

Book Reviews

The Death of the Good Canadian. Teachers, National Identities, and the Social Studies Curriculum. George H. Richardson. New York: Peter Lang, 2002, softcover, 169 pages, ISBN 0-8204-5535-0.

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The most successful hermeneutic conversations are uncomfortable precisely because they set in motion processes of mutual challenging, questioning, and learning. (Benhabib, 2002, p. 35)

George Richardson's thoughtfully conceived and written study *The Death of the Good Canadian* is timely. Dealing with questions that are—or should be—at the forefront of curricular and pedagogical practice, it serves in an exemplary way to invite the reader to engage in hermeneutic conversation, but as Benhabib suggests it should, in some unsettling ways. Unsettling because Richardson's announcement of the "death" of certain forms of cultural and national markers of identity signals a loss of innocence or naïveté about questions of purposes for social studies in the schools. The "current present," to use Jameson's (2002, p. 214) phrase, with its seeming newness and complexity, challenges as well taken-for-granted representations of social and cultural realities. As Richardson suggests, claims of a coherent and unitary form of national identity are being challenged by "the claims of culture" (Benhabib, 2002) for legitimate recognition and for inclusion in the curriculum of public schools.

In the province where I work, Alberta, the social studies curriculum is currently under revision. Among the contentious issues that the writers of the new program are struggling with is how to represent cultural identity as a focus of social studies teaching and learning. Failure to come to some consensus about what a curriculum should or should not include in terms of representing culture—whose culture and what should be emphasized—in part led to the demise of efforts to develop a common curriculum for the western provinces and territories. However, the difficulties inherent in developing curriculum around concepts like identity and difference have not eased with restricting the territorial scope.

Alberta itself has become, as a recent *Globe and Mail* newspaper series highlighted, one the four areas of Canada characterized by increasing ethnocultural diversity. And yet cultural difference sits uneasily, if at all, as a commonplace of curricular and pedagogic practice. Richardson's account of his conversations with four high school social studies teachers attests to how teachers' own convictions about purpose and identity frame—ambiguously, to use the term that figures prominently in Richardson's work—their own inter-

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pretation of social studies purposes, identity, and their responsibilities for educating students.

How to begin to respond to such diversity is one of the questions that underlie Richardson's inquiry. However, it would be a mistake to read *The Death of the Good Canadian* as providing answers for curriculum writers, or for social studies teaching practice in the absence of a legitimate definition of what it means to be Canadian. Richardson does not provide a prescription for the social studies curriculum. Instead, he is interested in the question of how teachers' own "perceptions of national identity" influence their thinking and practice. How teachers' respond to both the realities of cultural diversity in their classrooms and interpret the problematic narratives of national identity, if any such narratives legitimately exist, is a central concern for Richardson. As he notes, "Social studies teachers cannot isolate themselves from these concerns. The debate over what our national identity is and how it should look in the future has direct implications for what we do in the classroom" (p. 85).

Richardson constructed a multilayered narrative based on a research project he conducted in collaboration with four senior high school social studies teachers. The invitation offered was collectively to "take up the issue of how we conceived of nationalism in the post-Cold War period" (p. 7). The study took the form of action research, informed, as Richardson explains, by hermeneutic and postmodern thought. In part the book might be read as an example of what action research looks like when taken up in this way. Eschewing technical approaches that tend to be characterized by an interest in implementing preconceived curricular or pedagogic ideas or formulations, action research informed by postmodernism and hermeneutics instead is guided by an interest in conversation and oriented to ambiguities of experience and understanding. Referring to the idea of a "border pedagogy," which is derived from the postmodern challenge to certainties of power and knowledge, Richardson writes,

It is through this emphasis on the legitimacy of individual experience and on the need to share these diverse experiences in order to create some broader meaning or understanding that border pedagogy intersects with hermeneutics. Combining the political, dialogic, and fundamentally emancipatory thrust of postmodern border pedagogy with the hermeneutic quest for meaning creates conditions under which action research can become a successful response to the ambiguity and difficulty of classroom teaching. (p. 19)

The Death of the Good Canadian works well as an example of the kind of action research that Richardson practices and understands. The hermeneutic thrust of the book is illustrated with examples of conversations he and his collaborators had about questions provoked by the readings of some diverse texts, which included excerpts from the works of Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History*), Michael Ignatieff (*Blood and Belonging*), and Julia Kristeva (*Nations with Nationalism*). These readings served to focus the conversations on certain ideas central to the social studies curriculum such as an understanding of national identity and its problems.

