

# Canadian Identity and Curriculum Theory: An Ecological, Postmodern Perspective

*Dennis Sumara, Brent Davis and Linda Laidlaw*

In this article, we develop the thesis that curriculum studies work in Canada might be characterized in terms of some persistent and consistent theoretical commitments, ones that we suggest might have been prompted in part by the nation's history and by popular commentaries on national identity. We draw on ecological and postmodern discourses in efforts to conceptualize and to describe a relationship between Canadian culture(s) and the development of theories of curriculum within the Canadian context.

Cet article avance l'hypothèse que les études du curriculum au Canada peuvent être vues comme des engagements continus et cohérents qui ont été en partie suscités par l'histoire du pays et des idées courantes sur l'identité nationale. Les auteurs s'inspirent de discours écologiques et postmodernes en vue d'établir un lien entre les cultures canadiennes et le développement de théories du curriculum dans le contexte canadien.

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## PART 1: AS CANADIAN AS . . .

In a 1960s radio contest, Peter Gzowski of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation challenged the nation: "Complete the adage, As Canadian as . . ."

Apparently most listeners heard the contest as a quest for something quintessentially Canadian — a symbol to fit our nation the way the adage "mom and apple pie" describes the American character. Most submissions were predictable: a fresh snowfall; eh?; the Mounties. The contest judges, however, were not convinced that "Canadianism" could be captured by a single image: The winner was "As Canadian as possible under the circumstances."

The winning adage hints that an essential quality of Canada is a lack of essential qualities. At least, Canadians would prefer not to identify those qualities that we imagine might pin us to a particular way of identifying ourselves. To appreciate the sort of curriculum theorizing that has occurred in Canada, one must first have a sense of the deliberate diversity that is represented among the nation's peoples, its territories, its climates, and so on.

We frame this effort at redescription with the idea of “ecological postmodernism.” Both *ecology* and *postmodernism* have risen to considerable prominence in academic circles over the past few decades. Although deriving from somewhat different sources, ecology principally from the sciences and postmodernism principally from the arts and humanities, some interesting compatibilities among these frames exist.

Over the past two decades, postmodern and ecological perspectives have figured prominently in curriculum-theory literature. As Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) develop, these and a host of other contemporary discourses have been taken up recently, for the most part, in the service of a broad critique of the unified, logical, and totalized conceptions of reality that modernist and analytic philosophies project. As might be expected, there are critics of this shift in sensibility (e.g., Muller, 2000; Wraga, 1999). Announced concerns revolve around the tentativeness and self-imposed constraints of emergent discourses. Detractors worry that such delimited perspectives risk a descent into an ‘anything goes’ relativism.

Such criticisms and concerns appear to have some justification, especially as postmodern, ecological, and other discourses have been used in conjunction with, for example, trivialized constructivist accounts of learning (see von Glasersfeld’s [1995] critique) or populist versions of critical and emancipatory pedagogies (see Ellsworth’s [1988] critique). As educational researchers, we share this concern that an overzealous embrace of radically different ways of thinking has contributed to the rise of new, but not necessarily more informed, classroom orthodoxies.

However, at the same time, we find ourselves taken aback at the sometimes virulent responses of some educational researchers to emergent theoretical discourses. This puzzlement is re-emphasized each year as we contrast the topics and manners of presentation at academic conferences inside and outside Canada. Although meetings of Canadian educational researchers are not without their heated moments, we are under the strong impression that the sorts of ongoing territorial disputes and border skirmishes that we witness at American meetings simply do not occur with the same frequency in Canada—despite the fact that the conceptual diversity among Canadian theorists is at least as broad as that of Americans. (This point is underscored by the disproportionate representation of Canadians in such synoptic texts as Pinar et al., 1995.<sup>1</sup>)

We have developed a working hypothesis to help account for the different ways that such ideas seem to be taken up on opposite sides of the Canada-U.S. border. This difference might have something to do with popular habits of Canadian self-identification. In this article, we develop

this hypothesis by foregrounding and tracing some of what might be described as Canadian cultural mythology. More specifically, we draw on popular mythologies to understand how they might be knitted through the sorts of curriculum theorizing that Canadian educators have taken up and developed.

