

Postcolonial Historical Practices

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This article suggests that historical practice in Canada is in the process of changing as a result of national and international developments, such as Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, and the final report and recommendations of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A key part of this process has been the reconsideration of Canadian narrative frameworks, but it also involves debates surrounding commemorative practices and other innovations in exhibition and display. This shift creates an opportunity to revisit the moral nature of historical narratives, Indigenous conceptions of the importance of the past, the authority of professional historians, and the place of community-engaged historical research.

Keywords: historical practice, historiography, memory

Résumé

Cet article suggère que les pratiques historiques au Canada sont en train de changer sous l'effet de développements nationaux et internationaux tels que Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, et le rapport final et les recommandations de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada. La reconsidération de cadres narratifs canadiens est une partie clé de ce processus, lequel comporte en outre des débats sur les pratiques commémoratives et sur d'autres innovations relatives aux expositions et installations. Ce changement présente l'occasion de réexaminer la nature morale des narrations historiques, les conceptions autochtones sur l'importance du passé, l'autorité des historiens professionnels, et la place d'une recherche historique qui soit engagée au niveau communautaire.

Mots clés : pratiques historiques, historiographie, mémoire

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Introduction

On August 29, 2019, protestors pulled down a statue of John A. Macdonald that had stood in Montréal's Place du Canada. The fall knocked off the statue's head, leading at least some reports to claim that it had been "beheaded" (CityNews, 2020; Martinez, n.d.). The event caused something of a furor in the press, but it is likely better understood as one in a series of developments that illustrates the current state of debate surrounding Canadian historical practices. It is part of a wider reorientation in Canada's conception of its past, how that history is commemorated, what it means, and the narratives through which it should be taught. This reorientation has been particularly broad, both in terms of its time frame and its focus. It involves not simply historians but also Elders, knowledge keepers, First Peoples, activists, allied scholars, public figures, educators, archivists, and museum and gallery officials, among others. The aim of this article is not to precisely define the meaning and scope of this reorientation. Instead, the goal is to engage this issue and reflect on it. This article suggests that: a) this reorientation is conditioned by a range of factors, including but not limited to anti-racist protests and movements to recognize Indigenous autonomy, sovereignty, and treaty rights; b) this reorientation opens up new possibilities for dynamic and productive conversations about Canada's past and its meanings that settler society can learn from; and c) this conversation creates a space to revisit the cultural and individual importance of history. In this regard, important work has already been done by Indigenous scholars and within critical historiographic traditions that provides important indications of the form these practices could take (Downey, 2018; Palmater, 2015). This work should not be minimized; its effects can be seen among archivists, curators, educators, and others. This work should be acknowledged because it indicates a broad recognition of the need to address the dynamics of colonialism as an element of history, public memory, and the lived realities of racialized Canadians.

Colonialism and historical practices

Historical practices can be considered a diverse set of approaches to and relationships with the past. They involve teaching and learning, exhibition, preservation, narrative, research, writing, and other forms of communication about history, its meaning, and its significance. They are broadly connected in the sense that they take the past as their focus, but they are also diverse and decentred in the sense that they include institutions and individuals located in the state and civil society. While they are often connected, different centres of practice (e.g., museums, galleries, archives, the academy) retain their autonomy. Historical practices are linked to colonialism and First Peoples, activists and scholars, Elders and film-makers, teachers and students, youth and adults. There is no central organizing body for Canadian historical practices. Instead, they are loosely organized through professional associations, local historical societies, websites, knowledge keepers, museums, archives, the academy, and teachers' associations, among others. They also involve interpretive and ideological disagreements both within and across institutions. These practices are part of the archives and the museum; they are commemorative and impinge directly on public space; they involve autonomous Indigenous peoples and treaty relationships as well as settler society. Ongoing changes in historical practices will not produce a common perception of the past and its public significance – Canadian historical culture and practices will likely remain decentred. However, continued conversation that contributes to changes in public perceptions

about the past, authority over its representation, and modes of community engagement should be encouraged. To be clear: the intent of this article is not to try to roll back progressive changes in, say, commemorative practices or knowledge diffusion. It is important to recognize the damage done by colonialism and to respect those articulating concerns with public commemorations that limit, minimize, or seem to validate the architects of colonialism and racialization embedded in the Canadian state.

