

Radical Hope: Or, the Problem of Uncertainty in History Education

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ABSTRACT

Curricular questions of what and how knowledge should matter take on particular urgency when the knowledge at stake refers to cultural devastation in history. Whereas narratives of progress and discourses of “protecting the child” continue to dominate the public imaginary, a number of curriculum theorists have begun to explore the multiple ways in which educators have and continue to represent such histories in the classroom. This emergent literature offers a theory of pedagogy not as a set of skills to apply, but a way of asking questions about the ethical obligations, ontological crises and anxieties at work in efforts to teach and learn from difficult histories. My article elaborates on the problem of uncertainty from the vantage of two psychoanalytic thinkers who are also interested in the work of introducing the child to a world that fails: D.W. Winnicott’s discussions with mothers on the problem of “disillusionment” and Jonathan Lear’s discussion of “radical hope.” In bringing together these examples, I offer a theory of education that articulates what is hopeful about the capacity to tolerate the disillusionment of both learning from and living in difficult times. At stake is a model of history education that can survive the disillusion of the promise of certainty and still dream of tomorrow.

I begin this article with a child’s question: “Daddy, what are the Nazis?” (Stanley, 1999, p. 34). A younger sibling chimes in with another query: “Are they the bad guys?” These questions were posed by the children of Timothy Stanley, a professor of history and education at the University of Ottawa. Professor Stanley records his reply in a paper, “A Letter to My Children: Historical Memory and the Silences of Childhood.” The letter is presumably meant for his children to read once they are old enough to understand the history and the crises it evokes. But Stanley’s letter also addresses teachers. It articulates a host of conflicts and anxieties associated with the work of trying to represent historical trauma—such as genocide or slavery—in the classroom. Stanley (1999) gives voice to a number of worries that many teachers may recognize as their own: worries about what age children are old enough to learn about genocide, worries about how to speak “matter-of-factly” (p. 35) about knowledge that references

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incommensurability, worries about professional competence, about the limits of representation, and about one's dual obligation to history on the one hand and to the child's question on the other. The message that Stanley ultimately delivers to his children (and to teachers who read his published letter) is that "evil" is not a character flaw that belongs to others, whether real or imagined, but rather a human quality of aggression, which reached unprecedented heights and bone-chilling organization in the totalitarian context of Nazi Germany.¹ Even more, the message that Stanley delivers is one that positions education a significant intervention in helping children make sense of the conflicts of world history. As Stanley puts it, "Education is the only solution that I know to these dilemmas" (p. 41).

And yet, I argue that if education is to be an intervention into the complexities of history, it does not reside in the adult's capacity to provide a rational explanation that will resolve conflict. While it *is* the adult's obligation to respond to both the child and to history, I argue that responsibility does not reside in the realm of reason alone. Indeed, to focus on whether Stanley offers an adequate or inadequate explanation of "evil" is to forget the conflicts that mark historical representation and our efforts to engage it through pedagogy and curriculum. Stanley's letter performs some of these conflicts, and so raises a series of questions for history education that are also the pre-occupations of my article: What could it mean to imagine history education as a site of conflict, rather than its solution? How might teachers engage with knowledge that references social breakdown, not solely for the outcome of understanding, but to notice how pedagogy—and knowledge itself—is marked by the very trauma it attempts to work through? How might the desire for an "answer" to the child's question defend against disruptions of meaning that are also education?

My article explores these questions from the vantage of two psychoanalytic thinkers, D.W. Winnicott and Jonathan Lear, who, in different ways, theorize the work of becoming a subject as an encounter with otherness that disrupts the categories we typically use to understand the world and our place in it. I argue that something similar can be said of the work of becoming a *historical* subject: defined as a capacity to tolerate—and narrate—the disillusionment of encountering the otherness that history both references and provokes on the inside. It is a capacity that both requires hope and makes hope a radical project for history education.

Drawing on Winnicott and Lear, I offer a theory of historical pedagogy that is less about settling the questions of the past along a line of chronology or rational explanation and more about tolerating the disillusionment of reason to give us the answers it promises. This view offers a different understanding of pedagogy than debates in education that advocate for the censorship of difficult material (in the name of protecting the child's

innocence) *or* simply to speak “matter-of-factly” about such knowledge (in the name of settling the dilemmas of education and representation itself). My intervention is inspired by an established group of curriculum theorists, who, rather than choose one side or the other of this debate (to be silent or to speak neutrally) consider how experiences such as HIV/AIDS, slavery, racism, sexism, homophobia and historical trauma posit knowledge as a crisis of representation, *and* how the absence of these in curriculum is linked to historical denial (Britzman, 1998, 2003, 2006; Morris, 2001; Willinsky, 1998), heroic fantasies of nation and history (Pinar, 2004; Pinar & Kincheloe, 1991; Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000; Stanley, 2006; Walcott, 2000; Willinsky, 1998), and romantic constructions of childhood innocence (Boldt & Salvio, 2006; Silin, 1995).

