

# The Settler Grammar of Canadian History Curriculum: Why Historical Thinking Is Unable to Respond to the TRC's Calls to Action

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## Abstract

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) identified that education plays a central role in developing reconciliatory relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. However, the current historical thinking approach to history and social studies education imposes a settler grammar over the study of the past in ways that lessen the space available to develop the respect, openness for truth, and relationality needed to develop these ongoing relationships of reconciliation. By deconstructing one piece of work by a leading thinker in historical thinking, Peter Seixas, this article demonstrates the structural limitations of responding to the TRC using the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking.

*Keywords:* history teaching and learning, history education, Canadian history education, historical thinking, Benchmarks of Historical Thinking, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada, Peter Seixas, decolonizing education

## **Résumé**

Dans les appels à l'action de 2015, la réconciliation entamée par la Commission de vérité et réconciliation (CVR) a identifié que l'éducation joue un rôle central dans l'établissement de relations de rapprochement entre les peuples autochtones et les non-Autochtones. Cependant, l'approche actuelle de la pensée historique des programmes d'histoire et d'études sociales évoque une grammaire coloniale sur notre étude du passé de manière à réduire l'espace disponible pour développer le respect, l'ouverture à la vérité et la relationnalité doit développer une relation en cours de réconciliation. En déconstruisant un chapitre d'un penseur de premier plan dans la pensée historique, cet article montrera les limites structurelles de la réponse à la CVR en utilisant l'approche actuelle de la pensée historique de l'histoire et des études sociales.

*Mots-clés :* enseigner et apprendre l'histoire, éducation à l'histoire, éducation à l'histoire Canadienne, pensée historique, les six concepts de la pensée historique, Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada, Peter Seixas, décolonisation de l'éducation

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## Introduction

The [Truth and Reconciliation] Commission believes that to be an effective force for reconciliation, curriculum about residential schools must be part of a broader history education that integrates First Nations, Inuit, and Métis voices, perspectives, and experiences; and builds common ground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. The education system itself must be transformed into one that rejects the racism embedded in colonial systems of education and treats Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015b, p. 239)

[Telling our own stories] is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying. The sense of history conveyed by these approaches is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other. (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 28)

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) identified that education plays a central role in developing new, reconciliatory relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. This education would involve learning about residential schools, but would have a broader focus on transforming education into a place where Indigenous experiences would be integrated, racism and coloniality would be rejected, and equal respect for Indigenous and Western epistemologies could be demonstrated (TRC, 2015b, p. 239). In this way, the TRC has called for more than just an acknowledgement of residential school history. It has called for a decolonization of education in ways that lead to an *Indigenizing* of history in Canada.

Anecdotal evidence from teachers and teacher educators suggests that English teachers have been doing interesting work in bringing the voices of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people into their classrooms, but in many history classes there is a stalemate in integrating these perspectives into lessons. History teachers are certainly teaching about residential schools, but are not necessarily moving beyond simply telling these stories and toward a more complex exploration of colonialism in Canada. It is this work, the work of

learning about and through colonialism, that can lead to the transformation that the TRC has called for. It is this work that can lead to reconciliation.

There are many reasons why history teachers may not be teaching with the aim to decolonize historical narratives, including individual and structural racism (Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005), preconceived ideas about teaching history (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2009; Cutrara, in press; van Hover & Yeager, 2007), lack of knowledge or appropriate resources (Cunningham, 2009; Hill, Loewenberg Ball, & Schilling, 2008; Loewen, 1996), and fears about controversial content and wanting to “protect” students (Dion, 2009; Levstik, 2000). Situated in these larger patterns of practice, it is understandable why this work has not immediately flourished. However, more generally, any new approach to teaching and learning, especially one that challenges one’s view or position in the world such as the one called for by the TRC, causes a reevaluation of one’s “knowledge package” of what and how to teach (Ma, 1999). In an English class, with a planned study of novels, short stories, or poems, interpretations are constantly invited; whereas in a history class, a class where a teacher may teach with a certain timeline of facts or an ordering of progress, less room may (seem to) be available for exploring different interpretations of the past.

There have been changes to the history curriculum, however, that have attempted to move history education away from a traditional timeline-based understanding of the past and toward an approach that focuses on learning history with the tools of historical interpretation. This focus on thinking “historically” has been discussed for decades, but since 2011, any revision to the provincial history/social studies curricula has included “historical thinking,” as conceptualized by Peter Seixas, as a structural organizer (Cutrara, in press). While many teachers have embraced these curricular changes, research on pick up and integration is ongoing. Discussions with teachers and educational experts suggest that teachers are excited to bring these ideas into their classrooms, but in practice, doing so full time is slow.

