Picturing a Past in School: Situating Culture(s), Histories, Language(s) and Power in Fine Arts Teacher Training

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I ask provocatively what it is that we do when we teach about art to students in schools and in university teacher training programs. I attempt to think through the necessary relations that exist in secondary fine arts teacher training. Within a hermeneutic unfolding I consider the *difficulty* of *seeing*, *speaking*, and *listening* for myself and my students, considering not *what one is to teach*, nor even *how one is to teach*, but how omissions and absences inscribe partial, located, ahistorical, and dominant ideological narratives about what and who counts, what constitutes the *good*, and what knowledge is of most worth. The implications of understanding the past, and its place in our present dealings gives us important insights into imagining our futures and considering how we and our students might live well in teacher education in a changing world.

RESUME: Dans ce papier, je demande avec véhémence ce que nous faisons lorsque nous enseignons l'art aux étudiants dans les écoles et dans les programmes universitaires de formation pour enseignants. J'essaie de penser en m'appuyant sur les relations nécessaires qui existent dans la formation secondaire des enseignants en Beaux arts. Au cours d'un développement herméneutique je mets en question la *difficulté* que mes étudiants et moi-même ressentons face à *l'observation*, l'*expression* et l'*écoute*.Ici, je ne prends pas en compte ce qu'untel est supposé enseigner ni même comment il est supposé le faire mais plutôt comment des omissions et des absences déterminent à jamais des récits idéologiques partiels, situés dans un contexte, ahistoriques et dominants sur ce quoi et ce qui compte, sur ce qui constitue le *bien* et sur la connaissance la plus valeureuse. Les incidences dues à la compréhension du passé et sa place dans nos relations actuelles, nous donnent des aperçus importants sur ce que peut être notre avenir et nous donnent la possibilité de voir comment, nous et nos étudiants, pourrions vivre bien au sein du programme de

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> formation des enseignants alors que le monde est en perpétuel changement.

For me *living well*, alongside my fine arts students, in this particular place and at this historical and cultural juncture, is very much about negotiating the often-times *difficult dialogic terrain* about, surprisingly, the complexity of *seeing* (Smits, 1997). In reflecting on this paper over the last couple of months I have also come to see that it is also very much about *listening*: in part, my own careful *listening* to the way students narrate and perform their own understandings of the multiple art worlds they inhabit, and ultimately bring to the Masters of Teaching (MT) program, at the University of Calgary, and perhaps more importantly the art worlds they propose to enact in their own future classrooms.

Students too must *listen* carefully to the way in which cultures, histories, and subjectivities are threaded throughout official program of study and supplementary handbooks. In part to ascertain not *what one teaches*, nor even *how one teaches*, but to consider how omissions and absences inscribe partial, located, and dominant ideological narratives about what and who counts, what constitutes the *good* and what knowledge is of most worth. In *seeing* the intersections among the social and cultural function of arts in educational practices, curricula, and knowledge, we might well ask, what is it that we do when we teach about the arts in school and in teacher training programs? I suggest that *listening* invokes *seeing* – and *seeing* is inextricably linked to *listening*.

Part of the *difficulty* of "speaking/writing" to and with fine arts student teachers about *seeing* revolves around their own positioned interpretive understandings and embeddedness in the positioning aspect of "Culture," upon which they often draw as a primary constituent of self, identity, and artistic practice. Since it is an after-degree program, students come to the MT program with oft-times conventional understandings about the constitution of the artist as a transcendent and creative being and art as a normative form of subjectivity and social practice. Problematically, art is represented as *natural* and *timeless*, not subject to political, cultural, or aesthetic interests nor social contextualization.

Although I share the same artistic training, I am compelled to interrupt and subvert this ideological common-sense narrative to provide critical interventions, in the process providing multiple ways of making sense of, in this case, the Alberta Fine Art Program of Studies. I wonder

how to critically re-situate culture, language, power, and visuality in our understandings of what it might mean to be an artist-teacher-learner in the classroom.

