Teaching history as hermeneutics: Critically and pedagogically engaging narrative diversity in the curriculum

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Abstract

In recent years, a federal government dedicated to using curriculum as a vehicle of social cohesion and cultural reproduction, has questioned the apparently ‘postmodern’ and ‘relativist’ History curriculum reform efforts of the 1990s that occurred in New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland. Arguing for a “root and branch renewal” of Australian history, the federal government has asserted that the nation’s past was rewritten, during the decades prior to the Howard government, “in the service of a partisan political cause” (Bishop, 2006). In polemic fashion, contemporary conservative politicians and social commentators regularly collapse important distinctions between multiculturalism, pluralism, political correctness, and postmodernism, preferring to read all forms of contemporary social theory and practice as confusing and ideologically-loaded, while their own grand narratives are proposed as ‘common-sense’. In this paper, drawing upon important recent work in historiography, I rethink the ‘problem’ of narrative diversity in the curriculum. Arguing that relativism is not the inevitable conclusion of teaching rival historical narratives, I propose a hermeneutic approach to the teaching of history that by providing a curricular space for ‘critical pluralism’ pedagogically engages narrative diversity.

Introduction

Since the early days of the Howard federal government, conservative politicians, aided by a number of sympathetic journalists and social commentators, have made clear their dedication to using school curriculum as a vehicle of social cohesion and cultural reproduction, through a series of sporadic attacks upon the teaching of the nation’s past. A decade after Howard’s election to the office of Prime Minister, the critique of history education has intensified, and arguably, become more serious in its implications for History curriculum. Arguing for a ‘root and branch renewal’ of the teaching of Australian history, the Prime Minister in last year’s Australia Day speech (Howard, 2006), and the Minister for Education, Science and Training during her dinner address to the invited audience of her Australian History Summit (Bishop, 2006), both asserted a desire to block attempts to rewrite ‘the nation’s past in the service of a partisan political cause’. Supported by the ‘politics of concern’ peddled by the right-wing educationalist, Kevin Donnelly, and the self-styled ‘historian’ and social critic, Keith Windschuttle, the Howard government has questioned what they believe to be the ‘postmodern’ and ‘relativist’ curriculum reform efforts of the 1990s that occurred, in particular, in New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland. In
polemic fashion, one of the main tactics of these contemporary conservative politicians and social commentators has been to collapse important distinctions between multiculturalism, pluralism, political correctness, and postmodernism, suggesting to the public that all forms of contemporary social theory and practice are confusing and ideologically-loaded (see for example, L. Slattery, 2005a), while their own ‘grand narratives’ are offered as ‘common-sense’ (see Apple, 2001, for an analysis of the New Right's 'common sense' tactics in the United States). Further, while their recent polemics have not been reserved exclusively for History curriculum (see L. Slattery, 2005b, for a similar attack on English curriculum), they have none-the-less focused considerable critique upon History education. This attention culminated most recently in the Minister’s call for a national summit to rethink the teaching of Australian history in schools. The terms of reference for this summit included exploring possibilities for a narrative approach to the teaching of the nation’s past (Melleuish, 2006), and considerations for the reintroduction of History as a mandatory stand-alone subject in all states and territories (Taylor & Clark, 2006). Coupled with the adoption of Blainey’s ‘black armband history’ rhetoric from a decade earlier as part of a sustained attack on the revisionist national narratives being circulated and supported by the out-going Keating Labor government, the current moves towards a ‘normative’ and ‘narrative approach’ to teaching history (Melleuish, 2006), arguably veil distrust of narrative diversity, and embody a reactionary desire to ‘return’ to a single grand narrative of the nation.

In this paper, drawing upon important recent work in historiography, and exploring History curriculum change in New South Wales (NSW) as an illustrative example, I rethink the ‘problem’ of narrative diversity in the curriculum. Arguing that relativism is not the inevitable conclusion of teaching rival historical narratives, I propose a hermeneutic approach to the teaching of history that, by providing a curricular space for ‘critical pluralism’, pedagogically engages narrative diversity. Central to the argument presented in this paper then, is an attempt to explore, as a central problematic, the question of how we might maintain narrative diversity and a socially critical curriculum, without dooming our students to a pessimistic view of our nation’s past.