The development of Canadian postcolonial historical practices relates to a range of different factors. There may be no singular definition of postcolonial historical practice, but it can involve a range of considerations that include attention to colonized subjects, respect for different processes of preserving and narrating the past, collaborative work on display, and a new emphasis on public education. In civil society, the development of postcolonial historical practices is driven by anti-racist and decolonization movements related to campaigns for the recognition of Indigenous autonomy and rights and against systemic racism. This movement is international in scope and connected to a reconsideration of the past. In the United States, it is closely related to protests against both institutionalized systemic racism and police violence and campaigns against right-wing populism. In Britain, it involves a deep and broadly based re-evaluation of the country's national and imperial past, and how specific British social classes benefitted economically from the empire in ways that are marked on British heritage. In South Africa, it has been connected to student protests against a public space constructed around racist statues that commemorate Cecil Rhodes and the imperialist subjugation of the country (American Historical Association, 2017; Knudsen & Andersen, 2019; Kros, 2015). These international trends are echoed and reflected in Canada but amplified and modified by the Canadian context. Political activism has been a key factor in promoting debate about the organization of public space and the figures commemorated in it, where it is linked to a disjuncture between the discourse of reconciliation and the realities of colonialism and racialization. Put differently, there is a disconnect between the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (Canada, 2019) and the continued public celebration of key architects of colonialism. It is this gap activists seek to address. In effect, activists are asking a series of important questions: How should Canada mark its history of colonialism? What kinds of historical practices should be used to both address the reality of colonialism and construct a different non-colonial political formation? How should Canada remember colonialism? How should that memory be organized and preserved?

For Canadian historians, the development of postcolonial historical practices bears an affinity to critical historiographical traditions that date both to the rise of the “new social history” in the seventies and also stretch further back into Canada's past. Similar to postcolonial historical practices, the new social history was an international movement that involved a fundamental rethinking of historical education and the national narrative. A full consideration of its methods, effects, narrative strategies, and key arguments becomes complicated very quickly, but for the sake of simplicity, the Canadian new social history looked to displace a pre-existing “colony-to-nation” narrative that located the important dynamics of national history in prudent political leadership that managed the growth of a national political community. The Canadian proponents of

the new social history found this narrative both limiting and inaccurate. They looked to dramatically broaden the scope of historical research to include women, children, prisoners, workers, immigrants and racialized minorities, as well as gays and lesbians, among others. The new social history also looked to complicate and recast the Canadian historical narrative. Instead of focusing on political leadership, the new social history built its narratives around a different set of historical markers, particularly (but not exclusively) the development and effects of industrialization, urbanization, the changing relations of production, and state formation. In place of the progressive development of a national community, the new social historians found history laced with often violent conflict and repression (Cruikshank & Kealey, 1987; Frank, 1976; MacGillivray, 1974; Palmer, 1979) that was part and parcel of inequality, class, and social conflict (Cross, 1976; Gagan & Turner, 1982; Kealey, 1985; Stanley, 2000), while other studies used critical race theory to illustrate the deeply embedded character of inequality and racism in Canada (Bannerji, 2000; Mackey, 2002).

There is nothing particularly unusual in historical reassessment. By its very nature, history, as a form of research and writing, is inherently revisionist (Beaton, 2017; Berger, 1976; McKay, 1994; MacKay & Bates, 2010; Romney, 1999; Taylor, 1989; Wright, 2005, 2015). There is an important distinction to be made between commemoration and historical research. Commemoration does not easily encourage critical perspectives but instead focuses on the veneration of individuals as symbols of the nation. By contrast, history, as a form of research and writing, is a generally democratic enterprise in that it encourages a broad range of voices. It is also “data driven” in the sense that narratives are continually reassessed against the basis of existing research. In terms that are too simple: the national narrative changes as Canadians learn more about their past. This is something different than presentism, but it is connected to shifting questions Canadians ask of the past. For example, the rapid growth of the new social history reflected the fact that specific groups of Canadians did not recognize themselves in the history they were taught. As a significant body of scholarship now illustrates, Canadian conceptions of the past and approaches to historical education have changed appreciably over time and continue to evolve (Morgan, 2016). Changing perspectives are inherent in the nature of modern historical practices and, over the last fifty years, the effects of shifts in perspective have been generally positive. The new social history broadened the subjects of historical research, introduced new areas of study, promoted increased concern with historical education, focused attention on the connections between archives and communities, stimulated the growth of new archival collections, challenged stereotypes, developed a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of archival sources, and more readily captured the diversity and differences of Canada.

