



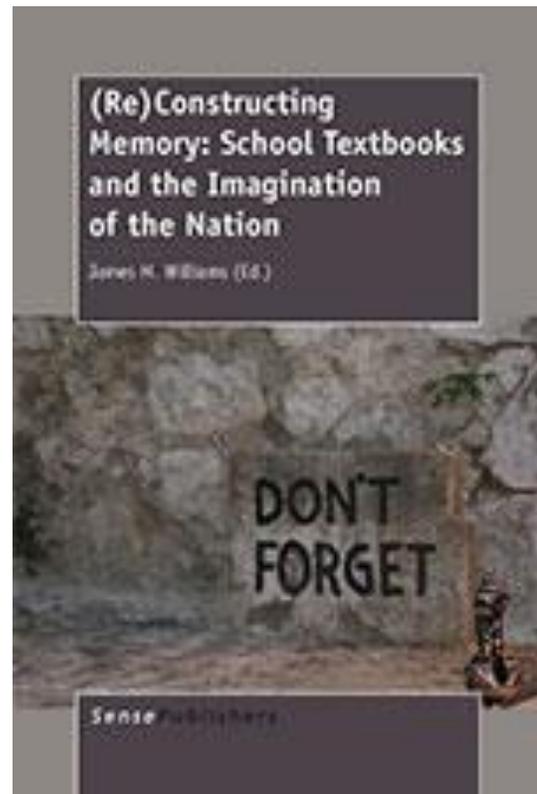
Williams, J. H. (2014). *(Re)Constructing memory: School textbooks and the imagination of the nation*. Washington, D. C.: Sense Publishers.

Pp. 356

ISBN: 9462096546

Reviewed by Mark Sinke  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
Canada

What is the relationship between school textbooks and the state's work of nurturing and forming national identities and consciousness? This is the question at the heart of this edited volume, the first in a series of three to be put out by Sense Publishers. Focusing on a variety of national contexts around the world, the contributors to this book use various methods and analyses to understand the specific ways that the formal curriculum in state textbooks is used to negotiate specific national circumstances that require a re-imagining of the nation by its citizens. The contexts examined could be post-genocide Cambodia, Ethiopia in an era of democratization, post-Soviet Ukraine, or Canada's remembering of the Second World War; in all cases the authors examine links between textbooks used in public schooling and the work of the nation-state to accomplish the "core civic work of schools...in response to threats to state legitimacy" (p. 2). This is how the volume is introduced and summarized by its editor, as an investigation into the role of textbooks as a tool for stabilizing the often unstable "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) of modern nation states.



To accomplish the goals of this volume, the editor has divided it into three sections, each focusing on a particular type of change that nation's face and the use of education in response to this change. The first section is titled: "Shoring up the state", and deals with challenges to the legitimacy of the state in five separate contexts of nation-building. The second section looks at "(Re)Imagining the nation after war", and engages questions dealing with conflict in the distant or recent past, or as an ongoing phenomenon as in the case of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Section three focuses on the change of political orders, either in newly-independent states or in contexts of ideological change where it is deemed necessary for textbooks to be used for "(Re)constructing the nation". Following these three sections (which include thirteen different chapters), a fourth section is added that seeks to conclude the discussion with answers to the question, "So what?" The three chapters in this section tie together the narratives and analyses of the previous articles and ask specific questions about the work of textbooks and the state, drawing answers and conclusions from the included works as a whole.

As is the case with many edited volumes, the content of this book varies greatly in its detail, focus, depth of analysis, forms of writing, and integration with theory. While some works focus very specifically on the methodological considerations of the context analysis that was carried out by the author on a set of textbooks, others place more emphasis on connections between the discourses of textbooks and those of the wider social/political context within which the textbooks are used. Additionally, some chapters dedicate most of their content to the conditions from which particular textbooks were developed and adopted for use in schools, while others focus instead on the overt and covert operations of the textbook images and narratives to formulate national imaginaries in students.

