# ETHNOHISTORY?

Heather McGregor starts by noting that "Indigenous scholars and communities have levelled significant critiques regarding research methodologies in general, as well as specifically towards the discipline of history for its potential to represent their understanding of the past and their interests in the present," adding that: "Non-Indigenous scholars have also problematised the relationship between disciplinary history and Indigenous knowledge systems."[1] As an example, McGregor cites "exclusive reliance on documents as evidence in history has been found to constrain rather than facilitate historical claims by Indigenous groups in cases such as land-use disputes or experiences of students at residential schools."[2] Over half a century ago, those "scholars working with and for Indigenous populations turned toward combining historical methods with anthropology," devising "a methodology they called ethnohistory."[3] McGregor's questions include: "is an ethnohistorical approach relevant? What is lost and what is gained by using ethnohistorical methodology? How does ethnohistory help to address the concerns raised by Indigenous communities regarding historiography?"[4]

To answer these questions McGregor reviewed literature from the field of ethnohistory, then brought "ethnohistorical approaches in conversation with critiques of research (in general and specifically in terms of history) by Indigenous scholars," thereby "assess[ing] whether conversation between these two fields may extend and enhance respectful, relevant, reciprocal and responsible cross-cultural research about the past."[5] Finally, McGregor concludes with "questions about methodology for consideration by educational historians working in and with Indigenous communities."[6]

As she would in a later article,[7] McGregor references "Michael Marker, an Indigenous scholar, who draws attention to the historiographic problems of writing Indigenous educational histories," in particular problems of "differing discursive categories of time and space, the importance of land, and the use of Indigenous autobiographies as historical evidence."[8] Marker recommended that historians "incorporate anthropological approaches into research regarding the history of education, particularly as education involves cultural transmission," giving "two reasons" why "ethnohistory and educational history should converge."[9] The first concerns the prominence of orality in Indigenous knowledge of the past; the second concerns the difference in Indigenous and non-Indigenous interpretations of the very concept of "understanding," a difference which "necessitates the epistemological destabilising towards which anthropological approaches may contribute."[10] Why isn't a juxtaposition[11] of the two different conceptions of "understanding" pedagogically appealing?

McGregor then pauses (as it were), to tackle issues of identity, a topic on which I, too, have commented.[12] She identifies the danger of "essentialising or totalising: individuals are attributed a simplified, singular essence that overrides or precludes other characteristics; all individuals associated with the category are assumed to be the same; or, it is prescribed that simultaneously being several different things in different spaces is impossible."[13] Yet "another danger is the interpretation that *only* individuals of a particular ancestry, genetic composition or blood quantum can understand or engage with knowledge(s) associated with their place or group, and therefore are the only authorities warranted to make knowledge claims," a "position does not address to what extent the individual making claims has been educated (meant in the broadest sense) in the relevant area of knowledge or tradition, or tried to understand such knowledge on its own terms," a position that "tends to paralyse and shut down conversation, producing rigidity that does little to advance ethical relations."[14] McGregor "acknowledge[s] the history of appropriation and misrepresentation in research to which Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately subject," but she also points out that "rigid claims to authority take on even greater limitations for historians who are always bridging the gap of time," noting that: "Historians must *attempt* to know those from whom they are distant (because of the gap of time), while remaining cognisant that it is impossible to *fully* know them."[15] These challenges "could," she continues, "be extended to bridging the gap of culture," adding that: "With a high degree of transparency, reflexivity, humility and patience people of different origins can enter respectful ways of coming to know others, and in the process come to know themselves better."[16] Wise advice that reminds us of Wang's work on cross-culturalism, organic relationality, and nonviolence.[17]

McGregor returns to ethnohistory, noting that "it has been described as a 'marriage of convenience' between history and anthropology" the purpose of which is 'to explain specific historical events and the processes of cultural change that have transformed individual cultures'," including Indigenous cultures, where it "intersects with advocacy or 'action anthropology'."[18] In fact, McGregor continues, the field "began as a methodological vehicle for those who held in common the intellectual, ethical and political interests of North American Indigenous communities."[19]

But then we're told that ethnohistory is not solely or even primarily a political "vehicle," McGregor explaining that "ethnohistorical methods" include both "fieldwork and archival research," and has been "viewed as a means to free history from the ethnocentric bias of documents created by Europeans."[20] Supplementing archival research with oral history has been "debated," McGregor reporting that while some assert that "ethnohistorians have only infrequently used oral sources" others suggest its use "as more common."[21] McGregor tells us that methodologically the field is data driven, "rather than being driven by theory," but that "an 'authoritative narrative' can be 'released' from the evidence."[22] Narrative would seem to involve

"cultural interpretation," itself "both controversial and important,"[23] as neither politics nor morality can be bleached from "narrative."

McGregor returns to Michael Marker, who thought "that the infusion of ethnographic theory into history can 'expose one's biases and presumptions about reality and identity', facilitating an unmasking of the self," apparently not everyone's "self," only the "self" associated with "dominant, non-Indigenous societies."[24] McGregor tells us that Marker and others "encourage historians to investigate further how and what Indigenous history can teach us about European history," with some saying "that ethnohistory requires double vision, 'that allows [the historian] to explain how historical actors on both sides of the cultural chasm – Indians and whites alike – responded to one another from their culturally distinct 'thoughtworlds'."[25] McGregor asks:

> Can the history of another culture, or of a cultural encounter, be dealt with through the theory, methodology and methods of a disciplinary tradition that emerges largely from one cultural origin (one that has had imperialist, colonising and assimilationist impacts on Indigenous cultures throughout the world)? How can ethnohistory be assessed in relationship to Indigenous critiques of research and Indigenous approaches to history? Put most simply, can history avoid Eurocentrism?

