



Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective Working Paper # 2

Negotiating Space: Public Education and The Dispossession of Japanese Canadians

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Good afternoon,

Let me begin with a modest confession...I have no idea how I ended up presenting a paper at this conference. I am a vice principal of an urban high school in Richmond, BC. About four years ago I was in my office, no doubt scolding one of my students for posting something inappropriate on Snapchat or Instagram or some other social media platform when I received an invitation from a colleague to be part of a seminal research project on the forced sale of Japanese-Canadian-owned property during the 1940s. At the time I was serving at my third secondary school as an administrator after teaching social studies, history and law for more than 17 years. Searching for something to reenergize my passion for the profession I agreed to take on a support role in the *Landscapes of Injustice* research project that included authoring some resource materials and finding teachers to pilot lessons. Fast forward and a year later I found myself sitting amongst a sizeable number of very accomplished academics in a steering committee meeting. I was now co-chair of the “Teacher Resources Cluster” (one of seven clusters on the project), dedicated to developing materials for secondary and elementary schools across Canada. As I sat in on that meeting I remember thinking to myself...what have I gotten myself into! But I was there for good reason. This is a project and an opportunity I am passionate about and because it is the type of history we need to be teaching in our classrooms.

Landscapes of Injustice is a 7-year project dedicated to uncovering the details of an injustice brought upon Canadians of Japanese ancestry. Many Canadians are aware that the federal government uprooted and interned over 21,000 Canadians of Japanese ancestry in the spring of 1942. However, the intricate details of the uprooting and the forced sale of their homes, business and personal chattels is less well known. The federal government ordered the uprooting, deportation and internment of all Japanese Canadians within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast but they offered the assurance, in law, that their property would be held, “as a protective measure only”, and it would be returned to them at the cessation of hostilities. With this promise Japanese Canadians made difficult decisions about what to take and what to leave behind in their forced exile from their

homes, what to sell and what to keep. Within a year of the initial deportation, in January 1943, the federal government reversed course, resolving to sell everything. Homes, businesses, farms, family heirlooms, treasured belongings, in short everything, was lost. The questions raised by the government's actions are the focus of the research project: Why did dispossession occur? Who benefited from it? How has it been remembered and forgotten? The first four years of the investigation will focus on research, drawing public attention to the issues, and building a repository of materials for academic and community use. The remaining years will be about building enduring sites of memory: a web site, museum exhibit, teacher materials and an archival database. Currently the project is in year three and has held two major symposiums to share research and to connect with members of the Nikkei community. The teacher resources cluster is now moving forward with the creation of mini-lessons to be piloted in classrooms across Canada.

Today I would like to address a few of the questions that my cluster is grappling with as we move forward with the development, production and implementation of teacher resources. Firstly, I am concerned about how our cluster will sift through and select research materials that will respect the complexity of the story while reaching the hearts and minds of our students? Students' understanding of the past is complicated by issues of appropriation, epistemology, absence of historical empathy and the inability to 'do' history. Secondly, how do we support and encourage teachers to allocate curriculum space to this topic while acknowledging the pressure they face to teach many of our common nation building narratives? Scan the social studies curriculum in any province and the emphasis on teaching to the nation building myths, while shifting, is very evident: early exploration, colonization by the French and English, Confederation, the building of the CPR, war are dominant themes. The landscape is shifting but it remains a challenge to fit in the narratives of the marginalized, disenfranchised or oppressed. Thirdly, where does this narrative fit in constructing a culture of memory that is vigorous, challenging and progressive? Academic research into memory, identity, nation building and history show very clear ties between teaching nation building myths and the development of

shared identity. Can we balance the need for a collective national consciousness founded upon common values, beliefs, laws, and customs while teaching narratives that illuminate past wrongs, discrimination and institutionalized racism?

The Past is a Complex Place

Educators, students, bureaucrats, and academics value history education for its ability to build collective memory, shape identity and draw connections between past and present. However, for students, drawing the connections and giving them deep and lasting meaning is not easily done. If we examine our past carefully and thoughtfully we can avoid making the similar mistakes in the present, or so the argument goes. If the deportation and internment of Japanese Canadians was a byproduct of a racist agenda, surely in its study we build a society less prone to discriminating against or marginalizing groups of people in the present. Often, however, adolescent learners struggle to make connections and to apply the understandings gained in the study of the past to present crises.

