



Embodied historical consciousness: From nationalist entanglements to the affective embodiment of a concept

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ABSTRACT: Given the popularity of historical consciousness within history education (Anderson, 2017; Seixas, 2006, 2017), there is a need to pause for reflection to consider the stakes, tenets, and presuppositions in taking on, continuing, and teaching, a traditional historical consciousness in disciplinary history. Drawing on Seixas' (2006) definition of historical consciousness, that being the intersection between public memory, history education and citizenship, we argue these underlying principles maintain and sustain oppressive, exclusionary practices. Such an understanding of historical consciousness fails to account for the ways in which histories are embodied, living in/through bodies, and cannot be separated from daily realities. Further, a disembodied historical consciousness does not allow for understanding histories as co-constitutive processes, which interweave and assemble in relational flows. In turn, we seek to work through an embodied historical consciousness, arguing this is necessary for an intra-relational assemblage of the past within the present, moving away from "rival histories" and their disciplinary boundaries that are inextricably tied to the state (Barad, 2007; Elmersjo, Clark, & Vinterek, 2017). This means not only being attentive to bodies in-and-as history, but making an overt space for working through affective elements, the trauma of being compared to the somatic norm (Puwar, 2004), and the national grand narratives that creates a limited and exclusionary version of "common memory" to critically theorize historical consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Historical consciousness; onto-epistemology; embodiment; nation

(Re)theorizing historical consciousness: Disrupting the nature of truth and reality

"We all have been marinated in Eurocentrism."

Marie Battiste.

In a 2017 piece for *Public History Weekly*, Canadian history educator Stéphane Lévesque opens his writing saying, "created in the height of nationalism, public schooling continues to educate 'a public' - to shape the national consciousness of its people," - yet, he continues, "the use of history for nation-building is a growing source of tension" (2017, Mar 16, para. 1). With this Lévesque asks, "should history promote national identification," in light of the seeming increase in cosmopolitan outlooks of young people, from "global" cultures and interactions of the internet age (Lévesque, 2017, Mar. 16)? Lévesque succinctly (re)opens the theoretical debate regarding continued entanglements of history education and the building of a national citizenry, or a "nationalized" public as a sort of common collectivity, advocating that educators "can no longer indoctrinate students to identify with the nation" (para. 15). He argues, "we simply cannot ignore the role of national identification on people's ways of knowing. School history

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needs to play a more productive role in helping students develop more complex and serviceable identities for the 21st century” (para. 5). As an attempt to develop more “complex [student] identities for the 21st century” should these two elements, “history” and “nation,” continue to be entangled as the means of understanding experiences with the past in the present? Further, why is the “nation” the space that marks the boundary of common history and memory, instead of a living, collective engagement with the past outside of a nationalist or institutionalized framing? These questions guide our exploration into an embodied historical consciousness.

In our view, Lévesque’s article points to the need to think through normalized relations of history as a form of knowing, the collectives created and assumed in historicity, and the practical and conceptual effects of these relations. As the epigraph from Battiste hints, that “we are marinated in Eurocentrism,” perhaps there are deeper patterns of knowing and being that are continually knotting “the nation” to dominant historical narratives. Such processes need to be brought to light in order to understand how the nation is used as a normalizing entity upon and through which knowledge of the past is constructed, and how these processes carry consequences for coming to terms with collective pasts in the present.

