

“Parallels”: Social justice through artmaking and the archives

Sheetal Prasad, York University, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Inspired by Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom (1997-2008), I created a series of photographic prints in 2019 called *Sheila and the...* (Figures 1-3) depicting in the foreground (in colour) my alter ego named “Sheila” against a black and white background of a historical event. Using a similar format, *Parallels: Sheetal and the...* (2022) (Figures 4-6) speaks to the shift that many have witnessed since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both series address the ongoing cycles of historical events and colonial violence. I posit that by engaging in history through artmaking, students can better understand the cycles of colonial narratives and navigate social justice issues in our lived experiences.

Keywords: *collage, archives, a/r/tography, social justice and art*

Sheetal Prasad is a Ph.D. candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her current research examines representation within Canadian history classrooms for secondary schooling and how history textbooks can be intervened through multimodal learning and engagement.

Introduction

In many Canadian and World Studies classrooms, there is a disassociation between colonial Canadian history studies, students' lived experiences, and cycles of colonialism. This disassociation seeps its way into our everyday lives and institutions (Kothari, 2006, p. 235). One way to address this disassociation in history classrooms is through collage art or other artistic mediums. By introducing creative ways of inquiring about history, students can articulate and engage with history and recognize patterns of colonialism and social justice issues. For instance, French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss' (1966) concept of *bricolage* describes the method of finding and recombining objects to create new meanings and narratives. Additionally, education and technology scholar Mark Hofer and curriculum scholar Kathleen Owings Swan (2005) describe how photo manipulation can perform the critical work of educating others and can be used as a social commentary. Education theorist Maxine Greene (2000) calls for classrooms to use imagination as a form of inquiry.

My most recent work, *Parallels: Sheetal and the...* (Prasad, 2022), builds on a previous project titled *Sheila and the...* (Prasad, 2019), where I experimented with the concept of *bricolage* to juxtapose the current cycle of major events with past cycles of historical events. I present a social justice-oriented narrative by combining the two cycles rather than presenting side-by-side depictions of repeating historical events (Yee, 2007). In both projects, I utilized a/r/tography—(a)rtmaking, (r)esearching, (t)eaching—to combine inquiry, research, and artmaking (Irwin et al., 2006) to highlight crucial social justice issues, such as gender, race, and class. A/r/tography can disrupt the notion of childhood innocence (Garlen, 2020) that has seeped its way into secondary schools (Owen, 2020, p. x) by having students engage with and confront social justice issues through inquiry and artmaking practices. This paper outlines the process of making collage-like

works and the ways in which *bricolage*-based methods can be used in classrooms to engage students with social justice issues.

***Sheila and the...*, photographic collage series, 2019**

In my original project *Sheila and the...* (Figures 1-3), I was inspired to use photo manipulation based on the work of Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom, who utilized this method to create social commentaries and bring issues surrounding Thailand and the Thai government to light (Musikawong, 2010). From his *Pink Man* collection (Sriwanichpoom, 1997-2018), Sriwanichpoom's *Horror in Pink* (2001) prints combine the photographs of the October Massacres in Thailand with a superimposed brightly dressed man with an equally bright shopping cart. This piece showcased the Thai government's indifference and lack of transparency about the massacres (Musikawong, 2010). TIME journalist Feliz Solomon (2016) highlights the memorial of student activism on October 6, which currently has become a taboo subject in Thailand. On October 6, 1976, "state forces massacred scores of student activists on the lawn of Bangkok's Thammasat University" and ever since, conversations about the massacres have been deemed taboo (Solomon, 2016). Silencing events like the October Massacres and those described throughout this paper allows the state and state-created systems to continually perpetuate violence and trauma, such as institutional racism and gender-based discrimination.

