

Nationalist Histories and Multiethnic Classrooms

Timothy J. Stanley

The nationalist narratives that shape public memory in Canada, including public school history curricula, differently affect the inhabitants of an ethnically and culturally diverse society. These narratives place some people as inherent members of the “imagined community”¹ of the nation and others as outsiders to that community. Thus, within the same classroom, the relationships of students to the same history curriculum can be vastly different. If for many students that curriculum shows that Canada is “the best country in the world,” for others it presents a Canada that is at best an alien place, far removed from their day-to-day experience. This presents teachers with the enormous challenge of building shared understandings of the past. If our educational objective is to illuminate people’s lives by teaching about their pasts, we need to refashion the ways in which historical curricula are commonly conceived.

“Grand narrative”² underlies public memory in Canada. It is the stuff of the most widely circulated, “common sense” representations of the past, of the CBC’s “Canada: A People’s History,” of beer commercials, of the Canada Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and of innumerable high school history textbooks and speeches by political leaders. The many variations of grand narrative all share certain features.

First, within the English Canadian grand narrative, history proper begins with the arrival of Europeans, whether Lief Ericson and the Vikings, John Cabot and the English, or Jacques Cartier and the French. Second, to the almost total disregard of other people, grand narrative traces the progress of European resettlement, emphasizing “nation-building” by farseeing politicians, most often “great men.” Third, like all historical accounts, grand narrative is in fact an interpretation, a particular account whose origins can be traced to the late nineteenth century. However, to many people grand narrative is the real past, *the* history of Canada.

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Grand narrative is often not especially good history. It imposes an organization of the past that starts with the present and works backwards. The results often fail to represent particular events in historical context. For example, the fixation on Europeans ignores the fact that, in the seventeenth century, during the first one hundred years of “Canadian” history, Europeans were at best minor players in the longer term contests between different aboriginal groups who were the overwhelming majority of the population. Indeed, aboriginal people remained dominant in much of what is now called Canada throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, when the colony of Vancouver Island was formally established in 1849, the non-aboriginal population of “British Columbia” was perhaps 500 in contrast to a probable aboriginal population of several hundred thousand; yet it is the exploits of the European minority that gain the greatest historical attention. Finally, as Daniel Francis has shown, English Canadian nationalist grand narrative is premised on a series of exclusions, the marginalization of aboriginal people, the infantilization of Quebec, and the exclusion of Africans and Asians.³

The assumption that grand narrative is the real history of the past, and consequently the framework for measuring all other things, is shown in the 2001 Dominion Institute Canada Day survey.⁴ My purpose here is not to criticize the Dominion

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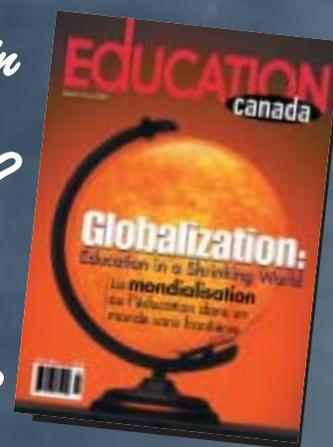
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Institute, but rather to point out some of the problems with the apparently common sense categories of grand narrative history. The very first question asked was, “Who was the first Prime Minister of Canada?” This seems an entirely reasonable question – the sort of thing one would expect an educated citizenry should know. However, the common sense answer, John A. MacDonald, is a problem. This answer imagines “Canada” as the state first organized by the British North America Act of 1867 and continuing into the present day. Significantly, MacDonald was not usually called “Prime Minister”, nor was he the first head of government for a political entity called “Canada.” That honour goes to Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine who became Premier of the Province of Canada in 1840. Thus, far from being the “correct” answer, “Macdonald” is an interpretation.



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Grand narrative is more about the nation as a kind of naturally occurring and unquestioned category than it is about the actual state called “Canada.” This is evident in another question, “Name one of the wars in which Canada was invaded by the US?” If we conceive Canada as the country founded in 1867, the answer is that it has never been invaded by the U.S.; but since the answers being looked for are the War of American Independence and the War of 1812, “Canada” is apparently more than the nation state, predating Confederation. (In which case, why isn't the answer to the first question LaFontaine?).

The last question shows how easily historical exclusions can be created: “In what decade in the 20th century were Canadian women given the right to vote in elections?” Here, the “correct” answer is the 1910s. Again this answer appears to make sense, as it was indeed in this decade that the federal government and most provinces extended voting rights to women for the first time. In fact, this answer reduces “Canadians” to English-speaking people of European origin. It does not allow for the “Canadian women” in Quebec, who did

not get the right to vote until 1940, nor the “Canadian women” who were also so-called status Indians, who did not get the right to vote federally until 1960 when all aboriginal people did. Nor presumably are the Chinese, Japanese and South Asian women, who only got the right to vote federally and in various provinces in 1947-49, “Canadian.” Similarly it does not include the women who were clan mothers of the Iroquois Confederacy, who had been voting since at least the thirteenth century.

Now it might seem that my concerns are largely a matter of semantics. But the problems of grand narrative cease to be merely semantic when young people are confronted with a curriculum that defines some of them as “Canadian” – those whose great grandmothers got the right to vote in the 1910s – and defines others as non-Canadian – those whose great grandmothers did not. This has profound consequences for some students. For example, many African Canadian students disengage from school in part because they rarely see themselves represented in the official curriculum⁵. School is about and for white people.

