

An Ode to 215 Babies Tossed Away Unmarked

David W. Jardine

All things being well
We have a baby coming.
All things being well.
A baby.
Where we become, so they say, grand.
All things being well.
Such are my words, here, now.

The changing of names – First Nations children, Jews at the port of entry. The suppressing or erasing of memory and language. Parents and grandparents who were taught that Cree, for example, was ugly and against God himself. Forgetting, figuratively and literally, where the bodies are buried. As Gail Jardine (2012) noted so clearly, with reference to Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947): “Our object is to continue [with ‘enfranchisement’, which means giving up ones First Nations status], “is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not be absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question” (cited in Miller, 2004, p. 34; see Jardine, G., 2012, p. 36 valuable detailing of this and other relevant Canadian legislation). One deals with difference, diversity, interrelationships by the *eradication of difference* and diversity such that no further dealing is required. “I want to get rid of the Indian problem,” (D.C. Scott, in Miller, p. 34) by getting rid of the Indians. Colonialism as precisely and exactly the epitome of *cancel culture*.

This is precisely the sort of thing *against which* applied hermeneutic work works. It is about *not* forgetting (*aletheia*), opening up wounds and occlusions wrought by regimes of power, silences

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foisted and fostered and often then denied. It is about suffering all the pain released in finding out about relations lost and found. It is about calling out attempts to replicate these silencings, bringing forth marginalized voices and letting one's own voice fade back and come forward in hoped-for good measure, uncanceled. As happens in such work, my own voice and expectation and memory and prejudices get called out in this work. Hermeneutics does not provide methodological immunity or a means to "enfranchise" its topics into the anticipations and presumptions of the day.

And there is always, always the open-wound prospect that all my efforts leave me and you unprepared for the arrivals that arrive. Unprepared for what they tell us about the world and, perhaps even more so, unprepared about what they tell us about ourselves. What they tell me about *myself*. This is the locale where hermeneutics is not "subjective" but far, far more intimate and immediate than that. I find that I have been precisely *not* subjective but instead complicit in a world of relations and ancestries "over and above my wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxvii)

We've all heard that a local school in Calgary, Alberta, just had its name changed from Langevin School to Riverside School. It had previously been named Riverside but was changed to Langevin in 1936. Hector-Louis Langevin (1826-1906) was one of the "Fathers of [Canadian] Confederation" and was considered the architect of the residential school system in Canada for First Nations children.

This name change followed up on the discovery in late May 2021 of the remains of 215 previously undocumented bodies of dead young children found buried and unmarked near a former residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia:

The children were students at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia that closed in 1978, according to the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation. (Paperny, May 29, 2021)

One of the main blocks of the Canadian parliament in Ottawa, Ontario, is called "The Langevin Block" (Hayday, 2017). This story is still unfolding. The Calgary Catholic Board of Education has been asked to consider renaming Bishop Grandin School, Grandin also having had a hand in the "work" of residential schooling in Canada. And now, more recently, a statue of Edgerton Ryerson was torn down outside the university named after him, and calls have arisen to rename that, too. I know this without knowing one single thing about Ryerson. I can easily simply get caught in the outpouring and end up as unknowing as I did before, but perhaps weirdly slaked by the chance to get roused up.

Tough to say, and even tougher, this. I had never heard of Langevin in all my 70 years except as the name of that nearby school. I had to look up even these mere facts. There comes a great deep breath of air with these new [to me] revelations and, frankly, a gasping for air as well – this, too, having provided us all with recent images and halts. Say his name: George Floyd. How about the 1921 Tulsa Oklahoma massacre that just had its anniversary? How about this revelation: Duncan Campbell Scott's "no more Indian problem" document was a Parliamentary Memo, written, not in the 19th century, but in 1920? (see Jardine, G., p. 36):

The *Gradual Civilization Act* (1857), the *British North America Act* (1867), the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* (1869), the *Indian Act* (1876) and Duncan Campbell Scott's parliamentary memo (1920) appear to intend to assimilate Aboriginal peoples through treating them as "minors," as "wards of the state" with no ability to make their own decisions. (Jardine, G., 2012, p. 30)

Shock but not surprise. A great, deep breath of humiliation once again about what is known, what is said, what is suppressed, what is revealed, how easy it is for me to live a life not knowing. Privilege means not only not knowing about "them" and "this" and what has been perpetrated upon First Nations people.

