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The Whispers in the Untold Stories: ‘Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future’

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A B S T R A C T

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada’s (2015) Report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*,” attests to the practices of cultural genocide that characterized the residential school experience for many of the Aboriginal children who were removed from their home communities and sent to residential schools across the country. The Report chronicles the anecdotes of Aboriginal peoples who survived the residential school experience and shares in gripping detail the physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse to which many of these students were victim. Upon a close examination of these anecdotes, however, it can be argued that equally compelling to the narratives of the survivors are the proverbial whispers that speak to us as readers from all those victims whose experiences are not directly cited in these testimonials but are among those who seem to have spoken on their behalf. This paper, consequently, provides a context of the residential school period as it was described in the Truth and Reconciliation Committee Report, and perhaps more significantly, argues that the words of the survivors are particularly captivating because of their potential to encompass the broader realities of trauma for all the children enrolled in these institutions.

Introduction

The residential school era in Canadian history is marked by political and policy initiatives on the part of the settler government that sought to colonize Aboriginal peoples by assimilating their children into the dominant Eurocentric values, traditions and beliefs (Chrisjohn,

Maraun, & Young, 1997; Haig-Brown, 1988). From the late 1800s to the late 1900s it is estimated that approximately 150,000 First Nation, Metis and Inuit students were enrolled in Church-operated residential schools. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada’s (2015)

Report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*,” attests to the practices of cultural genocide that characterized the residential school experience for many of the Aboriginal children who were removed from their home communities and sent to residential schools across the country – an outcome that has had intergenerational consequences on Aboriginal peoples and communities (see also, Battiste, 2000; Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Corbiere, 2000). According to Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott, the intent of the government policy directives in 1920 was to eliminate Aboriginal populations as distinct peoples in Canada and to assimilate their inferior ideologies and practices into the Canadian mainstream: “Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic” (TRC, 2015, p. 3).

A mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, thus, was to expose to all Canadians the difficult and multifaceted truths about the harms committed upon Aboriginal children and communities during this dark and generally obscure chapter of post-colonial history. It did just that.

In fact, it chronicles the anecdotes of countless Aboriginal peoples who survived the residential school experience and shares in gripping detail the physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse to which many of these students were victim. Upon a close examination of these anecdotes, however, it can be argued that equally compelling to the narratives of the survivors are the proverbial whispers that speak to us as readers from all those victims whose experiences are not directly cited in these testimonials but are among those who seem to have spoken on their behalf. This paper, consequently, will provide a context of the residential school period as it was described

in the Truth and Reconciliation Committee Report, and perhaps more significantly, argue that the words of the survivors are particularly captivating because of their potential to encompass the broader realities of trauma for all the children enrolled in these institutions.

Policy and Context

In 1883 the first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald, declared to a session of Parliament that Aboriginal children lived in communities that were “surrounded by savages” and as a result the onus rested upon the government,

That Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men. (TRC, 2015, p. 2).

Such sentiment was an outcome of colonization efforts and missionary crusades across the country. Prime Minister Macdonald seemed to echo the words of Egerton Ryerson (the superintendent of schools for Upper Canada) who recommended the establishment of residential schools where Aboriginal students would be instructed using “English language elements of general history religion and morals” (TRC, 2015, p. 50). From then, various churches and their missionary agendas operated residential schools in Ontario, across Canada, and in the Northwest Territories. In a previous publication, the following historical context was cited (in italics):

Beginning in the 1800s and surfacing well into the 1980s, Aboriginal children attended Church-operated residential schools and subsequently residential and band-operated

day schools as well (Lobo & Talbot, 2001; Sellars, 1993). The Acts of 1868 and 1869 that were passed by the Canadian federal government commissioned residential schools to assimilate Aboriginal children into Eurocentric values and norms (Haig-Brown, 1988). The missionary-educators forced Aboriginal students to comply with their rigid and relentless demands that prohibited discussion in Native languages and the practice of traditional Aboriginal ceremonies. Already separated from their Aboriginal families and communities, Aboriginal children were corporally punished, humiliated, and abused for resisting the assimilationist practices of the residential schools. Aboriginal children were often denied necessary supplies and basic needs and thus suffered from malnutrition and chronic illness (Ellis, 1994). The governing policy justified residential schooling practices on the basis of redeeming Aboriginal children from their primitive lifestyles in the bush to a more civilized way of life. As a result, Aboriginal socio-linguistic traditions became victims to the acts of cultural genocide at the hands of the colonizers (Bonvillain, 2001; Moran, 1998). Of equal consequence to the loss of socio-linguistic knowledge are the psychological wounds experienced by the victims of residential schools that continue to haunt them (Battiste, 2002; James, 1996). In fact, the consequences of this historic reality are marked by the multi-generational loss of parenting skills experienced in various Aboriginal communities (Robertson, 2003). Such exploitation was characteristic of conquest, power, and domination (Healey, 2006) by a colonizing presence determined to assimilate what they perceived to be an uncivilized people (Cherubini, 2010).