This might seem like an unusual characterization. It is a defence of history as an academic discipline; a set of historical practices; a collection of archival projects; and a subject of learning, exhibition, and display. Coupled with other developments, it does suggest that there is reason for optimism with regard to the changing dynamics of Canadian historical practice. What are those other developments? The key ones relate to increased recognition that Indigenous people and their Elders and knowledge keepers can and should play an important role in a public conversation about the past. The recognition has been uneven, and there are voices that continue to neglect

Indigenous perspectives and downplay the scope and character of colonialism in Canada. There are recent incidences where educational advances have been rolled back (Christou, 2018; Peck, 2021). By contrast, there is also a well-established recognition that Canadian historical institutions and practices should continue to embrace the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, their Elders, and their knowledge keepers. This has included a commitment to collaboration, the increased recognition of the biases of particular historical research methods, a growing awareness of the biases inherent in archival collections, and an increased respect for Elders and knowledge keepers. In other instances, it has meant exhibition practices that are more attuned to the dynamics of Indigenous perspectives, the introduction of Indigenous advisory panels, and the repatriation of appropriated artefacts (CBC News, 2020; Royal Ontario Museum, n.d.).

Trajectories and possibilities

Where will the changing dynamics of Canadian historical practice lead? The development of postcolonial historical practices will likely have a range of interrelated effects. First, it provides a broader, deeper, and more detailed treatment of the processes of colonialism. It is evident that colonialism cannot be reduced to residential schools. It must be seen as a concerted, extensive set of state policies that aimed to eliminate the separate cultural existence of First Peoples in Canada. Without limiting its scope, Canada's colonial history speaks to the territorial expansion of Canada; Canada's economic growth; racist labour practices; racist immigration, treaty, and legal histories; international issues and borderlands histories; gender relations; and a host of other subjects. It is a history that focuses on the meaning and implications of citizenship and other markers of Canada as a political community. Canadian history may not be reducible to colonialism – this can be a matter of discussion – but the development, organization, and boundaries of the colonial state, as well as resistance to it, are central features of the Canadian national narrative. For historians, studies into the character and nature of colonialism can provide a venue through which to generate an interdisciplinary conversation about the past. That is: the exploration of its parameters, ideologies, conflicts, and cultural forms can involve a series of different disciplinary perspectives (Dean, 2013; Fee, 2015). This narrative also helps locate the historicity of the present. In this sense, history is a story of the making of contemporary Canada – the various factors that constructed the present – but also something more than that. It locates the present as part of a history that opens onto the future. This does not guarantee that the future will move in any particular direction, but it does locate contemporary activism (as well as resistance to it) as part of a series of historical processes looking to reconstruct the relationships between Canadians in different ways. As it pertains to Indigenous peoples, the key issue is the relationship between autonomous First Peoples and settler society.

The second interrelated effect is that it suggests a narrative of resistance to colonialism that highlights Indigenous cultural resilience. A number of different scholars and cultural activists have addressed the ways in which Indigenous peoples and cultures have withstood the onslaught of colonialism and the strategies used to do so (Downey, 2018; Palmater, 2015; Parnaby, 2008). This narrative can also include alliances with supporters in settler society. This is a history that is being told in an affirmative mode that also speaks into the future. The history of resistance and resilience does not displace the per-

sonal, cultural, and social trauma associated with colonialism. It does, however, illustrate the capacity and strength inherent in Indigenous cultures, which provide some measure of optimism for the future (Palmater, 2015). What this type of narrative becomes is a counter history of a Canada whose very development challenged indigeneity.

Third, postcolonial historical practices encourage a reconsideration of the role history plays in individual lives. Mi'kmaq citizen Pamela Palmater's (2015) mediation on accepting personal responsibility for treaty rights might serve as an example. Palmater develops this idea on her blog (Palmater, 2021) and in her book *Indigenous Nationhood* (Palmater, 2015). In one instance, Palmater (2015) explains the idea through a poignant discussion of her father's military service and what motivated him to join the Canadian army during World War II. For Palmater's father, the key factor was his willingness to personally honour the terms of the Peace and Friendship Treaties and protect his people. In this sense, history is not a series of events or processes but rather the basis in which relationships between settler society and First Peoples are grounded.

A similar idea develops out of the work of Passamaquoddy scholar Donald Soctomah (2002), who describes his nation's heritage as a "gift" from his ancestors. What this does this mean? I will make no claim of expertise in this area, and I do not want to speak for Soctomah, whom I do not know. For me, this characterization raises a potentially important perspective about how we think about the past and our responsibility to it. In this way, heritage takes on an almost sacred character that "carries a responsibility for us to share ... with our children's children" (p. 170). This conveys a different kind of aura that requires respect, care, and faithfulness. This past is to be treated with a measure of reverence that incurs a particular burden in the present and a duty to educate the next generation. Allan Downey (2018) seems to put forth the same ideas in his award-winning history of lacrosse, *The Creator's Game*. Downey is careful to credit the Elders he learned from, to treat their knowledge with respect, and to relay their narratives through a faithful retelling. This seems particularly true in his discussion of the origins of lacrosse as a gift from the Creator because the game carries with it a sacred purpose inextricably connected to its provenance. This origin story establishes both Downey's intent to narrate the history of lacrosse differently than other sport historians and his fidelity to the Indigenous heritage of the game. It allows him to relate history in a different mode. If we accept its origin story, lacrosse's journey and reclamation by First Peoples gains greater force and depth.

