

**'A Better place to Live':
School history textbooks,
nationalist fantasies, and
the incarcerating banality
of white supremacy**

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The truths of white supremacy do not exist merely in the false taxonomies that humiliate and degrade, in profiled populations whose lives and movements are put under constant surveillance, in the minds of children tormented by racist name-calling, in whole populations of impoverished people devastated by globalisation, warfare and health epidemics, in racialised bodies that are punished, tortured, or hanged from tree limbs, nor in the skeletal mass remains of unspeakable genocides. Nor do the truths of white supremacy reside merely in anomalous and radically evil places, spaces, nations, or individuals. White supremacy also empowers, bestows unfair advantage, and procures privilege and benefits and, thus, the truths of white supremacy exist simultaneously in the minds, bodies, cultures, occupations, homes, vacations and bank accounts of racialised whites and in the most ordinary spaces, places and peoples (eg school textbooks).

In racial states such as Canada, 'white governance' prevails to the extent that policies and practices of multiculturalism have the effect

not of disrupting white domination, but rather of making such domination appear invisible via representing it as given, normal, or commonsensical (Goldberg, 2002; Omi and Winant, 1994: 77-91). Disturbing, dismantling, or otherwise contesting such oppressive power thus necessitates a de-construction of the normalised and naturalised structures that sustain both racisms and the racial state itself. It is, in other words, about taking seriously the discursive powers that construct knowledge, police it, and put it into the world as normal or as just the way things are.

This chapter considers how racism permeates the taken-for-granted structures of schooling via some of the most commonplace and seemingly benign discursive practices and formations that give rise to 'regimes of truth' about the subject of Canada (Foucault, 1980). It is based on an analysis of the most recent Canadian history textbooks sanctioned for use in Ontario high schools by that province's Ministry of Education. An endless procession of multicultural policies, legislation, formal **evaluative** procedures, and Ministry of Education directives for authors and publishers, have been designed to ensure that school learning resources are more inclusive of diverse perspectives and experiences and free from bias, prejudice, racism, and other forms of discrimination (Gidney, 1999: 150-152).

While the representation of **minoritised** and marginalised groups in Canadian history textbooks has changed for the better as a result of such well-intentioned procedures and while overt racisms are obviously less of a problem now than they once were, I take issue with assumptions that either the textbooks or the nation whose history they narrate have become non- or even antiracist in their essence. I contend that these textbooks depict Canada as a space of antiracist achievement in a way that obscures the always present entanglements between racism and antiracism and those between race and state formation.

A dangerous complacency is thus permitted with respect to racisms by perpetuating myths about the essential tolerance of Canada and the dearth of racisms within it. There are white-robed and easily-identifiable racisms and then there are those racisms banally reproduced and less easy to perceive because they take the shape of unquestionably valid truths (Foucault, 1980; Green and Grosvenor, 1997: 884). It is the latter which are the focus of this chapter.

I am using Canadian history textbooks in this analysis as a cultural site to illustrate the embeddedness of racism within the banal structures and taken-for-granted experiences that organise life in a modern racial state. Specifically, this analysis considers how the ordering of conceptual knowledge about racism effectively flags the nation and reproduces an 'imagined community' of nationhood that, while perhaps not obvious or blatantly racist, is nonetheless white supremacist insofar as it supports the political and cultural empowerment of racialised whites (Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

Speaking the truth about power in schools and nations

Although the nation is often taken for granted as some neutral entity, it does, in fact, articulate complexly in its boundary-making processes **with** constructs such as gender, race, sexuality, class, and colour to constitute subjectivities within interlocking systems of domination reproduced through such articulations (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). Focusing on the connections between race, nation, and gender, for example, a number of scholars of feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial theory have documented how **representations** of the Canadian nation contribute to the marginalisation of women and racialised groups by painting a normalised image of the nation that is predominantly white and male (Bannerji, 2000; Dua and Robertson, 1999; Henry and Tator, 2002; Mackey, 2002; Raiack, 2002; Strong-Boag, *et al.*, 1998). In the context of current world events in which the policing of nationalities and national boundaries has become so forceful and pervasive, and in which debates about the reasonable **accommodation** of racialised and religious minorities have come to preoccupy national politics across the globe, there would seem to be an imperative to understand more fully the multidimensional constructed-ness of these nations and their boundaries and, as well, the oppressive consequences of such constructions.

