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Historical Thinking, Ghosts and Hauntings: Imagination and the Poetics of On-Line Learning

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HISTORICAL THINKING, GHOSTS AND HAUNTINGS: IMAGINATION AND THE POETICS OF ON-LINE LEARNING

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This innovative collaborative research project and practice began with a critical pedagogical and curricular concern about how to incorporate "historical thinking" and knowledge into an on-line graduate course, Current Issues in Early Childhood Education. Drawing on the work of interpretive scholars who wrote about "living" ghosts, phantoms, and memory we strove to offer different insights into the context of teaching and learning in post-secondary programs of study. We invited Enlightenment philosopher and early childhood advocate Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) to class as a way to re-image critical historical and socio-cultural notions of childhood, and child care in Western curricular traditions and inheritances.

APPEARANCES OF THE DEAD[1]

In a recent on-line graduate course entitled, *Current Issues in Early Childhood Education* (ECE), Carolyn invited a ghost to class. More precisely, she *summoned* Enlightenment philosopher and early childhood advocate Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), as a way to re-image critical historical and socio-cultural notions of childhood, and child care in Western curricular traditions and inheritances. Rousseau (who was listed as a class participant) spoke directly with the students (*through Carolyn as*

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[1] We draw this title from R.C. Finucane's seminal 1984 study Appearances of the Dead: a Cultural History of the Ghosts (Buffalo: Prometheus).

the medium) and expanded contemporary, interdisciplinary ideas about childcare and early years learning with relative historical beliefs and pedagogical practices. The fourteen graduate student participants were all working in national and international preschool to post-secondary level education settings. Throughout the six week graduate level certificate course – part of the M.Ed. degree program at the Werklund School of Education – students viewed contemporary ECE issues through theoretical, historical, cultural and personal lenses[2]. For class participants, inviting Rousseau to discuss his controversial book *Èmile or On Education* (1979), and his Enlightenment ideas within a contemporary technological platform complicated the origins of modern child developmental discourses and showed how such concepts were not fixed and eternal but rather located, interpreted, and contingent (Caputo, 1987).

The innovative collaborative research project, which was prompted from Carolyn's *spirited* invitation to a ghost, has centered on the critical pedagogical and curricular concern about how to incorporate historical thinking, and knowledge into graduate curricula offerings (in all its course *manifestations*—face-to-face, blended and on-line). Haunted by a pervasive, 'single' curricular focus on modernist child developmental psychology in the various teacher education courses she has taught, Carolyn wondered how knowing historical perspectives might account for contemporary western childrearing and educational practices, and dominant discourses about children and childhood. A former early childhood educator herself, Carolyn was never introduced to the views of 18th and 19th century early childhood pedagogues and philosophers in either her post-secondary programs of studies nor in the field of early learning. When Lisa, Carolyn's doctoral supervisor, suggested that she read *Émile or On Education*, Carolyn discovered that ideas included in Rousseau's Enlightenment treatise on child rearing and education both echo and disrupt modern and postmodern childhood pedagogical theories

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[2] Formal Ethics approval for this research was received in September 2013. Ethics ID: REB13-0696.

and practices. New understandings and worlds opened up to Carolyn as she related and connected past to present early education and childcare customs and beliefs.[3]

Now acknowledging the critical importance of knowing and imagining bygone events, ideas and figures, Carolyn continues to view current ECE issues, through a historical lens and attempts to find creative ways to raise students' awareness of the past in teacher education classrooms. Although many ECE post-secondary programs remain ahistorical (and perhaps even anti-historical) and emphasize modern science-based pedagogical theories and practices we believe that, "[t]raining institutions for early childhood educators might also examine how critical reflection is incorporated within their daily practice. As … educators [in all disciplines] we need to understand why we practice as we do and to be aware of the discursive genealogy that underlies our beliefs" (Kummen, 2010, p. 110).