However, adolescents, and adults for that matter, struggle to absorb the lessons of history and apply them to the present for a number of reasons. These include an inability to understand the time-space continuum of history, an absence of tools for transferring knowledge of past events into present action, an inclination to “historicize” the past, and exposure to oversimplified or erroneous uses of the past in the service of present political, moral or social agendas (Boix-Mansilla, 2000). Holt and Wineburg have argued that adolescent learners do not have the correct toolkit to deal with the complexity of the past (1990, 1991). Young learners may lack the analytical tools, background knowledge, or historical empathy needed to thoughtfully deconstruct and reconstruct narratives. Often, this was evident in my classroom. Students could demonstrate historical empathy when studying an event like the Chinese Head Tax but continued to hold negative or stereotypical views on contemporary issues of immigration. On the one hand, they may acknowledge the injustice of a racist and exclusionary head tax, but might support the current exclusion of refugees on the basis of race, identity or religious affiliation.

Research in historical understanding among adolescents has generated a number of important questions about how students learn, know and understand the past. The findings have significant implications for classroom teachers in the selection of resources, teaching methods and narrative choice. One study, of students aged seven to fourteen, showed that the progression in students' ideas about accounts of the past varied widely because of age, accessibility, narrative choice, or availability of information (Lee and Ashby, 2000). The point I took from the study by Lee and Ashby is that a variety of factors influence student understanding of the past, but some of these can be impacted by applying historical thinking concepts, using a variety of sources, having awareness of the abilities of the students, and teaching students to recognize bias, point of view, and the complexity of cause and effect.

I was always challenged by the manner in which students conceptualized the past as nothing more than names and dates presented in chronological order. I think in part it is easier for students to construct or organize the past this way and their cognitive development makes it difficult to organize the past in more sophisticated ways. Lee and Ashby urge teachers to be thoughtful when selecting sources to study the past. Students do not come to the table with an understanding of how knowledge is formed or that knowledge claims can be disputed. What is presented in the textbook or by the teacher and their sources is likely to be viewed as the truth. Moreover, most are not equipped with the cognitive and analytical tools to deconstruct narratives and hold them to account for their truth claims, though these skills can be taught and applied. Secondary school curricula present fragments of a lived past, largely through textbook sources and often fail to illuminate students to other fragments or narratives. Teachers should apply critical pedagogy to challenge the embedded and hidden messages of such curricula and search for narratives that challenge dominant cultural myths, enlighten new perspectives and question the foundations of society.

Let me connect these understandings to the research coming out of the Landscapes Project. Good history teaching involves the use of multiple sources, examined from a variety of perspectives, including both primary and secondary sources, in addition to selecting an evocative and powerful narrative. To date the research coming from LOI is promising, the team has uncovered powerful and evocative letters of protest, detailed records of government decisions, compelling legal cases, the personal records and memoirs of individual Japanese Canadians, oral histories, financial records, and detailed traces of land title and exchange. These sources include the voices of brutally racist politicians, advocates for social justice, cost conscious bureaucrats, lawyers and judges making formal legal arguments, and of course many, many voices of diverse Japanese Canadians. They include the perspectives of witness and bystanders who saw these events unfold in their communities as well as the people who created and executed the policies and those who suffered by them. With so many rich primary sources of information and the associated interpretive analysis by the research leads, the construction of vibrant and provocative teaching resources will allow thoughtful, complex, and rigorous investigations into the dispossession.