Schools have always had an explicit role to play in solidifying the symbolic boundaries of nation. School history textbooks, moreover, have traditionally been integral to instilling in the young a sense of unity, pride, and patriotism toward the nation. However, such seemingly benign apparatuses of the State (ie officially sanctioned history

textbooks) are also violent in their effects insofar as they disseminate and legitimise hegemonic knowledge about racism as that which is done exclusively by evil, irrational, or ignorant people in distant nations and times (thus denying normalised or everyday racism), or else they reproduce fantasies of a particular nation as an antiracist exemplar for the world (thus denying the pervasiveness of racism within said nation or effective antiracisms elsewhere). I want to insist that racism be understood not as merely radical evil or obvious discrimination, but rather as banal, everyday experiences of racialised social oppressions that are discursively mediated and tied to the material world through social and political institutions of exclusionary/inclusionary power and through the consequences resulting from the defence and reproduction of this power. The benefit of such a conceptualisation is that it makes visible ways in which the state-sanctioned education system is clearly implicated in the production and reproduction of racisms in society (Dei, 1996; Stanley, 1995, 1998).

The cultures of schooling, childhood, and adolescence are racialised in ways that provide children and adolescents with meaningful ways to both understand and act in daily life (Hatcher and Troyna, 1993; Lewis, 2003; Troyna and Hatcher, 1992). This is not to suggest that racisms determine absolutely **these understandings** and actions, but rather that the grammars of racism steer children and youth toward particular hegemonic interpretations of difference and inequality (Rizvi, 1993). These grammars steer many, especially racialised whites, toward imprisoning dependencies upon meritocracy, individualism, and egalitarianism, which together, among other things, enable denials of racism, the negation of white capital, the repositioning of whites as victims of racism, an obfuscation of the processes and histories of appropriation that lead to white dominance, and colour-blind approaches to addressing social inequality (Gillborn, 2006; Leonardo, 2004; Rezai-Rashti, 2005; Solomon *et al.*, 2005). In what follows, I illustrate how such grammars of racism articulate with the imagined community of nation, and especially via nationalist discourses of multicultural destiny and antiracist maturation, achievement, and redemption.

'A Better Place to Live'

The current Ontario Grade 10 History Curriculum outlines four specific expectations as part of an overall goal that students should be able, by the end of the course, to 'demonstrate an understanding of the elements of Canadian identity' (Province of Ontario: Ministry of Education, 1999: 28). Students are expected to learn how to explain the extent to which certain symbols represent Canada and Canadians, to evaluate the contributions to Canadian society of its communities, to demonstrate how artistic expression reflects Canadian **identity**, and to articulate why the Canadian government promotes a common Canadian identity through its various agencies. This explicit curricular stress on Canadian identity is reflected in the new crop of textbooks as well, which parade Canada's diverse ethnic composition as having given rise to a distinctive Canadian identity and suggesting **that** the promotion of such a common multicultural identity is the key to a tranquil and harmonious nation-state free of racisms (Bain *et al.*, 2000: 1; Bolotta, *et al.*, 2000: ix; Newman, 2000: 12). Each of the textbooks asserts that a unique Canadian identity and culture exists (despite the apparent threat posed by the influence of American culture) and each repeats the idea that Canada is one of the best countries in the world in which to live, often citing UN rankings placing Canada at the top of its Human Development Index to support the claim (eg Bolotta *et al.*, 2000: 331; Fielding and Evans, 2000: 338). *Canadian History*, for example, reads:

Living in Canada today we are not free of worries and concerns. We have political and constitutional problems regarding power-sharing between levels of government. We have problems with the equitable sharing of wealth and with outside influences on our economy. We have incidents of discrimination and intolerance despite guarantees to our rights. Yet Statistics Canada surveys show that most Canadians feel a physical sense of well-being, and most would agree with the UN that Canada is the best place in the world to live. (Hundey *et al.*, 2000: 438)

This passage boasting of Canada's place in the world reduces all forms of social oppression (including racism) to episodic instances of intolerance. Such negation of the structural and historical persistence of racism is a discursive pattern to be found inside school systems and beyond and one **commonly** enacted by racialised whites in positions of power and authority (Henry and Tator, 2002; Varma-Joshi *et al.*,

2004). I have elsewhere made the argument that these same textbooks consistently reduce racism to irrational, abnormal, extreme, and individualised problems of psychological or moral deficit. They are represented as either foreign to Canada, isolated incidents within Canada, or part of a distant past and with consequences solely for the racially subjugated (Montgomery, 2005b). Here I am concerned with how this reductive conception of racism articulates with the redundant marking of Canada as a better place to live.