Given this diversity in writing and content, it could be argued that this book lacks clarity and connection between the works that are included, given the immense particularities of and differences between the national, historical, and political contexts analyzed. However the volume as a whole contributes a great deal to the specific discussion that it seeks to engage itself with, namely: how are textbooks used for

imagining nation-hood in response to challenges faced by nation-states around the world? Also, the introductory chapter as well as the three works in the concluding section prove extremely useful at connecting the major themes of the book together through the contributions of the various authors.

To give a the reader of this review a better idea of the works that are included in this volume, a few select chapters from the three main sections will be described here in more detail. Following that, the concluding arguments of the book set forward in the fourth section will be touched upon to give the reader a fuller understanding of the intentions of the authors and editor, and of the potential relevance of this volume to the reader's own area of study and work.

Chapter six is titled "Pedagogies of Space: (Re)mapping national territories, borders, and identities in Post-Soviet textbooks", and is written by three scholars who focus on the specific contexts of Armenia, Latvia, and Ukraine. In the process of post-Soviet national identification and imagination, the authors contend that "battles over borders and disputes about space – who *it belongs to* and *who belongs to it* – continue to rage in the vast territory of the former Soviet Union" (p. 103, emphasis original). To understand the role of textbooks in national imagining, Silova, Yaqub and Palandjian focus their attention on the early reading books that are used in public primary schooling, and they analyze how these readers represent: 1) the national landscape within the state, 2) boundaries and borders of the state, and 3) the mythology of the homeland that ties place to nationhood. Theoretically, the authors draw from Newman and Paasi's pedagogy of space (expanded to the plural *pedagogies of space* to make room for multiple, shifting, and changing institutional discourses of power) to allow an examination of the ways that national space is infused "with certain cultural, social, and national meanings" (p. 106). The application of this theoretical approach can be seen in the following brief example of the analysis that is contained within the chapter. For each of the three national cases examined, the internal landscapes of the nation-state are depicted in the official early readers as "almost exclusively natural and/or agricultural" (p. 113), which necessarily works to transmit an idyllic and rural national imaginary to the children who are using the readers in primary school. The authors argue that

this focus “could be the conscious rejection of the Soviet past associated with the triumph of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization over “peasant” life” (p. 115), and so the link is directly made between the often tenuous post-Soviet nation building process and the official discourses of power represented in the early reader textbooks. In the other areas of focus - boundaries/borders, and mythology of the homeland - these links are skillfully made by the authors, who conclude by arguing that the concept of pedagogies of space allows deeper understandings of the “complexity of post-Soviet nation-building projects, while making visible the ideological, tacitly accepted assumptions of national spatial categories inherent in the social production of national identities” (p. 123).

Belinno’s chapter titled “Whose past, whose present?: Historical memory among the “postwar” generation in Guatemala” provides a different form and context of analysis, as the author compares and contrasts differing narratives of the *Conflicto Armado* that exist among educators, parents, and students, alongside those found in official high-school textbooks. In his analysis of the official accounts of history in textbooks, the author echoes the themes that are present in an earlier chapter of the book by Friedrich in his analysis of post-dictatorship textbooks in Argentina, where the perpetrators of violence and subjugation are rejected as evildoers (or “devils” in the case of Guatemala) who have no connection or relation to the present-day citizens and leaders of the nation. Turning to the narratives from educators, parents, and students, the author finds much more nuanced and personal understandings of the past conflict, as teachers express their hesitancy to take on the complex social issues involved in teaching about the conflict. Similarly, parents find themselves having to negotiate the difficulties of memories from lived experiences that challenge or contradict the simplistic official discourses of the textbooks. High school students who study these textbooks, however, relate more easily to the present-day difficulties of facing crime and violence in their communities than to the past conflict experienced by the previous generation. In every case examined by the author of this work, the effect of the limited official discourses presented in textbooks has “relegated historical memory to the realm of unofficial spaces, where local

memory communities have preserved pre-existing social divisions between indigenous and ladinos and between army and guerrilla sympathizers, while also creating new fractures between those who are victims of past crimes and those who are victims of crimes committed in the present” (p. 149). In this case, therefore, the work of the school textbooks has been to silence meaningful discussion of the nation’s past in the realm of education, and as a result new challenges to nation-building have been opened up in the process.

