

## HISTORICAL EMPATHY

Sara Karn starts her study asserting that “learning about events, people, and circumstances in the past that require an awareness of different perspectives and consideration for the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others.”<sup>1</sup> In particular, “topics also hold the potential to foster empathy toward other people—in many cases, people vastly different from the students themselves—in both the past and present.”<sup>2</sup> Karn characterizes “empathy” as “an approach to teaching history focused on understanding the thoughts, feelings, experiences, decisions, and actions of people from the past within specific historical contexts.” She tells us the term was first introduced in the 1970s in England, where it was deemed “problematic for history education due to a wide range of interpretations of the term,” as “many teachers tended to conflate ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy,’ which resulted in students simply feeling bad for people in the past.”<sup>3</sup> To “clarify some of the conceptual confusion surrounding the term,” scholars who emphasized the “cognitive approach” declared the “purpose of historical empathy” to be the cultivation of “students’ historical thinking skills using the methods of the history discipline,” so – “since the early 2000s” – scholars began to “conceptualize historical empathy as a cognitive-affective process that also makes space for a range of feelings, emotions, and connections to be present alongside historical inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Since, in Karn’s view, insufficient “attention has been paid to historical empathy” in Canada, “greater attention should be paid to historical empathy,” and so she undertakes this study of the “affective dimensions of history as they relate to historical empathy.”<sup>5</sup>

“In Canada,” she reports, “history education research in the last few decades has centred on three main purposes for teaching and learning history in schools: (1) developing historical thinking and historical consciousness, (2) fostering citizenship within a democratic society, and (3) deconstructing popular narratives through decolonizing and anti-racist histories.”<sup>6</sup> It appears there are those attempt to link the first and the third, as Karn reports that “many scholars have identified qualities of historical empathy that foster students’ inquiry and historical thinking skills, including understanding multiple and diverse perspectives, considering contexts, analyzing evidence, recognizing cause and consequence, making inferences, avoiding presentism, and forming judgements.”<sup>7</sup> As “scholars began to consider the affective dimensions of historical empathy with a sociocultural approach to history education, an additional purpose was emphasized: fostering citizenship in a pluralistic democratic society.”<sup>8</sup> Empathy not only linked those three purposes, it provided a bonus: “In the process of developing more open-minded citizens who care about different perspectives in the past and present, historical empathy also offers students opportunities to create change in the present.”<sup>9</sup> Karn incorporates each of these in her “theory of historical empathy

for history education in Canada, which includes: (1) evidence and contextualization, (2) informed historical imagination, (3) historical perspectives, (4) ethical judgements, and (5) caring.”<sup>10</sup> She concludes that a “powerful pedagogical approach to historical empathy includes all five elements and integrates both their cognitive and affective dimensions.”<sup>11</sup>

“When empathizing with people in the past,” Karn continues, “historians engage in two closely related tasks: analyzing evidence and considering historical contexts,” so “students learning to empathize in their history classrooms require sufficient background information about historical events, people, and concepts, which can be acquired through teacher instruction, textbooks, films, literature, and primary source analysis.”<sup>12</sup> She notes that “in the process of turning sources into evidence, students learn to account for different—sometimes conflicting—perspectives, which is a foundational skill for doing history that also has applications in the present.”<sup>13</sup> Then - oddly given that “empathy” is a long-standing (and not unproblematic) concept in the West<sup>14</sup> - Karn suggests that “with its focus on understanding diverse perspectives based on a variety of sources, historical empathy also offers students more opportunities to engage with a wider scope of evidence than Western tradition allows.”<sup>15</sup> I am reminded of Marie Battiste’s citation<sup>16</sup> of the Supreme Court of Canada when Karn writes: “As educators try to shift away from exclusively Westernized thinking about historical evidence ... questions arise about the potential role that Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies—including land-based learning and sharing oral histories—could play in fostering historical empathy.”<sup>17</sup> Through the cognitive comes the affective: “It is through a close examination of historical evidence that contextualization occurs, a key component of scholarship on historical empathy.”<sup>18</sup> It is not only “historical evidence” that requires contextualization, so does the history education researcher him/herself: “With decolonizing goals in mind, history education researchers in Canada have called for increased attention to considering one’s positionality and reflecting on individual and collective identities when studying the past,” from which Karn concludes: “Thus, historical empathy could support learning history within cross-cultural contexts.”<sup>19</sup>