The death and return of ‘History’

According to Anna Clark (2003), a series of “critical approaches to Australian history” (p. 173) emerged from within the academy during the 1960s and 1970s, which began to question “established interpretations of settlement and progress” (p. 173). These critical approaches to academic history inevitably had an impact on the history that was taught in schools. In New South Wales (NSW), the case I will use as an illustrative example in this paper, this impact initially took the form of an increasing focus on the construction of a “non-prescriptive” student-enquiry focused syllabus in 1972 “which maximised the freedom of teachers and pupils to choose content and methodology to suit their interests, ability levels and school circumstances” (Johnston, 1982, p. 66). While the syllabus released in 1980 had intensified
the focus on the development of students’ historical understanding (Johnston, 1982), it was in the early 1990s that the impact, on the school curriculum, of the so-called ‘New History’ (Osborne & Mandle, 1982), took a decidedly more political turn. This political turn involved ‘changing the subject’ of school History (Parkes, in press), through the incorporation of the perspectives of women and Australia’s Indigenous peoples into the teaching of Australian history. Organised around five focus questions that attended to issues of Australian identity, heritage, Australia’s international relationships, women’s experience, and Indigenous perspectives, the 1992 NSW Years 7-10 History Syllabus was significant in its incorporation of social histories of, and more importantly from, the perspective of women and Australia’s Indigenous peoples, perspectives that had been historically sidelined; and its framing of these histories as legitimate alternatives to the master-narratives of ‘famous men’ and ‘pioneering settlement’.

The publication of a radical history syllabus in 1992 was made possible in the wake of the civil rights and social reform movements of the sixties, and the equity policy context of the late seventies and early eighties, that included the publication of documents such as: *Girls, school and society* in 1975; *Towards non-sexist education* in 1979; the *Multi-cultural education policy statement and guidelines* also in 1979; and the *Aboriginal education policy* in 1982. These policies were influenced by a growing social conscience constituted in part by the discourses of feminism, neo-Marxism, and multiculturalism, not we should note, ‘postmodernism’. Although sometime after its emergence, the growing influence of postmodern social theory in the academy may have rendered ‘history from below’ an increasingly appealing option over more totalizing approaches to history in the academy (Perry, 2002), the ‘new histories’ that came to the fore in the late seventies and early eighties that came to be called ‘social histories’ in their emphasis upon “the lives of ordinary people” rather than the study of elites (MacRaid & Taylor, 2004), clearly arose in response to Feminist and Marxist theory and scholarship.

While the interjection of women’s history into the curriculum undoubtedly followed the success of Feminism in influencing education policy in the late sixties and early seventies, public awareness of a distinctive Aboriginal perspective on Australian history had come partly as a result of a series of grass roots protests that culminated in a ‘day of mourning’ during the Bicentennial celebrations of 1988 (Reed, 2004). For many Australians, the call for a ‘day of mourning’ by Indigenous elders at the time of the Bicentennial provided an important catalyst for reflection on the nation’s past, and challenged the “Great Australian Silence” around Indigenous history (Biskup, 1982), that had been sustained by an Anglo-Australian myth that “the destruction of Aboriginal society in the face of colonising forces [was] inevitable . . . [and] also complete” (Macdonald, 2001, p. 176). Certainly the High Court’s Mabo decision, which, translated into practical terms, meant that Indigenous people had a right to dominion over their traditional lands, and that this situation demanded recognition within Australia’s political and legal institutions (Ritter & Flanagan, 2003), pushed these issues further into the public consciousness. Further, the Mabo decision (and the Wik decision that
followed in 1996) had important consequences for Australian history in particular and Australian society more generally. For, as Attwood (1996) has argued:

Mabo and the new Australian history ends the historical silence about the Aboriginal pre-colonial and colonial past upon which the conservative invention of Australia and Australianness was founded, and since their Australia was realised through and rests upon that conventional historical narrative, the end of this history constitutes for them the end of Australia. (p. 116)

It was this ‘end of history’ that so unmistakably emerges in the 1992 Syllabus, and that made it unpopular with conservative politicians, and some ‘traditional’ historians.