The *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* Report cites that the perspective of the Canadian government was to first

assimilate Aboriginal children into Eurocentric ways, worldviews, knowledge-systems, and spiritual beliefs while also engaging in Treaties with Aboriginal community leaders whereby land would be “surrendered” and “released” to the Crown (TRC, 2015, p. 53). In this way, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report informs us that the intent of the policies and Treaties was to assimilate all Aboriginal peoples into mainstream Canadian values and socio-cultural traditions and erase the distinct traditions of government, cultures, and identities of the Aboriginal peoples that existed long before first contact (see also, Frideres & Gadacz, 2005; Gamlin, 2003; Neegan, 2005).

The Truth and Reconciliation Report also concludes that the residential schools were a key component of the policy that aimed for the cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples. The Report defines cultural genocide as “the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group” (TRC, 2015, p. 1). The Report further states that the existence and practices of the residential schools were founded on the assumption that Eurocentric values and Christian religions were far more advanced than Aboriginal culture and worldviews. In the residential schools, Aboriginal children were often stripped of their belongings, separated from family, and subjected to hard labour. The residential schools were meant to undermine Aboriginal students’ identity, socio-linguistic and spiritual beliefs. In many instances the children were not properly nourished, housed in buildings that were unhygienic and unsafe, subjected to unregulated punishment, and victimized sexually by various abusers. The voices of the survivors strewn throughout the Report speak directly to these injustices.

Results and Discussion

There is no denying that the narratives and anecdotes of the residential school survivors that are captured in the Truth and Reconciliation Report are universally disturbing. However, it can be suggested that the proverbial whispers that exist in the spaces between the words of the testimonials are equally compelling. Stated differently, the narratives serve as not only a bothersome confirmation of the individual survivor's experiences, but encompass the broader collective experiences of the other survivors who suffered the same fate but whose testimonial is not told. I refer to these untold stories as *whispers* because as one immerses themselves fully into the anecdotes the imagined reality for all of the other children becomes transparently clear.

As an example, Archie Hyacinthe describes his experience of being taken from his community and brought to residential school: "That's when the trauma started for me, being separated from my sister, from my parents, and from our home. We were no longer free" (TRC, 2015, p. 39). What makes the narrative especially potent are the proverbial whispers of Hyacinthe's family as we imagine their agonizing experiences in light of their son's and brother's pain. As we read such an anecdote, there is a riveting impression left by the feelings of separation and isolation that the speaker alludes to in regards to all the others that experienced the ordeal.

In other examples Martin Nicholas and Lorna Morgan share their pride in the traditional clothes made for them by their parents and grandparents, and the despair they felt when these belongings were taken from them by the schoolteachers "and thrown in the garbage" (TRC, 2015, p. 40). Gilles Petiquay discloses, in a different

anecdote, the shock he felt when he and the other students were assigned numbers by their teachers and forced to "walk with the numbers on us" (TRC, 2015, p. 40). In these examples, too, the words of the survivors figuratively open new avenues for readers to consider the feelings of fear and alienation felt by all the other students who experienced the brutal assault on their identities as Aboriginal peoples. Hence, the testimonies cited in the Report are representative of the collective harm suffered by the Aboriginal children at the hands of the colonial educators. The reader becomes a present-day witness to these historical wrongdoings upon a generation of Aboriginal peoples. As a witness, the reader enters the conceptual space that compels us to consider the devastation of these experiences not only on the individual who shares their personal point of view, but on the collective of Aboriginal children who were exploited by the same practices.

Consider the story of Betsy Annahatak who used these words to describe her experiences in a residential school in northern Quebec:

When one person would start crying, all the, all the little girls would start crying; all of us. We were different ages. And we would cry like little puppies or dogs, night after night, until we go to sleep; longing for our families. (TRC, 2015, p. 42). As distressing as the image is of a little girl's literal cry for her absent family, equally upsetting is the space between the words that evoke images of a multitude of girls experiencing the same pain of separation.