Refocusing historical practices

Several important considerations follow from this discussion about the reconsideration of historical practices. First, the works of Palmater (2015), Downey (2018), and Soctomah (2002) seem only to increase history's importance. This may be a generalization that requires some explanation. The protests surrounding the commemoration of John A. Macdonald can serve as an example. Over the last several years, Canadians have engaged in a wide-ranging debate about commemoration and public space. In particular, a significant section of the population seems concerned about the ways in which Canadian colonialism is commemorated because it celebrates the architects of an attempted genocide. A significant number of First Peoples and activists argue that these statues should be taken down because they do not represent the kind of history

we should celebrate, nor the leaders we should commemorate. There are those who disagree. Macdonald has his defenders and there are, perhaps, more people who feel that his statues should not be taken down (Global News, 2020). One frequent claim is that removing statues erases history.

This is not, however, the case, and there is an appreciable merit to a fuller discussion of this matter. There are important historiographical, ethical, commemorative, and educational issues at stake. Moreover, it would be inaccurate to reduce the discussion of shifting historical practices to a binary distinction; there may be a range of options between taking down statues or leaving them up. In fact, this binary distinction does not reflect the broad and, at times, nuanced arguments made by different protagonists in this discussion. Statues of key figures in the development and consolidation of colonialism in Canada may be relocated, but John A. Macdonald is not in danger of disappearing from Canadian history. In fact, quite the opposite. While those who defend Macdonald may dislike some of the attention on him, discussions of colonialism in Canada cannot neglect him. Rather than erasing history, the debate about Macdonald and commemoration seems to have focused more attention on the past, both how it is interpreted and how it should be marked. Considerations of commemoration and history are connected not simply to Macdonald but to other aspects of Canadian society as well. In this discourse, the connection between the past and the present is not always clear, but what is clear is that it is seen as important. The discourse of anti-racists activists flows easily from commemoration to policy issues, providing a direct connection between the past and the present.

How might these developments affect Canadian history as a discipline? The affinities between a critical tradition of scholarly history and the increased relevance of Indigenous voices on the national stage will not automatically produce a new synthesis in historical practice; nor should this necessarily be the case. In particular, settler society needs to be wary of adopting Indigenous approaches to history on a number of grounds. For example, settler society should not assume that Indigenous approaches to the past are common across the diversity of First Peoples in Canada. Nor should scholars located in settler society assume that these perspectives are relatively easy to adopt, particularly in the absence of the learning processes that sustain them. There is also the risk of cultural appropriation, a dynamic embedded in the culture of colonialism. It should go without saying that cultural appropriation is not a sign of cultural respect but the opposite: an exercise in unequal power relations. Using Indigenous oral traditions or modes of historical education outside of their context and without the express approval of Indigenous peoples will replicate processes of colonialism.

Instead of adopting – almost certainly imperfectly and with the danger of appropriation – Indigenous perspectives on the past, a better and more likely approach would be the development of a conversational mode of historical discourse, education, commemoration, and record keeping (or, repatriation). One approach that historical institutions can take is to make common cause with activists as part of an ongoing conversation about the past and its meanings and implications. A key question to address is whether Canadian historical practices can extricate themselves from colonialism. Settler society cannot create a space of innocence that stands outside itself and looks at the past with

innocent eyes. Nor should the historical discipline – as it is currently constituted in the academy, think tanks, archives, libraries, and museums, among other places – assume its own authority. There can be no real conversation unless Canadians accept the idea that they cannot, *a priori*, establish the ground rules of that discussion. For instance, Canadians should *not* try to tell First Peoples what reconciliation means, nor establish limits in advance of discussions as to its meanings and historical practices.

The good news is that this discussion has already started on a range of different fronts, including the archives, the gallery, and the museum (Genovese, 2016; Mills, Rochat, & High, 2020; Thorkelson, 2019). It is also a conversation that will be defined by “shared authority” (High, 2009). This is another idea that has developed out of the new social history: recognizing the agency and autonomy of diverse social groups and their ability to speak meaningfully about the past. Learning about and commemorating the past is more effective when it is not isolated to a series of experts who speak to communities from outside them. This type of shared authority can also be seen in post-truth and reconciliation residential school commemorations. Here, communities engage in considerations of the scope and nature of the commemorative process, what it is intended to indicate, and how it can proceed as an educative process. The willingness and desire of archivists, museum officials, and curators to enter into a consideration of the ways their institutions operate has been nothing short of impressive (McTavish, Terry, Ashley, Igliorte, & Robertson, 2017).

