Rewriting Canadian History in Service to Reconciliation?

"What specifically the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC's) Calls to Action require of history educators and curriculum developers is disputed," Lindsay Gibson and Roland Case acknowledge, noting that "some scholars have suggested that integrating Indigenous perspectives and treating Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect require rejecting the discipline of history as currently understood because it is derived from an ethnocentric Western epistemology."[1] The Gibson-Case perspective differs: "Our contention is that the significant and important changes that history educators must undertake to address the TRC's Calls to Action can be implemented without radical epistemological restructuring of the discipline of history."[2] They "believe that the legitimate opposition to Eurocentric dominance of the history curriculum can be redressed without the wholesale dismissal of the discipline of history and its methods."[3] More specifically, Gibson and Case think that "historical thinking, which is the most widely discussed current interpretation of a disciplinary approach to history education in Canada, can usefully advance the reforms called for by the TRC," although they do call for "changes in three areas of educational practice, some of which are already underway, albeit imperfectly, in many Canadian jurisdictions": (1) "educators must strengthen the representation and centrality of Indigenous Peoples in Canadian history courses," (2) "educators need to alter the way history has traditionally been taught as an established body of conclusions about the past that students are expected to accept," and (3) "curriculum developers in each province and territory should establish one or more integrated, multidisciplinary courses in Indigenous studies dedicated to teaching about Indigenous historical and contemporary worldviews."[4]

Gibson and Case acknowledge that "from the 1890s to the present, history education in both anglophone Canada and francophone Quebec has been dominated by an authoritative, colonial, nation-building narrative intended to instill nationalistic identity and patriotism."[5] And so "implementing the TRC's recommendations requires additional concerted efforts to dislodge … prominent historic failings in the positioning and representation of Indigenous Peoples," among them (1) "Events, people, and developments in Canadian history that have significance for Indigenous people have often been ignored or treated as sidebars in the curriculum and textbooks," (2) "Learning about the history of treaties and landmark court cases, and official non-compliance with their terms, is essential if we are to expose myths about rightful entitlement to the land," and (3) "Beyond these historic injustices are a myriad of other gaps in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit history that need to be filled, including the contributions of notable Indigenous leaders to their own communities and the shaping

of Canada."[6] Additionally, "students need to be aware of the ideological assumptions that many taken-for-granted words carry, to appreciate why the connotations attached to many terms are not neutral."[7] For example, "stereotypical, one-dimensional, and homogenous portrayals in curricula and resources have often characterized Indigenous people as primitive, violent, and noble savages, or as misguided, passive, and submissive victims."[8] So, "in order to challenge over-generalizations about Indigenous perspectives more effort is needed to develop curricula and learning materials that highlight the diversity of interests, views, and circumstances of Indigenous people past and present."[9] This constitutes "one of the central curricular and pedagogical challenges of decolonizing Canadian education," namely "counter[ing] popular stereotypes with nuanced examples."[10]

"For example," Gibson and Case continue, "it is no longer acceptable for history textbooks to describe the Vancouver Island Treaties or the Numbered Treaties (1871–1877) as straightforward land transfers or peace agreements," as "these treaties have contested meanings and significance for different groups and individuals," requiring the fact of "conflicting cultural understandings and, in so doing, raise ethical and legal questions about the nature and legitimacy of these treaties."[11] This would include "more inclusive and explicitly anti-racist interpretations that incorporate Indigenous perspectives and present alternative perspectives must be the basis for constructing overarching historical narratives about Canada's past."[12] Moreover, "sweeping national narratives [must be replaced] with less 'grand,' more regionally contextualized narratives."[13] There is as well the matter of orality, as "traditionally, Western academic discourse has privileged written sources over oral traditions," but "in recent decades, historians have increasingly accepted oral histories as legitimate and valuable additions to the historical record," evident as well in "Supreme Court of Canada decisions."[14]