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I recently taught another iteration of the Fine Arts Secondary Curriculum Case Class A and B. Through a "recursive path of inquiry," the two back-to-back courses, in accordance with the themes of the semester, focus on curriculum content and contexts in secondary visual arts teaching.[1] The course(s) provokes students to *see* curriculum "as a lived and shared experience," that is rich and always mutable; a negotiated act that takes up the knowledge and interests of learners and teacher(s) and transforms the given curriculum to suit the situational and particular contexts of classroom and communities. The fine arts I argue – not unlike other disciplines and subject areas – are powerful and embodied ways in which we inquire into our world.

Enrolled that semester were 14 visual arts students with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and understandings about the arts' function in society and particularly in educational contexts. One of the cases I constructed that semester was entitled "Thinking About the Arts in School – A Canadian Historical Perspective." On the heels of a critical deconstruction of the program of studies, my intention was to orient students to grapple with how the fine arts curriculum lives in conversation with the past/present/future. I wanted students to think deeply about why knowing something about the function of artists-in-schools might be significant to their own learning and as an extension to their future students. I wanted to dispel the notion that arts and artists in schools and the new arts-based methodologies in teaching and learning were self-indulgent fads, as one parent fired back vitriolically, at one community meeting several years ago. Lastly, I posed the question: how was the notion of *history* stated/implied/ in the formal curriculum you examined last week? I wanted us also to wonder how our *forgetfulness* about what has come before, naively sets us up for a vacuous and fragmented *presentness.* Having said that, I have no commitment to a positivistic and empirical version of history which does nothing more than narrate a litany of dates, assumed facts, and canonical truths.

During an earlier case class, several students had *spoken* passionately about *seeing* the program of studies as an exponent of a Westernized fine arts curriculum which privileged, excluded, and reified
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specific cultural forms, artists, and historical practices. "Where are the women artists?" asked one student exasperated. "Haven't we been here before?" she added forcefully. I nodded in feminist agreement, adding that since parts of the curriculum had not been updated since 1977, we in fact had never really left. Another student eloquently fractured the ubiquitous technical rationalist and skills-based approach to the fine arts curriculum, and argued for a more critical visual culture context. "*Art is not created in a vacuum,*" he noted defiantly "*artists live, work in a culture ... we are influenced by everything around us.*" I was reminded of Nicholas Mirzoeff's (1998) assertion that visual culture is "not just part of ... [our] everyday life, it *is* ... [our] everyday life" (p. 3).

I was deeply impressed with the sophistication of the dialogue, students' passionate inclinations and interests in *speaking* critically about how the fine arts curriculum was caught up in the world and specifically how it implicated them. I spent the whole week imagining richness – I wondered if I had provided enough resources, if I should have assigned different sorts of readings. At the last moment, I had removed Dennis Atkinson's (2002) *Art in Education: Identity and Practice* from the reading list. In retrospect I wondered if his chapter on "Experience and the Hermeneutics and Semiotics of Visuality" may have been useful to our thinking about the work of *seeing* in our culture. If as theorist Fredric Jameson (1991) suggested we live in a society of the spectacle – a social space – completely saturated with the culture of the image, then *seeing* may be a critical pedagogical act.

My concern about additional material quickly subsided. I thought to myself, I can always bring in books and articles to supplement the outline. As well, students, as per our inquiry-based approach, and in our effort to prepare teacher/researchers, were responsible to locate their own resources. The MT program is not a teacher-directed program and I have no wish to provide students with fixed and authorized accounts of the educational world in which we are all embedded. Such attempts are illusionary, and for me misdirected desires.

The excitement of the moment seized me. Interpretively examining the world through histories of visual culture in education is also my work, my fascination, and my obsession. I actively research/write during the term, attempting to recursively *live* in the past and present at the same time, to be informed by my encounters in the classroom, in the community, and in the archives. It is a gift to engage these passions in my daily work and I am always grateful. As David Smith says "interpretation and understanding are creative acts, not just technical

functions" (1994, p. 102). So on that day, and in that moment I was giddy with possibilities of where my students and I might travel together and the tangled paths we might pursue, individually and collectively. Teaching and research are social practices which live in the world and we do ourselves and our students a disservice when we struggle to dualistically hold them apart.