Likewise Lisa, a cultural historian has always been deeply interested in the connection between on-line learning, historical inquiry and visual representation. As early as 2001, and while preparing to design and teach a course entitled the *History and Philosophy of Adult Education*, she pursued a study entitled: "Constructing a Critical Historical Practice in on-line Learning."[4] In that research, she strove to create a course shell in the evolving *Blackboard* platform that would richly embody historical knowledge, not only through text but in multimodal (visual, spatial, artifactual) contexts. Primary and secondary textual narratives of adult education were analyzed in light of contemporary theories of historical and philosophical interpretation, and particularly around methodological considerations which have inscribed the "visual" as a determining constituent of knowledge construction. Consequently, historical images (paintings, photographs, murals), artifacts/constructs (heritage plaques, monuments, spaces, and

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[3] In her thesis, The space-in-between: Ontology and the place of curriculum in the culturally diverse early childhood education post secondary classroom, Carolyn is examining how immigrant educators understand and situate their self with a western post secondary ECE curriculum. Using an interpretive narrative approach that focuses on the life stories of the research participants, Carolyn wants to know how immigrant educators juxtapose their own cultural ideas and beliefs about childcare and early learning with relevant western pedagogical theories and practices. Moreover, Carolyn asks - if immigrant educators are not invited to share their personal and cultural ideas in post secondary classrooms, how might it ultimately affect their work with children and families in Canadian ECE settings?

[4] The study was funded through a "Learning Commons Fellowship" (University of Calgary) and the Graduate Division of Educational Research (now Graduate Programs in Education, Werklund School of Education).

other public commemorations) as well as other communication technologies (video, film, radio, and the Internet) were incorporated as a central theorizing tool of analysis in this course. The course (and successive iterations of it) was grounded in emerging discussions in history around historical thinking, consciousness, and memory.

While incorporating historical knowledge and discussion in the *Current Issues in ECE* graduate course was likely the expected (and traditional) approach an instructor might have taken, we decided to follow interpretive scholars who metaphorically wrote about ghosts, hauntings and memory as a way to offer different insights into the context of teaching and learning. Buse and Stott (1997) have noted that the metaphor of haunting and spectrality has been employed by seminal thinkers such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and most principally by French Philosopher Jacques Derrida, as an intellectual concept to theorize our indebtedness to our historical inheritances and all that it offers us in the present. Working backwards and forwards from Derrida, who first coined the term "*hauntology*," (1993/1994) - which Kenway (2008) notes "refers to the metaphysical logic of the ghost" - we unravel how "hauntology is built on problematizing the notions of presence and present"(p. 3), reviving and conjuring up the inheritances we consciously or unconsciously refuse to address and critically interrogate. Derrida (1991) provocatively suggests that "the future belongs to ghosts" (p. 349). Significantly, we are interested in the ethical imperative at the heart of Derrida's summoning of ghosts (*revenant*) and how it connects to his notion of hospitality and the receiving of the other — whether it be the ghost, the guest or the troubling curriculum text or knowledge (Derrida, & Dufourmantelle, 2000). We share Derrida's notion that "speaking to" not just "seeing" ghosts is a deeply ethical practice that is grounded in our collective responsibility to ourselves and others.[5]

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[5] In a longer paper, we will flesh out the intellectual debates (among French continental philosophers such as Derrida) in the mid-century 20th around the visual, orality and writing (Jay, 1994), and its possible relation to on-line learning and teaching.

More recently, debates in the discipline of history (some drawing on Derrida and other hermeneutic scholars) have pointed to a similar concern about paucity of historical thinking and consciousness in K-16 classrooms. Such concerns have been exacerbated by Neo-Liberal agendas in post-secondary institutions which focus on individualism, notions of progress and economic and politic advantage, aimed at producing future-oriented students. For Peter Sexias, historical consciousness is critical to how we understand the past, the present and future. The implications for our forgetting of the past in the name of the present and future are more profound than we might imagine. The past is being increasingly conceived not as a sterile progressive continuum embedded in linear time but as a space/place (beyond time) that allows us to bring something to life (Munro-Hendry, & Winfield, 2013). Claudia Ruitenberg (2009), suggests provocatively that education should be seen as a *séance - "*a place where ghosts are summoned in order that we may come to (speaking) terms with them" (p. 295). William Doll (2002) suggests that such "ethereal presences" serve to "awaken us from our slumber" (p. 23). Doll (2002) adds "it is odd to think of ghosts—ethereal, ephemeral, elusive as imagistic metaphors for the way things are, have been, or could be" (p. 27), yet imagining curricula haunted by the ghosts of the past represents "unrealized possibilities" (p. 24).

