

CULTURAL INCOMMENSURABILITY

Here Heather E. McGregor examines the “intersections and divergences” of Indigenous histories and historical thinking, concluding with “suggestions as to how educators may proceed,” including constructing “communities of practice, drawing on specialists in historical thinking and Indigenous knowledges within and outside schools, to work towards supporting history classrooms inclusive of both historical thinking and Indigenous perspectives.”¹ Concerning the former, McGregor references UBC’s Historical Thinking Project.² She notes that – as of writing (2017) - there had been “little overlap between the Indigenous education and historical thinking reform movements,” even the adjective “little” signifying overstatement when she cites Indigenous scholar Michael Marker’s judgement that (in McGregor’s words) “the encounter between history and Indigenous knowledge in classrooms has not been a positive one for Indigenous students in the past.”³ Marker alleged that Indigenous content had been “neglected,” and that what content had been included was “stereotypical and misrepresentative,” accenting “the deeper problem ... that the categories of what counts as history do not often correspond with the ways that traditional indigenous communities make meaning out of the past.”⁴ Moreover, Marker complained that “the deeper perspectives of Aboriginal peoples in regard to their understandings of the processes of time and the principles of their knowledge systems are usually missing.”⁵ Given “expectations ... for integrating Indigenous knowledges and historical thinking into K-12 school programs,” McGregor acknowledges that “teachers are becoming caught in a space of tension that neither movement anticipated.”⁶ She suggests that “the success of the aforementioned movements may depend on the ability of educators to navigate both at the same time,” adjudicating what in fact “may feel like incommensurable demands.”⁷

McGregor proceeds to ask three questions: (1) “What is the relationship between Indigenous approaches to history and the emphasis in social studies and history education on historical thinking?” (2) “Can the relationship be characterized by common points of contact and contention in epistemological premises and goals?” (3) “What implications does this relationship have for social studies and history educators, and the students they teach?” To answer, McGregor reviewed “literature on Indigenous histories and disciplinary historical thinking respectively, developing an understanding of each area of specialization on its own terms.”⁸ Then she discusses “how each may change when integrated into schools,” identifying “some of the questions, conflicts and limitations produced in the encounter between these two fields.”⁹ She concludes her article with “preliminary suggestions as to how educators may proceed to adapt their programs with the goals of historical thinking in mind, while remaining respectful of Indigenous imperatives for school learning,” advocating “that educators involved in

Indigenous education and history continuously participate in deepening their understanding of each field, without smoothing out or ignoring the distinctions between them.¹⁰ McGregor appreciates that this general advice needs to be adapted to “particular learning contexts, places and relationships.”¹¹ But “adapted” it needs to be, as it is a “disservice to learners when educators do not model openness to both approaches in the same classroom.”¹²

“Indigenous and ally scholars, Elders and knowledge holders teach that Indigenous approaches to making meaning from the past differ from those of the discipline of history,” McGregor affirms, adding: “There is no singular way to teach and learn Indigenous histories, just as there is no singular Indigenous experience with the past,” a “variability ... rooted in the ecologies of cultures—how culture is produced from, and between, the conditions of language, place and practice, among other influences.”¹³ While “Indigenous ways of making meaning from the past have dimensions of continuity but do not remain static,” they do occur “within the pervasive impacts of colonization, Indigenous communities’ responses to assimilative influences, and their agency in choosing ways of adapting to contemporary conditions.”¹⁴

That said, generalizations (in addition to that one) are apparently possible, evident when McGregor encourages educators to start “with the history of the land on which their schools are situated, and the community or Nation with whom they are in relation,” as “local histories are the point of departure for learning”¹⁵ as - again quoting Michael Marker¹⁶ - “they provide the template for [Indigenous] expressions of identity and self-determination” and the “detail and complexity that break down the persistent stereotyping of the ‘Native other’.”¹⁷ Apparently determined to draw a sharp distinction between Indigenous and historical thinking McGregor writes: “This situatedness makes Indigenous approaches to the past dissimilar from disciplinary logics, that usually emphasize more uniform, universal or standardized techniques regardless of location,” by no means “careful generalizations about differences between Indigenous and disciplinary approaches to the past,”¹⁸ listed here:

- Narrative templates, and narrative competencies associated with such templates, can differ substantially;
- Oral and written practices depend on the speaker/author positioning or locating themselves, acknowledging their ancestry or tradition and education, how they came here (or to do this work), and how they fit into local understandings of identity;
- Temporal arrangements are not necessarily chronological, linear or progressive, but rather emphasize cycles or circles;
- Land can be positioned as a source of knowledge;
- Relationships (including with animals) are embedded in an ecological web, where humans are not necessarily dominant, frequently mediated by spiritual understandings; and,

- Many Indigenous scholars point out that the processes and events of colonization/ decolonization are a crucial context within which histories and memories should be acknowledged to reside, whereas non-Indigenous Canada still frequently neglects this context.¹⁹

McGregor adds that “Indigenous knowledge relies on openness to, and the credibility of, orality for a continual (re)making of meaning in the present, including sharing memories, testimony and story,” as “memory work in Indigenous traditions is a practice often connected to a place that can facilitate recognition of the presence of the past, moral lessons for individuals, as well as collective, cultural continuity.²⁰ Oral history is a major subsidiary field of academic history.²¹

McGregor notes that “Indigenous history education is old in the sense that Indigenous peoples have always educated their youth about the past, and the people, places and traces that belong to it,” but that: “It is also new, because only recently are such practices being institutionalized—naming, describing, categorizing, and comparing them in academic terms and contexts.”²² Again McGregor seems to overlook well-established practices of oral history within mainstream academic history when she suggests that: “Up until recently, Indigenous approaches to history were largely excluded from historiography, meaning the primarily university-based processes of defining historical methodology.”²³ While hardly identical, oral historiography and “Indigenous approaches” surely overlap.

McGregor suggests that the “historical thinking approach to history education resists teaching a set of fixed narratives for student consumption,” almost overstating her case when she asserts: “It is predicated on the idea that the stories we tell about the past—histories—are not facsimiles of the past, but rather constructions arrived at through imperfect human processes of interpretation.”²⁴ I suspect she misstates the motive for historical thinking when she suggests that “the more students know about these processes, the better they can participate in them, and eventually influence the stories produced by them.²⁵ More likely, the motive for the historical thinking movement is understanding how professional historians work, how History as an academic discipline is crafted, and in so doing cultivate students’ historical consciousness.²⁶ Academic vocationalism²⁷ can’t be counted out either, which may be what McGregor means when she suggests the motive is to invite students to “participate in” and “influence” the academic discipline of History - as future historians.

McGregor admits as much when she characterizes “the strength of this movement, both pedagogically and in persuading school stakeholders of its value, is its derivation from the academic discipline of history,” specifically that: “Historical thinking is said to give students access to authentic procedures for knowledge construction,” noting that “Seixas’ historical thinking concepts are conceived as subject-specific processes, just as math and science rely on subject-specific problem-solving processes.”²⁸ “Notwithstanding Seixas’ invitation to an ongoing dialogue about

the concepts,” McGregor worries, “they are increasingly—unquestioningly—reified amongst teachers as the singular avenue towards historical thinking” and “often conflated with historical consciousness.”²⁹ Then she suggests that “historical thinking need not be exclusively equated with Seixas’ six-concept model, and nor should the model itself be considered immutable,” noting that “the concepts defined by Seixas—like any other such model—remain open to critical intervention and change.”³⁰ After all, she continues, “the discipline of history is a contested space, so too should historical thinking remain a vibrant space for debate,” adding – and apparently contradicting her earlier assertion that the concepts “are increasingly—unquestioningly—reified amongst teachers as the singular avenue towards historical thinking” – that “at another level of variability, we should not assume the model is being adopted with uniformity,” asserting that: “Diversity and adaptation occur in the interpretation and application of Seixas’ concepts alongside other historical thinking approaches, both ‘officially’ at the curriculum policy level ... and ‘unofficially’ at the classroom level.”³¹

Having witnessed its generation of powerful understandings and appreciating how it renders the academic discipline of history “more transparent and accessible for teachers and students,” McGregor “support[s] the historical thinking approach as part of the solution to improving history education.”³² But she also adds that: “the historical thinking framework also raises many questions when it comes to considering the place of Indigenous peoples and knowledges.”³³