For others, the hardship of being separated from family was compounded by the fear of being humiliated. William Herney recalled his introduction to a residential school in Nova Scotia: "Within those few days, you had to learn, because otherwise you're

gonna get your head knocked off...You learned to obey...you were scared, you were very scared” (TRC, 2015, p.42). Similarly, Timothy Henderson recalled his experiences in a Manitoba school using these terms:

Every day was, you were in constant fear that, your hope was that it wasn't you today that we're going to, that was going to be the target, the victim. You know, you weren't going to have to suffer any form of humiliation (TRC, 2015, p. 42).

While the reader readily acknowledges the uncertainty and confusion in the voices of these survivors, it is the proverbial whispers from the students who indeed were the `targets` and `victims` identified in the narratives that resonate with equal force. As witnesses we cannot help but wonder and then imagine the experiences of all those victims who did not tell their story, but we know have such a strong and prominent presence throughout each and every narrative.

There are a number of testimonies that describe the corporal punishments administered by the residential school authorities that were meant to both deter students from disobeying the rules but also to publicly humiliate the children. There is an anecdote from 1934 where the principal of the Shubenacadie school had all the students he suspected of stealing chocolates from a staff member “thrashed with a seven-thonged strap and then placed on bread-and-water diets” (TRC, 2015, p. 102). As witnesses, we can imagine the shadows of the other Aboriginal children forced to witness the abuse inflicted upon their peers and function in a state of fear that they too would suffer the same fate if they disobeyed their teachers. The impression upon the reader reinforces the collective harm of these practices.

The sense of the collective injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal children in the residential schools is made even stronger when the reader is witness to the events of an Anglican school in Brocket, Alberta, where in 1920 it was alleged that boys were chained together to deter them from escaping from the school. For Fred Bass, the time he spent as a student of a Roman Catholic school in Saskatchewan were,

The hellish years of my life. You know to be degraded by our so-called educators, to be beat by these people that were supposed to have been there to look after us, to teach us right from wrong. It makes me wonder now today a lot of times I ask that question, who was right and who was wrong. (TRC, 2015, p. 103)

It is the whisper of those stories and experiences felt by the collective *us* that resonate with the reader as we are forced to contemplate the fears and misery of all the children. In addition, as current witnesses to these historical events the reader inevitably interprets the knowledge and information about the residential school era that is included throughout the Report through their own moral and ethical filters.

Although time and distance allows us to buffer the tormenting realities described by some of the residential school survivors, as present-day witnesses the wrongdoings of misdirected policies and inappropriate practices are projected upon us. The stories of individual anguish and collective hurt appeal to all of us. The authentic voices documented in the Report speak on behalf of thousands of other children who were exposed to the horrors of residential school as an outcome of a national ideology shaped by biased socio-political views. The individual stories force us to first empathize with the storyteller and feel for their pain;

and second, to attune our senses to the conceptual spaces that exist between the actual words of the survivors. In these spaces we can decipher the intense and prolonged distress experienced by the other children. And in these transitions we find the spaces to be most reflective.

Final Word

But there is a second mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee that includes directing a process of truth, healing, and reconciliation for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. In this context we as a collective have both an opportunity and an obligation to shape present and future understandings of Aboriginal and settler relations. If it is true that ‘history’ teaches about the past and ‘education’ gives it meaning, then it is incumbent upon us to consider how we will delineate the ‘education’ of a sombre legacy handed to us. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission does not ask us to harbour hatred, but instead to recognize what is inherent in the spirit of the Final Report – to listen carefully, respectfully and empathetically to the voices of the survivors as well as to the unheard voices that are the whispers in between the narratives. In the voices we can ascertain that though the experiences of residential school may have been distinguishing moments in the lives of the survivors, these same experiences did not weaken the distinguished resilience of Aboriginal peoples’ spirit and character.

Herein lies the promise for all Canadians...what the Final Report refers to as “a new vision for Canada: one that fully embraces Aboriginal peoples’ right to self-determination within, and in partnership with, a viable Canadian sovereignty.” It is a vision that the Final Report cites as being multi-generational in the making. It will

entail social, educational, health, and community engagement on many levels in order to successfully mediate the impact of the historical trauma for the present generation, and for us to be mindful of our responsibility to future ones.

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