“Much of the debate surrounding historical empathy in history education,” Karn reports, “has rested on the role of imagination—that is, how far we can reach when supposing or inferring details about the past based on available evidence,” with historians “concerned about the use of imagination eroding the integrity of the history discipline, since they believed such intellectual work needed to be grounded in verifiable evidence rather than imagined details.”<sup>20</sup> After acknowledging that concern, Karn reminds that the “imagination” – a key concept in curriculum studies<sup>21</sup> - “is not simply about being able to infer details from existing evidence; it can also engage students in more meaningful learning.”<sup>22</sup> a view also shared by Maxine Greene<sup>23</sup> and Kieran Egan (whose scholarship Karn cites<sup>24</sup>). She points out that “there are certain groups, particularly those from marginalized communities, whose histories are incomplete because sources have not been preserved due to power dynamics and

archival methodologies,” and “therefore, in order to represent diverse perspectives, even when evidence is lacking, an informed historical imagination is crucial.”<sup>25</sup> Karn thinks that “historical fiction may offer one pedagogical approach for engaging students in this process, as many fiction writers rely on a combination of evidence and imagination to develop their stories involving perspectives, places, and times that are vastly different from their own.”<sup>26</sup>

Karn’s next section is titled “Historical Perspectives,” a term that seems to me to risk preserving presentism, as “perspective” implies peering at the past from the present. I prefer the idea of “becoming historical,”<sup>27</sup> a sensibility stretching one’s subjectivity to incorporate elements of the past. For Karn, “the pedagogical focus of perspective-taking should remain on teaching students to avoid presentism, consider historical contexts, draw inferences based on evidence, and explore diverse points of view,” although not too diverse, as “seeking to understand a historical perspective is not necessarily for the purpose of identifying or sympathizing with it (e.g., we would not study *Mein Kampf* for the purpose of identifying with Adolf Hitler, nor would we say that we can ever fully understand him, but we may seek to understand how his anti-Semitic perspective could have come about.”<sup>28</sup> Excluding certain figures and phenomena then, “a consideration of multiple perspectives promotes empathy in the past and present through a combination of thinking and feeling.”<sup>29</sup> The pay-off is not only affective, as “studies of historical empathy have shown that when students are provided sources that reflect a wide range of perspectives on a topic, they demonstrate more complexity in their thinking.”<sup>30</sup>

“Historical empathy involves forming judgements about past perspectives and decisions,” Karn continues, “yet judging the past on its own terms can be difficult for students.”<sup>31</sup> Blurring the boundaries between past and present – as does the concept of “perspectives” – Karn explains that “by forming ethical judgements—defined here as the process of making decisions about an appropriate course of action based on social and personal conceptions of right and wrong—students can find contemporary relevance and meaning.”<sup>32</sup> Basing judgements on “personal conceptions” almost guarantees presentism, does not it? Karn admits as much, although she tries hedge her bets by advising: “when judging the actions of people in the past, it is important to exercise caution and avoid judgements *solely* based on contemporary worldviews.”<sup>33</sup> Not easy, she acknowledges, noting the magnetic-like power of the present: “However, it can be difficult for students to remove themselves from present-day perspectives which involve the benefit of hindsight—knowledge about the consequences of actions taken in the past.”<sup>34</sup> Actually, “consequences” requires moving out of the specific moment – those “actions” – and into retrospective historical narrative, not the “actions” themselves. Narrativizing is also involved when “uncovering the values and norms of a particular period,” an undertaking important for Karn, as “it is within these norms of the time that fair judgements about past thoughts, beliefs, and actions can be made.”<sup>35</sup>

Those judgements are apparently not made “solely” within the “norms” of the time, but through “connecting the past to present and future dimensions,” as doing so presumably informs “present social choices” as well “future preferable destinations” (those two phrases are den Heyer’s, whom she quotes), an assertion Karn illustrates by referencing “present controversies surrounding the commemoration of historical figures tied to histories of colonization and genocide, such as Sir John A. MacDonald in Canada,” noting that these “involve ethical judgements of past actions that have far-reaching consequences for the present and future.”<sup>36</sup> (No empathy encouraged for Mr. MacDonald, evidently.) “Ethical judgements, then, are just as much about understanding the present as they are about understanding the past,” Karn continues, concluding: “In this way, the ethical dimensions of historical thinking support the development of historical empathy by shifting away from an exclusive focus on past perspectives to consider their implications for the present and future.”<sup>37</sup> Karn writes: “While attempting to understand historical actors, students can improve their historical thinking by situating historical perspectives within the values and norms of the time and considering the meaning of past decisions in the present,” adding: “Ultimately, making informed judgements on ethical issues in the past allows students to reflect on the consequences of their own actions in the present.”<sup>38</sup>

Concerning the concept of “care,” Karn adopts the Barton-Levstik postulation of “four varieties of care in history education: (1) *caring about* people and events in the past, (2) *caring that* particular events took place, (3) *caring for* people in history who have suffered injustices or oppression, and (4) *caring to* change our beliefs and behaviours in the present in light of studying the past.”<sup>39</sup> She then tethers these “varieties of care” to empathy: “*Caring about* the past plays a crucial role in engaging students in historical empathy, through addressing topics that interest students.”<sup>40</sup> That seems almost tautological – caring is about what one cares about – but Karn continues, concluding that “*caring that* particular historical events [that] occurred allows students to develop their own responses to the past, including ethical responses,” these evidently a mix of cognition and emotion, as Karn acknowledges that “early critiques against caring involved the belief that the affective element can easily overpower the cognitive processes of historical thinking,” but – she concludes – these were mistaken, as: “On the contrary, classroom studies have shown that affective and cognitive processes can be complementary to one another.”<sup>41</sup> That settled, we learn that “*caring for* people in the past involves responding to their suffering, injustice, or oppression,” certain research – Karn again cites Barton and Levstik – shows that students “often expressed a desire for retrospective justice,” that “students want to do something to change the way events unfolded in the past because they cared for the well-being of others, even if they lived long ago.”<sup>42</sup> Apparently, however, students’ caring isn’t diverted from the present to the past: “*Caring to* change our present values, beliefs, and actions in light of studying the past is a significant outcome of historical empathy,” although Karn quickly qualifies that assertion, admitting that “there are currently only a few studies that reveal

how students have translated their empathy toward people in the past to empathy toward people in the present.”<sup>43</sup> That leaves Karn proposing “that we consider more seriously the potential of a caring approach to historical empathy,” as “providing an educational space to explore emotions and feelings can encourage us to ... [become] caring about perspectives different from one’s own and thinking critically about them can lead to more complex and multi-layered understandings of others.”<sup>44</sup> All others? Even Prime Minister Macdonald? Even Hitler? “A theory of historical empathy that emphasizes affective dimensions can develop informed, caring citizens who are willing to enact change,” Karn continues, concluding that: “In order for teachers to engage students in history and ensure their learning is relevant, students need to care about the past and how it impacts the present and future.”<sup>45</sup> Care also assists “historical thinking” as well: “When students are guided to examine evidence and consider past and present contexts, they build their historical thinking capacities and become more reflexive, critical thinkers,” even when lacking information to inform their thinking:

Applying an informed historical imagination to fill gaps in evidence allows students to consider a wide variety of perspectives, especially those of marginalized groups. Understanding such diverse historical perspectives through a cognitive-affective approach can develop open-mindedness toward multiple points of view in the present. These connections between the past, present, and future, are also made by students when forming ethical judgements about historical perspectives, thereby deepening their historical consciousness. Caring engages students in learning about the past in the first place and can contribute toward fostering empathetic citizens who are willing to affect change in the present.<sup>46</sup>

Sound almost too good to be true. I suppose it is, unless Karn is willing to admit that students’ imagination, fueling a “wide variety of perspectives,” may lead them to empathize with figures and phenomena antagonistic to “marginalized groups.” In fact, students – ideologically right-wing or fanatically religious – have done exactly that.

As a trained historian,” George L. Mosse writes, “I have some practice in attempting to go back in time to see how people living them understood their world. I have always believed that empathy is the chief quality a historian needs to cultivate, and I hope this belief has stood me in good stead as I come to look back upon my own long life. Empathy means putting contemporary prejudice aside while looking at the past without fear or favor.”<sup>47</sup> That conception of empathy – “putting contemporary prejudice aside” - would seem to set aside “ethical judgments,” insofar as these are informed by “contemporary prejudice,” students - animated by their imagination – unable or unwilling to study “the past without fear or favor.” Others question any allegiance to empathy, Jonathan Boyarin decrying what he terms the “hegemony of empathy,” explaining that “the hegemony of empathy is an ethic of obliteration of Otherness. We might say that this occurs where human demands acknowledgement of the Other’s suffering humanity, but where conditions do not allow the work involved what Eric Cheyfitz calls ‘the difficult poetics of translation’ ... that is, where the

paradoxical linkage of shared humanity and the culture of Otherness cannot be experienced.”<sup>48</sup> Boyarin warns that empathy might have “repressive effects.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, “empathy can be a move toward making the strange familiar,” Marla Morris worries: “If empathy suggests that your suffering is the same as mine ... then empathy is false.”<sup>50</sup>