Such "divergent epistemologies," Gibson and Case explain, "produce competing and irreconcilable truths, and that the Western academic discipline of history is inherently and irredeemably biased against Indigenous ways of knowing."[15] "To understand this objection," they continue, "we must be clearer about the conditions under which irreconcilable truths raise deep epistemological tensions," one of which concerns "contested claims about the intent and meaning of the Numbered Treaties."[16] While "for the federal government the Numbered Treaties were a final and once-for-all agreement that extinguished First Nations' land rights and opened their lands for settlement and development," for the "First Nations the treaties recognized and safeguarded their rights in perpetuity and were not considered permanent but could be renegotiated and renewed should conditions change.[17] I'm not sure there is cultural incommensurability embedded in that issue, as settlers too obviously did not consider the treaties "permanent," ignoring them almost at will. Gibson and Case would seem to concur, writing that "this is not an instance of epistemological irreconcilability unless the core facts of the case or the raw historical records accepted by each side are

contradictory," as "it is not enough that each side draws selectively from largely accepted facts to defend their position—the underlying factual basis must be substantially challenged for there to be irreconcilable epistemological differences."[18] Then they provide precisely such a challenge, citing the suggestion that "the Bering land bridge provided the means for early 'Aboriginal immigrants' to reach North America," an "account contradicted teachings from the … Elders, who explained that [Indigenous] people had come *from* the land, not *to* the land."[19] Gibson and Case conclude: "The arrival long ago of distant genetic relatives of Indigenous people to North America does not justify referring to Indigenous people as immigrants for two reasons: the remoteness of the time of their arrival before recorded history and their uniqueness as a people,"[20] the first reason somewhat sensible, the second risking exoticizing Indigenous peoples while effacing the "uniqueness" of other peoples. That said, Gibson and Case "see any contradiction in accepting the Bering land bridge theory as the most plausible explanation of how and when the distant ancestors of Indigenous people first arrived in the Americas, while also accepting the claim that Indigenous people are from this land."[21] Moreover, "profound differences in beliefs and convictions are not necessarily a sign of deep epistemological tension."[22]

Next, Gibson and Case to "a second criticism," namely "that the discipline of history privileges Eurocentric interests and epistemologies," quoting Cutrara's "claim that historians have prejudicially subjected Indigenous narratives 'to assessment and evaluation in ways that suit the demands of the colonizer more than the truths of the storyteller'."[23] That's not only a sweeping generalization, but one that is demonstrably false.[24] Rather than dismiss that falsehood, Gibson and Case concur: "The discipline of history has historically been racist," adding another sweeping and unrelated generalization: "There is no fixed, universal, or uncontested system for constructing knowledge in the discipline of history."[25] Apparently there is, however, one "fixed, universal, or uncontested" dynamic to the discipline, the fact that "the discipline has a self-corrective capacity," noting that "theories, questions, methods, and types of evidence utilized by historians today are considerably different from those in place when the formal discipline of history originated in the mid-nineteenth century.[26] Then – astonishingly – they install an ahistorical timeless truth, one not "self-correcting," one that contradicts their earlier (above) assertations that the Bering Strait issue acknowledges no "epistemological tension," namely that: "Western historical epistemology is inherently prejudicial," but quickly walking that back, but only in the dependent clause of the following: "Although racist narratives and perspectives have regularly been expunged from the discipline over the last few decades, this does not extinguish the contention that a fundamental commitment to rationality and logic biases the discipline of history against Indigenous knowledge."[27] Sounds like "epistemological tension" to me. Again quoting Cutrara's claim that "formal academic history 'was designed to organize the epistemological logic of progress and rationality into knowing'," even her allegation that "historical thinking [fails to acknowledge] 'the

presence of Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate ways for understanding the past'." [28] Gibson and Case then report Cutrara's allegation that "the Western preferences for documentary sources over oral sources, and for linear conceptions of time over Indigenous conceptions of time as circular constitute "two specific instances of apparent prejudice against Indigenous histories."[29]