Like Sriwanichpoom, in my work *Sheila and the...*, I engaged in social commentary by positioning my alter ego Sheila in different historical contexts in Canada by manipulating photographs from the *Toronto Star* Archives. I wanted my alter ego to be oblivious to her surroundings or seem bored or indifferent to convey the appearance of ignorance towards cycles of colonialism. My choice to put the character in the foreground in colour, like Sriwanichpoom's format, catches the eye of the viewer and immerses them into their own internal analysis, opinions,

and realizations about the historical events in the background. My association with “Sheila” started during my undergraduate studies as a fake English name I used to make ordering coffee easier for the baristas who struggled to pronounce my name. Sheila then manifested into an alter ego, who was the opposite of how I describe myself. Sheila is an ignorant, unaware, and imperceptive gaslighter. She emerged in my performance art piece as a travel agent trying to sell the idea of an idyllic, fun-filled, touristy Canada. Sheila is then juxtaposed with myself (Sheetal), who knows the truth that Canada has a history of colonial violence that is swept under the rug by the tourism industry and other industries and institutions with an interest in selling Canada as an idyllic nation.

The series *Sheila and the...* was created to draw attention to historical events that are often overlooked. For example, colonial powers refused to enlist racialized individuals until the Military Service Act of 1917. The series aimed to force viewers to examine their understanding of the historical context behind the piece or make their own interpretations through the provided visual cues. For example, in Figures 1-2, the two photographs depicting soldiers are visual indicators of war. The soldiers wearing this style of gas mask indicate that this took place during the Second World War (Figure 1), while cannons were also commonly used during that time (Figure 2). Viewers may also interpret Sheila’s presence as a grim reminder that some students are desensitized to historical traumas.



Figure 1: Prasad, S. (2019). *Sheila and the Gas Mask Men* (series). [found archival image with collage] Toronto, Ontario, Canada.



Figure 2: Prasad, S. (2019). *Sheila and the Cannon Man* (series). [found archival image with collage]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada



Figure 3: Prasad, S. (2019). *Sheila and the Flying Chair* (series). [found archival image with collage]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Through this work, I provoke viewers to do their own analysis to interpret what the pieces mean. People who analyze or interpret historical events with photographs may develop deeper understandings of complex social issues surrounding memory, memorialization, and censorship. If viewers do not come to their own understanding of the events shown, they often inquire or seek answers as to what they are witnessing. In history classrooms, students can also precipitate further discussions on social issues such as gender, race, and class by connecting archival photographs to present-day issues that we currently face, such as comparing slavery in Canada and contemporary

violence against the Black community, history of immigration in Canada and contemporary issues facing refugees and immigrants, and women's rights from 1900s onwards and the current status of women's rights today. Students in Grade 9 history classrooms are taught Canadian history from 1914 onwards, which should open discussions on gender, race, and class relations. Analyzing historical photographs and artworks can allow students to make connections to their lived experiences. I forgot about my 2019 series until 2022, when we witnessed events such as the pandemic and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States of America (Quinn, 2022). These events made me think about similar historical events, such as the Great Influenza epidemic in the early 1900s. I decided to expand upon this series to highlight these parallels.

Parallels: Sheetal and the..., photographic collage series, 2022

My current series (Figures 4-6), *Parallels: Sheetal and the...* (2022), utilizes *bricolage* similarly my 2019 series *Sheila and the...*, except without Sheila. The series touches on sociocultural shifts that many have witnessed since the start of the pandemic, specifically the overwhelming resurgence of Asian hate, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by addressing emerging social justice issues such as vaccination initiatives, workers' rights, and women's rights.

The first photo in *Parallels* addresses Asian hate and discrimination from the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Figure 4) until now. This photograph is a celebratory photograph of Prime Minister (PM) John A. McDonald hammering in the last spike of the railway, indicating that it is complete. In my representation, I—in my racialized form as Sheetal—am depicted lying on the ground below where the PM would be hammering in the last spike—looking almost as if I am about to be killed. This piece is a social commentary on the darker history of Canada's use of indentured labourers from China—they were paid very little, and their working conditions were

horrid. An estimate of over 600 Chinese migrant workers died during the construction of the railway—their stories, faces, and struggles are pushed aside in favour of a more celebratory narrative like the one in the photograph of PM McDonald (Lavallé, 2021).