This discussion is especially timely, as Conrad et al. (2013) and Tupper (2014) explain, conversations surrounding collective historical identity/ies and reconciliation have encouraged ongoing and arguably renewed investigations into processes of remembrance in Canada.¹ Specifically, Seixas’ (2006) theorization of historical consciousness has held particular purchase with education scholars (see for example, Duquette (2015) and Thorp (2014)), broadly defined as the intersection between public memory, citizenship, and history education (Seixas, 2006, p. 15). Even in the brief definition, the containers of memory, collectivity, and knowing, carry normalized relations and need critical unpacking. Seixas’ theorization of historical consciousness becomes a grounding point in order to parse out some of the tensions deployed in his version of historical consciousness, particularly in its relation to the somatic (bodies, embodiment), the ontological (nature of being), and the epistemological (forms of knowing). This is not to suggest that Seixas’ historical consciousness is “bad” or “wrong,” but rather to work through its entanglement with culturally-embedded historical values and norms that carry pedagogical consequences in its current conceptualization. With such engagement, we further the potential of an embodied historical consciousness as a reparative practice, and for attending to Lévesque’s critique above, by engaging with theoretical insights of feminist, post-colonial, decolonizing, and anti-racist perspectives. These perspectives strategically “raise an epistemological challenge” that critiques and “questions the ‘nature of truth and reality’” (Pillow, 2003, p. 187), in an unquestioned historical consciousness. These critical questions are paired with postcolonial and decolonizing theoretical insights, following similar tracts as Andreotti (2011), who argues for an engagement with ideas of adaptation and multiplicity within some Indigenous epistemologies, “that should be deployed in healing the trauma of colonization,” recognizing and taking seriously “the power of Indigenous metaphors to offer strategies for healing of the ‘soul wounds’ of both aboriginal and nonaboriginal communities” (p. 70). Such questions and insights provoke the ontological and epistemic foundations of historical consciousness (Seixas, 2006): to unravel common sense theoretical linkages and their effects, particularly the exclusionary and not-so-common normalization of particular bodies and identities, highlighting tethers to the nation-state. With this, we are conscious of our positionalities as privileged settler-academics living within a settler-colonial state, and follow Kerr (2014) in attempting to be(come) “unsettled settlers” who engage “with others in critical self-questioning” of real places in real ways (p. 102).

In turn, we take up the “challenge” and critically question the “nature of truth and reality” of historical consciousness, arguing that an *embodied* historical consciousness is needed: one that is not tied to nation or nation-building, but connects with affective, lived-experiences in the present; that allows for a relational understanding of being that is more concerned with

perhaps attending to the “cosmopolitan outlook of the 21st century,” as Lévesque suggests. In particular, this means not only being attentive to living bodies in-and-as history and separating history and “the past” from the body as a rational discipline, but making an overt space for working through ontological and affective elements, such as the trauma of being excluded from historically “somatic norms”² in nation-building narratives (Puar, 2004), in order to heal “soul wounds” as Andreotti advocates. This also means untethering national grand narratives as the space of “common” past, to critically construct an historical consciousness, differently.

In what follows, we offer a brief definition of historical consciousness as it has been developed by Peter Seixas (2004; 2006; 2017). This discussion provides a conceptual grounding for engaging in critical tensions where histories are contained and compared through a subtle reliance on Western hierarchical positions. We then show how these positions encourage and prop up the entanglements of historical consciousness and nation, and the possible negative effects of such relations in the present. With this, we argue that Seixas’ current historical consciousness, as he admits, requires an engagement with the ontological components of historicity more specifically, particularly the ways bodies are somatically living the effects of what is contained in “the past.” It is in such attention we then advocate for an embodied historical consciousness as a means of foregrounding the critical and ontological, in hopes of opening a space for more complex and hybrid understandings of history, particularly in light of reconciliation. Finally, we theorize and argue for an embodied historical consciousness as a way forward through more affective, interdisciplinary, and complex engagements with “the past” in relation with lived realities in the present.

Seixas’ Historical Consciousness

Though historical consciousness has varied definitions, we draw from the work of Seixas (2004; 2006; 2017), as these texts have been most prominent in discussions of historical consciousness in Canada. Seixas’ work in historical consciousness arrives out of a distinctly European understanding of the past, following German theorists Gadamer and Rüsen. Gadamer (1975) explains historical consciousness as not simply relating to the past by an everyday person, but “the full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of opinions” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 8). Seixas (2004) uses Gadamer as one possible way of relating the turn to “awareness” as “a specific cultural development located in the modern era” (p. 8), becoming a “privilege, perhaps even a burden” of “post-modern” generations (Gadamer, 1975, p. 8). To work through such “burden,” Seixas references Rüsen (2004), who theorizes historical consciousness as a moral orientation from the past towards present and future action, and a “prerequisite” to dealing with historicity. Yet, Rüsen (2004) positions historical “orientation” for historical consciousness as a decidedly teleological, linear, and narrative framework, where historical consciousness can be understood as a sort of temporal narrative competence, or “synthesis of moral and temporal consciousness” (p. 79). Rüsen (2004) argues it is the “orientation” of historical consciousness that reaffirms moral values of “togetherness” and “common life,” and notions of identity and difference are enfolded with a “competent” understanding of the past - such as those of the nation state as a form of “commons” (Rüsen, 2007; Seixas, 2004; 2006). In turn, for Rüsen, historical consciousness has a “practical function” as a guide for living together well. Rüsen’s and Gadamer’s historical consciousness then, acknowledge the social construction of reality and moral “burden” within historicity, and provides an argument for its importance for present and future collective action.