The conversations about these texts also became opportunities for the participants to begin to question their own understandings of nationalism, identity, and cultural difference, indeed to begin to see what is questionable (p. 49),

but also to begin to open possibilities for self-understanding as teachers. Richardson's work illustrates and exemplifies the hermeneutic work of interpreting the traditions that frame our present understandings and that we can only begin to understand ourselves against historical backgrounds and through historical narratives. Further, hermeneutic practices provide the possibility for understanding how our own identities might be interpreted and understood as possible answers to questions or difficulties (Warnke, 2002).

The "radical" or more postmodern hermeneutic practice that Richardson espouses is intended, however, to keep all such answers provisional and to resist the desire for closure and articulating certainties that in his estimation now hamper the social studies curriculum. The kind of action research that Richardson describes does not lead easily to immediate application, but has a more ontological aim expressed, for example, in his question "What does it mean to live in a pluralistic society?" (p. 50). Given the increased plurality and complexity of Canadian society, this is not a question that either invites or can be closed through simple formulas or slogans. Rather, this question perhaps at best invites ambivalent and ambiguous responses. But as Richardson argues, it is both the necessity and acceptance of ambiguity that provides possibility. This is expressed eloquently in his closing sentence: "Ambiguous conceptions of difference and national identity remain living conceptions able to accommodate the conflict and negotiation typical of plural societies, and most critically, able to seize the imagination and passion of our students" (p. 143).

As a social studies educator I have a great deal of admiration for what Richardson has undertaken here. In a short review, however, it is difficult to respond fully to the many layers of inquiry that are present in the book. Although the book is short and readable, it is also complex in its arguments. Its attempt to address and interrogate multiple questions with an appeal to various—and in themselves difficult and contestable—sources of history, philosophy, theory, and personal narratives limits a summarily coherent response and critique. For me each of the sections or chapters posed its own "problem positions," to use a phrase in Richardson's introduction.

As sites of emotional and intellectual ambiguity (p. 2) I found these problem positions to be unsettling, but also invitations to a conversation (or perhaps multiple conversations). In the spirit of conversation, then, I offer some questions related to the problem positions Richardson unveils. My questions address first, history, and especially how this is taken up as a background for the study participants. As an adjunct to this question is also the question of what constitutes adequate grounds for asserting categories like self and individual, and by extension how we may take up agency within a particular historical context. The second question relates to what I find increasingly problematic about assertions of postmodernism, especially in terms of vilifying modernism as something to be overcome or negated. Third, there are difficult questions about practice and ethics and what makes practice possible if the traditional grounds for action are hopelessly eroded. In my own work these questions have become central problem positions for curriculum thinking and practice.

The problem of history and historicity. First, I admire the scope of Richardson's own historical understanding, which is illustrated at a couple of interesting levels. From the perspective of providing an historical context for the problem

of identity in the social studies curriculum, he subtly explores, for example, the origins of discourses of the “good Canadian” and assertions of national identity in social studies programs and how they have been derived often through the struggle of elites to assert certain kinds of hegemonic or ideological views. For example, Richardson provides a concise explanation of the ambiguous origins of a Canadian national identity in the complex historical relationships that grew out of attachments to the British Empire and later economic and cultural ties to the United States. Particularly in the face of the growing diversity of Canada in the 20th century, assertions of Canadian identity and nationalism became more questionable as answers to “who we are” in a unitary or collective sense, in the words of one of the teachers in the study (p. 96). This notion of who we are is a critical issue currently in constructing a social studies curriculum that will more openly reflect differences, cultural and otherwise.

On another level, Richardson demonstrates thoughtfully as well the hermeneutic notion of historicity, the embeddedness of our own personal narratives in historical situations. He introduces his growing awareness of the limits of certain forms of national identity through his own teaching experiences, both in Canada and internationally. In a way, the book can be read as a narrative of an educator who through encounters with others, with texts, and a reflective engagement with his own teaching experiences has arrived at something that is “questionable” and with the questionable in hand proceeds with a journey of further inquiry.

