

## HISTORICAL EMPATHY AND CANADA: A PEOPLE'S HISTORY

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In this article, we examine the CBC/Radio-Canada series, *Canada: A People's History*, for its use of empathy, specifically with regard to its portrayal of Aboriginal people. We call the empathy promoted in the series, emotive empathy, and compare it to the concept of historical empathy constructed by researchers in history education. The emotive empathy employed in this series, while adequate for public audiences, is not sufficient for history classrooms because it lacks a cognitive dimension. We discuss implications for using the series, and by extension, other instructional resources, to promote the development of historical empathy.

**Key Words:** history teaching, historical empathy, history and film, narrative strategies, Aboriginal representations

Dans cet article, les auteurs analysent le recours à l'empathie dans la série *Le Canada : une histoire populaire / Canada: A People's History* de Radio-Canada / CBC, surtout pour ce qui a trait à la représentation des autochtones. Les auteurs qualifient d'empathie émotive l'empathie promue dans la série et la compare au concept d'empathie historique développé par les chercheurs qui étudient l'enseignement de l'histoire. L'empathie émotive utilisée dans cette série, bien qu'adéquate pour le grand public, ne l'est pas pour les cours d'histoire parce qu'il manque alors une dimension cognitive. Les auteurs analysent les implications de l'utilisation de cette série et, d'une manière plus générale, d'autres ressources pédagogiques par rapport à la promotion de l'empathie historique.

**Mots clés :** enseignement de l'histoire, empathie historique, histoire et films, stratégies narratives, représentation des autochtones

*The scene opens with a brief view of pictographs and then pans out to large rocks pounded by waves. We hear chanting. We are told that Aboriginal inhabitants have made these pictographs. The image cuts to Newfoundland, 1829, and we see Shawnadithit (Nancy) the “last Beothuk” working as a scullery maid in the Newfoundland outport of Exploits Bay. She gazes at the camera enigmatically while the narrator tells us that she “held the key to a great mystery” (Vol. 1, *Canada: A People’s History*).*

This is the beginning of *Canada: A People’s History*, a 17-episode, 30-hour epic television production by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and Radio-Canada, which first aired over the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 television seasons. The series traces Canadian history from a mythological pre-history through to 1990. Its central purpose, according to Executive Producer Mark Starowicz (2003), is to show “Canada, through the eyes of the people who lived it” (p. 155). The series uses a narrative framework, presenting Canadian history through stories intended to encourage viewers to identify with people of the past. As Starowicz expressed it, “Empathy. That’s the key” (p. 154).

In this article, we examine the concept of historical empathy, as constructed by researchers in history education, and compare it with the view of empathy explicated by Starowicz, which we call emotive empathy. We take the position that, although emotive empathy is a legitimate and even desirable goal for a public audience, it is inadequate in a history classroom. Then, with a focus on depictions of Aboriginal people in Volumes One and Two of *Canada: A People’s History (CAPH)*, we examine the series for its usefulness in teaching historical empathy in secondary school social studies. Finally, we draw out implications for using the series, and by extension, other instructional resources, to promote historical empathy.

*CAPH* was chosen for two reasons. First, it was developed not only for a public audience, but with the explicit intention that it “become part of the fabric of the education system” (Starowicz, qtd. in Cobb, 2000) and that it be used “in every school in the country” (Starowicz, 2003, p. 252). To this end, the series was offered at special rates to schools, and educational consultants developed resource packages to provide teachers with support to use the series for teaching Canadian history. Our second reason for choosing it was its deliberate focus on the

promotion of emotive empathy in its viewers. The intention was to promote audience engagement through humanizing history, drawing upon the universal and enduring appeal of storytelling, and promoting a connection between the viewer and historical figures.

#### HISTORICAL EMPATHY

Over the past twenty years, scholars of history education in the United Kingdom, and then in Canada and the United States, have drawn attention to particular understandings, skills, perspectives, and attitudes that students require to engage effectively in historical investigation (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Davis, Yeager, & Foster, 2001; Portal, 1987; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000; Wineburg, 2001). Much of this research has coalesced around examination of students' proficiency with "historical ways of making sense of what is learned" (Lee & Ashby, 2001, p. 47), separate from the substantive concepts of history. Peter Seixas (1996) has provided a framework that explicates these second-order or procedural concepts, identifying them as significance, agency, empathy (which he groups with moral judgment), epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, and progress and decline. Historical empathy is the second-order concept relevant here.

