

# Colonial Reckoning, National Reconciliation?: Aboriginal Peoples and the Culture of Redress in Canada

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**D**URING A PRESS CONFERENCE AT THE G20 Pittsburgh Summit in September 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper was asked by Reuters correspondents whether or not he feared a diminishment of Canada's role in this global economic organization with the expansion from eight to twenty members. In his response, Harper relied upon well-worn nationalist mythologies regarding Canada's distinctive status as a middle power "big enough to make a difference, but not big enough to threaten anybody" (quoted in Wherry). Elaborating further, Harper asserted: "We are one of the most stable regimes in history. There are very few countries that can say for nearly 150 years they've had the same political system without any social breakdown, political upheaval or invasion. We are unique in that regard. We also have no history of colonialism" (quoted in Wherry). While Harper's claims regarding the absence of any "social breakdown" or "invasion" in Canada alone offer a whitewashing of the foundational imperialist invasion upon which the nation is predicated as well as the state's long-standing policies of race-based discrimination, his outright denial of the "history of colonialism" punctuated the speech with a particularly remarkable form of erasure.

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In the wake of Harper's comments, many Aboriginal leaders pointed out the radical disjuncture between the prime minister's denial of colonialism and his rhetorical gesture of apology for residential schools only fifteen months earlier. Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Shawn Atleo responded by commenting: "The Prime Minister stated in his apology to students of residential schools that, 'There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again.' The Prime Minister must ensure that such commitments inform every statement and action" ("AFN National Chief"). While Atleo's assertion is apt, his efforts to hold the government to account by citing Harper's past official speech act sidestep the notable limitations of the 11 June 2008 apology. The prime minister's rhetorical gesture of contrition on behalf of the Government of Canada holds significance for some residential school survivors and their families who have long awaited official acknowledgement of their unjust suffering. It is possible, however, to recognize that importance while remaining critical of this speech act's implications for shaping dominant state formulations of a present and future of reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples. For instance, in the very gesture of purportedly criticizing "the attitudes that inspired" residential schools, the prime minister's statement of contrition fails to identify these "attitudes" as decidedly colonial. In fact, the entire 11 June apology manages never to invoke the category of colonialism, encoding a palpable absence that is not as far removed from Harper's subsequent outright denial of the "history of colonialism" as it might initially appear. The absence of the word "colonialism" from the prime minister's apology enables a strategic isolation and containment of residential schools as a discrete historical problem of educational malpractice rather than one devastating prong of an overarching and multifaceted system of colonial oppression that persists in the present.

Insofar as Harper's comment at the G20 summit was designed to stress the value of political stability, or "peace, order, and good government," that Canada purportedly has to offer the world financial system, it was not expedient for him in that particular moment to acknowledge the kinds of historical "mistakes" that, in other contexts, his own government has been more than willing to own. In the last few decades, Canadian governments have joined those of other liberal-democratic nation-states in making apologies for historically distant, carefully circumscribed instances of so-called misguided state action, often rhetorically mitigated via references to the antiquated "attitudes" of past eras. The 2008 apology for residential schools was subsequent to several other apologies by

Canadian governments for wartime internment and racist immigration policies.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of these state-inflicted group injuries, and Canada's proclaimed regret for them, now forms part of the hegemonic understanding of Canada. *Discover Canada*, the new citizenship test study guide released in November 2009, requires that every new citizen adopt such a conceptualization of the internment of Ukrainian Canadians in World War I and of Japanese Canadians in World War II as part of a narrative of the nation which has bravely faced up to its historical errors and, indeed, moved beyond the heavy-handed measures of the former interventionist state. The chain of apologies proffered by the state in the last twenty years surely suggests something about how nation-states currently qualify themselves to belong to the liberal community of countries wielding the banner of human rights; the apologies also speak to the kinds of performances through which the sense of a postideological endpoint of history is secured in the West. In this context, the apology for residential schooling may be seen as being as equally keyed to producing the conditions for international financial stability and safe investment as the seemingly contradictory statement at the G20 summit that Canada has "no history of colonialism." Acknowledgement of past errors—when those "mistakes" are carefully circumscribed—does not threaten the global image of Canada as a progressive beacon.

It is important to note, however, that the new citizenship study guide does not contain an acknowledgement of residential schooling.<sup>2</sup> The prospective citizen's awareness of Canada's history of colonialism is limited to brief mentions of the deaths of "large numbers of Aboriginals" due to "European diseases," "Métis and Indian rights ... threatened by westward settlement," and the fact that the "arrival of European traders, missionaries, soldiers, and colonists changed the native way of life forever" (14, 19). The institution of compulsory residential schooling in a collaboration between church and state to destroy intergenerational bonds and eradicate what Margaret D. Jacobs has called "intimate cultural knowledge of the land" clearly does not fit any of the categories established by the study guide's subheadings under "Canada's History" or "Modern Canada" (249). Perhaps the inclusion of residential schooling would introduce an anomaly of a

1 For a detailed discussion of the many apologies proffered by the Government of Canada over the past few decades, please see Matt James's "Wrestling with the Past."

