

ORAL HISTORY, REDRESS AND RECONCILIATION

“Oral history is about learning from the past,” Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook begin, reminding readers of their edited collection that orality is central to “Indigenous story practices, among these “testimony, song, digital storytelling.”¹ As a pedagogy, “oral history carries critical knowledge from one generation to the next, tells creation stories for communities and nations, provides markers of identity for families and groups, and records and archives eyewitness testimony and lived experiences.”² Moreover, “oral history plays a crucial role in global movements for redress and reconciliation of segregation, apartheid, forced migration, genocide, and other human rights abuses.”³

The essays Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook introduce are focused on “oral history as a form of education for redress and reconciliation.”⁴ They position oral history as “central to justice movements” due to “its potential to challenge closed narratives of the past,” democratizing history so “there is a shared authority, not only “the co-creation of stories, but also to a process of listening that requires an individual to bear responsibility for stories they hear.”⁵ Bearing responsibility – working through difficult knowledge – structures “redress and reconciliation,” as it enables us to “collectively use that history to re-story a just future.”⁶

Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook suggest that the essays in the collection they edited - *Oral History, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation* - depict oral history as both “public pedagogy and a school-based pedagogy,” emphasizing its role in “redress and reconciliation.”⁷ Among the questions explored are:

How do community-based oral history projects affect historical memory of the public? What do we learn from oral history in government systems of justice versus in the political struggles of non-governmental organizations? What is the burden of collective remembering and how does oral history implicate people in the past? How are survivor oral histories brought into conversation with youth who are wrestling with present injustices? How are oral histories about difficult knowledge represented in curriculum from digital storytelling and literature to environmental and treaty education?⁸

In the essay that follows, these questions circulate.

Henry Yu, Sarah Ling, and Denise Fong examined “legacy projects” undertaken by the Canadian federal government and the provincial government of British Columbia designed as apologies “for historical anti-Chinese legislation”; they ask what the “role of historical re-storying” has been “in creating alternative versions of the past that are useful in creating new collective memories that bind broader publics

together?”⁹ Have efforts at “recognition and reconciliation been in practice future-oriented?”¹⁰ They also ask how “the recovery of stories that have been ignored or erased historically so crucial to the creation—in the present—of a common shared past ... make a transformed collective future even possible?”¹¹

The national, provincial, and local government projects Yu, Ling and Fong reference were undertaken between 2010 and 2016; they funded “collaborative” efforts to re-story “recovered and coproduced histories that allowed transformative politics in the present.”¹² Yu, Ling and Fong focus on “three public history projects that grew out of the public apology process in British Columbia,” acknowledging that they were “involved in developing *Chinese Canadian Stories: Uncommon Histories to a Common Past (CCS)*, *All Our Father’s Relations (AOFR)*, *Fraser Corridor Heritage Landscape Project (FCHLP)*.¹³ These projects “illustrate how collaborative processes between communities and scholars have helped reshape the collective past.”¹⁴ While “storying an ignored, suppressed, or forgotten past is an act of redemption and reconciliation,” Yu, Ling and Fong report that “the excluded past returns to us as a surprise, the wondrous unknown coming to be known.”¹⁵

Yu, Ling and Fong review past instances of “narrative violence that defined Asians as perpetual ‘foreigners’ and ‘aliens’ who did not belong in the nation and embodied a continual threat to the nation’s security and existence,” characterizations in service to a national narrative “centred upon the triumphant stories describing pioneer settlement and the overcoming of challenges faced by European migrants.”¹⁶ They emphasize listeners’ “surprise upon hearing stories about Chinese as somehow part of the national story.”¹⁷ Surprise presents a teachable moment, as Yu and Fong recommend that this “legacy ... needs to be narrated in a way that acknowledges both its discriminatory impacts and the existence and continued possibilities of humane relations built out of mutual respect and reciprocity,” emphasizing that “both forms of restorative re-storying are necessary.”¹⁸ Without the two, “a distorted telling of the past, and a limited imagination of the future, results.”¹⁹

The focus on Chinese Canadians and the First Nations represent “an act of decentring from the perceived “Eurocentrism” of ... Canadian history as ... English and French settlement,” one of appropriation and displacement.”²⁰ Such oral history represents a “redemptive act of recuperating forgotten and ignored stories of excluded and marginalized peoples” but also a “more constructive past for collective memory making, historical narration, and relationship building in the present,” a “crucial challenge in particular for education because of the enduring mythic power of national historical narratives that continued to centre on European migration and settlement, even as formerly excluded communities were added to the margins of a revised but fundamentally unchanged mainstream story.”²¹