The use of the term empathy in the scholarly discourse of history education has been fraught with controversy and confusion (Knight, 1989; Lee & Ashby, 2001). For some, the term empathy is a matter of identifying with people of the past, a state that is affective rather than cognitive. This notion of empathy should more accurately be called sympathy. This view calls on historical investigators to merely apply the understandings, beliefs, and experiences of their own worlds to interpret the experiences of historical agents and their worlds (Low-Beer, 1989). It is evident in activities that call on students to consider what it might feel like to be a Roman soldier, a pioneer in Upper Canada, or a miner during the Klondike gold rush, and write a first-person account of that individual's experiences. As O. L. Davis Jr. (2001) points out, students rarely possess the contextual information or understanding to perform such a task with any degree of insight. Lacking these elements, they simply project their own feelings onto the historical actors and try to imagine what it would be like to be in the situation. Davis cautions that

this very limited notion of empathy “wreak[s] violence not only against empathy, but, also against the entire sense of history” (p. 3). We choose to label this notion, emotive empathy.

Historical empathy, on the other hand, is in large part cognitive, although it may include elements of the affective. According to Peter Seixas (1996), historical empathy implies an understanding that “people in the past not only lived in different circumstances . . . but also experienced and interpreted the world through different belief systems” (pp. 773-774). Historical empathy is not easy, as Ashby and Lee (1987) point out:

Entertaining the beliefs, goals, and values of other people or – insofar as one can talk in this way – of other societies, is a difficult intellectual achievement. It is difficult because it means holding in mind whole structures of ideas which are not one’s own, and with which one may profoundly disagree. And not just holding them in mind as inert knowledge, but being in a position to work with them in order to explain and understand what people did in the past. (p. 63)

In contrast to emotive empathy, historical empathy acknowledges the limitations of our ability to understand the past. It involves recognition that, because individuals are bound by space and time, we cannot fully understand historical agents, their circumstances and reasons for acting as they did, by applying contemporary beliefs, standards, and attitudes (VanSledright, 2001). Christopher Portal (1987) has illustrated the challenge of understanding even records that have been transmitted verbatim because historical context, cultural frames of reference, and the authors’ idiosyncrasies are not congruently transmitted. As Seixas and Peck (2004) put it, “artifacts can mislead us, if placed in contexts different from the lost worlds they once inhabited” (p. 111). Only a careful examination of a wide range of sources and perspectives that assess “the unique circumstances of the case” (Portal, 1987, p. 96) can account for (but never completely reconstruct) such knowledge. Practising historical empathy helps to fill some of the void.

Historical empathy draws on all available evidence, including competing accounts, to consider alternative, and often contradictory, perspectives (Boix-Mansilla, 2000; Davis, 2001). To develop historical empathy, students require a cocktail of critical skills such as the ability to weigh past meanings, perspectives, traces, accounts, and interpretations

(Davis, 2001). Such analysis permits creative, inferential thinking to “bridge the gaps” in our limited knowledge of the past (Yeager & Foster, 2001, p. 14). Historical empathy therefore allows history students to understand how the point of view held by “historical agents would actually have affected actions in particular circumstances” (Lee & Ashby, 2001, p. 24). Thus, historical empathy develops explanatory prowess, whereas emotive empathy aims only to promote common perspectives through a sharing in the feelings of people of the past (Lee & Ashby, 2001).

Portal (1987) points out that historical empathy necessitates understanding those with whom we may experience no emotive empathy whatsoever. He makes the point through the example of early contact between Aztec and Spaniards in which Motecuhzoma interprets the arrival of the Europeans as a “visitation of gods” and therefore orders a human sacrifice performed before the Spaniards, to whom the Aztecs offered blood-sprinkled food. The Europeans were revolted. “The standpoint of Cortez’s party would not be hard for modern pupils to share (although the Spaniards were not particularly squeamish when it came to dealing with their own captives); the Aztec position will require more preparation” (p. 97). In such circumstances, understanding is cultivated from beyond our own perspectives and values. Historical empathy requires the insight of alternative explanations (Ashby & Lee, 1987).

Historical empathy is atypical and counterintuitive for most students (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Lee & Ashby, 2001). It is rather the emotive form of empathy that students tend to apply and narratives exploit (VanSledright, 2001). Here history teachers must exercise caution because students tend, as if by default, to think counter-historically to make sense of contexts that are completely unlike their own experiences (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Gardner, 1991). Students tend to “believe that they can ‘know’ the lives of people in the past in the same way they ‘know’ their contemporaries” (Boix-Mansilla, 2000, p. 391). In this regard, Seixas (1994) found, upon examining students’ responses to the depiction of Aboriginal people in the film, “Dances with Wolves,” that students judged the plausibility of the filmic depictions through the lens of their own attitudes and concerns. The more the Aboriginal people seemed like

them, the more plausible they found them. Their working assumption was that people in the past were essentially the same as they were, an assumption that made it difficult for them to make sense of past values and actions.

Figure 1 sets out distinctions between emotive and historical empathy.

