DECONSTRUCTION, HOSPITALITY, GREENWASHING

Nicholas Ng-A-Fook characterizes "this moment of writing" as a "response to questions raised in previous texts," informed by the "now" within which he is "search[ing] for a method" of "understanding" – through Derrida – what it means for the curriculum to inhabit and be "inhabited by the language of the other."[1] Making explicit the autobiographical character of the search by referencing *currere*, he asks what he can learn from this "migrant subject's educational experiences of appropriation and alienation in the language of the other?"[2] To answer, he turns not only to his own life history, but also to Derrida's effort to deconstruct "the subject," specifically the subject of "colonialism, language, and its translations."[3] Ng-A-Fook promises to "problematize the impossible colonial politics of properly appropriating the language of the other," concluding with a "curriculum of hospitality towards the language of the other which moves beyond alienation and appropriation."[4] To approximate an understanding of deconstruction," or to attempt to "deconstruct the subject of and subject within autobiography, one is faced first with the problem of translation."[5]

Prior to that problem would seem to be the problem of the translator, e.g. the human subject, conceived, Derrida acknowledges (after Aristotle), as simultaneously "underneath," yet "identical to itself," while at the same time different from its properties, qualities, attributes; this layered internal heterogeneity is the "center of an identity."[6] Ng-A-Fook wonders: "How might one then reaffirm the structure of "the subject," within autobiography for example, while questioning the limits of its canonized representations (e.g., a white European male bourgeoisie)?"[7]

Deconstruction seems a suitable method, especially (quoting the Derrida scholar Denise Egéa-Kuehne), when defined as "questioning in the sense of search, exploration, reflectivity, rejection of all assumptions, not as an act of demolition, but as striving for awareness."[8] Quoting Derrida, Ng-A-Fook specifies that deconstruction constitutes "an ethics of affirmation," denoting "attentive[ness] to otherness, to the alterity of the other, to something new and other."[9] That prompts him to ask: "how does one learn-to-live within the aporias—a language of undecidability—of such hyphenated third space?"[10]

Derrida's autobiographical self-reflection prompts Ng-A-Fook to wonder how his surname contains "traces of Chinese-ness, or, in turn, how it erases Gaelic-ness under the maiden name Gray,"[11] his mother's name. "This universal system of exclusionary logic," he laments, "of defining philosophically what the other is, and what one is not, its system of deferral, différance, displacement, worked and still works today to privilege certain national identities associated to the metropolises of a colonial motherland or fatherland."[12] Considering Derrida's insight that culture or cultural

identity contains "difference within itself," he wonders how a "colonial or postcolonial subject" – such as himself – can "negotiate … hyphenated spaces of sameness and otherness, alienation and appropriation, the colonizer's institutional language and one's native language, the schoolmaster's tongue and one's mother tongue, which in turn is always already occupied by the language of the other?"[13]

Almost as an echo not only of Derrida but also of Aoki's understanding of "conversation as a bridging of two worlds by a bridge, which is not a bridge,"[14] Ng-A-Fook notes that "language is our invisible prosthesis for moving between the shifting terrain of self and other," adding that while we perform culture and race and gender through language, its immateriality "eludes both a master's ownership and a colonial subject's (re)appropriations of a proper terrain called homo-hegemonic meaning."[15] Against the colonial tendency to reduce linguistic diversity to uniformity – an issue that plagued Pasolini[16] – Ng-A-Fook (after Derrida) stresses "unconditional hospitality,"[17] an idea that has always seemed excessive to me while immersed in studying the Weimar Republic,[18] where tolerance (not even hospitality) of the Nazis was surely a factor (among others) that enabled their survival then triumph.

Evidently there is an ethical element of deconstruction, one that requires, Ng-A-Fook concludes, "questioning any institutional language that presupposes its foundations with universal systems of exclusionary logic, any "universal claims to a homo-hegemonic meaning."[19] Referencing again Egéa-Kuehne, Ng-A-Fook notes the "etymological closeness" between "subject" and "substance," the two converging in archaic conceptions of "basis" or "foundation."[20] Is this acknowledgement that the human subject remains central? Efforts at hospitality and against "homo-hegemonic meaning" can occur nowhere else.