In identifying this project, we do not mean to essentialize or reify a Canadian identity. Our intention is quite the opposite, in fact. While we do draw on stereotypes, established histories, and popular media depictions, the aim is not to interrogate, validate, or uncritically embrace such representations, but to investigate the work that they do with regard to the issue of Canadian self-identification. The premise is not that popularized conceptions of Canadian identity can capture the complexity of Canadian history and culture, but that they are part of a common sense that is influential.

In other words, we do not imagine there to be a quintessential Canadian identity. Nor is it our intention to map out a conclusive argument or a linear narrative that specifies relationships among historic, geographic, or political circumstances and curriculum theory. However, while we explicitly reject the suggestions that theory is *determined by* situation, we believe theory to be *dependent on* situation. Therefore, we are interested in useful (re)description, not totalized explanation.

On that count, we do not invoke ecology and postmodernism to account for a Canadian identity (or lack thereof). Such discourses do not offer explanatory principles. Instead, we are trying to show how the discourses of postmodernism and ecology offer interesting vocabularies for redescribing and reconceptualizing a relationship between Canadian history and culture, and curriculum theory in Canada. Although we offer a number of examples of persons working in the field of curriculum theory in Canada, we have not aimed to provide synoptic review. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview of curriculum theory in Canada, we use citations to support our central thesis.

### *Postmodernism and the Example of Canada*

Neither ecology nor postmodernism can be construed as a consistent or fully coherent discourse. This is particularly the case with postmodernism, which tends to be defined more in terms of what it isn't than what it is. That is, postmodernism isn't modernism (Borgmann, 1992; Madison, 1988; Taylor, 1991). It is thus a rejection of the belief that the universe is unified, finished, and available to a totalized explanation through analytic method. Instead, postmodernism posits that we live in a world of partial knowledge,

local narratives, situated truths, and evolving identities (Lyotard, 1984).

The world of the postmodern is relentlessly temporary and endlessly contemporary. It is a constantly emerging reality; one in which metaphor, rather than the logical proposition, is the main means of dealing with collisions between history and memory, language, and geography. As such, postmodern theories are primarily interested in how humans continuously adapt to new conditions of experiences and, at the same time, reinterpret the past. A postmodern sensibility demands endless reinterpretation of conditions and antecedents. There are, it seems, no universal truths and no grand unifying themes in this postmodern world. Except for one: The diversity of postmodern discourses and practices join in a rejection of modernist claims to reductive and totalizing truths.

On one level, this point of agreement announces a generously diverse range of conceptual possibilities. In repudiating the quest to locate a single narrative to represent conditions of humanity, postmodernists have either rediscovered or invented important interpretive tools (see, e.g. Lather, 1991). On another level, however, an uncritical embrace of interpretive multiplicity can quickly take on the character of naïve relativism. In a world still dominated by modernist sensibilities and structures, this latter interpretation is most often assigned to anything postmodern: unanchored, uninformed, incoherent.

Within this frame, an interesting parallel emerges between postmodern discourse and attempts to characterize Canada and Canadian identity. As might be interpreted from the CBC contest, the issue of “who we are” receives a good deal of air play in Canada. Despite the endless discussion, there seems to be only one point of real consensus. While Canadians can’t seem to agree on what they are, they have no trouble at all agreeing on what they’re not. That is, Canadians seem to define themselves in very much the same terms as postmodernism is defined. This practice of differentiation is not limited to national identities: regional and other forms of variation among Canadian groups and individuals are noticed and represented. Indeed, as will be developed, such variations are inscribed into our legal and educational systems.

To state it concisely, discussions around Canadian identity tend to cluster around claims that Canadians are not overbearing, not totalizing, not monolithic, not unified, not static: or, put more bluntly, Canadians are not Americans. Just as postmodern thought represents an explicit rejection of modernism’s two-way mirror of inward-looking rationalism and outward-looking empiricism, so popular Canadian self-definition might be read as an explicit rejection of what is seen as Americanism’s two-way mirror of inward-looking nationalism and outward-looking imperialism.