"Significantly," Gibson and Case continue, "the final TRC report is a product of both Indigenous and Western evidence and methods," adding (now in defense of the discipline): "Similarly, the once-popular narrative of progress may posit a linear progression, but there is nothing inherent in the discipline of history that dictates that the course of events is uni-directional and positive or that the past has a uniform metaphysical direction or shape."[30] Moreover, "whenever a well-respected person within any community, including Indigenous Elders, offers scientific or historical claims about how the world actually operates, these views are appropriately subject to critical examination."[31] Then they affirm "Western" culture full-stop:

> In an ethnically and culturally diverse world, individuals and groups should be free in their private realm to draw their own conclusions and espouse their own beliefs. However, in public spheres such as school curricula, groups with divergent worldviews must come to agreement about what is and is not included in the history curriculum. This does not mean accepting a single authoritative conclusion, but it does mean that we can at least agree where we disagree and that sincere efforts are made to understand the warrants for differing points of view.[32]

"Must come to agreement"? Upon whose authority? Does it not occur to Gibson and Case that "agreeing to disagree" affirms the status quo, a move many Indigenous scholars and activists cannot accept?

Apparently unaware – or is it unconcerned – that they have taken sides, they continue what Indigenous scholars could call a neo-colonial strategy, asserting that: "Doing this requires an agreed-upon basis for negotiating shared beliefs that are least intrusive to all groups," and – turns out - Gibson and Case have just such a "basis," the "so-called 'Western rationality' on which academic disciplines" rest, as its "core articles of faith are few and include assumptions that are generally acceptable to diverse groups."[33] Then we're told that a "commitment to rationality in history, at its most basic, requires accepting a few principles such as: "There are patterns and order in the world (for example, the sun is likely to rise and set each day)," that "events typically have one or more causes or explanations," and that "conclusions are more warranted to the extent that they are based on a robust collection of evidence and scrutiny of reasons (even if what counts as good reasons will differ greatly across individuals and groups)."[34] Ignored in this rather rudimentary list is the fact that history as an academic discipline is relatively recent, that ancient and oral cultures told stories about the past, the forms being myth, epic poetry, legend, and the "rational" contemporary academic discipline of history – while still narrative – diverges somewhat sharply from these

earlier methods of depicting what had happened.[35] Historiography is not Gibson and Case's main agenda item, however; "historical thinking" is.

Historical thinking, Gibson and Core assure us, "eschews the teaching of a fixed grand narrative, and instead focuses on teaching students to assess and construct historical accounts and interpretations with increasing sophistication,"[36] itself a rather "fixed grand narrative" – no? Again referencing Cutrara – in their view "the harshest critic of historical thinking" - they repeat her "claims that implementing historical thinking moves us further away from addressing the TRC's Calls to Action," summarizing "historical thinking" as "superimpos[ing] a 'settler grammar' on the study of the past, which widens the gulf between Indigenous and Euro-Canadian epistemologies and lessens the space to develop the mutual respect and openness for truth needed for reconciliation."[37] The Gibson-Case defence begins with entering a plea of innocence, insisting that because "many jurisdictions have multi-disciplinary K–12 social studies courses rather than specific history courses, historical thinking is often pushed to the margins rather than occupying a central place in the curriculum."[38] So, apparently historical thinking wasn't/isn't even at the scene of the crime. Next, reiterating 1960s structure-of-the-discipline discourse,[39] they defend the concept by reporting that "history education researchers in the United Kingdom and North America challenged the 'content-only' focus of traditional school history instruction because it provided students with a great deal of historical information, but little understanding of the structure of the discipline."[40] So: "In a historical thinking pedagogical approach, second-order concepts such as historical significance and cause and consequence are taught alongside first-order substantive concepts such as revolution and nation, as well as specific historical facts," emphasizing that "second-order concepts are used in tandem with substantive content during historical inquiries to deepen students' historical content knowledge while developing increasingly sophisticated understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed and conclusions arrived at."[41] Gibson and Case then cite Peter Seixas, namely his assertion that "second-order concepts reveal 'problems, tensions, or difficulties that demand comprehension, negotiation and, ultimately, an accommodation that is never a complete solution'."[42] Then something akin to a "complete solution" is provided when Gibson and Case reference the Seixas-Morton list of "six second-order concepts: historical significance, primary source evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension."[43]