*The White backlash against ‘black armband’ history*

Igniting a series of heated and highly public ‘history wars’ (Macintyre & Clark, 2003), Blainey (1993b) had, during an important public lecture in the April of 1993, and shortly after in an article in the conservative journal *Quadrant* (Blainey, 1993a), argued that our nation’s collective memory was under siege from the ‘black armband’ view of history. In short, Blainey (1993b) was concerned that a ‘mourmful view’ of the nation’s past was being promoted by the Keating left-wing Labor government, influenced by the writings of revisionist historians such as Henry Reynolds (1982). Blainey’s (1993a) argument was that the ‘balance sheet’ of the past did not warrant an excessive focus on past wrongs, and that to do so was not only inaccurate, but promoted a mournful relationship with the past that harmed the national spirit. Although Blainey’s protest did not go unnoticed, it was not until three years later, when the newly elected Prime Minister, John Howard, borrowed the phrase that Blainey’s metaphors of the ‘balance sheet’ and ‘black armband’ view of history entered into the national lexicon (Warhaft, 1993).

Blainey’s criticism of the representation and teaching of Australian history, and desire for a return to what he called the ‘three cheers view’ of the national past, was shared by McGuinness (1994), a columnist in *The Australian* newspaper, and by a host of other journalists and commentators (see for example, Partington, 1987; Wilkins, 1994). Their attacks, on the teaching of what they perceived to be a ‘black armband’ and overly ‘politically correct’ view of the nation’s past, have been well documented (Clark, 2003; Henderson, 2005; Parkes, in press). More recently, two particular conservative intellectuals have led a similar charge, the conservative educationalist, Kevin Donnelly, and the reactionary historian and social theorist, Keith Windshuttle. Donnelly’s (1997; 2004) broadsides against public education and state-based curricula have targeted what he considers to be a host of evils, including, but not limited to, ‘political correctness’, ‘multiculturalism’, the teaching of ‘popular culture’, and most importantly for this paper, the teaching of revisionist narratives, or ‘black armband’ accounts, of the colonisation of Australia, particularly those that depict White ‘settlement’
as an ‘invasion’. His comments follow significant debate on the issue, particularly as it arose in Queensland (see the essays in Land, 1994). Windshuttle’s polemics, on the other hand, have not been directly aimed at school curricula (though there has been some discussion in the professional journals, see for example, Poad, 2003). Rather, his attacks have been sharply focused on the academy, particularly criticizing the dominance of French social theory on contemporary scholarship and teaching (Windshuttle, 1996), and more recently, proposing that revisionist accounts of Australian history that depict a frontier war with the country’s Indigenous inhabitants amount to nothing less than a fabrication (Windshuttle, 2002). Needless to say, there has been significant debate both in support of (Dawson, 2004), and against his views (Manne, 2003; Ryan, 2001).

In her examination of the History curriculum wars, Anna Clark (2003) argued that disputes over the content of the curriculum that followed the incorporation of Indigenous histories of Australia’s colonial past were “simply the latest manifestation of a perennial concern about historical knowledge and national identity” (p. 172). I have argued elsewhere (Parkes, in press), that the conservative reaction to multiculturalism, political correctness and narrative diversity in the curriculum, in part operates as a nostalgic yearning for an unproblematic ‘White history’ that has been ‘naturalised’ to the point of its conflation with ‘reality’. But more than just that, it aims to capture a power-base among the White disenfranchised, who had experienced a succession of losses during the eighties, including less job security, traditional gender role contestation, and territorial encroachment through increased non-white immigration. In this climate of perceived ‘White disenfranchisement’, the Wik and Mabo decisions, and the political spin that arose around them, suggesting that even our own backyards could be under threat from Native Title claims, roused further concern. More recently, the emergence of global Islamist terrorism has been cause to heighten national security (Zakaria, 2001), and it is within this context that ‘multiculturalism’, and by default narrative diversity, have come to be perceived as undesirable – at least for Howard and his sympathizers – a position that would have been unfathomable to the nation in the seventies.iii Resultantly, for the New Right and their constituencies, pedagogical acknowledgement of alternative historical perspectives of both women and Indigenous Australians, given their destabilizing effects on the national mythology, is understood as an attack on Australian culture (Clark, 2004). Howard’s Australia Day speech on 26th January 2006, that once again repeated his Blainey-inspired rhetoric of getting the balance of history right, argued that a sense of national unity, to be provided by a History curriculum that focused on a coherent (all-embracing) narrative, was essential in the fight against ‘terror’ (Howard, 2006). The National History Summit that followed Howard’s proclamation to the nation can be seen as the next step in defending the national consciousness against relativism and political correctness, and in realizing the neo-conservative vision of a singular national narrative. In little more than a decade-and-a-half, what we have witnessed then is both the struggle for ‘histories’, followed by the triumphant return of ‘History’. Yet, despite these history curriculum wars having at their centre a concern for historical representation (particularly of the colonial past), it is
precisely recognition of history as a ‘form of representation’ that is absent from these debates.

Reconceptualising history as historiographic representation

In this next section, I want to pause for a moment, putting aside discussions about history education, and explore some of the insights about the nature of historical representation that can be gleaned from work occurring in contemporary historiography. To do this work justice, rather than attempt to be comprehensive, I want to pursue one particular line in this body of scholarship that arguably commences with Roland Barthes. In his essay, *The discourse of history*, Barthes (1967/1997) made his now famous pronouncement, that historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration. Barthes’ scepticism about the truth-value of historical discourse did not come from the identification of ‘biased content’ in a particular narrative; the weighing up of one historical account (or narrative) against another; or the testing of a narrative against the evidence. For Barthes, the recognition of the ‘ideological nature’ of historical discourse emerged from an examination of the way in which historical narratives operate rhetorically. It is “the absence of any signs of the author in the text” (Kansteiner, 1993, p. 275) that helps to give the reader of an historical narrative the sense that what they are reading is fact rather than fiction. Resultantly, it was Barthes’ argument that history was best understood not as a collection of facts, but as a literary genre.

Barthes’ argument prefigured much that has since been articulated by scholars such as Hayden White (2001b) at the level of rhetoric, and Frank Ankersmit (1983) at the level of the statement. The ideas of Hayden White have had a mixed reception among historians (Spiegel, 1987). Like Barthes, White has been accused of seeing “historical narrative as intrinsically no different than fictional narrative, except in its pretense to objectivity and referentiality” (White, 1978a). Sometimes Hayden White has been quite explicit about this, though he denies that he is saying that the past didn’t really exist, or certain events didn’t really happen (Ankersmit, 1998). White’s (1973) main argument seems to be that historical narratives are artefacts of an interpretive act constituted in part by an historian’s aesthetic, epistemological and ethical commitments, and in part by the underlying tropic forms of language itself. Exploring the literary structure of the historical text, White (1995; 1999) has advanced a sophisticated ‘tropology’ or poetic theory of historical discourse, which has proven important in the philosophy of history, and has recently been championed by Jenkins (1997) and Munslow (1980), among others, as an important contribution to a postmodern approach to history. According to Hans Kellner (1973), Hayden White’s work “represents an aggressive move to turn historical thought from a logical to a rhetorical form, and a defensive entrenchment against any counter-movement from rhetoric to logic” (p. 28).