Buoyed by such unrestrained promise, the following week we began a case about the historical and cultural place of Aboriginal art in the Alberta Fine Arts Program of Studies, its implication for students' field placement, and more generally its situatedness in the contemporary world. The art historian in me trudged out the historiographic debates around the taxonomic distinctions made by anthropologist Marius Barbeau (1883–1969) between "art" and "ritual," "craft and fine art," and the political and cultural implications for such dichotomized dualities. I proceeded to revisionist historians such as Charlotte Townsend-Gault and her work around the epistemological and methodological issues associated with First Nations art and visual culture, and particularly cultural representations associated with First Nations cultures in the public sphere. I ended with a brief overview of Ronald Hawker's thought-provoking book, *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia* (2003) and his post-colonial examination of the complex functioning of Northwest coast objects, in light of First Nations meaning, coupled with the federal government's denial of land claims, its ban of the potlatch, and its support of an assimilationist education. Hawker's book, and his focus on what some art historians have misguidedly called the *dark age* for Northwest Coast Aboriginal art, marked by a decline in production and the abandonment of traditional forms, reminded me of how art historical categories and periodization have a way of masking their own political and cultural intentions. Perhaps, I suggested to my students, we need to unpack and reconsider the standard explanation for the illumination of this "dark age/period:" that it was only in the 1950s, encouraged by institutional intervention, an infusion of public funding, and a reassessment of Canadian Indian policy, that there a revival and renaissance in Aboriginal art. Who proffered this analysis and what did they have to gain? Who lost? and what does it mean that White people get to *claim* that they were responsible for a revival of Aboriginal art? Whose art is it?

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In *Whose Culture is it?* Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006), seeks to unravel the often messy relations involved in what might constitute "cultural property," and who "owns it" in the contemporary world. He suggests that we are all in essence cultural stewards of the world's treasures (plundered and otherwise) and must complicate how we regard legalistic imbued terms such as "cultural patrimony" and "repatriation" (p. 38). Appiah notes that in our effort to forge cultural patrimony through identity we have neglected difference. For "we can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can only fully respond to 'our' art if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art" (p. 41). His perspective, although for some politically untenable is crucial to our thinking of the functioning of these plundered treasures, and our own investigations into the question "Whose art is it?"

Against this backdrop, I encouraged students to inquire into how they might work with Aboriginal arts in the visual arts classrooms. I suggested that they might produce an interdisciplinary unit, and to link these ideas through text and image. As a way, to enhance their technological prowess we used the Inspiration software program to construct the units. I clarified several times that our work was not intended to produce a recipe unit for future use nor to discreetly cite the successful use of technologies or techniques, but to help them *see, listen,* and *speak* about the complexity of what it might mean, broadly conceived, to work with students around Aboriginal arts. Among other things, I asked them to consider how this unit might support students to go deeper into a subject – how it might help students see the openings, discoveries, and *encounters* in the curriculum. How will you know your students through their work? I asked. And how will you assist them to have a particular kind of pedagogical experience?

The work seemed to progress well; students were engaged, talking exuberantly and thoughtfully with their peers about what they had found and how they might take it up in their curriculum. Several weeks later I asked the class how they found the experience of producing this unit. Was it insightful? I asked. What new understandings have you come to? Has it prompted new questions for you? If so, what do you think you need to do now? And, most importantly, where do you go from here?

And then it came. The question:

Well, [noted one young woman, in her most respectful voice] *I really liked looking up the art images and putting them together*
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> *and I enjoyed working on the computer – because I really want to know how to do Web sites but I don't understand how this is going to help me in my future class. What if I don't have a Native child in my classroom ... why would I want to do this unit? It seems, a lot of work for nothing,"* [she added].

Several members of her class social circle, nodded in agreement.