What makes Canada so wonderful, according to these textbooks, is the multicultural aspect of its identity, which supposedly permits tolerance of difference. Canada is made of many peoples with different heritages happily sharing in the shaping of Canadian society. As put in *Canada: Face of a Nation*:

Canada has a multicultural society where people from different cultures are encouraged to preserve their original languages, their religions, and many of their beliefs and customs, as they join and contribute to Canadian society ... interaction among these groups also creates more tolerance of differences and makes Canada a better place to live. (Bolotta *et al.*, 2000: x)

One can ask by what sort of institutionalised arrogance and structural self-congratulatory satisfaction does it become possible to claim (and to define as state-sanctioned high school knowledge) an entire nation-state to be a better place to live than any, or even most, others? The textbooks, even as they have come to document the violence enacted against multiple racialised groups within Canada, effectively erase such violence and its consequences with their proud assertions about Canada's superiority. Such obliterations are symbolically violent not only in what they eradicate from historical and contemporary spaces within Canada, but also in their egotistical vanquishing of lives, experiences, knowledges, and histories that exist beyond the geopolitical boundaries and historical timeline of Canada, and are surely better (ie less racist) than anything within Canada.

Who opposes racism?

I have argued elsewhere that these Canadian history textbooks reduce racism to individualised and isolated incidents that are largely contained to the past and that they permit an 18th century idea of race as natural or biological to subtly circulate, but that they do so even while

paying a great deal of explicit attention to racism (Montgomery, 2005). Here I am asking how the textbooks represent opposition to this racism, which is given so much more narrative space than in previous generations. Who, in other words, opposes racism, for what purposes, and with what consequences?

Most of the textbooks which cite the role of the federal government in attempting to forcibly assimilate Native peoples, highlight the use of residential schools as an especially damaging component of this attempt at assimilation and, significantly, illustrate that Aboriginal peoples worked against the injustices that infringed upon their cultures, traditions, land and human rights (eg Bain *et al.*, 2000: 122; Bolotta *et al.*, 2000: 77). A select few male leaders (eg Mohawk Chief EO. Lott) are represented as standing for the category of 'Aboriginal people' and heralded as initiating an 'Aboriginal activism that would blossom in the 1960s' (Newman, 2000: 187). Such representations obscure the unbroken line of activism (eg by both male and female Aboriginal persons) regarding their land rights by positioning these mid-twentieth century male Aboriginal activists as the founders of change. These representations also suggest that progressive transformation was inevitably on *its* way. Put differently, while the federal government's actions are clearly portrayed in a negative and oppressive light, they are also represented as somehow confined to an era in which the groundwork for improved relations between Aboriginal nations and the Canadian government was already being set.

The inevitability or destiny of such good relations is frequently illustrated through the insertion of the present into or alongside these narratives of the past. For example, a chronological narrative about Aboriginal political movements that arose in response to the forced assimilation policies of the Canadian government is broken in *Spotlight Canada* with a fast forward section of text declaring that 'In 1998, the Canadian government made a formal apology to Aboriginal peoples for the treatment they received in residential schools' (Cruyton and Wilson, 2000: 145).

Indeed, there is a recognisable pattern by which these textbooks discuss numerous racisms of the past, but frequently depict each as an incident resolved or eventually redressed, if only quite belatedly, through the actions of one state apparatus or another. Not only, therefore, is Canada imagined to be better than other places because of its

apparently unique tolerance, but it is also depicted as being better than its older self. This redemptive and retroactively antiracist representation is perhaps best illustrated through what is consistently referred to as the most shameful incident of racism in Canadian history: the internment of Japanese Canadians during WWII.