Now to the defence proper: Gibson and Case "contend that a historical thinking pedagogy can help teachers respond to the TRC's Calls to Action in at least four ways," including (1) "problematize the study of history to enable more sensitive and complex investigation of Indigenous topics," (2) "create space for alternative conclusions and interpretations, including room for Indigenous students to express their conclusions," (3) "nurture examination of history from Indigenous perspectives," and (4) "invite

Table 1. Historical thinking inquiry questions

Historical Thinking Concepts	Questions
Historical significance	• Is the Royal Proclamation more historically significant today than it was in 1763? • What three historically significant events, people, or developments in Indigenous history should be added to the textbook chapter on life in the Northwest in the 19th century?
Primary source evidence	• To what extent is Governor James Douglas's account of the Vancouver Island Treaties confirmed or refuted by Indigenous oral histories and other primary sources? • Is the textbook account of the Battle of Seven Oaks justifiable given evidence from various primary source accounts?
Cause and consequence	• What is the most plausible explanation for the disappearance of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians between 1535 and 1608? • What were the most impactful direct and indirect consequences of the near extinction of the bison for First Nations and Métis people living on the Plains?
Continuity and change	• Was the War of 1812 a turning point in Indigenous–European relations in North America? • What are the most important continuities and changes in daily life for the Inuit between 1900 and 2000?
Historical perspectives	• What underlying beliefs, values, and motivations influenced the federal government decision to ban the potlatch, the Sun Dance, and other Indigenous ceremonies and traditions in 1885? • What beliefs, values, and motivations led many Indigenous men to voluntarily enlist to fight in the First World War?
The ethical dimension	• Was the Stone Fort Treaty (Treaty One) fairly negotiated? • Has the federal government faithfully followed the terms and agreements agreed to in the Numbered Treaties?

ethical judgments about the historical treatment of Indigenous people."[44] The two lists converge in Table 1.[45]

The "historical thinking approach," Gibson and Case explain, "requires that teachers problematize history to engage students in genuine inquiry, assemble multiple primary and secondary sources reflecting a multiplicity of perspectives, and remain open to alternative interpretations and viewpoints put forward by students," inquiry that "supports students in recognizing the differences between present and past worldviews, understanding the perspectives of diverse historical actors in their historical context, and inferring how people thought in the past."[46] They note that a "key TRC recommendation is to 'ensure that tomorrow's citizens are both knowledgeable and caring about the injustices of the past, as these relate to their own futures'," concluding that the "ethical dimension" of historical thinking "expressly invites students to consider [quoting Seixas] 'the present legacies of past injustices and sacrifices'," meaning "the formation of ethical judgments about actors and actions

from the past, and about the memorial obligations that we in the present owe to those who made sacrifices from which we benefit."[47]

For the moment moving on from Cutrara's claim that "historical thinking arises out of a Western academic tradition [that] it is inherently biased against Indigenous historical thinking," Gibson and Case then consider Marker's "more nuanced concern about potential tensions between Indigenous ways of thinking about the past and Western conceptions of historical thinking," namely the "four themes within Indigenous historical consciousness" Marker considers as "traditionally excluded from the ways history courses are constructed and taught," specifically (1) "the circular nature of time," (2) "relationships with land and animals," (3) "the primacy of local knowledge over universal truths," (4) and "the complexities of colonization and decolonization."[48] Then back to Cutrara's – her conclusion that "treating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems with equal respect requires expanding the discipline of history to include the less delineated ways of knowing found within Indigenous communities," an idea Gibson and Case reject, proposing instead an acknowledgement of "the limits of what disciplinary history courses can offer in terms of understanding Indigenous knowledge and worldviews," and a recognition "of the need for a broader, integrated course on Indigenous ways of knowing."[49] Indeed, "teaching about these broader beliefs is a necessary aspect of reconciliation,"[50] a conclusion they appear to reach via Marker whom they quote again: "In our relationships of reconciliation, space for these truths—truths that may be different from what we traditionally have been able to hear or believe—must be central to the development of a decolonized and Indigenized Canada."[51]