I was stunned. It never occurred to me that we wouldn't do this unit because we didn't have a Native child in the class. Knowing my student, I realized that she was attempting to articulate her vision of a lived curriculum that was conscious of the situational experiences and contexts of that particular classroom of students. In doing that she was privileging a space of *presentness* and endorsing a common sense narrative of exclusion. Yet, I needed to unequivocally respond to this comment for, like many of my colleagues, "I have an obligation not only to describe and account for various teaching practices but to challenge accepted practices and to make judgements – to stand for something" (Lund, Panayotidis, Smits, & Towers, 2006, p. 17).

Before I had a chance to respond several students quickly jumped into the fore, concerned that the position taken by their peer was a denial of diversity and inclusivity. The discussion became heated and someone distressingly suggested that in attempting to create a unit on Aboriginal arts, a theme which was not directly called for in the existing fine arts program of studies, we were simply engaging in a doctrinaire form of political correctness. Boundaries were forged and positions entrenched. With the class finished, I wondered about what I had not *listened* to and what students might not have *seen*, for us to *speak* those sentiments. I also thought about my own interpretation of the *seeming ease* of that day and the *progress* of my student's work. Looking back now, I recognize my own longing, as a teacher, to have my students *see* the complexity, grasp something of the inequity of our social world, and recognize the constraints and possibilities in our own self-understanding. This emancipatory tendency is perhaps endemic to all teachers, yet lately I only see it as a myth – an ailing meta-narrative that refuses to see how power is enacted in our daily encounters.

Picturing a Past in School Spaces

I decided for the next class to return to *seeing* in order to provide some insight for students about how I had come to understand something about this very issue years earlier on the walls of an Ontario High

School. So for the next class I brought in a series of slides from Jarvis Collegiate in Toronto, in whose auditorium are found Canadian artists' George Reid's (1860-1947) 1929 murals, depicting Canada's *history* – at least how Reid pictured it! I wanted students to think through the complex intersections among culture[s], history[ies], language[s] and power and specifically what it mean to problematize our *seeing*. *Seeing*, Martin Jay (1994) declares, has become a metaphor of how "one thinks"– "How one sees the world." He has termed the prevalence of such visual metaphors as the "ocular permeation of language" (p. 2). However, *seeing* is an embodied practice, and we have as Meike Ball has noted, an "ethical commitment to seeing" (as cited in Jay, 2005).

Reid's mural scheme for the auditorium (he was assisted by Ontario College of Art graduate Lorna Claire) was expansive, comprising 11 panels, which charted Canada's *history, beginning* with Erickson's discovery of North America(1000 A.D.) and *ending* with Mackenzie's Discovery of the Pacific (1793). Dado and gallery panels were also included, along with a collection of heraldic and emblematic symbols. The mural's panels, of varying size, were set in chronological order from the southwest corner of the room, and moving from left to right, ending at the right side of the stage on the north wall. The east wall is, for the most part, windows. Two of the eleven panels depict more contemporary subjects. Entitled *Patriotism* and *Sacrifice*, both in part function as commemorations to Canada's World War I dead. To legitimate an interpretive reading of the mural scheme and to give credence to his own artistic choices, Reid wrote and published a little booklet entitled *Descriptive Notes of Mural Decorations*, in Jarvis Collegiate Auditorium (1931).

In problematizing our *seeing* of Reid's murals I wanted the visual artists to confront these images not as the work of a famous Canadian artist nor the well-rendered painterly and atmospheric impressionist stylings, but as a critical visual narrative of a racialized nation. I asked critically how did Reid's own interpretive understandings shape how he depicted the past, the relationship between the French and English explorers, and problematically the troublesome encounters between Native peoples and White Colonial explorers? Perhaps more importantly how do these murals and hundreds of others hanging in schools across Canada serve as a not-so hidden curriculum? [2] How might they illuminate contemporary issues of race, gender, diversity, identity, and inclusivity in today's educational contexts? How do they function today as escapism and wish fulfilment – as retreats from the troubling present

into a reassuring past (Marlin, 1982; Park & Markowitz, 1985; Seixas & Clark, 2004).