The problem has been eloquently put by Denise, an African-Canadian who spoke of her reasons for leaving school in a study conducted by George Dei and his colleagues: “The curriculum . . . was one-sided, especially when it came down to history. There was never a mention of any Black people that have contributed to society . . . I mean, everything, it's the White man that did. History is just based on the European Canadian that came over.”

Denise's feelings were echoed by Darren, “It's like you're learning about somebody else's history: you're learning about when they discovered America when things were good for them and when they did this and when they did that . . . It started to take its toll on me after a while”.⁶

Similarly, few First Nations students are likely to identify with a curriculum that begins with the exclusion of their peoples and continues by treating them as little more than the scenery, or as disrupters of the inevitable national progress.

Even well-intentioned efforts to include certain groups can lead to symbolic ghettoization. For example, African Canadians' histories are often ghettoized into Black History month. The contributions of Chinese workers in building the Canadian Pacific Railway might be celebrated as a Chinese contribution to “the National Dream,” but if this is the only story told about Chinese in Canada, their arguably much more significant contribution to national life is excluded; i.e., their largely successful fight against racist exclusion and for full democratic rights. Nor is “multiculturalizing” an otherwise uncultural curriculum to include the contributions of various cultural groups a complete solution. In schools where a minority of children speak English, or come from European backgrounds, or have lived in Canada long, inevitably someone will be left out – if only because his or her cultural group has been the last to arrive, too late to be included in the textbook, the curriculum guide, or even today's lesson plan.

In this context, it seems to me, educators need to rethink the history curriculum and its purposes. The first challenge is

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Le récit glorieux que les Canadiens anglais appelle l'Histoire du Canada est fondé sur une série de prémisses d'exclusion, à savoir: la marginalisation des Autochtones, l'infantilisation du Québec et l'omission des Africains et des Asiatiques. Les Canadiens n'ont pas une histoire commune, et aucun récit ne pourra changer cela. Nous devons repenser les programmes d'enseignement de l'histoire et leur fonction. Nous devons enseigner de multiples récits, des récits qui permettent aux enfants de voir les liens entre leur histoire personnelle et le Canada dans lequel ils vivent.

to enable each student to explore his or her past, to construct a narrative that explains how it is that they came to inhabit the common space of the classroom, and to allow other students to see and engage with this narrative. A second challenge is to see how this personal history intertwines with those of the multiple communities that young people inhabit, whether their physical neighbourhoods, their ethnic and religious communities, the people on their soccer team, or the people in the communities on the other side of the world to whom they are linked. A third task is to provide young people with a sense of how the spaces they inhabit have been constructed by people who have gone before. These spaces range from MuchMusic to the local shopping mall, but also include spaces which help to define Canada as a nation state. Throughout this process of investigating progressively larger circles, young people need to learn how to ground historical claims in evidence and how to evaluate historical interpretations.

Canadians in fact do not have a common history, and no single narrative will ever make it so. The good news is that teachers today have the resources and methods to incorporate multiple narratives into the classroom. Organizations like Historica, the National Archives, local museums, even the Dominion Institute, are popularizing innovative practices to make history come alive. These range from discovery approaches using primary historical documents, to organizing Heritage Fairs, to encouraging students to research and produce their own Heritage Minutes.⁷ Rethinking the history curriculum, combined with these practices, can help us build on historical understanding to insure that we have a common future. 

1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991). My argument is published in more detail "Why I Killed Canadian History: Conditions for an Anti-racist History in Canada," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33, 65 (2000): 79-103.

2 See Allan Megill, "'Grand Narrative' and the Discipline of History," in: Ankersmit and Kellner (Eds), *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995).

3 Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver, B.C. : Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997).

4 See "Dominion Institute / Ipsos-Reid Poll, 5th Annual Canada Day History Quiz," http://www.angusreid.com/media/dsp_displaypr_cdn.cfm?id_to_view=1255, Accessed April 26, 2002.

The Red Heart Tree

Between the oak and the ash tree

Rests my tree

Thick roots, rough bark

Green leaves shaped like hearts

Upside down hearts

Growing hearts

Hearts still in the shape of buds

As autumn comes

The hearts become red

Red like the sunset

Red like the cardinal

Red like strawberries from the field

The red hearts fall

Fall like water

Fall like a rock

The snow comes to protect my tree

Snow like icing

Snow like cream

Snow like thick cotton

The snow and I both come to protect my tree

Florence Shahabi, Grade 5
Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's School
Westmount, Quebec

5 See, for example, Carl James, "I don't want to talk about it," *Orbit*, Vol. 25, #2 (1994): 26-9.

6 George J. Sefa Dei, Josephine Mazzuca, Elizabeth McIsaac, Jasmin Zine. *Reconstructing 'Drop-out': A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement from School* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p 138.

7 Some useful websites in this regard are those of Historica, www.historica.ca, and the "Gateway to Canadian Studies" maintained by the Institute of Canadian Studies at the University of Ottawa, <http://www.canada.uottawa.ca/database/gatewaylist.htm>. See also, the home page of John Fielding, Faculty of Education, Queen's University, <http://educ.queensu.ca/~fieldinj/>.

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