

# THE IDEA OF CANADIAN CURRICULUM STUDIES

During October of 1992, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook reminds, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired a musical radio program – “The Idea of Canada”<sup>1</sup> – that had been commissioned to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Glenn Gould’s career and death.<sup>2</sup> Produced by Steve Wadhams “as a counterpoint of ideas,” this radio program was dedicated to an expression of “Canadians' competing beliefs about the ‘isnesses’ of what constitutes the myths, dreams, and nightmares of our imagined national identity.”<sup>3</sup> These, Ng-A-Fook implies, became fused in Glenn Gould and his music, as “his lived experiences, and sensibility as a Canadian (indeed his *currere*) were deeply connected to, and integrated into, the music he composed, played at concerts as a professional pianist, experimental documentaries.”<sup>4</sup> Gould was not the first to embody and express musically his nation’s identity, but he is here personifying the idea of Canada.

Twenty years later the CBC re-aired “The Idea of Canada” on a program called “Living Out Loud,” a program providing an overview of historical events, among them the Québec referendums on separation from Canada, the 1990 Mohawk standoff at Oka, and the Idle No More movement.<sup>5</sup> “In different ways,” Ng-A-Fook points out, “these national crises posed and posed threats to the very ‘idea’ of Canada as a singular unified nation.”<sup>6</sup> Wadhams explained how Gould’s “Idea of the North” had inspired his 1992 production, a montage of music and documentary wherein “fragments of speech and music—news broadcasts, advertisement, interviews, and so on—are used to narrate our mythic national identity (its verticality and horizontality) in stereo, as a storied composition of musical counterpointed movements.”<sup>7</sup>

“Much like this program,” Ng-A-Fook suggests, “the very ‘idea’ of Canadian curriculum studies is bound together by stories of counterpointed historical movements.”<sup>8</sup> “I would like to suggest,” he continues, “that curriculum scholars here in Canada, much like Gould and Wadhams, continue to experiment with curriculum theorizing as a composition of narrative counterpoints, rapprochements, and juxtapositions,” also conceived as “braiding” and “métissage.”<sup>9</sup> The very “idea” of “Canadian curriculum studies remains, Ng-A-Fook suggests (with gestures toward both Ted Aoki and George Tomkins), “an opportunity for improvised interpretive and reiterative play to curriculum in a new key with the uncommon countenances of our differing intellectual histories and respective interpretations.”<sup>10</sup>

In his “narrative snapshots” of the field, Ng-A-Fook first acknowledges (after Cynthia Chambers’ 2003 review of the field), regional and “disciplinary blinders,”<sup>11</sup> as well as time constraints, limiting his purview to articles published in curriculum studies journals between 2000 and 2013 by scholars who worked and/or are working in Canadian universities.<sup>12</sup> The bibliography thus compiled “might provide a future passageway for readers to revisit, add to, challenge, deconstruct, and play with

compositions of our intellectual history anew as documentary experimentations.”<sup>13</sup> The challenge Ng-A-Fook faced was not availability but “a challenge of organizing, analyzing, synthesizing, and then introducing the plethora of diverse and innovative research generated by past and contemporary curriculum scholars.”<sup>14</sup>

After asking “Where are we at, in this place and this time, as Canadian curriculum scholars?”<sup>15</sup> Ng-A-Fook asserts that contemporary curriculum scholars – no longer submerged in *Two Solitudes*<sup>16</sup> – are now committed “to create, disrupt, complicate, and inspire different possibilities for imagining, recreating and sharing our national mythologies through our curriculum development and theorizing as a form of literary *métissage*.”<sup>17</sup>

Referencing Cynthia Chambers’ “initial and ground-breaking intellectual study of our field,”<sup>18</sup> Ng-A-Fook characterizes her thematics – “survival, the alienated outsider, colonialism and our tenuous relations to the land” as a series of “counterpoints,”<sup>19</sup> testifying to the generative tension juxtaposition implies.<sup>20</sup> Referencing its reprinting in Gibson’s *Canadian Curriculum Studies: Trends, Issues, and Influences*, citing specifically Chambers’ four questions, Ng-A-Fook observes that “these four questions invite us to challenge the discourse of ‘social efficiency’ and the current push to hand over our re/conceptualizations of ‘curriculum’ to multinational corporations,” acknowledging that “our hands in terms of influencing curriculum policy are often tied.”<sup>21</sup> In subsequent scholarship Chambers emphasized that “the very foundation of what it means to be Canadian curriculum scholars is invoked in our historical and present treaty relationships with the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit nations across Canada.”<sup>22</sup> That being the case, Ng-A-Fook wonders what does it mean for “scholars who take up the very shifting tectonic ‘ideas’ of Canadian curriculum studies that move beyond the classical philosophical studies of European antiquity firmly housed within the privileged universe of its academies? Can we?”<sup>23</sup>

Other scholars work with “postmodern and ecological perspectives” that enable them “to analyze, challenge, interrupt, and synthesize neo-conservative – liberal or positivist, unified, logical, and totalized – narrative conceptions of reality.”<sup>24</sup> The result – at least in one instance – is reality defined by what it is not: Canada is Canada because it not the United States.<sup>25</sup> Others – after Aoki – inhabit reality “in-between,” including first generation immigrant youth who experience reality as a series of “third spaces.”<sup>26</sup> Ng-A-Fook notes that an emphasis on “place” and our “relationships” to it continue to preoccupy Canadian curriculum scholars.<sup>27</sup> Place disappears into cyberspace: “Now the curriculum must be hardwired for Smartphones, iPads, iPods, and so on,” Ng-A-Fook notes, teachers and students now “are plugged-in ... to the corporate and social Matrix of YouTube, Google Cloud, Microsoft 365, and Facebook—myself included of course.”<sup>28</sup> He reminds: “In light of these technological and social innovations, our tasks as Canadian curriculum theorists are increasingly subject to these newly established discursive and material matrices.”<sup>29</sup> He wonders: “what kinds of curricular questions do we want to, or ought to ... ask and mobilize in the name of Canadian curriculum