McGregor would consider my concern for academic vocationalism excessive, as she asserts: “Teaching historical thinking in schools does not necessarily mean that all students are trained to become ‘mini historians’,” as it provides “students an approximation of the tools and terms for engagement that reflect the best match between disciplinary practice and the goals of a public education in a democratic society.”³⁴ Setting aside the “important question” of “whether or not these goals for public education are appropriate or realistic (e.g., what kind of engagement schools actually facilitate, and whether or not such engagement is in any way ‘democratic’),” McGregor points out that “this vision of history *education*—more often than not mingled with social studies and citizenship learning goals in schools—may certainly differ from a historian’s purposes for history.”³⁵ Moreover, like other academic disciplines, history, “to date, largely been shaped by men of European ancestry who speak European languages, come from industrialized and formerly (and/or currently) imperialistic nations, and participate in intellectual traditions largely based on liberalism and rationalism.”³⁶ Acknowledging that “there is diversity within categories such as ‘Western’ or ‘European’ thought, and [that] great inroads to the academy have been made by scholars who were formerly marginalized, to argue that these systems reflect the ‘best’ way of constructing knowledge is contingent on recognition of this potentially limited ‘sampling’,”³⁷ a patronizing and sweeping statement of anthropological and epistemological relativism. She goes on to assert that: “Using a discipline as a litmus

test for what is taught in schools offers teachers strengths, but it also introduces rigidity that may not reflect the people or place in which history education is occurring.”³⁸

Having put History in its anthropological place, McGregor juxtaposes it with “Indigenous knowledge,” cautioning that teaching it “will not make all students ‘Indigenous knowledge holders,’” as “school initiatives or lessons can [only] give students an approximation of activities that reflect Indigenous histories, practices, languages and conceptual orientations.”³⁹ “Usually, and perhaps ideally,” she explains, “Indigenous education occurs on the land/water, through intergenerational and ecological relationships, with opportunities to use language authentically and beyond the constraints of 45-minute periods.”⁴⁰ Indigenous education is “informed and shaped by decolonizing, antiracist and place-based theories that may, or may not, align with Indigenous goals for schooling sourced from local communities,” and, moreover, “these goals are equally affected by western epistemic dominance.”⁴¹

Next McGregor turns her attention to “what happens when history, as it has typically been taught, and Indigenous knowledges come together in schools,” drawing on scholarship primarily composed by Indigenous scholars.⁴² She returns to Michael Marker’s concern that “history classrooms can be damaging for Indigenous students,”⁴³ in his words: “When Aboriginal students are told that their cultural interpretation of history is not the correct one, the hegemony of this moment is often internalized. This deteriorates the ability of indigenous communities to organize around their own epistemologies.”⁴⁴ Marker advocates “new ways of understanding history,”⁴⁵ which will “necessarily entail sacrificing some conventional ways of teaching Canadian history.”⁴⁶ McGregor misinterprets Marker as intending for public school curriculum to become “more inclusive towards Indigenous perspectives and in order for all students to (quoting Marker) imagine alternative ways to structure the societies of the future.”⁴⁷ At least the lines she has quoted imply not including “Indigenous perspectives” alongside Canadian history but replacing Canadian history education with what Marker deems as “new,” that is, “Indigenous perspectives.”

McGregor is sure that “Teaching history differently can allow students—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—to understand the historical formations of present relationships, including the associated formations of colonization, Eurocentrism and resulting inequities,”⁴⁸ as if these topics weren’t already treated voluminously within the extant academic discipline of History.⁴⁹ Teaching “differently,” she adds, may “support” students “to better resist when history is used in service to perpetuating colonizing relations,” specifically “help[ing] undercut the tendency for Indigenous communities to be misframed as demanding ‘hand outs’ from governments, instead bringing awareness to the failure of governments in implementing the letter and spirit of treaties and agreements to which we are all party, or failure to finalize agreements at all (as in much of British Columbia, and Canada’s national capital region).”⁵⁰ While it’s not obvious how public-school students can help with these legal issues, it is clear that – as I suggested earlier – it is less the “inclusion of Indigenous perspectives” than the

larger-scale replacement of History that McGregor seems to be suggesting when she writes: “And, improving history education may help students come to know the past for the purposes, and in ways, advanced and centred by Indigenous peoples.”⁵¹ This is no juxtaposition of two culturally incommensurate conceptions of time – a reasonable curricular compromise to my mind – but instead one “centred” by Indigenous perspectives.