I intend it as a kind of invitation to continue that inquiry and not a criticism of the book, to say that I wish Richardson had gone further in his historical inquiry and perhaps explored more fully what both constrains and offers possibilities for teachers: teachers’ own beliefs and practices being a focus of his inquiry. On the first point, there are two issues. One has to do with understanding Canada—and provinces like Alberta—in a global framework, particularly the framework of global capitalism and the challenges this poses for articulation of identity in national terms.

Although certainly globalization has called into question the more recent, in historical terms, idea of the modern nation-state and the relevance of national identity as critics of economic globalization suggest, needs are emerging for forms of local and regional association that at the same time respect diversity (Bello, 2002). This idea rests uneasily and understandably, ambiguously, in Richardson’s work. He perhaps does not give sufficient attention to some expressions of Canadian nationalism and identity that historically were expressed as resistance to US cultural and economic hegemony, nor the deep influences of both economics and homogenizing cultural forces.

Although Richardson does gesture toward the importance of some sense of community and association, he also, at least in my reading of his work, privileges ultimately a kind of individualist solution, suggested in conclusion to a chapter dealing with the “re-imagining of the Good Canadian”: “As each reader brings his or her own meaning to the ‘text’ of national identity, it becomes increasingly apparent that there is no ‘common imagining’ and the Good Canadian cannot be reinvented” (p. 133). Although I wholeheartedly agree that we must honor difference in the context of community, however that

is imagined, there is nonetheless a danger here of asserting in the “presence of an absence” (p. 131), which can become another form of presence, one not free of ideology, a point to which I return briefly below.

My final point about history is that although Richardson’s own exploration of his identity has depth as expressed historically, there is less sense of this depth in his portrait of his teacher participants. I realize this is partly due to the format and length of the book and the fact that it was not about the teacher participants per se. Yet it was not apparent in the stories how their own interpretations and understandings of history and Canadian identity necessarily played out, either in their own lives or in the classroom. And I found it odd that the teachers involved referred to some limited events in Canadian history as markers of national identity, and which for them had emotional resonance: Expo ’67 being one example. If, as I assumed from my reading, we were of a similar generation, I wondered why there was such a limited reading of Canadian history. Why weren’t other issues and events raised, which in my own experience were instrumental in reshaping Canadian identity and how I understood the nature of the Canada? (The Quebec crisis, the repatriation of the Constitution, the Charlottetown and Meech Lake Accords, and the NAFTA being only some examples that I think had a profound influence on both Canadian identity and the questioning of it).

If, as one teacher is quoted as saying, “after we teach the fur trade and the Riel Rebellion, there is not much else until you get to Quebec and what’s happening today and frankly, my students just aren’t that interested anymore,” one might worry both about the view of history that is advanced to students and how certain events are simply ignored or not taken up in terms of students’ own lives and understandings. For me this speaks to a difficult problem, if not the central one, of the social studies curriculum. This is a problem that cannot be resolved only by identifying appropriate ends or purposes of curriculum, a belief that Richardson, I think, holds as well with his emphasis on the idea of *currere* and how students can actually live and enact their understandings.

The problem of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. A significant aspect of Richardson’s argument is that most, if not all, expressions of national identity, nationhood, and nationalism are expressions of modernism. The articulation of modernism as expressed through “an autonomous subject capable of independent action who possesses the tools (knowledge, reason, science) to allow for control over nature” (p. 12), in Richardson’s view, lies behind expressions of national identity. In the context of growing plurality and complexity, such traditional views of nationhood and identity have become impervious, inflexible, and indeed if not wholly injurious, certainly irrelevant to the realities and ambiguities of what some would call the “postmodern condition.”

I do not entirely disagree with Richardson’s critique of modernism and his proposals for a more postmodern approach to education. My unease with his characterization—particularly to theorize postmodernity as a “reaction to” modernism—is that it carries the danger of creating another false dualism, and one that can be ahistorical in quality. Conceptualizing postmodernity as a reaction perhaps denies a necessary reexamination of modernist ideas—and

ideals—as exemplified in Taylor’s (1991) ideas about authenticity and the need for a richer ontology of the self. From a hermeneutic perspective, Warnke (2002) argues that we cannot simply dismiss forms of identity that have served to guide and frame our actions, but that the task is rather to understand identities (e.g., *Canadian*) interpretively, and as responses to certain kinds of questions.