This point was underscored in a highly successful beer advertisement appearing several years previously, which, as such televised commercials often go, had nothing to do (explicitly) with beer. Referred to as "The Rant," the ad featured a young man demonstrating the very Canadian habit of defining national identity in terms of what it is not. Midway through he declares, "I believe in peace-keeping, not policing. Diversity, not assimilation." Although never overtly stated, Canadians did not miss the implication that the nation more given to policing and assimilation was the United States of America.

### *Ecology and the Example of Canada*

"The Rant" begins with, "I'm not a lumberjack or a fur trader. And I don't live in an igloo, or eat blubber, or own a dogsled."

This is, of course, a statement about popular Canadian perceptions of the typical American's knowledge of Canada. Anyone who has visited the Canadian Pavilion at the Epcot Center in Florida's Disneyworld would appreciate this objection. There, Canada is represented by a trading post staffed by people clad in the familiar red and black plaid of lumberjacks. The trinkets for sale are mainly coon-skin hats, plush beavers and moose, plastic Mounties, toy rifles with eagle feathers, snowshoes, mittens, maple syrup, and the like. This image of Canada is complemented by a 20-minute 360° movie, given to sweeps over mountains, forests, tundra, and prairie.

Stereotypical representations aside, it is no surprise that climate, geography, and natural resources figure so prominently in these instances of cultural marking. Canada is a resource-rich, geographically diverse, northern country. The topic of the weather, in particular, never seems far from mind.

Such references are not simply matters of environmental awareness. They are, rather, indicative of a certain ecological sensibility. To draw an important distinction, *environmental* and *ecological* announce two very different ways of thinking. "Environmental" implies a separation of observer and observed, as it points to concerns with surroundings. In contrast, "ecological" is about relationships, with particular attention to the complex co-evolutions of humans and the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). The ecologist is interested in the continually evolving relationships of biological and phenomenological worlds, an attention that Merleau-Ponty (1962) described as double-embodiment.

The intertwinings of human and more-than-human have particular relevance to Canadians, for whom physical contexts occupy a large part of our attention. Historically, the European settlers who first tried to hunt

and farm these lands were dismayed to learn that Canadian winters were longer and much more severe than those they had known, and that things only seemed to become worse as they pressed westward. Much of the early journal writing by explorers, fur traders, lumberjacks, and homesteaders focused on the challenges of accommodating to the Canadian climate. Despite the fact that we can now control our exposures to such conditions, our habit of talking about the weather continues. As Chambers (1999) notes, an enduring theme in Canadian literature is how physical setting is woven into the psyche. The unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unrelenting characters of landscape, climate, and weather are particularly present in novels and memoirs written in Canada.

In Canadian literature, many works reflect strong interests in the physical, particularly with how human bodies are tied to environmental circumstances. Many of our most prominent works, for example, Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), Michaels *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), and Urquhart's *The Underpainter* (1997), are developed around the struggles of characters to maintain a coherent personal and collective sense of identity as they age and ail within unforgiving environmental conditions. While this theme is not restricted to Canadian writers, Canadian literary workers tend to share interests in the complex ways that the biological, the geographical, and the phenomenological co-develop.

### *Ecological Postmodernism and the Example of Canada*

With an emphasis on examining the evolving web of interactions that constitute human relations within the more-than-human world, postmodern discourses provide support for ecological discourses. Some postmodern theorists and philosophers regard the field of ecology as a subdiscourse of postmodernism (see, e.g., White, 1998). This move, however, is not always embraced by ecologists themselves, as reflected in contemporary work in ecology that has provided a potent criticism of some postmodern thought. Such discourses, it is argued, tend to be too narrowly focused on the social and the cultural, that is, on the bounded realm of immediate human concern and activity, on the already noticed objects of consciousness (see, e.g., Merchant, 1994). This criticism is especially relevant when it comes to questions of personal knowing and collective knowledge. In particular, ecological thought rejects the mantra of what might be considered *postmodern social constructivism*: All knowledge is socially constructed.