Then McGregor appears to retreat from that incendiary position, offering instead that: “Adopting a historical thinking approach to history education advances learning goals that can be beneficial for Indigenous students and communities, just as for other Canadians,” that possibility contingent on the condition that: “The active engagement of Indigenous peoples, knowledges and prerogatives in history education must, however, be predicated on an acknowledgement of the ways that disciplinary practice—such as historical thinking—has neglected, marginalized or directly conflicted with Indigenous education.”⁵² She then resorts to well-worn arguments regarding identity, referencing research that shows “that students’ ethnic identities shape how they determine what is historically significant,” then extending her defense of “inclusion” by alleging “that the disciplinary historical thinking approach fails to recognize that students are differently implicated by what they encounter in the history classroom, depending on their identities, because of over-emphasis on rational, disciplinary, skill-oriented pedagogies.”⁵³

In a move that fails to acknowledge there was no one “European Enlightenment,”⁵⁴ that in any case the conception of Enlightenment cannot be reduced to a “framework,” or of having caused colonialism – never mind that the onset of the latter preceded the former – McGregor tells us: “By continuously normalizing European Enlightenment frameworks of historiography, whether passively or intentionally, historical thinking may perpetuate the conditions by which anything else appears to come ‘after’ it.”⁵⁵ As a consequence, “Indigenous traditions of engaging with the past may be measured against a Eurocentric baseline of cognitive, linguistic, ethical, procedural and other criteria, or potentially rendered only a ‘belief’ system,”⁵⁶ definitionally the case if “criteria” lack rational or empirical documentation. “I am keenly aware,” she continues, “that non-Indigenous scholars, researchers and teachers are almost never expected to do the mental gymnastics of defending their knowledge using systems of criteria and expression that they did not contribute to creating, as Indigenous scholars, Elders and teachers regularly are.”⁵⁷ She calls for “extending epistemic recognition to Indigenous knowledges and peoples, ... a crucial part of curricular reform.”⁵⁸ Given what McGregor has written thus far, “recognition” in that sentence implies “superiority,” a move that subordinates epistemology to anthropology.

Then, apparently assuming her reader is “on board” with her, McGregor cautions that “providing learners (whether they be adults/educators or youth/students) with information, stories, testimonies or other forms of evidence from, and about, the

past does not *guarantee* learning outcomes in alignment with teaching objectives,”⁵⁹ an assertion that ignores the long-established fact that no curriculum or pedagogy can “guarantee” outcomes, even when physical coercion is involved, a fact she then acknowledges, noting that “history education pedagogies and their productions unfold in ways that differ from, and exceed, the intentions of the pedagogue and transitive calls they may have in mind.”⁶⁰ She notes that “pedagogy demands humility about the potential for direct, predictable or parallel change to deep structural and individual formations of self and society,” not suggesting that “teaching history is a futile endeavour.”⁶¹ Teaching knowledge of most worth is an ethical not primarily an outcome-based decision. If teaching Indigenous knowledge is ethically warranted, students’ inability or refusal to study the subject is of course a concern, calling for an adjustment in pedagogical enactment, but unwelcome “outcomes” cannot invalidate the effort.

“Historical thinking,” McGregor reminds, “comes from a particular group of people, in particular places, with culturally situated understandings of the past, of the flow of time, and of meanings derived from human experience,”⁶² as does (although she fails to acknowledge) Indigenous knowledge as well. “And, inherently, disciplinary approaches to knowledge construction restrict what counts as knowledge and what counts as valid ways of assessing that knowledge,”⁶³ a fact also not confined to “historical thinking.” She calls upon “educators and their students ... to think critically about such models, especially as they apply to diverse local contexts or situated historical questions,”⁶⁴ a call – to “think critically” – that seems ensconced in especially French Enlightenment values. Invoking a concept of curricular juxtaposition, McGregor then calls for “respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge and historical thinking.”⁶⁵ Apparently by “respectful engagement” – does that include thinking “critically”? – “educators can then advance the ability of students to understand each system or approach, and discern creative ways of connecting them—in contrast to being passive knowledge recipients.”⁶⁶ Given her critique of “historical thinking” – as being implicated in colonialism – I am surprised to read her proposal for “communities of practice could be supported by a think-tank and network ... focused on the alignment between history and Indigeneity,” communities that “increase the transparency of their own approaches to constructing knowledge, and the extent to which such systems are textured with tensions and contingencies. Perhaps they can constructively take up the layers of difference, potential conflicts, and many questions inherent in teaching both historical thinking and Indigenous knowledges in the same classroom.”⁶⁷ Is acknowledging cultural incommensurability included?

