

TOWARD CANADIAN CURRICULUM THEORY

Drawing upon Canadian literature that explores the themes of survival, alienation, and victimization, Cynthia Chambers presents four challenges to Canadian curriculum theorists: (1) to formulate curriculum languages and genres that portray the sociopolitical, geophysical, and imaginative landscape wherein Canadians have lived, live now, and will live; (2) to draw upon Canadian scholars, indigenous languages, and traditions for that language and those genres; (3) to devise interpretive tools for understanding what it means to be Canadian and what Canadians might become in the 21st century; and, (4) finally, to “create curriculum theory that is written at home but works on behalf of everyone.”¹

The two characteristics of Canadian literature Chambers deems pertinent to curriculum theorizing are first, the significance of “setting,” and second, the “theme of the Alienated Outsider.”² When the characters of Canadian novels struggle to survive in the harsh environment, they inevitably lose, reaffirming “the deeply held belief that Canadians are shaped by the climate and geographies of where they live, and that they are always ultimately subordinate to nature.”³

Referencing Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Chambers reiterates Atwood’s claims that “there”—America, England and France—has always been more important than “here.”⁴ Allowing that Atwood’s manifesto may seem “old fashioned now, written as if there was a single Canadian culture or identity,” she reminds that Atwood was “writing from Ontario, the deeply resented capital of the Canadian culture and knowledge industries, a site that rarely seems to question its own right to speak for others,” including those “who speak languages other than English, and who live on the prairies, in the mountains, or by the oceans, particularly the Arctic Ocean.”⁵ But, she allows, Atwood’s conclusion that Canadians must know this “place in order to survive sounds neither old fashioned nor quaint.”⁶

For the United States of America,⁷ the “central symbol,” Chambers asserts, has been “the frontier,” an image infusing American literature and consciousness, evident in that nation’s expectation of “continual expansion and redemption through the conquest of new lands, the ever-present possibility of Utopia and the fantasy of its realization.”⁸ In contrast, Canadians have tended to be “much more ambivalent about their relationship to the unknown, to the wilderness.”⁹ Frye joins Atwood, Chambers suggests, in claiming “survival” as the dominant motif in Canadian life, including sheer physical survival in an often harsh environment and sometimes hostile First Peoples, survival in times of disaster and crisis; cultural survival given the threat of the United States’ cultural imperialism, political survival for a country emerging from the “long shadow of British colonialism to find itself in the deeper shadows of a political, economic, and military machine to the south,” and, finally, “spiritual survival that might allow Canadians to imagine and forge a life beyond the minimal or perhaps to live well

where they are right now.”¹⁰ But “survival,” Chambers tells us, has “seemed too basic, too mundane a concept around which to organize a curriculum.”¹¹

Crediting Milburn and Herbert’s *National Consciousness and the Curriculum: The Canadian Case* and Tomkin’s *A Common Countenance: Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum* with addressing the question of “Where is here?” in Canadian curriculum, many curriculum studies scholars “still tend to speak from an imaginal space derived from and created by the cognitive habits of Europe.”¹² Chambers challenges Canadian scholars to cultivate a “curricular imagination that not only honours the multitude of ways the Canadian landscape shapes how Canadians ‘see’ things, but, more importantly, that explores how such shaping itself is an active process that cannot be simply described through the Eurocentric instrumentalities of previous generations.”¹³ Not only concepts that are consonant with Canadian experience, but stylistics as well, the two intertwined to convey the distinctiveness of this place as well as its educational implications: “Perhaps the Canadian experience of marginalization as a site of both critique and creativity,” she suggests, “opens the possibility for sensitivity to otherness, difference, life, and seeing the world simultaneously from multiple intersecting latitudes and longitudes.”¹⁴

The curriculum scholarship Chambers envisions is not only *about* “here,” it is also “a form of curriculum theorizing grounded *in* ‘here,’” not only mapping the physical, sociopolitical, historical, and institutional landscape of Canadian lives, but also a “curriculum theorizing that helps educators and students come to grips with how Canada, such as it is, has survived to date, can continue to survive, not only physically but culturally, “find[ing] our way together in this place.”¹⁵ To do so requires first “to name where we are, and what it looks and feels like to be in this place, even when we feel ‘out of place.’”¹⁶ “Canadian curriculum theorists,” she continues, “may need to experiment with tools from the indigenous Canadian intellectual tradition and incorporate them into our theorizing.”¹⁷ In addition to the First Peoples, Chambers is referring also to “the rich Canadian traditions of journalism and creative documentary” as they cultivate the “poetic voice.”¹⁸