Within this company, Deborah Britzman coins the term *difficult knowledge* to reference not only the traumatic content of knowledge, but also the internal conflicts—anxieties and wishes—that those representations set into motion (Britzman, 1998) and that, in turn, leave traces in pedagogy and narratives of teaching, such as in the case of Stanley’s letter (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). In the context of history education, “difficult knowledge” is difficult not only because of its inclusion of traumatic content in and otherwise-sanitized curriculum, but also because it poses a challenge to teachers and students, who, in efforts to understand such knowledge, may be confronted with affective traces of an *internal* history made from primal helplessness, disillusionment and crises of authority and (not) knowing.² At stake here is a view of historical knowledge that is touched by the very anxieties it hopes to settle in answering “matter-of-factly” a child’s burning question. “Difficult knowledge,” then, raises questions for education about the limits of reason in thinking about the breakdown of meaning in history and our efforts to make sense of it, and, I will add, “difficult knowledge” also poses questions about the disillusionment of certainty as the grounds for both learning and hope.

In the next section, I begin with Winnicott’s theory of disillusionment, and in particular, the published transcripts of a radio broadcast he hosted with a group of mothers. The transcripts are important to my discussion because they narrate some of the pleasures and problems that accompany our best efforts to introduce to the child a world that precedes (and can interrupt) the illusions s/he brings to it. The public format of the radio show represents Winnicott’s characteristic attempt to bring psychoanalytic concepts—such as disillusionment—out of the clinic and to a broader audience. In the spirit of his effort, I further extend Winnicott’s radio broadcast of his disillusionment theory to raise questions about the relation between “difficult knowledge,” teaching and learning. What is at stake for adults and children in encountering knowledge of a world that challenges existing understandings of it? Can we tune in to Winnicott’s radio program, originally broadcast for parents, to learn something about the psychological dynamics of teaching and learning from “difficult knowledge”?

Disillusionment: Broadcasting a Condition of Being

Intermittently between 1939 and 1962, Winnicott hosted a radio show that brought his particular brand of object-relations theory to the public and specifically, to parents. This was an era pre-occupied with the child (Steedman, 1995).³ On the heels of the 19th-century discovery of “childhood” as worthy of both emotional care and intellectual study, Winnicott was steeped in a tradition that saw childhood as something that required astute adult attention. Of course, this pre-occupation has not gone away; Stanley’s letter to his children is itself evidence. It is also significant to note that Winnicott was part of the object-relations school of psychoanalytic thought, a discourse and practice oriented around the mother/baby relation and which rose to prominence after the war. As Adam Phillips (1988) puts it, “In British psychoanalysis after the war there was not so much a return to Freud, as there had been in France with the work of Lacan, as a return to the Mother” (p. 10). Winnicott’s work, and his radio show in particular, is characterized by the period in which it was produced: the promise of childhood, the return to the mother and the anxieties of a nation at—and after—war (Phillips, 1988). It is in this context that Winnicott’s public remarks were broadcast, and in which the public tuned in, week after week.

Winnicott used radio to broadcast three unconscious movements that characterize the mother/baby relationship: what he referred to as illusion, disillusion and re-illusion. These were the grounds of meaning-making. The first, illusion, is rooted in omnipotence and can be described as an unconscious belief that one has created the world that is already there. The illusion of omnipotence is born from the mother’s close adaptation to the infant’s needs, or the “good breast.” In presenting her breast in good-enough time to quell the baby’s pangs of hunger, the mother performs at least two key tasks. First, the milk on offer (if accepted) fulfills the baby’s physical needs. But it also performs an emotional function. Because the baby cannot yet distinguish the inside from the outside, there is an unconscious belief that the baby has her-/himself created the satisfying sense of fullness—goodness—afforded by the mother. It is in this intermediate space, where the mother’s offering and the baby’s satisfaction are experienced as the *same thing*, that omnipotence is born. What the baby experiences as omnipotence, the mother experiences as a “full responsibility” to provide an outside environment that is responsive to and that fits the child’s needs (Winnicott, 1960/2002, p. 118).