Throughout the body of his work, White argues that when historians begin the process of writing a history, they are predisposed to organize their insights in one of four modes, derived from and limited in choice by what he
believes to be the tropic ‘deep structure’ of our ‘figurative’ (White, 1978c), or what Chartier (1997) has called “the historical imagination” (p. 29). White’s scheme appears to synthesize and extend earlier schema developed by Vico (Ricoeur, 1983), and Mannheim and Pepper (White, 1973), among others. Hayden White put forward the theory that the four tropes of metaphor (representation), metonymy (reduction), synecdoche (integration), and irony (negation), prefigure the production of any historical narrative, and when combined with particular modes of argument (ideographic, organicist, mechanistic, contextualist), emplotment strategies (romance, comedy, tragedy, satire), and ideological commitments (anarchist, conservative, radical, liberal), constitute “the historiographical ‘style’ of a particular historian or philosopher of history” (White, 1978b). Further, he argues that “most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings” (see the discussion of Irving in R. J. Evans, 1997). I think it can be safely said that this is usually considered Hayden White’s most controversial claim. His point is not that particular events didn’t happen, as we might see argued in the revisionist narratives of anti-Semitic holocaust-denying historians (White, 1975). Rather, White (1997) argues that there is no inherent meaning in an event, and that it is meaningful to us only after we give the event significance through our narrativisation of it. Therefore, it should not be surprising to find that Hayden White makes no claims for the ontological reality to which historical narratives refer. The historic past comes to us, in Hayden White’s view, always ‘mediated’ by textual forms (Roth, 1995).

Chartier (1998) has indicated an uneasiness about Hayden White’s commitment to a semiological approach to the study of history texts that ignores questions about the text’s “reliability as witness” to specific events (p. 38), although the event must be given some ontological status if it can be emplotted in a number of different ways. Despite this, Lorenz (1998) has challenged White on the basis that his theory of history does not allow historical narratives to appeal to ‘the evidence’ in order to verify their truth claims, thus conflating history and fiction, projecting them “as two exemplars of the same species” (p. 329). However, there is a clear difference in the process of producing (and for that matter ‘reading’) an historical account and a fictional novel, despite the universal presence of similar tropic structures, and adopting an aesthetic orientation towards history does not preclude such a recognition. Indeed, according to Golob (1980), “Collingwood showed with great precision how evidence limited the formation of historical narrative and how it disciplined imagination” (p. 59). Thus, it should not be surprising to learn that the later White “allows that the data may resist representation in a given form and therefore require a different tropological structure” (Nelson, 1980). Despite criticisms from a number of sources (Evans, 1997; Roth, 1995; Vann, 1998), Hayden White’s work remains important for the attention it draws to rhetorical, tropological, narratological, and ideological analyses of the content and form of history texts (Chartier, 1997), for the liberation of history from its insensitivity to “the modalities and figures of discourse” (Ricoeur, 1983), and for its central argument that “history is intrinsically historio-graphy . . . a literary artifact” (Holton, 1994).
A similar narrativist conception of history was also ‘advanced’ in the work of Louis Mink. Mink (1978/2001) argued that historical narrative was best understood as “an artifice, the product of individual imagination”, that acted as a “cognitive instrument” whose function it was “not just to relate a succession of events but to body forth an ensemble of interrelationships of many different kinds as a single whole” (p. 218). Hans Kellner’s (1989) assertion that “the straightness of any story is a rhetoric invention” makes a similar point (p. x). Together, these scholars can be taken as developing a particular historiographic view of history, in which the ‘real events’ of the past are seen to be organised by the structuring effects of the narrative form, having no inherent structure in themselves. This view is sometimes referred to as ‘narrative impositionalism’. It certainly has its critics, particularly among those who, like David Carr (1986; 2001), argue that life is lived as a narrative independent of a historian’s attempts to write about it. However, it is difficult to argue against the suggestion that subject to the selective, ordering, re-contextualising strategies of the historian, the past becomes an object that we can ‘recognise’ as history; and that without the ‘gaze’ of the historian, traces of the past remain fragments of memory, and not history.