<i>Emotive Empathy</i>	<i>Historical Empathy</i>
Primarily affective domain	Primarily cognitive domain
Relies on limited sources of evidence	Uses multiple sources of evidence
Accepts evidence at face value	Probes for context (motives of historical agents and their access to knowledge)
Identifies with historical agents. Seeks to share their feelings, perspectives, values	Includes those with whom we cannot identify, as well as those with whom we can
Seeks to understand the past through a contemporary lens	Recognizes that the passage of time limits the ability to understand historical agents' actions because our access to information about the influences on those actions diminishes over time

*Figure 1*

*A Comparison of Emotive and Historical Empathy*

Tenacious research by Rosalyn Ashby and Peter Lee (1987, 2001) has identified several typical counter-historical habits of mind: students understand through shared meaning by equating their own experiences with those of the past; students tend to view historical people as ignorant or mentally defective in comparison to contemporary people; students view change over time as progressive, improving on the way things were in the past; students explain behavior through stereotype or generalization; students cannot relate circumstances and decisions to

beliefs, values, or conditions other than their own when they are able to see the past as unique. Given these findings, it is possible that an emotively driven narrative could actually exacerbate students' dubious historical orientation. This is an area for further research.

Given the distinction between emotive and historical empathy and the intuitive nature of students' historical understandings, it is useful to ask whether narratives such as *CAPH* can be used to counteract students' tendencies toward emotive modes of thinking. Hence, our discussion now turns to the aims that guided the production decision for *CAPH* to employ a story form framework.

#### THE EPIC NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN *CAPH*

"It is striking how tremendous the stories are. You don't need to be an expert in television to bring the stories to life. It's like finding gold lying on the beach" (Starowicz, cited in Clark, 2002, n.p.). One of the appealing characteristics of *CAPH* is its use of a narrative approach to portray the sweep of Canadian history. A storytelling framework was chosen for the express purpose of cultivating imagination and emotive empathy. Stories, Starowicz believes, create a level of interest unattainable through other means. "There is a reason we tell stories. A hush falls on a room when someone says, 'Let me tell you a story,' or 'Let me give you an example'" (Starowicz, cited in Clark, 2002, n.p.). Stories engage readers intuitively because stories evoke emotive empathy.

In his 2003 book, *Making History*, which describes the process of production, Starowicz further explicates his rationale for using a narrative approach. His aim was to humanize history. Viewers would hear the actual words of both common and famous people, as recorded in extant documents, and spoken by actors in period costume. Events would also be recreated. The effect would be that of a story in which "the power of literature [would be imbued] with the authority of history" (p. 147). People of the past would have the emotional impact of characters in novels, and events would be displayed dramatically rather than through the more traditional didactic documentary approach. Story form would thus invoke the imagination and stir emotive empathy, the fundamental guide for Starowicz's production decisions.

Canadian journalist Robert Fulford was one influence on the thinking of Mark Starowicz and his production team. Starowicz recounts hearing a Fulford lecture, "The Triumph of Narrative," on CBC Radio. Fulford identified storytelling as the ultimate narrative device.

Those who make news into narratives, and those who read or watch or otherwise absorb them, are appropriately responding to a human necessity. . . . Stories are the building blocks of human thought; they are the way the brain organizes itself. . . . Narrative gives us a way to feel empathy for others. (cited in Starowicz, 2003, p. 154)

Elsewhere, Fulford (1999) notes that "by imitating our own life experience, narrative gives us a way to absorb past events on an emotional as well as an intellectual level" (p. 38).

The question – Does it move the narrative forward? – became the selection criterion for inclusion in the program. For this reason, historians were not given screen time, although they did act as consultants on the script (with no guarantee their advice would be taken). According to Starowicz, "[Academic] history is essentially an analytical, not a narrative discipline. Narrative historians are a controversial minority. We need good storytellers" (cited in Clark, 2002, n.p.). The producers viewed interjection by historians to analyze evidence or suggest alternative interpretations as obstacles to the flow of the narrative. Gordon Henderson, a senior producer, commented in the video which describes the making of the series, "I would rather see the narrative driven; I'd rather see the story kept alive. We want to avoid history class. We want to keep telling stories" (Starowicz & Rinn, 2000, videorecording). In fact, the producers were dismissive of historians. Henderson says, "I think one of the really cool things about the series is that we don't have historians that come on, analysts that come on, with a tie on, and a tweed jacket, and a bookcase behind explaining what we just saw, giving you perspective" (Starowicz & Rinn, 2000, videorecording). Starowicz (2003) refers to "snoring academics," (p. 104) probably intending to refer to the audience rather than the historians. He added, "We are not interested in having a floating Supreme Court of historians passing judgments on events" (p. 121).