Winnicott notes a version of “full responsibility” when the mothers discuss their role in creating an environment that enables the child to play, somewhat protected, in a world that might otherwise burst the bubble of omnipotence. One mother puts it frankly when she says, “At twenty-one months, you can put things out of their reach—they probably can’t climb” (as cited in Winnicott, 1960/2002, p. 110). Today, parents may recognize this as “baby-proofing” a house or a room, which refers to the task of

organizing a physical environment in ways that remove objects that could potentially become obstacles to the child's exploration of the space. Full responsibility is oriented toward the creation and maintenance of an environment in which the child is able to explore, without disruption or interference. Winnicott (1953/1971) articulates the pact between mother and child that sustains this realm:

Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: "Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?" The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated. (p. 12, original emphasis)

The illusion is that the child has conceived of, and *created* what is already there. In the phase of "full responsibility," the mother does not question this illusion and, where possible, creates an environment that (she believes) the child can safely claim (and tolerate) as her/his own discovery.

Teachers, too, may feel a sense of "full responsibility" in trying to create safe environments in which children may find the world. As you will recall, Stanley struggled with a felt obligation—perhaps a "full responsibility"—to provide such an environment for his children. Indeed, Stanley articulates this sense of "full responsibility" when he worries about how the "difficult knowledge" of Holocaust history will disrupt the "innocence" that he imagines to be his children's internal experience:

At my patriarchal best, if that's not an oxymoron, I want to keep you innocent of such knowledge . . . [but] until when? Age twelve? Sixty-five? Someday, I know you must know, or you will be unarmed to meet the future. But not now, not while you are so young, when? (pp. 35–36)

As Winnicott argues, adults *do* have a responsibility to create environments that children can safely find, but as Stanley's opening quip also suggests, this responsibility is fueled by its own fantasies. That is, as much as "full responsibility" sustains the child's illusion of omnipotence, it also sustains the *adult* illusion of childhood innocence: Not that this is bad news. For Winnicott, such illusions are both defensive *and* creative. They stave off anxiety just long enough to inaugurate thinking, but only, and here is the condition, if we do not remain stuck there.

But no sooner do we find Stanley's sense of "full responsibility" than we find a second layer of response, this time to the outside world and to history. And with this second layer, we have arrived at Winnicott's second time of disillusionment. In articulating the concept of disillusionment, Winnicott (1953) begins with a warning. He suggests that the mother's orientation to sustain the child's illusion, however necessary, can be maladaptive when it is carried on too long:

[T]he infant can be disturbed by a close adaptation to need that is continued too long, not allowed its natural decrease, since exact adaptation resembles magic and the object that behaves perfectly becomes no better than a hallucination. (p. 11)

The important point here is that if the world is to signify as something other than a fulfillment of wish, then it must fail to sustain illusion. In other words, failure is a condition of growth to the extent that it pierces the young ego's bubble of omnipotence and confronts one with a loss of certainty of being, a loss that de-stabilizes the illusion of omnipotence. Winnicott gave the name disillusionment to the child's capacity to tolerate environmental failure. Significantly, disillusionment does not refer to a child's apathy but the opposite: It refers to the child's capacity to survive a world that exceeds and can oppose one's expectations of it.

Disillusionment therefore sets into motion a different way of being in the world. As Pitt (2003, p. 91) puts it, disillusionment opens up a way of "more fully experiencing" the difficult fact of being human. Its lessons may include a full range of difficult experiences: that we are born into a world we did not choose, we are not all-powerful or all-knowing, we cannot be the masters of ourselves or the world in which we live, our beliefs can be mistaken and we cannot predict either the future or the outcomes of our intentions. In other words, disillusionment reveals a world that disrupts our capacity to grasp hold of it, a world that cannot be mastered in advance through knowledge or pedagogy.

History education may involve a similar process of disillusionment to the extent that it entails encountering the ethical failure of environments past. Another feature of this failure involves our own failed capacity to respond adequately to events that have already happened. As Emmanuel Lévinas (1981/1998) reminds us, there is a belated quality of our arrival to the scene of history; invariably, we are "already late and guilty for being late" (p. 87). Just as Lévinas reminds us of guilt that can accompany our belated arrival to the scene of history, Britzman (2000) highlights the sense of helplessness that being late also implies:

What makes trauma traumatic is the incapacity to respond adequately, accompanied by feelings of profound helplessness and loss, and a sense that no other person or group will intervene. What makes trauma traumatic is the loss of self and other. (p. 202)

What is difficult about "difficult knowledge" is that it confronts teachers with feelings of helplessness and loss, and the impossibility of undoing what has already happened. And even more, a child's startling questions about historical trauma may lift the veil on some of the illusions that drive teaching; illusions of self-mastery, or perfect authority, or enlightenment, for instance. Indeed, Stanley's children disillusioned the idea that "facts" could resolve the complexities of history.