Yu and Fong reflect on “this decade of collaborative processes of history making,” a “re-storying of the past by restoring forgotten and hidden pasts to a

collective memory in the present,” noting that “many critics of “reconciliation” processes point to the ‘backward’ looking nature of ‘apologizing’ for the past, as if the past was past and nothing can be done to change history,” but also noting that “others have claimed that reopening the ‘wounds’ of the past will create division and dissension in the present day.”²² Yu and Fong report that “the creation and enhancement of networks between researchers, students, educators, and community organizations has been highly generative of new forms of history making and relationship building,” a key complement to the important labour undertaken by expert scholars, as “these projects reflect practices of collaborative knowledge making that co-produce and share through a re-storying process new representations of the past.”²³

Returning to the issue of affect, Yu and Fong deem “surprise and curiosity” as “useful ... only when their effects are not marshalled for purposes of exploitation or mere self-interest and gain, but within the broader context of the relationships within which the sharing took place.”²⁴ “Out of collaborative processes of re-storying,” they conclude, “can come the mutual interests and common ground from which a future is made.”²⁵

COMMENTARY

In their introduction, Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook affirm oral history’s potential in education for redress and reconciliation, an idea enacted in the essay by Yu, Ling and Fong, who speak to the actors, actions, and emotions of re-storying and “history making” during the past decade of apologies. Emphasizing historical injustice is necessary to correct past Eurocentric accounts of the past; it constitutes a “re-storying” the past. Collaboration among story holders and the public is key, they suggest; I would include academics and other experts in the co-construction of more accurate historical narratives.

REFERENCES

- Llewellyn, Katrina R. and Ng-A-Fook, Nicholas. 2020. Introduction: Oral History and Education: Hopes for Addressing, Redressing and Reconciliation. In *Oral history, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*, edited by Katrina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (1-10). New York: Routledge.

Yu, Henry, Ling, Sarah, and Fong, Denise. 2020. Re-storying and Restoring Pacific Canada: Alternative Pasts for a Changing Present in *Oral History, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*, edited by K. R. Llewellyn and N. Ng-A-Fook, (13-31). New York: Routledge.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook 2020, 1.
 - ² Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook 2020, 1.
 - ³ Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook 2020, 1.
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 - ⁵ Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook 2020, 1.
 - ⁶ Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook 2020, 2.
 - ⁷ Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook 2020, 3.
 - ⁸ Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook 2020, 3.
 - ⁹ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 13.
 - ¹⁰ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 13.
 - ¹¹ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 13.
 - ¹² Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 14.
 - ¹³ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 14.
 - ¹⁴ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 14.
 - ¹⁵ Yu, Ling and Fong, 2020, 14. Yu and Fong (2020, 27) focus on the affective power of this process of historical restoration,” ranging from “straightforward surprise to more complex feelings that might be described as atonement and redemption.”
 - ¹⁶ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 15.
 - ¹⁷ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 15.
 - ¹⁸ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 16.
 - ¹⁹ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 16.
 - ²⁰ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 23.
 - ²¹ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 23.
 - ²² Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 27-28.
 - ²³ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 28. The “key complement” concept is mine; Yu and Fong actually privilege the work they describe over academic historiography, to my mind a self-undermining move, as oral history itself disappears without its registration in the academic discipline of history. This point is indirectly driven home when Fu, Ying and Yong (2012, 28) acknowledge that “these processes also respected and adhered to, at all moments, the protocols of Chinese and First Nations communities and families that participated in the collaborations, particularly in terms of cultural knowledge and the conditions by which it was shared with others. Sharing and co-

producing knowledge, especially in terms of personal stories, must occur within relationships that control the process of how the knowledge which has been co-created is further shared and distributed.” The free flow of information is culturally unacceptable, evidently. Saving it from such self-enclosure, academic history – including oral history and the curriculum studies scholarship which Yu, Ling and Fong has produced here - can ensure its preservation for the future.

²⁴ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 28.

²⁵ Yu, Ling and Fong 2020, 28. Devaluing academic history, with its assurance of preservation and dissemination, makes less likely any formation of “common ground,” a potential undermined by oral history treated as private cultural property. Moreover, compulsory collaboration threatens conformity not courage.