Moment of silence
Constructions of race and nation in narratives of Canadian history

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Abstract
This project explores the racialized construction of the Canadian nation through the teaching of history and the discourse of multiculturalism, and investigates the ways in which young people experience and make sense of history, nation and race in the context of 'official' narratives of the nation. I begin by reviewing the literature of critical race theory, then use this theoretical framework as a lens through which to review the literature of qualitative studies of young people’s historical meaning-making. Following a discussion of the methodological approach, I analyse the construction of race and nation through the discourse of Canadian history, as manifested in a variety of sites, including federal policy, curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and the Historica Foundation’s Heritage Minutes. Finally, I present the results of a conversation with youth about their experiences with and views of race, nation and history.

Résumé
Ce projet examine la construction racialisée de la nation canadienne à travers l’enseignement de l’histoire et le discours du multiculturalisme, et enquête sur la manière dont les jeunes ressentent et comprennent l’histoire, la nation, et la race dans le contexte des récits officiels de la nation. Je commence par réviser la littérature de la théorie critique de la race, puis de utilise ce cadre théorique comme point de vue au travers duquel je révise la littérature des travaux qualitatifs portant sur la construction de la signification historique chez les jeunes. Après une discussion de l’approche méthodologique, j’analyse la construction de la race et de la nation à travers le discours de l’histoire canadienne, telle qu’elle se manifeste au sein de divers paysages comme la politique fédérale, la structure des programmes d’enseignement, les manuels de classes, et les «Minutes du Patrimoine» de la fondation Historica. Pour finir, je présente les résultats d’une conversation effectuée avec des jeunes à propos de leur expériences et points de vues sur la race, la nation et l’histoire.
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Chapter one: introduction

Overview of the study

This project explores the racialized construction of the Canadian nation through the teaching of history and the discourse of multiculturalism, and investigates the ways in which young people experience and make sense of history, nation and race in the context of official narratives of the nation. The study combines a text-based analysis and critique of the use of history education for nation building with an investigation of the ways in which young people navigate this discourse. The paper first discusses the discursive environment in which young Canadians construct their national and racial identities, and then reports on a conversation with young people about their own experiences and perceptions with respect to race, nation, history and multiculturalism.

A review of the literature of qualitative studies of adolescents' historical meaning making indicates, first, that little attention has been paid to the Canadian context and to the ways in which Canadian students make sense of national history. (For examples of such studies in the US and Canada, see Barton, 2001; Levesque, 2001, 2003; Levstik, 1995, 2000; Seixas, 1994, 1997, 2002.) Secondly, a critical antiracist reading of this literature reveals that it does not problematize the nation or address the inherently political nature of race. Furthermore, an antiracist project requires an investigation of the ways in which social difference is constructed and understood (Dei, 1996); such an investigation is missing in this work. Finally, many Canadian scholars have analyzed the messages about nation and culture conveyed by Canadian history texts, including high school textbooks, coursework, museum exhibits and television documentaries. (See, for example, Stanley, 2003; Mackey, 1999; Montgomery, 1999; Rukzsto, 2003; Clark, 1995.) However, very few have asked how young people make sense of this information for themselves. My goal, therefore, is to explore how students navigate the official discourse of Canada-as-nation, with particular attention to the ways in which the teaching of history—both formal and nonformal—is used to create and reinforce a national identity rooted in tolerance.
and cultural pluralism. I am particularly interested in how the ahistorical nature of the official narrative affects young people's understandings of nation and race. By approaching these questions through the lens of critical race theory, I maintain a focus on the ways in which national identity is implicitly or explicitly racialised, and raise questions about how young people understand and experience the meanings of race and racism in Canadian society.

Background and context of the study

This study is premised on the notion that we make sense of the world through stories. In a similar way, I can make sense of the project itself only in the context of the story of its origins. The questions it addresses have grown out of a number of experiences, encounters, readings and writings over the course of many years. As a teacher, I always found history the most difficult subject to teach, mainly because I struggled with questions of historical significance and developmental appropriateness. As a result of these struggles, I suspect that I neglected the teaching of history while at the same time feeling that it is one of the most important aspects of the curriculum.

I also noticed the contrast between children's responses to the history they were 'supposed' to be learning and the questions that came up spontaneously in other contexts. Even stories of African American heroes elicited polite silence or restless mischief-making from my African American students. Their own questions arose unscheduled. "Why did people have slavery?" one child asked me while I was reading a story aloud. Although on the surface the question seems straightforward—a simple request for information—it struck me as deeply personal. These children, like all of us, were still living with the legacy of that not-so-distant institution. I heard in the question many others that remained unspoken: Why is there racism, and poverty, and injustice? Why are some people and groups more powerful than others? How do I fit in, and why, and what does that say about me?

Later, more questions arose through a community-based research project in which I participated as a graduate student. A group of community leaders and
members was working together to improve services for youth in their South-Philadelphia neighbourhood. My job, with a partner, was to conduct group interviews with youth to find out about their interests, concerns, and needs. Participants shared their dreams for the future as well as their concerns about the significant problems that afflicted their community. They talked about programs they liked or wanted—sports, arts, tutoring, cultural exchanges, information about colleges and universities. But what struck me most was the number of people who wanted to learn more about history, “but not the kind of history you learn in school,” and African and African American history in particular. (Most of the youth in the community were African American.) This was not completely out of the blue; many had been learning about history in after-school programs and wanted more. This raised profound questions for me about collective memory and its role in the construction of identity and agency.

Moving to Montreal for my master’s program, I struggled with the dilemma of how to conduct research that addresses what I perceive as ‘authentic’ questions—those that arise spontaneously and address an identified need—while at the same time needing to initiate a project myself and complete it within a limited timeframe. Though I realize that the notion of authenticity is problematic, I was and remain uncomfortable with the conventional model in which the researcher determines the questions, designs the protocol, extracts and interprets data and controls the final product—all in isolation from the study participants (or ‘subjects’). But stumbling upon ‘authentic’ questions, especially in a new city, was harder than I had anticipated.

In the course of grappling with this dilemma, I read and wrote a lot about race, history and nationalism. I was particularly captivated by the work of Terrie Epstein (1998, 2001), who spoke with black and white high school students from the same US history class, and found very different perceptions regarding historical meaning and significance, breaking down largely along racial lines. One particularly notable point was that while most white students perceived the course as reflecting a “multicultural” perspective, because it included information about people from various backgrounds, black students were more inclined to
perceive it as “white people’s history.” This suggested to me that when we ‘read’
historical texts (whether written or otherwise), we pay attention less to the details
of the story than to the overall shape of the narrative. In this case, the
(macro)narrative of the school-based history course conformed significantly to the
worldviews of those students who belong to the dominant social group. At the
same time, that narrative—no matter how much it incorporated information about
‘other’ people—represented a worldview that conflicted with the narrative lens
through which those from a historically marginalized group experienced and
understood the world. This points to the powerful influence of racialization on
the ways we experience and narrate the world, and particularly about the
invisibility of that influence to the dominant group. As a member of that group
myself, this was mostly new to me. It reminded me of my conversations with
youth in Philadelphia, and made me want to know more about their interest in
history.

Armed with a literature review and theoretical framework, I was all ready
to go back and talk further with young people about what they wanted to know
and why. But I couldn’t do it. I realized that, by designing a project based on
long-distance data collection, I had set up exactly the kind of “drive by” research
(Carter, 2003) that I had set out to avoid. So, after some soul-searching, I
switched the focus to the Canadian context and plunged into a new round of
research. The explicit connection in Canada between history teaching and nation
building led to new questions about the relationship between race and nation.
Having lived most of my life in the U.S., though I am Canadian by birth, I
encountered the official myths of Canada from a combined insider/outsider
perspective—outsider in that these myths were largely new to me, and insider in
that I am invested enough in the nation to want to critique it passionately. Also,
having lived in both countries, I was baffled by Canadians’ fervent beliefs about
national difference—not only because they bear no relationship to my experience,
but more importantly because they are based on arbitrary and largely meaningless
divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The perceived need to differentiate ‘Canada’
from ‘America’—as if these were discrete, homogenous, stable, and definable
entities, and as if the dichotomy were more significant than divisions within and across the two countries—made me reflect on the concept of nation and how it is constructed discursively. And the contrast between popular perceptions of essential tolerance and Canada's overtly white-supremacist history led to new questions about the effects of an ahistorical national narrative on young people's subjectivities.

Although my research questions shifted to reflect the new context, they remained focused on the ways in which young people's perceptions of the past affect their identities and understandings of social relations, particularly race. Also, the connection between nation and race is especially evident in this context because Canadian nationalism is so deeply entangled with the discourse of multiculturalism, which actively manages constructions of social difference. Also, the rhetorical dichotomy between 'Canadians' and 'Americans' raises questions about how that dichotomy affects people's perceptions of other socially constructed differences. I designed the project as an exploratory study; in the process of analysing the dominant discourse and talking with young people about their relationship to it, I hoped to (and did) formulate and uncover further questions that will drive future projects. Also, because of this exploratory agenda, the project evolved a combination of methods: I began by studying articulations of race, history and nation in various official texts, then spoke with youth in order to understand the ways in which they make sense of those concepts within that discursive context.

With this and subsequent projects, I hope to include young people in conversations about which stories we should tell about the past, how we should tell them, and for what ultimate purpose. In addition, I want to understand how they conceive the role of agency in historical change and how those conceptions affect their own self-understanding as social and political actors. Based on the Freireian assumption that we must understand the world in order to change it, I formulate my questions around the intersection of understanding and action, and keeping in mind the roles of national, racial, and other aspects of identity in shaping both.
Research questions

1. How does the ‘official’ discourse of Canadian nation-building construct notions of race through pedagogies of history?

- How has the shift from a homogeneous and anglo-dominant to a ‘multicultural’ national identity affected the meanings attached to nation and race in Canada, as reflected in the construction of historical narratives?

- How does the racialized nation-building discourse reproduce existing power relations?

- What are the pedagogical and political implications of an ahistorical national identity?

2. How do Anglophone Canadian youth construct understandings of nation and race with respect to the dominant narrative of Canada as a multicultural society?

- How does the discourse of multiculturalism affect their perceptions of race and nation?

- How do youth understand race and racism in historical context?

- What do youth perceive as the value of historical knowledge in a society structured by race and other oppressions?

Though the research was conducted in Quebec, participants are Anglophone and the focus is on English Canadian nationalism and experience; the question of French nationalism and history-telling adds another fascinating layer which nevertheless remains outside the scope of this study. The title of the thesis has two meanings: it comes from my discussion with youth in which they reported that the history of race relations had been reduced to little more than a moment of silence for Martin Luther King, Jr. in their classroom. It also plays with the other meaning of moment; in this sense, it refers to the powerful effects of official silence on the historical construction and ongoing significance of race in our society.
Significance of the study

Academic significance: This study addresses gaps in the existing literature on the intersection of race, nationalism, and young people's historical sense-making. It applies insights from critical race theory to young people's construction of historical meaning, specifically in the context of Canadian nation-building. As some scholars (e.g., Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Howard, 2003; Dei, 2000) have noted, race remains under-theorized in the literature of education, compared to class and gender. This study seeks to contribute to understanding of the role of race in the formal and nonformal curriculum, specifically with respect to history and as constructed through the discourse of multiculturalism as a tool of nation building. Much theoretical work analyzes the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism and the ways in which it constructs notions of race and nation, but theorists have paid little attention to specific, contemporary sites of history-telling such as textbooks and mass-media productions. At the same time, there are many studies of young people's historical meaning-making, but relatively few that are specific to the Canadian context. My goal is to bridge these bodies of work by analysing the discursive constructions of race, culture and nation in official narratives of Canadian history, particularly those aimed at youth, and then exploring the ways in which young Canadians experience and make sense of these discourses.

Practical significance: This project aims to bring young people's voices into conversations about history-telling and its role in both constructing and challenging hegemonic discourses. It attempts to provoke reflection about the connections among historical consciousness, power and social justice. Though young people are the most frequent targets of history lessons aimed at a variety of political and social goals, they are rarely collaborators or even consultants in that process. I hope not only to inform myself and others about young people's views of race, nation and history, but also to inspire action in response to issues that have arisen in the course of the research.
Secondly, this project demonstrates young people’s eagerness to learn about history in a way that is meaningful and useful to them. As I have described my project to people, many have expressed skepticism about young people’s interest in history. This perception is disturbing, but perhaps not surprising given our society’s frequent portrayal of youth as apathetic and nihilistic. I intend to counter that perception by showing participants’ passion for historical understanding that serves their own intellectual, political, personal or other purposes.

Finally, this study serves as a preliminary information-gathering project which will inform further research in this area. It aims not only to provide insights into young people’s historical consciousness, but also to raise further questions and to point to ways in which youth can be collaborators both in the process of knowledge construction and in the use of history-telling in the service of social change.

**Definitions / use of terms**

In this paper, I use the term *historical consciousness* as a general term to denote people’s thinking about the past and about the historical context of contemporary issues. I use *historical meaning-making* when I want to emphasize the active process by which we make sense of historical information from various sources, filtered through our own experience and mental schemas. I use *history-telling* to refer to the many sites through which historical narratives are constructed and disseminated, and to emphasize their storied nature. Generally, I refer to *narrative* and *story* in slightly different contexts; *narrative* suggests a large, overarching framework according to which we make sense of the world: the narrative of progress, the narrative of Western superiority. *Story* often implies a more specific or more detailed organization of events that fits within a general narrative. For example, stories of the underground railroad reflect and reinforce the narrative of Canadian tolerance. However, I see the boundary between the two terms as fluid and do not intend to create a rigid distinction.

I understand *race* as an inherently political term referring to social
hierarchies based on phenotype and/or linguistic, religious, and national origins. As Foster writes, “race is really about how people are socially constructed, how they are placed within or outside the state, and what positions they are allowed to aspire to and achieve within the nation-state” (2005, p.92). This concise definition illustrates clearly the inherently racialized nature of the nation. When referring to people as “black” or “white,” I recognize that these terms have shifting meanings, but nevertheless represent shared characterizations in contemporary Canada.

I use the term official when referring to the kind of ideas, images, or discourses that legitimize dominant groups or existing relations of power. In this sense I follow Bannerji (2000), who counterposes “official or elite multiculturalism” against “popular multiculturalism,” the latter of which she defines as “culture of resistance” (pp.4-5). Official ideas and discourses may originate from any of various sources; although they serve the interests of power, they are not necessarily the result of a unidirectional, top-down flow of ideology. As Michael Apple reminds us, “The politics of official knowledge are the politics of accords or compromises. They are usually not impositions, but signify how dominant groups try to create situations where the compromises that are formed favor them” (Apple, 1993, p.10; emphasis in original). On the other hand, Francis (1997) observes that, “many of our [Canadians’] cherished myths were invented by government agencies or private corporations for quite specific, usually self-serving, purposes” (p.9). Similarly, Rukszto (2003) and Webster (2000) describe in detail the corporate representatives involved in the creation of the Heritage Minutes and other recent history-telling initiatives. However, though it is possible to trace the specific origins of some national myths, the process by which these stories are interpreted, experienced, modified and passed on is complex. Keeping in mind these complexities, I use the term official to indicate the dominant position and hegemonic effects of the specific nationalist discourses I analyze.

1 For analyses of the Heritage Minutes, including content, origins and sponsors of the project, see Rukszto, 2002, 2003; Hodgins, 2003.
Organization of the thesis

Chapter two begins with an overview of critical race and narrative theories, then applies those theories in a critical review of the literature of young people's historical meaning-making. This lays the theoretical groundwork for the study and identifies gaps in the existing qualitative research into young people's engagements with history. In Chapter three I explain my methodological approach, both in terms of the theoretical underpinnings and the specific methods I used. Chapter four presents an analysis of the dominant discourse of Canadian nation-building as constructed through historical narrative, and manifested in a variety of pedagogical sites. In Chapter five I discuss my conversations with youth about race, nation and history, making connections between those conversations and the discourses, literatures and theoretical framework identified in the preceding chapters. Finally, Chapter six offers conclusions, reflections, and implications for further research.
Chapter two: Critical race theory and historical meaning making

Introduction

Because of its emphasis on the role of race in shaping both individual subjectivities and larger social structures—and the relationship between the two—critical race theory provides a useful lens for examining the racialized construction of the Canadian nation and the impact of that discursive construction on young people’s meaning-making about race, nation and history. In addition, its explicitly activist orientation makes critical race theory appropriate to a project that grew out of students’ own questions and concerns, and which is aimed at increasing understanding of the relationship between racism and historical consciousness in order to challenge pedagogical practices—both formal and nonformal—that reinforce social oppressions.

I begin the chapter with a brief review of the literature of critical race theory (CRT) and similar work that applies its principles to the Canadian context. Building on CRT’s emphasis on narrative construction of subjectivity, I briefly discuss theories that address the relationships among narrative, history and identity. Next, I apply the insights of these theories in reviewing and critiquing the literature of qualitative studies of young people’s historical meaning-making. As I will show, this latter body of work is based largely on a liberal multicultural framework, which downplays the inherently political nature of race, and which also informs most of the Canadian history curricula. Informed by CRT’s emphasis on the role of narrative in shaping consciousness, as well as its critique of liberalism, I argue that the “reconciliation” approach embraced by these researchers is insufficient to challenge commonsense notions that support existing systems of privilege. Finally, I argue that the focus on nation-centered history, which is reproduced in the literature of young people’s historical thinking, distorts and obscures the role of racialization in shaping social relations. Therefore, race must be named and explicitly deconstructed, and in order to fully understand its influence, we must decenter or at least problematize the nation-state as the
primary unit of historical analysis.

**Critical race theory and the history curriculum**

The official Canadian nation-building story emphasizes progress and harmonious diversity while ignoring race or treating it as simply a form of ethnicity or ‘cultural’ difference. When racism is acknowledged, it is presented as individual prejudice. This elision not only distorts our understanding of history but also reinforces our inability to name racism and act against it in the present. Critical race theory sheds light on the importance of historical narratives in shaping our understandings of race, and social relations in general, by calling our attention to the role of stories in constructing and reinforcing dominant ideas about the nature of reality. “The dominant group of society justifies its position with stock stories. These stock stories construct reality in ways that legitimize power and position” (Delgado and Williams, cited in Tate, 1997, p.220). Stock stories can be understood as metanarratives, or the overarching stories that dominant groups accept as commonsense representations of “the way the world is.” (Schepple, cited in Chiarella, 2000) As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) observe, following Gramsci, “stories serve as interpretive structures by which we impose order on experience and it on us” (p. 57). The larger narrative is reproduced and reinforced through micro-stories that reflect the dominant themes; for example, stories of individual (white) Canadians who helped with the underground railroad or Mounties who resolved disputes in the nineteenth-century West enact the themes of righteousness, benevolence and good government that characterize the overall national narrative.

Writing about the history and principles of critical race theory (CRT), which originated among legal scholars of colour in the United States, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) notes that storytelling has been used frequently in legal contexts as a counterhegemonic strategy to challenge assumptions on which certain legislation—particularly that regarding civil rights—rests, such as the notion that the law is colourblind and impartial. In CRT, the narration of individual lived experience reveals stories that violate assumptions embedded in
official metanarratives, which are unstated and usually invisible. Canadian scholars have applied CRT’s insights to the Canadian justice system as well (e.g., St. Lewis, 1996).

Central to CRT is a critique of liberalism, which presumes a free and autonomous individual and does not recognize collective oppressions or rights (Lazos Vargas, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Because racism operates, at least in part, at the level of discourse, permeating the stories through which we make sense of the world, a liberal framework that constructs racism simply as ignorance or bigotry is insufficient to address the deeper, unconscious assumptions (Tate, 1997) that normalize race-based privilege and oppression. Also, institutionalized oppression is invisible from a liberal perspective that sees only independent actors and legal formalisms. Finally, as Ladson-Billings (1998) argues, liberalism emphasizes slow, incremental reforms based on legal precedent, while attacking racism calls for radical, sweeping social change.