Yet, to understand something of Reid's ideological understandings and how they shaped the mural scheme, we need to look closely at the actual commission of the work and more generally the place of mural design in the cultural and educational landscape of post-WWI Toronto. A *traditionalist*, who preferred realistic, idealistic, and allegorical representation, Reid had become interested in mural painting as early as the 1890s and in 1894 formed the Society of Mural Painters. While the society disbanded shortly after, Reid remained committed to mural art, believing that "mural painting is the best way to promote public interest in art." He noted that, "the authorities didn't get round from the artistic point of view so I'm going to attack them from the educational and historical angles" (Reid, as cited in Miller, 1946, p. 70). Reid was invited in 1927 by E.A Hardy, head of the department of English and History, and Principal Dr. J. Jeffries at Jarvis Collegiate, to create "some decorations" for the auditorium. For Reid, as his for contemporary, C.W. Jefferys, "the history of the country is to be read not only in the printed records. While these are of the greatest importance they do not tell us all we need to know. Often pictorial records ... [were] of equal importance, and even of greater values, being more reliable" (Jefferys, 1950, p. vii). Meanwhile, artist and art educator Arthur Lismer made an interesting distinction about the functions of murals in public and private institutional spaces, noting: "If commercialism can pre-empt our outside spaces with fearful billboards advertising things we already know there should be some centres where the things we *feel* about life, mankind and destiny can find a public showing" (Lismer, 1933, pp. 134-135).

The *story of* Reid's murals has been, in large part, narrated through an art historical disciplinary lens (McKay, 2002; Pepall, 1986; Sisler, 1993), which has assuredly chosen the *irreducible aesthetic object* and its transcendent creator – the artists, as its focus of interest. The priorities and boundaries of the discipline have until late offered oft-times simplified and non-contextualized interpretations of the function of art in society. Recent challenges, arising from multiple theoretical and methodological trajectories, against conventional *art history*, particularly critiques around what might constitute art and history, have fractured the assured mastery of such assumptions. Starting in the early 1970s and 1980s, historians interested in a social history of art went in search for new objects of study and theories, which culminated in a critical challenge against art histories canonical irreducible aesthetic object of

study, reconfiguring the notion of culture *as a whole way of life*, rather than a limited and hierarchal term, referring to only previously appointed canonical works. Such an expansive notion of culture has expanded the scope of a whole range of cultural productions in society.

Reid's murals have called to me, disturbed me, fascinated me, and repulsed me for the last 15 years. I have sought to untangle the complex relations among the images and their textual empirical descriptions and particularly how the images function/perform within historical, cultural, and educational contexts, in which they are necessarily enmeshed. Reid's murals have never been far from my embodied gaze and my conceptual wonderings about their function, their original production starting in 1929, and the *place* they take up in our present world. Over the years, I have responded, in part by "plundering" this series of images "for a certain theoretical use" (Buck-Morss, 2002, p. 326) dutifully lugging the *slides* back and forth from graduate courses on visual culture, space, and embodiment, eager to share my concerns with how they serve as historical witnesses to colonial understandings.

My own encounter with Reid's murals took place in the early 1990s. Then a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, I was writing a thesis on the impact of the English Arts and Crafts movement on Ontario's elementary and secondary public school system in the first half of the 20th century. I also taught a night course for the then Toronto Board of Education Records, Museums and Archives, on school art in Toronto's public school system. I was invited by a history teacher at the school to come and speak to the students about George Reid's murals. On the phone, she described to me her concerns and intents for this visit. She wanted her students to know that their school *owned* one of the most important school murals in the country, created by one of Canada's most important artist. Knowledgeable about Canadian art history, she noted that before the emergence of abstraction in Canadian art, these murals demonstrate one of the last vestiges of arts and crafts impressionist style.

Yes, I agreed enthusiastically, but I would also love to speak to students about the content – and the way in which in this historical period visuality functioned to envision a nation, to order and authorize the past, creating a lineage for our present. How are these historical myths generated through interests and power and how are they represented so matter-of-factly through the visual? Like other high schools, Jarvis had experienced some school violence amongst rival *ethnic* groups, and I wondered whether raising issues of diversity and

difference might impact the students. It was ironic, at least to me, that the mural's envisioning of nation, and their attendant notions of conquest, marginalization, and defeat, were somewhat akin to student's contemporary experience of enculturation, alienation, and subjugation. I was struck with how the past was being played out in present in the shadow of Reid's work.

