Paper Cranes

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One cannot not speak of the scandals of an epoch. One cannot not espouse a cause. One cannot not be summoned by an obligation of fidelity.

—Hélène Cixous, 1991: vii

The question of nuclear war...challenge[s] us to reevaluate the very foundation of our speaking and living together.

—David Geoffrey Smith, 1999: 133
These quotes by Hélène Cixous (1991) and David Smith (1999), from different parts of the world, provoke me to speak of my own obligation of fidelity, to articulate my composure towards curriculum, in a syntax summoned by what “calls [me] from both within and beyond [myself] (p. 168),” so that curriculum can indeed become:

a provocation, or ‘calling’ (L. provoco, call forth)...to read and understand our own childhoods, to understand our personal and collective pasts in a truly pedagogic way, that is, in a way that contributes positively and dialogically to a new understanding of and appreciation for the world. (Smith, 1994: 193).

So I ask, from this place of the world/my world: How can I be true to the obligation to speak of the scandals of an epoch while facing, once again, and still, pedagogy and life in the nuclear shadow?

The Canadian writer Dennis Bock’s recent novel The Ash Garden (2000) begins with a young girl’s memory of August 6, 1945:

One morning toward the end of the summer they burned away my face. My little brother and I were playing on the bank of the river that flowed past the eastern edge of our old neighbourhood, on the grassy floodplain that had been my people’s home and misery for centuries. It was there I used to draw mud pictures on Mitsuo’s back with a wide-edged cherry switch, which I hid in a nearby hickory brush when it was time to go home. I liked its shape and how it felt in my hand, like a fine pen or paintbrush. I scooped up mud from the bank and shaped it
into pictures of all sorts: trees, fishes, animals... The day my parents were killed I’d decided to paint my grandfather’s face. I had turned six just a few weeks earlier. Mitsuo, my little brother, was only four years old and three months. (p. 3).

Every year, on August 6, the children of Hiroshima hang garlands of paper cranes under the statue of Sadako Sasaki who died in 1955 at the age of 12 from leukemia, the atom bomb disease. To commemorate Sadako and all those who died in the bombings, the children’s wish is engraved at the statue’s base:

This is our cry,
This is our prayer:
Peace in the world.
—Coerr & Young, 1997:?

The world in 2003 cannot not forget this cry, this prayer, as it is pushed once again to the edge of a global war. The world in 2003 has not remembered and learned from Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor, and other sites that are reminders of the very real possibility of the human race being erased like a mud picture on a young boy’s back.

As far as she knows, my daughter Charlotte’s paternal heritage goes back three generations to Hiroshima. Her father Ken is a sansei/third generation Japanese Canadian. His parents were born in Canada, sent to school in Hiroshima, settled on the BC coast, were declared “enemy aliens” after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, were interned with their young family of five in a camp in the interior, and lost all family records in the bombing of
Hiroshima. My daughter writes about herself as “a mixture of the antagonists of World War II. My mother is German and my father of Japanese ancestry. Sometimes it takes people a few minutes to think about this.”

For my daughter, Canada is the historical, cultural, and political ground she stands on, that is her father’s native soil, and that has opened up the possibility for her and her generation to speak and write from a new hybrid place and race (Trinh, 1992). This is a discourse which is mindful of the scandals and true to “…a fidelity to that which calls out to us from within the heart of what we do not understand and for which we do not at present have words” (Smith, 1994a: 167) but determined to consciously speak from a new middle place in between the old antagonistic histories, languages and cultures. In my curricular composing, I want to be reminded of both the difficulties and the possibilities of speaking and living together and enacting curriculum as a communicative collective praxis (Schrag, 1986). I want to be mindful of the questions of a teacher I work with:

How do we establish connections with students' lives, “crack” the planned curriculum and give the unplanned its necessary importance? (And what about those exams?)

Last year I picked the lines from Leonard Cohen’s *Anthem*, which Ted Aoki introduced me to, as my “theme song” when I had kids write about theirs.

*Ring that bell that still can ring*

*Forget your perfect offering*

*There is a crack, a crack in everything*

*That's how the light gets in.*

I have been trying to remember that what matters is the crack that lets the light get in and pay attention to it and act on that in my life. So that is the crack in the curriculum, the crack in the even tenor of [students’] lives, lives forever disrupted.

(And what about those exams?)

—Hasebe-Ludt, in press

When we are summoned by an obligation of fidelity to step into that crack, we cultivate the ground for a curriculum in which teachers and students can dis(e)rupt language, enter dialogues with others about their lives, school each other in thought, language, and ethical action. That is, Gadamer (1992) tells us, the very soul of hermeneutics. That is also the very soul of curriculum as verb, as political act: we cannot not become warriors in the context of war, we cannot not speak or ring the bell, we cannot not write in between languages, places, and races (Mignolo, 2000), to be provoked to speak of the scandals that touch our lives, reveal the inhuman in the human condition. I am summoned by my wish for my daughter’s children and
future generations to be able to pick up that wide-edged cherry switch and paint mud pictures on each others’ backs, without the threat of war. As teachers, we are summoned by an obligation of fidelity to offer our students a curriculum that gives them the power to wage war with words, syntax, and action, to together create a new ethos in order to be “at home in the world” (Arendt, as quoted in Kristeva, 2001), wherever we are.

Emiko, the young narrator in The Ash Garden, was responsible to get her brother home whenever they saw warplanes in the sky above Hiroshima. On that day in 1945 their lives were forever disrupted, and home as they knew it existed only in their memories from that day on. On a monument somewhere in the same city, nearby a school, stands inscribed a poem:

The large bones
Might be the teacher’s

Nearby are gathered
The smaller skulls.

—Shoda, as quoted in Treat, 1995: 195

And what about those exams?
Resources


About the Author

Erika Hasebe-Ludt is an associate professor of teacher education at the University of Lethbridge. Her background is in interdisciplinary studies in first and second language literacy, literature, and cultural studies, with degrees from the Freie Universität Berlin and the University of British Columbia. She has taught in K–12 classrooms with the Vancouver School Board and in international teacher education at Simon Fraser University. Her current research focuses on local and global literacies and discourses of teaching in between languages and cultures in postcolonial/post-structural frameworks. Together with Wanda Hurren, she is co-editor of Curriculum Intertext: Place/Language/Pedagogy (2003, Peter Lang).

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