Yet, even with a more full application of historical thinking in the classroom, I argue that history education will not be transformed into a place that fully answers the call of the TRC to decolonize and Indigenize Canadian history and Canadian history education. Instead, historical thinking, as conceptualized by Peter Seixas, imposes a settler grammar over the study of the past in such ways that widens the gulf between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems, lessening the space available to develop the

respect, openness for truth, and room for relationality needed to develop relationships of reconciliation. In fact, I argue that the closer we move toward historical thinking as a way to enter into the study of history, the further we will get from answering the TRC's Calls to Action.

## **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Thinking Historically with the Canadian Curriculum**

History and social studies curricula, like all Canadian curricula, is the domain of the provinces and therefore not consistent across Canada; however, there are some curricular trends across the country, and currently, the historical thinking disciplines approach to the study of history is the dominant framework for studying the Canadian past. Developed from studies in the 1990s that aimed to understand how young people thought “historically” (Ashby, Lee, & Dickinson, 1997; Lee, 1998; Lee, Dickinson, & Ashby, 1997), the historical thinking approach focuses on teaching students the skills to think and do “like historians”—assess significance, interpret evidence, understand patterns of continuity and change, think through cause and consequence, and appreciate the ethics of different perspectives. This approach began as a response to the “problem” of competing narratives in a complex world (Lee, 1991); something, it has been argued, that is particularly well-suited to the multifaceted nature of Canada’s population today (Seixas, 2002, 2012). By developing a methodological understanding of the historical method, advocates of this approach stress that young people can advance their historical consciousness instead of just intensifying it (Seixas, 2002), giving them training to “invite close study of the same rules of evidence and human behaviour that a citizen should learn to apply to commercial advertising, political speeches, and ministry circulars” (Morton, 2006, p. 27). To organize this work, the six *Benchmarks of Historical Thinking*—Historical Significance, Primary Source Evidence, Continuity and Change, Cause and Consequence, Historical Perspective-Taking, and Ethical Dimensions—have provided a framework for guiding young people to progressively develop disciplinary skills in their study of history (Peck & Seixas, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012; Seixas & Peck, 2004).

While this approach is much lauded by contemporary educators and theorists, educational historian Ken Osborne (2000, 2011) has shown that for over 100 years, the

“disciplines approach” to history education comes into fashion once a generation. Currently, every province that has revised its history/social studies curriculum in the last six years has used the historical thinking approach to frame the study of history (Cutrara, in press). However, with the TRC’s Calls to Action, theorists and practitioners will increasingly find it difficult to reconcile these recommendations with the curricular objectives organized around this approach (for initial attempts, see Taylor, Earl, & Williams, 2017). As an approach to history teaching that was meant to take the politics out of teaching and learning history (Lee, 1991), historical thinking has an intolerance for the type of work needed to decolonize history education and Indigenize our understanding of the Canadian past.

To support my argument, I use as an example a chapter published in 2012 by Peter Seixas. For over two decades, Seixas has been the dominant voice in how historical thinking is taught and understood in Canadian history education. While other Canadian theorists and practitioners have written about historical thinking and the aligned concept of historical consciousness more broadly, Seixas’s work has been dominant in shaping the theory and practice of historical thinking in many of today’s history classrooms. Given that Seixas “conceptualized” the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking (Seixas, 2017), Seixas’s words about the function and purpose of these Benchmarks in the context of learning about and with Indigenous epistemologies speaks strongly to what historical thinking is able to do.

In 2012, Seixas contributed a chapter to the edited collection *History Education and the Construction of National Identities* titled “Indigenous Historical Consciousness: An Oxymoron or a Dialogue?” In this chapter, Seixas provided a response to a chapter written by Michael Marker in *New Possibilities of the Past* (2011) titled “Teaching History from an Indigenous Perspective: Four Winding Paths up the Mountain.” Seixas was also inspired to write his response by the *Theorizing and Grounding Indigenous Historical Consciousness and Voice* symposium he attended at the University of Saskatchewan in September 2010 (Seixas, 2012, p. 125). In his chapter, Seixas compared the six Benchmarks of Historical Thinking to four Indigenous epistemic themes identified by Marker: oral traditions and the circular nature of time; relationships between humans, land, and animals; knowledge of the local; and colonization as understood through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples. Seixas used the description of each Benchmark to ask specific questions about whether Indigenous historical consciousness was an oxymoron

or dialogic concept, asking scholars to consider the “consequences of taking seriously the claims to alternative epistemologies” in the study of the past; alternative epistemologies such as Indigenous epistemologies (p. 127). While Seixas framed these questions as benign, his aim was more pointed: to demonstrate the oxymoronic fit between Indigenous epistemologies and historical consciousness and underscore the “trouble” that Indigenous epistemologies posed to historical consciousness (p. 134). Seixas could then conclude that the aligned concept of historical thinking was more aptly suited than Indigenous epistemologies for teaching and learning history in today’s “cosmopolitan” world (pp. 135–136).