The Derridean moment seems have passed in the next essay. "As a curriculum theorist and a parent," Ng-A-Fook embraces the "earthliness of our ecological presence," provoking to think – in these dual intertwining roles - about "the things we do, could do just now, and/or put off doing just now?"[21] These "reflexive moments" remind Ng-A-Fook of David Jardine's haunting phrase which he revises as "an empty curricular sky," under which we somehow must "attune ourselves away from … urban cluttered noise, in which many of us now live?"[22] He confides:

> I do fear making time to sit down, to question my sense of breathlessness, to communicate my autobiographical narrative struggles with greenwashing, the commons of my daily curriculum lived away from the writing within this digital screen. But more than anything else, I fear what I may or may not find within the potential emptiness of this kind of asking.[23]

Referencing Brian Casemore's formulation of "the autobiographical demand of place,"[24] he suggests that: "Such a demand calls forth, of being on call, and asking about

the things to which we can do justice now."[25]

Ng-A-Fook then names the place where "I now teach and write as a curriculum theorist, as a global citizen, and as a parent," the nation's capital yes, but also the river Kichi Sibi,[26] whose "tributaries bleed life into this earthy place, calling us forth and asking us to do ecological justice, right now."[27] It is in this ancient place where "each week students and I gather within the concrete inter/disciplinary conglomerate we call the University of Ottawa, as curriculum workers teaching and learning on/within/through the colonizing abundance and emptiness of an industrious urbanized territory that has been inhabited by the Anishinabeg since time immemorial."[28] He quotes Casemore: **"**Place holds the past" even "when we lose our sense of connection to what has gone before."[29] It would seem such loss is an occupational hazard when he describes us as "transnational nomadic curriculum textworkers," wondering **"**how might we provoke such a calling forth on this traditional indigenous territory in relation to the narrative enclosures of its ecological presence?"[30] Another complicated question follows: "how might we open our provocations of alter/native narrative accounts in relation to concepts like greenwashing, curriculum, and ecojustice as a praxis of living earth democracy within the institutional and inter/disciplinary places we curriculum theorists call teacher education?[31]

Ng-A-Fook confronts the Ontario Ministry of Education's 2007 response to the environmental crisis, its establishment of a Curriculum Council and its report *Shaping Our Schools, Shaping our Future.* He suggests that the report rewrites the Ontario curriculum as "more inclusively green," but it "fails in many ways to address such intergenerational calling forth across the territories we now inhabit."[32] Employing a scientistic technological vocabulary – including the slogan "evidence-based learning."[33] the report ignores and "the very experiences that take place beneath our feet."[34] The Curriculum Council Report and its curriculum policy documents, Ng-A-Fook continues, remain embedded in the "technical root metaphors of overall and specific expectations, which reinscribe anthropocentric and individualistic pedagogical approaches for environmental education within our future curricular designs."[35] Still, "this report pushes teachers, communities, and students to take action, just now, so that we may sustain our narrative and material existence as a species within the near future."[36] What is ignored, however, is the "student's 'subjective' presence within their daily earthy activities."[37] Admitting that this "alter/native" characterization of what the place demands is "perhaps somewhat idealistic and even a little romantic," he is undeterred, wondering "what would romancing our relationships with the earth as a greener narrative em-plot-ment look like on our curricular centre stage?"[38] How might teacher education "provoke environmentally responsible citizens of every kind, that in turn understand how shaping the stories taken up in our schools is interrelated with how we conceptualize the future shaping of the ecological territories that many of us

now call home?[39]

Next, Ng-A-Fook turns his attention to "greenwashing," a term he traces to 1986, first invoked to reference the hotel industry's practice of persuading guests to reuse their towels, presumably in the service of protecting the environment but also, obviously, in service of increasing profits.[40] He associates greenwashing with the Curriculum Council Report's question: what are schools doing to reduce waste?[41] "In a sense," he writes, "we can reread the Curriculum Council Report, and its respective resource documents, as a yet another technocratic and corporate narrative of greenwashing, which seeks to place overall and specific green expectations in every classroom."[42]