Collective Memory, Identity and Schools

The construction of national memory and of official sites of remembering have been common projects in nation states in the 20th century. Ceremonies, historic landmarks, national holidays, museums and school curriculum were built upon the idea of nationhood with the goal of indoctrination and collective acceptance. Schools play an important role in creating the collective identity of society, and the narratives taught in schools reflect this objective by giving substance to what Francis calls 'the myths of nationhood' (Francis, 1997; Paris, 2000). How do we ensure that our students are exposed to a culture of memory that is progressive and challenges the norms so that they are mindful and critical without losing sight of the goals of a shared and unifying identity? Teachers are charged with negotiating the tension between teaching a master narrative and a search for a much muddier, incomplete past. They also face the challenge of teaching students to question received versions and to apply the lessons of the past to

their own lives, while at the same time meeting the prescribed curriculum, departmental pressures to conform, or to teach to a cross-grade or province wide exam and to meet common citizenship goals.

Research on the connections between history, memory and relics builds on the position that all historical narratives are negotiations between the actual lived past and our memories of that past (Lowenthal, 1985; Nora, 1989; Holt, 1990; Seixas, 1996). Much of the thinking is built on the premise that we can never truly know the past, it will always be removed from our own experience and understanding, therefore all history is constructed for a purpose other than mere knowledge (Lowenthal, 1985). So what does this mean to our students and how does it play out in the classroom? At the start of each history course or section I would take some time to help my students consider the complexity and interplay of history and memory. We would discuss questions like what is memory? Can memories be shared and if so how do we share them? What can we use to aid us in remembering things that happened long ago? What is history and how is it different than the past? In debriefing their answers to questions like these my students could begin to understand the complexity of history and that what we remember and how we remember it is important even in the present; they understood that there is no singular, authentic version of the past.

Conservative minded governments and uninformed bureaucrats, federal and provincial, are slow to accept responsibility for the injustices of the past and reticent to adopt sanctioned curriculum that confronts such events. This may be particularly true when these events have not been reconciled or acknowledged in the public realm. Teaching topics like the dispossession of Japanese Canadian owned property can serve multiple goals within the construction of a more authentic national memory. Kymlicka noted that 'a nation that hides from the injustices of its past will not address the wrongs of the present or safeguard the future' (1999). Those engaged in the Landscapes of Injustice project could not agree more. In confronting our troubled past we must face and reconcile the kind of society we aspire to be; inclusive or discriminatory, apologetic or indifferent,

embracing or intolerant. By openly telling the story of dispossession, and events like it, we are acknowledging the importance of respecting the harm done to that community, and a willingness to think about what we can do in the present to reconcile our collective moral failure.

Why Teach About Dispossession?

History is the reconstruction of the traces and accounts of the past, or more particularly, selected moments in the past. The choice of which narratives or stories to tell is a reflection of conscious decisions made by teachers, curriculum authors and textbook publishers, in part, to develop cognitive capacities, moral stances, or critical habits of the mind but also in furtherance of larger citizenship objectives. These choices are not random, inadvertent or unbiased and are used to service any number of competing and complementary objectives. History and social studies educators can make choices in the selection of narratives taught in their classrooms to meet the developmental objectives set out in curriculum guides. While it remains true that much of the content found in the curriculum guides across the ten provinces continues to emphasize a traditional nation-building master narrative, the paradigm is shifting. There are fewer standardized exams, greater recognition that the big ideas and concepts behind the story matter more and that there is room for choice in the specific lessons of history used to underpin the big ideas. We see an emphasis on inquiry learning, critical and creative thinking competencies, and a greater appreciation for the tools needed to be a global citizen.

The choice of narratives does matter and the basis for those choices need be thoughtful and reflective of considerations beyond building national pride. In the late 1990's noted Canadian historian Jack Granatsein authored a monograph titled *Who Killed Canadian History*. In it he suggested that college and high school history courses were now hostage to political correctness, victimization stories and poor classroom pedagogy and that these recent trends were undermining the purpose of teaching Canadian history (Granatstein, 1998). The Dominion Institute (now Historica) has used a series of polls over the past 15 years to highlight the very issue Granatstein raised, that young and old Canadians alike do

not know the diplomatic, military or political history of Canada. The Harper government's retooling of the citizenship study guide, over a decade ago, supported this narrow view of Canada's nation building story (the guide is being re-written by the Trudeau government). In this view, feminist, social, anti-racist, and multicultural narratives had replaced the tradition of instructing young Canadians about the mythic heroes, conquests and colonization, and our coming of age through war and economic crisis. In learning Canada's traditional nation building narrative, Granatstein argued, students are prepared for participation in our democratic institutions and political processes. In this view of teaching Canada's past the purpose of the history curriculum is to emphasize the great achievements of Canadian society, not examine the faults, failings and injustices of a more troubled past.