The application of CRT to structural issues in education—which Lazos Vargas (2003) locates in the “second generation of Critical Race Studies”—is fairly recent and has been discussed by several scholars in the past decade (e.g., Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Parker, Deyhle and Villenas, 1999; Lopez and Parker, 2003). Reflecting its origin in law, much of the scholarship focuses on structural issues such as funding, tracking and equality of educational opportunity. More recently, critical race theorists have begun to apply CRT’s insights to the content of the curriculum (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2003a). The schools’ function as the transmitter of “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993) makes them central to the struggle over which stories get told and how those stories help to perpetuate or challenge existing power relations. Just as critical race legal scholarship exposes the failure of colourblind legislation to combat racist structures, CRT can help us understand why ostensibly colourblind curriculum, pedagogy, and education-related research are insufficient to combat societal injustice rooted in racial hierarchy. As Walcott (1996) writes, “In many Ontario classrooms today, multicultural education has been advocated as the panacea for correcting the historically structured inequalities of schooling for ‘minorities’” (p. 286). These
programs and approaches typically consist of showcasing superficial aspects of various cultures or cultural groups, while ignoring deeper issues of beliefs, values and power (Hebert, 2001; Clark, 1995; James and Brathwaite, 1996). Typically, the emphasis is on the “contributions” of minority groups to the “building of Canada,” rather than on the ways in which social difference itself has been constructed and has been tied to the construction of the imagined community (Anderson, 1991) of Canada (Stanley, 2000; Day, 2000).

Zimmerman (2002), addressing the US context, describes the problems associated with emphasizing contributions of various groups to a single national project. One of his central arguments is that movements to honour heroes of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds have—by emphasizing these groups’ contributions to America’s greatness—strengthened the dominant narrative of American progress and moral superiority, and therefore have come at the expense of a more critical analysis of the nation’s past. "The more America widened its ethnic scope, the more it seemed to narrow its critical lens. . . . [T]extbooks never revised—or even examined—the larger narrative that supposedly bound these 'happy' groups together" (p.128). Ladson-Billings (1998, 2003) makes a similar point about the incorporation of members of racialized groups into dominant narratives. Stanley (2000) identifies a parallel trend in Canadian history-telling, suggesting that this ‘contribution’ approach exacerbates exclusion by “populariz[ing] the myth that all peoples have been allowed to contribute equally to the country, and hence that those who complain of racist treatment today have only themselves to blame” (p.85). Also, as Clark (1995) demonstrates, Canadian textbooks tend to trivialize these contributions as “songs and stories, music and dancing, and the producing and purchasing of consumer goods and services” (p. 159). Perhaps most importantly, though, by emphasizing contributions to “national progress,” this narrative serves to legitimize the nation-building project which, as this paper demonstrates, is inherently racialized and hegemonic. As Dei and Calliste (2000) note, “Anti-racism . . . views as suspect the whole nation-building enterprise . . . [and] shifts the talk away from tolerance of diversity to the pointed notion of difference and power” (p.21). The official narrative’s reliance
on the notion of diversity to shape an identity based on tolerance creates the need to both simplify and reify difference, and to construct some as subjects and others as objects of tolerant attitudes and behaviours.

As several scholars have pointed out (e.g., Ng, 2003; Walcott, 1993), neither the ‘museum’ (James and Brathwaite, 1996) nor the contribution approach to multiculturalizing the Canadian curriculum challenges the commonsense assumptions built into and reinforced by the overall logic of the nation-building narrative. As a result, these histories are not useful in either recognizing or understanding the ongoing effects of historical exclusion, which are rendered invisible to dominant-group members by the official story of harmonious pluralism. Even when the story is tempered by occasional acknowledgment of past injustices, that acknowledgment usually serves to confine racism to individual prejudice (Clark, 1995), while simultaneously illustrating the progress that ‘we’ have made in our treatment of ‘them’ (Mackey, 1999). Also, as indicated by Wills’ (1996) research, stories of racial oppression do not necessarily combat commonsense assumptions if they are not grounded in systemic critique. In Wills’ U.S.-based study, teachers were frustrated by students’ “seeming inability to connect past and present” (p.372) in order to make sense of contemporary racism. He argues that the curriculum encouraged students to view past injustice through a moral, rather than a political lens; furthermore, students tended to understand racism primarily as a historical phenomenon. Wills argues that this perception is a result of the episodic inclusion of people of color in a narrative whose overall form is still Eurocentric. Despite the efforts of teachers, the students could not use historical information to make sense of ongoing racial conflict and injustice.

James (2001) notes that attempts to include ‘multicultural’ content in the Canadian curriculum are ineffective as long as they limit the discussion to presumed cultural differences while ignoring the reality of race. Despite attempts to acknowledge diversity, students of colour continue to perform poorly as a result of systemic racism, which multicultural policies do not address. Elsewhere, James and Brathwaite (1996) describe the dissatisfaction of African Canadian
parents who have noted that, despite multicultural and antiracist policies, “the Eurocentric curriculum which promoted conformity or assimilation to Anglo-Canadian values and norms remained evident in the curriculum, teaching methods and materials and student assessment” (p. 24).

CRT posits that racism is not aberrant or rooted in individual behaviours or prejudices, but is “enmeshed in the fabric of our social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Lawrence (cited in Tate, 1997) explains that Americans share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role. . . . We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. In other words, a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation. (p. 219)

This analysis can be extended to the Canadian context, both in terms of the cultural heritage of racism and the failure to recognize that heritage. This failure is exacerbated in Canada by the reflexive dismissal of racism as a distinctly U.S. problem. For example, James (2001) notes that texts featuring people of African descent used in Canadian schools are typically U.S. texts about black Americans. James suggests that this reliance on U.S. literature is both a cause and an effect of the widespread perception that race and racial conflict, both historically and in the present, are U.S. issues, not relevant—or at least far less relevant—to Canada. He attributes this perception further to “the liberal ideology of colourblindness that Canadians like to maintain” (p.185). By foregrounding the issue of race and demanding the inclusion of perspectives that challenge the dominant story, “Critical race theory can operate as a tool to fill in the gaps in the collective memory of civic knowledge” (Tyson, 2003, p.20).

Critical race theorists and antiracist scholars point out the dangers in the “race-neutral or colourblind perspective,” which “presumes a homogenized ‘we’ in a celebration of diversity” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.18). Also, by ignoring “the racial construction of whiteness,” race neutrality “reinforces [whiteness’s] privileged and oppressive position” (Taylor, 2000, p.542). This colourblind perspective is evident not only in the curricula but also in much of the literature
on children’s historical consciousness, to which I will turn shortly. Finally, by focusing on the ‘contributions’ of ‘other’ Canadians, multiculturalism turns our gaze away from the culture and worldview of the dominant group, which must be exoticized and interrogated in order to challenge its hegemonic power. Referring to the specific case of Aboriginal Canadians, Sherene Razack notes that, “A cultural differences approach is not a discussion of contemporary white/Aboriginal relations but a discussion of who Aboriginal people are. . . . We may know how colonization changed Aboriginal people, but do we know how it changed, and continues to change, white people?” (1998, p.19) (See also Simon, 2000.)

This last point underscores further the insufficiency of injecting racialized people into the curriculum by emphasizing their contributions to nation-building, while remaining silent about the process of racialization itself. With this approach, we not only fail to interrogate the official narrative, but we limit inclusion in that narrative to those people who have lived within the contemporary borders of the nation-state we call Canada. Thus we artificially isolate the nation-state from the historical context in which it was created and developed, and the ideological reasons for which some have been admitted into the nation while others have been excluded. Rather than focusing on the contributions of people of colour to the ‘building of Canada’, a curriculum informed by critical race theory would address both the historical presences and absences of people of colour in Canada, as well as the role of racialization in the construction of the nation. Such an understanding of the historical processes by which social difference has been constructed and exploited is essential to any antiracist project.

Narrative and identity

In calling attention to the power of stories to both reinforce and challenge hegemonic ideologies, as well as in shaping subjectivities, critical race theory posits the narrative construction of reality. Many scholars have elaborated on the relationships among narrative, identity and meaning-making. In a 1980 essay, “The value of narrativity in the representation of reality,” White argues that
narrative “ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted” (1980, p.6). The way we narrate ourselves is intimately tied to our sense of how we fit into a larger, ongoing story; this in turn is rooted in our sense of whose story belongs to us—or to whose story we belong. As critical race theorists point out, our identification with a particular collective memory is deeply racialized. And according to critical historians, the ways in which we narrate ourselves through history have significant implications for our understandings of ourselves as social and political agents.

Gee (1991) notes that “this ability to narrate experience that we all share is by no means an innocent one. As a way of organizing experience it often appeals to pervasive, culturally shared, and unquestioned myths” (p. 93). This appeal to shared myths is evident in the use of history-telling as a tool of nation-building, whose advocates frequently claim that an “uplifting” national story is necessary to national unity. As Mackey points out, “official and vernacular constructions of identity in Canada often take it for granted that a nation, to be strong, must have a bounded and definable national ‘culture’ and identity, a culture that is distinct and different from all other national cultures” (1999, p. 11). The creation and recounting of a national story is one of the most powerful and visible ways in which such cultures and identities are constructed (Anderson, 1991). Also, as White points out, the power of official stories lies in the invisibility of the narrator; narrative authority depends on events’ “appear[ing] to tell themselves” (Benveniste, cited in White, 1980, p.7). Thus, a successful national mythology takes on an aura of truth that renders the evidence of experience superfluous.

However, the invisibility of the narrator is compromised when a history of selective inclusion in the national ‘we’ leads to differing positionalities vis-à-vis any contemporary grand narrative of the nation. To members of the dominant group within a nation-state, that ‘we’ is usually assumed to refer unproblematically to the entire population of the state. To those who have been constructed historically as Other, even—or perhaps especially—if their otherness is denied by those who wish to create a new, more flattering story, such presumptions of unity can be profoundly alienating. As Himani Bannerji writes,
Canada’s cultural pluralist discourse

serves as a fantastic evocation of ‘unity’, which in any case becomes a reminder of the divisions. . . . The nation state’s need for an ideology that can avert a complete rupture . . . gives rise to a multicultural ideology which both needs and creates ‘others’ while subverting demands for anti-racism and political equality. (2000, p.97)

Only by exposing the ways in which otherness has been constructed and enforced historically, and how that process has shaped contemporary social relationships, can we hope to overturn its legacy. It is for this reason that narratives like the one recounted in contemporary Canadian history textbooks, which go to great lengths to include ‘contributions’ of people from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds in a story of progress and tolerance, can only exacerbate exclusions as long as they ignore the larger story of how hierarchies of social difference have been constructed and lived throughout Canada’s history (and in its global, colonial context).

In asking how things got to be the way they are, we pose implicit questions about ourselves, where we fit in the social order, and—perhaps—about how things might be otherwise. Such questions are perhaps more likely to be asked by those outside the dominant group than those within it. Frisch (1986) points to these differing relationships to the past in quoting a Nigerian friend who asked,

Why bother with history when you’re rich and powerful? All it can do is tell you how you climbed to the top, which is a story it’s probably best not to examine too closely. . . . For the rest of us, it’s a lot different. . . . History is a giant stone that lies on top of us; for us, history is something we have to struggle to get out from under. (p. 10)

Frisch’s friend suggests that those in the dominant group have an interest in forgetting much of the past. This truth is reflected in the ahistorical nature of Canada’s official narrative. In order to portray Canada as noble, virtuous and proud of its diversity, those who would construct a triumphalist national story have no choice but to say as little as possible about the nation’s historical evolution. Until the post-war crumbling of the British empire, it was believed possible to tell a story that was both elitist and noble—rooted in British
imperialism as a benevolent and civilizing enterprise—but as imperialism has fallen out of fashion, at least rhetorically, Canada has had to construct a new legitimating story virtually from scratch (Bannerji, 2000; Francis, 1997).

Frisch’s friend also points out that, while some would prefer to forget the past, others have no choice but to remember it, as they struggle daily beneath its weight. Such remembering is often framed as subversive of oppressive ideologies, as the official grand narratives tend to elide not only the injustices perpetrated by the powerful, but also the agency and resistance of the oppressed. By reclaiming these stories of past resistance, many hope to inspire both pride and action in the present. The Quebec license plate that proclaims, “Je me souviens,” is a tribute to the belief in the subversive power of memory. Veteran civil rights activist Robert Moses speaks to its potentially catalyzing power in reflecting on the role of history-telling in organizing for social change.

History can help, but can we as a people begin to really take some kind of hold of our history and use it effectively? . . . The civil rights movement is more often than not discussed as a series of protest marches. The people who really made change and the ways they effected change are not recorded in the official canon of ‘civil rights history.’ As a consequence, it is difficult for ordinary people to see themselves as being central to making change. (Moses and Cobb, p.171)

As Moses suggests, the way in which history is told and understood affects its impact on contemporary behaviour. History-telling is oppressive when it obscures or rationalizes the origins of injustices experienced in the present. But it is liberating when it shows us how those injustices are shaped by human agency, and how human agency has continually challenged and reshaped the structure of society. Benson, Brier and Rosenzweig (1986) capture this liberating power by pointing out that, “Grasping the contingent nature of the past can break the tyranny of the present; seeing how historical actors made and remade social life, we can gain a new vision of our own present and future” (p.xxiv). This complex relationship between the contemporary legacy of past events—the ways in which those events have shaped our social identities and positions—and the power inherent in the diverse narrations of those events, which also shape our identities
and belief in our own ability to act, is at the heart of critical race theory’s storytelling project.

**Current research on young people’s historical meaning-making**

What does research into students’ historical thinking tell us about the usefulness of critical race and narrative theories for understanding how young people make sense of history? Over the past ten to fifteen years, qualitative researchers have begun to explore the ways in which children and adolescents think about history. (See, for example, Barton, 1997, 2001; Epstein, 1998, 2000, 2001; Levstik, 1995, 2000; Seixas, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2002.) This recent work, rooted in a constructivist view of meaning-making, addresses questions unexplored by earlier, cognition-based research (Levstik and Pappas, 1992; Levesque, 2005). While this body of literature offers important insights into young people’s historical meaning-making, I will argue that its liberal-multicultural orientation limits its usefulness in addressing societal inequities, with a particular focus on race.

Most of the research in this area, like the curriculum itself, is grounded in a liberal theoretical framework which assumes a free and autonomous subject and downplays or ignores the ways in which our experiences and worldviews are shaped by social categories in ways that we do not choose – and in many cases are not even consciously aware of. There are a few exceptions to this colourblind approach in the research. For example, Terrie Epstein has explored how race affects secondary students’ perceptions of U.S. history. In interviews examining questions of historical significance, reliability, and civil rights, black and white students from the same high-school history class showed very different patterns of historical meaning-making, falling largely along racial lines.

In describing the importance of historical events, black students tended to discuss individual rights in the context of their denial to many Americans, while white students most often used a general “we” that ignored racial distinctions (similar to the celebratory “homogenized we” noted by Ladson-Billings). For
example, in Epstein’s study,

European American students ... constructed the concept of individual or citizenship rights ... as a distinct and unalienable characteristic of the nation's historical legacy and of their own civic identities. African American students, however, thought about citizenship rights as a contradiction between the concept as an ideal and the actual denial of rights to African Americans and other significant segments of the nation's population. (Epstein, 1997, p.29)

This illustrates an essential flaw in teaching about civil rights from a liberal perspective. While the promise of equal treatment under the law was accepted as already-existing fact by the white students, it was recognized as an unrealized ideal by those who carried conflicting collective memories. This indicates that it is ineffective or counterproductive to construct a national story based on the expansion of civil rights through legislation, since the gap between policy and experience is easily overlooked by members of the dominant group. As a result, such a story serves only to reinforce social divisions by blinding those with racial and other forms of privilege to ongoing inequities that are beyond the scope of simple legislation to overcome.

Another excerpt from Epstein’s study illustrates the insufficiency of simply adding people of colour to a pre-existing narrative:

Whereas the White eleventh graders thought their teachers had taught history from multicultural perspectives because they included information about people from all racial groups, the Black students believed that the same teachers taught "White people's history." Many of the Black students noted that the only time Black people were included in the teachers' lessons was when Black people's experiences were related to White people's experiences. (Epstein, 2000, p.204)

This last point in particular should raise concerns about the positioning of people of colour in the narration of the Canadian mosaic. Too often, their presence serves merely to illustrate the presumed benevolence of white Canadians. A typical example is the much-beloved story of the underground railroad, which positions Canada as the land of freedom to which people enslaved in the United States struggled to escape. As one Franco-Ontarian student states, “Dans les années 1840 lorsque les esclaves américains sont dirigé vers le Canada sur ‘le chemin de fer” marque le moment que la diversité Canadien a commencé....
[S]ans le chemin de fer le Canada ne serait pas le mosaïque de cultures que c’est aujourd’hui² (quoted in Levesque, 2005). This telling of the story illustrates the tendency to project the multicultural image onto the past. The student’s version not only omits but necessarily occludes significant details, such as the fact that most of those who entered Canada on the underground railroad later fled because of ill treatment (Rukszto, 2002; Mensah, 2002), and that Canada denied entry to black migrants throughout most of its history (Kelly, 2004; Day, 2000; Foster, 2005; Abu-Laban and Gabriel, 2002; Osborne, 2004). The canonical story of the underground railroad illustrates the students’ point in the passage above; black people are included in this narrative only for their value to white liberal identity. In the process, the story distorts the historical record and thus inhibits our ability to understand its legacy in contemporary society.

Epstein’s research raises questions not only about the accuracy of official stories, but about who believes them and what effect that belief has. As I suggested above, a story that feels true and is accepted uncritically by members of the dominant group can exacerbate divisions by fostering a belief among the privileged that justice has been achieved as long as overtly discriminatory laws have been overturned—and especially when ostensibly anti-discriminatory policies such as multiculturalism are in place. In Canadian studies of young people’s historical consciousness, social difference and its effect on historical meaning-making are frequently acknowledged. However, race itself is rarely named and the political nature of racialization—the way that race has been used in the inequitable distribution of power—is sidestepped. Instead, race is treated as just another “cultural” or “ethnic” difference, thus inhibiting researchers’ ability to explain the significance of conflicting historical memories. An exception to this is Roman and Stanley’s (1997) study of young people’s articulations of race and nation, in which participants spontaneously engaged with historical narratives, although they had not been asked specifically to do so. This study illustrates the complexity of young Canadians’ lived experience of race, as well as

² “In the 1840s when the American slaves headed to Canada on ‘the railroad’ marks the moment when Canadian diversity began. . . . Without the railroad Canada would not be the cultural mosaic that it is today.”
the centrality of history in the construction and deconstruction of racial ideology.

In a study of Canadian high school students’ constructions of historical meaning, Peter Seixas (1997) deliberately sought out students from a variety of racial, ethnic and class backgrounds. He profiled six students in depth (from the several dozen who completed the activity), and identified their ethnic backgrounds as a prelude to discussing their views of history. While one is identified as “born in Canada to Italian-born parents” and another as an immigrant from Taiwan, two of the six are described as having been born in Canada to “Canadian” parents, with no further elaboration. This reflects the unmarked positionality of dominant-group Canadians, which is at the root of the perceived neutrality of official stories.