The decision to use a story form framework creates potential for audience appeal as well as a possible platform for learning. This



approach is endorsed by Canadian professor of education Kieran Egan (1986) who, in his argument for teaching through story form, explains that the organizing schemata of stories provide the most natural approach for structuring learning, a method that people find inherently interesting because stories rely on themes to which students can most easily relate. Egan (1999) believes that it is with the "transcendent human qualities . . . such qualities as courage, ingenuity, patience, power and so on that students associate" (p. 312). In a similar vein, Starowicz speaks of the importance of Shakespearean themes to develop a strong narrative. "It's love, it's hope, it's failure, and that's universal" (Starowicz & Rinn, 2000, videorecording). Both recognize that broad themes touch all humanity and therefore serve to connect audiences, or students, with the past.

Egan and Starowicz both use dramatic tension as a device. Starowicz (2003) argues that contrasting themes such as "good and evil, love and hate, honour and betrayal" (p. 147) stir interest and create suspense. Likewise, Egan (1986) observes that "Embedded in the story or embodied by the story are conflicts between good and bad, courage and cowardice, fear and security and so on" (p. 26). These "binary opposites" (p. 26) parallel the manner in which children learn: first understanding, for example, cold and hot and then proceeding towards mediating positions such as warm. Indeed, for Egan, guiding students from the extremes of binaries towards moderating points defines learning. "Because our aim is educational . . . we should be seeking mediation of the binary opposites we start with" (p. 28). Although Egan encourages teachers to find binaries that will promote the greatest interest by being most dramatic in difference, the educational motive differs from television entertainment that aims to engage and thus to find conflicts that will hold viewer interest through several episodes. Just as Starowicz (2003) aims to tell "stories of ordinary men and women elevated to the extraordinary when caught in the churning current of history and confronted by" (p. 147) dramatic conflict and Shakespearean themes, so Egan (1999) argues that "We create a sense of the heroic when we emphasize those qualities that overcome the everyday constraints that hem us in" (p. 312). The heroic qualities of characters, given their

universal appeal, therefore serve to further promote empathy in the viewer for people of the past.

Starowicz has thus recognized and applied the very attributes of story form that Egan views as holding great educational potential. For Starowicz, however, such themes and characterizations serve primarily as devices to drive the narrative through the evoking of emotive empathy. For him, "The drama of hope, and love, and war, and loss" (Starowicz & Rinn, 2000, videorecording) brings appeal across culture, location and time. But, for Egan (1986), story form helps us to "make sense of the world and experience 'affectively' no less than 'cognitively'" (p. 29). Here Egan and Starowicz part. Egan endorses story form as a powerful strategy to move students along a path toward cognitive understanding; whereas Starowicz's purpose is more limited. His intention is to evoke emotive empathy in his viewers as a tool to promote engagement with the story of history.

To further elucidate the differences between the purposes of Starowicz and Egan, we turn to Seixas and Peck (2004), who point out that

historical film, historical reconstructions and historical fiction are all designed to sweep their audiences into an apparent past. When successful, the audiences imagine . . . that they are experiencing history as historical people experienced it, that they have a direct window showing what the past looked like, felt like, and what it meant. . . . [S]chool history has a different objective and . . . it should come at history from an entirely different angle. While these genres aim to sweep students in, school history should provide students with the ability to approach historical narratives critically—precisely the opposite of being swept in. (p. 109)

A focus on narrative, while engaging, suggests problems for students in cultivating historical empathy because it encourages them to access personal experiences rather than cognitive tools to make judgments.

The other, and more central, problem with the decision to prohibit the intrusion of historians into narrative is that it avoids letting students in on the messiness of history. As Keith Barton (1996) reminds us,

History isn't a story; stories are simply one way of talking about the past, and any single story invariably involves selection, simplification, and distortion . . . . Much of the business of history, in fact, is argumentation over whose selective interpretation is best; presenting history to children as 'a story' independent of

human intention is an unconscionable misrepresentation of how historical knowledge is created. (p. 403)

He says that school history should not reinforce students' existing view that history is a single, linear story. Historian Veronica Strong-Boag, who was a consultant for the series, (although she probably does not wear a tweed jacket or tie), endorsed this view when she commented that she would have liked to see "the senior consultants, Ramsay Cook and Jean-Claude Robert, interviewed on air to give a sense that there's a debate, say, about [native chief] Tecumseh. I think it's gripping to know that people are willing to slash and burn in disagreement" (cited in Conlogue, 2000, p. R5). School history must acknowledge competing narratives.

#### ABORIGINAL REPRESENTATIONS IN *CAPH* AND EMOTIVE EMPATHY

In *CAPH*, the goal of evoking emotive empathy guided fundamental production decisions that had impact on the representation of Aboriginal peoples. In this section of our article, we will examine how *CAPH* addresses Aboriginal peoples in two periods: pre- and early contact.