The postmodern social constructivist formulation has figured prominently in the academy since the late 1960s, so much so that it is now

regarded in many circles to be commonsense. Many ecologists have noted, however, that such an assertion implies a narrow conception of knowledge, one in which all knowing is seen to occur within realms of human sociality. That is, if all knowledge is understood to be socially constructed, then it makes no sense to suggest that hearts know how to beat, beavers know how to build dams, ecosystems know how to recover from unexpected perturbations, and so on. These examples of knowing and knowledge compel an elaboration of contemporary postmodern discourses, an awareness which in turn should broaden the ways that learning and schooling are discussed.

We offer these linguistic moves, that is, the distinction between *environmental* and *ecological* and the elaboration of *postmodern* concerns through *ecological* discourses, to characterize what we perceive as trends in curriculum theorizing in Canada. For many persons working in the field of curriculum theory in Canada, there is an attention to the complex, co-specifying, mutually affective relationships between actor and circumstance. (See, for example, the work of theorists such as Chambers, 1999; Smith, 1999; van Manen, 1990; Jardine, 1992). Curriculum theorists in Canada, then, are not so much interested in representing the objects, personalities, or content of their inquiries. Rather, they seem to be fascinated by projects of showing the usually invisible relations among these.

It is our impression that much curriculum theorizing in Canada might be described as representing a sort of ecological postmodernism. In addition to curriculum theory, cultural studies, various critical discourses, and continental and pragmatist philosophies, which are domains that have drawn from and influenced postmodernist discourse, ecological postmodernism includes developments in biology, meteorology, geography, geology, neurology, immunology, cognitive studies, and mathematics. The term ecological postmodernism in itself represents an attempt to refuse a dissociation of the biological and the phenomenological, an effort reflected in such recently invented terms as geoepistemology, ecosophy, biomythography, bioethics, neurotheology, ecopsychology, and ecopolitics.

This embrace of theories to account for the complexity of human interaction with the more-than-human world has been represented in curriculum theory in Canada in many ways. In Canada, the moment one raises issues of identity, knowledge, and history — the subject matters of curriculum—one enters the realm of the contextually dependent, the negotiated, and the compromised. Following a long history of learning to create a nation by stitching together geographies, climates, cultures, ethnicities, and languages, curriculum theorists in Canada seem to have

learned that meanings and identities are not discovered, nor can they be fully represented. As Canadian historian and political analyst John Ralston Saul (2001) notes, Canada embraced organizing ideas that have only recently been supported by both postmodernism and complexity theories:

Canadians still see themselves as a society of minorities. They are constantly balancing the centre, the regions, the language groups, and even the importance of the population versus the land. It seems that they believe that taking responsibility for minorities is one of government's principal jobs. (p. A13)

For Canadians, this has meant being prepared to live with a certain sense of ambiguity, a belief that the nation and the identities of Canadians are continually being created. As Saul (2001) suggests, the country's continued success in maintaining a nation state has been Canadian's embracing of the idea that nations are made of collections of minority groups and interests, whose identities are continually shaped by the overlappings of history, geography, memory, and language. This point might be better framed by a brief tour through some popular interpretations of moments in Canada's knotted past.

#### PART 2: . . . POSSIBLE, UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

Because we, the authors, have lived significant parts of our lives in different regions of Canada, it has become clear to us that the experience of Canadian identity shifts with changes in geography and language. In Canada, we might not be able to say much about what it means to be a Canadian, but we can, and often do, make clear distinctions among ourselves in terms of region, language, history, and culture. To name only a few examples: Atlantic Maritimers, Francophones in Quebec, Manitoba, New Brunswick, or Ontario, central Canadian urbanites, Aboriginal Canadians (distinguished by region, history, language, and culture). The particularly Canadian patchwork of identities is also alluded to in the descriptive terms cultural pastiche or vertical mosaic (Porter, 1965), often used to set us apart from the more American melting pot.

The suggestion here is that the noted lack of essential qualities to Canada and Canadian identity may be linked to a certain extent to circumstances of both history and geography. Canada is a postcolonial country, where significant institutional structures may be traced to their associations with Britain. For example, Canadian federal government is a parliamentary structure inherited from this history, in addition to a continued recognition of the British monarchy. At the same time, the effects of proximity to the



United States have also provided a pervasive influence. Canada maintains strong economic, political, and cultural relationships with the United States. In contrast to the typical American's general knowledge about Canada (or lack thereof), it is not unusual for Canadians to be up to date on the Dow Jones and the NASDAQ, the latest American presidential election and political scandal, or current Hollywood movies and Billboard charts. Of course, affiliations with the United States extend beyond economic ties, political leanings, and/or pop culture. Those of us involved in the Canadian academy conduct much of our intellectual work within structures that are American or, at least, shared with Americans.