Indigenous traditions, scholarly, and aesthetics forms fuse in finding “a language of our own,” what also includes philosophy (Chambers names Charles Taylor and Ursula Franklin), media theory (she cites Marshall McLuhan), and hybrid forms (Chambers cites Blackfoot lawyer and philosopher Leroy Little Bear).¹⁹ Chambers also invokes postmodernism (referencing Arthur Kroker and Linda Hutcheon), noting that the “here” is addressed not only in the academy, but also in poetry and novels and other forms of fiction as well as non-fiction, especially those composed by “Aboriginal writers.”²⁰ She cautions that the distinctive curriculum theory that could follow “may not be enough to ensure survival in any of its various forms.”²¹

Canadian curriculum theory could encourage “learning to hear each other,” requiring a kind of curricular “braiding”²² enacted by “mixing languages within a single text” or by “blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction,” and “crossing

genres.”²³ Chambers suggests “Aboriginal writers can provide an example the rest can follow,” citing Louise Halfe’s poetic juxtaposition of English and Cree, a move Chambers judges as “heighten[ing] the meaning of the words in each language, as well as the overall effect and significance of the poem.”²⁴ This is a language of “multiplicity,” Chambers continues, “offer[ing] Canadian curriculum scholars the possibility of both creating and locating a curricular landscape of our own,” one that “might bear a much closer relationship to the imaginary landscape of Canadian fiction and creative nonfiction, as well as to the physical landscape in which Canadian educators and their students live and work, than most contemporary curriculum discourses.”²⁵

Chambers also challenges curriculum studies scholars to devise “interpretive tools that allow” the interpretation of “who Canadians are, what we know, and where we want to go, all the while remaining cognizant of an important truism: there will be no single answer to these questions.”²⁶ “Most interpretive devices Canadian curriculum theorists have inherited,” she points out, “are from the European imaginary space, tools meant to dislodge, to show what is behind and beyond what is taken for granted, to make individuals uncomfortable with society and possibly with themselves.”²⁷ “The single most important task for Canadian curriculum theorists,” she emphasizes, “may be to search within the physical and imaginary landscape of Canada for the tools we need to see our home, to help us understand how we have come to be ‘out of place’ in this home, and how we can finally come home here.”²⁸ Recalling that Chambers’ earlier point about “here” (Canada) being “there” (Great Britain, France, or the United States) contextualizes her next point: “If anything offers the possibility for community and commonality in this era of multiplicity and difference, it is the land that we share.”²⁹

Recalling geography’s “original meaning” - *geo-graphy* meant to write or scribe *geo*, the world – Chambers recommends that Canadian curriculum theorists undertake “the slightly more humble but no less difficult task of beginning a topography, rather than a geography, of curriculum theory,” detailing “the particular places and regions where we live and work,” as well as “how these places are inscribed in our theorizing, as either presence or absence, whether we want them there or not.”³⁰ “Through recovery of an understanding of the topos,” she continues, “especially of imaginary and physical landscape and our history within it, we may find a place to begin the difficult work of reaching into and across the [148] territories of difference.”³¹ Such “a topography for curriculum theory” is “one that begins at home but journeys elsewhere.”³²

At this point Chambers references “Dene elders,” who, when they “spoke of survival ... meant survival for us all, not just Dene people,” adding that “when the Cree elders hold a pipe in a ceremony and pray, they pray for us all, not just for Cree people,” concluding that: “So too curriculum theorizing must begin at home but it must work on behalf of everyone.”³³ “[O]n behalf of all Canadians,” curriculum theorists “must continue to ask the question ‘Who are we?’ a question “they can only begin to answer the question as they write from here, from this particular place, even

if they are not writing it directly,” again suggesting that “Indigenous Canadian languages and literatures” might prove helpful in understanding how the land “writes us rather than how we write.”³⁴ In doing so, curriculum theorists not only join Indigenous but also other “Canadian novelists, poets, essayists, and (creative) nonfiction writers,”³⁵ thereby positioning curriculum theory alongside, rather than subservient (as only curricular translators of) Canadian novels, poetry, essays and nonfiction. She concludes:

