

Transforming the Canadian History Classroom: Imagining a New “We” by Samantha Cutrara

Aaron Stout

Volume 115, Number 1, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098791ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098791ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stout, A. (2023). Review of [*Transforming the Canadian History Classroom: Imagining a New “We”* by Samantha Cutrara]. *Ontario History*, 115(1), 146–148.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1098791ar>

sensitive and effective way to examine continuity and change.

How could this story have been forgotten? It was widely covered in national and international press, including reports in *The Chicago Tribune*. There is a growing literature about women's lives, work, and organizing in the postwar period, but there is still much we need to learn about domes-

tic violence in this period. This memoir seeks to "make visible in Canadian history" (238) this family's experience of abuse. It may inspire future study of the countless other women whose stories have been ignored and forgotten.

Nancy Janovicek
Dept. of History, University of Calgary

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

by Samantha Cutrara

Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2020. 245 pages. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 9780774862837
(<https://www.ubcpress.ca>)

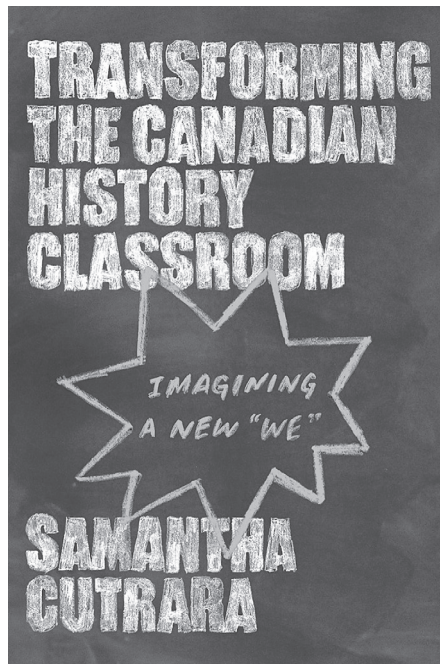
Teaching and learning history are foundational to citizenship education. The controversies in history education are often rooted in whose history is taught as canon and how that content should be learned. In the Canadian context, these debates were fanned into flame in the late 1990s and early 2000s where some argued for a specific 'Canadian' content, while others proposed a procedural approach.¹ The procedural approach, recognized as *Historical Thinking*, has emerged as a framing theory of history education in curriculum documents across the country. In Ontario, the 2018 social studies curriculum asks students to use "concepts of disciplinary thinking" to investigate issues and events in the course.² Dr. Cutrara's book, *Transforming the Canadian History Classroom*, is a welcome addition into this discussion. While the Historical Thinking approach elaborates on the 'how' of history education, Cutrara dives deeply into the 'who,' arguing that the silenced stories of Canadian history are essential to disrupt the grand narrative that

have been promoted uncritically in history education.

Transforming the Canadian History Classroom offers educators a theoretical structure to reconsider the role of history education in shaping society. Cutrara notes that critical theory and critical pedagogy offer lenses to deconstruct historical narratives that students, and their teachers, often take for granted. She writes "it is through postmodern and poststructural theories that we can better explore how history is not a canonical narrative of the past, but rather a medium for constant refashioning, remoulding, and retelling what happened in the past for the purposes of the present" (22). Refashioning and remolding the narratives of the past is the active process of thinking historically. Addressing historical silences and debating significance are important aspects that should be present in history classrooms. Uncovering difficult or contrary narratives encourages disillusionment in students, which creates an opportunity for learning and hope. Cutrara's vi-

sion of deconstructing grand narratives is a necessary addition to discourses about history education. Society is multifaceted and complex and history education needs to disrupt and confront structural racism and inequality in society. If history educators fail to complicate nationalistic narratives, then classroom will continue to reinforce a colonial narrative and solidify traditional perspectives of power and privilege.

