

From the Margins of Learning and Teaching: Changing the way

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From the Margins of Learning and Teaching

Mary Lindsay¹

The teaching of history in schools has always been precarious; however, it is only now with the awakening of historical consciousness and its dispersion within mainstream society becoming recognized as such. However, I – consigned as a societal *Other* – have been alert to the dubious nature of many a transmitted history for most of my life.

I grew up at the margins of Canadian society. Its history placed me there. My father paid the Chinese Head Tax to enter the country. My mother was prohibited entry until the Exclusion Act was repealed. They found belonging within an enclave of those who shared their history, traditions, customs, and language.

Our Chinatown was not one of the large, bustling centres found in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, or Victoria. Instead, it was, in my dialect, a Chinese street – *Hong ngin gai* – and a short one at that. Outside of that small place, I knew English language-speaking people held sway.

For most of my elementary school years, my brother's face and mine were the only Chinese ones, or ones of any color for that matter. In grade 5 the history textbook *Pirates and Pathfinders* (Hamilton, 1963) heralded Marco Polo, discoverer of Cathay, and uncovered what China/Chinese meant. That was the power of history, of a text: a written record of who, what, where, why, how – a singular, omniscient narrative.

At the time, I could not have articulated that history was written from a Eurocentric perspective. I am unsure if my teachers had that level of consciousness. After all, Canada was part of the *dominion* – one of several areas demarcated by the pink of the British empire on the world map. Text, teacher, school – status quo – were without challenge. However, what I did know for myself was that in each chapter of *Pirates and Pathfinders*, people of color – non-Europeans – were not the discoverers, but the discovered: discoveries made significant, or insignificant, according to European values.

¹ Currently, I research, write and live on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Xwsepsum Nations). Their relationships with the land – historical and contemporary – continue to create and inform a space for my work and play. I am indebted.

My years in secondary school and university brought me into contact with more diverse students. Although we did not compare accounts of what we gathered from our own lived experiences with what we were formally taught by institutions, our ensuing silences in class affirmed what we collectively understood: what was being taught was the dominant society version of the story where our peoples – the collective societal *Other* – were dispossessed of agency.

With reference to the beginnings of Canada’s grand narrative, Stanley (2010) observes the fixation on Europeans despite different indigenous groups far surpassing them in numbers for the first hundred years of colonization and settlement. Despite this population disparity, the acts by Europeans are still recorded as history and receive the greatest attention in the grand narrative of Canada.

Now in British Columbia, Canada, the Ministry of Education has completed implementation of new Social Studies curricula (September, 2019) where inquiry-based learning is to be predicated on six concepts of historical thinking: historical perspective-taking, use of primary source evidence, historical significance, cause and consequence, the ethical dimension of history, and continuity and change. These historical thinking concepts further illuminate the critical thinking noted in previous iterations of the curricula and unlike the education of my earlier years invite interrogation of a reported history. At the same time, certain aspects of historical thinking may also subjugate, omit, or continue to distort the history of the *Other*.

In historical thinking, historical perspective-taking requires comprehension of the differences between “us” in the present and those in the past. Who are the present-day us? The inference is that we of today share similar worldviews. If not, the present-day us are capable and willing to adopt different stances.

According to Grever and Adriaansen (2019), this attitude of “multiperspectivity” requires learning about the limits of one’s own assumptions and biases about the past. Peggy McIntosh (1990) may have questioned if such openness was likely. She was of the opinion that “whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege” (p. 1). Now, three decades later, the “invisible knapsack of privilege” that McIntosh described is still more visible to some and troublesome to others.

By way of example as to how this phenomenon unfolds for teachers in classrooms, I was hired to teach a graduate course in what was then referred to as “Aboriginal” issues in education shortly after I completed a doctorate. At the time, there was a paucity of credentialed Indigenous applicants. However, I believe the Indigenous community within the university vetted my hire, not on my subject matter knowledge alone, but because they were of the opinion that people of color are often more aware of privilege than those who are privileged and for that reason, I was likely to be more understanding of their worldviews.

In contrast, a sentiment held by some non-Indigenous teachers teaching courses about Indigenous peoples is a “fear of getting something wrong” (Hennig & Paetkau, 2018): mispronouncing words, not knowing protocol, misrepresenting cultural practices – in essence, maintaining the colonizing, instead of decolonial, curriculum. While the hesitancy of these non-Indigenous teachers has potentially positive implications for their students insofar as the teachers are thoughtful about the content, it is also a deviation from the comfortable position afforded by a singular truth and its transmission.