But it would be a mistake to think that our primary identifications and affiliations are with the United States. We are also aligned with other nations. The vitae of a curriculum theorist in Canada will likely include presentations at American conferences and publications in American journals alongside publications and presentations in such countries as England, Australia, South Africa, France, or the Netherlands. Such tendencies toward European (and, to a lesser extent, Asian and African) academic identifications are as much rooted in family lineage, through our history of immigration, as in our history of relationships with the United States.

### *On the Emergence of Canada*

The history of Canada's development as a nation, at least in terms of post-European contact, is one that differs considerably from that of the United States. When the American Civil War ended in 1865, the residents of the lands north of the 49th parallel felt that the Union armies might soon turn their expansionist attentions to resource-rich territories of what is now Canada. Confederation in 1867, then, was prompted in part by worries that the smaller colonies in Central Canada and in the Eastern Maritimes were vulnerable to American intrusion. This was not an unwarranted paranoia: a series of border disputes and American attempts at military invasion punctuated Canada's pre-confederation history.

Much of this wariness was linked to Canadian perceptions of the American attitude toward cultural difference. A century before Canada achieved nationhood, for instance, American commentators such as Benjamin Franklin took no pause in their criticisms of the liberal British attitudes that allowed French to be spoken and Roman Catholicism to be practised in an English colony. Franklin, along with others, advocated an invasion of the territories known as Canada, confident that the population would quickly be incorporated into the norms of American culture. Indeed,

the “Quebec Act” of the British parliament, which legislated rights of language and religion for Canada’s French population, was one of the final straws, prior to revolution, for Americans set on independence from England.

Canada’s cultural and legal commitments to two languages and to distinct cultures predate its official nationhood. Such commitments have given rise to some of the most progressive multicultural policies in the world. With its brief history and its explicit acknowledgment of multi-linguistic and ethnic minorities, Canada has never fallen into the error that it is an ethnic nationalist state, nor has it attempted to project an image of a singular or unified nation. As Ignatieff (2000) and Gwynn (1996) have explained, Canada’s national identity has not emerged from a long history of shared ethnic or linguistic experiences, but instead has arisen from complex and innovative rights frameworks, social infrastructures, and government services. While an ethnic nationalist state defines its citizens on the basis of common ancestry, language, religion, customs, and rituals — and, in consequence, places a heavy emphasis on the assimilation of other groups into dominant cultural trends — a nation state like Canada derives its unity from common principles rather than common origins.

We do not suggest that common origins cannot be historically traced, nor that these are not officially recognized. The difficulty for Canada has been that it is a country that has emerged from French and English colonial experiments. Although the British North America Act of 1867 is commonly portrayed as the defining moment for Canada as a country, confederation was more a culmination of long processes of negotiation with French, English, and various independent First Nations, including, for example, the Cree, the Ojibway, the Salish, the Blackfoot, and the Shuswap. Canadian Confederation, then, was not so much prompted by shared ethnic experiences or desires for cultural uniformity or independence. Rather, it emerged from ongoing processes of conflict, co-operation, and conciliation. Embedded in the confederation-defining British North America Act of 1867 are historical traces of the ways in which the Dominion of Canada was pieced together through negotiation. Because the colonial powers and the numerous First Nations could not draw on shared language or ancestry as bases for common understanding, they were compelled to develop policies and principles that would be useful in the ongoing challenges of maintaining a national unity, and which might, at the same time, embrace linguistic and ethnic diversity.

Although Canada is a relatively young nation, members of the colonizing nations have lived in parts of what is now Canada since the 1600s. The French settling of Canada, which originally consisted of the territory along

the St. Lawrence River and, later, around the Great Lakes, occurred alongside the British colonization of the east coast of North America. These two colonial projects met in what the French called Acadia and what the English called Nova Scotia, a region that passed back and forth between the colonizing nations.