Often, however, the sweeping national narratives for which Granatstein pines are constructions of the past that do not tell the full story. Such narrative also do not challenge the moral frameworks of students because there is less emphasis on critical analysis. Consider the example of building the Canadian Pacific Railway. The commonly told story of the Canadian Pacific Railway is one in which it was central to the creation of Canada by uniting the country geographically, economically, politically, socially, and militarily. An alternate view of the building of the C.P.R. would be that it was used to oppress Canada's aboriginal people, settle their land with immigrants, exploit the resources appropriated by the Crown, and that it exploited the labour of thousands of Chinese immigrants. The validity of each narrative is perhaps less important than the function of each in expressing truths about who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. What is learned in a history that emphasizes colonial conquest, European exploration, confederation, mythic heroes, and the pioneer settlers? What alternative lessons are drawn from a history that centers on the narratives of women, aboriginal peoples, the working class, and ethnic minorities (Osborne, 1999)? Is it possible that in looking at the remarkable achievements of many marginalized and excluded communities we can face our past and acknowledge the redeeming qualities of our modern society, seeking reconciliation rather than indifference?

So how would a more balanced approach to the study of Canada's past look like in our schools? Let me illustrate this with an example from the new social studies curriculum being developed in British Columbia. The revamped provincial social studies curriculum in BC attests to the tension between telling a full story of our past while maintaining a commitment to the nation building narrative and the underlying citizenship attributes and values it is meant to transmit to students. The new curriculum in BC articulates the need to honour First Peoples principles of learning, increasing coverage of First Nations history and mandating the examination of discriminatory policies. The curriculum specifically references the Komagata Maru, Chinese Head Tax, residential schools and the internment of Japanese Canadians as examples of past injustices that students are expected to know. More interestingly the draft for Social Studies 10 in BC states that we must teach about "historical and contemporary injustices [to] challenge the narrative and identity of Canada as an inclusive, multicultural society". The guide goes on to state that students are expected to "make reasoned ethical judgments about actions in the past and present, and determine appropriate ways to remember and respond". The guide also includes references to many common nation-building myths. It is an attempt at balancing the tension between forging common identity with shared principles, values and civic goals while acknowledging the need to face the moments of discrimination, exclusion, marginalization and oppression found in our past and to make amends for those wrongs.

As teachers of history we cannot ignore this tension, in fact it should be embraced. The approaches are not mutually exclusive; we can tell a vibrant and effective narrative that includes mythic heroes like Champlain, military history including the Battle of Vimy Ridge and our political evolution while examining the LaFonatine-Baldwin debates. Within these significant moments of Canada's past we can also teach about the exploitation and oppression that occurred during colonization, institutional racism experienced by ethnic minorities early in the 20th century and the fight for the franchise by women. Teaching in a province that has a long history of institutionalized racism, discrimination, colonial exploitation, and marginalization it has always mattered to me that we tell a full picture of the past. In telling the story of the dispossession of Japanese Canadian property in the

1940's there is an opportunity to examine a past in ways that speak to big picture issues we still grapple with today. The story is one of great hardship and loss and confronts the exclusionary and racist views of Canadians and our government in the 1940's. It is also a story of redemption, incredible achievement, resiliency and belief in the very principles of democracy that were betrayed in the dispossession. With a rich and varied base of archival materials, numerous evocative personal stories of hardship and triumph, a variety of sites, and layers of legal issues, the study of the Japanese Canadian loss of property can be rigorous, powerful and potentially transformative for our students. It is the goal of the teacher resources cluster to access these material artifacts, personal stories, geographic data, and legal documents to prepare a rich experience for teachers and students. We expect to produce digital resources with supporting materials that are applicable in any social studies classroom in Canada, both secondary and primary. I want to thank you for listening this afternoon and hope that you will visit the Landscape of Injustice website to follow our progress and learn more about the project.

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