Marker’s 2011 work was not a direct attack on historical thinking nor on historical consciousness, but rather an invitation to consider the ways in which Indigenous epistemologies could contour and broaden the idea of historical consciousness in Canada. Given the power of stories to narrate a past that speaks to our responsibilities in the present and future, Marker (2011) identified that “traveling outside” how history is traditionally taught and understood (p. 98) invites the general population to “reconfigure our relationships to the ecologies of our communities and revise our thinking about how to live sustainably in the future” (p. 111). With this focus, Marker suggests that we can come to better understand the legacy of colonialism in Canada and the ways it divorced people, knowledge, and spirituality from the land. Marker recognized that teaching with these ideas requires “sacrifice,” but that because these ideas are “holistic and interdisciplinary,” they would have lasting resonance on Canada’s future (p. 111).

Marker’s chapter was designed as an invitation to discuss how Indigenous epistemologies could (and should) complement historical consciousness, but Seixas’s response leaves no room for this dialogue to continue. Marker (2011) situated his discussion as attending to the needs of Indigenous students who were often framed as “disrupting” their history courses if they challenged what was being taught (p. 111). Seixas (2012), on the other hand, wanted Indigenous thinkers to consider the “trouble” Indigenous epistemologies brought to historical thinking (p. 134); in essence, to consider the “disruption” Indigenous epistemologies brought to the disciplinary study of the past. Thus, while Marker proposed ways for Indigenous epistemologies to broaden the conversation about the ways we can teach and learn history, in countering Marker’s approach with an appeal to the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking, Seixas demonstrates the structural and ideological limitations of historical thinking—the “settler grammar” of historical thinking (Calderon,

2014)—that makes it unable to engage in the necessary work of challenging, transforming, and decolonizing history education.

Calderon (2014) uses the concept of settler grammar to highlight the “discursive logic” that legitimizes ongoing settler coloniality through both the “physical and ideological dispossession of Indigenous inhabitants” and “cooptation of nativeness by settlers” (p. 314). Drawing on Weitzer (1990), Calderon explains this dialectic by demonstrating how settler grammar, especially in history and social studies, makes Indigenous peoples *absent* by promoting a vision of a “new” world built by immigrants, while also making Indigenous peoples *present* through the political and legal mechanisms that demonstrate colonial superiority (Weitzer, quoted in Calderon, 2014, p. 318). In Canada, scholar Dwayne Donald (2012) writes of a similar phenomenon using the metaphor of a fort. If one was a settler inside the fort, Indigenous people could be imagined as *absent*, but the *presence* of Indigenous people is needed to rationalize the creation of the fort. The fort thus sets up a duality of experiences and epistemic imaginings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and detaches the possibility of a literal or figurative meeting ground for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to learn from and with each other in the past, present, or future of Canada.

Historical thinking plays with this dialectic by denying the presence of Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate ways for understanding the past, while also demonstrating the need for Western logic, Western epistemic rule, to organize and make sense of the past. Seixas uses disciplinary benchmarks to create a fort around “appropriate” history and leaves outside the fort understandings of the past that may direct one’s gaze elsewhere. By denying the space for Indigenous epistemologies in the study of the Canadian past, Seixas perpetuates the belief that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people “inhabit separate realities” and have no common ground for speaking the past to the present (Donald, 2012, p. 4). In the very act of posing and exploring the question of whether Indigenous epistemologies have an oxymoronic or dialogic relationship with historical consciousness, Seixas (2012) demonstrates the settler grammar structured in historical thinking in ways that invest history education in settler colonialism and the permanence of the settler-colonial nation state (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013, p. 73). Given his influence on historical thinking in Canada, Seixas’s (2012) argument, and the dismissive tone he uses to build this argument, demonstrates how the practice, or future imagined practice, of history teaching in Canada is built on this duality of settler and



Indigenous realities in ways that preclude the epistemological space for developing relationships needed by the TRC.