Such writing and theorizing may elucidate how for the Dene of northern Canada, the French both inside and outside Quebec, and all Canadians in the era of North American and Asia-Pacific free trade, it is possible to survive and to thrive in—and possibly even to subvert—the economic and political shadow of others.³⁶

“To accomplish this,” she reiterates, Canadian curriculum theorists must also come to understand “the physical, imaginary, and sociopolitical landscape they share with the communities and children on behalf of whom they work and write.”³⁷

COMMENTARY

Chambers names the need for Indigenous scholarship in a double sense, as honouring by following Indigenous writing into an intimate – possibly spiritual (as Chambers implies in another essay³⁸) – relationship with the land, itself both a divisive (as occupied by settlers and treaties were broken) and unifying experience as well as symbol for shared space shattered by settlers’ efforts at genocide. This canonical essay provides the backdrop and inspiration for the Curriculum Studies in Canada Project.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Chambers 1999, 137.
- ² Chambers 1999, 139.
- ³ Chambers 1999, 139.
- ⁴ Chambers 1999, 139.
- ⁵ Chambers 1999, 140.
- ⁶ Chambers 1999, 140. "Atwood claims that in Canadian literature 'victim' is a sister preoccupation to that of survival," Chambers (1999, 143) reminds.
- ⁷ While I do not dispute Chambers' contrast between the two countries, in the time of Trump I posit "subjective and social survival" as the challenge characterizing the contemporary United States: see Pinar 2019, 113.

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- ⁸ Chambers 1999, 140.
- ⁹ Chambers 1999, 141.
- ¹⁰ Chambers 1999, 141.
- ¹¹ Chambers 1999, 141. Maybe at the time of her writing, but now – in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, facing economic collapse and climate crisis – survival seems to me entirely suitable.
- ¹² Chambers 1999, 142.
- ¹³ Chambers 1999, 142-143.
- ¹⁴ Chambers 1999, 144.
- ¹⁵ Chambers 1999, 144.
- ¹⁶ Chambers 1999, 144.
- ¹⁷ Chambers 1999, 144. This raises the thorny issue of cultural appropriation: see research briefs #5, #13 (n. 7), #17, #26.
- ¹⁸ Chambers 1999, 144. Certainly the poetry of Carl Leggo would figure here: see Irwin, Hasebe-Ludt, Sinner 2019.
- ¹⁹ Chambers 1999, 145.
- ²⁰ Chambers 1999, 145.
- ²¹ Chambers 1999, 146.
- ²² Susan D. Dion’s canonical concept: see research brief #2.
- ²³ Chambers 1999, 146.
- ²⁴ Chambers 1999, 146.
- ²⁵ Chambers 1999, 146.
- ²⁶ Chambers 1999, 146.
- ²⁷ Chambers 1999, 147.
- ²⁸ Chambers 1999, 147.
- ²⁹ Chambers 1999, 147.
- ³⁰ Chambers 1999, 147.
- ³¹ Chambers 1999, 147-148.
- ³² Chambers 1999, 148.
- ³³ Chambers 1999, 148. “Everyone” means, I think, not everyone within the borders of Canada, but everyone everywhere, an acknowledgement of Canada’s self-concept of peacekeeping and international cooperation. In the next line, however, Chambers restricts her inclusion to Canada.
- ³⁴ Chambers 1999, 148.
- ³⁵ Chambers 1999, 148.
- ³⁶ Chambers 1999, 148.
- ³⁷ Chambers 1999, 148.
- ³⁸ “A curriculum of place is a wayfinding,” Chambers (2008, 122) explains; “wayfinding is knowing as you go; it is living your geography; learning a place by dwelling and traveling in that place.” See also Chambers 2020, 33; MacDonald, 2019, 26; Ng-A-Fook 2014, 37.