There are clear implications for other social groups and other issues. Community archives and museums can, and should, speak to their communities, their sense of the past and its significance, a point that appears to be increasingly recognized by archivists. A range of institutions are in the process of considering the repatriation of artefacts and the rituals associated with their preservation. As a range of other historical disciplinary fields, including social studies, labour studies, women’s studies, and ethnic studies, have demonstrated for an appreciable time, the gaze of the old colony-to-nation narrative left the vast majority of Canadians outside its field of vision. Heritage sites, local museums, and amateur historical societies, however, did not seem to do the same thing. They tended to focus on the lived experiences of a broader cross-section of Canadian society. This does not mean that there are not next steps, but it indicates that the reconsideration of Canadian historical practices is already well advanced. The ground for meaningful conversation has already been laid.

The presence of the past

The past cannot be changed. This is a truism. In recent debates about commemoration and public space in Canada, this argument is often used to support limiting the number of changes made to commemorative practice – to, for example, maintain statues of Canadian political leaders associated with the development of colonialism. No one is arguing that the past can be changed, but it should not be assumed that some measure of closure cannot be brought to it. As Canada, First Peoples, racialized minorities, and marginalized social groups move into the future, new questions will be asked of the past and new ways to understand it will emerge. Advances in digital archiving, for instance, can provide better and broader access to a range of different sources. One change already underway relates to the idea of the finality of the past. Assumptions

about the finality of the past are simply that – assumptions – and should be explored as such. This is one of the key tenets of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, official apologies, movements for redress, and campaigns to reorganize public space: the past is not gone and there is something that can be done about it. The idea that the past lives on in the present is hardly surprising. It is a standard element of heritage commemoration and of many traditional values and public policies designed to address processes of marginalization and inequality. It encompasses Soctomah's (2002) conception of heritage as a gift. Much of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission served to demonstrate how history, in a direct and traumatic way, continued to deeply affect the lives of residential school survivors. To say that the past is gone and cannot be altered blatantly (if unintentionally) disrespects the experiences of survivors and the problem of traumatic memory and intergenerational trauma.

The idea of healing, expanding education, and rethinking who is commemorated and why is precisely intended to address the presence of the past, for survivors, First Peoples, marginalized Canadians, and Canadians in general. These are not the only approaches that have been used to address the realities of the past and its effects on the present. There are different views on practices such as land acknowledgements, apologies, commissions of inquiry, artistic interpretations of the past, renaming, community consultations, and similar developments. There is nothing wrong with a discussion of the range of ways in which Canadians and Indigenous peoples grapple with the past and its importance for the present. But to suggest that the past is simply gone and should be left alone artificially limits the ways we think and learn about it and mark and celebrate it. It limits the scope of historical practice at a time when a range of different communities are suggesting that they want these considerations broadened.

The transition Canada is moving through with regard to historical practices is not completely new, and it is not fed by a single source. It connects to critical traditions of historical scholarship with deep roots in Canada's past, and to anti-racist activism and decolonization. At their most public, these practices contest commemoration in public space, raising questions about who should be seen as a significant historical figure of notable accomplishment. At the very least, the debate ushered in by activists has served Canadians well because it provides an opportunity to consider the character and nature of the national narrative, what is included in it, how it is taught, and how it is displayed. There is nothing unusual in shifting historical perspectives. Canadian historical institutions have been adapting to postcolonial practices for some time, and adapting to new perspectives could place them in a good position to carry on a ready dialogue with Indigenous peoples, anti-racist activists, and marginalized communities, as well as students and Canadians. Building on conceptions of shared authority and agency, historical institutions appear to be interested in being part of a conversation about Canada's past that can be meaningful to a range of communities. Equally important, postcolonial historical practices challenge the idea of the finality of the past. Through processes relating to healing, redress, apology, and reconciliation, they point to the ongoing significance and relevance of history while providing ways to address its legacies and dark continuities. Put together, this suggests a multi-dimensional transition that proceeds unevenly across a range of historical practices. To be sure, some his-

torical practices and some Canadians will move more slowly to consider the full potential of these shifts. In the end, however, they provide an important corrective while simultaneously reasserting the importance and relevance of historical practices and history. This is a significant development that stands to reinforce the importance of history and make possible a new multivocal conversation about it.

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