Most of the textbooks conclude narrative sections dealing with the experiences of Japanese Canadians during World War II by tagging on a sentence or short paragraph indicating that the Canadian government apologised to Japanese Canadians for past injustices and offered financial compensation to individual survivors (Bolotta *et al.*, 2000: 172). One textbook, *Canadian History*, simply reprinted the government advertisement placed in newspapers to announce the redress settlement (Hundey *et al.*, 2000: 239). There is virtually no explanation about what was involved in getting the federal apology and financial compensation.

The lifetime of hard work carried out by Canadian citizens interned during the war and others who viewed this as an injustice in need of redress is entirely obscured along with the long history of successive politicians' reluctance and outright refusal to agree to such a redress settlement (Sunahara, 1981). Redress, in these narratives, functions to sustain the national **imaginary** of **Canada** as a just society and the Canadian state as one that **would** undo the racist injustice of the past by voluntarily making reparations in the present.

There are several references to organisations explicitly identified as having fought 'racial intolerance' (eg the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) and which are deemed to have been politically active and successful in their efforts to lobby for 'improved civil rights' and 'antiracist legislation' (Cruyton and Wilson, 2000: 357; Hundey *et al.*, 2000: 235). However, the nation's moral reformation is discursively centred in these accounts, while the anti-racist efforts of those people made objects of racialised exclusions are marginalised. The lack of details regarding the historical contributions of those involved in advancing the cause of civil rights and successfully bringing in legislation to combat racial discrimination suggest that such details are somehow less critical to the national story than the knowledge that Canada has made significant progress in extending human rights and, moreover, that it was destined to do so. In *Canadian History* it appears that the efforts of racialised

minorities to combat racism are most useful insofar as they facilitate an illustration that Canada made significant progress in the realm of human rights and that, in fact, that some Canadian provinces were even ahead of their time in that regard.

The wartime contributions of Blacks, Aboriginal peoples, and other minorities advanced the cause of civil rights after the war. By 1945, Ontario and Alberta had legislated against racial and religious discrimination in hiring and housing - the first provinces to do so. Over **the** second half of the century, the rights of Canadians were extended in provincial and federal human rights legislation. (Hundey *et al.*, 2000: 245)

The subject of Canada is similarly central with respect to depictions of prominent Black Canadians in the post-WWII period who are said to have actively opposed racism. For example, Carrie Best is described in several textbooks as a 'lifelong champion of human rights' who fought against 'racist laws' and who 'helped change antiracism strategies in Canada' (Bolotta *et al.*, 2000: 192; Fielding and Evans, 2000: 228-229). However, the narrative figure of Best is consistently prone to textual segregation, by being positioned in side-bars or so-called '**hidden** story' boxes. Certainly Best's lifelong work was not hidden from **those** who read her paper *The Clarion* or from many Black Canadians. Is this knowledge of Best therefore hidden or ignored and if the latter, what are the implications of it being called the former? Given the stated significance of Best's work, the exclusion of her story from the main narrative suggests that her work is of more relevance to Black Canadians than it is to all residents of Canada and this, in turn, is indicative of a perception of racism which ignores the fact that privilege is accrued by some (eg racialised whites) even as others (eg racialised minorities) are subjected to the consequences of racism. Moreover, while Best's efforts are represented as impacting upon governments and 'antiracism strategies in Canada,' the 'only solution' (ie 'outlawing racial discrimination') is one made by the implied and ever present figure of Canada (Fielding and Evans, 2000: 228-229). In other words, Carrie Best, one of the few women of colour represented with much detail at all, functions in these narratives as a trope for the maturation into goodness and tolerance of the Canadian national body.

Certainly some acknowledgement is directed toward the efforts of Black Canadians like Rosemary Brown and Lincoln Alexander in lobbying for civil rights, but primarily it is state apparatuses like the Supreme Court and certain white male political leaders standing for the nation (eg Prime Ministers Diefenbaker and Trudeau) that are credited with championing human rights and racial equality, presumably making the country a better place to live (eg Bogle *et al.*, 2000: 345). Diefenbaker's Bill of Rights 'that rejected discrimination on the basis of race' and Trudeau's Charter of Rights and Freedoms designed 'to end racial discrimination within Canada' (Cruyton and Wilson, 2000: 309; Fielding and Evans, 2000: 290) are among the many references propping up an image of Canada as a nation actively transforming itself into a just, even antiracist, society. Opposition to racism (ie anti-racism) is positioned in these textbooks as the normal condition practiced vigorously by 'many Canadians' who 'struggled to make Canada and the world a better place through the promotion of human rights' (Bolotta *et al.*, 2000: 342).