Seixas pulls from Gadamer’s and Rüsen’s theorizations when suggesting that historical consciousness entails “individual and collective understandings of the past, the cognitive and cultural factors that shape those understandings, as well as the relations of historical understanding to those of the present and the future” (Seixas, 2004, p. 10). Yet, Seixas (2004,

2006) also sees the “burden” of history as a decidedly nation-state and educational project, through the three intersections of public memory, citizenship, and history education. This version of historical consciousness also connects national belonging, and formalized educational processes of remembrance through and with history education (Seixas, 2006, p. 15). This is not to suggest that historical consciousness should or should not be cultivated in formal schooling, nor are we critiquing the relative merit of Seixas’ theorizations, particularly as it is important work that has gained uptake and interest for historical inquiry and the teaching of history within Canada.³ Instead, what we are interested in is better understanding the possible consequences of defining historical consciousness as a national and public education project in a nation that is grappling with its historical “moral burdens” and multiplicity of experiences of living difficult pasts in the present.

Postmodern “burdens”: “Rival histories” and comparative historical containers

Seixas recently (2012b; 2017) acknowledged that current iterations of historical consciousness are still restraining, falling short of thinking through what he calls a more “postmodernist understanding” of history: one that confronts that all knowledge is imbued with power, including historical narratives in their production, methods, and Western epistemological presuppositions (Foucault, 1972; Munro, 1998). What types of power, then, are upheld within a historical narrative intricately tied to the building of the Canadian nation-state, and what type of historicity is encouraged in this type of historical thinking?

In Seixas’ “postmodernist understanding” of history, power becomes a comparative tension in a relativist framework: one historical “interpretation” positioned against “other” interpretations of history, often leading to conflicting perspectives. Yet, paying closer attention to historical “difference” through an epistemological lens shows the potential for understanding such postmodern burdens, and all their complexity, as not simply a matter of rivalry or historical comparison, but a deeper look into the way historical meaning is created in historical consciousness. As an example, Andreotti (2011) argues that attempts at “dialogue” between Indigenous and Western epistemologies continue to be plagued by dominant and subordinate relationships, becoming what Battiste (1998) calls problematic “add and stir models of education” (p. 21). Working under the premise that history is comprised of comparative, even contrasting perspectives, “other” (non-Euro dominant) histories are relegated to a comparative periphery, not as potentially viable ontological or epistemic perspectives in their own right. In other words, interpretations are siloed, and historical understanding is limited to a correlational or comparative politics, where non-normative ways of knowing and being related to the past become in tension with, or opposition to, dominant ones. This is similar to Byrd’s (2007) suggestion that comparative historical configurations have the troubling tendency of leading from comparison to *equation*; comparison slips into the hierarchical, when Western conceptions of the past continue as unproblematically centered and normalized histories through which “other” interpretations are positioned.

This is particularly the case in historical narratives of nation-building as “the” normalized means of interpreting a collective past. As Lévesque’s (2017) comments remind, history education has long been dominated by nation-building histories. Further, Seixas (2012b) conflates the “human story” of the past into “national stories” as if they are the same historical “stories” that are common sense, and for all peoples (p. 863). Like Lévesque above, we do not deny that national identification affects peoples’ ways of knowing the past, as Conrad et al. (2013) have also shown in their Canadian study, but it is vital to acknowledge that these “ways of knowing” and the identifications that they engender, are not a unilateral experience. Nations carry value judgements for making the distinctions of “us vs them” that are not only imagined, but felt and lived *in* people, somatically, and affectively.