The third section of the volume, which focuses on “(Re)constructing the nation”, is limited in its scope because each of the four chapters included examine a post-Soviet context (Lithuania, Russia, Armenia, and Ukraine). Two of these chapters are authored by scholars whose work was included earlier in the chapter on pedagogies of space, further limiting the breadth of contexts and approaches that are included in the volume. Work from other regions of the world that are undergoing a “dramatic political change” (the description of this section of the volume) could have been included – as they are in the other two sections - to broaden the comparative perspective for this volume as a whole. What has been included does however present useful contributions to the book and must not be dismissed. An example of this contribution is the chapter titled “An unimagined community?: Examining narratives of the Holocaust in Lithuanian textbooks” by Beresniová. By examining the discourses of school textbooks and workbooks on the Holocaust, the author situates the national conversations about the Second World War within the context of more recent engagements of the Lithuanian nation-state with its Soviet past. This analysis is used to help understand how the democratization of the nation opens and closes opportunities to relate to and remember difficult and violent pasts. In line with other chapters in this volume, the textbooks that were examined reflected a dissociation and distancing of the nation and its people with the violence of the past, as the perpetrators of the Holocaust are recognized as outsiders who are contrasted with the heroic Lithuanian resistance fighters. What the author highlights within this contrast is the lack of a place in the national conversation for the Jewish experience of the Holocaust as part of the Lithuanian people’s

histories of oppression. Rather, the oppression faced by the freedom fighters during the war and the general Lithuanian population post-war under the Soviets are emphasized as worth remembering for the sake of nation-building. Though this chapter involves less in-depth discussion or theorizing compared to some others in the volume, it represents the type of content analysis found in several of the book's chapters that is extremely useful in highlighting the interconnections between school textbooks and particular narratives of remembering within nation-states.

Bringing together the work of the fourteen previous chapters are three pieces at the end of the book that connect the work of the other authors to the larger fields of study in nationalism, identity, and comparative education. Sobe's article highlights the role school textbooks serve as "technologies of national imaginaries" (p. 313) that open up schools as "important sites of production and not simply sites of reproduction" (p. 316). In the research included in the book as a whole, Sobe finds that textbooks often serve as tools that are taken up in educational spaces in complex and important ways, and not merely as the finished representations of the coalesced and accomplished national identities of the state. Breim's concluding chapter focuses on the ways that textbooks are used to formulate both the insider member of the nation and the outsider against which the national subject is necessarily contrasted. Engaging with the work of Anderson, Breuilly and Balibar, the author examines some of the possible ways to make sense of the discourses of power that are represented in the textbooks examined in this volume, and concludes that the textbooks work to establish a particular linguistic community that belongs to the nation. Those who 'speak a different language' from that of the textbooks (by remembering alternative narratives of the state and its past) are automatically excluded from the national identity, though the author points out that in many cases the contestation over narratives of the nation points to the value of schools as sites where what Brehm calls "strategic linguistic communit[ies]" negotiate the inclusion and exclusion of allowable narratives.

The book ends with the editor's concluding chapter that ties together the themes of the previous chapters while highlighting very explicitly the obvious presence of the state in educational sites around the world, a presence which can be felt in the "games that nations play" (p. 332) through textbooks. All of these games (ten of which are listed and described by the author) represent the importance of schools as sites where the state continues to express its response to challenges to its legitimacy, experiences of conflict, or profound ideological change. With this in mind the editor of this book calls for ongoing work to not only examine the connections between textbooks and the national imaginary, but also to work towards providing opportunities for students around the world to engage in meaningful dialogue about nation and identity within educational settings. This specific call to action stands out from most of the contributions made in this book, as it betrays the editor's desire to move beyond analysis of the textbooks and their roles, and into discussions of how textbooks *should* be used for today's generation of students (see p. 335). Whether the upcoming volumes in this series will take up that task remains to be seen, but this volume stands up very well on its own, in the depth and breadth of its analysis of this topic and its relevance to the field of comparative education studies.

### About the Reviewer

Mark Sinke  
PhD candidate  
University of Toronto  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
mark.sinke@MAIL.UTORONTO.CA



**education review // reseñas educativas**

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

**editors: gustavo e. fischman /  
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass**

**Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University**

 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview