

TESTIMONY, WITNESSING, REPRESENTATION

Susan D. Dion anticipated the 2009 publication of *Braiding Histories*¹ by naming the three themes around which she was organizing her study: “understanding Aboriginal conceptions of history and story, understanding the relationship between testimony and witnessing, and questions of representation.”² Noting that non-Aboriginal Canadians fail to listen to Aboriginal peoples, Dion speculates why. Among the factors in play, she suggests, are three: such listening involves (1) “challenging the relevance of the narrative for one’s life in the present,” (2) “locking the events in a history that has no present,” (3) “dehumanizing Aboriginal people,” while (4) “claiming ‘there is nothing I can do, therefore I don’t have to listen,’” and that (5) the stories are too hard to listen to.”³ Dion concludes that “that past lives inside its present deep in the national psyche,”⁴ resulting in non-Aboriginal Canadians positioning themselves as the “respectful admirer or patronizing helper.”⁵

Dion’s study is “premised on an understanding that the study of history is concerned with understanding who we are, documenting our relationships with others, as well as anticipating the kind of world we want to create,” thereby asking non-Aboriginal readers to “rethink their understanding of themselves, of Aboriginal people, and themselves in relationship with Aboriginal people.”⁶ For Aboriginal peoples, she continues, history has been conveyed through narrative,⁷ explaining:

Stories have always been valued as a means of teaching and learning within First Nations communities. Stories are not just entertainment but power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perception, relationship, and attitudes of a people and can be used to bring harmony and balance to all beings that inhabit the nations’ universe.⁸

Such stories are, within “Aboriginal conceptions of story ... a social event,” positioning the “listener” as responsible for finding “meaning in the stories,” and the “teller” as responsible for telling “an appropriate story,”⁹ requiring reflection of “who we are and why we are telling this particular story.”¹⁰ Who we are is both “witness and testifier, bearing witness to the stories of our ancestors and giving testimony as survivors of the policy of forced assimilation,”¹¹ asking “readers to bear the position of witness?”¹² It is by cultivating relationship between ourselves, our readers and the story subject [that] we draw the readers into the story where they are confronted with the human repercussions of colonization on all of us.”¹³ This, Dion emphasizes, is a “shared history that requires responsible attention.”¹⁴ Evidently “responsible attention” does not include “respectful silence,” as she asserts that this is a silence that pre-empts the possibility of listeners ‘working through’ the difficult learning they are called upon to participate in.”¹⁵

Focused on “teachers’ understanding of their relationship with Aboriginal people,” Dion sketches the outlines of what she terms a “critical pedagogy of remembrance that allows teachers to attend to and learn from the biography of their relationship with Aboriginal people,” calling attention to teachers’ self-positioning as “perfect stranger” to Aboriginal peoples, as she explores forms of “ethical learning” that rely on “remembrance to raise awareness of the ways in which the identities of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada have been shaped by the colonial encounter,” all in service to “transform[ing] relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada.”¹⁶ The “school curriculum” is paramount, informed as it is “by dominant discourses,” skewing teachers’ understanding of Aboriginal people and the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada,” resulting in the phantasy of the “imaginary Indian.”¹⁷

Despite their apparent encapsulation in phantasy, Dion reports that “teachers are able to recognise their implication in reproducing dominant discourses,” enabling them to “imagine new relationships, and to think about how they might want to work toward transforming their practice.”¹⁸ This conclusion derives in part from her experience teaching a graduate course entitled “Teaching and Learning from indigenous Ways of Knowing,” during which she required students to “collect” and reflect on “cultural artifacts” that register their relationship with Aboriginal peoples and their learning of and from “Indigenous knowledge.”¹⁹

Dion distinguishes “critical pedagogy of remembrance” from both multicultural education - “with its focus on the celebration of cultural difference” - and antiracism education - focused on “respect for difference” - as her pedagogy cultivates both a “recognition of difference and a consideration of the implications of difference,”²⁰ enabling students to realize “their own investments in dominant discourses and support the possibility of affecting a change in their ways of knowing and their ways of teaching.”²¹ Remembrance is crucial, as raises “[ethical] awareness of the ways in which the identities of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada have been shaped by the colonial encounter and its aftermath,” a “promising way to progressively transform relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Canadian education system.”²² Remembrance cannot occur without knowledge, requiring “increased attention to Aboriginal subject material at all levels of schooling.”²³

COMMENTARY

The past inhabits the national psyche, Dion testifies, and bringing it to the surface depends on stories, narratives that document Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

peoples in relationship, a crucial concept for understanding the bind history places us in.²⁴ Relationship is also the site for reconstructing that history, and, in her concept of braiding, Dion shows how.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Dion 2009; see research brief #2

² Dion 2004, 57.

³ Dion 2004, 57-58.

⁴ Dion 2004, 58.

⁵ Dion 2004, 59.

⁶ Dion 2004, 60.

⁷ See also Archibald 2008; Donald 2009 (research brief #11).

⁸ Dion 2004, 61.

⁹ Dion 2004, 61.

¹⁰ Dion 2004, 62. “The stories of our ancestors make a claim on us,” Dion (2004, 65) testifies, and “we are called upon to share the stories with others. We have a responsibility both to ourselves and our ancestors to take up the project of (re)telling.”

¹¹ Dion 2004, 63.

¹² Dion 2004, 64.

¹³ Dion 2004, 70.

¹⁴ Dion 2004, 74.

¹⁵ Dion 2004, 74-75. “Respectful silence” could also be a first step in “working through,” surely a central feature of reconciliation, but one left unaddressed here.

¹⁶ Dion 2007, 329.

¹⁷ Dion 2007, 330.

¹⁸ Dion 2007, 330.

¹⁹ Dion 2007, 332.

²⁰ Dion 2007, 334.

²¹ Dion 2007, 339-340. My anti-racist curriculum theory (Pinar 2006; see also 2001) requires more than “respect for difference,” it requires self-shattering. Given the pervasiveness of anti-Aboriginal attitudes, one would think “respect” and “celebration of difference” would be welcomed, even if as initial steps.

²² Dion 2007, 340.

²³ Dion 2007, 340.

²⁴ For me, the relationship between history and subjectivity is, in our presentistic era, the central challenge of academic study (Pinar 2017).