When looking closely at historical thinking as envisioned by Seixas, what comes to the surface is the supremacy of and disrespect of that which is not Western thinking, the intolerance for the contours of truth needed for understanding the different experiences of colonialism, and the lack of relational learning needed to build relationships of reconciliation. Given the prominence of organizing Canadian history education with historical thinking, I question: Where is the respect, where is the truth, and where is the relationality needed for reconciliation?

### **Where Is the Respect?**

The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking developed from a tradition of formal academic history. This discipline, like many formal Western academic disciplines, was designed to organize the epistemological logic of progress and rationality into knowing, often as a way to counter that which was perceived as less organized, logical, or formal ways of knowing, such as those found in Indigenous societies. While postmodern theorists have criticized this logic (Barthes, 1967/1981; Cherryholmes, 1983; Segall, 2006), this critique originally came from Indigenous peoples who recognized their displacement from, and in, Western epistemologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008).

In his chapter, when Seixas (2012) asks if historical consciousness is oxymoronic or dialogic to Indigenous epistemologies, the answer is obvious that it is oxymoronic. The concept of historical consciousness came from Western Enlightenment epistemologies designed to counter Indigenous epistemologies; subsequently, “the sense of history conveyed by [Indigenous epistemologies] is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 28). Thus, it is not so much that there is no fit between historical consciousness as understood by

Seixas (2012) and Indigenous epistemologies—there is not<sup>1</sup>—but it is the way in which that ill fit is recognized and regarded that causes the most tension between what historical thinking does and what the TRC needs.

As an example of settler grammar, historical thinking, as articulated by Seixas (2012), both pushes away and makes present Indigenous epistemologies in the study of the past in order to legitimate the discipline of history and the worldview it reinforces. In invoking historical thinking as the way forward, Seixas talks of it as if its use for studying the past, like other grammars, was “not ideological” but “a natural and inevitable outgrowth of human progress as conceived in the Western tradition” (Calderon, 2014, p. 315).

Seixas (2012) writes of Indigenous epistemologies with implicit colonial echoes that these worldviews are backward, premodern, and ignorant and thus, in the study of history, need to be stymied by rationality and order. Seixas writes of Indigenous epistemologies as optional, as “alternatives” that hold the same weight as “Haitian voodoo” for studying the Canadian past (p. 136). By structuring his argument in this way, Seixas naturalizes the Western discipline of history and demonstrates the logical nature of this order on the experiences of the past. Seixas can then demonstrate the impossible, even nonsensical, fit of Indigenous epistemologies with historical thinking and the logical importance of historical thinking for studying the past. In doing so, Seixas leaves behind the structural possibility of respecting both Indigenous and Western epistemologies in the study of history; a core component of reconciliation (TRC, 2015b, p. 239).

Seixas (2012) uses the first Historical Thinking Benchmark, *Historical Significance*, to question if an Indigenous focus on the local environment does the same work

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1 *Historical consciousness* is a concept that originated in Europe and is used by theorists with a broader scope than history curriculum or a reverence for the traditional discipline of history (Lorenz, 2004; Rüsen, 2004; Simon, 2004). Seixas (2004, 2006) defines *historical consciousness* as a concept that links ideas about public memory, citizenship, and the discipline of history together to reference the collective consciousness and the methodological understanding of the national story. This definition of *historical consciousness* can be developed in history classrooms through the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking. Given that there is no standard definition of *historical consciousness*, Marker's (2011) proposal of Indigenous *historical consciousness* and the *historical consciousness* referenced by Seixas are not necessarily at odds with one another, because the understanding of *historical consciousness* that they start from differs from one another. However, my particular focus is on the concept of *historical consciousness* as put forward by Seixas. In his chapter, Seixas (2012) argues against Indigenous historical consciousness by contrasting it to the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking. In my argument, I similarly follow the logic that flows from these definitions.

of linking individual actions to larger historical movements—the main idea of Historical Significance. However, if an Indigenous focus (re)directs our view to the local environment and the land, how could it also link lives “to larger historical movements of which they were a part and [show] how their actions helped shape historical developments, often in relation to those who were close to the reins of power,” as Seixas writes of Historical Significance (p. 132)? Seixas states that, if “we take Marker seriously,” there would be “no need to contextualize the specific and local in a larger narrative” and thus no basis for establishing what makes something historically significant (p. 132). Although Seixas poses this question with an air of innocence, the answer is clear: he sees conflict, not overlap, between the focus on the local that Marker puts forth and the ways in which historical significance is defined in the Benchmarks. His question, therefore serves the purpose of demonstrating the extent of this conflict, not in identifying points of further discussion, as he suggests.