Sociologist Max Weber (2009) explains that the nation does not arrive from an economic origin, but from an emotional one. The nation is about “exact[ing] a sentiment of solidarity in the face of other groups. Thus the concept belongs in the sphere of values” (p. 172). In this way, Weber speaks with Anderson’s (1991) oft-cited remark that nations are “imagined communities.” As such, the promotion of the nation as “the” space of collective history, presumes that the collective will develop a value-orientation based on a type of affective historical consciousness. In other words, positioning the nation as the space through which to build historical consciousness can continually recenter an affective orientation built from dominant cultural values to collective understandings of the past. Left unquestioned, the nation-building narrative “orients,” to use Rüsén’s term, the “historicity of everything and relativity of opinions” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 8), which at first glance allows space for multiple historical narratives, however, working within the “burden” of postmodern perspectives, historical rivalries work to reposition dominant tellings of the past, leaving us to grapple with the leftovers from such comparative, limited, and competing historical orientations. Goldberg (2015) recently critiqued such a comparativist analysis, seeing it as “hid[ing] as much as it reveals” (p. 252); by continuing to see nation-states as common sense separate entities, rather than seen as *relational* to each other. This is the work that critical scholars and activists continue to advocate for, through the foregrounding of processes of power production in their very “reality.” What comparative or rivalry histories hide, then, are the ways in which they support and allow traces of power to continue through banal constructions of history, surviving through buried assumptions in the reproduction of a type of uncritical historical consciousness.

These epistemological and ontological comparative separations are compounded as historical narratives - as units of interpretive orientation - as they become containers for comparison, and analysis becomes about working through “*rival histories*” (Elmertsjo, Clark, & Vinterek, 2017; Seixas, 2017), or dialogues *between* differing narratives as a means of gathering an “awareness of historicity” (Rüsén, 2007). The power in the production and possible effects of these narratives as separate containers is often obscured and difficult to analyze as points of collectivity, if their separateness as narratives is assumed in advance. As Seixas (2004) states, the narrative “defines the boundary between members who share the common past and those who do not” (p. 6). Such a formulation, where boundaries are drawn between historical narratives, carries consequences for individuals and their relations to the past, but also for present understandings and relations for those narrative collectives. This is evident in the separations of particularized histories placed within “history” *en totum*.

Historical narratives as separate, comparable narratives imbued with their own meanings, not only breaks these narratives into national stories but further into particular segments of the population, such as Indigenous, African Canadian, Francophone, or women’s histories. In identity demarcations, like “women’s history” for instance, not only is “women’s history” particularized as a possessive subject, it is often manifested in histories of familial or “private” spaces as narratives, fracturing spaces and gendered bodies from an unnamed norm of “men’s history.” Or, in racialized terms, having “Black history month” embodies and racializes the subject of history in particular ways which separate historical narratives, but also contains these narratives to a specific temporal space - a month. The politics of the particularities of experiences of “the past” that have created these separations of identity collectives along, nationalized, racialized, gendered terms for instance, are not actively or specifically engaged in historical consciousness, but continue unproblematically. In other words, why are such demarcations necessary in the first place, and what do such separations have to do with historical consciousness? Continuing to see histories and historical inquiry through a comparative configuration *creates* power-laden collisions as historical approaches and the narratives they generate as distinct containers, denying a means of thinking more relationally as Goldberg (2015) suggests. So, the power/knowledge dynamics of historical consciousness,

its “nature of truth and reality,” continue relatively unquestioned and normalized in its epistemological and ontological foundations of how we live and know our pasts.

Historical consciousness as intra-actional: Attending to relationality

One way to foreground processes of power in historical consciousness is to conceptually pair with an embodied understanding, through the idea of history as an “intra-relational assemblage” (Barad, 2007). Barad’s (2007) work allows for a type of ontological and epistemological plasticity, since intra-relation is a take on Barad’s (2007) notion of “intra-action,” where connection (to the “past” or “others”) is not about privileging two or more distinct entities and engaging them comparatively, as in *inter*-action, or dialogue, but rather that the specificity of any entity comes out of and through its connections, as an “assemblage” of those connections in all their tensions (what Goldberg calls “relational” above). Assemblage therefore describes the complex and temporary wholes that come together through intra-actions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; see also Delanda, 2006). This process highlights the importance of power *in* and *as* pieces of connection themselves - such as the ways in which nationhood or nationalism are powerfully braided into histories and history education, where these connections are not assumed in advance, but entwined with(in) historical inquiry itself.⁴ In turn, historical understandings are emergent, entangled and embodied, and “containers” of nation or otherwise are active aspects of the development of an orientational awareness of historicity as historical consciousness. An embodied “intra-relational assemblage” is a concept that shifts historical consciousness to an emerging and relational process, moving away from linear, “rival histories,” with their enclosed boundaries and their tendency towards centre-periphery relations. It keeps the connections of past-present-future in dynamic flux, and in direct relational connection with the living body in the present, where the past can live in active tension with the present. The insights within the concept of an embodied intra-actional assemblage process for historical consciousness allow us to unpack further the effects in the epistemological and ontological assumptions Seixas’ relies on to position an “orientation” for awareness of historicity as described above, namely, the notion of a “finished” past, and a nation-state as historical ontological narrative container, and the somatic normalizations that come with a privileging of the nation-building historical narrative to collective understandings of history. It is to these dynamics we now turn in the next section.