Seixas asked the students in his study to briefly narrate the history of Canada and then to explain why the events they included are important. He identifies what he sees as varying levels of sophistication in their historical meaning-making, and then goes on to discuss the significance of official versus alternative or vernacular histories. He writes:

By design, each of the classes in this study contained a majority of students who would be marginalized in the traditional grand narratives of Western history. In different ways, each student risked a problematic choice: either building a significant past around his or her own particularistic concerns or adopting the authoritative grand narratives while relegating self and family to the margin outside of ‘really’ significant history. (p. 27)

In this passage, Seixas acknowledges the fact that many students are marginalized in traditional grand narratives. He goes on to cite Epstein’s work as illustrating this tension between particularistic and official stories; however, he overlooks the central insight of her study, which is that students come to school having already absorbed and/or constructed vernacular histories at home and in their communities. As a result, an individual has neither the need nor the option of creating such histories from scratch, as Seixas suggests. His framing of competing historical narratives as a problem reflects the same assumptions embedded in official Canadian multiculturalism: first, that ethnic or cultural identity is a matter of choice, and second, that it is a private choice, and any
conflicts or questions that lead us to seek alternative stories are personal and idiosyncratic. Finally, it constructs cultural diversity as a barrier to be overcome in the interest of national unity. These assumptions and their origins in policy will be discussed further in Chapter four.

Furthermore, Seixas’ claim that his subjects “would be marginalized in the traditional grand narratives of Western history” makes sense only if one assumes that such history is constructed in an intellectual and geographical vacuum. Only by reducing Canadian history to part of a decontextualized “Western” narrative could we assume that students without longstanding roots in the territory of modern Canada would have no exposure to alternative narratives that would have any relevance to the official Canadian story. Finally, by setting up a dichotomy between authoritative and “particularistic” perspectives, Seixas trivializes nonofficial or vernacular histories and ignores the fact that they offer fundamental critiques of the official story. Instead, he suggests that they simply represent competing and mutually exclusive points of view among which each individual must choose.

For all of these reasons, this brief passage encapsulates many of the problems inherent in liberal multiculturalism’s framing of diversity—which, of course, is a construction in itself (Day, 2000)—and in its attempts to address presumed challenges associated with social difference. But these problems also point to their own possible solutions. The most obvious, and the one from which the others follow pretty naturally, is that Canadian history must be understood in a global context, particularly in the context of European imperialism and from a global perspective (i.e., not only from the perspective of the imperialists). As Althea Prince writes, describing an inclusive history that encompasses both colonialism and resistance to it, “this kind of wholeness of history would, in fact, be liberating for all of us in Canadian society. For we would see ourselves adequately portrayed in the fabric of society” (Prince, 1996, p.173). This is not to suggest that the single, unproblematic story of ‘the building of Canada’ should be traded for a single, unproblematic alternative story—even one that is more inclusive and critical. It is simply to challenge the centering of the nation as the
basic and decontextualized unit of analysis. Furthermore, the construction of historical narrative must be understood in its social and political contexts; it is insufficient to frame conflicting narratives as commodities among which individuals choose freely, and to reduce the repercussions of those choices to pedagogical challenges faced by educators.

**Narrative, power, and moral frameworks**

Some researchers who discuss nonofficial counterstories do acknowledge the political significance of these histories, while still managing to downplay or ignore race. For example, Barton (2001), in a comparative study of children's historical meaning-making in the US and Northern Ireland, observes that history is taught within a narrative framework in the former, and in a completely non-narrative manner in the latter. He explains this by pointing out that society in Northern Ireland is deeply divided between two groups whose competing historical narratives cannot be addressed in public settings (such as schools and museums) without causing enormous conflict. Although his acknowledgment of the contentious nature of historical narrative is useful, his explanation of the difference in approach is based on the clearly false assumption that there are no competing narratives of US history. What his argument—and omission—reveal is the imbalance of power among groups with differing memories in the US (in apparent contrast to those in Northern Ireland) which makes it far easier to present a single, authoritative master narrative in the former.

In the Canadian context, Barton’s analysis calls to mind the relationship between French and English versions of national history. As Stephane Levesque points out, “Since its creation, Canada has been deeply shaped by a historical division along the lines of the two [sic] linguistic communities (French and English)” (2005, p.2). (See also Morton, 2000.) Unlike the case of Northern Ireland, however, this has not led to a non-narrative approach to history education, but rather to what has been described as “two solitudes,” in which Canadians of French and British heritage are seen to inhabit entirely different spheres of historical, cultural and political understanding. Levesque and others
have suggested that this divide is becoming less pronounced; in fact, Laville (1996) argues that the difference between the official histories told in Quebec and "the rest of Canada" is no greater than the difference between those of any two provinces. Still, noticeable differences between French and English traditions remain (Levesque, 2005). By focusing only on French- and English-Canadian narratives, however, this perspective reinforces the racialized construction of the Canadian nation. A discussion of competing Canadian histories that acknowledges only the two dominant cultural/linguistic groups illustrates the extent to which the Canadian nation is understood as white, even as it ignores the process by which that racialized identity has been constructed.

Barton and Levstik (1998) acknowledge the existence of counternarratives and the political significance of competing stories. Citing Bodnar, the authors introduce the term 'vernacular history' to describe the histories that young people bring with them to school, and which frequently contradict official stories. The authors even note that "history matters politically" (p. 499). However, their main concern seems to be with recommendations for improved teaching practice that takes into account young people's pre-existing conceptions with the ultimate goal only of managing those conceptions by teaching students to "reconcile" their contradictory assumptions about historical reality. This view is troubling since it sidesteps questions about why and how divergent historical narratives have been formed, and suggests that challenges to the dominant story of white, Western progress are nothing more than a pedagogical inconvenience. Furthermore, it locates the 'problem' in the students with conflicting views of history rather than in those who uncritically accept the official story. The same approach is evident in the Canadian scholarship of historical meaning-making, where difference is depoliticized and problems located within the Other.

In several articles, Levstik (1986, 1992, 1995) discusses the role of narrative or narrativization in shaping children's views of history, and she argues that narrative structures embody moral arguments. White (1980) also suggests that "moralizing" is inherent in narrative structure—that it is the consciousness of a moral and social order that provides the meaning according to which narratives
are constructed out of otherwise random events. It is this unspoken moral order that critical race theorists seek to expose and disrupt. Seixas (1994) has illustrated these implicit moral frameworks by talking with high school students about two historical-fiction films based on very different sets of moral assumptions, one of which was familiar—and therefore invisible—to his participants, and the other of which was alien and jarring.

Both films used in the study depict relationships between white colonists and Aboriginal people in North America in the nineteenth century. The first was *Dances with Wolves*, in which the US military is shown as invading the territory and disrupting the way of life of the peace-loving native people. The second, a John Wayne movie made in 1956, features virtuous white settlers who are the innocent victims of “Indian” savagery. Because the former film conformed to students’ narrative understandings of the relationship between Aboriginal and white people, its moral assumptions and implications were invisible to them. When watching the latter film, however, the students were highly aware of the film’s moral argument and strongly critical of it. The study shows that taken-for-granted metanarratives can be challenged—or at least made visible, so that they can be examined and discussed—by presenting people with stories whose implicit moral frameworks contradict their own unconscious assumptions. This principle—that the moral implications of micro-stories can effectively challenge unquestioned metanarratives—is one of the central tenets of critical race theory.

**Conclusion**

Critical race theory is based on the proposition that race is not rooted in individual psychology, but is built into the fundamental structure of our society. This structure is supported ideologically by “stock stories” or official metanarratives, through which we organize our understandings of reality. Any attempt to disrupt these commonsense understandings must include the explicit naming of race and racism, as well as the inclusion of alternative stories that challenge “official knowledge.” Furthermore, as I have argued, an understanding of the ways in which racial ideology has been constructed historically is crucial to
challenging that ideology. Therefore, the pedagogy of history (both formal and nonformal) is central to any struggle for social justice. However, most of the contemporary literature of young people's historical meaning-making fails to foreground race or the historical construction of social difference. A critical review of this literature suggests that antiracist history education can begin with a historical perspective that de-centers the nation-state, and acknowledges its exclusionary nature. Finally, some of the empirical literature points to ways in which storytelling can be effective in challenging the larger narrative structures on which dominant ideologies are based.
Chapter three: methodology

What we think about our origins determines what we believe about our current situation. (Saul, 1997, p.23)

Overview

Polls have consistently shown that Canadians remember few factual details of national history (Osborne, 2003). Yet the core narrative—Canada as a haven of tolerance, diversity and good governance—retains a powerful grip on the Canadian imagination. Francis (1997) writes that “the history courses which I don’t even remember must have had an impact because, as a result of what they taught me, I grew up with a whole set of misconceptions about the country which I have spent much of my adult life unlearning” (p.13). Like a good television commercial, a good national story need not concern itself with details. “Viewers don’t have to remember the specifics of the ad for it to work as ... intended—the emotional valence imprints, the positive connection ... is all that matters in the legitimation strategy” (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997, p.14). Keeping in mind these insights into the power of unremembered stories, I am less interested in retention of details than in the underlying myths that tell us what Canada means. I ask how that meaning-making shapes perceptions of the past, rather than the other way around. Ultimately, I ask how historical consciousness affects understandings of and attitudes toward social inequity in the present.

The first part of the study analyses the discourse of Canadian nation building through the narration of history in both formal (school-based) and nonformal pedagogical sites. This analysis is informed by critical theories of discourse, which interrogate the relationship between discourse and power, and by critical race theory, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, foregrounds race and its influence on both subjectivity and lived experience. My goal is to understand dominant constructions of race, nation and history in the context of history teaching as nation-building. I include both formal and nonformal sites of historical pedagogy, including government policy, curriculum frameworks, school textbooks, and mass media.
In the second part of the study, I explore the ways in which young people experience and make sense of these concepts and discourses. Using a qualitative approach and an antiracist theoretical perspective, I conducted a focus group composed of secondary students who were participants at a community youth center. The focus group was structured as an informal conversation, though it was guided by my research questions and interview protocol. I analysed this conversation with the goal of understanding participants' subjective experiences of race, nation, multiculturalism and historical meaning vis-à-vis the discursive construction of the Canadian nation through the teaching and learning of history.

**Theoretical framework**

I have approached this project through the perspective of critical race theory (CRT), which highlights the social and political significance of race and its role in shaping our subjectivities, whether we belong to a racialized minority or to the dominant group. CRT calls attention to the ways in which power is reproduced through 'stock stories,' or what many cultural theorists, following Gramsci, refer to as ideological frames or grand narratives. (Fairclough, 1995; Ng, 1995; Walcott, 1993). As Ng (1995) points out, these ideological frames work most effectively when they are invisible. While many official myths of Canadian identity are taught explicitly, the ways in which these narratives construct race and other forms of social difference are much more subtle. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze these narratives closely to understand the racial ideologies that underlie them and that they reinscribe.

Critical discourse analysis is based on many of the same tenets as critical race theory; drawing on Gramsci, both are concerned with the ways in which dominant ideologies are reproduced, and in turn reproduce power relations. CRT focuses on identifying and disrupting racial ideologies, while also underscoring the intersectionality of oppressions, and emphasizes the role of storytelling in both reproductive and counterhegemonic practices. Critical discourse analysis examines the specific ways in which dominant ideologies are constructed. In this study, I examine the discourse of Canadian history-telling as nation-building, with
attention to the ways in which this discourse constructs racial ideologies. As a
result, my study is informed by the insights of CRT, while using techniques of
critical discourse analysis.

Fairclough describes discourse as “a practice not just of representing the
world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in
meaning” (Fairclough, cited in Locke 2004, p.5) Gee (cited in Locke, p.7) writes
that “Discourses are . . . ‘ways of being in the world’; they are ‘forms of life’.
They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories.”
As these two descriptions illustrate, discourses are both produced by and
constitutive of historical consciousness and social processes. For this reason, I am
interested both in how historical events have shaped dominant discourses of race
and nation, as well as how narratives about history shape our identities and our
perceptions of contemporary social relations. As I will discuss in greater detail in
subsequent chapters, I am particularly interested in the contradictions between the
non-conscious legacies of historical events and the consciously articulated official
histories; in the second part of the study, I will explore the effects of those
contradictions on participants’ subjectivities.

In its focus on the many sites through which discourses are produced,
combined with qualitative inquiry into people’s subjective experiences of those
discourses, my approach is similar to that of Eva Mackey (1999), who studied
perceptions of nation and race among white Canadians in the early 1990s.
Mackey weaves together interviews and participant observations with analyses of
many different kinds of ‘texts,’ from museum exhibits and government-sponsored
celebrations to novels and visual arts. In the process, she explores the complex
ways that people make sense of the racialized nation in the context of the many
messages they receive from a wide variety of sources. This multi-part
“methodology accounts for the fact that national identity is produced both in face-
to-face encounters in multiple sites, as well as through representations,
institutions, and policies” (p.7). It implicitly accounts for the “societal curriculum
(Cortes, 1979) that operates within and beyond the school and classroom,” and
through which young people encounter unspoken lessons about race (Ladson-
Billings, 2003b, p.4).

Discussing the analysis of racial discourses, van Dijk (1993) suggests that one needs not only to look at a variety of sites, but also to approach those sites in diverse ways, informed by different disciplinary techniques. These techniques might include close rhetorical analysis of individual texts as well as a more general study of ‘discourse structures’ in which those texts are embedded. (See also Locke, 2004.) While acknowledging that this combination of perspectives may present some problems, he concludes that, “Despite this disparity, we have good reasons to assume that multidisciplinary integration is not only possible but also both theoretically and empirically crucial to seriously account for such a complex phenomenon as racism and its processes of reproduction” (p.16).

Consistent with this insight, I examine discourses of race and nation on a variety of levels, from textual analysis of policy documents and textbooks and mass media productions to an exploration of the ways in which young people make sense of and articulate these concepts. Also, as suggested by Fairclough’s notion of intertextuality, I attempt to show how these specific texts shape and are shaped by the generally accepted commonsense notions and narratives that “bridge the gap” between texts and individual meaning-making. (Fairclough, 1995)

As Wills (2001) points out, “Meaning does not reside in texts, but in the interaction between the symbolic resources of texts and their readers in specific social, historical, and institutional settings” (p.45). CRT’s emphasis on storytelling and its relationship to subjectivity implies the need for an approach that combines discursive analysis with research involving human participants that explores how people actually make sense of the multiple, often contradictory, messages they receive about race, nation and history from both in- and out-of-school sources, and through lived experience. In looking for examples of such a combined approach, I came across the work of many scholars who study education through the lens of cultural studies. The discipline—or non-discipline, or anti-discipline, or trans-discipline (Stratton and Ang, 1996; Walcott, 1996; Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg, 1992)—of cultural studies is concerned primarily with the relationship between meaning-making and power (Ferguson
and Golding, 1997). Some cultural studies scholars have identified a schism in the field between practitioners of textual analysis and those who favor ethnographic research; the former attempt to uncover messages inherent in popular texts, while the latter examine the ways in which people use, interpret and manipulate cultural artifacts for their own purposes (See for example, McCarthy and Valdivia, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; McRobbie, 1994). Several researchers (e.g., Kelly, 2004; Dimitriadis, 2001) have combined insights from the two approaches by examining popular cultural texts along with the ways in which people—in both cases, youth—use and make sense of them. Kelly (2004) cites “Angela McRobbie’s (1991) challenge for cultural studies to return to ethnographic cultural analysis which takes as its object of study ‘[t]he lived experience which breathes life into [the] . . . inanimate objects [of popular culture]’” (p.xi).

While following this advice methodologically, I do not limit myself to a study of popular texts, nor do I posit a dichotomy between formal (school-based) and non-formal (out-of-school) pedagogies. Some theorists have suggested such a dichotomy (e.g., Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997; Dimitriadis, 2001; Giroux, 1994) and I think the distinction can be useful in some situations, but the case of Canadian nation-building renders it problematic. The distinction tends to be based on a presumed tension between the top-down, official or state interests represented by schools and the decentralized, popular pedagogies of the private and commercial realm. However, in my exploration of the dominant discourses of Canadian history, I found very similar themes permeating textbooks, curriculum frameworks, government policies, and privately-financed, mass-mediated texts such as the Historica Foundation’s Heritage Minutes. I also found documentation of historical continuity in this overlap between private and state-based discourses about the nation (Francis, 1997; Webster, 2000).

The Heritage Minutes series is an example of the significant private and corporate involvement in the history-as-nation-building project in Canada. The Minutes are a series of sixty-second mini-movies, each of which depicts an event in Canadian history, and which have been shown widely on television and in
movie theatres, as well as in classrooms, across the country since 1991 (Rukszto, 2002). The Historica Foundation, which produces the Minutes, was created and is funded and directed by many Canadian corporate giants (Webster, 2000; Cameron and McGinnis, 2002; Hodgins, 2003). Rukszto (2002) reports a partnership between Historica and McDonald’s to produce comic books based on the Minutes. The Dominion Institute is another corporate-funded initiative which claims to have “had a far-reaching impact on Canadians’ perceptions of their history and shared citizenship” (Dominion Institute Web site).

As the case of Canadian nation-building illustrates, the interests of the state and the private sector are not necessarily distinct. Clearly, elites in both government and commerce benefit (or expect to benefit) from promoting a strong Canadian national identity, and both use similar images and storylines to construct a coherent narrative of Canadian-ness. For this reason, it is more useful in this case to make a distinction between ‘vernacular’ histories—those derived from lived experience, and passed on through family and community—and those that originate with elites, whether they operate through the state or the private sector. This distinction is necessarily crude, but nevertheless I think it is important to emphasize the overlap of elite public and private interests in the nation-building project. This study focuses on the elite or official stories, looking at the wide variety of sites through which they are projected, while keeping in mind the fact that they are mediated by the nonofficial stories of home and community.

My study is informed by social constructionist theories of cognition, which view meaning making as an active and intersubjective process (Gergen, 1995; Fine, 1993; Berger and Luckman, 1966). Social constructionism is based in part on the idea that “What is defined or perceived by people as real is real in its consequences” (Thomas and Thomas, cited in Patton, 2002, p.96). Furthermore, it acknowledges the historically and politically situated nature of knowledge. “The basic assumption of the social constructionist perspective is that knowledge is never free from interests, politics and human experience” (Schwandt 2000, p. 198). It is also shaped by history. “Student understandings are ‘contextualized social phenomena, they are produced, circulated and received within specific
social-historical locations” (Thompson, cited in Kelly, 2004, p.24). For this reason, I pay particular attention to the history of multiculturalism discourse, as well as the historical discourse of race in Canadian society in general. Students’ understandings are constructed at the intersection of historical tradition, contemporary discourses, and their own lived experiences.

Acknowledging the power struggles inherent in historical representations, Giroux writes that “History is not an artifact but a struggle over the relationship between representation and agency” (1997, p.37). In Canada, the current official historical narrative depicts people from diverse backgrounds working together to build a peaceful, harmonious and culturally diverse nation. At the same time, past actions and events that produced social divisions and oppressions continue to shape our subjectivities and our experiences. A social constructionist perspective enables me to explore the ways in which young people make sense of these contradictions, while remaining conscious of the political interests that shape dominant discourses. In this way, my approach is similar to what Kelly (2004; referencing Thomson) identifies as a ‘depth hermeneutic’ framework, which “allows us to understand the research participants’ perspectives while at the same time being able to locate those perspectives within a wider political, socio-economic, and historical framework” (p.9). In addition, this perspective emphasizes that people’s perceptions are ‘real in their consequences’; in other words, what we think about history matters politically as much as the ongoing effects of the events themselves.

Researchers informed by CRT seek to disrupt the traditional, hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched, and between producers and consumers of knowledge. CRT challenges the traditional privilege of the academy to define what counts as knowledge and, especially, the alleged moral and political neutrality of knowledge. Carter (2003) points out that some view the rules of the academy as gatekeeping techniques that help “protect the dominant narrative from new interpretations that cannot be fully explored with traditional modes of inquiry” (p.34). Because of its efforts to disrupt both those modes of inquiry and the narratives they protect, CRT has an “intrinsic applicability as a
methodological tool to change societal conceptions of truth and justice versus other analytical tools that are not linked to societal change” (p.30).

