

# Educational Textbooks and National Narratives: Myths and Distorted Interpretations of Canadian History and National Identity

*Nicole Daylene Kestila*

## **Abstract**

Educational book publishing continues to be one of Canada's leading sources of information and communication pertaining to our history and interpretation of national identity; therefore, those of us entering the Canadian Publishing Industry need to be aware of past wrongs and misconceptions in our national narrative, in order to write and publish educational textbooks that are current, relevant, and inclusive.

**Keywords:** Textbooks, Educational Publishing

For decades, communication technology and media have extended power to the state, fostering empires through mass communication. In Canada, technological nationalism has been used to extend Ottawa's political power and military presence. National narratives have been created, painting a distorted picture of Canadian history. These narratives support white settler colonialism; as well as the exploitation, slavery, and racism of Indigenous people and minorities.



This year Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation has seen an explosion of federally funded and celebrated national narratives, as well as a huge rise in protest and debate against these distorted interpretations of history. Indigenous people and the city of Vancouver are rebranding Canada 150, and there has been a call for critical changes in curriculum, educational practices and

textbook revisions to better educate Canadians.

We as Canadian authors and publishers need to ask ourselves what values our current national narratives communicate about us as a country, how these narratives have contributed to our distorted national identity through communication media like educational publishing, and what changes need to be made to repair the damage already done, re-educating the next generation of young Canadians.

## Introduction

This year marked Canada's 150th anniversary of the British North American Act of 1867. While some are celebrating Canada's Confederation, others are protesting Canada's national narrative in support of indigenous rights, and asking what exactly the celebration is about?



Confederation celebrates a union of Canada, honouring our country's colonial past and completely ignoring 14,000 years of indigenous history on this continent. It celebrates the occupation of stolen land, ignoring Canada's genocidal policies toward indigenous people (Kassam, 2017). The Canadian federal government announced it would be spending an estimated half billion dollars on 150th anniversary events, with some projects given special recognition as signature, large-scale, participation-oriented, of national scope, or high impact.

Canada 150 projects involve a revival of government endorsed national narratives, which are taking the heat in the media. Public debates and campaigns have given way to protests against the continued use of damaging 'myths' about Canadian history. Vancouver has chosen to celebrate the city's indigenous history and culture as "Canada 150+" (The plus added to counter the myth that Canada was empty and in need of civilization before settler contact). A National Day of Action, coinciding with July 1 festivities, celebrated indigenous and human rights

to self-determination, lands, territories, and resources, and the survival of racism and genocide.

National narratives are the stories that the state has and continues to tell itself and others about Canada's history; narratives in which laws and policies have been written, without indigenous partnership or minority inclusion. They are stories about a nation's origin and achievements, and the perceived characteristics of its national identity. These narratives are created and governed by the state and have had extreme consequences for minorities and indigenous peoples since the nineteenth century. They have often contributed to the mobilization of the masses for war and for committing genocides by presenting tendentious myths or distorted understandings of the past (Berger, 2007).

In British Columbia, criticism of the teaching of history from outdated textbooks, deeply rooted in a false national identity, have reached new heights. Questions of how Canada's history and identity have been addressed through educational textbooks, parallel questions that have concerned historians and textbook authors for decades.

National history is a central topic in education, therefore it is important to question these narratives in current textbooks and to gain a greater understanding of underlying structures. In order to understand the historical significance of these narratives, one must begin with communication history as a whole, especially in understanding Canada's current national identity.

Should we as Canadians, and those in the Canadian Publishing Industry continue to be so focused on a Canadian national identity that has been so damaging to our founding indigenous population and minorities? What changes need to be made in educational publishing, in order to be inclusive of all people of Canada? These are just some of the concerns addressed in this paper as we move forward into a new age of reconciliation.

## **Communication History**

“How do communication systems shape our understanding of society and human history?” (Robinson, 2009, p.1)

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in mid-fifteenth century Europe reduced the time and cost required to produce texts, advancing the reading public. In the nineteenth century, the documentation of history became a scientific discipline. Emerging nation states used communication technology and media to transmit patriotic values and historic knowledge about the nation, employing



national historiographies who claimed to be an impartial disciple, but were in fact closely linked to the state (Grever and van der Vlies, 2017).