And so even if, in Winnicott's archive, it is the adult who disrupts the child's illusions of omnipotence, Britzman and Stanley remind us that adults, too, are subject to disillusionment. Britzman (2003) notices a certain pain in the disillusionment of the adult's investment in knowledge:

It is painful to entertain the possibility that however one might try to pin down meanings by such stabilizing concepts as ideology, experience, identity, or culture, for instance, that one is still not in control of intentions, of the symbolic reach of representation and, of course, the unconscious. (p. 126)

Transposed to the context of historical pedagogy, I would like to re-write Britzman's argument to read: It is painful to entertain the possibility that however one might try to pin down meanings through pedagogy or curriculum, we can control neither the reach of historical representation, nor the psychological conflicts they invoke and through which it must pass on the way to becoming meaningful. That is, no matter how meticulous one's pedagogy and no matter how well planned one's response, the adult cannot predict the child's question, nor the meanings that child will make from the knowledge one offers in response.

And so despite the promise of knowledge, progression or development in historical understanding, students will make, discard, resist and struggle over knowledge in quite startling and unpredictable ways. The point here is that we cannot avoid the surprising force of knowledge and its signification—embodied in a child's question—by claiming refuge in a programmatic pedagogy. Indeed, the educational illusion that there can be a perfect fit between pedagogy and understanding may defend against the messy realities of knowledge and our anxious efforts to teach and to learn it (Ellsworth, 1997). The difficult news is that Winnicott asks us to entertain a disillusionment theory for education in which the possibility of "more fully experiencing" (Pitt, 2003, p. 91) historical knowledge means having to tolerate the loss of certainty in the very effort to know. And yet, surely disillusionment cannot be the end of the story, for there must be hope for the capacity to represent *something* of the world, even as representation must fail to fully represent that relation. What might hope look like if not simply a return to the familiar wish of and for enlightenment?

These two questions bring me to the third time of Winnicott's emotional trajectory: the time of re-illusion. If disillusionment refers to the loss of past strategies of being and thinking about the world, then re-illusionment refers to the capacity to symbolize, through word or concept, the self in relation to the outside world that fails. In noticing this third time, Winnicott is suggesting that the "No" of disillusionment is just the beginning. Indeed, the pedagogical aim to "disillusion others" may be the biggest illusion of them all. Hopefully, there will come a time after disillusion that involves both surviving failure and yet, still finding creative ways to think and to live there. Returning to Winnicott's (1960/2002) radio programme,

one mother takes a rather brazen step into the realm of re-illusion when she articulates the value of “playing with fire,” as it were:

- Take matches—they’ll get a sort of thing that matches are the most interesting thing in the house because you’ve been so “No” about them. I think—I think you’ve got to let them play with matches.
- Has anybody tried teaching them to strike matches by holding them away . . . ?
- . . . but that fascinates all the more.
- I don’t know, I think it’s an awfully good approach, though, to show children just what does happen if they go on playing with them.
- Even to the extent of burning their fingers literally?
- I don’t know—I suppose that’s a bit hard, but if they can get near enough to realize that it is hot and it could be painful and they can learn from other things what heat is. (Winnicott, 1960/2002, pp. 110–111)

Winnicott’s concern with “heat” in this example is not just that the mother teaches the child a new word. For Winnicott, language represents an emotional achievement: Through language, one is able to tolerate the experience of losing one’s footing in the world. Language, then, approaches Winnicott’s third time of re-illusion, a transitional space, where one can symbolize aspects of the environment that fail, without having to be literally burned or having to abide by the “No” that prohibits any risky engagement at all. Whether in the form of a letter, or concept (such as evil or heat), or, as Lear will suggest, in the form of a dream, re-illusion allows us to transform the psychical losses of being into narrative form where they can be described, interpreted, and, if all goes well, tolerated. In the time of re-illusion, where words digest the rawness of experience, we can, as Judith Robertson (2000) puts it, “articulate authority in a potentially frustrating space” (p. 210).

Both students and teachers, I think, reside within Winnicott’s three times of illusion, disillusion and re-illusion. To teach history is to introduce a world that can startle the student’s (omnipotent) illusions of self and other in the world. But even in that very moment, the student’s vulnerability finds the vulnerability of the adult, and so the teacher, too, may be faced with her own disillusionment in the very effort to instruct others (Britzman, 1998). For as much as historical learning is about gaining insight, it is also a painful labour of making a relation to that which disrupts the self, or that, as Stanley (1999) puts it, “we would rather forget or not know” (p. 41).

Winnicott’s time of “re-illusionment” adds a third argument to debates in education that tend to swirl between the first two: either censoring difficult material or disillusioning the child by speaking “matter-of-factly” about histories of genocide. Both positions assume the child’s innocence—either to be protected or disrupted. And both positions presume a collapse between experience and representation because to speak of genocide is to

literally expose the child to that trauma, for worse or for better. And yet, Winnicott opens up a space of interpretation between these two positions, where we might be curious about how words stand in for visceral experiences that we did not directly undergo and, in turn, the visceral experience of choosing language to describe events that always exceed our linguistic efforts.