However, establishing historical significance, as defined through the Benchmarks, is not a natural approach to the study of the past. It is a colonial vestige that maintains a colonial logic as to how one could or should understand the past. The criteria for significance, when understood through Historical Significance, is then also colonial: “trapping” Indigenous people in the “project of modernity” in which their experiences are only understood through a larger narrative of settler progress (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 34).

Similarly, for the Benchmark of *Continuity and Change*—a Benchmark that provides space to discuss progress and decline, periodization, and chronological time—Seixas (2012) contends that while the Western notion of progress can be problematic, “the concept of progress [still] provides a seminal yardstick for gauging change” (p. 133). Keeping the idea of progress intact, Seixas questions if the idea of progress can “be reconciled with a belief in the ‘circular nature of time’” that is an element of many Indigenous epistemologies (p. 133). Well, no. No, it cannot. Seixas just defined progress as a movement forward, thus there can be no room for considering an understanding of time that is circular.

The questions Seixas (2012) pose serve to demonstrate his position that Indigenous epistemologies are incongruous with historical thinking. These questions seem to invite discussion, but the flippancy of these questions reveals the oxymoronic relationship Seixas sees between Indigenous epistemologies and the Benchmarks. They serve the

grammatical purpose of writing Indigenous epistemologies out of a serious discussion about what can be asked of the past.

Along with these questions, Seixas (2012) also uses distortion to underscore the ill fit between Indigenous epistemologies and historical thinking. Seixas compares the Benchmark of *Cause and Consequence*—the Benchmark designed to “introduce students to increasingly complex notions of cause” (p. 134)—with the idea expressed by Marker that Indigenous epistemologies honour relationships between humans, animals, and the land. Seixas leaves the element of learning from the land behind and derides the notion that historians must take animals seriously in the study of the past. Seixas argues that animals do not have agency or intentionality, and because the study of history requires that we look at the cause and consequence of *intentional* actions, animals cannot be part of the study of the past; humans must remain the “centre of the story” (p. 134). Underlying this argument is the insinuation that Marker holds a vision of animal and human interaction where animals and humans purposefully and equally influence the course of history together.

However, Marker (2011) had no anthropomorphic delusions about animals in his argument. Marker argued that the relationship between humans, animals, *and the land* demonstrates the ecological and spiritual learning that comes from being in harmony with nature, and that by understanding the historical relationships between humans, animals, and the land, we can understand our present differently, even better. Colonialism was a cultural revolution and an ecological one too, which divorced spiritual meaning and connection from the land (Cronon, quoted in Marker, 2011, p. 105). Developing reconciliatory relationships of respect as called for by the TRC requires that we respect the stories that help us develop a responsive understanding and stewardship of the environment.

However, with the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking, this as a possibility is missing. The *respect* for this as a possibility is missing. Seixas’s position, or more accurately the flippant way Seixas argues his position, demonstrates the colonial mentality embedded in the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking: our understanding of the world must come from that which we can categorize and measure; if it does not, then it is not valid in our learning. This then allows us to look at the past with a reasoned eye, a serious eye, and a dispassionate eye—but not with an invested eye, nor a humble eye, nor a respectful eye that invites us to see what is not immediately in front of us. Not with an eye that invites a transformation of history into a subject that can “reject the racism embedded

in colonial systems of education and treats Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect” (TRC, 2015b, p. 239). Without the respect to do this work, this work cannot be done.

### Where Is the Truth?

Central to the TRC was the telling, and believing, of truths related to the lived experiences of residential schools and colonialism in Canada. Colonial epistemology, and the accompanying systems of politics, law, and policy, have traditionally set the terms for truth in ways that prevented the experiences of Indigenous peoples from being believed and respected (TRC, 2015a, pp. 47–48). However, truths, according to Indigenous traditions, can rely on oral histories and testimonies shared by elders. In our relationships of reconciliation, space for these truths—truths that may be different from what we traditionally have been able to hear or believe—must be central to the development of a decolonized and Indigenous Canada (Marker 2011, p. 110).

In Indigenous epistemologies, stories do not live on their own: “Once created and circulated, stories connect with other stories, and become the ‘truth’ that guides our decisions, the life patterns that liberate or entrap, and that become enshrined in belief structures that drive legislation and law” (Armstrong, 2013, p. 38). When situated in a broader epistemology of story and storytelling (Cruikshank, 1990), stories and truths shared by Indigenous elders can be viewed as *testimony* that requires different ways of attending to knowing and knowledge (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 144). To respect these stories as testimony, as *truth*, an approach to teaching and learning based more on bearing witness to the story and less on assessing the credibility of evidence is needed.

