

POSITION PAPER

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Untold Damage of the Singular Story

Written by
Jessica Shin

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I am an immigrant scholar and educator based in Vancouver, British Columbia on the unceded traditional territories of the x^wməθk^wəy^əm (Musqueam), S^kwx^wú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́lilwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. I am also a long-time student at Simon Fraser University, where I completed my B.A. in 2008, my B.Ed. in 2012, and my M.A. in 2020. I was born in Seoul, South Korea in 1985. In 1990, my family and I immigrated to Canada. Without a fluent English-speaking parent, I turned to books to inform my understanding of my new English-speaking world and to negotiate where I fit into the schema of the Canadian social landscape. Unfortunately, I seldom found representations of my Korean-Canadian identity amongst the books borrowed from the public library. Growing up, I enjoyed literature written by settler authors, especially *The Little House on the Prairies* and *Anne of Green Gables* novel series. For most of my life, the only Canadian writers I read were Lucy Maude Montgomery and Margaret Atwood and other canonical authors pushed onto me by the public education system. Realising as an adult that there has always been great literature authored by minority and Indigenous and writers has been revolutionary and affirming for me. I endeavour to share my discoveries with my high school students and hope that they will leave my class with an understanding that there is always more than one version of any given story.

The colonial imposition
of “order,” whereby Indigenous peoples’
reality was reconstituted within Western frames of reference
(political, legal, economic, social, ideological),
created a cultural disorder
that disconnected people from
their land, their languages,
their knowledge, and
their histories.

—Isabel Altamirano-Jiminez and Nathalie Kermoal, *Living on the Land* (112)

Most Canadian high school students will graduate with a limited understanding of their country’s history and the people that populate it. They cannot be faulted for this shortcoming, for their formal education airbrushes the “founding” of their country by European settlers, whose efforts to “civilize” the New World are portrayed as honourable and even heroic. Indigenous people are seldom mentioned in this narrative and when they are, they are presented as passive (non)entities who quietly acquiesced to the usurpation of their lands and calmly receded into obsolescence. This version of Canadian history has done untold damage. When I started teaching Indigenous literatures at a Catholic high school in British Columbia, I knew that I needed to do two things: I needed to start the process of unlearning an unbalanced history of Canada, and I needed to foster open-mindedness and curiosity, not only for myself, but also for my students.

What most of my non-Indigenous high school-aged students know about Indigeneity comes from their Social Studies textbooks. Still to this day many of these textbooks are written largely from the

perspective of what Cree scholar Janice Acoose calls “white-canadian-christian patriarchy” (8). A section from the *Canada Revisited* (1992) textbook reads: “To control the newly claimed lands, colonization was essential. Colonization involves one country (historically called the mother country) bringing another separate region under its direct control. This was often accomplished by establishing permanent settlements in the new region. These new settlements were expected to develop the region’s resources and supply the European country with inexpensive raw materials and products” (Clark and McKay 27). Colonialism is described as merely a tool through which the European agenda could be achieved. There is no mention of how the original inhabitants of the “New World” resisted the seizure of their lands and opposed the systematic cultural genocide that persists to present day. The absence of the story of Indigenous resistance to the story of colonization, in spite of the rich body of Indigenous literatures that provide evidence of this resistance, suggests that Indigenous people’s perspectives on colonization do not matter. This one-sided story is damaging not only because it contributes to the (continued) colonial erasure of Indigeneity, but also because it gives students the impression that this is the *only* story of colonization.

The European assumption of easy and lawful lands in America,
reinforced by missionary rhetoric,
provided the foundation
for post-Enlightenment colonialism in North America,
engendering processes, such as treaty-making
under John A. MacDonald’s Conservative government
in the late nineteenth century, intended to transfer
vast areas of interest and control of lands
from Aboriginal people to settlers.

—Paul W. DePasquale (Mohawk), *Natives and Settlers, Now and Then* (xxiv)

Unlearning a damaging history is, of course, no simple task, and certainly not one I can accomplish within a semester. What I *can* do is introduce students to the notion that there is more than one version of every story. In her 2009 Ted Talk, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie warns of the dangers of a “single story.” It seems that educators can sometimes forget “how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children” (Adichie). Students who learned Canadian history through *Canada Revisited* or other textbooks from a similar perspective only know the story as presented by the colonizer and are rarely invited to consider other perspectives.

[The] colonizers believed so fervently
in the veracity of their own
mythology that they did not consider
that there might be another perspective on history.
Furthermore, the colonizers . . . considered it their responsibility
to eradicate pagan superstition
and replace it with “truth.”
The Canadian myth does not acknowledge

that the nation was founded on
a practice of psychological terrorism and theft.

—Jo-Ann Episkenew (Métis), *Taking Back Our Spirits* (5)

When I learned that the history of Canadian residential schools was covered only in a brief, perfunctory paragraph in my students' textbooks, I felt compelled to read Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse* with my English class. This novel was a deeply moving experience for my students, who were able to see that there are histories that are told but continue to live in the shadows of settler narratives. Through the perspective of Saul Indian Horse, my students encountered a nation that was fraught with systemic injustices, rendering the country inhospitable to its original inhabitants. It was a country that was unrecognizable to them, yet the very one that they were born in. Through Saul's harrowing account of his residential school experience, my students were able to understand the insidious effects of colonization on Indigenous populations and that colonization has never truly ended. For these Catholic school students who learned unsavoury truths about their church as well as their country, the residential school accounts hit very close to home. One student wrote in her reading log:

We Canadians pride ourselves in being kind peacekeepers. We've got a fantastic reputation for the most part. Because of this, we're especially uncomfortable when things come up that are contrary to this golden ideal. People have bravely shared their stories of the residential schools, however, they are met with denial and skepticism as we'd rather ignore the fact that this ever happened than take responsibility for such a terrible thing. On top of that, the fact that it wasn't just at the hands of some crazy cult, but rather our very own government and Catholic Church, makes things even harder to swallow.

I do not know if this student continued her process of learning about the darker side of Canadian history, but what I *do* know is that she can no longer be sated by a singular narrative.

Admitting that their prosperity and privilege
is built on Indigenous people's sufferings
would injure the collective self-esteem
of the majority White settler population.
In Canada, this is unacceptable.

One of the unearned privileges that White-skinned people enjoy
is that of denying any evidence
that calls into question their right
to a guilt-free existence.

—Jo-Ann Episkenew (Métis), *Taking Back Our Spirits* (6)

Through processes of self-reflection and un-learning, I have become cognisant of the weighty responsibilities of educators: it is not enough that we merely shift from the (often) white default of texts studied in the classroom; we must also challenge students' worldviews which are often molded by the master narrative of the colonizer. Through reading and studying Indigenous literatures, students are invited to unlearn the dominant narratives that have informed their formal education and to fight the cognitive sovereignty of settler ideology in the story of Canada.

SOURCES

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