But it also means something more severe: not knowing *about my own relations*. Great networks of relations now rising up out of the earthbowels *full of unnamed, re-named children's flesh*. Looking, now, for names and family lines. Petitioning the Catholic Church to open its records. Stay tuned. Stay tuned. But now that the school's name has simply disappeared, so has even the possibility of the tricky confrontation. Like it never happened. Like everything is now set right by erasing the name and replacing it with an English name...oops, no, sorry, that's what residential schools did. It's a joke, this cancelling, a terrible one. And those who swoon over land acknowledgements and exploring First Nations language and knowledge –I'll say it. Don't think for a moment that they have explored their own language, their own ancestries.

I would never impugn motives, here. There is most often a real affection and real, valuable learning happening in the interweavings and acknowledgments. Again, a note towards hermeneutic work and an acknowledgement of the careful work needed to go beyond a simple attraction to leaving one's own tongue, one's own people's doings, behind. There is nothing to be gained by leaving one's own living forgotten but still vividly, secretly at work. Would that just once some well-meaning person would start a meeting with reading from the Treaty promises that their people wrote. Acknowledging my own impugnments.

And now, amid all the scurrying talk of "cancel culture" (Gerstmann, 2021) at the change of that school's name, I settle in to thinking, yes, change the name, but don't simply replicate the erasure of names and languages and memory perpetrated by residential schools in the first place. Put a placard with the old name's stone out front of Riverside School. Name what happened, who, and when and their reasons, with all the detail you can muster. This is one of *my ancestors* whether the name is changed or not. This *happened*, name change or not. Don't let me forget what happened *again*.

Give Hector-Louis Langevin his full due in full view. Otherwise, we simply name-change as a sort of high-handed moral duty and then risk forgetting *all over again*. This field must be dug up, relation after relation, named, shown and *I will not change that terrible image of a field dug up*. I will say it loudly in the face of images of 215 babies tossed away unmarked. The purpose of hermeneutics is to read the marks, make the marks, not erase them. It means to remember, to open, to enliven. This is true of *every topic that hermeneutics confronts*. And this sort of forgetting, suppressing is itself tragically endemic. Pandemic, perhaps.

I must learn, once again once again once again, to not turn away, to love the terrible griefs as good, harsh, demanding teachers. There are terrible courses still to come and I hope we can bear it. I hope I can bear it. We're told by Elders that this 215 is a mere drop of rain in a storm more terrible than we can imagine. More terrible than *I* can imagine, because many of our fellow beings have long-since heard of it and many still suffer it. Many suffer it without knowing about its whence and whither. And ah, yes, literally as I began to write this, Pope Benedict, June 6, 2021:

"I follow with sorrow the news that arrives from Canada about the upsetting discovery of the remains of 215 children," Francis said in his customary Sunday noon remarks to the public.

"I join with the Catholic church in Canada in expressing closeness to the Canadian people traumatized by the shocking news," Francis said. "This sad discovery increases the awareness of the sorrows and sufferings of the past."

"May the political and religious authorities continue to collaborate with determination to shed light on this sad affair and to commit to a path of healing," Francis added. (D'emilio, 2021)

"The sorrows and sufferings of the past." No. The open wound is *now* and simply changing the name of that school, or that university, does not serve to cleanse that wound. Tearing down statues might be required as a locale of action and pain and anger and its outworking. But don't erase. None of us will be healed by cancelling and forgetting.

And yet, I step back, right here, because I cannot adequately imagine what actions might be right, proper, needed, helpful. It may be that rage and outrage are hermeneutically acute explications – there's a sentence for you and for this journal and for my own work and its limits and usefulness.

My work is feeble, here. Like this: it is ironic, perhaps even tragic, that "Benedict" means "well-spoken." It is ironic, perhaps even tragic, how much sway the Catholic Church still holds over First Nations people. But what do I know other than bending my cupped ear again and falling, right here, right now, into silly words?

We need the repressed and marginalized stories of schools, of deaths and births, of illness, of joy, of Earthly Raven arrivals, of entangled ancestral howls in the night. All of us need this. And we need this whatever our topics may be. We don't fulfill our summons by all simply rushing off towards the latest news. But this latest news-that-is-not-new can provide a moment of renewal whatever work might then ensue, now, again, hopefully more alert, more full of the energies that hermeneutics provides and demands (see Aho, 2018; see Jardine. D., 2018)

But who am I to say much more than that, knowing so very little of any of this till just now? I can only hope that something of the blackened pages to follow struggle to be true to that howling familiar's whisperings. We all have work to do.

I have work to do.

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