Untethering the nation-state: Understanding historical processes of somatic normalization

Working through the stickiness of deploying “postmodern understandings” in history, Seixas (2017) concludes by stating: “History education scholars have aimed at the abilities of students to analyze, evaluate, and construct narratives about the past. But what if narrative has not only an epistemological but an ontological dimension?” (Seixas, 2017, p. 264). While Seixas admits to an ontological “dimension” to historical education, we argue more direct engagement is exactly what is needed for historical consciousness to work through complex histories, and attend to the powerful effects of this ontological element.

The effects of privileging the nation as an ontological container for history are reproduced and reinforced in the continuing articulation of nationalist history as connected to certain bodies (and identities) over others. These are bodies of particular kinds, mostly cis-gendered, male, racialized white, with European (particularly Anglo and Francophone) heritages. For those who identify with some or all of these identity positions, the notion of a collective space like “nation” is more common than not, unproblematic.⁵ It creates, as Puwar (2004) puts it, “a palace of

mirrors” (p. 17) - where normalized somatic identities in terms like “Canadian” are reflected back in positive ways, reinforcing those identities as part of the collective, historically, and in the present, and others as “space invaders” into the national norm (Puwar, 2004). Stanley (2011) makes this point in an anti-racist analysis of the continued legacies of disenfranchisement of Chinese Canadians. These legacies have encouraged a grammar of Chinese Canadians as being forever “foreigners” or “recent immigrants” rather than as having deep, complex relations to the development of Canada in its nation-building historical narrative (see also Coloma, 2013). Normalized “reflections” then, create and reproduce an invisible “somatic norm” that is imbued with power, and if not understood critically, and taken apart, repeat the same patterns of normalized inclusions and exclusions of certain bodies as a palace of mirrors (Puwar, 2004). This is particularly poignant in settler-colonial nation-states like Canada, where the dominance of grand narratives of nation-building, and settler neutrality continue to position “other” bodies and the histories they may link to, not even as rivals, but as “add ons” or side-narratives to the central story, if they are present at all (Rogers & Grant, 2017; Stanley, 2011), what Puwar (2004) calls a conceptual and representative “straight-jacket.” We see this with many historical narratives and representations of Indigenous peoples within the broader nation-building narratives, as they are reflecting historical representations that are misconstrued (or completed absent) from legacies of colonialism and racism (see for example, Paul, 2006).

With this, not all bodies do or wish to reflect the somatic norm of “Canadian.” An historical consciousness not attuned to these complexities takes these processes of certain bodies as the privileged and positively related subjects of historical narrative for granted, assuming a collective and neutral common understanding of peoples’ connections to the past and to the nation in which they live. What about bodies who do not feel a solidarity with “Canada,” but continue to live in the proscribed boundaries of Canada, the nation-state? What if the mirror as somatic norm reflects a body that one cannot feel or see as themselves, does that mean they must “fit” into an already assumed somatic slot, even if this slot is exclusionary and limited?⁶ How does one attempt to understand differing historical contexts, and develop a complex understanding of time, if the histories one is continually encountering exclude, silence, deny or misconstrue *present* identities that one inhabits?

As such, we argue that positioning historical consciousness as a nationalized comparative endeavour for settler-colonial nation-states like Canada, closes historical understanding in exclusionary ways continuing power politics that critical understandings question, deconstruct and bring to light. At the same time, how would a potentially embodied historical consciousness that at the very least “imagines” but more feels and experiences as solidarities not tethered to nations and nation-building narratives, *work*? In engaging the ontological components of historicity specifically, we find hope for a complex and reparative historical understanding as an embodied intra-actional assemblage.