As "travelling textworkers," Ng-A-Fook wonders how "we might then attune ourselves to a bell ringing in the empty sky," enabling us to "reread the Ontario curriculum as a form of ecocriticism that works in turn toward fostering environmentally responsible citizens of every kind."[43] There are, he notes, three types of citizenship programs associated with the Character Development Initiatives taking place within Ontario schools: (1) Personally responsible citizens acting responsibly within their community; (2) Participatory citizens, e.g. active members of community organizations; (3) Social justice-oriented citizens asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.[44] Referencing Westheimer, Ng-A-Fook notes that "there are no guarantees that our curriculum-as-planned will necessarily translate pedagogically as an ecojustice curriculum lived as earth democracy."[45]

COMMENTARY

The first study is emblematic of Ng-A-Fook's Derridean moment, expertly performed, invoking his own genealogy to concretize the abstractions, settling on hospitality as a key concept. There and in the following essay, Ng-A-Fook enacts his curriculum theory as a conceptual montage, assembling key concepts to document an instance of curricular "greenwashing," e.g. emphasizing students' responsibility for the environment, a move that embeds individualistic conceptions of citizenship in ecological education, discouraging collective forms of activism as well as intellectual efforts to understand why the environmental crisis has occurred in the first place. While he starts autobiographically – speaking as a curriculum theorist and a parent – he ends collectively, invoking the "we" that climate crisis creates.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Ng-A-Fook, 2009, 4.

[2] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 5.

[3] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 5.

[4] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 5. On this later point, he anticipates Ruitenberg 2015.

[5] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 6. Translation is also a topic of interest to Ruitenberg 2010.

[6] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 6. Here Ng-A-Fook is quoting Derrida.

[7] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 7.

[8] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 7.

[9] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 7.

[10] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 9. Often associated with Homi Bhabha, the "third space" has also been taken up extensively in curriculum studies, including, memorably, by Wang 2004.

[11] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 10.

[12] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 11.

[13] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 11.

[14] Aoki 2005 (1981), 228; see also Aoki 2005 (1996), 316.

[15] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 12.

[16] "In a period of reactionary, centralist State politics," Pasolini lamented, "language achieved a maximum of 'fixation'" (see Pinar 2009, 113). Not only the eradication of regional dialects characterized this "fixation," but, Pasolini pointed out, also the reduction of language to information exchange, absent poetic, playful, and provocative elements.

[17] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 13. See Ruitenberg 2015.

[18] Pinar 2012.

[19] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 15. Does not universalizing "hospitality" (or even "deconstruction") function as an inhospitable (an exclusionary) act?

[20] Ng-A-Fook 2009, 17 n. 6.

[21] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 43.

[22] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 43. Here he is referencing David Jardine.

[23] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 43-44.

[24] Casemore 2008.

[25] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 44. See Casemore 2008.

[26] Kichi Sibi, which means great river in the Algonquin language, provides an overview of the ancient history of the Ottawa Valley using artifacts found in the region. Picnickers, hikers, farmers and avocational archaeologists found these objects over the past 150 years and donated them to museums. Their generosity, hard work and interest in preserving the past have given us a greater awareness of the Valley's ancient   history.

https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/archeo/kichisibi/kich01e.html Accessed June 5, 2020.

[27] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 44.

[28] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 44. "Anishinabeg" is an alternate spelling of Anishinaabe, which is a name the Ojibway and Algonquin people use for themselves in their own language. Anishinabeg is actually a plural form of Anishinabe, and literally means "original people." https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=Anishinabeg accessed July 4, 2020.

[29] Casemore 2008, 23; quoted in Ng-A-Fook 2020, 44.

[30] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 44.

[31] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 44.

[32] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 45.

[33] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 50.

[34] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 46.

[35] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 46.

[36] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 46.

[37] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 49.

[38] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 51.

[39] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 51.

[40] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 51.

[41] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 51.

[42] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 52.

[43] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 54.

[44] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 59-60.

[45] Ng-A-Fook 2010, 60.