Like critical race researchers, feminist theorists call attention to the relationship between modes of inquiry and their political effects. Feminist theorists (e.g., Lather, 1986; Oakley, 1981; Fine, 1992; Maguire, 1987) call for democratizing the interview, and the research process in general, so that researcher and participants become collaborators in the process of constructing meaning, rather than subject and objects, one of whom holds a monopoly on knowledge and interpretation while the others simply provide the raw materials. Their work underscores the importance of remaining vigilant about the ways in which one constructs the relationship with the participants, since the very structure of the interview lends itself to an imbalance of power. I found these insights useful not only in designing the interviews themselves, but in reflecting on the importance of including young people’s perspectives in the study, as opposed to simply relying on textual analysis. A purely text-based approach, while challenging hegemonic practices in some ways, would in other ways reinforce traditional hierarchies by privileging my own voice as an academic researcher and implicitly discounting the meaning-making processes of those at whom these nation-building narratives are directed.

Methods

First part: texts

As noted above, the first part of my study, in which I analyzed the construction of race through discourses of history as nation-building, includes analyses of a variety of texts, beginning with provincial curriculum documents, and including the federal multiculturalism policy, high school textbooks, and Heritage Minutes. I include my own close readings of certain of these texts, as well as insights gained by other researchers who have done more focused studies of particular regions, time periods, or content areas. I also make reference to general discursive frameworks which both inform and are informed by these texts. Roman and Stanley (1997) use a similar combination of textual analysis and
reference to discursive structures. This approach, which they call semiotic analysis, “aims to show how meaning is produced not as a reflection of a presumed reality or naturally given categories (e.g., ‘race,’ ‘women,’ ‘youth,’ etc.) but rather through a process of sign production and signification which can either construct or interrupt existing codes of meaning” (p.229). I chose this broad-based approach in order to illustrate the many sources through which young people receive messages about national history, and to demonstrate the similar themes running through these many texts. My goal was to provide a general picture of the dominant discourse of Canadian history-telling as nation-building, in order to demonstrate how this discourse constructs popular notions of nation, history and race. In doing this, I have attempted to integrate what Fairclough (1995) calls linguistic analysis and intertextual analysis.

As Fairclough argues, detailed textual analysis can strengthen discourse analysis, while the analysis of individual texts “should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discoursal practices within which texts are embedded” (1995, p.9). The two exist in dialectical relationship and should be examined with this in mind. Fairclough goes on to illustrate ways in which reference to “orders of discourse” such as dominant narrative frames can illuminate practices manifested in individual texts; at the same time, texts “constitute a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes” (p.209).

In choosing specific texts for analysis, I kept in mind the intertextual nature of discourse. I examined the language of the multiculturalism policy because of its powerful influence on official representations of Canadian identity. Because they represent formal articulations of educational goals, I include references to provincial curriculum frameworks. These references are brief because the very broad language of the curricula does not provide a lot of insights into the specific narratives of nation that young people encounter in the classroom. To get a sense of those narratives, I examined a variety of history textbooks in order to look for patterns in their representations of race and nation. Again, in the interest of an overarching perspective, I focused on a few specific themes and how they were
addressed or manifested in a wide range of books. In particular, I looked at introductions, which often included statements about Canadian identity, and at references throughout the texts to national identity and culture. In this way, I hoped to get a broad picture of the way the nation is represented through history-telling. I chose textbooks published from the late 1980s through the present, in order to get a sense of the messages received by contemporary youth.

Finally, I included a close reading of several of the Heritage Minutes. The Minutes are valuable for two reasons: first, their narrative structure illustrates the ways in which discourses are embedded in story. Secondly, their wide distribution and frequent repetition mean that they represent a shared experience of ‘the nation’ among an entire generation of Canadians, in a way that no single textbook can do. By limiting my discussion to just three of the Minutes, I was able to describe them in enough detail to illustrate clearly certain of the discursive strategies at work in the stories they tell.

Second part: youth perspectives

In exploring participants’ subjective experiences regarding race, culture, nation and history, it was necessary to use a qualitative approach that enabled me to pose open-ended questions about opinions, beliefs, experiences, and points of view. In keeping with the social constructionist framework, I felt that a group interview provided the most effective setting for understanding participants’ meaning-making processes. As Eder and Fingerson (2002) point out, “Children [and adolescents] . . . acquire social knowledge through interaction with others as they construct meaning through a shared process. This is also the most natural way for them to communicate social knowledge to others” (Eder and Fingerson, 2002, p. 285). Eder and Fingerson also suggest that “there is less chance for a researcher to impose adult interpretations and language on the young people if they are interviewed collectively. . . .” (p.285) Besides fidelity to participants’ meaning-making and communication styles, the extent to which the interviewer plans and directs the conversation also raises questions of ethics (Oakley, 1981). As an academic researcher, one has the power to determine the format,
questioning, interpretation, and many other subtle aspects of the interaction. However, this power does not imply that the researcher has the right to dictate how knowledge is produced, understood and represented. A group interview can mediate the interviewer's power to a certain extent by including multiple voices that influence the direction of the conversation.

I recruited participants for the study by contacting a community center that involves youth in projects designed to promote awareness and action of social issues. The non-school setting enabled us to talk openly and critically about race, official histories and school practices. The focus group was held at the centre, in a setting that was familiar to the participants. Although I was prepared with an interview protocol, most of my questions emerged spontaneously from issues raised by the participants. Still, my questions did steer the discussion in the direction of my research agenda, and I began the conversation with an explanation of how I had created the project and why. I encouraged the participants to respond to each other, not only to me, and they did this increasingly as the conversation progressed.

The focus group consisted of three participants (besides me): one male and two female; one whose parents had immigrated from Africa and two who identified as “just Canadian,” which they defined as British or mixed British/Irish/French ancestry. I did not specifically ask them about their racial or ethnic identities, since I had not intended to disaggregate responses on this basis. However, these identifiers came up spontaneously during the discussion, and I felt that they were relevant; I will address this in greater depth in Chapter five.

**Data analysis**

In analysing the texts, I first identified a few key themes that permeate the intertextual discourse of Canadian history as nation-building. Then I examined the ways in which these themes were represented or constructed, paying close attention to the assumptions and implications built into both narrative structures and expository statements. Using the insights of critical discourse analysis, I noted how the embedded assumptions both reflected and reinforced dominant
ideological constructions. I organized the analysis by identifying several common
discursive structures and illustrating the ways in which these structures shape
commonsense understandings of race and nation.

Looking through the lens of Critical Race Theory, I tried to identify the
overall narrative themes—particularly those concerning race—within which the
texts’ discourse was situated. What is the larger “story of Canada” that is being
told? How does that story frame what is stated in the texts? Beginning with the
federal Multiculturalism Policy, I focused on the ways in which the language of
the policy reveals certain assumptions about the nature of social difference and its
relationship to nation. For example, the policy states that “the government will
assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full
participation in Canadian society.” This suggests not only that cultural diversity
is a problem, but that the problem is located in the cultural Other. Although the
policy mentions “all cultural groups,” it is clearly implied that those who need
such help from the state are not the members of the dominant cultural majority,
but those whose heritage is other than British-Canadian. Furthermore, the
policy’s repeated invocation of “cultural groups” implies that such groups are
natural and pre-existing. In this way, it denies the fact that categorizations of
people are socially constructed and, as a result, it preempts questions about how,
by whom, and to what effect various groups are defined. In this way, the policy
constructs (or reinforces) a narrative about Canada as a nation made up of distinct
and clearly-defined cultural groups, in which the dominant majority is welcoming
and tolerant to diverse Others.

When looking at textbooks, I kept in mind the assumptions and narrative
frames that I had identified in the federal policy and looked for manifestations of
similar ideas, but without limiting myself to those that I had already begun to
shape. Because I was interested in overall patterns among different kinds of texts,
I paid particular attention to the ways in which these various texts echo and
reinforce one another. I began by locating sections of the textbooks that discuss
culture and/or national identity. I looked for patterns or similarities among the
various textbooks, as well as between the textbooks and the policy. In the
process, I zeroed in on a few constructions that were repeated regularly in the
textbooks; one of the most obvious was the comparison between the United States
and Canada, and especially the description of these two societies as a “melting
pot” and a “mosaic” respectively. When I looked closely at the language of these
descriptions, I identified many of the same assumptions I had seen in the
Multiculturalism Policy. For example, the notion of melting-pot-versus-mosaic is
typically explained by assertions that “Americans” ask immigrants to renounce
their cultures of origin, while “Canadians” allow people to retain their cultures.
This suggests a storyline similar to that described above: Canada as a haven of
tolerance in which the dominant group welcomes people who are culturally
different. In this example, the narrative is reinforced through the creation of a
binary opposition: Canada/United States; tolerant/intolerant. As MacLure (2003)
points out, “binary structures – unfair pairs, we might call them – are a pervasive
feature of argumentation and of the making of identity claims” (p.10). This story
about differing attitudes toward immigrants and their cultures also reinforces the
notion – which I had identified in the federal policy – that culture is an essential
characteristic of naturally-occurring groups, and it sets up an implicit and
hierarchical dichotomy between dominant-group Canadians/Americans and
immigrant Others.

Turning to the Heritage Minutes, I began by simply watching many of the
Minutes in order to get a sense of how they are constructed and the overall tone of
the stories they tell. Again, I was conscious of the patterns and narrative
structures that I had analysed in the other texts, and I looked for articulations of
similar themes. In particular, I was looking for ways in which the brief micro-
stories told in the Minutes reflect and reinforce the larger metanarratives of
Canada-as-nation that I was beginning to identify. For the sake of analytical
focus, I narrowed down my discussion to the three Minutes that feature people of
African descent. I looked for similarities among these three Minutes as well as
between the Minutes and the other texts I had examined. In particular, I identified
ways in which these stories manifest commonsense assumptions about the
relationship between dominant and minority groups in Canadian society, while simultaneously reinforcing the official story of tolerance for diversity.

In analysing the conversation with youth, I kept in mind the themes that I had identified in the texts and looked for ways in which similar assumptions were manifested and/or challenged in participants’ responses. I paid similarly close attention to the ways in which certain commonsense understandings of race and nation were embedded in their language and in the narrative structures within which their statements were situated. Using the lens of critical race theory, I looked for ways in which their stories implicitly or explicitly defined race and its role in shaping society. Although I had not intended to look for patterns based on race or any other constructed difference, I found myself identifying such patterns and ultimately felt that they were significant enough to include in my analysis. However, because of the very small sample size, I emphasize that these observations should be used primarily to generate further questions, and not as a basis for generalizing about the relationship between social position and historical perspective.

Reading through the transcript several times, I wrote down themes that I saw in the conversation. Again, these themes were influenced to a significant extent by the patterns I had identified in the texts. Because my second research question asks how young people negotiate dominant discourses of race and nation, I wanted to highlight the ways in which those dominant discourses—based on my analysis of the texts—were represented in the conversation. Again, I looked for unspoken assumptions embedded in the participants’ language, while at the same time paying attention to what they said explicitly. This provided some interesting insights into the ways in which dominant narratives shaped their views. Also, the lens of critical race theory focused my attention on the larger narratives within which participants’ comments were embedded, as well as their use of counterstorytelling to challenge certain ideas that characterize the dominant discourse. Because I identified far more themes than I could discuss within the space available, I narrowed down my discussion to a few key ideas that I had highlighted in the preceding chapter.
Conclusion

This project seeks to understand how Canadian youth make sense of the racialized nation in historical context, and how that sense-making affects their perceptions of race and racism in contemporary Canadian society. It combines focus-group interviewing with textual analysis of key sites of history-telling in order to examine the relationship between the 'official' discourses of the Canadian nation and the experiences and understandings of youth. It is an exploratory study that identifies prominent themes related to race, nation-building and young people's historical consciousness, and thus will lay the groundwork for future investigations that address more specific questions.
Chapter 4: race, history and the discourse of Canadian nationalism

*The most basic experiences one has, the things one believes most confidently because they are the most obvious, those are precisely what power and ideology have produced.* (Grossberg, cited in Kelly, 2004, p.31)

**Introduction**

In this section, I explore the discourse of Canadian nation-building in the context of historical narrative as manifested in the federal multiculturalism policy, curriculum frameworks, history textbooks, and mass media. I examine this discourse from a critical race theoretical perspective in an effort to understand both the ways in which race has been constructed historically with respect to the nation, and how the contemporary discourse of multiculturalism—the essence of Canada’s nation-building narrative—shapes commonsense understandings of race. I argue that the use of multiculturalism as a nation-building tool leads to the entrenchment of racial ideology. The ahistorical discourse of multiculturalism constructs essentialized notions of Canada-as-nation, as well as of the non-British ethnic, national and racial groups within Canada. Through both of these essentialisms, the British-Canadian is framed as the unmarked ideal and the Canadian of non-British heritage as Other. Finally, multiculturalism depoliticizes social difference and suppresses understanding of social oppression by framing all socially constructed forms of difference simply as cultural diversity. I will demonstrate the ahistorical nature of the multicultural national self-image, and raise questions about the effects of this ahistoricism on contemporary understandings of race, nation and history.

I begin by illustrating the connections among history-telling, national identity and the idea of national culture in the Canadian context through excerpts from history curricula and textbooks. Next I locate the origins of much of the contemporary discourse of culture, race and nation in the federal multiculturalism policy and illustrate how this discourse is reflected in recent history textbooks. By tracing the history of the policy itself, and of Canadian national identity in general, I demonstrate the tension between historical and contemporary official
definitions of Canadian-ness. Finally, I discuss one of the key elements of the nation-building discourse—comparison with the United States—in several of its manifestations in order to demonstrate that it reinforces white- or anglo-normativity and impedes historical reasoning by encouraging essentialist thinking. I illustrate this through excerpts from history textbooks and through three of the Historica Foundation’s Heritage Minutes.

History education, national identity and culture

The use of history-telling to construct an ‘imagined community’ is typical of nation-states (Anderson, 1991); however, it is particularly self-conscious in the Canadian context. It could be argued that Canadian identity consists to a significant extent of shared anxiety about Canadian identity; as Berland notes, “Canada has produced a veritable canon of strategical exploration and description of its ongoing identity crisis” (Berland, 1995, p.514). The preoccupation with national identity construction is reflected in federal and provincial policies (Brodie, 2002) as well as in history curriculum documents, textbooks, and other didactic materials (Osborne, 2004). For example, the introduction to Ontario’s grade 10 history curriculum (Canadian History Since World War I) begins by stating that, “This course explores the local, national, and global forces that have shaped Canada's national identity from World War I to the present” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). The link between history teaching and national identity construction is also prominent in British Columbia’s social studies program, and somewhat less so in Alberta and Manitoba. A similar attention to national identity is displayed in Canadian history textbooks. In one recent text, a subsection of the introductory chapter begins, “Canada’s history is the basis for our nation’s identity” (Hundey, Magarrey, Evans, & O’Sullivan, 2003, p. 32). Another states that, “As a nation, we get our identity from our early history” (Smith, McDevitt & Scully, 1996, p.3). As studies of older textbooks show, the highly self-conscious use of history for nation building has been consistent, even as it has been articulated in varying ways over time. (See for example: Stanley, 2003; Montgomery, 1999; Francis, 1997; Clark, 1995.)
These frequent and explicit connections between history and national identity serve to reify the nation and reinforce the idea that the inhabitants of a nation-state share a common character or essence which is rooted in a shared past and illustrated by 'the' narrative of that past. The repeated invocation of Canadian identity presumes not only that such an identity exists, but that it is singular, stable and definable. Locating its origin in “Canada’s history” makes it appear to be a fact of nature rather than a human construction. Furthermore, this identity is presumed to manifest itself in the form of a national culture. As Mackey demonstrates, “official and vernacular constructions of identity in Canada often take it for granted that a nation, to be strong, must have a bounded and definable national ‘culture’ and identity, a culture that is distinct and different from all other national cultures” (1999, p. 11). This assumption is made explicit in many history texts; one includes an entire chapter entitled “Identity and Culture,” stating that “It is culture that forms the main part of a nation’s identity” (Scully, Smith, & McDevitt, 1988, p.291). In another example, the bulleted points below introduce a chapter on “American cultural influence” in the text Canada’s Century:

- An important part of being an independent country is having a clear, strong national identity. . . .
- Canada does possess a distinctive national identity.
- However, this identity is in constant and growing danger from the powerful influence of American culture. (Evans and Martinello, 1988, p.321)

This alleged threat reinforces the notion that culture is coterminous with state borders and defines national identities. Based on the assumed relationship between nation, identity, culture, and history, a narrative of Canada must be constructed in such a way that it articulates an essential and unique national culture rooted in a shared past.

The Canadian discourse of culture has been affected profoundly by the idea of multiculturalism (Day, 2000; Bannerji, 1999; Henry, 2002; Walcott, 1993), which was introduced as official policy by the Trudeau government in 1971. As demonstrated above, a notable effect of this discourse has been to
essentialize the concept of culture and tie it to that of nation. Although the
language of the policy itself does not postulate a national Canadian culture—in
fact, it specifically states that Canada has no official culture—the policy has sinceecome the basis of a clearly articulated national identity based on the idea that
Canada’s essential nature, or culture, is defined by multiculturalism. This
apparent contradiction is managed through the rhetorical construction of two
different meanings of culture: the particularistic or Other, and the universal or
normative. This distinction is articulated in the textbook *Canadian History:*
*Patterns and Transformations,* which instructs students that:

> Culture is sometimes used to refer to a particular group of people... who
share the same ethnic background, language, religion(s), beliefs, and customs.
> We use culture in this sense when we say... that Canada is a multicultural
country—that it is a country made up of many cultures. A second sense of the
word culture is used when we make reference to Canadian culture—the
totality of languages, ideas, knowledge, beliefs and values on lifestyles [sic]
that are shared by Canadians. Culture is evident in the arts, laws, institutions
and customs of a group of people. For example, we might say that a
characteristic of Canadian culture is that it honours the many cultural values
of its diverse citizens. (Hundey et al., 2003, p. 28)

As this excerpt illustrates, the particularistic/Other culture is limited to the
private sphere, while the universal/normative culture is defined by the public and
the civic. Furthermore, the normative culture has moral significance: Canadian
culture “honours” diversity; it is tolerant and magnanimous. This moral element
is rooted in its universality and therefore is unavailable to the particularistic
cultures. As I will demonstrate, this two-tiered definition of culture contributes to
shaping racial ideology, even (or especially) when race itself is not named. The
following excerpts from Canadian history textbooks reinforce the characterization
of Canada as having a unique culture or essence defined by multiculturalism and
rooted in a shared national history:

> When we examine what makes Canada distinct from other nations, we soon
discover that *multiculturalism* is an important component of the national
identity. Multiculturalism is a government policy recognizing and promoting
all cultural groups that live in Canada. Our history shows we have always
been a multicultural nation. (Smith et al., 1996, p.60; emphasis in original)
One possible answer to the riddle of Canadian identity lies in the relative harmony in which its citizens have come to live. The way in which Canadians from coast to coast have embraced the world within their borders may define the essence of Canada at the dawn of the new millennium. (Newman et al., 2000, p.8)

The second passage emphasizes Canada’s distinctiveness by comparing it to other countries: its citizens live in relative harmony. This relativism is a recurring theme in Canadian nation-building, as I will demonstrate later in the chapter.