Historical consciousness or historical embodiment?: Questioning ontological containment

Historical consciousness, must promote ways of thinking that do not side-step somatic and ontological aspects of collectivity,⁷ remaining critical of what it means to work and teach for a collective that is not reliant on nation or dichotomous essentialisms for identification. For Seixas (2012a; 2012b; 2017), ontological components of history and history education involve an understanding of the self as an “historical agent,” which relies on the interpretation and contextualization of the past as a “finished” entity and engaged through historical traces outside the body in the present moment. Seixas’ (2012a) remark, that “the past is a foreign country”

(p. 127), which is “finished” (Seixas, 2006), exemplifies the continued separations of the past from the present and the future within Western conceptions of history (Marker, 2011).

Historical consciousness from the perspective of a “foreign” and “finished” past assumes and therefore makes unproblematic the very separation of past/present/future and its orientation as a teleological procession: the individual and collective are contained and separate entities from the past and future. In other words, one cannot “know” the past in the present if it is “foreign,” and cannot actively disentangle this history if it is “finished.” In this way, there is little conceptual room for “historical agents” to work through the powerful effects of the somatic norm to which they are asked to relate in the present. Further, as Marker (2011) shows, Indigenous ways of understanding the past are “different” in that “the past” is not past at all, but circular and relational; it is contingent and entangled with living bodies in the present, where local land, flora and fauna, including people, are *living* historical beings with meanings. This is a means of enacting an orientation to the past as always connected in complex relation to a living body, not as something to be engaged from the distance of something “foreign.” One does not have to “pick” a conception of the past, as this would continue a comparative analysis, but rather, an intra-actional approach sees the relational, power-laden effects within the ontological and epistemological assumptions of these analyses in the conception of the past. By assuming the Western epistemological understanding that time is a finished place, and the ontological position of the past as “foreign” for historical consciousness, Seixas closes down potential engagement of an Indigenous understanding of an embodied historical knowing and its relations for those who identify with it.

More deeply, when viewing the past as finished, the historical “traces” are also distanced from the embodied and living present. Traces are petrified and disembodied “artefacts” from the past (Seixas, 2006), to be objectively engaged from a distance, ontologically splitting an awareness of historicity from the body (including the head), and the enduring connections in and with individuals and/or collectives in the present are not directly engaged. In so doing, it takes for granted (and dismisses) that bodies are themselves historical traces in the sense that we all “wear” historical and contemporary understandings of racial/settler-colonial thinking as somatic markings.

Yet, experiences like those related in a recent CBC article (Fenn, 2018, May 14), where four Inuit women were “reunited” with artefacts of their ancestors kept at the Smithsonian in Washington, USA, become tension-filled reminders of “other” ways of relating to the past and that “traces” are not so distant from the bodies assembling them for historical orientation. As one of the women, Manitok Thompson, recounts upon seeing the enclosed clothing of her great-grandmother behind an artefact drawer, “It seems my bones, somewhere, my spirit had a connection and it seemed like it was shouting out, ‘We’ve been lonely for so many years. We want to go back home now’” (Fenn, May 14, para. 10). Seeing the past in traces outside of the body and as “finished” elements continues the common sense that obscures that past is lived *in* bodies, in “the bones,” “in the spirit” in the present and into the future. Historical consciousness’ definitional separations of “the past” and the living body seem to exacerbate tensions of comparative space that it struggles to work through in the first place: It continues the “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 1986) of Western epistemologies in Canadian history education which denies the living human bodies as sites of knowledge making and knowing, and awareness of historicity. The centrality of the living body and spaces for/of these bodies and identities as they are produced through intra-actions of what is understood as “the past,” seems to be a pivotal, missing element within Seixas’ current historical consciousness. As such, an attention to *embodiment* for historical consciousness is an element we highlight in Seixas’ current conception to encourage the contingency and relationality of historicity and embody historical consciousness in practice. It requires critical understanding of bodies as part of history, living history, and troubling of the notion of the past as disembodied, traceable

“finished” artefacts without powerful and tension-laden connections to living bodies, both individuals and collectives.