As one of his four “winding paths up a mountain,” Marker (2011) identifies the importance of these truths when stating that history education must involve “Indigenous narratives and perspectives on the histories of colonization that attempted to displace and replace Indigenous knowledge” (p. 98). The past, as Marker writes, is used as a reference point for Indigenous peoples “to communicate truths and identities that bind their worlds together” (p. 97). Given the violent and ongoing rupture of colonialism in the lives of Indigenous peoples, giving voice to their experiences of colonialism provides opportunity to understand the “labyrinthine history” of Indigenous people in responding to the ongoing hegemonic forces of elimination and assimilation (pp. 109–110).

In his rejoinder, Seixas (2012) was not critical of bringing perspectives of Indigenous peoples into the study of history, and even identified that the Benchmark of *Ethical Dimension* had the most space to explore this idea of truth and truth telling. In this Benchmark, students are introduced to the “dilemma posed by the distance between the past and present” (p. 135), and are encouraged to judge historical actions only within the historical context in which they took place.<sup>2</sup> Seixas finds overlaps and shared goals between this Benchmark and Indigenous’ perspectives on colonialism because, when understood through the Ethical Dimension Benchmark, Indigenous stories, especially about residential schools, can be told, explored, and evaluated in the context of the time in which they took place (p. 135). In this way, Indigenous epistemologies and Historical Thinking can find points of “harmony” amongst each other because they can “come together around debts of memory, and the obligations for reparations and restitution” (p. 135).

However, while Seixas (2012) supports the inclusion of more Aboriginal *stories* in the study of the Canadian past, historical thinking is not capable of, nor interested in, attending to these stories as *testimony*: stories that narrate truths oppositional to a colonial gaze. To draw on Calderon (2014), historical thinking imposes a settler grammar on the study of the past by making present stories only through colonial mechanisms of control, thus extracting stories from their epistemology and demonstrating mastery over how they are to be heard and believed.

This discursive logic is most keenly demonstrated when Seixas (2012) introduces the Benchmark of *Primary Source Evidence*—the procedures involved in handling traces of the past (p. 133). In discussing Primary Source Evidence, Seixas makes clear that truth is defined by the rules laid out by the discipline of history. Historians never take a historical text at face value: “their authority always demands a critical stance” (p. 133). From this critical stance, historians can identify the reasoned truth. With these standards set, Seixas uses this Benchmark to ask: “How different is the Aboriginal approach to the interpretation of traditional stories of elders?” (p. 133).

Within Indigenous epistemologies, stories, oral histories, and testimonies shared by elders *is* the epistemology. These stories, and the respected storytellers who share them, bear a worldview that tells truths in different ways than we can hear with Western

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2 For more about the problematic notion of this argument see Cutrara (2012).

epistemologies. These stories fulfill “a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 28). Being present for these stories without judgement is honouring something more than the stories. It is honouring the epistemologies from which they came, and it is acknowledging the power of speaking truths that may have been long suppressed. It is this work, the work of hearing, reading, and learning from Indigenous stories in the context in which they are told, and the work of believing these stories as bearing truth, which is one of the most powerful tools for reconciliation.

However, with historical thinking, Indigenous epistemologies can only be present within a colonial grammar of understanding. They can only be present when the stories told by elders are considered with an equal “critical stance” to that taken by formally trained historians. In this way, stories that feature Indigenous narratives and perspectives become open to assessment and evaluation in ways that suit the demands of the colonizer more than the truths of the storyteller. The stories become filtered through and weighed against a colonial tradition characterized by:

A drive to see, to traverse, to know, to translate (to make equivalent), to own, and to exploit. It is based on the belief that everything should be accessible, is ultimately comprehensible, and a potential commodity or resource, or at least something that can be recorded or otherwise saved. (Garneau, 2012, p. 29)

When examined through the Benchmark of Primary Source Evidence, only those stories that can be filtered through the colonial standards of seeing, traversing, knowing, and translating become present, become *commodities*, so that these stories become “Native informants” in a longer, colonial history of appropriation rather than tools of decolonization (Garneau, 2012, p. 29). By divorcing the telling of stories from epistemologies of storytelling—by saying, we will hear your story but respect it as truth only through our gaze—Historical Thinking follows in a long tradition of taking from First Nations and not giving anything back (Brownlie, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2008).