Ankersmit (2001a) makes this problem clear in his example of “the Renaissance”. ‘The Renaissance’ is a category that historians apply to a series of events that could have been ordered, described, selected, defined, periodised, or segregated in some other way (Jenkins, 2003). While ‘the facts of the matter’ may include reference to Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and a host of other ‘important’ figures and their ‘contributions’ to the intellectual and cultural life of their times, ‘the narrative’ of the Renaissance, which furnishes these people and events with ‘meaning’, arises from particular interpretations of ‘the facts’. Thus, a debate about what the Renaissance was or means, “is not a debate about the actual past but about narrative interpretations of the past” (Ankersmit, 2001b). Ankersmit (2001b) argues that “Interpretation is not translation. The past is not a text that has to be translated into narrative historiography; it has to be interpreted” (emphasis in the original, p. 237). Further, he asserts that “Narrative interpretations apply to the past, but do not correspond or refer to it (as statements do)” (emphasis in the original, p. 239). As “proposals”, narrative interpretations of the past “may be useful, fruitful, or not, but cannot be either true or false”, according to Ankersmit (2001b). This is because only an individual statement can be verified as true or false (Ankersmit, 2001b).

Quite powerfully, I think, Ankersmit (2001b) also argues that “a historical narrative is a historical narrative only insofar as the (metaphorical) meaning of the historical narrative in its totality transcends the (literal) meaning of the sum of its individual statements” (p. 243). Where this is not the case, the set of statements is probably better described, as Hayden White (1973) argues, by the term “chronicle”. Ankersmit (2001a) asserts that “the ultimate challenge for both historical writing and the historian is not factual or ethical, but aesthetic” (p. 176). Viewed in this way, historical research only becomes ‘history’ as the traces of the past are given meaning within a narrative structure (a historiographic form). To quote Jenkins (1995), and his more radical conception of this historicizing phenomenon, “most
historiography is the imposition of meaningful form onto a meaningless past” (p. 137).

In the preceding discussion, I explored a series of compelling arguments that history is an act of writing that transforms, rather than simply gathers, the traces of the past into a narrative text. Whether we are examining Barthes’ (1967/1997) notion of the way the impersonal style of the historical narrative encourages us to read it as fact, White’s (1973) argument for the prefigurative power of an historian’s aesthetic, epistemological and ethical commitments, operating in conjunction with the underlying tropic forms of language itself; or Ankersmit’s (2001a) conception of the way the metaphorical meaning of an historical narrative transcends the literal meaning of the sum of its referential statements, the overall message must surely be that history is unavoidably “the texted past” (Dening, 1996, p. 42). Such an understanding of historical representation and narrative has important implications for History education, implications that are promising in terms of a curricular response to the ‘problem’ of narrative diversity in the curriculum.

**Teaching history as hermeneutics**

Taking seriously the idea that history, as we know it (particularly in schools), is the transformation of the traces of the past into a narratively organized textual form, opens up the possibility for thinking differently about current debates over what should be taught within the History curriculum. It means that we must understand the act of teaching and learning history, as one of engaging in interpretive acts, as we ‘read’ the histories that are made available to us. Acknowledging and pedagogically emphasizing the interpretive act, or the practice of ‘reading’, that is necessary to engage with multiple histories, opens up the possibility for a transformative history pedagogy that does not automatically or inevitably result in a turn to relativism. That is, acceptance of the existence of multiple, and indeed rival narratives, does not in and of itself, doom us to indecision about which narratives are more likely to present an adequate representation of the past. Let me show this by exploring the three approaches to history teaching identified by Peter Seixas (2000), understood in the context of the historiographic work of Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow (2004), and explored in relation to the idea of reading history hermeneutically.