Multiculturalism policy and discursive construction of race

Although the association of Canadian identity with harmonious diversity did not originate with the 1971 multiculturalism policy—a 1970 textbook makes the same connection—but that policy has played a significant role in solidifying this national self-image and the policy is frequently invoked as evidence of Canadians’ inherent tolerance. This is implied, for example, in the passage cited earlier, which claims that national culture is evident in a nation-state’s laws and institutions. In the policy’s framing of culture, we can see the roots of the essentialist constructions of culture that dominate the nation-building discourse today. The multiculturalism policy’s specific points include:

► First . . . the government will seek to assist all Canadian cultural groups . . . to grow and contribute to Canada . . .

► Second, the government will assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society.

► Third, the government will promote creative encounters and interchange among all Canadian cultural groups in the interest of national unity.

► Fourth, the government will continue to assist immigrants to acquire at least one of Canada’s official languages in order to become full participants in Canadian society. (Trudeau et al., 1971)

3 "The Canadian nation is a patchwork or mosaic composed of many peoples, but the Canadian habit of encouraging all groups to take pride in their own non-Canadian backgrounds has inevitably limited the growth of a uniform Canadianism. Immigrants to the United States enter the American ‘melting pot’ and soon become Americanized. Immigrants to Canada are never fully ‘Canadianized’, simply because Canada believes her unity lies in her very diversity. This is Canada’s unique response to the basic challenge posed by the multinational origins of her people.” (Moir and Saunders, 1970, p.11; emphasis added)
As these points indicate, the policy’s goal was to promote unity by constructing a pan-Canadian identity. To this end, the state would “promote creative encounters” while helping people to “overcome cultural barriers” to participation in the dominant society. In this way, the policy creates a distinction between the private realm of cultural identity and the public realm of “Canadian society.” In this distinction we see the same hierarchy articulated by textbook authors who distinguish between Canadian culture and particularistic Other cultures. This two-tiered definition of culture reinscribes Anglo-Canadian dominance and normativity.

Furthermore, culture is removed from questions of power by being framed as a matter of personal choice; Trudeau stated in the introduction that, “a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework is basically the conscious support of individual freedom of choice. We are free to be ourselves” (Trudeau et al., 1971; my emphasis). In this way, the policy effectively depoliticizes social difference by denying the ways in which such difference is constructed through exclusions, oppressions, and hierarchies (Moodley, 1983; Bannerji, 2000). Furthermore, social disunity is presumed to result exclusively from cultural diversity; the policy mentions only culture as an obstacle to national unity. In this way, the policy’s language creates a discursive context in which a private and apolitical notion of culture stands in for all forms of socially constructed difference.

The policy’s language also constructs an essentialized understanding of culture. By referring repeatedly to “cultural groups,” the policy suggests that such groups are unproblematically distinct and naturally-occurring entities. This is reinforced through the conflation of culture with ethnicity. Trudeau asserted, in introducing the policy, that “there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other” (Trudeau et al., 1971). By implicitly linking culture with ethnicity, this language suggests that culture is innate, since ethnicity is associated with heritage or ancestry. This conflation has been normalized to such an extent that the term ‘ethnocultural’ has been coined and appears frequently in policy documents, textbooks, and elsewhere to refer to presumably
naturally-occurring groups of people. The Multiculturalism Act, passed in 1988, takes this a step further by asserting that “multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society” (Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1988). By tying multiculturalism to race, the Act not only reinforces the understanding of culture as innate, but implicitly locates it in the body.

The writing of culture onto the body is taken up by textbook writers; below are sample captions describing photos of children or adolescents with a variety of skin colours and facial features:

Many Canadian schools have students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. (Clark and Wallace, 1996, p.131)

These students represent the part of our story that focuses on our people . . . . Canada has the most culturally diverse society in the history of the world. [!] (Deir, E., Fielding, J., Brune, N., Grant, P. & Abram, 2000, p.3)

[illustrating a passage about culture] These children, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, are holding a Canadian flag made of numerous flags from other countries. How does this photograph capture the true essence of Canada? (Newman et al., 2000, p.400)

These excerpts reflect the policy’s use of culture as an apolitical euphemism with which to talk about all kinds of constructed social difference. By conflating culture with ethnicity and physical appearance, the discourse of multiculturalism not only locates culture in the body but also denies the ways in which physical differences have been used historically to justify social hierarchies. The celebratory tone of these captions illustrates how the narrative of multicultural Canada exploits Gloria Ladson-Billings’ “homogenized ‘we’” that celebrates diversity while denying the political significance of race. As critical race theorists argue and as I will show, this denial ultimately reinforces the privileged position of whiteness (Taylor, 2000; Dei 2000).

Multiculturalism as ahistorical identity

In addition to its discursive reinscription of social hierarchies, multiculturalism-as-national-identity is problematic because of its contribution to an ahistorical discourse of Canadian nationalism. It has gone from a state strategy
for social cohesion to a ritualistic assertion of an actually existing reality, in which Canada is imagined as a model of uniquely harmonious pluralism. Because of the desire to locate the source of Canadian identity in a national history, as indicated by previously-cited textbook excerpts, this picture of diversity and tolerance must be projected onto the past. The resulting ahistoricism is manifested in two ways: first, as factually inaccurate representations of the past, and secondly as the undermining of historical reasoning and historical perspective. I define the latter as the ability to draw conclusions about historical phenomena based on reason and evidence, and the awareness of social flux and how the past shapes the present. As I will argue, this ahistoricism inhibits understanding of the ways in which social reality has been constructed in the interest of powerful groups, and this ignorance reinforces the normalization of existing social relations.

A historical narrative of Canada that emphasizes harmonious diversity must necessarily distort the past. As Bannerji (1999) points out, the need for state action to promote unity is the result of “fissures and ruptures” that have been caused by historical oppressions and exclusions. Therefore, ignoring or denying those ruptures requires an inaccurate representation of historical events. This inaccuracy sometimes consists of outright falsehoods and fabrications, but more often it is effected through narrative and metaphorical frameworks that contain implicit arguments about the meaning or essence of Canadian-ness.

A brief review of the history of racialization in Canadian national identity reveals the disingenuousness of the ‘multicultural history’ narrative and also raises questions about the ways in which historically-situated discourses continue to shape our subjectivities, especially when they are contradicted by contemporary rhetoric. Even when official histories, such as those recounted in textbooks, acknowledge some instances of past discrimination, they do not hint at the fact that Canadian identity has been inherently and explicitly racialized. This in turn raises questions about the effects of the conflict between belief in a history of tolerance and the lived experience of a society shaped by a legacy of exclusion. This question is at the heart of my study; below I document the historical racialization that is absent from official narratives.
Historically, Canada’s overtly British identity was maintained systematically through a combination of immigration controls (both formal and informal), assimilation policies (for those not of British stock but perceived as assimilable), legal segregation, and disenfranchisement, and deportation of those constructed as non-white or otherwise not assimilable (Day, 2000; Osborne, 2004; Abu-Laban and Gabriel, 2002; Foster, 2005; Matas, 1996). The discourse of nation was explicitly racial, based on the assumption of northern-European supremacy, and with the Anglo-Saxon ‘race’ occupying the uppermost rung of a graduated whiteness (Day, 2000; Rukszto, 2003; Francis, 1997; Montgomery, 1999; Senese, 2000). Also, assertions of Canadian racial superiority were rooted in a form of environmental determinism; cold, northern climates were said to have produced “northern races” who were temperamentally suited to liberty and self-government; by contrast, “southern races” were characterized by degeneracy and inclination to tyranny (Mackey, 1999; Berger, 1997; Kelly, 2004; Rukszto, 2003). This belief, which was explicitly enshrined in law (Debicki, 1992), drove Canada’s immigration policy until economic necessity and changing global politics led to the gradual elimination of racial barriers in the 1960s and 1970s. Through most of its history, Canada’s climate, as well as widespread acceptance of ‘scientific’ racism among those in positions of power, provided the rationale for safeguarding the nation’s racial purity which was, according to this logic, inseparable from both its ‘character’ and institutions.

National identity was also tied to Canada’s part in the ostensibly noble enterprise of British imperialism, which in turn was based on the presumed racial and cultural superiority of the British (Stanley, 2003; Francis, 1997; Osborne, 2003; Willinsky, 1998; Senese, 2000). This identity was explicit in Canadian textbooks (Francis, 1997; Willinsky, 1998). Stanley notes that

Even tolerance was transformed into an imperial virtue by the first B.C. civics text [used between 1916 and 1925] . . . Since “[t]he British Empire is so vast that it contains within itself nations of all languages and all religions,” Canadian Civics suggested, “respect and toleration for the opinions of others” was essential so that “our brother nations may all have an ardent loyalty, whatever may be their creed, race or tongue.” (Stanley, 2003, p.118)
This linking of tolerance to loyalty anticipates the 1971 multiculturalism policy, indicating that policy’s continuity with the logic of imperialism.

In response to growing sovereignist sentiment among French Canadians in the 1960s, the federal government created the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (B&B Commission) to examine the perceived crisis of national unity and to recommend solutions. However, the commission encountered opposition from groups representing Canadians of neither French nor British heritage, who challenged the presumption that Canada has only two languages and two cultures. As a result of this pressure, and also in an effort to weaken French Canadian influence (Stevenson, 1995; McRoberts, 1997; Bannerji, 2000), the government arrived at the formulation of “multiculturalism within a bilingual framework,” which ultimately formed the essence of the 1971 multiculturalism policy.

As I indicated above, the shift from an identity based on ethnic and racial homogeneity to one defined by diversity did not begin in 1971. (See also Day, 2000.) Nevertheless, the change has been fairly abrupt, and the new national story, while incorporating occasional recognition of past injustices, does not acknowledge its dramatic reversal of the old narrative. Bloemraad (1999) calls the rapid embrace of multiculturalism “a stunning change for a society that in 1963 still spoke of the country’s ‘two founding races’” (meaning French and English). While this change has been positive insofar as it has (mostly) delegitimized the explicitly white supremacist national identity, it presents new problems to the extent that it creates barriers to historical understanding. Only through an awareness of how social difference has been constructed can we hope to overcome oppression rooted in those constructed differences. (Dei, 2000; Wills, 2001; Bedard, 2000; Prince, 1996)

**The mosaic and the melting pot: comparative nation-building**

For many reasons, including proximity, cultural similarity, and its counterrevolutionary origins, Canada’s identity is built to an enormous extent on assertions of difference between Canada and the United States. As I will show,
this reflexively comparative identity construction serves to reify the nation as a singular and naturally-occurring entity with a definable character. Furthermore, it rigidifies the nation as an unquestioned frame through which to view history, thus inhibiting understanding of social, political, economic and geographical context.

In this section, I argue that, through the reification of the nation, the discourse of comparative nation-building leads to an essentialism that is necessarily both ahistorical and hegemonic. I illustrate how this process works through the example of one of the most common tropes of Canadian national identity.

The essentialist—and therefore ahistorical—nature of Canada’s contemporary identity is most evident in the ritual invocation of the mosaic-versus-melting-pot metaphor, intended to illustrate a fundamental difference between the presumed Canadian ethos and that of the United States. As taught to Canadian schoolchildren, the mosaic represents celebration of diversity, while the melting pot indicates a collective desire for homogenization (Abu-Laban & Lamont, 1997; Reitz and Breton, 1994; Osborne, 2004; Stevenson, 1995). The following textbook excerpts illustrate the ubiquity of the metaphor and uniformity of its interpretation:

[The multiculturalism policy] was a formal recognition that Canada was not an American-style “melting pot,” in which people were expected to give up their ethnic identities in favour of the dominant culture. Instead Canada was a “mosaic,” where people from many ethnic groups lived side by side while participating in Canadian society. (Newman et al., 2000, p. 400; emphasis in original)

The multiculturalism policy stressed that Canada was not like the United States, which asked immigrants to give up their culture in the “melting pot” of the majority Anglophone ways of life. Long before 1971, Canadians had traditionally seen their diversity of cultures as a “mosaic” rather than a melting pot. Each ethnic community remained distinct, but still formed an important part of the broad picture representing the Canadian national identity. (Smith et al., 1996, p. 61)

Canada’s pluralism is sometimes described as a mosaic. . . . To understand this model better, you might contrast it with the model often used by the United States. While experiencing a similar immigration pattern to our own, Americans have chosen to make their society a “melting pot.” The melting pot concept means that while people from all cultural backgrounds are
accepted into the country, they are encouraged to give up their original cultures in favour of the dominant majority's culture. (Barr, Fretts, Hunter, & Rediger, 1996, p.12)

All of these passages are notable most obviously for their invocation of the United States as a foil against which Canadian identity is defined, as well as for their attempts to construct an essential difference between the two nations and project that difference onto the past. The first two passages suggest that the multiculturalism policy itself was enacted simply for the purpose of distinguishing Canada from the US, thus obscuring the actual historical circumstances under which it was created. Also, these two excerpts suggest that the policy was created in order to recognize an already-existing social reality. This creates confusion not only about multiculturalism, but about the nature of public policy in general; it suggests that legislation is a spontaneous outgrowth and reflection of essential national cultures, rather than a response to specific historical circumstances and an effort to influence behaviour.

The authors further essentialize the nation-state by constructing ‘the United States’ as an intentional agent: “the United States . . . asked immigrants . . .”; “The U.S. refers to itself . . .”; “model . . . used by the United States.” This attribution of agency to a state, which in turn is conflated with its citizens, reinforces an essentialist understanding of nation, which obscures the question of how social processes happen. Because no human agent is identified, the reader is left with a sense of unanimity among the population; this apparent consensus is suggested most baldly in the third passage, which claims that, “Americans have chosen to make their society a ‘melting pot.’” In this last example, “Americans” is used interchangeably with “the United States” as an agent, thus underscoring the conflation of state with nation and citizenry. These passages also suggest that some social processes simply happen, as opposed to being shaped by human beings (e.g., Americans “experienced immigration patterns . . .”) The question of agency is confused further by the fact that none of the passages suggests any mechanism by which these alleged approaches to receiving immigrants are either decided upon or implemented. Presumably, the American “expectation” that
immigrants give up their "cultures" arises more or less spontaneously from shared national attitudes and values. Still, it is not clear how this presumed expectation is manifested.

By constructing the nation as an essence, the melting-pot-versus-mosaic metaphor inhibits both historical and global perspective. Not only does it elevate one form of social division above all others—including race, class, ethnicity, religion and gender—but it obscures the significance of global forces, both within and across nations, that shape policies and practices. Furthermore, the notion of national character de-historicizes the nation by freezing policies, practices, and attitudes in time. In the melting pot story, an early-twentieth-century mindset common to Anglo-Saxon elites worldwide is attributed uniquely and universally to U.S. citizens of all time periods. As a result, this essentialism undermines historical perspective by decontextualizing historical trends and obscuring the dynamic nature of society.

Furthermore, it impairs historical reasoning to suggest that a metaphor can be an unproblematic reflection of a social reality. All three of the above passages claim that the melting-pot-mosaic metaphor has a fixed meaning and can be understood as representing an objective social fact. This is reinforced by including the term in several of the books’ glossaries; one defines it as a “society in which cultural groups are encouraged to adopt the main culture of the society and to stop practicing their own customs” (Clark and Wallace, 1996, p.494). At the same time, none of the passages above contains a single empirical or falsifiable statement. By asking students to confuse a figure of speech with a social fact, the authors discourage historical reasoning and promote anti-intellectual habits. Finally, as noted above, the passages’ personification of states impedes understanding of historical agency. There is no mention, for example, of the activism of members of “other ethnic groups”—this is the way they were actually referred to in the report of the B & B Commission—in demanding that Canada not be characterized officially as having only two cultures. As a result, the texts encourage confusion—and preempt questions—about historical agency, social change, and the construction of social divisions.
Finally, the ahistorical nature of this metaphor is evident in its inaccurate representation of the past. First and most obviously, the claim that Canadian policy has never been assimilationist is a simple denial of historical fact. As Osborne (2004) points out,

For the last hundred years, Canadian history curricula have described Canada as a “mosaic” and contrasted it with the “melting pot” of the United States. At the same time, as historians have shown, for much of the twentieth century policy-makers in English-speaking Canada expected schools to socialize students into a culture of “Anglo-conformity.” (p.8)

Furthermore, the idea that the US is or has been more assimilationist than Canada has no empirical basis either in policy, in popular attitudes, or in studies that seek to measure aspects of cultural retention (Reitz and Breton, 1994; Stevenson, 1995; Henry and Tator, 1999; Osborne, 2004). The two countries’ historical patterns with respect to admission and integration of immigrants have been very similar and rooted in global trends and political and economic expediency (Stevenson, 1995; Lew and Carter, 2002; Kelly, 2004; Abu-Laban, 1998), not timeless attributes of national character. While it is historically accurate to say that the United States has often been described as a melting pot, it is simply disingenuous to suggest that this image has a fixed ‘meaning’ either in the minds of US citizens or in social reality. In fact, the connotation of the melting pot image has always been highly elastic, and it was used in the early twentieth century both descriptively and prescriptively by proponents of diversity as well as by adamant assimilationists (Abu-Laban and Lamont, 1997). The same flexibility of meaning is evident today; in my own experience, the term is used most often either in a historical context and/or to connote diversity.

The historical centering of the nation-state is certainly not unique to Canada, but Canada’s proximity and similarity to its much-larger neighbour leads to particularly pronounced attempts to narrate national uniqueness.4 The popular

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4 Burton (1997, citing Lowenthal) suggests that “no country is more intent on distinguishing itself from others than Britain”; thus Canada’s preoccupation with uniqueness could also be a legacy of its British heritage. Foster (1995) also describes Canada’s past efforts to establish itself as a leader and model of “racial planning” within the British empire, and ultimately to carry on the torch of world leadership from the declining Britain. This suggests that contemporary efforts to establish Canada as an example to the world have deep historical roots.
acceptance of the mosaic-versus-melting-pot myth relies upon the perpetuation of ignorance about the history of policies and ideologies that regulate inclusion and exclusion. Also, the national frame necessarily de-emphasizes global trends—imperialism, capitalism, the slave trade, popular and scientific theories of race—while overemphasizing (or inventing) aspects that underscore Canada’s presumed uniqueness. These omissions and distortions impede students’ ability to examine critically the historical roots of contemporary social and political structures (Wills, 2001; Dei, 2000). The ability to understand current social reality is crucial both to questioning those aspects of it that are unjust, and in recognizing that they are not given; they are the products of human agency and can be changed by human agency. Stanley (2000) acknowledges the inherent problems with nation-centered history when he argues that an anti-racist approach to history is preferable to a national focus not only from a political perspective, but from a purely intellectual one as well. It is simply better, more accurate history.

**National comparison and white normativity**

In addition to promoting essentialist and therefore ahistorical thinking, the nation-centered narrative—reinforced by national comparison—rhetorically reinscribes social and political hierarchies within the nation-state. In the passages cited above, the authors postulate two groups of people called “Canadians” and “Americans.” Then, by placing these two groups on the receiving end of immigration, the text creates a discursive dichotomy between “Canadians / Americans” on one hand and “immigrants” on the other. As a result of this dichotomy, we are led to understand that the only significant social division in the former British North American colonies is between populations of contemporary nation-states, not between Europeans and Aboriginal peoples, or between earlier and later immigrants, or between those constructed as white and those constructed as non-white, or any other divisions. Furthermore, the real Canadians and Americans—those whose differences define the national characters—are those descended from early British settlers who simply reacted to the arrival of others. Thus, through this comparative articulation of Canadian history, national identity
is identified with members of society’s dominant group, and other social divisions are made invisible.