To further explore what Winnicott's theory means for reading and learning from history, I turn now to Jonathan Lear's study of *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. As we will see, Lear changes the usual question of how education can settle the future by learning from the mistakes of the past to consider what history can teach us about the ways that meaning emerges precisely where language fails, or exceeds attempts to make closure (Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992). For Lear, this possibility cannot be achieved through wish or reason; what is required is radical hope.

Beyond Wishes and Reasons: Radical Hope

Lear (2006) is startled upon reading the following testimony of Plenty Coups, the last chief of the Crow nation:

... when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. Besides, you know that part of my life as well as I do. You saw what happened to us when the Buffalo went away. (p. 2)

What haunts Lear are the words *After this nothing happened*. And his book, *Radical Hope* is an effort to understand what Plenty Coups might have meant in uttering those words. The puzzling nature of the statement becomes clearer if we turn to the history books, where we find the material fact that after the buffalo went away, lots of things happened to the Crow, including the forced confinement of the tribe onto reservations. After the buffalo went away, it is not, then, that literally nothing happened; quite the contrary, this was a time marked by rapid change and profound loss. On the reservation, life as the Crow knew it became something different, fundamentally different, than could ever have been predicted or imagined. And so Lear's question is made from a conflict: In light of the fact of change and loss, how can we read Plenty Coups as saying something true about the world, that "after this, nothing happened"?

One objection that needs to be met right away concerns Lear's reading of Plenty Coups as its own example of European appropriation, this time, traveling under the name of history. The danger is that historical interpretation becomes a form of rhetoric, a misuse of power, which renders the experiences of past others within present analytic frameworks. For Dominik LaCapra (2004), history must grapple with the problem of power, and in particular, the risk of "an abuse of interpretive power or an extreme

disempowerment of the object of study” (p. 78). When it comes to the study of Crow history in particular, the danger is that interpretation risks repeating the very conditions of power that enabled the aggressive assimilation of traditional ways of knowing in the first place. That is, historical interpretation risks becoming a form of rhetoric when it imposes an epistemological certainty that subsumes the experiences of past others from the perspective of the present. Drawing on LaCapra, we need, then, to keep in mind the cultural lens that Lear brings to *Plenty Coups*, and of course, the potential “abuse of interpretive power” that haunts his (and perhaps all) historical interpretations.

And yet there is another implication at stake here. That is, it would seem to me that to avoid the rhetorical violence of which LaCapra speaks (see also Derrida, 1978), we need to loosen up the complicity between epistemological certainty and historical interpretation. Returning to LaCapra, loosening this knot requires a kind of “heuristic readiness” on the part of the historian to view the work of interpretation as something other than an un-mediated avenue to the other’s experience (p. 79). At stake instead is an openness to the contingency of meaning, what Hannah Arendt (2003, p. 63) calls a “natural aversion” to existing categories of knowledge that announce the certainty of any one interpretation. Lear (2006, p. 7) enacts precisely this kind of readiness, I think, for he is not interested in speaking on behalf of the Crow, not in pronouncing “the deepest truths” of Crow history and experience. Quite the contrary, and to return to the quote that begins this section, Lear’s study begins precisely where *Plenty Coups*’s testimony unsettles and exceeds the desire for narrative closure.

Lear looks to the example of *Plenty Coups*, then, not to determine “actuality,” but to highlight a possibility that we might prefer to forget: namely, that what matters to us most—our ways of doing things in the world—are at constant risk of coming undone, and becoming our undoing. Lear (2006) poses this terrible possibility as a question: “If [breakdown] is a possibility, it is a possibility we all must live with—even when our culture is robust, even if we never have to face its becoming actual. It is a possibility that marks us as human. How should we live with it?” (p. 7). Lear’s question raises a provocation for educators as well. That is, if history references breakdown as a possibility that we all must live with (and indeed some more than others), what could it mean for education to live with—and indeed represent—this “difficult knowledge”? What might Lear’s study teach us about the vulnerabilities of trying to teach and learn from “difficult knowledge”?

For Lear, the capacity to live with the possibility of breakdown requires the complex affect of hope, which, as a close cousin to courage, is significantly different from mere optimism or wishing. Both optimism and wishing defend against reality and the disillusionment that comes from engaging it.⁴ We are in the realm of hope—and not mere wishing—when we make meaning in relation to a world without the illusions we use to protect ourselves from what is difficult.