Consequently Canada is represented as a redeemed and just nation, a representation enhanced by persistent references to the spirit of tolerance deemed to characterise the Canadian identity. The 'riddle of Canadian identity' according to *Canada: A Nation Unfolding* 'lies in the relative harmony in which its citizens have come to live' and the manner by which 'Canadians from coast to coast' have constructed a tolerant and 'cosmopolitan society tolerant of cultural and religious differences' (Newman, 2000: 8). These textbooks frequently make clear that things have not always been harmonious in Canada's historical path toward its imagined multicultural destiny, but they also privilege the view that the present is predominantly a picture of multicultural bliss. The multicultural perfection of the present redeems the racism of the past in these textbooks since Canadians have, with few exceptions, presumably become energetic antiracists and Canada itself a place defined by its racial egalitarianism. It is not merely that the mosaic model has been accepted in Canada, nor that such a model has been effective in creating a just and tolerant nation no longer substantially troubled by racisms or other social oppressions. It is more than this. State multiculturalism is represented as having successfully configured opposition to racism as the essence of Canadian identity and this vigorous and ethical stance against racism is deemed funda-

mental to understanding both Canadian distinctiveness and the perceived dearth of racism in Canadian society.

In these recent textbooks, which make explicit the racisms of Canada's past and present and the various actions taken to overcome them, the idea of being against racism is clearly attached to the state itself while the antiracist struggles of oppressed groups and their allies are obscured or marginalised. That is to say, these texts make clear that Canada has been antiracist or at least instrumental in stopping racism. Opposition to a racism that is conceived as prejudice and discrimination is central to Canadian identity and is, moreover, deemed to have become an achieved reality of the current Canada through commitments to justice and tolerance brought about with official multiculturalism.

In the logic of these new textbooks, Canada is a better place to live precisely because of its supposed dearth of racism and corresponding wealth of antiracism (or minimally a nation-wide conviction to redress, repair, and refrain from racisms) and it is multiculturalism that ensures this. There is in these textbooks a forceful assertion that the essential and unifying trait of Canadian society must be defended by respecting and tolerating differences. This differentialist assertion is paradoxically juxtaposed with an assimilative goal of unifying everyone and all difference under the nationalist umbrella of Canadian identity (Day, 2000). Canadian society is defended (from racists and racisms, but also from that which fractures society – namely difference) by the illusion of multicultural destiny, which controls, limits, and manages difference in part by encapsulating it within a multicultural bubble of homogeneity deemed Canadian identity, which paradoxically depends upon the rhetoric of heterogeneity.

The Violent illusion of Destiny

A common thread running through the various generations of state-sanctioned textbooks is that Canada is somehow better than elsewhere and better than it once was - in large part because it has fulfilled its presumed destiny of finding harmonious ways to tolerate racialised others. Canada is depicted as better in part because those few acknowledged racisms attributed to the space of Canada have been overcome through the formation of a tolerant multicultural nation. That is to say, multiculturalism is envisioned both as the

institutionalised arrogance which positions Canada in mandated textbooks as a morally superior nation blessed with an abundance of goodness and therefore burdened with an obligation to assist or uplift Others and Other places. Despite the certainty that antiracisms have also organised, shaped, been represented by, reproduced through, and to various degrees even privileged within these recent history textbooks, these cultural texts continue to reproduce representations of the nation and national belonging that structure taken-for-granted advantage and dominating power for people racialised as white. They do so behind incarcerating mythologies of multiculturalism, which makes it exceedingly difficult for the privileged and empowered to break free and comprehend the truth about the reproduction of imbalanced power relations. A term with the semantic virtue of clearly signalling reference to such institutionalised reproduction of power is 'white supremacy' (Mills, 1998).

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