"PEOPLE LIKE US CAN'T GO INTO A PLACE LIKE THAT": The need for multicultural diversity in Canadian History

BY Audrey Kobayashi

STORIES

I REMEMBER A FAMILY HOLIDAY WHEN I WAS A CHILD. DRIVING THROUGH THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, PARENTS IN THE FRONT SEAT, KIDS PILED IN THE BACK, WE STOPPED TO VIEW THE BREATHTAKING SITE OF LAKE LOUISE. WHILE DULY IMPRESSED BY THE SPECTACULAR MOUNTAINS PLUMMETING INTO THE SMALL GLACIAL LAKE OF THE MOST BRILLIANT BLUE AND MILKY GREEN, I WAS COMPLETELY ENCHANTED BY THE CHATEAU THAT COMMANDED THE SHORELINE. WITH ITS IMPOSING STONE, ITS TURRETS AND MASSIVE ARCHED WINDOWS, IT WAS THE GRANDEST EDIFICE I HAD EVER SEEN. IT EVOKED TO ME EVERYTHING TO WHICH ONE MIGHT ASPIRE IN MAKE-BELIEVE. THE PEOPLE PASSING NONCHALANTLY THROUGH ITS IMPOSING ENTRANCEWAY MUST BE FROM SOME OTHER PLACE, A PLACE THAT I COULD JUST BEGIN TO IMAGINE. WHEN MY MOTHER SUGGESTED, A LITTLE TENTATIVELY, THAT WE MIGHT JUST WALK UP AND LOOK AROUND IN THE LOBBY, MY FATHER OBJECTED VEHEMENTLY. "PEOPLE LIKE US," HE SAID, "CANNOT GO INTO A PLACE LIKE THAT." HIS FEAR, TINGED WITH BITTERNESS, SUFFUSED OUR OLD CAR AS WE REVERSED OUT OF THE GRAND DRIVEWAY AND HEADED BACK TO OUR CAMPSITE IN THE NEARBY PROVINCIAL PARK. WE CHILDREN TURNED TO KNEEL IN THE BACK SEAT, LOOKING BACK, NOT QUITE UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAD ELUDED US, KNOWING THAT SOME IMPERMEABLE BARRIER SEPARATED US FROM THAT GLITTERING WORLD. THE TENSION IN THE FRONT SEAT WAS PALPABLE. MY MOTHER RAILED, UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND WHY MY FATHER SHOULD DENY HER REQUEST. MY FATHER KEPT DRIVING, HIS FACE SET IN SILENCE.



The internment of Japanese-Canadians / National Archives of Canada / C046355

Many years later, as a student of geography, both graduate and undergraduate, at the University of B.C., I learned to read that Rocky Mountain landscape, and the Lake Louise resort, as a statement of the power of class and money to command nature, to transform it into a means for the rich and leisured to travel in search of the an imagined sublimity. Adventurous travellers from the East, or from Britain, appropriated the entire Canadian landscape, newly opened to them by the Canadian Pacific Railway, which built luxury hotels, strategically placed to maximize the experience between train stops. And more than a playground for the rich, it represented the power of the railways in constructing the geography of Canada, and the complex symbolic iconography through which to interpret the 'national dream' of a railway linking east to west – and everything that that railway signified and facilitated. That landscape cannot be essentialized as simple beauty or nature's grand design, but needs to be understood as socially constructed according to the dominant mores and interconnected aesthetic tastes of the time. Class and taste were intertwined, fed fantasies of power and status, expressed as access to that which very few had the privilege to view. The shores of Lake Louise and the imposing edifice on its banks played reciprocal roles in this construction.

But my professors did not teach me that the social history of Lake Louise had anything to do with my childhood memory of my first view of that sublime scene, for I went to university in the days before 'ethnic studies' were part of the standard undergraduate curriculum. I began to discover things for myself, however, when, during the late 1970s I joined the small but growing group of students beginning to explore the meaning of their own long neglected pasts. Embarking on research for

my master's degree, I found in the archives of the University of British Columbia a photograph of a large group of porters at Hotel Vancouver – another Canadian Pacific Hotel – during the 1930s. They were all Japanese Canadians, mostly Nisei, or second generation. At that time, people of colour were barred entry to the Hotel Vancouver, and other CPR hotels such as the Lake Louise Resort, except as porters or other domestic workers. All those workers, of course, were fired from their jobs in 1941 when – having declared war on Japan – the government stripped all its Canadians of Japanese 'racial background' of their rights as citizens, and subjected them to a period of dispossession, uprooting and internment that lasted until 1949. Their national dream was perhaps a little different from that articulated in Ottawa or in the boardrooms of Montreal and Toronto.

Finding that photograph also shed new light upon my understanding of my father's emotional reaction to the suggestion that our family might traipse through the lobby, as tourists, viewing not only the grandeur of the hotel and the beautiful lake, but also the beautiful, rich and white people who had access to that place, who were a part of that landscape rather than observers from its margins. My research also taught me that just a short crow's flight from the Lake Louise Resort, Japanese-Canadian men, undoubtedly some of them the same men recently fired from their jobs as porters at the Hotel Vancouver, were placed into forced labour to build the Roger's Pass, a road link across the Rocky Mountains that has been just as important – if not as romantically symbolic – as the railway in forging the transportation geography of Canada.