Seixas (2012) also uses the Benchmark of Primary Source Evidence to identify a “final node of contention” with Marker’s argument, by saying that Marker failed to mention that in Indigenous epistemologies some “historical knowledge, or stories about the past, can be the exclusive possession of certain individuals” (p. 129). Seixas extends this observation to suggest that if exclusive stories are built into Indigenous epistemologies,

it makes all stories, told and not told, suspect and potentially unfit to be considered historical evidence. Seixas's observation within the context of this Benchmark acts as a rhetorical dare: you want us to hear your stories, then tell us them all. If not, be warned that the ones we hear are the ones we have created mechanisms to critically explore. With this charge, the duality of settler grammar becomes apparent: within the confines of our epistemic rule, we will make your stories present, but if these stories do not meet these standards, then they will become absent.

Marker (2011) does not spend much time discussing the idea of sacred knowledge in his chapter because, while there are sacred stories within Indigenous epistemologies, there are more stories that *are* shared, that *need* to be listened to respectfully, and, once attended to, become testimony with the ability to rewrite our colonial history and transform the future. Telling stories, sharing experiences, protecting knowledge, restoring spirit, *and* learning history can all exist together. The process of listening without judgement or analytical disciplined rigour is not a less demanding way of understanding the past. It is a different way of understanding the past, one that invites a shift in how and what we understand as truth, and how and what stories we will use to narrate this land. As a tool of resistance and self-preservation, respecting testimony as truth in our study of the past begins to rewrite the history of colonialism and develop new ways toward reconciliation.

### **Where Is the Relationality?**

Seixas (2012) ends his response to Marker by identifying that in today's multicultural, multinational Canada, a "cosmopolitan" history education is a goal that we should work toward. He introduces this concept as a way to set up the benefits of historical thinking to "shape a future together" (p. 135). To do this, he says, we cannot just add more topics to, or tell different stories in, the study of history, but instead "we need to teach students how to assess the significance of stories, how to analyze the evidence behind stories, how to relate micro-stories to larger pictures of historical development, and how to unearth stories' underlying structures and implicit ethical messages" (p. 135). For Seixas, the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking are able to achieve these goals, whereas Indigenous epistemologies, with what he sees as their insular and dichotomous foci, cannot. Seixas writes that Indigenous epistemologies make "exclusive claims to insular knowledge" that simply make no sense in today's Canada (p. 136).



The idea that Indigenous epistemologies escaped the requirements of cosmopolitanism was intended to be Seixas's (2012) definitive conclusion about how and why Indigenous epistemologies were oxymoronic when paired with historical consciousness study of the Canadian past. However, cosmopolitanism has multiple definitions, and can be understood in alignment with Indigenous epistemologies (Forte, 2010a; Goodale, 2006). According to David T. Hansen (2009), cosmopolitanism can be understood as a "reflective openness to the world combined with reflective loyalty to the local" (p. 128). Maximillian Forte (2010b) writes that cosmopolitanism is "rooted in and routed through particular settings" (p. 8). A cosmopolitanism developed from the "ground up" represents a "fusion," according to Hansen (2010), that is "sometimes tenuous and tension-laden" and demonstrates a "receptivity to the new and loyalty to the known" (p. 5). In this way, while cosmopolitanism is often associated with global urbanism, cosmopolitanism can be better understood as grounded in the local to develop an openness to the global. Thus, like in Indigenous epistemologies, learning for a cosmopolitan future imagines learning as a communal activity that looks forward, backward, and around, in both global and local contexts, to transform our focus on one to a focus on the whole (Forte, 2010b; Goodale, 2006). This sense of *relationality* to each other, to the past, and to epistemologies is integral to a cosmopolitanism that reflects and respects the uniqueness of local environments. This sense of *relationality* is also integral to reconciliation.

While Seixas (2012) sets up the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking to be better suited for a cosmopolitan education, the Benchmarks were not designed for the relationality to do this work. Historical thinking was not designed to bring people together in a shared experience of teaching, learning, sharing, and listening with stories about the past and the historicized present in ways that honour the differences in how the world is interpreted. Seixas may conclude his response to Marker by insinuating the benevolent openness of historical thinking as a way to navigate the diversity in today's world, but historical thinking starts and ends with a disciplinary approach to history not designed for fluidity and respect for multiple understandings of the past—multiple interpretations of history based on historical evidence, yes; but not different ways of seeing and being able to see into the past.

Historical thinking developed from a colonial epistemological tradition of individuality: a historical discipline that set the rules for a written and "static record of an authority's singular recounting of a series of events" (Hanson, 2009). This approach to

history is opposed to oral traditions of Indigenous societies based on a relational dialogue that connect “the speaker and listener in communal experiences and uniting past and present in memory” (Hanson, 2009). By drawing on the thinkers Gadamer, Yerushalmi, and Rösen, Seixas (2012) identifies that historical consciousness and historical thinking are based on an understanding of the singular human actor in the “morally inflected historical universe” (p. 128). While individuals could come to these stories from different positions (Peck, 2010), the evidence is designed to show a story of one—or ones—rather than of us together in a series of interlocking and interrelated global and local communities.

