

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Samantha Cutrara

Transforming the Canadian History Classroom: Imagining a New "We"

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2020. 256 pp.

Samantha Cutrara's *Transforming the Canadian History Classroom* comes at a moment when history education, especially when understood as patriotic education, is in the public eye. As just one recent example, Alberta's new K-6 social studies curriculum, problematic on many levels, was described by the province as taking a balanced approach to Canadian history that cultivates gratitude and pride. In this moment, the possibilities for history education are being reduced to overtly ideological goals and a problematic nationalism that Cutrara states "leaves out the violent history of colonialism, the state's perpetuation of continuous racial injustice, and the desire (and actions taken) to make, and keep, Canada white" (1). *Transforming the Canadian History Classroom* calls for a "radical imaginative history education practice" that "places students, and the stories they carry, the stories they want to hear, the histories they desire to be part of—at the centre"(14). For Cutrara, meaningful history education supports a historically grounded vision of a more inclusive "we," both in the classroom and for the future.

Cutrara's work takes us into the classroom by way of her dissertation data, a space that feels, at this time, vital and necessary. Cutrara moves from theoretical underpinnings (chapter 1) to a broad examination of the current climate of history education in K-12 schools across Canada (chapter 2). She takes up student voices about their experience of history education (chapter 3) and then zeroes in on one case study of a teacher (chapter 4). Cutrara then focuses on how teachers speak about the lack of time, space, and place to engage in more meaningful history education practices (chapter 5), and then the book ends with an in-depth exploration of "historic space," a method of inquiry Cutrara has developed that invites students into an active engagement with and challenging of mainstream historical narratives (chapter 6). The cohesion of these chapters is maintained partly by the careful, recursive exploration of meaningful learning, expressed repeatedly through three main concepts: connection (with an emphasis on centring learner's lives, experiences, and desires); complexity (with an emphasis on counterstories); and care. The rich treatment of these ideas represents a consistent strength of the book.

Chapter 4 was particularly compelling. Focusing on one award-winning teacher and her practices, Cutrara shows "the patterns of practice that circumvent the possibilities of meaningful learning" (103). The author carefully takes up the ways that

this well-meaning, skilled teacher also stands in as a “manager of a larger Canada-first nation-building project” (104). The chapter details multiple situations where the (best) practices of history education also reinforce mainstream Canadian history; these details, combined with Cutrara’s analysis, make this chapter both useful and insightful.

I was also intrigued by the author’s use of “we.” The author invites readers to imagine a history education that promotes a “we” that widens the possible participation of marginalized students in both their understanding of Canadian history and their imagining of a possible future in this place. At other times, “we” is used to describe how classroom practice develops community. In this sense, “we” is almost a verb; it’s the work that goes into developing a sense of being “we” in the Canadian history classroom. The range of ways that “we” is used speaks to the vibrant possibilities for both a classroom and the body politic.

Much of this research necessarily centres the voices of the many racialized students from her studies. Cutrara notes that her conception of “meaningful learning with national history seems to be of particular importance for students who have been marginalized in the nation” (201). Given the difficult nature of much of the historical learning that might be undertaken, it is worth asking about pedagogy. We read about a white student who was “broken inside” (198) at the realization that she had not included any concepts related to Black history in her initial work. That the pedagogical weight of this moment is not explored seems like an issue. What do we do with this breaking? We have invited it as teachers. How do we make space for it and allow that discomfort to remain productive and not destructive? Dismantling dominant histories is necessary work for all students, and this book might have more carefully attended to the pedagogies that this discomfort might require.

To this critique I would add a larger concern: outside of some history and theory offered in the first chapter, the work of wrestling with Canada’s colonial legacy vis-a-vis Indigenous peoples is largely not part of this narrative, appearing neither in the stories of school, nor the analysis that follows. What can the Canadian history classroom say about Indigenous sovereignty? How does this classroom invite all students to (un)learn in order to redress the historical and ongoing wrongs to Indigenous nations on this land? Does the “we” in this book make space for Indigenous nations that might not share dreams of more inclusive Canadian citizenship? At this moment, as overt revelations of the horrors of colonialism amplify calls for meaningful reconciliation, more needs to be asked of the Canadian history classroom: both a more robust engagement with Canadian colonialism and a sustained invitation to take up the possibilities of an increasingly decolonized future. Given the theoretical framing and promise of this book, this feels like a missed opportunity.

In spite of these concerns, I see tremendous value in the vision, ideas, and practices in this book. I think anyone interested in history education, in-service and pre-service teachers in particular, would benefit from engaging with Cutrara’s work. An inclusive future “we” will require youth to know, learn, and engage with Canadian history and each other. That future, in many ways, depends on what happens in schools.

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