According to Seixas’ (2000), teachers may decide to present a single story as the best history we have available, perhaps because, as he notes elsewhere, this is the way they encounter history from historians (Seixas, 1999). He describes the approach of teaching ‘the best story’ as “enhancing collective memory” (Seixas, 2000, p. 20). In the historiographic work of Jenkins and Munslow (2004), this approach to teaching history would seem to correspond with a “reconstructionist” epistemology (p. 7), held by those few historians who still claim “to fair-mindedly discover the ‘truthful interpretation’ in the documents and write it up in an essentially unproblematic representation” (Munslow, 2003, p. 5, my emphasis). This is of course, the approach to history teaching that many conservative politicians would have all
schools adopt, given it provides them with a sense of control over ‘public memory’. The 2006 Australia Day speech of Australia’s conservative Prime Minister John Howard, in which he called for a return to teaching history as a “structured narrative” informed by “the central currents of our nation’s development” (Howard, 2006, p. 4), is unreserved in its support for a ‘reconstructionist pedagogy’ of ‘collective memory’. At its best, as Seixas (2000) suggests, it promises the possibility of group “identity, cohesion and social purpose” (p. 22), or in the themes of Howard’s (2006) Australia Day tome, “social cohesion” and “national unity” (p. 4). At its worst, this approach is likely to manifest in a doctrinaire, nostalgic, nation-centric ‘names and dates’ pedagogy that has the potential to limit the development of more differentiated and sophisticated forms of ‘historical consciousness’ (for some interesting work on the development of ‘historical consciousness’ see the work of Rüsen, 2004a; 2004b).

An alternative approach identified by Seixas (2000), and one that parallels in some ways the advice of the 1992 Syllabus, involves presenting conflicting interpretations of the past to students, with a view to “reach[ing] conclusions about which is the better interpretation on the basis of [studying] a series of documents, historians’ assessments, and other materials” (p. 20). In Jenkins and Munslow’s (2004) heuristic, this approach would seem to be underpinned by a “constructionist” epistemology, held by historians who engage in “the study of the actions of people in groups” (p. 10), using “varying levels of social theory . . . to [form] more or less complex forms of explanatory conceptualisation” (p. 11). Constructionist historians use “concepts and theories such as race, class, gender, imperialism, nationalism” to make sense of ‘the past’ (Jenkins & Munslow, 2004, p. 11). According to Jenkins and Munslow (2004):

unlike reconstructionists, constructionists accept that getting at the story is not simply assured by a detailed knowledge of the sources. However, for constructionists, knowing the truth of the past is still feasible in principle precisely because history is constructed through using the tools of sophisticated conceptualisation and social theory. (p. 11, original emphasis).

Given the constructionist’s confidence in developing relatively reliable histories from the evidence, this approach is likely to engage students in learning “disciplinary criteria for what makes good history” (Seixas, 2000, p. 20), assuming that one is seeking to determine which interpretation among alternatives is the ‘best interpretation’. Although the 1992 Syllabus encouraged teachers to engage students in ‘historical inquiry’, and to look at the past from ‘multiple perspectives’ (underpinned by at least some understanding of social theory), the use of loaded words such as ‘invasion’ in place of the traditional, and perhaps equally loaded but seemingly benign, ‘settlement’, to describe British colonisation of Australia, showed a commitment to a ‘constructionist pedagogy’. Arguably, it also demonstrated the intrusion of a pedagogy of ‘collective memory’ that has the potential to replace one master-narrative with another, even if that new master-narrative originated ‘from the
margins’. Of course, the 1992 Syllabus did not preclude using ‘different perspectives’ to push ‘disciplined inquiry’, but nor did it mandate such an approach.

The third and final approach to teaching history discussed by Seixas (2000), is oftentimes identified by its resistance towards any attempt to adjudicate between histories in terms of which story is the ‘best interpretation’, and aims instead to assist students “to understand how different groups organize the past into histories” (pp. 20-21), an approach that it is distinctly historiographic in orientation. This approach would seem to be based on what Jenkins and Munslow (2004) describe as a “deconstructionist” epistemology (p. 12). According to Jenkins and Munslow (2004), deconstructionist historians typically:

critique correspondence and coherence theories of knowledge (referentiality); the notion of inference and the truthful statement (explanation to the best fit); the clear distinction between fact and fiction; the subject-object division (objectivity); representationalism (accurate representation), and the idea that the appropriate use of social theory (concept and argument) can generate truthful statements. (p. 12)

Committed to an anti-representationalist (though not necessarily an anti-realist) position, deconstructionist historians often “explore the consequences of reversing the priority of content over form . . . experimenting with [new forms of] representation” (Jenkins & Munslow, 2004, p. 13). Understanding history as a representational practice invites recognition that different groups, and indeed different historians, have organised their histories differently, underscoring Wineburg’s (2001) assertion that historical thinking is an “unnatural act” (p. 3). However, accepting that history is a thoroughly ‘cultural-historical act’ does not necessarily mean that we must consider all histories of equal merit. This in fact misrepresents the actual practice of historiographic scholarship, and the manner in which disciplines like History function, where methodological rules, themselves the product of a particular socio-historical milieu, assist ‘readers’ to adjudicate between rival historical representations.