During these imperialist expansions, many First Nations groups who had occupied such areas participated actively in alliances with either British or French colonists and sometimes with both, especially under threat of American expansion. While this article is not the place to provide details, it must be noted that the borders separating Canada from the United States were settled through combinations of disputes between the French and the British, other wars to defend Canada from the Americans, and numerous overlapping skirmishes between and among First Nations groups, rebel groups, and soldiers representing France and England. The very existence of the British and French communities depended in large part on alliances and relationships with First Nations groups. The dependencies were more than that of economic relations through the fur trade; early settlers were also heavily reliant on indigenous peoples' knowledge of how to survive the Canadian climatic extremes. Settlers also enlisted warriors who made pivotal contributions in many military campaigns. Despite this, Aboriginal nations were largely forgotten by both the French and the British at the time of confederation, when the founding nations of the country were officially named as England, Scotland, Ireland, and France.

Canada's early history of nation-making began with compulsions to pay attention to the relationships between national identity and attachments to language, to history, to ethnic ritual and memory, and to the material world (including geography) that comprise or contribute to personal identity. Although not made explicit at the time, a principle in the founding of Canada as a nation was that experiences of individuality were inescapably social experiences. To succeed as a nation, Canada needed to develop a system of governance that embraced the notion that identities, individual and collective, were not pre-given or discovered but were continually invented, including the invention of a national character. It is not surprising, then, that Canadians have some difficulty answering the question of what might be considered as quintessentially Canadian. This is not so much because Canadians lack a sense of who they are, but instead, a logical hesitation that emerges from a long history of having to first look around and interpret current circumstances, and compare these to the remembered and the imagined, before attempting to represent current experiences of identity. Canadian identity is not unified or seamless, but

shifts according to the particularity of language, geographical affiliations, and historical circumstances.

### *On the Emergence of Canadian Curriculum*

The history of efforts and events in Canadian curriculum is also inextricably tied to Canada's particular history of nationhood. As Canadian curriculum historian Tomkins (1981) concluded, cultural conflict has been a noticeable theme from the historical beginnings of Canadian schooling, with "bitter social, political and religious controversies which ultimately have hung on the objectives and content, including the materials, of the curriculum" (p. 135). Many examples of struggles have emerged within the history of Canadian schooling: controversies over religion and language, such as demands for separate schools in Upper Canada (the issue of funding for separate schools continues to be controversial in the province of Ontario today); the establishment, and subsequent dismantling, of denominational schools in Newfoundland; the Manitoba Schools Act of 1890.

As with other national institutions mentioned earlier, history and geography have also influenced Canadian educational institutions. Historical trends in curriculum have often mirrored those of the United States or reflected British or French colonial ties. Until after the 1930s, the cultural content of curriculum in English-speaking areas of Canada generally provided a British imperialist or colonial perspective at the expense of addressing Canadian contexts or content (Chambers, 1999). However, the pervasive influence of American curriculum theories began to emerge as Canadian curriculum took up the call of the scientific movement in education in the 1920s, embracing the models of efficiency offered by Ralph Tyler and Franklin Bobbitt (Tomkins, 1979). Here, however, it is also interesting to note a Canadian reluctance to acknowledge this reliance on American ideas, for example:

. . . both in Ontario and British Columbia, the famous British Hadow report of 1926, which ironically acknowledged its own debt to American progressive ideas, was cited in the 1930s as the source of those same ideas. (Tomkins, 1979, p. 9)

In large part the desire to accommodate nations within nations has prompted the formation of formal education in Canada as a shared responsibility of federal and provincial governments, with specific accommodations for local ethnicities, religions, and languages. Public school and post-secondary education in Canada are funded federally, through negotiated transfer payments from the federal government to the

individual provincial governments, and provincially, largely through property taxes and, in the case of post-secondary education, through tuition fees. Each province has a minister of education who is responsible for overseeing educational structures and processes, including the development of curriculum content. While implementation of these structures varies from province to province, in most there are processes of collaboration, regarding matters of education, among representatives from the ministry of education, provincial teachers' organizations, local and provincial teachers' unions, and local school boards and districts. For the most part, and to varying extents, university-based faculties of education also provide input, and, in most provinces, these faculties are also responsible for pre-service, in-service, and post-graduate programs in education.