The normalization of white/Anglo dominance is reinforced by the erasure, noted above, of the role of collective action in effecting social change. By suggesting that the multiculturalism policy reflects the essential nature of Canadians, these texts deny the role of members of non-charter groups whose activism was instrumental in the creation of the policy. Credit is given instead, implicitly, to the dominant group, whose innate tolerance the policy is said to embody. When texts speak of the ‘contributions’ of ‘other’ cultural groups, they indicate “songs and stories, music and dancing, and the producing and purchasing of consumer goods and services” (Clark, 1995, p.173). They do not mention the multiculturalism policy, which forms the essence of Anglo-Canadian identity, and which owes its existence in large part to the work of Ukrainian Canadians, Jewish Canadians, and others, who actively opposed the government’s attempt to define Canada as bicultural. Ironically, the policy is now used to represent these and other non-charter groups as the passive beneficiaries of the dominant group’s largesse.

The way in which the narrative of relative national tolerance reinscribes white/Anglo normativity is clearly evident in those Heritage Minutes that deal with race and racism. As I explained earlier, the Minutes are a series of sixty-second vignettes depicting stories of Canadian history and broadcast widely on television and in movie theatres. To demonstrate their construction of racial ideology, I will describe and analyse the Minutes that feature characters of African descent. There are three (out of about sixty Minutes in total): one about the Underground Railroad, one about Jackie Robinson, and one about a mining accident in Nova Scotia. In two of the three, the black characters are from the U.S., thus reinforcing the notion that race and racism are American issues, and all three Minutes are explicitly centered around comparisons between white people’s treatment of blacks in Canada and the United States. For this reason, white people are the true protagonists and, as I will show, black people are primarily props whose presence is valued only for its utility in illustrating alleged
In the Minute entitled Underground Railroad, a black woman and a white woman are shown looking out a window together, evidently waiting for an arrival via the network. The black woman wails that the person is “three hours late already!” She quickly becomes hysterical while the white woman remains calm and rational, assuring her that “we’ve all done this before.” The black woman then runs screaming out of the house into the street, only to be greeted, as promised, by the wagon bearing the man she is waiting for, who emerges from hiding to say “We’re free!” The woman adds, “Yes, Pa, we’s in Canada!” In this story, the white people are calm, rational, competent saviours, while the black people are irrational, overwrought, childlike, and passive. The objectification of black people is dictated by a narrative based on comparing ‘the US’ and ‘Canada’ according to their presumed collective treatment of the Other. The differences between ‘Canadians’ and ‘Americans’ are the differences between white Canadians and white Americans; black bodies are simply the objects through which whites exhibit their respective national characters.

In the Minute featuring Jackie Robinson, white people are once again the historical actors—both good and bad—while Robinson has only one line: “Hi, gentleman.” The team’s white owner is the sole agent of desegregation, shown introducing Robinson to his new teammates. The following scene is a game set in Montreal; the visiting team, with “Newark” clearly marked on its jerseys, attacks Robinson viciously while Montrealers give him a roaring ovation. Robinson himself—a lifelong civil rights activist—does nothing in the Minute except advance to the plate and hit the ball. The voice-over credits “cheering Montrealers” with “launch[ing] his journey to baseball’s Hall of Fame.” Once again, white people are constructed as the agents of history and white Canadians as characterized by magnanimity toward the racial Other. One of many ironies of this story is the fact that rigid immigration laws in place at the time (1947) were designed to keep Canada’s population as pristinely white as possible. This fact is obscured by the camera’s final closeup on a black woman in the stands. Another irony is that there were many Canadian activists of colour who challenged
segregation in Canada, and whose stories would be more appropriate to a project aimed at telling Canadian history—but those stories would not fit within the official narrative of white Canadian virtue.

Finally, in the one Minute that does feature an African Canadian, Nova Scotian Maurice Ruddick recounts a story of being trapped underground in a mining accident with a group of which he was presumably the only black member. He tells the story of how he sang to keep up his own and others’ spirits during the eight-day ordeal. In this way, he is granted a significant amount of agency; still, the point of the story is how he was treated by the white people—and the contrast between white Americans and Canadians. This is evident in the next part of the story, when he tells us that “the good folks in the US gave all us survivors a free holiday in the south, [but] said I couldn’t stay with the others because of my color.” As he tells it, the other miners accepted the invitation only at his (Ruddick’s) insistence. In closing, he returns to the memory of being trapped in the mine: “My, didn’t we sing those hymns – together.” Again, the white Canadians are the heroes; their apparently equitable treatment of Ruddick is contrasted with American segregation. Note that the narration is scripted carefully to generalize responsibility for Ruddick’s segregation to the entire US population. At the same time, the history of racial injustice and exclusion in Canada is denied by Ruddick’s claim that he told the others, “We’ll all have our holiday; then we’ll be together again. And we were!”

A similar treatment of black people in Canada is evident in many history textbooks. For example, *My Country, Our History* includes a “case study” called “People of African Descent in Early Canada” (Hux, Brandao, & Wong, 1995, p.20). It briefly mentions black loyalists in Nova Scotia, but focuses on those who escaped slavery in the US by fleeing to Canada. The text provides several quotations ascribed to people who fled to Canada, and who describe their lives there in glowing terms. Only one quotation out of six mentions discrimination, and attributes it merely to selected individuals, particularly those “of the lower classes.” The authors provide very little context for these quotations (most of which is highly misleading), thus creating the impression that the conditions they
describe were typical. Most importantly, the emphasis in the entire “case study” is on how the black refugees were treated by whites, and ultimately, as in the case of the Heritage Minutes described above, white Canadians are the protagonists in this story.

By positing essential differences between ‘Canadians’ and ‘Americans’, rooted in the ways those groups respond to immigrant and racialized Others, comparative nation-centered histories construct certain groups as ideal representatives of the two nation-states. The white person’s perspective is universalized, thus preempting analysis of social hierarchies and political-economic structures within and across nation-states. Thus comparative nationalism, by rigidifying the artificial boundaries and allegiances created by nation-centered historical perspective, necessarily impedes understanding of the ways in which race and other social divisions have been constructed and exploited historically in the interests of power.

In addition to deflecting racism onto the United States, the comparative national perspective further denies the significance of race in Canada through its emphasis on assimilation versus retention of culture. As demonstrated in the previous section, the textbooks claim that immigrants to the U.S. are forced to “give up” their “cultures,” while immigrants to Canada are encouraged to retain theirs. This sets up an artificial dichotomy between retention and loss of culture, which implicitly reduces difficulties faced by Othered groups to a question of maintaining exotic customs. This deflects attention from material inequalities and the structures that keep them in place. As Li (1999) observes, “Strangely, in the New World it is always internal culture and never external force that determines ethnic survival” (p.5)

The question of external force is elided in part by a discourse that bases national identity on the dominant group’s relationship to immigrants, thus marginalizing the presence and experience of Aboriginal peoples, who did not choose to come to Canada and whose very recent experience of forcible assimilation policies belies the whole mosaic narrative. By placing cultural retention at the center of the narrative of Canadian exceptionalism, the
multicultural story denies the significance of race, which is inherent in Canada's colonial history, and which defines the relationship between European-Canadians and Aboriginal peoples. The experiences of First Nations people repudiate the reduction of social difference to culture, which is at the core of the multicultural narrative. Therefore, the official story necessarily marginalizes First Nations people in the process of denying the historical and ongoing significance of race in Canadian society. This is not to suggest that First Nations are absent from official histories; however, they are usually represented as belonging to the past, and their ongoing relationship to the nation and state are marginal to the official narrative.

Conclusion

Most textbooks acknowledge the historical—and sometimes the current—reality of discrimination to varying degrees. However, this recognition is downplayed by the overall narrative of relative tolerance. "By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Canada is seen as a place where cultural diversity, and civil and human rights are respected more fully than in many other societies" (Hundey et al, 2003, p. 32). The passive voice is typical of such statements; we are not told by whom Canada is seen in this way. Another text muses that "One possible answer to the riddle of Canadian identity lies in the relative harmony in which its citizens have come to live" (Newman, et al, 2000, p.8). The reflexive framing of Canadian virtue in relative terms makes it possible to acknowledge national foibles while still maintaining a belief in Canadian exceptionalism. In fact, even the (limited) acknowledgment of injustice can play into a narrative of moral superiority, by suggesting that we are noble enough to take responsibility for our (relatively minor) mistakes and to learn from them. At the same time, the vagueness of such statements enables textbook authors to invoke and reinforce a widespread commonsense belief without condescending to the level of empiricism.

Despite the ritual assertions of harmony in diversity, the recent shift in Canadian national identity and the use of cultural language to obscure the political nature of social difference have not changed the reality of a society structured by
race. Many scholars have documented ongoing institutionalized racism in sites including courts, schools, and the job market (Henry, 2002; Henry and Tator, 1999, 2000; Walcott, 1993; Lian and Matthews, 1998; Lewis, 1996; Khenti, 1996; Weinstock; Neegan, 2005; James and Brathwaite, 1996; Dei, 1996). The 1988 Multiculturalism Act does include mention of race and racial discrimination; still, this acknowledgment is brief and buried under much apple-pie language about “promoting respect and appreciation for the multicultural reality of Canada” (Section 5d). By relegating anti-racial-discrimination language to a policy that is allegedly about culture, the Act reinforces the conflation of the two, obscuring the significance of race-based inequity.

As Francis (1997) points out, and as the reality of racial injustice illustrates, “the myth of the master race . . . left a lasting legacy still evident in our institutions, even in ourselves” (p.83). Yet because the official image is inconsistent with this legacy, it depends on collective unknowing of the past in order to construct a historically coherent national identity. As Simon (2000) writes, “Ignorance is not simply a rationally organized state of affairs but is, as well, a dynamic, unconscious structure which fosters resistance to knowledge” (p. 74). The resistance to knowledge about past and present racism raises questions about how young people socialized since Trudeau’s proclamation of a cultureless Canada make sense of the discourses of race and nation in the context of their own experience. I turn to this question in Chapter five.
Chapter 5: Voices of youth

Introduction

In a recent study of Quebec and British Columbian students’ civic identities, Levesque notes that his informants “are children of the ‘multicultural era.’ For most of them, all they know of Canada and Canadian is multicultural” (Levesque, 2001, p. 309). Stevenson (1995) describes the degree to which Canadian youth have absorbed the notion that Canada represents a “cultural mosaic.” However, as Levesque points out, there has been very little research into how ideas about Canadian citizenship are interpreted and “become part of students’ lives” (Levesque, 2001, p. 297). As the emphasis on national and nation-building history increases, both in the formal curriculum (Osborne, 2004) and in the nonformal sector (Hodgins, 2003), the question of how students understand multicultural Canada in historical context becomes especially salient, particularly in light of history-telling’s key role in shaping ideologies of race and power. In this chapter, I describe a conversation with a group of youth about history, race, culture, and the Canadian nation. In doing so, I highlight the ways in which the young people’s language and stories both reflect and challenge the dominant discursive practices identified in the previous chapter.

First, the participants were highly critical of the narrow treatment of race in the formal curriculum. In particular, they noted that many groups are othered through an exclusive focus on instances of their victimization. This focus results from an Anglo-centric worldview, although they did not use that specific term; they did point out that history is written from the perspective of those in power and tends to present the teller’s own group in a favourable light. They argued that history should be taught from a global perspective to combat ignorance and parochialism.

In addition to their quite sophisticated critiques, one of the things that stood out for me was the frequent tension between the participants’ critical perspectives vis-à-vis official nation-building rhetoric and an acceptance of many aspects of the dominant discourse. This seems to me to reflect the power of
narrative and its ability to structure our commonsense views of the world in ways that we are not only unaware of but may even disagree with intellectually and politically. Furthermore, I was struck by a contrast between the generally nation-centered historical perspective of those who identified with the dominant social group and the more global, systemic analysis of the participant whose parents had immigrated from Africa. The latter participant frequently challenged specific aspects of the dominant discourse including cultural essentializing and the narrative of progress. As indicated above, I had not intended to look for patterns of responses based on racial, ethnic or national origins of the participants. However, perhaps because the theme of nation-centered perspective had emerged so prominently in the document analysis, I was particularly attuned to that discourse. My interpretive lens was also shaped by awareness of the influence of racial—or dominant/nondominant group—identity on narrative frameworks, as discussed in Chapter two. As a result, I was particularly sensitive to differences between the larger narratives within which each participant’s statements were situated. [Note: names used here are pseudonyms.]

**Critiques of school history**

Throughout the conversation, all three participants demonstrated a clear interest in the role of history in antiracist pedagogy and a strong commitment to antiracist practice in general. As noted above, they were highly critical of the narrow treatment of race in their school curriculum. Much of the discussion revolved around black history, probably because I had introduced the project by speaking about its origin in my conversations with youth about their interest in African and African American history. For example, when I asked about their sources of historical information—after observing that they know a lot—Josh said that he reads “nonstop,” and Kate and Sara expressed criticism about how little they learn in school. They spoke about the focus on Martin Luther King, Jr. and indicated that the treatment of race and race-related issues in their history classes was limited largely to a brief mention of one man.
Kate: You know what I learn in school? Martin Luther King was an excellent person and he made a really good speech that said “I had a dream.” That’s all you learn. He got shot. That’s the end of Martin Luther King. We never learn what he accomplished or anything, or if we do it’s very rare...

Sara: There’s very little text about what... his accomplishments were...

Kate: And then how messed up a society do we have to live in for a person as great as Martin Luther King who actually tried to make a difference, and succeeded, to have like endless stories of him being shot... rather than what he accomplished and what lived on through him, you know?

This is a powerful critique of the trivialization of the history of race relations through the focus on a single individual, which appears to emphasize his death more than his life. Even an emphasis on his life would be problematic for several reasons; it would reinforce the ‘great man’ treatment of history, obscuring the role of collective action, and it would underscore the relegation of racial issues to the United States. Nevertheless, these young women expressed a clear interest in learning about King’s accomplishments, which would necessarily entail an examination of the historical context of his activism. When I hinted at the broad reach of his analysis—going beyond African American civil rights to a systemic critique of racism, militarism and materialism—all participants responded enthusiastically that this should be addressed in school:

Sara: They don’t tell us... anything about other issues that he really hated, like the Vietnam war as you said and like the army and stuff—

Josh: Just what he succeeded at. Because they have to.

Sara: But they only put him as a person who was trying – like he was trying to stop racism against other minorities, not just only black people, he wanted to stop it, you know? But they only classified him as the black guy who tried to revolutionize the whole plague of racism.

Kate: He tried to evolutionize racism and unfortunately, he succeeded. Like—

Sara: Yeah, cause they don’t want him in textbooks to be involved in other issues like in Vietnam and war. They don’t want him involved in any other governmental thing...
Here Sara argued that discussion of ‘race’ should not be limited to or equated with black people; this view came up again later in the conversation, as I will show in more detail later. In this exchange, she suggested that King’s work is trivialized by his being presented specifically as a black man working exclusively on black/white issues. This is consistent, also, with her later comments to the effect that black history should not be isolated and taught for only one month, but should be integrated throughout the curriculum. Participants also told me that it is not even taught for a full month; Kate said, “Black history month? Shortest month of the year. . . Like and, at school – one day we talk about this, out of the entire month. [[yeah]]” Josh said that he didn’t learn about black history in school at all.

In this part of the conversation, participants also suggested that their classmates’ lack of respect for King—which they interpret as reflecting a more general lack of concern with questions of racism and social justice—is the result of the schools’ failure to educate them about these issues.

Kate: And at our school last year, when we were in the same class together – a moment for Martin Luther King. Twenty seconds later, “OK thank you students.”

A: A moment of silence?

Kate: Yeah, a moment of silence for whatever they’re asking us for black history month.

Josh: And for the rest of the year you can ignore it, never happened.

[ . . . ]

Sara: Ok, I was silent and then . . . After a few seconds . . . I open my eyes, we’re continuing class. I’m like, what happened to the moment of silence? Geez, it was only a few seconds. Have some respect for the guy. For the history.

Kate: And even throughout, people are so ignorant towards these things. People were talking the entire time. C’mon . . . [ . . . ] They didn’t give a shit. At all. . . Like, they don’t care because they’re not—I’m pretty sure that if people actually educated them on subjects like this more efficiently, then they would give more of a rat’s ass, but because they’re ignorant-
Pursuing this line of thought, Sara also spoke about the media as “a horrible teacher.” She said that her classmates “live in a bubble” with no understanding of the outside world. For example, she said, “They think that giraffes walk on the street in Africa,” and they internalize stereotypes that are promoted on television: “Like say Chinese people can’t drive. Or all Middle Eastern people work at dépanneurs.”

As this exchange demonstrates, the participants exhibited both passion and a sense of urgency about the narrow way in which race is addressed in school, and how the curriculum either reinforces stereotypes or fails to combat those that result from isolation and exposure to the media. They went on to offer concrete solutions; for example, Sara argued that black history should be integrated throughout the curriculum:

Sara: And in my class, we didn’t touch on black history at all. And even Martin Luther King said there shouldn’t be only one month. It should be all year round.

Kate: Black history year.

Sara: Not even a year. Like we should learn about this history every time. It’s a part of history. It shouldn’t be one specific month where you only talk about it and then leave it alone after many months.

Also, later, in response to Sara’s comments about stereotyping, Josh argued that it should not be history of Quebec and Canada. It should be history of the world, like the total. And not just concentrate on Africa, don’t just concentrate on Canada. Take everything. Learn Chinese history, which by the way is much more interesting than Canadian history. Learn Greek... Learn Mongolian. Learn everything... Even if it’s not in depth, but just enough so that you can actually go there and not feel like an idiot.

Sara: We don’t know enough about every continent... We should know a lot cause it’s our world, it’s our earth... Some people have no idea where they’re living. They have no idea what’s going on around them. They’re just – yeah, as I said, a bubble... We should learn more, we should take more of an effort to learn about other countries that history books don’t talk about or censor.

In this excerpt, both Josh and Sara connected history education to understanding
of the contemporary world. They took slightly different views of the ultimate purpose: Josh suggested that world history should prepare us to be knowledgeable about places we might someday visit, while Sara’s answer implies that historical knowledge is valuable because it can help us understand our own position in the world. Without knowledge of the larger world, we lack the context to understand our own society: “Some people have no idea where they’re living. They have no idea what’s going on around them.” Without global historical understanding, we live “in a bubble.” And this bubble, as they argued earlier, makes people insensitive to and unconcerned about questions of justice and oppression.

In addition to the role of historical knowledge in promoting understanding of self and others, participants suggested that such knowledge is valuable because we can learn lessons from past mistakes. Sara was critical of the narrative of progress, according to which past injustices are acknowledged but presented as having been resolved; she spoke about the need to learn from history, and others responded with other ideas about the value of historical knowledge:

Sara: The teachers don’t want to put in all the bad stuff so they keep that aside. And you’re not told the whole truth, and like say if there’s a time in history where something bad happened but it just got quickly resolved put a bandaid on it and everything’s fine . . . But time repeats itself and if they just put aside the mistakes . . . it’ll just repeat itself . . . [They should] tell all the faults so we can learn from our forefathers . . .

Kate: But they’re censoring it . . .

Josh: . . . But you can’t withhold information like that, or you’re going to do it again, just because you’ve never heard it before . . . . If they tell you, then you know . . . that ‘oh if I do that a war will start’ . . . .

As Sara suggests and Josh reinforces, history offers lessons for the present, particularly about what not to do. This view is expressed frequently among students in the literature of historical consciousness, usually when they are asked directly why we should study history (e.g., VanSledright, 1996). Although this perspective begs the problematic question of historical agency, it nevertheless demonstrates a belief that historical information is valuable for understanding and acting in the present. It also represents an awareness that official narratives of
progress are built on the exclusion or censoring of significant aspects of history. These aspects, participants argued, should be included in order for us to gain an accurate—or at least useful—view of the past.