If we accept that all histories are coloured by their socio-historical circumstances, even highly ‘empirical’ histories (since they too are determined by what historical questions are, or are not asked; what evidence is collected, or is ignored) then systematic induction into ways of ‘reading’ history, perhaps drawn from literary theory such as those advocated by Dominick LaCapra (2000), become even more pressing. As Curthoys and Docker (2006) note, there is a particular quality of “doubleness” to history that prevents it from escaping either its sources or its representational forms (p. 11). Historiography assists us to work “in the space between history as rigorous scrutiny of sources and history as part of the world of literary forms” (Curthoys & Docker, 2006, p.11). It leads us to the realisation that “history is a method rather than a truth” (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 86). Embracing this insight into the way history functions means paying attention to how we read our sources, and how we read the historical narratives we encounter. It means understanding ‘historical method’ as a thoroughly hermeneutic or interpretive act. When
history is understood as ‘historical representation’, engaging with histories *hermeneutically* becomes a tool to navigate through and between multiple and conflicting historical narratives. This hermeneutic move allows us to understand and appreciate, but also adjudicate between, rival historical narratives.

The hermeneutic move advocated here is not simply about realizing that historians interpret, rather than take on at face value their sources. It is a little more complex than that, achieved by drawing together both the constructionist and deconstructionist approaches to history teaching discussed above. Firstly, understanding that historical representation emerges from within particular historiographic traditions (such as Feminism, Marxism, Social History, Intellectual History, Cultural History, etc.), and hence is marked ‘historically’ by the biases of those methodological traditions; and secondly, that our own acts of reading and interpretation are prejudiced by the methodological biases of the historiographic traditions we have been initiated into – and for that matter, our personal socio-historically situated experiences – we come to understand what Foucault (1969/1972) has called ‘the conditions of possibility’ for any historical narrative we encounter. We come to know, at least potentially, what it was possible for this history to tell, and perhaps what it was impossible for it to tell. Further, like Falzon (1998), we come to realize that interpretation is not only historically shaped, but that it is also inevitable and unavoidable. We are unable not to pass judgment on the interpretations of the past we encounter, and we do this within the limits of our methodological prejudices. Where history pedagogy is able to emphasize the historiographic and hermeneutic dimensions of ‘history’ in this way, we are not left at the mercy of an uncritical relativism. Rather, there is potential for us to take a ‘critical pluralist’ stance towards history, in which we accept narrative diversity in the curriculum, recognizing the inevitable and almost endless proliferation of historical interpretations, but have the capacity to make value-judgements about the historical narratives we encounter.

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**Endnotes**

i At the time of Taylor and Clark’s (2006) report, only NSW and Victoria have a discrete discipline-based history subject.

ii For a detailed discussion of the social and policy context of this era and its effect on education in NSW more broadly, see Barcan (1988); although this does mark the shift in Liberal party politics from a ‘liberal’ philosophy to a neo-conservative one.

iii It is ironic that Howard – who was treasurer in the Fraser government responsible for many of the multicultural reforms of the seventies – should be leader of a reactionary government intent on challenging and dismantling many of these reforms.

iv Although there are many different forms of hermeneutics, from the biblical, through the phenomenological, to the philosophical (P. Slattery, 2002), it is the later, inspired by the work of Gadamer (1999), that is perhaps most useful for our purposes. Gallagher (1993) has argued that hermeneutics is not simply the theory and practice of interpretation, but “investigates the process of interpretation… the phenomenon of the text and the interplay of interpretation, meaning, and language in understanding the text” (p. 6).

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