Can history also avoid Indigenous-centrism? McGregor appears to anticipate my question, reassuring us that "ethnohistory" is "a methodology that endeavours to represent cultural encounter in the past, making explicit the necessary contribution of ethnographic evidence, methods and interpretation to examine differing epistemological (or other) foundations of the cultures in question, and how they affected each other."[26] So some ethnohistorians affirm impartiality and balance, pushing politics to the side?

What can be "*gained* through an ethnohistorical approach," she suggests, include (1) "focusing on cultural continuity and change over time within/between two or more cultures that encounter one another and may produce a new culture;" (2) avoiding problematic representations of any culture as isolated or static;" (3) "decreasing the likelihood of imposing Western or Eurocentric systems of making meaning through historical analysis;" (4) "returning the gaze onto dominant societies so as to better understand, and critique, them;" (5) "incorporating the interests and perspectives of Indigenous people, including potentially their own research questions;" (6) "contextualising data from Indigenous sources more thoroughly, decreasing the likelihood of extracting and dissecting them from cultural reference points;" (7) "extending from narrative histories into conclusions regarding the nature of cultural exchange in societies, organisations and structures;" (8) "examining closely the *cultural* construction of histories, and differing systems for understanding the past."[27] McGregor also lists what "ethnohistory does not help the historian with," including (1) "documenting the past in greater depth and detail, made possible when only one culture

is featured;" (2) "disrupting a cultural hierarchy that may (unintentionally or intentionally) result when cultures are placed in comparison with another and the Indigenous culture comes out looking 'less than';" (3) "engaging in more transparent, complex, reflexive and sustained attention to how methodology shapes our understanding of the past, as this does not seem to be common or expected in the ethnohistory field;" (4) "deeply examining what is produced when we pursue processes of understanding the past using methods or evidence other than archives or historical documents;" (5) "holding the larger fields of history and historiography accountable for the same flexibility, innovation and responsiveness to Indigenous concerns about methodology as are now expected from ethnohistorians;" (6) "failing to reach some audiences if Indigenous histories are placed in a special category; it may echo a legacy of 'Othering', exoticising, 'the Indian problem', and isolating exceptionalism;" and (7) "participating in a rigorous conversation about ethics in historical practices and disciplines (again, because this has not been common and/or does not seem expected by the literature in the field, with the exception of Marker)."[28] Eight reasons in favour, and seven against: looks like a tie to me.

So one is unsurprised when McGregor concludes that "the literature and conversations aligned with the term ethnohistory have some potential to guide historiography concerned with Indigenous societies, and for the purpose of representing Indigenous histories," adding that "ethnohistory does not provide enough insight into what scholars must ask themselves in embarking on historical research with Indigenous communities."[29] To compensate for this insufficient "insight" she turns "towards Indigenous scholars – those who have critiqued research generally, as well as those who have worked towards identifying differences between disciplinary and Indigenous approaches to the past," suggesting that "research … ought to take cues from Indigenous research methodologies, Indigenous representations and interpretations of culture, and Indigenous historical consciousness."[30] In particular, "I call for historians to consult with Elders, leaders, intellectuals and scholars from the Indigenous peoples with whom they work, regarding perspectives on history and particularly on how history should be done. Turning the lens on ourselves – as historians interested in education – we must think, and think again, about how to conduct and share historical research in responsible and responsive ways."[31]

## COMMENTARY

In his commentary, the research assistant – Anton Birioukov-Brant – praises the article, calling it "succinct, yet comprehensive," although allowing that the article could have been "strengthened by a nod to oral history research, which also transgresses the 'traditional' text-based historical research." While I, too, would acknowledege oral history as invaluable, I remain wary of regarding it as always accurate, as memory fades

and stories shift over time. I do share Anton's praise for the piece, disclosing, as it does, the struggles that cultural incommensurability impose on those of us committed to "truth and reconciliation."

## References

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## Endnotes

[1] 2014, 431.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See research brief #94.

[8] 2014, 433. Non-Indigenous historians also use autobiography: see Traverso 2023.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Juxtaposition is, Strong-Wilson (2021, 23) explains, "a mode of bringing disparate things, people, events into provocative relation, even these also remain distinct from one another."

[12] Pinar 2015, 174-179.

[13] 2014, 434.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Wang in press; Wang 2021; Eppert and Wang 2007.

[18] 2014, 436.

[19] Ibid.

[20] 2014, 437. Is McGregor suggesting that European "ethnocentric bias" be replaced with Indigenous "ethnocentric bias"?

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] 2014, 440.

[24] Ibid. "After decades of critique of the subject, rebuke of idealism, and anti-Cartesian strictures against the self-constitution of thought," Resina (2020, 1) wryly writes, "the self obstinately refuses to give up the ghost. It hesitates, like Hamlet, between being and seeming, but it remains on stage."

[25] Ibid. McGregor (2014, 442-443) provides a summary of Indigenous academics' critiques of scholarly research with/about Indigenous peoples.

[26] 2014, 446.

[27] Ibid. If politics had earlier been pushed to the side, in this list she welcomes it center stage.

[28] 2014, 446-447.

[29] 2014, 448.

[30] 2014, 448-449.

[31] 2014, 449.