In our (the authors') home province of Alberta, for example, there is a long history of co-operation and collaboration among a variety of agencies and institutions. The development of school curricula, for example, has been carried out by teams, with representatives from Alberta Learning (the provincial ministry of education), teachers and consultants from school districts across the province, members of the Alberta Teachers' Association, subject area specialists representing organized councils, and professors from university teacher-education institutions. The resulting curriculum documents usually represent the interests and expertise of these groups, with attention given to the most recent research studies in particular learning and teaching areas. Notable, as well, is Canadian researchers' proclivity for interdisciplinarity and for cross-cultural and international interests.<sup>2</sup> The current English language arts curriculum in Alberta, for example, includes innovations drawn from research in North America, Great Britain, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. As well, reading lists include reviewed and approved fiction (in both the English and French languages) from many countries worldwide.

Historically, Alberta's curriculum path has involved multiple influences, echoing a number of the themes we have discussed earlier, in terms of their significance to a Canadian sense of nationhood, or, more accurately, the lack of a definitive sense thereof. Events outside the province as well as those of a more regional nature have, over the years, shaped the development of curriculum.

After joining Confederation in 1905, Alberta acquired a school organization, a program of studies, and financial organization from the North-West Territories. The British-oriented curriculum was one that had originated in Ontario, developed by David C. Goggin, who became superintendent of Alberta in 1893 (Sheehan, 1986). Palmer (1982) notes, as

well, that this imperialistic curriculum was, in part, directed by a fear of the immigrant, in a time when record wheat production and an economic boom invited an increase in population through migration.

By the 1920s, curriculum in Alberta, as in schools elsewhere in Canada, attempted to move away from its focus on the Empire. However, as Stamp (1971) suggests, the variety and availability of American resource materials and textbooks was influential. Although American influences in curriculum might not be actively acknowledged, they were ever-present in the classroom and on school library shelves.

Although education is provincially controlled in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada, curriculum has also been influenced by federal interests and decisions. For example, the 1971 national policy on multiculturalism and the focus on national bilingualism led to an increased emphasis on multiculturalism for instruction in Alberta, and affected curriculum in terms of support for French language instruction across the nation (Sheehan, 1986). These efforts have continued to underline the importance of recognizing and supporting diversity within curriculum

### *On the Emergence of Canadian Curriculum Theory*

One of the earliest and most influential explications of postmodern thought, *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard (1989), was commissioned in 1979 by Conseil des Universités of the government of Quebec. That Quebecers should have enlisted the assistance of a French philosopher for a report on knowledge is indicative not only of strong Canadian ties to Europe, but of Canadians' history of incorporating new threads of thought into the socio-cultural and economic fabric.

On this point, it often seems that writings of Canadian curriculum theorists echo the historical contingencies of Canada's emergence (see, e.g., Aoki, 1991; Barrow, 1978; Egan, 1978; Milburn & Herbert, 1973; Tomkins, 1986). As well, the language used by these theorists tends toward themes of diversity (rather than the bifurcating Otherness) and considered compromise (rather than the domination-seeking standard of the rational argument)—linguistic moves through which writers have attempted to avoid (or at least to trouble) some of the commonsense dichotomies that frame popular discourse. There is also a tendency to embrace what Lyotard (1989) names "*les petits-récits*" (p. xxiv)(roughly translated, small or personal accounts, narratives, or stories, including interpretive cultural histories) rather than grand narratives (e.g., Clifford & Friesen, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Leggo, 1997).

While curriculum theory in Canada continues to be developed by

persons from a wide array of theoretical positions, a diversity that resists simplistic attempts at summary,<sup>3</sup> this theoretical diversity is accommodated, in part, because Canadians have emerged from their history with a sensibility that resonates with postmodern thought. There are deep commitments to the notions that history is layered in the present, that language cannot represent experience, and that translation is difficult.