Towards an embodied historical consciousness: Re-membering history

A shift in historical understanding to include notions of “bodies” (the ontological), into an engagement with the past as an intra-actional assemblage can attend to some of the realities of ongoing racism, misogyny, and/or colonization through critical engagement of somatic, embodied elements and orientations of past/present/future. It forces a recognition of the “containers” of history, and has the possibility of making the politics of embodiment - whose/which bodies, when and where - part of discussions of the past from its foundation. In particular, this means not only being attentive to bodies in-and-as history, but making space for working through embodied elements of history, how bodies and consciousness are not only interconnected, but how bodies are made through common-sense and violent distinctions that make this living and any attempt at a “common” historical consciousness difficult to work through as evidenced in our discussion of national narratives above. The national grand narrative creates a limited and exclusionary version of “common memory,” where an embodied historical consciousness offers an understanding the past *in the present* and *through the somatic*, to work on “re-membering” history and “recovering” collective notions from the past to be pulled into the present (Munro, 1998).

As Laforteza (2015) argues, re-membering “ensures that the body is continually remade by ‘breaking the silence’ against white supremacy and oppression” (Laforteza, 2015, p. 143; Lorde, 1983, p. 97). As a continual “breaking” of the naturalized denial of the body, re-membering “allows for a new way of examining these forms of power and privilege, thus engendering a different relationship to them” (Laforteza, 2015, p. 143), that an embodied historical consciousness may reveal. Munro (1998) furthers this point saying that for those who have been denied, excluded or silenced in history, “to recover from history is in part dependant on reconceptualising, re-member-ing, the suppression, the contradiction, the pain, the fiction that is history” (p. 267). History education, as an integral aspect of historical consciousness, needs then to be open to multiple ways of knowing *and* being, but also work through affective trauma from exclusionary and linear constructions of history, and “the past.” An embodied historical consciousness must give space to multiple, complex, embodied ways of being as a collective in any space, nation or otherwise, but also requires attending to the affects and “soul wounds” of the somatic norm as a historical construct in its denial and silencing, as well as its privileging, in the past and present (Andreotti, 2011).

Taking up affect, collective memory, and collective healing

An embodied history is one that is lived in the present, and the “body” of that living can shift and change with context; it does not presuppose the nation, or a universal body, but points to the need to better understand embodied elements of history, such as affect. One option is to look to the reparative work of post-colonial and decolonizing scholars to engage with critical postmodern and ontological understandings of how “we” have come to our present moments. Laforteza’s (2015) notions of re-membering becomes an affective reflexive analysis through what she calls “somatechnics.” These analyses aim to make “the colonial and imperial economies of race, gender, sexuality, disability, class and religion accountable for their corporeal consequences” (p. 147), therefore providing a possible analytical framework for a relational, and embodied historical orientation that does not neglect power, but makes its very “corporeal” engagement a foundational element. There is also possibility, for example, in the work by Rothenburg (2009) on multidirectional memory that “considers a series of

interventions through which social actors bring multiple traumatic pasts into a heterogeneous and changing post-World War II present” (p. 4). Such interventions allow for an attention to epistemic hybridism (Andreotti, 2011), where epistemological positions are not merged (as an add and stir formulation), but held in productive tension, as we see in the possibility of an intra-actional assemblages. Such a “hybrid” position then foregrounds tensions of multiple and shifting understandings of the past that can work through trauma, as the very “tensions” become the analysis, rather than contained and separate positions for comparative analyses.

Yet, there is also powerful hope to integrate new methods into the discipline of history, towards more affective meaning-making in the arts (as one example), which have repeatedly shown to work through the “soul wounds” of the past in ways that bring the world and the individual’s body together in complex assemblages. Steele’s (2000) work in trauma theory, for instance, “illuminates our connections to the past, and how the past connects to us...[and] makes visible the problem and possibilities of our connections to each other” (p. 4). In openly working with(in) affective realms in relation to the past, like notions of trauma and artistic means of expression, new collectivities are possible, new forms of reparation in the form of witnessing also become more seriously plausible. The poetry of witnessing, according to Steele (2000), is:

. . . written for the people on the other side of desks, professors, and politicians and social workers and all those who are in a position of power, a position to witness. To witness means to decide to participate, not only with the head but with the heart- in the experience of another, an experience so painful that it must be shared in order to be confronted. (pp. 1-2)