##### *Pre-Contact History: Aboriginal Storytellers*

As *CAPH* unfolds, it adjusts tactics used to describe the Aboriginal experience. Each tactic reflects the historiographic record of the period in question. In the pre-contact period, the only sources of knowledge about Aboriginal people lie in oral history, in relics, and in other traces of the past such as pictographs. In this period, the tactic was to use Aboriginal storytellers, who transcend time, to relate mythological and traditional accounts of pre-European Canada by speaking directly to the camera. Because direct interjection of expert authority had been rejected, viewpoints other than that of the storyteller-narrator are absent. The strategy is well suited to the narrative story form structure. However, this decision limits opportunities for provoking historical empathy.

This strategy results in some confusion. The series introduction indicates that "All the events portrayed in this history actually happened. All the people you see actually lived" (*CAPH* vol. 1). However, pre-contact episodes depict no specific, named Aboriginal

person who is actually known to have lived. Instead actors play anonymous storytellers who relate accounts and myths taken from oral tradition. Given the opening claim, this strategy is confusing. Were the storytellers historical people who actually spoke these words? *CAPH* blurs the boundaries of historicity when the same storytellers appear later in early contact episodes. To which period do the storytellers belong? Did their ancestors pass along descriptions of early contact incidents as they had myth? Were these accounts then recorded by Europeans and put into the mouths of the earlier storytellers for narrative impact? Or, were they created by producers to fill a gap in the story? None of this is made clear by the narrator, who functions as a device to drive the narrative rather than providing academic commentary and analysis – the perceived enemy of storytelling.

Starowicz (2003) indicated, “our series would use no historians on the air, because we wanted to stay ‘in the period.’ We wanted to write it as if all the incertitude of the moment were still alive, with the audience having no idea how things would turn out” (pp. 89 – 90). The goal of achieving emotive empathy for period characters serves to diminish the series’ explanatory power because primary sources are employed merely as props to support the narrative, rather than as evidence with potential to illuminate viewers’ understanding. For instance, in the first episode we see fur-covered Aboriginal mourners, somewhere in northeast Labrador, placing a body into a grave. The narrator explains how the mourners placed stone spearheads into the tomb and laid a boulder on the body “as if to keep it there” (*CAPH* vol. 1). They raised the snout and tusks of a walrus over the grave while the narrator comments, “Little is known about who [the walrus hunters] were” (*CAPH* vol. 1). Yet, she provides the interpretation that “They left a sign that speaks to the ages. In the face of death the walrus hunters had affirmed that this was their place and that they would live on.” Is this consistent with the historical record? The narrator, concerned with driving the story, fails to describe what archaeologists have inferred from the artifacts these people left behind. It is difficult to accept “speaking to the ages” as the walrus hunters’ intention. Has more been made of the evidence? We cannot know because the storytelling approach prevents the narrator from explaining what archeologists and historians have to say. In

presenting an implausible motive, certainly one not easily inferred from the relics featured in the episode, the narrator presents an incomplete portrayal and a puzzling interpretation. Although viewers may achieve a degree of emotive empathy for the walrus hunters, they are no closer to historical empathy. Viewers lack the contextual detail required to place themselves into the perspective of the walrus hunters because engaging experts who could propose alternative explanations does not fit the narrative structure.

Historian Jonathan Vance (2000) points out that the reliance on actors and a narrator who tells, but who does not analyze, requires the viewer to take what is presented at face value. He uses, as an example, the case of John Jewitt, one of two English sailors captured by the Nootka at the turn of the nineteenth century, following the slaughter of their fellow crew members. Vance explains that there were two book versions of Jewitt's story: one published in 1807 by Jewitt himself, and a second, "a much-embellished 1815 version, probably written by Richard Alsop, a Connecticut millionaire with a taste for adventure" (n.p.). Vance notes that many of the events viewers see depicted in *CAPH*, such as a dance that preceded the massacre of crew members, and Chief Maquinna in irons, appear in the Alsop account, but are not in Jewitt's original account of his adventures. Vance asks: "Did they actually occur, or were they products of Mr. Alsop's fertile mind? Despite the credence the actor portrayal lends to the tale, we simply don't know" (n.p.) The viewer, who is not informed of this discrepancy between the two accounts, or even that there is a second embellished account, assumes that the version of events presented on screen is well supported by historical evidence. Why not inform viewers of this controversy, so they can begin to see that historical accounts are contested and that what we call history may or may not have happened in the way we choose to think it did?

*Early Contact History: The Problem of Perspective*

In the early contact period, *CAPH* takes a different tack. Here the main sources of knowledge are European documentation. To propel the narrative, actors representing Europeans speak directly to the camera and utter words actually written by, or attributed to, their historical

counterparts. In contrast, Aboriginal individuals, including those whose existence is recorded, have no voice. When Aboriginal people do speak, it is either through the Aboriginal storyteller, or in non-translated native dialect. For example, even though actors play the roles of the Iroquois chief, Donnacona, his sons Domagaya and Taignaogny, the Beothuk Shawnadithit, and the Nootka chief Maquinna, they speak only in Aboriginal languages. Possibly, this limited portrayal indicates ignorance of what Aboriginal Canadians actually said: we only know the perspectives attributed to them by Europeans.