Meanwhile, uncovering the history of the societal *Other* so these stories can be taught has not been without its challenges. As a researcher, I investigated the relationship between Indigenous and Chinese peoples in BC from the mid-1800s to the twentieth century. When searching for primary source or any evidence, I found little: some intermarriages, transactional agreements, disputes over gambling debts, illegal liquor sales, etc. The available evidence could suggest that Indigenous and Chinese peoples enter the record often labelled as criminals – perpetrators *and* victims – especially when they got together. Although this dearth of information was disappointing, it was not surprising considering whose records and ephemera are collected in archives.

Carter (2006) argues that archives are not neutral places. Instead, they highlight particular narratives, recorded in certain ways by certain groups. In this way, marginalized groups are denied entry into the historical records, and thus the archives, and, more importantly, from the social memory of western society that favours textual records and physical evidence to remember.

Even when gaps or omissions in archives are acknowledged, filling them is a challenge. I found that when conducting oral histories with Indigenous and Chinese peoples about their inter-group relationships in the past, they can be poor informants. They acknowledge engagement between Indigenous and Chinese peoples – casual encounters, regular transactions, long-term intimacies – but they do not necessarily separate these interactions from the fabric of their daily lives where benefit, detriment, reciprocity, and mutuality are interwoven. These oral history participants may have been representative of Ricoeur’s point of *having* a history but not thinking of themselves as *making* history (cited in Grever & Adriaansen, 2019). Alternatively, their brevity in responding may have been related to the use of silence within their particular cultures, or even to an unwillingness to share information (Carter, 2006). On the surface, though, their inter-group relationships were seemingly of no consequence. Similarly, in researching Black history mid-1800’s British Columbia, author Crawford Kilian, concludes that Blacks “succeeded in getting on with their ordinary lives” in spite of enormous adversity (Storyhive, 2019). Further understanding the big picture of British Columbia is not possible without knowing the contribution that Black settlers, just like Chinese settlers and Indigenous peoples, made to that picture.

For past interactions between Indigenous, Chinese, Blacks (as well as other non-European encounters) to have historical significance – as aligned with the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking – the story snippets of their lives and relationships would need to be linked to something important today: something part of larger trends (CSHC, 2014).

Generally-speaking, though, in the frame of grand narrative, significant relationships/events only occurred when Europeans (British) were involved – not in their absence. Is the omission of the voice of *Otherness* from recorded accounts important? Reading against the grain, are minority voices telling alternative versions of the grand narrative where Indigenous, Chinese, Blacks, and non-Europeans co-existed side-by-side, if not cooperated, to live in harmony while the story of Europeans is one of disruption and colonization rather than progress and civilization?

The ethical dimension of the Historical Thinking Benchmark is about questioning what responsibilities for past injustices should society today shoulder. As critical reconciliation work on decolonizing archives, libraries and public spaces proceeds, a major focus lies in refuting historical records created by Europeans (e.g. Douglas Treaties) as well as condemning discriminatory actions of individuals from the times (e.g. John A. Macdonald). However, identifying, substituting and amplifying the voices of the *Other* where their agency resisted adversity and victimization seem to be neglected.

In response, I have re-created a frontier of colonial British Columbia: a new text² where Europeans are no longer centre stage. Instead, they form a backdrop where Chinese, Indigenous, Blacks, Hawaiians, Mexicans, and women are the actors rather than those solely acted upon.

Novick (1988) makes the case that history is neither just facts or objective. Instead, he writes that ‘historical objectivity’ is “a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and antipathies” (p. 1). In my case, I have crafted research with multiperspectivity and experience to bring order and coherence – as a “kind of thought experiment” (Slotkin, 2007) that enables exploration of plausible possibilities. Further, Ives (2016) writing on the topic of archival fiction observes:

Rather than presenting a single, definitive story—an ostensibly objective chronicle of events—these [archival fiction] books offer a past of competing perspectives, of multiple voices. They are not so much historical as archival: instead of giving us the imagined experience of an event, they offer the ambiguous traces that such events leave behind. These fictions do not focus on

² Lee, Mei-Li. (2019). *Potlatch Blanket for a China Man*. AzimuthBooks.

fact but on fact's record, the media by which we have any historical knowledge at all (para. 2).

In essence, by writing and identifying my work as a history – albeit a *literary* one – I resist the boilerplate of British Columbia's chapters in Canada's grand narrative. Moreover, by later producing and promoting a guide to accompany this novel history into BC's new Social Studies curricula³, I invite, encourage and support the interrogation of text: an attitude absent too long in education.

Why assume such a precarious stance? A favourite story is about an elder asking a young man to carry what appears to be an empty box. The young man agrees but instead of giving the box over to the young man, the elder holds the box close and asks, "How many sides do you see?" The young man can only see one until the elder holds the box outward and turns it in which case they can each see three sides of the box: together they can see six (Hampton as cited in Battiste, 2011). In teaching history that's what I want; to hold a box and turn it so we see together – multiple histories/truths.

³ Lindsay, Mary. (2019). *Course Bearings*. AzimuthBooks.

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