This new perspective on the landscape of Lake Louise, and for that matter on the Rocky Mountains, repositioned my understanding of how I might understand the Canadian landscape as a deeply racialized manifestation of one of the fundamental aspects of social relations in Canada. Of course, when I was a student at UBC, few even thought of the Canadian landscape as racialized. It was therefore with a deep sense of both consternation and intellectual discovery that I worked my way towards an understanding of the processes that have built this country, and of the place of my own community in that national story. This learning process was all the more difficult because it also brought the realization that my past had been kept from me as a child, by the teachers responsible for inculcating among their charges a sense of what it is to be 'Canadian', and by my parents – Japanese-Canadian father and English-Canadian mother – who, like so many other parents in the Japanese-Canadian community of the 1950s and 1960s, did not want to exhume the horror of the 1940s. I grew up with a vague sense of something terribly wrong, of a deep and terrible secret, but not knowing the full extent of the actions taken by the Canadian government just one short decade prior to my own childhood.

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Recently, wanting to find out more about those uniformed porters smiling so proudly in front of the Hotel Vancouver whose lives had touched mine in this tangential but poignant manner, I began searching for any who might be alive today, to find out what had become of them after they had been dismissed from their positions at all the Canadian Pacific hotels strung across the Western Canadian landscape like markers in a power board game. In the course of my research, I interviewed the nephew of one of those porters. This is the story he told me. His uncle and his family were interned at one of the interior concentration camps in 1942. Japanese-Canadian internees were not allowed to travel freely, but he received a special permit to visit another camp. He was sitting on the full bus, waiting for the journey to begin, when two members of the air force boarded the bus. Spying a Japanese Canadian, they went up to him and demanded that he vacate his seat. He told them that he had arrived early and obtained a seat, and they should have done the same. They attempted physical force to remove him. The young man resisted, a scuffle ensued, the police were called, and he was taken away and placed in a provincial prison. Without benefit of trial or other legal process, he languished there until after the end of World War II. His wife and two children were never informed of his whereabouts, but he did manage to write one letter, to his sister, in which he told her, in coded language that he hoped might get past the censors who regularly turned letters into spaghetti strips, that he was writing from a "dark place". Filled with the sense of shame, he never told his family of the experience. His children grew up believing that he had abandoned them during the war and, as a result, they were estranged. Many years later their cousin (the one who recently recounted the story to me) told them what had actually happened. The result was a partial reconciliation, but the explanation could not undo the emotional and psychological damage that this experience had created.

As I heard this story, I remembered once again, and even more vividly, that moment in my parents' car when my innocent childhood mind could not quite grasp the hurt, anger, and desperation, the horrible dark secret, that filled the air like a noxious cloud. My experience was much, much less damaging, of course, than that of a man wrongfully imprisoned and of an entire family affected by a nearly forgotten incident on a bus. But when I connect the two stories, I realize how major historic events insinuate themselves into so many lives, in different but connected ways, to profoundly condition how one's

life chances are structured. Japanese Canadians are all tied by their common past experience, a string of trauma and bitter memories that runs through their community, weakening no doubt among the current generation, but still securely tied to many of us.

MULTICULTURAL DIVERSITY IN CANADIAN HISTORY

These stories provide a didactic opening to stress a number of points about why we need to pay attention to multicultural diversity in Canadian history. The landscapes that emerge from my stories have diverse meanings that can be appreciated only by presenting a complex tapestry of the many and diverse people who have traversed those landscapes. So, I begin my plea for multicultural diversity with the simple statement that a complete history includes the experiences of all Canadians and is therefore by definition diverse. We need to tell many stories.

But demographic diversity is of course only a part of the justification for multicultural history. More compelling is the fact that the diverse experiences of Canadians from wide-ranging cultural backgrounds occur across a landscape of inequality. We may provide equal space in the history books, therefore, but that would not redress the balance of differential power, or address the human rights issues surrounding the experiences of, especially, minority ethnocultural groups of colour. For this reason, scholars have been somewhat split on the issue of whether 'ethnic' history is about providing balance, or about redressing historical wrongs. Do we want to promote exoticism or activism?

My personal inclination is to provide a balance. By all means let students learn about both their own backgrounds and those of others, but let them do so in a manner that reinforces multiculturalism as more than a collection of 'others', or as a romantic vision of cute dances and exotic foods. Let them learn to be critical about their past, and about their future, about both the important contributions that have made Canada what it is, and about the many human rights issues – some of which remain unresolved – that also define Canada's history. Perhaps if more people were better informed about First Nations history, for example, we would make better and more rapid progress towards settling treaty claims. If they understood more of the experiences that immigrants have faced, especially the experiences of immigrants of colour, new Canadians may be treated more fairly today. And better education about these and all other concerns of Canada's diverse populations would undoubted have an effect in improving our ability to develop public policies to meet the needs of a diverse population.

Our stories define us. The stories we tell not only provide a window on the past through which we may see the diverse peoples and issues through which we have created our history, but also say much about the dominant norms according to which we imagine ourselves as a nation. That imagination needs to be encouraged to express itself in all its diversity, connecting past to present and future in such a way that by learning history we also help to ensure that no one in future will say that "People like us can't go into a place like that."

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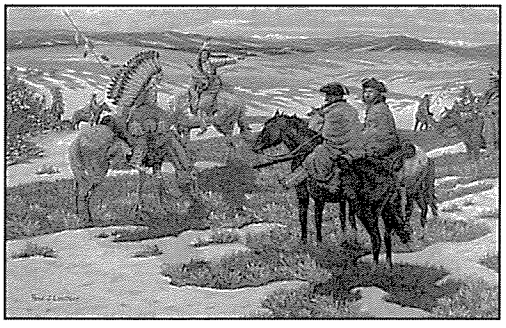

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