The primary sources represented in this period are European, such as the journals of explorer Jacques Cartier and Newfoundland merchant William Cormack. Therefore, viewers learn the opinions of Aboriginal peoples through interpretations offered by European characters and the voice of the narrator. The result is an empathetic distance from Aboriginal peoples and a sense of proximity to Europeans. The decision is odd. André Thevet, the French King's cosmographer, recorded the last words of Donnacona. Why not allow the elder chieftain to speak them? Perhaps Starowicz is attempting to be true to history: if we do not know the actual words of historical people, than the respective actors should not offer them. Yet, if this is the case, the principle is not applied consistently because the fictional storyteller device is used to provide native perspectives on contact. The most prominent example is the use of the Salish storyteller who, having earlier related a pre-contact myth, relates an account of first contact with Captain Cook's ship. The storyteller says,

The people went out to the ship. They thought they was [sic] looking at fish come alive into people. They were taking a real good look at these white people on the deck there. One white man had a real hooked nose and one of the people said to another, "See he must have been a dog salmon, that one there, he's got a hooked nose." (Starowicz, 2000, CAPH, vol. 1)

The storyteller goes on to relate:

The people started talking our language to them, telling them to go around the sound to drop anchor. They were saying, "*nu-tka-isim, nu-tka-ism*" which means, you go around the harbour. Captain Cook says, "They're telling us the name of the place is Nootka." And that's how Nootka got its name." (CAPH vol. 1)

The use of the storyteller device in this context is strange. When actors representing real people do not speak the words attributed to them by Europeans, why have fictitious characters relate such specific accounts? The strategy becomes confusing. Although earlier, the storytellers had related orally transmitted myth, what is the source of the account of Cook's arrival in Nootka? Did a bilingual Aboriginal or Englishman, happening to be at Nootka, actually hear Cook's words and those of the anonymous villagers and later relate them? This seems unlikely. Was this particular storyteller an actual person? Did Cook record an account of this interaction? The source is unclear. This situation leads one to conclude that this account was created by a scriptwriter; however, the narrator has assured viewers that all the people represented actually lived and the words spoken by them actually were uttered. How can students actually use such an account to understand early contact events if the account itself is dubious? How can even emotive empathy be cultivated if students cannot ascertain the origin of the perspective being relayed? The attempt to humanize the Nootka by relating villagers' casual discussions could in fact produce the opposite reaction, calling into question the authenticity of the account or create empathy for a perspective not actually held at the time. Rather than fictionalizing accounts to fill gaps in the narrative and to create emotive empathy, the use of historians to analyze the available evidence would be helpful as a way to promote the development of historical empathy.

By the end of episode two, all words spoken in English (or French in the French version) by historical characters have been uttered only by Europeans. Through European words we understand Aboriginal people during the contact era. All Europeans have names and identities and speak to us directly, but all Aboriginals who speak are anonymous and those with names do not speak. Lacking written sources that record Aboriginal people's early words coupled with the determination to avoid use of historical interpretation may serve to limit viewers' historical empathy by reducing the available strategies by which setting, motivation, and perspective might be understood. Although the storytelling strategy may drive the narrative, it is more likely to assist in the achievement of historical empathy for early European explorers and settlers who have left behind much documentation while undermining

the effort to build historical empathy for Aboriginal peoples for whom Europeans speak.

The third phase of continuous contact, which we will not examine here, is handled much differently. Here Aboriginal peoples actually do speak to the camera in words that have been recorded in primary sources. Thus there is no need for the storyteller. Alternative perspectives, that might be provided by historians, are still avoided.

<b>Pre-Contact</b>	<b>Early Contact</b>	<b>Continuing Contact</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The only Aboriginal people who speak are storytellers.</li> <li>- Storytellers (a narrative device) are the only source of insight because of decision to exclude historians.</li> <li>- Primary sources are treated like props – support the narrative but do not provide insight.</li> <li>- The narrative neglects opportunities to build historical empathy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotive empathy is nurtured toward Europeans, who speak for themselves.</li> <li>- Understanding of, and empathy for, Aboriginal perspectives is mediated through Europeans because Aboriginal characters (e.g., actual named individuals such as Donnacona) speak in dialect.</li> <li>- Anonymous Aboriginal storytellers and European characters drive the narrative.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aboriginals have acquired a voice. They speak for themselves in English and address the camera.</li> </ul>

*Figure 2*  
*Mediating Aboriginal Perspectives*



*Aboriginal Peoples as Mysterious Holders of Mysterious Knowledge*

Engendering historical empathy for Aboriginal peoples may be further inhibited by the themes that drive the story of early contact: natives are mysterious and contact with them leads inexorably to conflict. If binary opposites obtain with regard to Aboriginal people in *CAPH*, they would be mystery / discovery and war / peace. These binaries place the theme of tension between Europeans and Aboriginal people at the centre of Canadian history; whereas another selection might drive inquiry towards a more complete understanding of the nature of Aboriginal society and culture. Kieran Egan (1986) suggests the binary of survival/loss for this purpose.