This new scientific discipline influenced the rise

of history as an educational subject and introduced the presses to a new form of production in educational textbooks. “ At this time the state elites and the majority of professional historians presupposed that education in national history was essential for nation-building and for responsible citizenship” (Grever and van der Vlies, 2017, p.286). Historical scholarship and school history became producers of national narratives (Wertsch, 2004) in a period of nation-building, excluding the culture and history of minorities and indigenous people (Stuurman, 2007).

## Canadian History and Print Culture

In North America print culture challenged long-standing cultural beliefs and practices of oral traditions among indigenous peoples. North America had originally been an oral culture (a culture with no knowledge of writing or texts), with the dominant mode of communication being speech. Aboriginal stories had

served as historical documents of time and space in Canada, as traditional storytelling and speeches were among the most highly valued arts in traditional culture. Aboriginal cultural beliefs had been criticized by European missionaries and teachers for four centuries in Canada. Missionaries were the first to introduce the First Nations to print with the bible and literacy was a powerful weapon used against Aboriginal culture (Robinson, 2009).

“The Indian was the first here and this is where he was created; the white man was created overseas and came here afterwards. The bible we were given was nature itself; the white man was given a book”  
(Robinson, 2009, p.27).

- By Robert Bear, an eighty year old elder of the Little Pine Reserve

## **The History of Textbooks as an Educational Resource**

History textbooks are educational resources intentionally written and published for teaching and learning purposes. Since 1980 they have consisted of stories, sources, images, graphs, maps, and references to films and websites (Grever and van der Vlies, 2017). They are a simplified version of a historical narrative, with specifically selected content quite often developed for a younger audience. Events are narrated in such a way that students can easily follow along, read, and understand the content.

Textbooks contain historical knowledge or perceived ‘cultural truths,’ selected and taught from one generation to another. They teach preferred values, norms, behaviours, and ideologies; and topics are negotiated and selected by political elites, opinion leaders, historians, educational experts and sometimes teachers (Grever and van der Vlies, 2017) carrying different social and political agendas.

Harold Innis saw media technology as primary agents of historical change, social organization, and cultural expression. He asked questions like: Do some media promote democracy and egalitarianism while others engender totalitarian rule and imperial conquest? What role do particular media play in promoting

diversity in thought and opinion, or, conversely, homogenous ideas and conformity? Marshall McLuhan was also interested in the relationship between media technologies and human society. He is best known for the phrase, “The medium is the message.” James W. Carey, wrote about communication history in his ‘ritual’ approach, by interpreting communication through the lenses of culture.

## Technological Nationalism - Creating a National Identity

Technological nationalism refers to the relationship between a medium of communication and national identity, or when a nation’s technology serves as a



metaphor for national identity. Maurice Charland referred to the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the CBC broadcasting system as elements of Canada’s technological nationalism, or “networks of domination extending the power of the Canadian State across the region as a defensive move to protect Canada’s consciousness from American influence” (Robinson, 2009, p.32).

The Canadian Pacific Railway has been documented in educational textbooks as a national dream, attributed to the bringing together and building of a nation. This is an example of technologically mediated discourse: A narrative that

romanticizes the interpretation of Canadian history and attributes Canada's identity to communication and technology, rather than its people. According to Daniel Robinson, technological nationalism is the dominant discourse of Canadian nationalism in anglophone Canada (2009).

According to Harold Innis, the history of the Canadian Pacific Railroad is the history of the spread of Western civilization, extending Ottawa's political power and military presence. The railroad did more than link territory it developed, "A mythic rhetoric of national origin" (Robinson, 2009, p.53). It extended spacial control over a territory through colonization, binding space to become a nation. The rhetoric of technological nationalism ensured Ottawa's continued power by willing its own image or identity, but it did not create a common Canadian culture; for this technological nationalism required newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and education through textbooks to enhance its own rhetoric.