The recommendation that educators "expand the scope of history courses to accommodate Indigenous historical worldviews" Gibson and Case decline: "History is one of the disciplines in the Western worldview and is clearly the basis for many insights, but by no means does it account for the range of truths found in Indigenous historical worldviews," but the two prefer to "retain a discipline-based study of history and establish an integrated course that recognizes the broader ways of knowing within Indigenous historical worldviews," a curricular supplement that they believe would answer the "TRC calls for the treatment of Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect, which includes teaching about Indigenous insights, philosophies, and worldviews," and so "an integrated course in Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, analogous to a humanities course in the Western tradition, would recognize the limits of disciplinary history courses in developing a comprehensive and holistic understanding of Indigenous thinking."[52] "Adding an integrated course on Indigenous worldviews achieves the desired goals," they continue, "without requiring a complete restructuring of the history curriculum," a curriculum that is "already over-crowded," without "space to add significant, richly contextualized treatments of Indigenous worldviews to the history and social studies courses currently offered."[53] They conclude:

> [T]reating Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect should be taken to mean that Indigenous worldviews deserve equal respect among other worldviews, but it cannot require that all communities adopt Indigenous worldviews as their own. Yet, intentionally or not, this seems to be the implied result when non-Indigenous people are asked to accept *historical* claims from Indigenous Elders without evidence or scrutiny."[54]

Gibson and Case make an important if contentious distinction between treating "Indigenous worldviews" with "equal respect" and adopting "Indigenous worldviews as their own." Nor – as implied in the second sentence – does "equal respect" imply gullibility, as non-Indigenous peoples are not obligated to accept uncritically everything they hear from the Indigenous. Despite my own critique of historical thinking – that it installs a somewhat simplistic academic vocationalism uncritically reiterating a discredited U.S.-based 1960s "structure-of-the-disciplines" approach – I admire the courage of Gibson and Case to draw a line not to be crossed - even for the sake of "reconciliation."

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ENDNOTES

[1] 2019, 253.

[2] Ibid.

[3] 2019, 254.

[4] Ibid. "Historical thinking" is a concept attributed to Professor Peter Seixas: https://edcp.educ.ubc.ca/faculty-spotlight-peter-seixas/#:~:text=Peter%20Seixas%E2%80%99%20research%20examines%20how%20people%E2%80%94both%20children%20and,heroism%20and%20come%20to%20terms%20with%20historical%20injustice See also: http://historicalthinking.ca/peter-seixas

[5] 2019, 255.

[6] 2019, 256.

[7] Ibid.

[8] 2019, 257.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] 2019, 258.

[14] Ibid.

[15] 2019, 259.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] 2019, 259-260.

[19] 2019, 260.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] 2019, 261.

[23] Ibid.

[24] See – one example among many – Hoxie 2001 (1984).

[25] 2019, 261.

[26] 2019, 262.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] 2019, 263.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.
[32] 2019, 264.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] See, for starters, https://www.britannica.com/topic/historiography To pursue the subject further: https://libguides.princeton.edu/c.php?g=84196&p=544005 For recent and specific examples, see Clark and Sears 2020, Jay 2022, Lorenz 2004, and Traverso 2023.
[36] 2019, 265.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Pinar et al, 1995, 160-164.
[40] 2019, 266.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] 2019, 267.
[45] 2019, 268.
[46] 2019, 269.
[47] 2019, 270.
[48] 2019, 272.
[49] 2019, 273.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Quoted in 2019, 273.
[52] 2019, 273-274.
[53] 2019, 274.
[54] 2019, 275.