Perhaps to convey the momentous challenge that Europeans encountered in exploring the New World, *CAPH* takes pains to emphasize the secretive nature of the land and the mysteries embodied in its inhabitants, who are the gatekeepers of the continent. The first episode refers to the mysterious nature of Aboriginal people no fewer than six times. In the opening sequence, the narrator discusses the "land of mystery" as viewers watch native peoples canoe past. This image is repeated in the next two episodes when the narrator refers to "the great river that unlocks its [the continent's] secrets" and states that "the French need allies and teachers if they are to unlock the secrets of this land" (*CAPH* Vol. 2). The association of the mysterious land with Aboriginal people permeates the early contact narrative. Shawnadithit, who "stumbled out of a land of ghosts," is deemed the holder of "the key to a great mystery" of not merely "the Beothuk [who] had always been mysterious" (*CAPH* Vol. 1) but, amazingly of Aboriginal origins. In employing the story of Shawnadithit to segue a discussion of Aboriginal migration from Asia, the series implies that the last living Beothuk held such insight. Reinforcing this image, *CAPH* depicts the Beothuk as stoically "proud and cautious" (vol. 1) in the face of distress. Problems for historical empathy emerge when peoples are represented stereotypically or as other than they were.

## LAND OWNERSHIP AND CONFLICT

The binary opposites of war and peace, which centre on the theme of conflict, are used to promote the story's narrative progression. In an

interesting manifestation of the theme of conflict, Starowicz and company explain the Aboriginal conception of land ownership in European terms. This strategy is engaging and promotes emotive empathy but does not serve to facilitate historical empathy in which students would come to understand the concept of property held by Aboriginal people at that time.

In the first episode, the series attempts to establish that prior to European contact, Canada was already “a continent of nations.” The narrator explains that land was “claimed by hundreds of tribes . . . They knew the land as their own . . . Canada” (*CAPH* vol. 1). A map of native regions with tribal groups labeled on specific locations accompanies the commentary. This serves to reinforce a European understanding of property that is delineated and claimed. The storyteller explains, “Nappi said, ‘here I’ll mark you off a piece of ground . . .’ Then he said, ‘There is your land. . . . When people come to cross the line, take your bows and arrows and give them battle and keep them out. If they gain a footing, trouble will come to you’” (*CAPH*, vol. 1). Thus, *CAPH* establishes a strong conception of property, understood very much in European terms. (Again, this segment is problematic in that viewers do not know who the storyteller is nor the extent to which the related myth has been tailored to propel the narrative.) *CAPH* does not explain Aboriginal understandings of property. Many tribal populations made improvements to the land in which they lived, some groups used land only seasonally, and others used the land communally, having no sense of private property (Ray, 1997). *CAPH* does not explicitly explain differences from European conceptions of property and analyze the potential for conflict inherent in such differences. Rather, the conflict over property is conveyed through the lens of a European conceptual framework. Developing an understanding of Aboriginal property conceptions could permit students to empathize with their plight in a richer way, and more fully understand what led Europeans to make the claims that they did.

The producers seem deliberately to embellish the concept of European-Aboriginal conflict over property. For instance, in describing the meeting of Cartier and Donnacona, the narrator claims that “Cartier recognized an adversary when he saw one.” The series quotes Cartier’s

interpretation of Donaconna's behavior, "He pointed to the land all about as if to say that the region belonged to him. And we ought not to set up the cross without his permission" (*CAPH*, vol. 1). The narrator explains neither how Cartier, apparently having no translator, nonetheless understood Donaconna's meaning, nor how Donaconna, without a European paradigm, would have understood the significance of the planted cross.

#### TEACHING HISTORICAL EMPATHY

Seixas (2002) points out that vehicles such as film, community commemorations, and popular music can "arouse interest, involvement, and imagination by propagating myth and heritage. They are often—indeed almost always—more dramatically convincing, more appealing, more technologically current, or more persuasive than what can be offered up within the wall of a classroom" (n.p.). He goes on to say that schools must promote a critical engagement with the past. Teachers who use the series in class should consider the impact that a story-like narrative has on historical understanding and whether, on its own, it can overturn students' ahistorical approaches to history. This is especially true when considering the sensitive issue of how to represent Aboriginal people. It falls to the teacher who elects to use *CAPH* in the classroom to promote strategies that will help students progress from emotive to historical forms of empathy.