2 Sections of a draft version of the study guide that included references to the abuse of Aboriginal children in church-run residential schools and to Canada's legalization of gay marriage were reportedly excised. See Dean Beeby.

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different order from unjustifiable internment, exclusionary immigration, and restrictive franchise criteria, all of which the study guide's version of history accommodates as symptoms of an earlier, less open and flexible Canada that could be left behind with postwar prosperity.<sup>3</sup> Something about residential schooling threatens to blow open the Canada promoted by the new, more commodious and repentant citizenship study guide and accounts for its absence in that document.

Even though residential schooling could be isolated and contained in the text of the prime minister's 2008 apology, even though a focus on residential schooling may be justifiably critiqued as a part-for-whole substitution which allows the state to sidestep issues of land claims and constitutional change (not to mention the continuation of the assimilationist aims of residential schooling in certain child welfare practices), and even though the Assembly of First Nations, in choosing to build a case for apology and compensation around the historical wrong of residential schooling, may have opted for the pragmatic and achievable, residential schooling remains a potentially explosive and scandalous "error" in the making of Canada. As Jacobs has argued, while the founding narratives of settler colonies often obscure the violence of settlement, what distinguished settler colonies from colonies focused on resource extraction was the way in which settler-colonial states sought to effect the disappearance of Indigenous peoples; child removal and institutionalization constituted an attempt to "complete" this disappearance (4, 26). Current struggles to contain the meaning of residential schooling point to colonialism's uneasy status as a purportedly finished project. Indigenous claims to land, natural resources, and self-determination threaten to take the open secret of ongoing colonial oppression and reconstitute it as an outright scandal for a self-proclaimed liberal democracy. As Rebecca Tsosie observes, in the global context of movements for redress for collective historical injuries, "Native peoples are asserting claims for recognition of cultural and political rights, as separate governments, which distinguishes their claims for reparations from those of any other group" (44). The spectre of sovereignty raised by Aboriginal redress consequently renders acknowledgement of any part or whole of the colonial enterprise in Canada risky terrain for the settler society status quo.

<sup>3</sup> The study guide mentions the latter two in a "Modern Canada" subsection that stresses that social assistance programs were enabled by postwar prosperity and also pairs Canada's modern overcoming of restrictive franchise and immigration policies with its ability to welcome waves of refugees from communism in the Cold War era.

The significance of residential schooling in the public imaginary, and the immense stakes of its recognition as a history alive in the present, belongs to a politics of truth in settler societies, where the difficulty of establishing the truth of settlement's violence cannot be underestimated. The irruption of the memory of residential schooling into Canada's public spheres has the status of a "truth-event."<sup>4</sup> Ian Baucom theorizes the truth-event as something apparently singular that, precisely insofar as it appears as an exception or anomaly, "demonstrates the repressed or previously unrecognizable truth of a historical situation." The truth-event stands as a paradoxically "representative anomaly": an anomaly because its appearance has been controlled, up until recently, such that it has seemed to form an exception to the rule of Canada's vaunted tolerance, but at the same time it is representative in that residential schooling condenses in itself the truth of a whole colonial system (120, 121). Residential schooling was of course preceded and made possible by a whole set of colonial conditions. What makes the exposure of residential schooling today an event at the level of truth or knowledge is the way in which it makes those wider conditions and circumstances legible, retrospectively. In this sense, residential schooling as a truth-event is what Baucom calls "untimely": it appears "not at the moment of its happening but only within the retrospective purview of [its] subjects—those who, having made a *decision* for the truth of the event, belatedly call the event into being (as one) by naming it as such and naming themselves as those who are faithful to the truth they have discerned in it" (121, emphasis added). The truth discerned in residential schooling may be the truth of settler colonialism and nation-building as projects resting on deliberate cultural genocide.<sup>5</sup> That truth may also be that schemes of liberal-education-for-others—education in Christianity,

4 "Truth-event" is a concept developed by Alain Badiou in his *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988) and discussed by Slavoj Žižek in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999). We are drawing on Ian Baucom's engagement with these theorists, and his discussion of the Benjaminian resonances of the "truth-event" in particular, in *Specters of the Atlantic*, 117–40.