Figure 4: Prasad, S. (2022). *Parallels: Sheetal and the railway* (series). [found archival image with collage]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The second photo (Figure 5) may look familiar to many. For the past two years, we have been in a pandemic and the importance of hygiene has become a massive discussion. The one statement I have heard on social media and through my interactions with people is that they say, “people in the past never had to social distance!” However, this is not true. In 1918, Canada experienced a pandemic that wreaked havoc around the world during the First World War (Mlynaryk & Makovac, 2020). It was previously known as the Spanish Flu (now known as the Great Influenza epidemic). Even though its origins are unknown, the racist assumption was made that the flu originated in Spain. 50, 000 Canadians lost their lives to the influenza pandemic, while globally, between 20-100 million lives were lost (Mlynaryk & Makovac, 2020). During the pandemic of 1918, the Medical Officer of Health issued mandates such as hand washing and hygiene, mask-wearing, absenteeism (social distancing), lockdowns, shutdowns, and vaccines, as you see in the background of the photo in Figure 5 (Mlynaryk & Mokovac, 2020). These measures may sound familiar as we have been going through similar mandates since 2020. In the foreground of the photograph, I am depicted receiving a vaccine while the background presents a historiography of the fact that vaccines have been around for over one hundred years and continue to be tested for efficacy. This dichotomy echoes cycles of histories repeating themselves in the present day—the flu pandemic of 1918 echoes similarly to the COVID pandemic. I propose that history classrooms teach localized histories in schooling to reveal cycles of historical oppressions. Racialized history is silenced in favour of a more “pleasant” and patriotic (colonial) version of Canadian history. I propose a social-justice-oriented approach to the curriculum to discuss historical and social issues that students may relate to and engage with.



Figure 5: Prasad, S. (2022). *Parallels: Sheetal and the vaccine* (series). [found archival image with collage]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The final photograph (Figure 6) depicts a group of women sitting with stacks of newspapers. These women are members of the suffragette movement, which spearheaded the campaign for white women's right to vote in Canada and the United States. White women gained

voting rights in 1918 during the flu pandemic (Strong-Boag, 2021). In this piece, I chose to use the methods above to insert my racialized and gendered body into the archival photographs to become a grim reminder that the suffragette movement only protected the interests of white women in Canada. Separate campaigns were initiated to enfranchise other marginalized groups, such as movements for Black enfranchisement (1918) and Asian enfranchisement (1947-1949) (Courtney, 2020; Operation Black Vote Canada, 2020; South Asian Studies Institute, 2021). To put this gap into perspective, Indigenous women in Ontario did not gain the right to vote in provincial elections until the 1960s! (Courtney, 2020). In the following sections, I discuss why this kind of work is essential for history classrooms and student engagement.



Figure 6: Prasad, S. (2022). *Parallels: Sheetal and the suffragettes* (series). [found archival image with collage]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada

When history collides with artmaking...a method

The dichotomy between my body and the historical background has the potential to facilitate further explorations and engagements within history in classrooms. Hofer and Swan (2005) comment that “photographs can alter and magnify historical events...[and] can literally manipulate the lens with which viewers see the world” (Hofer & Swan, 2005, p. 290). I am inspired by the method of *Inserting details* and *Photomontage*, which are described by the authors as adding details or other photographs to change the meaning behind the original photo and its intended use (p. 291). I utilize this method in my series by inserting additional details (either myself or Sheila) in archival photographs that stray from what the colonial shutter tells us as viewers. My racialized body serves as a reminder that this railway has ghosts that are waiting to be acknowledged.

What does it mean to have a social justice classroom?