As well, from an historical perspective, it is arguable whether modernism refers to a coherent set of qualities and beliefs. As Todorov (2002) argues, “Modernity itself is not homogenous; the criticism to which it has been subjected has revealed several tendencies within it that constitute the framework of social thought in which we are living today (p. 10).” Jameson (2002) puts it more figuratively. He explains that to understand the present, the postmodern if you like, requires looking through a pane of glass, but you have to acknowledge the presence of the glass, that is, the presence of modernism as it continues to live in certain ways through our practices, institutions, and forms of thought. For Jameson the important challenge is to engage in what he calls an inquiry into “an ontology of the present”: “A true ontology would not only wish to register the forces of past and future within that present, but would also be intent on diagnosing, as I am, the enfeeblement and virtual eclipse of those forces within our current present” (p. 214).

Certainly to Richardson’s credit he does take up the question of what is different about today and what calls for a different response, but perhaps this difference has to be captured more resolutely through an interrogation of the present. For Jameson modernism is less a concept than a narrative category that in ideological terms has served certain purposes and interests such as those that Richardson ascribes to attempts to define Canadian identity in the social studies. But Jameson argues that narration has to focus on the situation, and not only on subjectivity—there is always the danger and desire—to reinscribe ideologically the self as central, albeit dressed up in postmodern fragments.

The problem of ethics and practice. Benhabib (2002) argues in *The Claims of Culture* that the hard task confronting us today (by us I mean in the context of this review, especially those concerned about social studies curriculum) is how to reconcile what she calls moral universalism with the legitimate recognition of difference. She concedes that universalism may be understood without recourse to metaphysical norms, indeed that it is categorically necessary to recognize plurality and difference, but some form of what she calls *normative reason*—another term might be *practice*—is required to be able to understand, negotiate, and converse across assertions of difference and identity. As she emphasizes, “The negotiation of complex cultural dialogues in a global civilization is now our lot (p. 186).

Richardson shares this view, I think. Perhaps his book has to be seen as a challenge to begin to imagine Benhabib’s idea of negotiation. But here I would also argue that as well as imagining other forms of identity, that is, to make in a sense identity central to the task albeit ambiguously, perhaps avoids emphasizing the more urgent task of imagining forms of reason and understanding that can begin to offer opportunities for “border crossing.” Hence for me the critical problem position for social studies today is not only how we frame questions of identity and purpose, but even more how we understand practice:

and here I mean both teaching and pedagogic practice and learning experiences for children. I see Richardson's book as dropping us off, well provisioned with ideas and questions, at the start of that difficult journey.

In a more general sense, again in relation to ethics and practice, I was left unsettled by Richardson's emphasis on ambiguity and living with ambiguity. At one level I support the kind of ironic posture that accepting ambiguity implies in relation to narratives that hinder a fuller understanding and acceptance of difference. On the other hand, it is a position, although perhaps rhetorically appropriate, for those who have the luxury of thinking and writing about these issues, less appropriate in the context of responsibility for children. Here (ambiguously) I take up Arendt's (1968) concern about the difficulties of natality and how we take up pedagogic responsibility for children, whose lives necessarily exist between a world they inherit and need to know and a world that must also ultimately be renewed by them. Pedagogic responsibility also implies that we need to stand outside our desires as adults, as MacIntyre (1999) suggests, and recognize the dependence that children have on certain forms of identity and association for their own well-being.

Perhaps to end this review, the above discussion brings us back not solely to ambiguity, but to questions of how we ought to live together. Richardson acknowledges his own discomfort with resting entirely in ambiguity and postmodern restlessness when he notes that for children and students, "it seems equally clear that students need *some* sense of community and shared experience in their lives" (p. 85, italics in original). I would certainly agree with that, and with White's (2000) assertion of the need for a "stickier" sense of the self: for forms of attachment that can both live in the present, but also in Jameson's terms, looks forward through the "desire of Utopia" to understanding the future, not simply looking back to the past, imagined or otherwise (p. 215). George Richardson deserves our thanks for encouraging the beginnings of this kind of thinking and helping this to initiate inquiry into a richer conceptualization and practice of social studies in schools.

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