No, it would seem, perhaps a characteristically Canadian commitment to inclusion, to multiculturalism, if now differently stated; McGregor writes: “Due to the differing origin of each knowledge paradigm—a discipline in the case of historical thinking, and an ancestral, place based, and often political affiliation in the case of Indigenous approaches—there are distinctions in the structure of each approach to

knowledge,” distinctions that if “oversimplified and misunderstood ... produce a greater likelihood of neglect, clash or conflict between paradigms.”⁶⁸ While not acknowledging the elephant in the room – cultural incommensurability – McGregor gestures toward it in different terms, admitting that juxtaposing the two “paradigms” (itself a non-Indigenous concept) might mean that “one classroom of students must learn historical thinking and Indigenous education from two different teachers, while sorting out for themselves the gaps and overlaps.”⁶⁹ Recall that these “overlaps” remain unspecified, but the fact of “gaps” means that: “It is crucial to begin considering how each of these educational reform movements may necessitate adaptation in relation to each other.”⁷⁰ McGregor concludes: “At this time there are many questions and few answers.”⁷¹

In his commentary, Anton Birioukov-Brant registers McGregor’s acknowledgement of the “disconnect” between “historical thinking” and Indigenous knowledge that “continues to marginalize Indigenous education, as it is seen as ‘lesser’ than Western-oriented historical thinking skills,” leading her to suggest “that historical thinking skills be critically analyzed, rather than be universally adapted dogma.”⁷² Birioukov-Brant continues: “Teachers need support in educating themselves about Indigenous history and finding ways pay credence to historical thinking from an Indigenous perspective. How this is to be accomplished is somewhat vague, but McGregor does present an intriguing argument of the perceived, and perhaps real incommensurability between Indigenous and Western ways of thinking about history.”⁷³ To my mind there is no “perhaps” about it.

References

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ENDNOTES

¹ 2017, 1.

² <http://historicalthinking.ca/about-historical-thinking-project>

³ 2017, 2. See Marker 2011.

⁴ Marker 2011, 97.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ McGregor 2017, 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 2017, 4.

¹³ 2017, 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 2017, 5.

¹⁶ For more on Professor Marker, see: <https://met.ubc.ca/2021/01/in-memorial-dr-michael-marker/>

¹⁷ Marker 2011, 10.

¹⁸ 2017, 5.

¹⁹ 2017, 6.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The examples are endless:
https://www.amazon.ca/s?k=oral+history&ref=nb_sb_noss

²² 2017, 6. If orality is central to Indigenous cultures – including the education of the young – one wonders if institutionalization – “naming, describing, categorizing, and comparing them in academic terms” (as McGregor puts it) - does not destroy as it attempts to preserve Indigenous cultures.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 2017, 7. The story is more complex, as noted in #93. See Carr 2014, Clark 2011.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Seixas 2004; Clark 2011. Also:
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/historical-thinking-concepts>

²⁷ Pinar 2019, 56.

²⁸ 2017, 8.

²⁹ Insert.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 2017, 8-9.

³² 2017, 9.

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- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 2017, 10.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 2017, 10-11.
- 43 2017, 11.
- 44 Quoted in 2017, 11; Marker 2011, 100.
- 45 2017, 11.
- 46 Marker 2011, 111; quoted in McGregor 2017, 11.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 2017, 11.
- 49 One example I have been reading is Satia 2020.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 2017, 12.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 <https://www.history.com/topics/european-history/enlightenment#:~:text=There%20was%20no%20single%2C%20unified%20Enlightenment.%20Instead%2C%20it,and%20the%20English%2C%20German%2C%20Swiss%20or%20American%20Enlightenment.>
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 2017, 12-13.
- 58 2017, 13.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 2017, 14.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 2017, 15.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid. I am unsure Indigenous activists would consider their ancient traditions equivalent to an “educational reform movement.”
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Birioukov-Brant’s commentary.
- 73 Ibid.