5 Thus, while federal officials may have focused upon residential schools in an effort to circumvent recognition of broader colonial relations, AFN leader Shawn Atleo understands residential schools as a pivotal instance of colonial policy, inextricably linked to "the colonial Indian Act that displaces traditional forms of First Nations governance, the theft of Indian lands and forced relocations of First Nations communities, the criminalization and suppression of First Nations languages and cultural practices, the chronic under-funding of First Nations communities and programs, and the denial of treaty and aboriginal rights, even though they are recognized in Canada's Constitution" ("AFN National Chief").

literacy, prudent economic practices, and tradeable skills for participation in the “modern” world—are the very terrain of brutal coercion.

From this perspective, the selection of residential schooling from among other aspects of a multifaceted system of colonialism is not a good enough reason for maintaining a position of cynicism in relation to the politics around apology, compensation, healing, and reconciliation. Rather, this selection is what Baucom might call the very “belated partisan decision for” residential schooling as a truth-event, in other words, the decision that residential schooling must be recalled for the present, that a case for injustice must be built around residential schooling, a case which brings responsibility to us, to bear active witness to the ways in which our present was “predicted” by residential schooling (122). Some of “us” know better than others that compulsory residential schooling is an enduring event and that we (a necessarily uneven “we”) occupy the accumulated aftermath of child removal, institutionalized neglect and abuse, and systematic cultural degradation. Indeed, for some, “decision” may not be the right word for the act of holding steadfastly to the memory of this event—but at the same time, neither would decision’s opposite—compulsion—be quite right. Gregory Younging, in his contribution to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s recent publication, *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, implicitly suggests an alternative to the dominant pathologizing sense of intergenerational memory as psychological damage when he frames “blood memory” as a concept of Indigenous epistemology, “meaning that the experience of those that have gone before us is embedded in our physical and psychological being” (327).<sup>6</sup> Describing an experience in which the pain of those members of his family who went to residential school irrupted in the midst of his attempt to speak the language of a book publicist as a student in a publishing workshop, Younging stresses the impact of this irruption as a linkage to or continuity with his “ancestors’ legacy,” a continuity that brings responsibility. He reminds us that the “blood memory state of being is not exclusive to Indigenous peoples,” and that, “[a]part from their relationship with Indigenous peoples, Canadians first need to undergo a type of micro-reconciliation within themselves. In so doing, the present generation of Canadians need to face up to what has been done in their name” (327).

6 For a discussion of the ways in which the Harper apology for residential schooling constructs Aboriginal families in the language of psychological “deviance,” see Eva Mackey, “The Apologizer’s Apology,” in *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, eds. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham. Forthcoming.

Younging raises the question of what it would mean for non-Aboriginal Canadians to grasp residential schooling as an event that anticipates our present and more precisely our embeddedness in the social relations that residential schooling set in motion. The question of what kinds of responsibilities this enduring event carries for non-Aboriginals can begin to be broached with some consideration of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (or TRC) and the more immediate question of what it would mean to bear responsible witness to the survivor testimony the Commission will hear.<sup>7</sup> The temporality and teleology of mourning and closure are not necessarily orientations to the past that should be carried into politics: they do not necessarily favour justice-seeking and the kind of profound political changes that national “reconciliation” could be made to mean, in a different model of time where history was acknowledged as persisting in the present.<sup>8</sup> The problem at the level of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions in Canada is not one of inadequate closure, as statements like the prime minister’s 2008 apology might suggest, but one of repeated, pre-emptive attempts at reaching closure and “cure.” The insistent repetition of state performances of resolution and, in turn, the adaptive forms of Aboriginal anti-colonial resistance that have perpetually ruptured such premature

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7 Although the truth and reconciliation commission established by the 2007 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement was initially referred to as the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (or IRSTRC), the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has recently changed its terminology, referring to the Commission simply as the TRC. The TRC itself has begun to call itself Truth and Reconciliation Canada, a name that has puzzled some due to its resonances of a government bureaucracy rather than an independent commission (Curry). On the other hand, TRC might suggest a wider remit for the commission. Throughout this issue, we refer to the commission as the TRC.

8 We find Richard Wagamese’s fascinating account of his personal reconciliation with the United Church relevant in this regard. In this account, Wagamese heals from the inherited pain of his family’s residential school experience and his own “institutional kidnapping” by the Children’s Aid Society of Ontario in the 1950s when he is prepared to “sacrifice”: “the price of admission,” he writes, was “a keen desire to be rid of the block of anger” (143, 146). While Wagamese’s point that non-Aboriginals, during the TRC process, will “need to hear stories about our capacity for forgiveness, for self-examination, for compassion, and for our yearning for peace because they speak to our resiliency as a people” makes a very important argument about the way a positive self-image, for Aboriginal peoples, is at stake in the TRC process, we wonder if anger should have to be exchanged for such an image and, more generally, if this individual healing process should have to be the model for reconciliation between what should be recognized as sovereign nations (146).

pronouncements are made evident by briefly retracing the prehistory of Canada's so-called reconciliatory present, to which we now turn.