Put differently, we could say that that ecological postmodern thought has presented a vocabulary that helps Canadians express an already well developed sensibility, one that is woven through our national character. In refusing to say with finality who or what we are, Canadians are able to operate in and through what Rorty (1999) calls final vocabularies — the words we can find at this moment to define ourselves and our situation, but that are constantly at risk of being replaced by new final vocabularies. In academia, this license to use whatever final vocabulary presents itself might appear as a certain opportunism, as Canadian theorists seem to draw readily from emergent and divergent discourses. However, not only have Canadian curriculum theorists been willing to incorporate new vocabularies into the study of educational experience, they have also demonstrated an innovative and rigorous interdisciplinarity.

Canada, it seems, has been uniquely positioned to take advantage of theoretical tools from the United States and from western Europe. In most of our university faculties of education, one finds interdisciplinary theoretical work in which North American and European thought is mixed in provocative ways. Of course, these academic tendencies are not restricted to Canadians. However, our informal comparisons of writing that emerges from Canadian-based curriculum scholars to those from other nations indicate a decidedly more pronounced attention to cross-cultural interdisciplinarity. Indeed, one of the difficulties we have encountered in this writing is one of categorization. The work of some of the theorists mentioned in this article has shifted in terms of how it might be categorized and often changed along with geographical moves. As well, we note that a number of individuals we classify as Canadian curriculum theorists originate from roots outside of Canada, though currently doing their work here, or have left for other geographical contexts, often American. The irony of the difficulty in pigeon-holing Canadian curriculum theorists in light of our discussions of Canadian identity does not escape us. However, we also expect that these difficulties further underscore the complexity of notions of Canadian identities and thought.<sup>4</sup>

As commentators such as Rorty (1999) and Said (1994) have noted, ideas emerge from people who are situated in particular contexts, and who are influenced by particular histories. Images and ideas emerging from fields

of postmodernism and ecology emphasize this theme. In this article we have used the example of Canada to emphasize the usefulness of vocabularies emerging from an ecological postmodern sensibility. In so doing, we have been able to create an interpretive shape — a useful fiction — for representing relationships among history, memory, language, and geography, and the ways these interact to form a nation, personal identities, and intellectual work.

For us, this manner of representing curriculum experiences with small, contextually and historically specific narratives is more than an interesting academic exercise. It also operates as a cautionary tale. In times when international projects are popular, as is the case in our home university, and when calls to internationalize curriculum intensify, we are reminded that ways of organizing and interpreting curriculum are always rooted in local needs, worries, desires, and imaginings.

#### NOTES

- 1 To provide one typical example, in the chapter, "Understanding Curriculum as Institutionalized Text," Pinar et al. refer heavily to the work of Canadian curriculum theorists including Robin Barrow, Ted Aoki, Terry Carson, Peter McLaren (who later established himself in the U.S.), Richard Butt, Kieran Egan, John Willinsky, Max van Manen, David Jardine, John Goodlad (another relocated Canadian), Michael Fullan, Jean Clandinin, Michael Connelly, Clermont Gauthier, Andy Hargreaves, Warren Crichlow (originally from the U.S., but now living in Toronto) Hugh Munby, Antoinette Oberg, and Ivor Goodson, among others.
- 2 Smits (1997), Hunsberger (1992), and Jardine (1992, 1993) are curriculum theorists who provide such examples.
- 3 To provide only small evidence of this range, we note the work of Canadian curriculum theorists working in the areas of psychoanalysis (e.g., Britzman, 1998; jagodzinski, 1997; Simon, 1992), Aboriginal education (e.g., Battiste & Barman, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1995), poststructuralism (e.g., Aoki, 1991; Daignault & Gauthier, 1982; Graham, 1991), gender (e.g., de Castell & Bryson, 1997; Khayatt, 1997) hermeneutics and phenomenology (e.g., Martel & Peterat, 1994; Smith, 1999; van Manen, 1990), peace education (e.g., Smith & Carson, 1998), postcolonialism (e.g., Willinsky, 1998) among many other areas of possible categorization.
- 4 We recognize the impossibility of including *all* Canadian curriculum theorists within the space of an essay and apologize to those theorists and colleagues who may not find themselves mentioned here. We believe that the purpose of this article, however, is not to provide a compendium of "who's who" in Canadian curriculum theory.



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