The importance of contemplating “a new we” is supported through the observations and interviews that were conducted in four secondary history classes. Using design-based research (DBR), Cutrara addresses the following question “What are the relationships in a history classroom that support or curtail the possibilities of meaningful learning” (37)? The structure of her research involved an observation phase, intervention phase, and a reflection phase. Although the scope of the research could be expanded numerically and geographically, the strength of this approach is that it is grounded in a relational context, which allowed for rich dialogue. Through her use of data from the interviews and observations, Cutrara highlights the perspectives of students, teachers, and the structural realities of history classrooms to support her thesis that history classrooms can, and should, be transformed. The biggest drawback in the research structure is that it does not aggregate perspectives broadly. In the



chapter, “Teaching the Others in the Room,” the practice of one teacher is used as a case study of the “slippages between philosophy and practice” (144). The use of a singular narrative to exemplify undesirable pedagogical approaches exposes one teacher’s voice in a way that is uncomfortable to read as an educator. Although the case study highlights the profound influence teachers have on how history classrooms are perceived, a wider sample would

highlight how widespread the divergence between theory and practice is.

A strength in this book is seen in the priority placed on the student voices and experiences. In her early interviews, it was apparent that students “have a hatred toward their Canadian history class” (66). Although hatred is a strong emotion, the voices of students reveal that history classes lack constructive engagement as well as a lack of diverse narratives that connect with students in Canadian classrooms. Cutrara asserts that the material presented in history classrooms should place “students and their questions about the world at the center of why and how we teach about the past” (72). Ideally, history courses are places that students find connection, complexity, and care. The reality is that students feel that the content and pedagogy employed in history classrooms emphasizes a colonial, nation-building narrative over complex multi-ethnic narratives that are connected to individuals and communities of the pre-

sent (66-67).

One of the key struggles in transforming history classroom are the structural aspects of the education system. History teachers are the individuals who shape how students engage with the past. In her chapter titled “The Need for Time, Space, and Place,” Cutrara argues that the institutional structures hinder how history is taught in schools. Teachers lack support to identify resources that can challenge and disrupt traditional narratives (147), lack time and energy to reflect (153-154), and lack meaningful places to deconstruct their own experiences (161). In many classrooms the need to cover material impedes the opportunity for students to construct an understanding of the past that is personal and significant.

Cutrara articulates an inquiry driven constructive approach to history education that intentionally builds connection, complexity, and care. This approach is referred to as Historic Space. Rather than a model of history education that prioritizes the transfer of information, Historic Space “provides an opportunity for students to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct historical narratives in ways that invite them to explore the operations of power and privilege in the past and present” (41). The strength of this model is that it places inquiry at the forefront of historical exploration. In the ‘expanding’ step of the process, students are asked to critically consider how new information can challenged accepted narratives of the past. Teaching becomes a “problem posing” endeavour where students are explicitly involved

(187). This is a significant strength of Cutrara’s work. Advocating for a constructivist approach to history education must involve students. It is not passive; it must be active. Although institutional constraints limit the ability of teachers to implementing change, Cutrara calls on teachers to be aware of the unintended impacts of the traditional history classroom that prioritizes ‘approved’ content over meaningful interactions.

Ontario History readers should note the phrase, “Imagining a new we,” that is at the forefront of Cutrara’s thesis. Currently, history curriculum can fixate on a story of the past that excludes many narratives and perspectives. It is the role of historians, curators, and teachers to challenge the hegemony of colonial nationalism and make the narrative broader, richer by comparison. Only when people see their past reflected in history can they see themselves as part of their present. To ‘imagine a new we,’ history students need to be exposed to stories of resilience and resistance, stories that highlight the strength of community over the violence of colonialism. The value of this book to educators is its calls to teachers to be responsive to their communities. To see their students as constructors of their histories rather than mere consumers. This is a vision that allows us, as a society, to imagine a more inclusive ‘we’ that can celebrate narratives that shape the present.

Aaron Stout
University of Lethbridge
Faculty of Education
Instructor – Social Studies Education

¹ Seixas, Peter, “A model of historical thinking.” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49:6 (2017), 593-605, doi:10.1080/00131857.2015.1101363

² Ontario Ministry of Education. “*The Ontario curriculum: Social studies, grades 1 to 6: History and geography, grades 7 and 8.*” (2018) <<https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/social-studies-history-geography-2018.pdf#page=67>>