**Ideology and critique: tensions**

One noteworthy aspect of this conversation was that the participants’ clearly critical views often coincided with statements that reflected the official discourse of Canadian history. This was particularly—though not exclusively—true of those participants who identified as members of the dominant group. In a further example of their critical perspectives, all three expressed an eloquent analysis of the ways history-telling is used in the service of power. For example, after explaining the origins of the project, I asked whether there are different histories for different groups of people. Sara responded with a critique of the nation-centric perspective:

We have our African American history about the Africans going to slavery to America and the whole Martin Luther King thing and then the revolution and all that stuff but . . . what you don’t see a lot is the beginning in Africa, like about the Africans, the tribes, the roots – like the roots of Africa – they don’t talk about that a lot. They only talk about, well basically American history about the people. It’s about the blacks but it’s about America just because it happened in America, and yes it’s different.

Here, Sara illustrates how a nation-centered (or European-American/Canadian-centered) narrative others people of African heritage by presenting them only in relation to white Americans, and particularly as victims of slavery and civil rights abuses. In this way, she echoes the African American students in Epstein’s (2000) study who observed that black people were included in the narrative only when their experiences were related to white people’s experiences. At the same time, though not intentionally, Sara’s answer demonstrates how the Canadian history curriculum deflects questions of race and racism onto the United States.

The other participants did not immediately take up this point about how some are constructed as subjects and others as objects of history; however, that point was to emerge again later in the discussion. In her immediate response to
Sara (or to my question), Kate noted that there are different historical perspectives, citing the example of French and English accounts of the war between English and French. Josh elaborated on her point, introducing the concept of bias. “Your side is the good side, whether it’s true or not, cause it’s all relative to your perspective. . . . And I don’t know if there’s a true history, but if there is, I have yet to see it.” The understanding of historical truth as partial or unknowable was also repeated throughout the conversation. Citing denials of the Holocaust, Kate said, “I think there’s a lot of denial and disbelief also.” She applied this principle to her own experience, saying many people persuade themselves that they can pass a test without studying, when in fact they can’t. “The human mind is a really weird thing. You can lie to yourself and make yourself believe it.” And Sara added, “You know it’s wrong at first, but you keep telling yourself that it’ll turn right. You can switch your thinking.” Josh added, “If enough people tell you the grass is blue, eventually you’re going to start seeing it.” Turning back to the subject of history, Josh illustrated the reality of denial by describing the internment of Italian- and German-Canadians during the Second World War, and noting that this story has been omitted from the official narrative: “And that’s not in history at all. Thafs nowhere. . . . No, not real.”

However, despite these clearly articulated understandings of the role of power in history-telling, the participants also demonstrated that they had accepted or internalized certain aspects of the dominant discourse of Canadian national identity. One example of this was in Josh and Kate’s constructions of racial and cultural difference, and their positioning of white/British Canadians as the unmarked and cultureless norm. This came up in a discussion of race and power, and was intertwined with a critique of othering behaviour:

Josh: Say you have problem with someone in school. You’re more likely to start something with him if he’s just Canadian, than you would if he was Italian, than you would if he was black. . . .

A: So what is “just Canadian”?

Josh: Well like someone who doesn’t have any – I would say someone who’s neutral. He doesn’t have any particular – he’s not leaning towards any
particular culture. . . . You’re more likely to mess with someone who’s like that than you are with an Italian.

A: So how can you have no cult – I’m just curious . . .

Kate: Your parents grew up in Canada, you grew up in Canada

Josh: a British person

Kate: For instance like – you don’t take any particular pride in where you’re from cause you’re from many different places. Like let’s say Canadian, French Canadian, British, Irish; you’re everything. . . . you don’t take much pride in one place . . . Cause as a generalization, Italian people are like - they’re really proud of where they’re from . . .

Josh: What I meant was just like, someone who’s just from Britain. Let’s say he just came from Britain. . . . I mean some British kid who doesn’t look like he has any pride in anything . . . .

It should be emphasized that Josh offered the initial example of racial othering as an illustration of how racism is reproduced through the construction of the Other as inherently dangerous. At the same time, however, his and Kate’s critique subtly reinforces white normativity in the very process of condemning it.

First of all, I found it interesting that the identification of unmarked Canadian (or “just Canadian”) with British heritage was so conscious. This illustrates the extent to which the legacy of the pre-multicultural, explicitly British Canadian identity retains its influence. Even when Kate elaborated on Josh’s point to include people of mixed heritage, she added only French Canadian and Irish to British and Canadian, and summed up with, “you’re everything.” Also, Josh’s use of the generic “you”—who would be less intimidated by a “British kid” than an Italian or black person—clearly indicates that the unmarked individual is presumed to be of British heritage.

Secondly, the association of otherness with pride and its counterposition to neutrality or lack of culture reflects the multiculturalism policy’s assertion that Canada has no official culture, which is tied to its association of superficial and visible ‘cultures’ with the Other. Also, the reduction of culture to pride in one’s origins reflects the trivialization of constructed social difference that accompanies
multiculturalism’s emphasis on celebration of diversity. (See, for example, Prince, 1996.) This is underscored by the fact that just-Canadians, in this exchange, are not constructed as proud of their identity. Instead, ‘pride’ indicates people’s identification with Othered groups. But pride is contextual; in two recent Ipsos-Reid surveys, 94% of Canadians said that they are proud of their “culture and identity” as a nation (Ipsos-Reid, 2002; 2004). With this in mind, the assertion that dominant-group Canadians do not identify with any particular culture indicates the two-tiered understanding of culture discussed in Chapter four: Other cultures as folklore; Canadian culture as values and institutions. In a section of the passage that I ellipted, Josh mentioned multiculturalism as part of his explanation of culturelessness: “[The just-Canadian] doesn’t have any particular—he’s not leaning towards any particular culture. And that’s why I said the Canadian – multicultural. Into everything – like he’s not more Italian. Or something.” In this statement, multiculturalism constructs the (male) British-Canadian as representing the universal, while the Italian/black/other represents the particularistic. Also, we can hear echoes of the moral significance of official Canadian culture that was evident in the textbooks; the unmarked Canadian is above cultural or ethnic partisanship.

Finally, Kate’s and Josh’s comments reflect the dominant discourse in terms of the unstable and graduated nature of whiteness with respect to Canadian identity. The participants did not mention whiteness in this exchange—though they did use the term at other points in the interview—but they did mention blackness and placed it in the same non-normative category as Italian-ness. Both categorizations mark someone as Other in Canadian society. However, a notion of whiteness can be inferred from their discussion. On one hand, Kate and Josh both suggested that being Other is rooted in behaviour and attitude; “just Canadians” were described as those who do not demonstrate pride in any particular ethnic heritage (implying that non-normative Canadians do). On the other hand, by explicitly opposing “black”—a phenotypical descriptor—to just-Canadian, Josh indicated that a person perceived as black is marked indelibly as Other regardless of attitude or behaviour. So, in this exchange, whiteness
emerges implicitly as a liminal space in which some people can construct themselves as normatively Canadian or not, based on whether they exhibit attachment to an Other ethnic identity. This whiteness (or potential whiteness) is made possible by the categorization “black”, which indicates that certain people are absolutely othered solely on the basis of their appearance.

It should be reiterated that participants’ discursive construction of the British Canadian as dominant or unmarked coexists with an awareness of how othering discourse reproduces racial hierarchy. Participants also disavowed more overt kinds of cultural essentializing, such as stereotyping, and consistently expressed opposition to racist practice, as they conceive it. This opposition is evident throughout the interview; for example, Kate expressed outrage over a book she had seen in her school library that seemed to justify slavery by saying that black people would have enslaved white people if they had had the opportunity. “They were talking about how black people are just as bad as white people and how slavery even if it did happen they treated everyone great . . . I wanted to kill it.” She also critiqued the presentation of the Other as victim in Canadian histories, pointing out that one doesn’t hear about Africa before colonization or Jewish people before the Holocaust. “Because they don’t want to think of them as actually people who had their own societies and have their own culture. They want to think of them as oh just name[less] and faceless people who we can degrade and wrong and whatever.” Josh added that “this is all done in the name of civilization . . . ‘oh we’re going to civilize them by making them slaves.’” These comments are not only explicitly antiracist but represent a sophisticated critique of othering discourses. The fact that this critical, antiracist perspective coexists with an unconscious acceptance of much of the dominant, hegemonic discourse indicates the profound impact of the latter.

**Meanings of race and culture**

In the discussion above, the culturelessness of the normative Canadian is made possible by the essentializing of the culture of the Other in the official discourse of multiculturalism. In order to get a feel for how they make sense of
This discourse, I asked participants what it means to live in a multicultural society. There was some hesitation and several false starts, suggesting that they had not been asked to define it before—or else that I had asked the question awkwardly!—or both. Finally Kate responded that, “I think cause every person’s from a different place . . . so if you live in a multicultural society that usually means that many people from different places who do different things are in—one place. Something like that.” Josh added that people “approach different situations differently because they’ve been raised somewhere else and they’ve had different experiences from us . . .”

Perhaps it is heavy-handed to point out the us/them dichotomy in Josh’s answer, but he does seem to suggest that culture means ‘them’ and is rooted in their differences from ‘us.’ More obvious, though, is the location of culture in national or geographic origin. When I probed a bit, asking whether people who live in the same place have the same culture, Josh responded that it has to do with how you were raised, which has to do with where your parents or ancestors came from. In defining culture, Kate mentioned “different food,” but also “different outlooks on life, different lessons that have to be learned.” Though the bulk of her response addressed more substantive aspects of culture than the superficial ‘museum’ perspective mentioned in Chapter four, her description is still located within the discourse of cultural essentialism that characterizes the official story of Canada: “You could be born here, but still have the culture of Chinese, cause your parents came from China.” In an apparent contradiction, later in the conversation, she actively challenged stereotyping of othered groups. In fact, this contradiction itself is inherent in the official discourse. Stereotyping is prejudice, and therefore inconsistent with liberal multiculturalism. On the other hand, the notion of cultural diversity that presumably characterizes Canada requires that culture be reified so that each tile in the mosaic can retain its distinct shape and colour.

Speaking after Kate and Josh, Sara explicitly interrupted the discourse of essentialism by saying, “Well you might live in the same society where they have a certain culture, but everybody’s unique.” She gave the example of her father who, she said, grew up in Africa and retains his African “roots” in some ways but
not others. She said he is still “traditional, somewhat”, but doesn’t “pressure [her] on education as much” as children are (presumably) pressured there. (She had also said that education is taken very seriously in Africa.) At the end of her statement, she reiterated that “everybody’s really different.” Her eagerness to make the point about individual uniqueness suggests she is well acquainted with the tendency to essentialize cultural difference; she very intentionally challenged this discourse, asserting individual distinctness several times and backing it up with a concrete example—an act of counterstorytelling. Sara’s concern with disrupting absolutism came up again later when she, like the others, addressed stereotyping. In the above case, though, she seemed to be making a subtler point. Culture is dynamic and hybrid. It is not dictated by one’s place of origin or one’s heritage, and individuals have the ability to adapt their ways of being to different circumstances as they choose or as they see as necessary.

As demonstrated above, all participants were critical of othering discourses, either those that essentialize or those that construct the Other as victim. Coexisting with this critique, however, was an individualized and psychologized understanding of what racism is. For the most part, racism was framed as bigotry, and my clumsy attempts to raise the question of structural racism were mostly unsuccessful. One interesting comment was in response to my question about racism in the past versus the present.

A: We’re talking about racism as if it’s in the past . . . Is racism over?

Kate: Hell, no. The only difference between racism now and racism back then is—

Josh: They did it in the streets.

Kate: They did it in the streets. Now it’s just more subtle, you know? . . . Now they do it inside.

In this exchange, racism was constructed as something that people “do.” At first, there seemed to be an acknowledgment that racism can be expressed subtly—more subtly than something that is done “in the streets”—but then the subtlety of contemporary racism was defined simply as covertness. It is still something that
people do to one another on an individual level, but it is simply more hidden than
it was in the past. Racism was also framed as making racist remarks; all three
participants spoke at different times about using "racist terms" directed at many
different groups of people, including Europeans of non-British origin.

When I tried to shift the conversation to a discussion of structural racism, Kate
and Sara introduced the concept of white normativity.

A: We’re talking about racism in terms of what you say to people, how you
treat people . . . Can there be - what other kinds of racism are there besides
um how individuals treat other individuals?

Sara: Well there’s favouring . . . like say you’re black you’re walking down
the street and accidentally bump into someone and it’s your fault? Ahh, the
other person will say “oh sorry that was my fault – ah, I really shouldn’t have
done that, ah I’m really sorry.”

Kate: If you’re white they’ll start cursing at you cause they’re not afraid of
you as much as they are of a black girl cause she might be part of a gang.

. . .

Sara: Yeah, so there’s this favouring that’s a form of I guess racism – right?

We have shifted from race-based hatred to “favouring,” which Sara identifies
as a form of racism, since it is based on othering and on construction of the Other
as inherently violent or dangerous; this is similar to Josh’s earlier example. In the
previous example, participants had implicitly constructed a notion of whiteness
through the juxtaposition of skin colour and attitude as indicators of otherness. In
the passage above, Kate explicitly used the term “white” as an indicator of
normative-group status. Her usage suggests that this group is defined as not-
black—i.e., based on appearance, and presumably including groups (such as Irish
and Italian) that might be othered in different situations. This illustrates the
plasticity of the concept of race; a person who is othered in some situations
because of ethnic background, identity or attitude becomes white in a superficial
encounter where those things are not visible. On the other hand, a person whose
skin colour designates her as ‘black’ is always othered, regardless of the situation.
In this case, the participants pointed out through a critique of what they call
favouring that the construction of whiteness as normative is a form of racism. Although it is still framed in the language of attitudes, this critique hints at an awareness of the ways in which race is constructed socially, as opposed to being simply a matter of individual pathology.

At another point in the discussion, Sara problematized the understanding of race by arguing that “when people think about racism, they only think about the black and white race and them clashing. But racism is everywhere, whether it’s . . . Irish and say Chinese . . .” Here, Sara was pointing out that many people think of race in terms of skin colour—and especially as a matter of black and white—and she explicitly challenged that notion, consciously expanding the definition of racism to include bigotry toward Irish or Chinese people. This could be interpreted as an argument against a biological or essentialist definition of race and for a recognition that race is ultimately about in-group / out-group status, regardless of how membership in either group is defined. Later in the conversation, she made a comment that reinforces this interpretation. We were talking about the relationship between race and power, and Sara said, “racism has a lot of power . . . not a lot of people want to change it cause that’s just how people think . . . they were raised to get scared of another culture because they were from somewhere else or they have different skin colour or like they have a certain quality that the other person doesn’t have . . .” So in this explanation, racism is understood as the process of othering; it can be based on geographic origin or phenotype or any other characteristic. At the same time, her response reflects the conflation of race and culture as well as the individualized understanding of racism that characterize the dominant discourse. This is another example of how critical perspectives coexist with certain elements of that discourse.

**Discourses of national comparison**

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Canadian nation-building is dependent on comparison between Canada and the United States. This is achieved through both overt claims of difference, such as the creation of the
melting-pot-versus-mosaic metaphor, and through the construction of a narrative of Canada that projects Canadian tolerance onto an imagined past and situates it within a morally consistent storyline. As Linda Levstik and Peter Seixas remind us, stories—both micro and macro—have moral frameworks built into them. These moral visions are inherent in the structures of stories, rendering concrete detail secondary to the stories’ moral truth. This becomes evident in the following exchange:

Kate: All you hear about Canada when it comes to black history month is the underground railroad, that’s where it led. We were the north, we were freedom. [This last sentence was expressed in an ironic tone.] Yet we were just as bad as the US, just not as cruel. Like,

Josh: Come from their cage to our better cage. Here’s water.

Kate: And you can work and not get paid. Like, it wasn’t slavery here because people told

Sara: Well we had slavery.

Kate: Yeah, we had slavery, but we weren’t as ignorant as the US in the fact where, we got punished. If we had slavery in Canada and we were like outwardly hurting people like just because of their race or their colour even, then there was penalties, right? And that’s the only reason

Josh: People still do that now.

Kate: Yeah, people still do it. But that’s the only reason that people didn’t have slavery in Canada. That’s the only reason. Because the government told us if you do, we’ll shoot you. You’ll be executed. That’s the only reason. And people still did it.

A: People said you would be shot if you had slaves?

Josh: Oh no no, you go to court, you get a slap on the wrist, you maybe pass a couple fives and go back

A: Well slavery was actually legal in Canada [[really?]] for a long time.[[for a long time - yeah]]

Kate: Yeah so it was legal for a while yes, but then we did make it illegal before the US did.
A: Actually some of the US made it illegal before Canada.

Kate: Yeah but, in general the US was worse with slavery than Canada.

In this discussion, we see the larger metanarrative—Canada as less racist, more tolerant than the US—shaping the facts that presumably support it. Even as the facts shift, the larger story remains the same. Ultimately, Kate arrives at a reasonably accurate statement: slavery was in fact more widespread in the US than in Canada. But the question of historical accuracy strikes me as less significant than the meanings attached to the information and the ways in which they fit it into their larger narratives of Canada—or, more specifically, of Canada-vis-a-vis-the-United States. First, the accuracy of the statement seems almost incidental; she arrives at it by trial and error from a pre-determined conclusion. Secondly, there is a notable difference between the statements “the US was worse with slavery” (Kate) and “slavery was more widespread in the US” (my reflexive translation into ‘scholarly’ language). The latter is a falsifiable, empirical statement; the former is a moral judgment. Her language is that of myth rather than historical evidence, and her statement is not, strictly speaking, a fact. This illustrates the a-empirical or anti-empirical nature of official history-telling which impedes critical analysis.

Also, Kate’s construction of “the US” and “Canada” as intentional agents reflects the textbook-based discourse demonstrated in the previous chapter. In order to be portrayed as actors, nation-states are conceived as homogenized wholes, and as a result, the question of agency is muddled or simply brushed aside. At the same time, the global context of the slave trade is elided, including Canada’s historical status as part of the British empire. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that participants had spontaneously mentioned the British slave trade earlier. In the above excerpt, however, the boundaries of the contemporary nation-state are projected onto the past and isolated in both space and time. The practice of slavery seems to be rooted in the essential moral natures of nation-states, rather than in global political, economic, social, and other structures. Thus, the comparative, nation-centered narrative impedes our ability
to understand those structures and their historical and ongoing effects, even when the speaker is aware of facts that contradict the official story. The moral perspective evident here also recalls Wills’ (1996) point that viewing past injustice through a moral rather than a political lens impedes students’ ability to understand such injustice in a way that helps them to make sense of social relations in the present. A similar moral tone was manifested throughout the interview; participants frequently described incidents and behaviours as “bad” or “wrong,” thus locating racism within individuals rather than in societal structures.

At the same time, though, Kate’s judgment was tempered. While repeating the official story of Canadian moral superiority, she indicated that she is critical of that story (even before the others interrupted to correct some of the historical details). First, she suggested that the treatment of history with respect to black Canadians is inadequate: “All you hear about Canada when it comes to black history month is the underground railroad, that’s where it led.” This was followed by “We were the north, we were freedom,” uttered in a clearly ironic tone, indicating her sense that this is more patriotic rhetoric than meaningful historical information. Then she articulated a qualified criticism of that story: “Yet we were just as bad as the US, just not as cruel.” The distinction between “bad” and “cruel” is unclear; perhaps the former has a more moral connotation while the latter is more behavioural. At any rate, Kate seems caught between a critical stance toward the official story and a lack of actual historical information that would enable her to evaluate it for herself. Ultimately, the notion of relative Canadian innocence seems to prevail in her assertions that “[there] wasn’t slavery here” and “we weren’t as ignorant as the US . . . .” Still, the contradiction is interesting: in the absence of concrete information, Kate seems to be struggling to reconcile her competing beliefs that “we were just as bad,” and that “the US was worse . . . .” This suggests to me that she has internalized the narrative of Canadian moral superiority, while simultaneously feeling that there must be more to the story. Her struggle illustrates the effects of a curriculum that teaches history as myth rather than as tools through which students can make sense of the past for themselves.
In the exchange above, Sara remained aloof from the US/Canada comparison, interjecting only to correct Kate by pointing out that slavery did exist in Canada. Throughout the conversation, her contributions reflected a more global worldview than those of Kate and Josh, whose comments tended to be framed within a more nation-centered narrative. In the following example, in response to a question about what is omitted from the histories they learn, Sara raised the case of Rwanda and the failure of powerful nation-states to intervene in the genocide. In the process, she resisted the other participants’ pull toward a narrative based on the centering and essentializing of the nation-state:

Sara: You don’t hear a lot about . . . Rwanda, the whole genocide and the mass slaughter. Like about America and Britain, like America and Europe not helping at all because there was nothing in it for them, because whenever they go to war supposedly to protect another country, you know there’s always something in it for them.