When I hung up the phone, I knew I'd said too much so I wasn't surprised when the teacher called several weeks later and apologetically noted that she was not going to be able to accommodate a class talk – they had simply run of out time and needed to move on to the next unit. Months later, in conversation with a peer – a teaching colleague of the teacher I had spoken with at Jarvis, I was told that the teacher was upset with my *politically correct* agenda as all she really wanted, according to my peer, was to *celebrate Canadian art.* Such *celebratory* acts bring to mind Gadamer's (1960/2003) assertion that "by detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it up" (p. 135).

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So what is it that we do when we teach art to students in schools and in university teacher training programs? How do we evoke students' critical attunement to *listening, speaking,* and *seeing*? My class and I, in our effort to live well in the world, *spoke* with some *difficulty* that day about our own attachments, alliances, hopes, and desires, for ourselves and our students. We began by wondering how we had come to know the world and why we had, at times, so easily accepted the *facts.* For most of us, school, books, images, and knowing experts – teachers and parents – had led us down certainist paths to the *truth.* Nietzsche's statement that "there are no facts in themselves [as it is] ... always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact," must alert us to the way in which *truth* is fragile, subject to introspection, and always open to reconsideration (Nietzsche, as cited in Barthes, 1997, p. 121). The class ended without fanfare – there was no grand gesture, no words of reconciliation, little emotion. Students left to go to lunch and attend their next class. A few smiles and waves from students as they departed made me feel that we had challenged ourselves to *listen and speak about the difficulty of seeing.* We had come to think "of how we can go on together in the midst of constraints and difficulties that constantly threaten to foreclose on the future" (Smith, 1994, p. 102).
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As I write we are close to the end of the fall term. The air is cold and damp and the city is clothed in what one gardening book has termed our "white period" (the other being our "brown"). I have begun more deliberately to think about the new fine arts curriculum course I will undertake in the winter term. As I gaze out on the winter nature-scape garden, watching the inevitable encounters between the birds, rabbits, squirrels, and occasional neighbourhood cat, I struggle with how to *speak, see,* and *listen,* alongside my students. How do I *speak* about the unequal relations in the world? How will I address it in a way that is not superficial – reduced to idiosyncratic whims and interests? How might I assist my students to see – the way in which visuality can mask invisibilities and power? And lastly, how will we all *listen,* allowing our misunderstandings to be risked and lost, in our ethical considerations. As I look up from the page I am jolted by what I *see.* A temporary truce is in place – several species of birds and two squirrels are eating. I can't help but think that, for a moment anyway, they are all at home in the garden – for this garden is theirs as much as ours. In fact, they were here before we came. I've been thinking that in introducing myself to the fine arts students next semester, I might bring in pictures of the garden and speak about what I have learned by seeing. As a novice gardener I've had to be watchful, constantly attuned to the vagaries of time and space, past and present. Likewise in the classroom, the implications of understanding the past, and its place in our present dealings, and taking up *difficulties* not as barriers but as invitational encounters for understanding (Smits, 1997, p. 21), gives us important insights into imagining our futures and considering how we and our students might live well in teacher education in a changing world.

NOTES

1. While the MT secondary Fine Arts cohort generally includes visual arts, drama, and music, over the last several years we have opted for more specialization and divided the cohort (usually a group of 30 -35 students), between visual arts on one hand and music and drama on the other. Our enrolment numbers in the different streams support this organizational structure.
2. A similar mural scheme, depicting Canada's history was produced by artist and child art educator Arthur Lismer at Humberside Collegiate, Toronto, Ontario (1927-1932). Murals in elementary schools, such J.W. Beatty's evocative *Spring, Summer and Autumn in the Don Valley, 1908-10,* adorned walls so that young children may be shaped by the moral lessons

contained therein. For an expanded discussion on the relationship between art and children see: E.L. Panayotidis (2002).

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