriad difficulties that accompany their emotional labour.

Elizabeth Yeoman's contribution furthers the investigation of pedagogy as a difficult relation with difference. An invitation to Yeoman to collaborate with Innu activist Elizabeth Penashue to translate her diaries from Innu-aimun offers an opportunity for a broad audience of non-Innu readers to learn from Penashue's formidable experience as an environmental activist and respected community elder. However, decisions about translating, editing and illustrating the diaries raise ethical dilemmas at every turn. Like pedagogy itself, which risks perpetuating a fantasy that what is unknowable can be known and mastered, Yeoman points to the ways translation can "domesticate" indigenous cosmologies when inserted into dominant discourse. The question of her article is not whether or not to translate, but rather, how to work ethically across differences in language, which for Yeoman, means building into any given translation signs that call attention to the limits of their capacity to fully capture the meanings they seek to represent. For instance, Yeoman suggests that partial translation of words and concepts may generate an impulse to "seek explanation" for what we do not know, not as an act of mastery but as an ethical relation of listening. Indeed, Yeoman's investigation of the dilemmas of translation offers a way of understanding the ethical possibilities that emerge from attending to the risks and limits of our very efforts to represent others and which, arguably, imbue all of education's communicative acts in curriculum and pedagogy.

Randa Khattar and Carol Anne Wien describe the concept of "aesthetic responsiveness" at work in the pedagogical relation itself. Putting Gregory Bateson's notion of "patterns that connect" inside the walls of the early childhood classroom, they consider the qualities and conditions of "aesthetic responsiveness" that emerge in encounters with a teacher's illness. Made from a combination of recognition, appreciation and empathy, Khattar and Wien find evidence of aesthetic responsiveness in very young children, and further specify the ill teacher's special challenge in relation to them, a relation that we believe calls up, in Meltzer's language, an "aesthetic conflict." Khattar and Wien name the conflict as one of embodying an authentic relation to the self in illness while also recognizing and appreciating the child's achievements, limits and struggles in empathy. Their paper offers a theory of the aesthetic found not only in great works of art, but as D.W. Winnicott (1971) insisted some time ago, in the human capacity to "live creatively" (p. 65) in the face of difficulty, and in this case, to exist in the face of the threat of mortality, at times more present than others, as part of life and learning in the early childhood classroom.

Avril Aitken and Linda Radford explore digital storytelling for its potential to archive the conflicts of learning to teach. Their paper presents the reader with two case studies that illustrate what the authors call "blind spots" of seeing: those that defend against the difficulties of meaning making in learning the profession. Working with digital stories crafted by their students alongside their own, the authors bring Lacan's insights on the nature of subjectivity to bear on their reading of conflict as made from the tension between "one's inner landscape and the demands of educational discourse". It is where understanding resists symbolization on screen, Aitken and Radford suggest, that fantasies of the ideal self as teacher begin to unravel and to provoke new forms of thought. With this orientation they challenge modalities of filmmaking in teacher education that understand introspection and self-reflection as the therapeutic end to learning. Central to this argument is Aitken and Radford's view that it is rather the "knowledge that is difficult to think" that opens the emancipatory potential of learning. The aesthetic elements of digital storytelling, they claim, might both contain and make legible this difficult work.

In a short provocation, Melanie Bourke offers a psychoanalytic reading of the silhouettes of Kara Walker to open questions about the meaning of both representing and facing histories of slavery. Bourke traces censorship debates as evidence for the emotional difficulty of representing, in art, unthinkable human violence. But where the field is polarized into two positions, Bourke offers a third through a psychoanalytic interpretation of "the uncanny." From the vantage of the uncanny, Bourke argues that Walker's projected images represent not only the history of slavery at stake in debates over their censorship but also, a return of the repressed qualities of psychical history that these images call up in the viewer who witnesses them. At stake in Bourke's paper is a theory of history that must attend not only to the material traces of lives once lived and lost, but the intangible traces of affect—helplessness, aggression and sexuality—left behind in the artist's representations, and our reading of them.

To conclude the special issue, we have a section dedicated to what we have named "aesthetic interventions". The word intervention conjures the idea of the action of coming between—an interference—into the order of things. Bringing intervention together with aesthetics conveys something of our desire with this section to explore how creativity interrupts, or interferes with, the recognized scripts of academia. Each of the pieces published here experiment with poetic language as a medium of encounter between thought, affect and symbolization. With her collection "I Sing the Poet Electric", Judith Robertson explores poetry as a slippery intervention that plumbs the interstices between "pedagogy and art, memory and desire, chaos and learning". Presenting the reader with various "scenes" that limn the dynamics of learning and creative discovery inspired by the teachings of her doctoral supervisor, Roger Simon, Robertson's poetic interventions hand on his gift, or, in Simon's (2005) terms, they "receive" his intellectual and emotional legacy "as counsel" (p. 151). Robertson's poetry dwells with Simon's teachings to offer an "expanded notion of what art in times of conflict can be," which seems particularly fitting for a man who taught us about the "difficult inheritance" of the other's teaching. To receive the other's story (and theory) as counsel, "is not only to pass on the content or information contained within it" but to "tell it again" with attention to "the difficult experience of your attending it" (p. 151). We believe that Robertson's poetic interventions take up Simon's invitation "to tell again" some of his stories and theories, not simply as content, but "as counsel" that attend the difficult experience of bearing witness to the intellectual traces he leaves behind. Carl Leggo furthers Simon's invitation to "tell again" in his meditation on the liveliness of poetic language where he considers the rhetorical question "what is a poem good for"? Taking poetry as the centre of a curriculum of possibility that teaches us how to "live poetically in the world", Leggo understands the provocation of poetry to be a "fecund place of tensions where conflicts are integral to vitality, education and transformation". With their aesthetic interventions, both Leggo and Robertson punctuate this special issue with the aesthetic spirit that inspired its beginnings: where readers are faced with texts that cannot be faithful to singular or set answers, but rather perform the very dilemmas they seek to explore.

References

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