Perhaps the biggest wish is that we could somehow un-do past suffering, that European contact was not the violent project it was, and that, by learning from the mistakes of the past, we can one day find ways to live ethically across differences without conflict. Lévinas (1982/1998), however, finds hope in the opposite trajectory, that is, in the *impossibility* of making from past trauma a moral lesson; what is hopeful, for Lévinas, is to preserve the “uselessness of suffering,” as opposed to rendering it within an epistemological framework, a “pedagogical moment” (p. 92). It is not that we ought to do away with all efforts to make meaning from “difficult knowledge.” What is needed, I think, is a theory of meaning-making that does not at the same time curtail the excesses and disruptions of historical trauma. Especially in the context of education, and the aim to help students make sense of past suffering, in this regard, I think Lear offers an important theory of meaning-making that resists epistemological certitude and so challenges educators to consider how both pedagogy and learning are touched (and so constituted) by uncertainty, disruption and conflict in ways that reason, or a “pedagogical moment,” cannot school away. Lear names this possibility radical hope.⁵

To illustrate radical hope and consider its implications for theories of historical pedagogy and learning, I turn to a final example that features, once again, the adult/child relationship. In this example, 9-year-old Plenty Coups has just returned from his foray into the forest to dream in the early days of European contact, when not much was known about how that contact would affect, and ultimately destroy, Crow ways of life and tradition. Lear’s analysis of the dream has much to teach readers about the prophetic meaning of dreams in Crow culture, for its stormy content foreshadows the on-coming vortex of European assimilation. At the same time, Lear’s reading of the dream offers a window through which to explore the work of symbolization in the context of encountering—and having to survive—historical rupture. Of course, there is a key difference between living in the midst of historical rupture (which was Plenty Coups’s experience) and in its aftermath (which is Lear’s position, as well as that of Stanley and his children). But, taking my cue from Lear, I am interested in exploring how the example of Plenty Coups might instruct us about the fragility of our efforts to teach the subject of history, which, in light of the rationalized ways in which we try to explain history to students, makes his analysis both compelling and risky—itsself “difficult knowledge”—for history education.

The Dream as “Difficult Knowledge” for History Education

Lear (2006, p. 66) estimates that the year was “1855 or perhaps 1856” when Plenty Coups dreamed his dream. At the time, Crow elders believed that 9-year-old Plenty Coups was capable of producing a dream image that would lead them through the storm of European assimilation, a storm that

would uproot their ties to tradition, culture, and history. Plenty Coups did not let his people down. The young chief dreamed of a “man-person” who wears a buffalo robe and whose shake of the ceremonial rattle calls forth an endless herd of buffalo, cows and calves that emerge from a hole in the ground. A citation from Plenty Coups sets the dreamscape: “Everywhere I looked, great herds of buffalo were going in every direction, and still others were pouring out of the hole in the ground to travel on the wide plains” (p. 69). But just as quickly as the animals set foot outside the hole, they disappear. Plenty Coups continues: “When at last they ceased coming out of the hole in the ground, all were gone, *all!*” (p. 69, emphasis in original). The “Man-person” then points back to the hole and once again, out comes a plethora of bulls, cows and calves, as Plenty Coups puts it, “past counting.” But it turns out that this second group of animals is not at all recognizable. Plenty Coups describes these returning creatures as, “rather strange animals from a foreign planet” (Lear, 2006, p. 70). Lear describes a final feature of the dream: There is a “tremendous storm” that knocks down all the trees in the forest except one, which houses “the lodge of the Chickadee.” An old man stands amidst the wreckage and that the “Man-person” identifies as an older, chief Plenty Coups.

Partly because of the meaning of dreams in Crow culture, and also because of 9-year-old Plenty Coups’s position as a future chief, the elders of the tribe interpret the dream as prophetic, as communicating a warning about the White man’s increasingly invasive encroachment upon the tribe, its land and ways of life. Lear cites an excerpt of Yellow Bear’s interpretation:

The dream of Plenty-coups means that the white man will take and hold this country and that their Spotted-buffalo will cover the plains. He was told to think for himself, to listen, to learn to avoid disaster by the experiences of others. He was advised to develop his body but not to forget his mind. . . . By listening as the Chickadee listens we may escape this and keep our lands. (p. 72)

As much as the dream points to “a huge storm” on the horizon and signals the importance of the Chickadee, the precise forms these symbols would take—whether deforestation or treaty negotiations—could not yet be conceptualized. And for this reason, the dream referenced a future that had to remain uncertain. According to Lear, “There was much about the dream that had, for them, to remain enigmatic” (p. 75).

The dream and its interpretation raises a key point for understanding historical pedagogy and learning, and which requires a brief return to Winnicott’s times of disillusionment and re-illusion. As described earlier, disillusionment references a time when the existing concepts we have to explain the world (and our place in it) are stretched beyond what the meanings they initially reference. And re-illusion transforms the losses of disillusionment into symbolic form, where they can be contemplated, and if all goes well, imagined anew.