Through my engagements with *bricolage*, I advocate for a new method of teaching high school history that is taught intentionally through a social justice lens. Contrary to mainstream depictions of teachers, social-justice-oriented educators are not trying to create a classroom filled with “woke warriors”, but rather create a space that aims to allow students to become socially aware of their positionality within and outside the classroom. Why are social justice issues so taboo to discuss in secondary schools? One of the things I reflected on as an adult when thinking about my former high school education is how disconnected I was from social justice movements during the early 2010s, including LGBTQ+ movements, and workplace rights. Social justice movements surrounding race, gender, class, (dis)ability, and more are often shielded from youths and adolescents as a way to “preserve” the notion of innocence. According to youth studies scholar Julie C. Garlen (2020), many parents believe in childhood innocence; a notion constructed by Jean Jacques-Rousseau (1762, as cited in Foxley, 2019) where “childhood innocence was rooted in a

white, middle-class, Euro-centric and hetero-patriarchal worldview that excluded the lived realities of all but the most privileged...[and] fuelled concerns over child labour, health and education” (Garlen, 2020, para. 7). This notion of innocence is extended to adolescent years, perpetuating the idea that innocence should be prolonged as long as possible. This mentality allows for skewed thinking of what needs to be shielded from students to preserve their innocence.

The biggest issue with preserving innocence is that it perpetuates archaic Eurocentric beliefs that young people are to never learn about the ‘real world’ or that they are ‘too young to understand the ways of the world’, which is a false narrative that perpetuates cycles of ignorance and white supremacist thinking through the notion that history only exists in the past. Even though Garlen (2020) speaks about children, the notion of innocence can also apply to adolescents. Classrooms can potentially be sites of transformation through social justice work. Having students become aware of their positionality within and outside of classrooms can help foster buildable discussions and skills to help them advocate for themselves as well as others, navigate their own lived experiences, and create conditions for their fears, desires, and emotions to be seen and heard. By diverging from the notion of innocence, students and teachers can be in dialogue with one another to navigate complex or difficult knowledge, see patterns, and imagine ways to provide possibilities for solutions.

How can artmaking be used in classrooms?

Collage combines fragments of images to create a new but complex set of meanings (*bricolage*). In both of my series, I utilize the archive to find photographs that can then be manipulated or combined with photographs of myself or my alter-ego. This juxtaposition contradicts or comments on the historical events depicted in the photographs. Collage can then

bring forth fragmented narratives within history and the archives and create new narratives to be explored or analyzed.

Bricolage as a method does not necessarily apply to collage specifically but can be applied to other mediums. For example, media studies scholar Catherine Burwell (2013) utilized Johnathan McIntosh's 2009 video remix to discuss copyright laws and consent. In the video, McIntosh remixes Buffy from the titular series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Edward from the movie franchise, *Twilight*. In this remix, Edward's interactions with Buffy look very predatory and make the viewer feel uneasy or uncomfortable. Burwell's experiment with her class earned much discussion surrounding consent, safety, and copyright laws. Burwell (2013) states that "Critical discussion of digital texts and practices opens up possibilities for students to analyze their everyday media experiences, an important undertaking in a context in which young people's identities and worldview are increasingly shaped through digital texts and interactions" (p. 206). Students are constantly consuming images and have processed these images with their own assumptions, opinions, relatability, and feelings.

When thinking about how art can intertwine with social justice, education theorist Maxine Greene (2000) states that "Creation does not imply a making something out of nothing. It has to do with reshaping, renewing the materials at hand, very often the materials of our own lives, our experiences, our memories", and to do so, teachers and students need to have a "wide-awakening" and confront complex and difficult knowledge (p. 96). Allowing students to actively criticize and analyze social justice issues through images, media, and art better prepares them to deal with issues after graduating. By having students utilize art as a conduit for their expressions, desires, fears, and what they know, we can produce meaningful discussions surrounding complex or difficult knowledge or, complex and challenging cycles of historical events. *Bricolage*, as presented in my

works, is one of many ways in which students can engage with a history that is both generative and connected to their lived experiences. The future of history classrooms should no longer be a classroom that frames learning through statistics, dates, and impersonal narratives, but rather classrooms that transform the ways students think about historical events and civic duty.

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