Foster (2001) offers approaches to "translat[e] historical empathy into meaningful classroom practice" (p. 175). As a starting point, he suggests that a teacher pose a puzzling or paradoxical situation to which students may initially respond by sharing opinions and ideas. For example, after viewing *CAPH* to the end of Volume Two, the teacher might ask: Why did many Aboriginal groups respond to the disruptive arrival of Europeans by providing assistance in the European endeavour of exploration and conquest rather than by doing everything possible to inhibit their success? Students may hypothesize answers. However, before directly addressing the question, Foster advises that students form research teams to investigate relevant contextual information. In this particular context, this might include aspects of the economic bases of Aboriginal lifestyles and the appeal of the new, technologically

superior trade goods. Students should be introduced to a wide range of relevant primary and secondary sources to investigate the question. For example, students could explore internet resources such as websites of the Archaeological Survey of Canada or Musée McCord Museum, which provide visual traces as well as academic analyses. They should be encouraged to ask critical questions concerning the authenticity of the primary sources, and the validity of the interpretations in the secondary source analyses. For example, of secondary source analyses, such questions might include: Who created the source? For what purpose was it created? What perspective is taken? How does this impact the interpretation? Whose perspectives are omitted? Do other sources support this one? How do the authors' purposes differ? What kinds of historical evidence are used in each case? Is it simply a matter of believing one or the other account? Is one account more credible than the other? What makes it so? By doing this, students will develop their analytical capacity and will come to view *CAPH* as only one source, and certainly not as an exact representation of what really happened. Teachers should also ask questions that invite students to probe their initial understandings. In addition, they should encourage students to ask which assumptions or biases influence their own interpretations of their sources.

Students should then identify the sources that will be most fruitful for developing a thoughtful response to the question that has been posed and use those sources to construct a narrative account. As Foster points out, "Requiring each student to write a narrative account is an important, if difficult, final assignment for young people. Fundamentally, this requires students to marshal available evidence in order to construct an explanatory account out of past action—the ultimate task of any historian" (p. 177). Finally, students should be reminded that their conclusions should be regarded as tentative and may not be in agreement with those of classmates, or even historians. There should be discussion as to why this is the case. Foster notes, "Central to this discussion should be deliberations about the availability and reliability of evidence, how contemporary perspectives and 'presentism' may distort understandings of the past, and how new and emerging evidence might influence previous assertions about the past" (p. 178).

Foster cautions that “engaging students in meaningful empathy inquiry requires considerable classroom time, energy, and resources” (p. 178). The role of the teacher in this process is, of course, crucial.

An essential strategy for promoting historical empathy is to explicitly discuss its characteristics and how it differs from emotive empathy. *CAPH* provides a platform for such a discussion. Teachers can help students analyze segments to determine which form of empathy is being promoted. Where a segment appeals to emotive empathy, teachers can guide students to use their contextual research to rewrite the segment, applying the tools of historical empathy. Alternatively, by deliberately discussing the characteristics of historical empathy, students can themselves analyze the extent to which their perceptions are shaped by rich evidence and a range of perspectives or the extent to which emotive empathy has shaped their understanding. In this manner, the use of *CAPH* may involve a metacognitive exercise in which students analyze their own thinking. *CAPH* may then serve as a tool to practise historical criticism and as a means to shift student empathy from emotive to historical as students analyze their own viewpoints on the emotive – historical empathy continuum.

#### CONCLUSION

There has been a paucity of film resources available for use in teaching Canadian history. *Canada: A People's History* is visually rich, portrays experiences of groups which have often been absent in the past, and makes extensive use of primary sources that do not seem to have been accessible before. It is no wonder that it is finding its way into the history classrooms of the nation. And so it should.

However, it is crucial to remember that the job of the history teacher extends beyond mere engagement with historical narratives. The question here for history teachers is how to take the story of Canadian history, as presented through the medium of a television series, and use it most effectively in the context of a critical disciplinary approach to history. By relying on emotive empathy to drive the narrative, the producers risk diminishing its potential to promote the development of historical empathy. The decision to explicitly avoid the use of expert analysis to contextualize the story historically has made for an engaging

presentation, as intended by the producers. However, in the process, the problematic nature of historical sources is not made evident and alternative explanations for, and interpretations of, events and actions are not presented. There is the danger that students will interpret what they view as a faithful representation of what really happened. This is especially true when Aboriginal peoples are represented in the pre and early contact phases of Canadian history.

Teachers who elect to use *CAPH* in their classrooms can do so most effectively by utilizing it as one of many resources, examining a range of perspectives, helping students to understand the different strategies and impacts of narrative approaches, and explicitly analyzing the manner in which emotive empathy shapes this historical account. Historical empathy provides the key to moving students beyond emotive empathy to a rich understanding of historical agents and the contexts in which they lived, while also recognizing the vast distance between them as historical investigators and the historical agents and events they are investigating.

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