In the present paper,[6] our intent is two-fold and dialogically interrelated. First, we examine the educational historiography and veritable curiosity in curriculum ghosts and hauntings in the educational literature. We ask: what does the appearance of the dead, and allusions to ghosts and hauntings signal in contemporary curriculum scholarship? And how does it speak to weighty and ethical concern about the importance of memory and remembrance? Second, how might this be linked to digital and imaginal innovation, particularly as it is associated to multimodal, embodied and poetic aspects of on-line learning environments? We wonder: How do learning technologies such as *Blackboard* and now *Desire2Learn* both suit and enhance ghostly appearances and imagining of the past?

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[6] See also Bjartveit & Panayotidis (In press).

The metaphor of ghosts and hauntings has found a productive context in educational discussions particularly around the historical and socio-cultural discourses that underwrite all our K-12 curricula. An examination of the literature produces an eclectic array of titles for one's delectation and wonderment (Bakker, 2013; Doll, 2002; Kenway, 2008; Morton, 2013; Ruitenberg, 2009; Taylor, 2010). To speak of the practice of hauntology and the *appearance* of the dead in our classrooms and curricula is to envision historical discourses, ideas, and ideals from the past in wholly imaginative terms. And what is historical writing after all if it is not (more or less) an imaginative and poetic practice, according to historian Hayden White (1985).

Crossing Thresholds and Boundaries

The topic of ghosts and hauntings in the curriculum has admittedly an enthralling theatricality to it which elicits poetic inquiry, fictional writing and performativity, and lends itself powerfully to on-line learning. We believe that part of the success of this *haunting* was due in no small measure to the course delivery technology. In this respect, digital environments, with its disembodied and ethereal virtuality becomes a dramaturgical space that elicits and problematizes students' sense of presence and present, and their sense of the known and all knowing, invoking past worlds, voices, and ideas not yet encountered. In the western cultural tradition ghosts and hauntings have always *played* an important part in the theatre, in literature in art, and most recently in film. From classical Greek tragedies, to Shakespearian plays and to Dickens, *Christmas Carol* (1843), the appearance of ghosts has been a way in which the living have grappled with their fears, imaginings and dreams. However, Derrida implores us to not only see ghosts but to address them — to critically engage and learn from them. Owen Davies notes that ghosts have historically always been considered "purposeful." He asks: "Why would the spirits of the dead want to haunt the world of the living? There was always a reason — or to be more precise people always found a reason" (Davies, 2007 p. 4).

This innovative curricular and pedagogical practice — summoning the dead— enabled us to imagine and re-envision multiple pasts, providing diverse understandings of historical contexts, contingencies, and agents relative to present day beliefs and pedagogy. The graduate students in the course expressed curiosity and some suspicion regarding the ghost's arrival in the virtual classroom and yet they playfully engaged with Rousseau in an animated dialogue. The students risked crossing boundaries and stepped into a liminal space were they were recipients of the unforeseen. An ahistorical ECE curriculum summoned the ghost of Rousseau. As Derrida has noted: "'A place of haunting… "is a place with no phantoms. Ghosts haunt places that exist without them; they return to where they have been excluded'" (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, pp. 151-152).

 Through these ideas we invited class participants to further imagine, create and dream of innovative ways to engage their own students, raising a critical and dialogic historical awareness. In an email sent to Carolyn (Sept. 22, 2013), one student explained how her ghostly encounter was a conduit to her re-thinking and presenting historical perspectives —she planned to use similar haunting ideas in an ECE post-secondary course she instructed. We argue that in preparing students for an unknown (and digital) world we need to develop their historical thinking about the storied past. We need to support students to address the diverse and often troubling and difficult knowledge from history. As we move forward with this research we hope to forge a greater awareness of the deep and ethical regard we must hold for the past, however unpalatable or distasteful to our modern sensibilities.

Significantly, on-line learning technologies may serve as a *medium* through which to bring forward the ghosts, as they act as actual and illusory thresholds and boundaries that mark past and present, life and death, this world and the afterlife (Ellis Davidson, 1993). Our contribution to this body of work on the metaphors of ghosts and hauntings in education is to theorize and apply these complex understandings to on-line teaching and learning. We sense that ghosts are calling out from beyond the grave —

pleading to be remembered and inviting us to take up this challenge — perhaps then they will rest in peace.

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