When understood in this way, historical thinking becomes incongruous with an approach to history that stresses, that *needs*, relationality to operate. Seixas’s understanding of historical thinking, the one mapped into and onto Canadian history curriculum with the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking, is about privileging an individual rational actor who can dispassionately assess evidence to navigate toward truth. This is not an approach that can relationally and respectfully respond to difference in ways that demonstrate a cosmopolitan “reflective openness to the world combined with reflective loyalty to the local” (Hansen, 2009, p. 128). Instead, the cosmopolitan that Seixas (2012) speaks of is a cosmopolitanism of another time: a cosmopolitanism of the colonial with the goals of seeking, finding, and replanting; a cosmopolitanism that sets from above the terms of how to be together; a cosmopolitanism of erasure that rewrites the history of Canada as if Indigenous epistemologies had not provided ways to understand this land for far longer than settlers have been here (Calderon, 2014; Garneau, 2012; Ribeiro, 2005).

Marker (2011) puts forward Indigenous epistemologies as a way to understand the Canadian past, knowing that this will be “tenuous and tension-laden,” as Hansen (2010) identifies, but that as “holistic and interdisciplinary way[s] of understanding reality” (Marker, 2011, p. 111), Indigenous epistemologies provide the “receptivity to the new and loyalty to the known” (Hansen, 2010, p. 5) needed for understanding Canada’s broader, more cosmopolitan, future. Indigenous epistemologies are not about small, local, animal-filled stories for few, as Seixas (2012) seems to suggest, but a bigger and broader view of the world that carries with it a responsibility to a world bigger than ourselves. It is this spirit of bringing in from one’s local standpoint, rather than asserting dominance, that is cosmopolitanism. This is relationality. This is, or can be, reconciliation.

## Conclusion

Seixas (2012) concludes his paper by keeping the idea of historical thinking, the one that is influencing our curricula and pedagogy today, intact, and questions if there is “more complexity beneath the surface” of Indigenous epistemologies (p. 134). While Seixas is only one scholar in this field, as the one who “conceptualized” historical thinking (Seixas, 2017), his influence on how we understand, talk through, and teach history in Canadian schools cannot be underestimated. This is why recognizing his articulation of the relationship between historical thinking and Indigenous epistemologies is important for understanding how current history education can, or cannot, respond to the Calls to Action by the TRC.

While the dismissive tone and rhetorical devices of this response could be attributed to the author, his initial question as to whether there is an oxymoronic fit between historical consciousness, the aligned Benchmarks of Historical Thinking, and Indigenous epistemologies is valid. The fit is oxymoronic. It was designed to be. Western epistemologies and Indigenous epistemologies cannot easily fit together without being honest that the colonial grammar of one has delegitimized the other. Both Marker (2011) and Tuhiwai Smith (2008) write of the “collision” that happens when Western and Indigenous accounts of the past come in contact with each other. One of the goals of Marker’s (2011) proposal was to prevent this “collision” from taking place in the bodies and minds of young Indigenous peoples (p. 99). While Seixas (2012) wants to question “what is at stake in the exchange” between Indigenous epistemologies and historical thinking (p. 127), his response to Marker fails to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples historically come out on the losing end of these exchanges.

To answer the Calls of Action identified by the TRC, we have to engage in history education in ways that invite us to respect the different ways of seeing into the past and present, to believe these stories as truths, and to court relationships that allow these ideas to exist together. Reconciliation will require us to display “more openness, innovation, and willingness to take risks” in our study of the past (Brownlie, 2009, p. 33). Marker’s work, and the work of other Indigenous scholars, indicate openness, innovation, risk, and complexity for engaging in ways to blend the past, present, and future together in a holistic view of humans, animals, and the land. However, this complexity can neither be respected, understood as truth, nor have space for relationality with an approach to

learning history that takes for granted and reveres the centrality of Western and colonial ways of seeing the world. To decolonize and Indigenize Canadian history education, we need to recognize the large chasms that lie in the structure of historical thinking that denies respect, truth, and relationality needed to respond to these histories in ways that are more than cursory. We need to approach the past, and the lessons it teaches for the present and future, with respect, truth, and relationality. Historical thinking was not designed for this work; consequently, to establish truth and reconciliation in our history education, how can we ensure this work is done?

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