

*Not “As Canadian as Possible Under
the Circumstances”: The Struggle to be
Visible in Canadian Curriculum
Studies*

INGRID JOHNSTON

University of Alberta

In responding to Nicholas Ng-a-Fook’s fascinating paper on the current state of Canadian curriculum studies, I take my lead from his discussion of our shifting concepts of Canadian identity. He references the article by Sumara, Davis, and Laidlaw (2001), in which they point to the 1960s CBC contest where Peter Gzowski, host of the *Morningside* radio show, challenged the nation to complete the adage: “As Canadian as...”. The eventual winner was the enigmatic “As Canadian as possible under the circumstances” (Sumara et al., 2001, p. 10). In my response, I take up this notion of Canadianness in relation to the historical disadvantage of those

for whom being seen as Canadian is not a given, and whose voices are often still only being heard faintly in our classrooms today.

For many Canadians, particularly those of European descent, a nebulous notion of a dispersed and undefined Canadianness is a comfortable one. As Ng-a-Fook explains, for the majority of Canadians “while we cannot say for sure what we are, we will readily define ourselves by what we are not, specifically by distinguishing ourselves from the nationalist ‘melting-pot’ and ‘imperialistic’ idealizations we ascribe to the United States” (p. 24).

Similar points were made by student teachers we interviewed in a research study (see Johnston, Bainbridge, Gagnon, & Mangat, 2006) in which we asked several classes of mostly white student teachers at our Alberta University to respond to their understanding of Canadian identity prompted by their reading of Canadian multicultural picture books. To our surprise, many of the respondents focused on a perceived “lack” of an identifiable Canadian identity. One participant suggested in our survey that “Canadian identity means what we are not” and another commented, “what it doesn’t mean is a better question.” Other responses had similar connotations:

The intriguing thing about Canadians is their constant insistence to describe themselves by saying what they are not. To me it seems we are so preoccupied by juxtaposing our identity in sharp contrast with the US or the Brits. This in itself makes our culture interesting – as we are the ‘invisible other’.

Another respondent articulated a similar concern with the notion of absence of identity in Canada:

We compare ourselves to other countries by saying what we're not rather than what we are. So, you know, we're not a melting pot like the U. S. We're not this, we're not that, but you're left with – what are you then?

One participant, trying to explain her difficulties in defining what it means to be Canadian, said:

The question isn't right for Canadians. What are you? Our identity is so much of what Canadians are not. We're, I don't want to say we're not Americans although that's something that comes up a lot. I think very peaceful, accepting ... but in a way they're true because there is no Canadian.

For these student teachers, Canadian identity was conceived as an absence or a shadow of a more clearly defined American identity. Yet, for most of these mainstream Canadians, being the “invisible other” was seen only in relation to the more concrete and well-articulated sense of identity for those south of our border. I would suggest that the notion of invisibleness is often experienced much more graphically by those who are first or second-generation Canadians originating from countries outside of Europe.

Possibly the most vivid and tragic recent example of such invisibleness is the Air India disaster in 1985 when a terrorist bomb, planted in an Air-India jet on Canadian soil, blew up after leaving

Montreal, killing 329 passengers, most of whom were Canadians of Indian origin. The prime minister of Canada at the time, Brian Mulroney, phoned the prime minister of India to offer Canada's condolences for India's loss. Although Mulroney subsequently regretted this response and wrote personal letters to the families of those killed in the disaster, the damage was done. The attitude that the tragedy constituted an "Indian problem" persisted in Canada until well into the twenty-first century. Only since a criminal trial revealed the extent of the incompetence of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in investigating the alleged perpetrators have public attitudes changed significantly. As a result of public outrage, an official inquiry was set in place to review the process of the investigation. Increased media coverage, and the political commitment of surviving family members, changing notions of who counts as "Canadian" and growing anger at systemic injustices surrounding the tragedy have reignited interest in the Air India bombing.

An essay in the *Globe and Mail* (Brethour, 2010) entitled "Why Canada Chose to Unremember Air India and Disown its Victims" examines the extent to which the Canadian victims of the tragedy became invisible. Brethour writes: "The terrorists who blew up Air India Flight 182 took the victims' lives. But Canadians took the victims' identities, a theft of personal history – a second tragedy – that made their murder even more painful to their families" (p. 1)

Brethour's essay quotes Ujjal Dosanjh, former liberal MP, whose words cut to the heart of how the victims of the disaster were disowned

as Canadians: "Canadians, and particularly Canadian politicians... felt these were brown guys fighting over something happening 15,000 miles away" (p. 1). Brethour also describes his conversation with a grieving father who lost his daughter, Indira, in the bombing and who remains angry at the Canadian attitude "that made his daughter – who had spent two-thirds of her life as a Canadian citizen – into a dead foreigner". Indira was born in Britain, was a Canadian citizen and had never set foot in India, but when she died on Air India Flight 182, she became an Indian in the eyes of Canadians.

Twenty-five years after the disaster, Brethour explains how Mr. Justice John Major, reporting on the federal commission of inquiry into the Air India investigation, took direct aim at the notion that the attack and its victims were somehow divorced from Canada: "I stress that this is a Canadian atrocity," he said in his opening remarks. "For too long the greatest loss of Canadian lives at the hands of terrorists has been somehow relegated outside the Canadian consciousness" (p. 1).

Despite this tragedy being Canada's most fatal terrorist attack, many Canadians have remained unaware of the event. In a small study of the responses of high school students from both European and South Asian backgrounds to reading a fictionalized story about the Air India disaster, we found that only one of the 10 students interviewed had any knowledge about the tragedy or about its impact on the lives of Canadians (see Johnston & Mangat, 2012). We had assumed that, despite the fact that most of these students would have been only two years old

at the time, they would still know or have heard something about this event as they grew up.

We can perhaps begin to undo the “unremembering” that is the legacy of Air India by paying increasing attention in the Canadian curriculum to the stories of our country that were previously unacknowledged or marginalized. Nicholas Ng-a-Fook reminds us of this need when he comments that “several colonial scars still haunt our collective historical consciousness” (p. 24). He rightly points to the many scars we have inherited, including the legacy of residential schools, the troubling years of Japanese internment and the shameful refusal of entry to Jewish refugees during WWII. To these legacies we must add the more recent scar of the Air India disaster. In each case, Canada sought to deny access or visibility to those who already were or wished to become Canadian – and we are an impoverished society as a result.

There is also a need for us to look forward as well as backward, to move beyond the “narrative monologue of the provincial school curricula” (p. 26). As Ng-a-Fook suggests, we can begin by listening to the voices of curriculum scholars such as Ted Aoki, who lived through his own experiences of silencing and invisibility but retained his passion and optimism about the ways in which Canada can become a multiplicity of cultures in which all voices are acknowledged and respected.

References

- Brethour, Patrick. (2010, June 25). Why Canada chose to unremember Air India and disown its victims. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/why-canada-chose-to-unremember-air-india-and-disown-its-victims/article1212010>.
- Johnston, I., Bainbridge, J., Gagnon, R., & Mangat, J. (2006). National identity and the ideology of Canadian multicultural picture books: Pre-service teachers encountering representations of difference. *Canadian Children's Literature*, 32(2), 76–96.
- Johnston, I & Mangat J. (2012). Spaces of impact: Adolescents interrogating a story of the Air India bombing. In Ingrid Johnston & Jyoti Mangat. *Reading practices, postcolonial literature, and cultural mediation in the classroom* (pp. 18–33). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Sumara, D., Davis, B., & Laidlaw, L. (2001). Canadian identity and curriculum theory: An ecological, postmodern perspective. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 26(2), 144–163.