Sharing is a form of solidarity that does not rely upon an “other” in the sense of exclusion or comparison, but as the foundational means of creating, maintaining, and expanding solidarity. To witness is to acknowledge power, not ignore its effects, and work towards healing. Further, it means choosing the collective with which one associates historically and in the present, drawing strength from the activity of “confronting” what such a collective means now and for potential futures. What would be the point of historical consciousness, or even, historical embodiment, if not to heal and find deeper more connective understandings of “our” histories? By healing, we mean healing from collective trauma, inflicted on peoples historically, in the recent past, and in the present. Working in affective domains, with people’s somatic and emotional lived experiences, means working in healing, in a very broad sense of the word. So, we have worked our thinking about historical consciousness, towards collectivity as healing, reparation, and embodied knowledge that is then “awake” (Greene, 1995) to the past in the present moment. How then, can historical consciousness, help in the process of collective healing, or healing as/through solidarity by bringing out and working through the ontological elements of history?

By way of conclusion

What we suggest is no simple task, and as Battiste reminds us again, we are *all* marinating in Eurocentrism, making the process of finding different historical relations especially difficult to provoke and continue. For this reason, there seems to be a shying away from these sticky spots or a tendency to defer troubling realities to a future problem. Even as Seixas (2017) openly hints to the “ontological dimension” of history education and historical narrative, his response is endemic of side-stepping trouble spots saying: “the ontological dimension of narrative competence is potentially a conceptualization for a more expansive and ambitious history education (perhaps, admittedly, at such an abstract level that it has little use, practically)” (p. 264). So as much as the ontological may be present, it is something for a more “expansive and ambitious history education,” one that is perhaps not “practical.” Further, at present, any historical inquiry has to exist in the space of the nation, in educational institutions, in a

discipline guided by scientific, “objective” methodologies, in the rationalized space of the “head,” and in sparse curricular “real estate” (Rothberg, 2009). This is difficult work! And yet, if we make no effort, as people, as educators, what happens to historical consciousness? How “conscious” of the past can any one body be if this consciousness is marred with blinders, cooked from restrictive and exclusionary spaces that deny that the past is not so common, not straight-forward or even “rival”? Indeed, our understandings of history will always be limited, and our positionalities partial to our own lived experiences, however, thinking through ways in which we construct the past, and how we live with it in the present is not a futile exercise. Instead of thinking of this type of history education as “impractical,” we can think of it as being necessary, and through that necessity for collective work (healing and solidarity) we can find a way through. Our envisioning of an embodied historical consciousness as an intra-actional assemblage seeks to do just that.

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Endnotes

¹Since the recent publication from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), along with the flurry of celebrations for Canada's 150th anniversary, there has been increasing engagement in practices of collective remembrance and national historical narratives. See also Nijhawan, Winland, & Wüstenberg (2018).

² Puwar (2004) defines the somatic norm as the effect of connection between "bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time" where it is "certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions" (p. 8).

³ Seixas' (2004) theorizing of historical consciousness inspired discussions within disciplinary history education in Canada, and has been significant for the pedagogical reasoning of specific "historical thinking concepts" to encourage students to "become more competent as historical thinkers" (The Historical Thinking Project, n.d.). While the historical thinking concepts have been taken up in several provincial social studies and history curricula (for e.g., Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba), historical consciousness is not explicitly utilized, and, we argue, has been undertheorized in the Canadian context.

⁴ See McDonough and Cormier (2013) for example discussions of the distinction of teaching nationalism (or not) or teaching processes of nationalism in schooling.

⁵ For a discussion of collective, tension-laden understandings of the past, see research on tensions with collective remembrance across Canada from Conrad et al. (2013).

⁶ This process is exemplified in Ibrahim (2014) in the tensions of African migrant youth coming to Canada having to "racially fit" in the already contained space of Western, and particularly North American representations of Blackness.

⁷ By 'ontological aspects of collectivity' we mean to suggest that ontology - the engagement with the 'nature of being' - and the "underlying beliefs about existence that shape everyday relationships to ourselves, others, and to the world" (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 5), are important to bring to focus in understandings of 'collectivity' for historical consciousness. As White (2000) suggests, ontological commitments, "are entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively" (p. 4).

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