As if providing an illustration of these allegations, Saidiya V. Hartman argues that abolitionist John Rankin’s<sup>51</sup> practice of empathizing with the enslaved confounds his interest in identifying with the enslaved. In making the slave’s suffering his own, Rankin’s identificatory experience shifts: now he begins to feel for himself rather than for those his exercise in imagination presumably represents. Moreover, Hartman explains, by using the vulnerability of the male slave’s body as a vessel for his own purposes, his own thoughts and feelings, the humanity Rankin is attempting to extend to the slave inadvertently evaporates in his imagination. The pain of the “other” is acknowledged to the extent that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of the substitution – the slave’s experience replaced by his imagination - Rankin’s object of identification disappears. Hartman points out that “it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration.”<sup>52</sup> Note that Hartman does not reject empathy altogether.

Nor do I, although I prefer the term “reactivation,” a “partaking” of the past<sup>53</sup> that enables re-experiencing the utter alterity of past, the past not occluded by making it one’s own. Reactivation of the past is less recalling what happened *from* one’s present positioning – a “historical perspective” - in which case the past is confined to one’s knowledge or memory of it, a past then relocated – recalled - into the present, implying no shift, no reconstruction of that present, only an addition to it. Rather, reactivation implies returning to an earlier moment through immersion in the past: its tone, mood, ambiance, that is to say, its utter immediacy and singularity. When one returns, the present – specifically one’s present – becomes expanded, altered, possibly clearer, including its call to be present in the present. No effort at empathy here, no projecting the past onto the present, but re-experiencing what is not only elsewhere at another time but also what is possibly within oneself, the latter idea associated with Jung’s conception of “collective unconscious” – not so much the idea of archetypes but as of specific persons, events, situations. Empathy is not as promising as Karn imagines it to be.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 2023, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> 2023, 83.

<sup>5</sup> 2023, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> 2023, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. What “change” does Karn have in mind, I wonder; I write this during student protests over Israel’s war with Hamas:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/pro-palestinian-encampment-set-up-at-ubc-s-point-grey-campus-1.7188490>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/mcgill-encampment-wednesday-1.7190335>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/encampment-uoft-pro-palestinian-protesters-1.7194321>

See also: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68908885>

<sup>10</sup> 2023, 86. Caring is a long-standing concern in curriculum studies: see, for example, Jung 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Incorporating everyone’s research into one “approach” could conceivably satisfy – or irritate – everyone. I admire Karn’s courage.

<sup>12</sup> 2023, 87-88.

<sup>13</sup> 2023, 88.

<sup>14</sup>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy/#:~:text=The%20concept%20of%20empathy%20is%20used%20to%20refer,and%20feelings%20and%20to%20care%20for%20their%20well%E2%80%93being.>

<sup>15</sup> 2023, 88.

<sup>16</sup> See research brief #122.

<sup>17</sup> 2023, 88.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> 2023, 89.

<sup>20</sup> 2023, 90.

<sup>21</sup> See Wearing et al. 2020, 112.

<sup>22</sup> 2023, 90.

<sup>23</sup> “One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world,” Greene (1995, 3) explains, “is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible,” as “imagination is what permits us to give credence to alternative realities.”

<sup>24</sup> See 2023, 90.

<sup>25</sup> 2023, 91.

<sup>26</sup> 2023, 92.

<sup>27</sup> Pinar 2019, 57.

<sup>28</sup> 2023, 92.

<sup>29</sup> 2023, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> 2023, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> 2023, 95. Italics added.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> 2023, 95-96.

<sup>37</sup> 2023, 96.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> 2023, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> 2023, 98.



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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> 2023, 99.

<sup>45</sup> 2023, 99-100.

<sup>46</sup> 2023, 100.

<sup>47</sup> 2000, 5.

<sup>48</sup> 1992, 86. Concerning Cheyfitz, see: <https://english.cornell.edu/eric-cheyfitz>

<sup>49</sup> 1992, 87.

<sup>50</sup> 1999, 17.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.nationalabolitionhalloffameandmuseum.org/john-rankin.html>

<sup>52</sup> 1997, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Pinar 2019, 17.