## Colonialism - The Myth of Terra Nullius



"Settler colonialism demands Indigenous erasure for the purpose of claiming Indigenous land. It is the symbolic and real replacement of Indigenous peoples with settlers who attempt to claim belonging."  
 - PhD student Eric Ritskes  
 (Saganash, 2017).

Colonialism is a Western tradition of imperialism which has enabled Western Europeans to tell stories of other peoples' histories, societies, and cultural practices, imposing their own versions as universal truths. Rather than 'truth,' these stories represent historically and culturally specific ideas, desires, and socio-political/economic interests. Settler ideology is embedded in Canada's historical narrative and history textbooks. Stories of discovery and civilization have replaced

realities of domination and exploitation through education and repetition, constructing a shared ‘reality’ of Canadian history (Saganash, 2017).

Canadian textbook narratives place colonization in the past, but indigenous people continue to struggle for land and identity taken from them in colonialism. Indigenous stories have been a form of anti-colonial resistance challenging the so called ‘truths’ about Canadian history. The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has brought some indigenous people’s stories to the forefront, facilitating broad public access to personal testimonies regarding the extensive trauma inflicted upon indigenous children, families, and communities in Canada’s history. Although, much more needs to be done in the way of anti-colonial critique and action to update educational texts, teachings, and practices that challenge colonial ideology.

“The Myth of Terra Nullius (nobody’s land) is the idea that European settlers discovered and brought civilization to an empty wilderness where land was theirs for the taking. This myth is key to the destruction of indigenous cultures to legitimize the state in Canada” (Hampton and DeMartini, 2017, p.253).

## Problems and Challenges with Educational Textbooks



Textbooks have a strong international research tradition. In the 1920s the League of Nations encouraged comparative textbook research. Since 1951, the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Germany, has contributed substantially to textbook research; providing critical analysis of production, perspectives, and discourse. Studies have raised questions about relations of power, ideology, and historical knowledge (Grever and van der Vlies, 2017). Researchers have investigated how people, events, or processes have been presented, marginalized and/or neglected.

Textbooks continue to be used in the classroom with a combination of other websites, apps, and online media, but are beginning to be considered an outdated resource by some. Historians criticize the absence of topics they value and chapters dedicated to ‘trendy’ items. History textbooks often perpetuate old narratives, contributing to false narratives due to state interventions: national governments ask for textbook revisions or impose their idea of the ‘right’ knowledge. Sensitive topics about the past are suppressed, ignored or erased. More research is needed involving the impact of national narratives in history textbooks.

Another challenge with textbooks is the issue of authorship. We need to know much more about who actually writes and publishes the textbooks Canadian students read. Is the production of history textbooks highly influenced by the commercial interests of the textbook industry? Various forms of authorship may influence the historical content, but might also offer an explanation for the practice of duplicating old or false narratives.

### **What changes need to be made in educational publishing, in order to be inclusive of all people of Canada?**

According to Hampton and DeMartini (2017) we cannot call back or erase colonial stories. We need to confront the tensions, discomforts, and truths these stories raise in order to support future generations in remembering the past and retelling stories. We can decolonize education, challenging linear national narratives, and develop ‘land literacy’ to gain an understanding of indigenous relations to the land, learning to critique ongoing settler-colonialism in Canada.

Critical Land Literacy is, “The critical consciousness and understanding of land that centres indigenous knowledges and presence, while recognizing the ways in which the past and present co-constitute each other. CLL requires the critique of ongoing settler-colonial and capitalist practices that normalize white hegemony and the dispossession, exploitation, and destruction of land and indigenous peoples’ ways of life.” (Hampton and DeMartini, 2017, p.253)

The research of Hampton and DeMartini suggests that critical land literacy involves a long-term commitment to dismantling colonial ideology; working against its reproduction in our teachings through better educational textbooks and teacher education programs. The new narrative needs to focus on ‘racial literacy’ as well, dismantling false rhetoric that normalizes racial hierarchies; ignoring crimes like land theft, slavery, and residential schools. According to Hampton and DeMartini (2017), historical studies focused on Canadian multiculturalism can also be blamed for failing to recognize white dominance, class inequality, colonialism, and the racial struggle of people of colour (p.254).