Plenty Coups's dream embodies precisely these times of disillusionment and re-illusion, for it symbolizes an experience of rupture that could not yet be known at the time, but that was nonetheless anxiously felt. As Lear puts it, "It is not unreasonable to suppose that a sensitive nine-year-old was attuned to the anxiety in his community and that he was able to dream what he was not yet in a position to think. And he dreamt it on the tribe's behalf" (p. 77). Plenty Coups's dream can be viewed as a work of symbolization—and indeed hope—because it gave expression to the breakdown of meaning while simultaneously offering up symbols, such as the Chickadee, that signaled a future that was still possible in the context of such devastation. And the elder's interpretation of it seemed to offer a way for the tribe to "metabolize its shared anxiety" about a future that was far beyond what they could consciously imagine or prevent at the time. In other words, the dream gives expression to a radically different future, the details of which could not yet be known, and it is here that Lear locates radical hope.

A key implication for history education may involve creating spaces for symbolization, where teachers and students can make from the affective force of "difficult knowledge" a meaningful narrative where we can consider how conflicts on the outside hook into, echo and transform conflicts on the inside. And so as much as historical knowledge represents the outside world, the work of symbolizing our encounters with such knowledge asks us to confront an internal world made from desire, illusion, and anxiety and defense. Symbolization, then, offers a way of "more fully experiencing" (Pitt, 2003, p. 91) the conflicts that arise in relation to historical representation, conflicts that also disillusion the desire for linear progression in learning and the lure of mastery in teaching. To disillusion these old narratives is not simply to give up on the possibility of either teaching or learning from history. Quite the contrary, it is to attend to points in narration—whether the narration of history or efforts to teach and learn from it—where desire, conflict or uncertainty break through. All these disruptions—breakdowns and breakthroughs—are qualities of what Britzman (1998) and Pitt (2003) have called "difficult knowledge." From the vantage of this concept, we may need to reconsider uncertainty as a condition of history education, and why, in turn, it requires the teacher's and the student's radical hope.

On the Problem of Uncertainty: A Question of Hope for Education

This article centres on a curiosity about particularities of the relations between people—between Stanley and his children, between mother and child and between Plenty Coups and his elders—as saying something significant about the radical sense of uncertainty of coming to know the world as historical. Albeit in very different ways, Stanley, the mothers in Winnicott's archive and Lear remind us that "difficult knowledge" cannot

be settled through chronology or reason, but rather exceeds any such order or effort to understand. I have argued that historical pedagogy and learning from “difficult knowledge” operate on similar grounds. As discussed, even when we begin with the fact of trauma in history (whether this is the Holocaust or post-contact Aboriginal history), learning is never as straightforward or “matter-of-fact” as teachers might wish.

Historical knowledge becomes meaningful *because* it hooks into and passes through conflicted and embodied relations that education cannot school away. This means that teachers may never be able to settle, once and for all, a child’s burning questions. And we may never know for sure how students will use outside contexts in their efforts to make significance of the world (whether to strike a match or to conjure up a dream). Indeed, from a psychoanalytic vantage, the idea that past knowledge is something to be acquired, and that “arms” children against the conflicts in the future is necessarily defensive. For when we emphasize the promise of reason and progress through education, what is forgotten is its underside: the conflicts, passions, anxieties and uncertainties that fuel questions in the first place. Forgotten is the idea that both teaching and becoming a subject of history, what Ken Osborne (2006, p. 128) calls a “historically situated being” *is* an unruly process.

Stanley’s letter is significant in this regard, not only because it articulates his efforts to disillusion his children with knowledge, but also because he begins to symbolize his own disillusionment with the promise of reason to settle the uncertainties that his children’s questions opened, and where Lear locates radical hope. Putting pen to paper, Stanley arrives at a theory of history education that is a way of asking questions about our worldly obligations and the psychical complexities that accompany them. In particular, Stanley (1999) learns that his fantasies defended against the uncertainties that his children’s questions set into motion:

To have given you full answers would have screamed difference, decentered my location, destabilized my manliness, established my powerlessness. It would have challenged the categories of my existence. Yet to have given lesser answers would also have constituted my incompetence both as a parent and as a witness to history. Your questions caught me, because I knew that my fantasy of your childhood innocence was just that, a fantasy. (p. 36)

If Stanley is to take the side of hope, there is a need to symbolize the disillusion of the promise of certainty of knowledge through education. Indeed, there is a need to work through the anxiety of his own insignificance in encountering histories of devastation, as opposed to retreating to fantasies—illusions—that defend against it. In working through this anxiety, adults *do* still have an obligation to help children think critically about historical representation. What I am suggesting is the need to deepen our vocabulary for describing the conflicts that “difficult knowledge” raise for teachers—conflicts between knowing too much and saying

too little, between what can be explained and what interrupts reason, and between the crises of living in the midst of historical breakdown and the belated effort to represent it to others.