Kate: personal gain

Sara: Yeah, personal gain. But there was nothing in it for them helping Rwanda, so Rwanda like the people were on their own, they have to survive on their own. And you don’t hear a lot about that-you hear so much about World War Two because America helped. You hear so much about I don’t know – about the war in Iraq because there’s something in it for them . . . . So you don’t hear a lot about other countries that have been stricken by terror or have huge tragedies, but they have nothing to offer to the big giants, the first world countries because they hadn’t – there was nothing in it for the big guys.

Kate: United States

Sara: Well, Americans, whichever, like the first world countries, the rich ones. There’s nothing to gain by helping this county – that certain country, so yeah, if there’s something in it for them then they’ll tell the history or they’ll do whatever, so long as they have, ah, gain.

Josh: It’s pretty much the story of everyone’s life. [[yeah, yeah]]

Sara’s answer is rooted in a history-is-written-by-the-victors narrative (which Josh and Kate had also articulated earlier), and the victors in her narrative are the powerful countries of the world. Her perspective is global, and her statement is based on an analysis of how elites wield military power: elites fight wars in self-interest and justify them by claiming altruistic motives. Although she
acknowledged the United States’ major role, she ultimately resisted the others’ attempts to focus blame exclusively on the US—a move that would deflect attention from larger systems of power to a nation-centered worldview in which evil is contained within a single country. Kate translated “big giants . . . big guys” to “United States.” Her nation-centered view reflects the dominant discourse of Canadian history, in which Canada and the United States are at the center and larger global power structures are ignored. Furthermore, the counterposition of the two always shows Canada in a light of (relative) innocence, and reduces global hegemony and resulting evils to a manifestation of essential national nature. However, in Sara’s narrative, individual nations are less significant than the power bloc made up of “the first world countries, the rich ones.” It is probably not insignificant that this includes Canada.

After Sara had resisted the ‘nationalizing’ of responsibility for sins of omission and commission, Josh responded by turning attention from global power relations to human nature, saying that “It’s pretty much the story of everyone’s life.” In other words, all people are self-serving, so bad behaviour is inevitable and responsibility is diffused. This emphasis on human nature was reinforced later in the conversation, when Kate said, “I can guarantee you that white people—ok humans are not good people. . . . we are made to be selfish, greedy individuals . . .” I don’t mean to suggest that Kate and Josh were consciously deflecting responsibility; their responses simply demonstrate the different metanarratives within which each places the story of Rwanda’s abandonment. Sara’s narrative implicates Canada, however indirectly; their narratives subtly undermine her story of how power is distributed globally and how we are all positioned within that imbalance.

This leads to another interesting contradiction, which is the contrast between the repeated emphasis on selfishness as universal human nature and the acceptance of the narrative of relative national virtue. The latter view was evident in the exchange cited above, in which Kate asserted that “the US was worse with slavery [than Canada]” and “we [Canada] . . . were not as cruel . . . not as ignorant.” Previously, Sara had said “the racism there was the worst.” (It is not
clear from the context whether “there” referred to the U.S. in particular or to other parts of the world in general.) This underscores the fact that conflicting beliefs can exist simultaneously, especially when the official curriculum is based on abstractions and stories rather than empiricism. The ability to hold conflicting ideas suggests that, if we want to undermine hegemonic official stories, it is not sufficient simply to provide isolated facts or even competing ideas; the official storylines must be confronted directly. This is consistent with the insights of critical race theory, which encourages the use of counterstorytelling to expose and challenge the assumptions of commonsense beliefs. Students must become active deconstructors of unspoken messages, not so that they can ‘reconcile’ conflicting stories, but so that they can tell the difference between evidence-based analysis and manipulative innuendo.

When I asked about the possible effects of comparative moralizing, Kate responded that comparison is inevitable:

A: One of the things that I’m curious about is . . . if you’re always looking at it in comparative perspective. And say, “ok we have racism but it’s not as bad as . . . other people, you know?”

Josh: Because we’re the ones who wrote the books.

A: Does that . . . do you think that affects how people deal with racism . . . if they’re always comparing it . . .

Kate: Yeah, sure, but there’s no other way to look at it. Cause think about it. We don’t really know whether or not it was that bad because we weren’t there . . . All we can do is think of what we did and compare it to like basically our morals. But if we take someone else, and we take ours, and we’re like ok theirs is just horrible, but ours it was horrible also, but in comparison to them, it wasn’t that bad. It’s no justification, it’s no excuse, of course not. But what other way do we really have to look at it?

The idea that comparison is inevitable depends on acceptance of the nation-state as a naturally-occurring unit of social division and on identification of the polity with the state. In fairness, my question included the word “we” and likely set the tone for an us/them response. Nevertheless, I do think Kate’s answer provides insights into her thinking; she accepted the us/them dichotomy as natural and
elaborated on it. Comparison between “us” and “someone else” makes sense only to the extent that speaker and listener share a common and unquestioned understanding of who ‘we’ and ‘they’ are. In this case, that division coincides with the international border. Furthermore, the use of moralistic language (“it’s no excuse”) reflects an official story that evades social and political/economic structures. Sara’s narrative, which challenges the nationalist one, includes a more complex global analysis. This is true even though Sara does not discount the official Canadian story absolutely. For example, as cited above, she did suggest that “the racism there [in the US and/or other non-Canadian countries] was the worst.” For the most part, though, her narrative decenters the nation and situates power within a global political and economic system.

Conclusion

This conversation reveals many ways in which youth take up, internalize and contest dominant discourses of nation and race. In particular, the participants demonstrated a clear and passionate commitment to social justice and a sophisticated critique of many of the ways in which history-telling either reinforces or fails to disrupt hegemonic discourses. In the process, they offered concrete suggestions for the improvement of history teaching, particularly in the context of school, but also with attention to the media as “teacher.” In addition, participants’ responses illustrate how internalization of certain elements of official discourse, such as anglonormativity, national essentialism, and a nation-centered perspective, can co-exist with an inclination to be critical of official rhetoric and a strong commitment to antiracism. Also, participants’ responses illustrate the ways in which official history-telling discourages historical reasoning; this is manifested both in the lack of attention to empiricism and in the largely nation-centered views of two of the participants (even as they argued against such an approach to history teaching).

Finally, there was a noticeable difference between dominant-group and first-generation Canadians in terms of the larger narratives within which they situated their understandings of race and history. While it is premature to draw
general conclusions from this, the difference raises questions for further research: Will this pattern repeat itself in other groups of young people? To what extent is it connected to racial or ethnic identity, immigration status, or other factors? What are its implications for history teaching, both within and beyond the school curriculum? What insights can be gained by including young people's varied perspectives in history-telling projects (including both formal and nonformal curricula)? I hope these questions will lead not only to further information-gathering, but to projects that actively include young people in counterstorytelling that disrupts hegemonic discourses and constructs 'usable pasts' in the interest of social justice.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and reflections

Conclusions

As both the document study and the focus group illustrate, the nation-building discourse of multiculturalism reinforces racial ideology and impedes the historical knowledge and historical reasoning that are necessary to “reading the world” (Freire) effectively in order to change it. The juxtaposition of text-based constructions of race and nation with young people’s lived experience of those constructions provided insight into the ways in which dominant narratives—and the commonsense beliefs they embody—are produced, manipulated, internalized and contested. Building on previous research, this study points to the significance of race in shaping the interpretive lenses through which young people make sense of the past and present; it raises questions for further inquiry, particularly with respect to the Canadian context. It illustrates the coexistence of official constructions with critical attitudes and even contradictory information, thus suggesting that attempts to counter official, legitimizing histories and the hierarchies they support must address and deconstruct notions of race and nation explicitly. Finally, it illustrates that students’ counterstorytelling provides not simply alternatives to but profound and valuable critiques of the official narrative.

Constructions of race and nation in the official discourse

The documents I reviewed—beginning with the federal multiculturalism policy and including textbooks and Heritage Minutes—indicate an ahistorical and essentialist construction of the nation, which in turn leads to both an essentializing of culture and elision of race. When racism is acknowledged, it is constructed as individual bigotry and usually relegated to the past and/or to other countries, especially the United States. Furthermore, the reification of the nation and linking of national identity to multiculturalism lead to a discourse of white/anglo normativity; people of colour and members of non-charter ethnic groups are present in the narrative primarily as illustrations of the righteousness of dominant-group Canadians. Multiculturalism sets up a hierarchy of cultures; according to
the texts, ‘other’ cultures consist primarily of superficial characteristics and are rooted in geographic origin and/or in the body. Canadian culture, in contrast, is universal and morally significant, defined by values and institutions. In this way, the official narrative serves to discursively reinforce existing power relations.

The rhetoric of national comparison has several harmful effects, both political and pedagogical. First, it reinforces a nation-centric view of the world, which impedes historical reasoning by obfuscating the intra- and extra-national forces that drive social, political and economic change. Any nation-centric approach is problematic in that it assumes the nation is a natural and given unit of analysis, thus necessarily distorting historical perspective. However, this distortion is exacerbated by continuous and explicit comparison between one nation and another, which reifies national borders and promotes essentialist thinking based on belief in a correspondence between national/state territory and ‘culture’ or ‘society.’ The reification of national divisions works at counter purposes to an antiracist project informed by critical race theory. CRT emphasizes the need to make race central in any social analysis. In contrast, nation-centrism pushes race to the margins, obscuring its significance and implicitly constructing the normative Canadian and American as white and, in the case of Canada, of British descent. Official multiculturalism amasses all socially constructed difference under the rubric of “culture”; in doing so, it conflates culture with race and race with phenotype. In this way, social difference is simultaneously reified, depoliticized, and inscribed on the body, and race-based inequity is not only ignored but discursively reinforced.

The official nationalist narrative promotes social and political stasis by constructing liberal notions of ‘tolerance’ as progressive or even revolutionary. The discourse of multiculturalism constructs racism merely as intolerance of cultural difference, and frames both as a matter of individual attitudes which the state is actively working against. The elaborate efforts to construct the United States as ‘intolerant’ enable liberal Canadian multiculturalism to be positioned as pioneering progressivism. This pre-empts analysis of systemic racism by positing identification with the Canadian state as inherently and exceptionally anti-
oppressive. Furthermore, by directing blame for historical and contemporary oppression away from social and economic structures and toward ordinary people on the basis of where they live, this discourse impedes collective action for change and thus reinforces the social and political status quo.

Youth constructions of nation and race in the context of official history

The views expressed by the participants in the focus group demonstrate a strong commitment to antiracism as well as an inclination to be skeptical of the official historical narrative. At the same time, they illustrate the far-reaching effects of the official discourse, many aspects of which coexist with participants’ critical perspectives. While condemning racism on many levels and offering thoughtful critiques of othering discourses, participants’ responses also reflected certain elements of the official narrative, including a nation-centric perspective and anglonormativity. This led to some tension in their perceptions of race and racism in historical context; while racism was acknowledged and condemned, even in some of its subtler manifestations, it was not analysed within a global context that acknowledged its relationship to political and economic systems. At the same time, there were noticeable differences between dominant-group members and a first-generation Canadian of African heritage in terms of the larger narratives through which each viewed questions of race, history and power. While Kate and Josh were inclined to view race and history within a national framework, Sara resisted this narrative, offering instead a more global analysis.

Despite these tensions, all three participants offered valuable insights into the ways in which history-telling can combat hegemonic and othering discourses. While I can make recommendations on the basis of textual analysis rooted in critical race theory, the recommendations offered by students themselves indicate what would be most useful and valuable from their perspectives. First, as Josh pointed out, the nation should be decentered and historical context globalized. “It should not be history of Quebec and Canada. It should be history of the world.” Secondly, as Kate argued, we should not learn about any group only in the context of its victimization by another. She spoke out vehemently against the fact that
students hear nothing about African civilization before the European slave trade, or Jewish people before the Holocaust. This is an argument for the decentering of the Anglo/European worldview and a genuinely multicultural—in the radical, epistemological sense—approach to history-telling.

Finally, Sara spoke passionately and repeatedly about the fact that most of her fellow students “live in a bubble” and that history education—like all education—should help us recognize our position in the world by providing a global context for understanding our lives. Throughout the interview, she demonstrated an awareness of this global context by frequently disrupting the discourses of nation-centrism and cultural essentialism. Because of the small group size and because I had not previously spoken with youth about the issues raised in the study, I had not originally intended to disaggregate or to draw conclusions on the basis of participants’ racial, ethnic, national, or other identities. Nevertheless, the difference between Sara’s narrative framework on one hand and Kate’s and Josh’s on the other was visible enough that it must be pointed out, if only for the sake of raising further questions. In fact, this pattern is not surprising given the evidence discussed in the literature review. Epstein’s (1998) study indicated that social/political identity (in this case, race) has a profound effect on the narrative structures through which we view our social worlds. Stanley and Roman (1997) found “occasions when students, particularly students of color and emigrés, sharply dispute[d] and reject[ed]” the nationalist historical narrative (p. 224). They also found a similar coexistence of critical views with acceptance of dominant discourses, and a similar passion for antiracist pedagogies. For this reason, my findings are not surprising; still, the very small sample size makes it difficult to place too much conclusive weight on this one interview. Its significance lies primarily in the questions it generates for future research about the different narrative frameworks through which Canadian youth make sense of history and contemporary society.

Participants’ descriptions of their classmates’ apathy toward issues of social justice and their naivete about the world suggest the possible effects of an official discourse that promotes celebration of the status quo. This raises more questions
for future investigation. My focus group was comprised of youth who had chosen to be involved in social action and therefore were probably not a very representative sample. Further research with a broader group of youth would provide additional insights into the effects of an official narrative that equates tolerance of one's neighbours with progressive action. At the same time, certain of the participants' comments did conform to the official story, including their individualized understanding of racism and nation-centered worldview. They also manifested to a certain extent the effects of an ahistorical national identity, including national essentialism and an unproblematized view of historical agency. As critical race theorists and others argue, the ahistoricism of traditional grand narratives enables the perpetuation of a colourblind view which reinforces white power and privilege (Tyson, 2003; Dei, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Wills, 2001). In order to weaken the power of social difference—including nation and race—it is necessary to show them as constructions, and this is possible only by making those constructions themselves the center of historical study.

Reflections

This project brought back to me a lot of questions about the purpose and meaning of research and my role as a researcher. The youth raised many issues that I wanted to pursue concretely, and their passion led me to imagine ways we could address their concerns. For example, Sara repeatedly brought up the media and its pedagogical power—particularly with respect to perpetuation of stereotypes and misinformation. This could lead to a project that would address the role of the media; it could be anything from designing and implementing a media-literacy program for younger children, to an art project that challenges dominant imagery, to a campaign aimed at influencing the way local media represent specific groups. Of course it would be up to the participants what (if anything) they wanted to do, but the point is that my research cannot be only about data collection or knowledge generation for its own sake. It is insufficient even to suggest that this can help promote social change eventually by contributing to our understanding of how youth make sense of race in the context
of official discourses. That is important, but without immediate and concrete action, it is not enough. Ideally, the action should be part of the project itself. This was my original vision and I got pulled away from it to a certain extent, but in the process I have learned, or maybe re-learned, how important it is.

The discussion with participants also led me to reflect on how involved I should be in the interviews, and in what way. I found myself a few times ‘correcting’ misconceptions, which made me ask myself whether my role is simply to pose questions, or to provoke reflection, or to inspire action, or something else. And can those purposes be separated? For example, my interjections of information about slavery provoked responses that gave me useful information about participants’ views and thought processes. On the other hand, in reviewing the transcript, I came across several occasions when I had intervened with questions or information, and wished in retrospect that I had not redirected the conversation. In any case, I will always end up with different responses based on what questions I ask, how I ask them, whether I enter into the conversation and provide information, or whether I simply sit back and listen. So it is really not a question of whether I intervene, but how.

Questions for further research

The following questions emerged from my engagement with the texts and participants, and suggest avenues for further investigation:

Is nationalism inherently ahistorical, or is Canadian nationalism peculiar in that way? Is ahistoricism absolute, or is it a matter of degree?

To what extent does the pattern of responses repeat itself in other groups of youth? What are the implications of these different perspectives?

How has official history-telling changed over the past few decades, particularly with respect to the specific issues I have raised here?

To what extent can differing narratives be attributed to racial or ethnic identity, immigration status, class background, or other factors?
Final thoughts

This study demonstrates that young people can and should be partners in the creation of an antiracist pedagogy, and that history should be at the center of that pedagogical project. As I argued above, an effective antiracist history would problematise the nation and place the historical construction of race and other forms of social difference at the center of the curriculum. The need for such an approach is evident both in the way history-telling texts reinforce existing social hierarchies, and in the ways youth simultaneously resist and reproduce these official discourses. Finally, my study reinforces and extends the findings of earlier researchers about the significance of the historical knowledge that young people acquire and construct outside of school, and the different narratives within which that knowledge is situated. By actively engaging with young people’s knowledges and insights, antiracist educators—both formal and nonformal—can work with youth to name the silences within the dominant story, and to rupture those silences by building and telling new and multilayered stories together.
References


Appendix: Informed consent form

Youth and Diversity in Canadian Society
Informed consent for participation in research:
Parent or guardian of participant

This is to certify that I allow my child to participate in the research project entitled “Youth and diversity in Canadian society,” carried out by Amy Stuart in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Master’s degree in education at McGill University.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gain understanding of young people’s experiences, perceptions and concerns regarding issues of race and culture in Canadian society. It arises from questions about how our views of the past—including what we learn at school, at home, and in the community—shape our identities and experiences.

Procedures: If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study by signing this consent form, your child will be contacted by the researcher to set up a time for a group interview. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be audiotaped. The tapes will be transcribed and then erased, and the transcripts will be kept in files that can only be accessed by the researcher. When the report is written, the participants (and the organization) will be assigned false names in order to protect their identities. The final report will be available in the McGill education library, and will also be available to the participants upon request. If any results are published in any other form, the identities of the participants will remain secret.

Participants will be asked open-ended questions in a group setting about their experiences with and perceptions of race, multiculturalism, and Canadian history. The setting will be informal, and participants will be encouraged to respond directly to one another’s comments, and to raise questions of their own.

Conditions of participation:

- I understand that my child may refuse to answer any question and/or may withdraw from the research project at any time without penalty.

- I understand that, in the reporting of the results, my child will be referred to by a pseudonym to protect his/her identity, and that other identifying information (such as the name of the organization) will be similarly disguised. I am aware that this study involves the use of group interviews, which means that my child’s identity will be known to the other participants in the study.
I understand that the data will be used for research purposes only, and that a copy of the final report will be available for viewing in the McGill education library. I consent to the publication of the study results so long as they are presented in a manner that does not identify my child.

- I understand that the investigator will be glad to answer any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other aspect of the study.

_I have read the above and I understand all of the above conditions. I agree to allow my child to participate in this study._

Name of participant (please print) ________________________________

Name of parent or guardian (please print) ________________________________

Signature of parent or guardian: ________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________