New tools for textbook analysis have been developed and applied including: the analysis of images that have become a considerable part of history textbooks; digital tools such as software to code the content of textbooks and examine vocabulary of a certain discourse; comparative studies on textbook narratives in relation to other media; and a holistic approach to analyzing the history textbook to see how historical knowledge is organized according to time, events, and periods.

## Conclusion

As a former teacher and current communications and publishing undergraduate, I feel it’s my responsibility to be familiar with and make use of the best Canadian educational texts possible, in order to be better informed about past myths and historical wrong doings.

Canada 150 celebrations and narratives have opened my eyes to a nation in need of desperate repair, and I have learned through the media, digital technology, and social media that published texts do not have to serve as independent sources of historical facts and narratives. Yet, even in this new digital age, the use of the

classroom textbook continues to be a source of historical reference in teaching the next generation of Canadians; therefore, efforts need to be made in creating a truer Canadian narrative, rejecting 1867 as a starting point of our collective history and recognizing at least 12,000 years prior. Changes in curriculum and educational practices in BC, as well as critical reflections of textbook revisions is important in bringing awareness to Canadian youth, who are becoming our next storytellers, as well as part of a much bigger global picture.

The inclusive nature of the next generation is extremely important. Future Canadians need to be proud of where they come from but also aware of what roles they play in a much more complex developing world, with shared global issues.

## References

- Berger, S. and Lorenz, C. (2008). Introduction: National history writing in Europe in a global age. In Berger, S. and Lorenz, C. (eds) *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, class, religion and gender in national histories*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1–23.
- Carter, Adam (June 26, 2017). Is Canada 150 a national party or a celebration of colonization? *CBC/Hamilton*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/aboriginal-150-1.4178341>
- Crosby, Andrew and Jeffrey Monaghan (2016). Settler Colonialism and the Policing of Idle No More. *Social Justice*, Vol.43, No.2
- Foster, S. (2011). Dominant traditions in international textbook research and revision. *Education Inquiry*, Vol.2, No. 1, pp. 5–20.
- Fuchs, E. (2011). Current trends in history and social studies textbook research. *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, Vol.14, No. 2, pp.17–34.
- Grever, Maria and Tina van der Vlies (July 2017). Why national narratives are perpetuated: A literature review on new insights from history textbook research. *London Review of Education*, Vol. 15, No 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.15.2.11>

- Hampton, Rosalind and Ashley DeMartini (2017). We Cannot Call Back Colonial Stories: Storytelling and Critical Land Literacy. *Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 40, No. 3. Canadian Society for the Study of Education.
- Kassam, Ashifa (June 27, 2017). Canada celebrates 150 but indigenous groups say history is being 'skated over.' *theguardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/27/canada-150th-anniversary-celebration-indigenous-groups>
- Letourneau, Jocelyn and Arthur Chapman (July 2017). Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education. *London Review of Education*, Vol. 15, No. 2, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.15.2.01>
- Macdonald, Nancy (March 13, 2017). How Indigenous people are rebranding Canada 150, *Maclean's*. Retrieved from <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/how-indigenous-people-are-rebranding-canada-150/>
- Marom, Lilach (2016). A New Immigrant Experience of Navigating Multiculturalism and Indigenous Content in Teacher Education. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 23-40.
- Robinson, Daniel (2009). *Communication History in Canada*. Second Edition, Oxford University Press Canada.
- Saganash, Romeo (July 1, 2017). 150 years of cultural genocide: Today, like all days, is an insult, *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/150-years-of-cultural-genocide-today-like-all-days-is-an-insult/article35526345/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>
- Stuurman, S. (2007). *Integration, assimilation and exclusion in the making of modern nations*. Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis, pp. 446–59.
- Wertsch, J.V. (2004). Specific narratives and schematic narrative templates. In Seixas, P. (ed.) *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp.49–62



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© Nicole Daylene Kestila, 2017

Available from: <http://journals.sfu.ca/courses/index.php/pub371/issue/view/1>