All these conflicts are themselves qualities of “difficult knowledge” that pose a paradox for history education, or rather, history education *as* a paradox: In representing “difficult knowledge” of the past, teachers may be invoking the very dilemmas that we hope to resolve through that curriculum. The question for teachers in this context is not how to avoid conflict or school it away, but rather, how to think about historical pedagogy as affected by the conflicts and losses it seeks to represent through knowledge. Whether the loss of past others, or, as the letter and the dream show, the loss of concepts through which to fully explain a world that fails, history education is, in this context, much more than a lesson in chronology or cognition; it is, fundamentally, a psychical labour of symbolizing the internal conflicts that both complicate and constitute our attachments to the world. And while these conflicts threaten to derail set paths of teaching and learning, their symbolization may help us move toward Lear’s notion of radical hope, which, unlike the wish to rescue ourselves (and history) through reason, confronts teachers and students with uncertainty as the very grounds of meaning-making, not its opposite. What remains, I think, is the question of whether history education can itself learn from “difficult knowledge” and so survive the loss of the promise of reason, and still dream of tomorrow.

NOTES

1. Here is how Stanley (1999) represents his response:

Nazis were, are [I corrected myself], people who believe that if you are blond-haired and blue-eyed, and especially white skinned, you should rule the world and that everyone else should either be your slave or be killed. In the 1930s after coming to power in Germany, they took over Austria, and many other countries in Europe. . . . Although they do not control governments anymore, Nazis are still around. And no, they are not “bad guys” like Darth Vader or Cruella De Vil. They were pretty well ordinary people like you and me. But what they did was murder millions of people, mainly Jewish people, because they weren’t blond-haired and blue-eyed, and what they did was evil. Indeed it is the essence of evil. (pp. 41–42)

I gather Stanley’s response into an endnote—and not in the body of the text—because my concern is not its adequacy (or inadequacy), but rather the ambiguities and uncertainties of meaning that tend to be forgotten in the desire for an “answer” to history’s difficult questions. It is fruitful, in other words, to imagine historical pedagogy not only as an application of curriculum or, in answer to a question, but a work of symbolizing the internal conflicts that historical knowledge sets into motion, and that provoke questions of history in the first place.

2. The emphasis on history’s affective traces works against the contemporary turn to historical consciousness in education, where the grounds of knowledge are

primarily rational, and where the conditions of learning require the application of critical-thinking skills to analyze the validity of representations and to build from evidence plausible historical accounts (Seixas, 2006). Of course, the aim for critical thought is important and is itself reasonable. But to the extent that history can also evidence the irrational ends (and so limits) of human reason, what is also required, I think, is a theory of history education that can notice the conflicts—wishes and anxieties—that both obstruct and constitute our very efforts to make sense of the world as historical.

3. With producer Janet Quigley, the early talks were published in a pamphlet entitled, *Getting to Know Your Baby*. A second pamphlet, *The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby*, consisted of a series of later talks (ca. 1949–1950) produced by Isa Benzie. Both publications went quickly out of print. As a response to requests for the re-issue of these pamphlets, Tavistock published *The Child and the Family* in 1957 under the editorship of Janet Hardenberg. A few more talks, mainly concerning wartime evacuation, were included in the companion volume, *The Child and the Outside World*. In 1964, Penguin published selections of both volumes under the title, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*.
4. Lear (2006) describes this defensive position this way: “Instead of facing up to the challenges that the world presents, one stubbornly clings to a dreamlike fantasy—as a way of wishfully avoiding those challenges” (p. 116). This sounds a lot like the omnipotent thinking that characterizes Winnicott’s first time of illusion. Hope, on the other hand, offers a different way of responding to the world and in particular, the difficult fact of vulnerability that defines the human condition. Lear understands vulnerability to be a direct consequence of our existence as “finite erotic creatures” (p. 119). Finitude refers to a whole family of vulnerabilities that remind me of Winnicott’s second time of disillusionment: that we are born into a world we did not choose, we are not all-powerful or all-knowing, we cannot be the masters of ourselves or the world in which we live, our beliefs can be mistaken and we cannot predict either the future or the outcomes of our intentions. It is the erotic component of Lear’s human formula that reaches into Winnicott’s third time of re-illusion, or hope, for it suggests that even under the condition of lack, we nonetheless reach out to the world in the desire to grasp (or re-find) what we understand to be meaningful, or satisfying or good.
5. It is important to note that Lear’s point is *not* that the Crow would have experienced European contact as hopeful; rather, he is interested in considering what is hopeful about the ways the Crow coped (and survived)—in both ordinary and surprising ways—in this destructive context.

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