studies?”<sup>30</sup>

“Our field, Ng-A-Fook concludes,” is gifted with the presence of scholars who bring differing innovative theoretical and methodological ideas for us to listen to, reflect on, and synthesize in relation to our research methodologies, our theorizing, and in our praxis where the term ‘curriculum’ still remains many things to many people.”<sup>31</sup> That “community” and its “crazy” ideas comprise “the distinct field of Canadian curriculum studies.”<sup>32</sup> He asks that “we then continue to be open and pay attention, to live well together as a community without consensus, while discussing what ‘curriculum’ is at this time and place.”<sup>33</sup> Like his essay, “Canadian curriculum studies [i]s an ever evolving alliterated, aesthetic, complicated, contested, counterpointed, composition.”<sup>34</sup>

## COMMENTARY

This review of the field – self-consciously contextualized in previous such statements<sup>35</sup> – synchronizes style and content, as Ng-A-Fook incorporates concepts from others in his representation of them, not only often ocularcentric concepts of identity, place, and space but also (after Aoki<sup>36</sup>) auditory ones, e.g. curriculum in a new key, enacted by his reference to Glenn Gould and the “idea” of Canada. The field’s intellectual history Ng-A-Fook reconstrues as “documentary experimentation,” a move fastening fact and fiction, empiricism and art, evocative of the alliance between art education and curriculum studies.<sup>37</sup> Despite domination by technology – itself a long-standing Canadian preoccupation<sup>38</sup> - the “basis” of the field is now those “historical and contemporary relationships” to and among the “First Nation, Inuit, and Métis nations.” The ascendancy of this claim is apparent in the sequencing of these research briefs.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The title has its antecedent: see Armour 1981.
- <sup>2</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 11.
- <sup>3</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 11.
- <sup>4</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 12-13.

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- <sup>6</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 13. But then the idea of Canada was never singular or unified: in addition to Armour 1981, see Armour and Trott 1981 and Russell 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 13. I have described curriculum design as a montage, most recently as connecting concepts to events (as reported in newspapers and elsewhere): Pinar 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 13. He credits Hans Smits with this idea of counterpoint, conveying the intellectual history of the field as an interweaving of diverse “chords” that are often “discordant or dissident” (quoted in 2014, 13).
- <sup>9</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 13. See research briefs #2 and #11.
- <sup>10</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 14.
- <sup>12</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 15.
- <sup>13</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 15. A distinguishing characteristic of Ng-A-Fook’s scholarship is its incorporation of concepts, names, and metaphors from a wide range of intellectual traditions and present-day currents, methodologically mirroring the idea of the curriculum studies field itself as synoptic, inclusive, open to challenge. In literary (and aggressive) terms: “To crowd the imagination is to call back the images of all precursors, and to ram them together in metaphors that subsume all previous tropes” (Bloom 2019, 175).
- <sup>14</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 18.
- <sup>15</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 18.
- <sup>16</sup> This is a reference to the title of Hugh McLennan’s 1945 novel. “In English Canada,” Terry Carson (2005, 7) reminds, “students were assimilated into an English Canadian/British identity, and in Québec into a French/Catholic identity. Newcomers were integrated into these already existing identities. In addition there was the especially egregious example of forced assimilation during a thirty-year period that ended in 1969, aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities and sent to church run residential schools to remove their native languages and cultures.” A third solitude perhaps, broken only by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- <sup>17</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 19. Regarding *métissage* see research brief #11.
- <sup>18</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 20. See research brief #34.
- <sup>19</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 20.
- <sup>20</sup> See Strong-Wilson 2020.
- <sup>21</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 21. In Ravitch (2000, 59) terms, “social efficiency” was – is – not only a vulgar vocationalism, but, much more broadly, “the idea that the methods and ends of education could be determined by assessing the needs of society and then fitting children for their role in society.” By this expansive definition even efforts to alter non-Aboriginal attitudes toward the First Peoples qualify as an instance of “social efficiency.” Labaree’s (2004, 150) view of social efficiency – that it recast “the whole curriculum ... as an effort to prepare students for their

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vocational roles as workers and homemakers, whatever the particular title” – conveys the reactionary subtext of the movement, as it accepted uncritically the status quo.

<sup>22</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 22. If to “move beyond” means surpassing a self-enclosed Eurocentrism by embracing a worldly cosmopolitanism, one requiring working through – not moving beyond – the legacy of European settlement in what is now the Americas, I agree. But if it means discarding European thought, does it not risk replacing one privileged knowledge with another? Hierarchy, exclusion, epistemicide remain.

<sup>24</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 24. See Sumara, Davis, and Laidlaw 2001; for my critique Pinar 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 34. He acknowledges that “organizations like the Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies (CACS) continue to be a hub for our community to ask more of our research in response to such international economic, social, and technological ‘innovations.’ In 1973, our association became one of the first members of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. This organizational consortium of Learned Societies is in many ways our national equivalent of the American Association of Education Research” (2014, 34).

<sup>31</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 43-44.

<sup>32</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2014, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Especially Chambers 1999 and 2003, but also Gibson 2012 and Ng-A-Fook and Rottman 2012. It foreshadows statements to follow: Hasebe-Ludt and Leggo 2018, and, of course, the present project.

<sup>36</sup> Aoki 2005 (1978).

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Carter and Triggs 2017; Irwin, Hasebe-Ludt 2019; Walsh, Bickel, and Leggo 2014; Sameshima, White, Sinner 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Pinar 2019, 97-101.