

A PLACE FOR A MORE CRITICAL FORM OF HISTORICAL INQUIRY IN SOCIAL STUDIES AND HISTORY CLASSROOMS

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Throughout much of the 20th century, in Canada and elsewhere, the primary purpose of social studies and history education has been the promotion of positive identifications with the nation-state (Seixas, 2000). By advancing a single vision of the nation, history and social studies education became an extension of the nation-state to produce and inculcate an idea of national culture that might provide a common anchor of values and loyalties among the citizenry. As a result of this process, students have been presented an authorless and authoritative story of the nation's past that provides a generally celebratory account of the great events and figures in the nation's history most often framed within a linear narrative of moral progress. Within English Canada, this single vision of the nation as mediated through social studies and history textbooks has been closely linked to conformity with British culture and a Eurocentric historical view (Osborne, 1997). Resulting from this, the single English Canadian vision of the nation presented to students excluded women and minorities, as well as Aboriginal participation and contributions to national life (Donald, 2009; Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012), while also distancing itself from Quebec and Canada's Francophone populations (Thompson, 2004).

Scholars informed by recent developments in post-colonial and Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum (den Heyer & Abbott, 2011; Donald, 2009; Stanley, 2007) seek to counter this legacy, arguing that re-reading and reframing stories of the nation will open up a space to cultivate care and attention towards groups formally positioned as 'Other'. As this form of critical historical inquiry has yet to gain significant traction in contemporary classrooms in Canada, I want to draw on the work of Timothy Stanley at the University of Ottawa to briefly outline what such an engagement would entail. In a provocative piece Stanley (2007) demonstrates the ways seemingly neutral and taken-for-granted 'historical facts' exist within a historical imaginary that continues to exclude and marginalize certain peoples as existing outside the Canadian historical experience and thus outside the boundaries of who 'we' are as Canadians. Stanley makes this point by posing a question drawn directly from a 2001 survey by The Dominion Institute, an organization that promotes the single, patriotic version of history described above. The question is as follows: *In what decade of the 20th century were women first given the right to vote in Canada?*

As Stanley outlines, the response being sought here of 1910, which points to the Canada Elections Act that in 1918 gave 'women' over 21 the right to vote federally,

is far from a simple 'historical fact'. Obscured from this act of historical remembrance is how the category women really only includes largely English speaking women of European origins. Framing this taken-for-granted interpretation of the decade in which women first received the vote is a historical imaginary that recognizes some people as Canadians while placing others outside the Canadian historical experience. Women in Quebec, for example, were not able to vote provincially until 1940. Many women, and men for that matter, of Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian origin did not receive the right to vote federally until between 1947-1949. For women deemed 'status Indians', it wasn't until 1960 that they received full suffrage rights to vote in federal elections. Thus, if by Canadian women we mean all women living in Canada, the answer should be 1960. However, this response still exists within a historical imaginary that further obscures how women of the Iroquois Confederacy had been voting and participating in democratic institutions since at least the thirteenth century, "only to have this vote taken away by the Canadian government in the twentieth" (Stanley, 2007, p. 37).

What Stanley's insight points to concerns how a particular narrative of Canadian history simultaneously enables and constrains us to see the past in particular ways. As documented by Létourneau (2007), powerful collectively held narrations of a national past, or what he terms "mythhistories," rely on basic narrative structures that carry with them a series of reference points including binary notions of insiders and outsiders, stereotypes, and other representations that "act a basic matrix of understanding, a simple way of comprehending the complexity of the past (and the present as well) (p. 79). In this way, the common-sense response to this question which occluded altogether the presence and historical experience of Aboriginal women can probably be attributed to a narrative structure of Canadian history emphasizing European 'explorers' first 'discovering' Canada, followed by later European arrivals carving civilization out of a largely unoccupied wilderness (Donald, 2009). This frame of reference positions Aboriginal peoples outside the story of Canada and assumes only Europeans can possess elements of civilization including democratic institutions. Similarly, the failure of this response to perceive the presence of Québécois and racialized women can probably be attributed to the assimilation of a national narrative that conflates the experience of English speaking women of European origins with that of all women living in Canada. Seen through this lens, a long history of institutionalized racism in Canada is obscured from view.

From the revival of Heritage Minutes, to the federal government's decision to rebrand the Museum of Civilization to focus on Canadian history, to a new 28-million dollar federal fund to support re-enactments and other remembrances of the War of 1812, all at once it seems that Canadian history is everywhere. This officially sanctioned revival of history is really a focus on heritage and carries with it dangers. If we continue to promote the very historical narratives that marginalize and even deny the presence, contribution, and participation of certain peoples we may be doomed to stay trapped in "obsolete narratives, mistaken identities, and univocal representations of the complexity of our country, not to say the world" (Létourneau, 2007, p. 86). A critical historical inquiry along the lines of Timothy Stanley's work provides teachers with the curricular focus that seeks to address and correct this in some very specific and significant ways.

Helping students re-imagine and reframe a historical system of representation, however, is no easy task and will often elicit resistance. Given this, I believe there are some basic measures teachers can take to move in this direction. First, as outlined by Létourneau (2007), we have to stop treating students like empty vessels. They already come to class with a very powerful vision of the past. Thus, a key object of historical inquiry should include examining the narrative structures that inhabit student's vision of the past, entering these basic matrixes of understanding and pointing out their limitations. Teachers could then help students construct different patterns of understanding that offer a more reliable reflection of the complexity of the past. It is my belief that creating a space to make what we already know the object of our inquiry while simultaneously rereading and reframing stories of the nation, may offer new possibilities for how we relate to others, act in the present, and what we believe is possible in the future.

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Biography

David Scott is a 2nd year PhD student at the University of Calgary. In the fall of 2011 David was awarded a SSHRC funded Bombardier Canada Graduate Fellowship to support his research investigating how adolescents living outside of Quebec recount the historical experience of Canada and how this understanding shapes their current identities and sense of possibilities for the future. He can be reached at david.s@calgaryscienceschool.com.