## **Histories of Colonialism, Histories of Redress**

If the residential school system needs to be understood within the broader history and ongoing conditions of colonialism in Canada, so also do current discussions of redress for Indigenous peoples require contextualization in relation to longstanding counter-histories of Aboriginal anti-colonial resistance. Even before compulsory attendance for children between the ages of seven and fifteen was mandated in an amendment to the Indian Act in 1920, many Indigenous leaders had the ability to foresee the devastating effects of such policies. Testifying to a House of Commons committee on 21 March 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of the Department of Indian Affairs, argued in support of Bill 14—the legislation that became the 1920 Act to amend the Indian Act which established mandatory residential school attendance and the aggressive “enfranchisement” of Aboriginal peoples through loosened criteria that would strip some of their Indian status. As Scott asserted to the committee charged with considering the proposed legislation, these policies were interlinked by virtue of their shared goal of assimilation. The “object,” as Scott put it, “is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department” (House of Commons). While Scott’s words are oft-quoted, what is far less frequently recited is the fact that several “Indian witnesses” were present in the forum and used the opportunity to express their resistance to colonial paternalism. As a Mr Hill of the Brantford Six Nations asserted to the House:

[I]t seems to me that all the way through this Bill the powers given to the Superintendent General are too great.... Our people are [an] advanced people, and they are dissatisfied with the system of education we have on the reserve, and it seems to me that ... this committee ... [should] make such provisions that we could be given an opportunity under the law to run our own schools in such a way as will meet the desires of the people. (House of Commons)

Mr Hill’s statement not only suggests resistance to the proposed assimilatory policies of Bill 14; it also implicitly asserts principles of Indigenous sovereignty, affirming both the capacity and right of Aboriginal peoples to operate their own educational systems and, by extension, to govern themselves.



The counter-history of Indigenous resistance to the colonial policy of compulsory residential schooling is consequently interwoven throughout the history of these institutions. Just as the federal government relinquished its primary control of the remaining residential schools in the mid-1980s and before the last government-operated institution, located on the Gordon Reserve in Saskatchewan, closed its doors in 1996, Aboriginal constituencies' anti-colonial action was metamorphosing into a concerted campaign for redress—a movement seeking an apology and reparations for the oppression perpetrated by government and church organizations.<sup>9</sup> In 1990, the first lawsuit alleging abuse was filed by a former residential school student and, one year later, then Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs Phil Fontaine publicly disclosed his experiences of abuse within the residential school system, encouraging other survivors to come forward and galvanize the movement for redress (Episkenew 10).<sup>10</sup> The Assembly of First Nations began to consult survivors across Canada and, in 1994, published *Breaking the Silence: An Interpretive Study of Residential School Impact and Healing as Illustrated by the Stories of First Nations Individuals*, a report written by and for Aboriginal peoples that sought to generate healing strategies for individuals and communities. At the same time that the AFN was gathering its own stories, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was established to investigate the status of Canada's relations with Aboriginal groups. Although RCAP's mandate was wide-reaching, one of the crucial topics that kept surfacing from Indigenous commentators was the devastating intergenerational impact of residential school experiences upon Indigenous communities. As Georges Erasmus, Co-Chair of RCAP, stated in 1993:

Everywhere we have gone, we have been told about the impact of residential schools.... Inevitably, we are told about the loss of culture, the loss of language, the loss of parenting skills, the agony of being separated from family, from community ... the many, many years of being away from home, the return home, the alienations, the need to reintegrate into the community. (quoted in *Breaking the Silence* 2–3)

9 For a detailed timeline of events of redress regarding the residential school system, refer to “Apology and Reconciliation: A Timeline of Events” in *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal*, eds. Younging, Dewar, and DeGagné, 176–77.

10 Some authors have referred to Fontaine as being AFN Grand Chief when he made his disclosure in 1991. However, Fontaine did not become the AFN leader until 1997.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples became one of the first large-scale processes for witnessing and documenting the experiences of residential school survivors, providing an important early testimonial forum—*avant la lettre* of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—for the aging population of former students, many of whom are no longer able to share their experiences in the new millennium.

The final report of RCAP called for a public inquiry into residential schooling. As Jennifer Llewellyn has observed, the “motivating desire behind calls from Aboriginal communities and their leaders, and the Royal Commission” for such an inquiry was the same desire that shaped the restorative-justice model of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which aimed to make history “part of the public record, creating information in the society about what happened, who was harmed, and who was responsible” (297, 296). The federal government responded to RCAP in 1998 with the release of *Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan*, a plan that included \$350 million for the establishment of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, an organization designed to promote community-based healing and renewal initiatives. As well, in January 1998, then Minister of Aboriginal Affairs Jane Stewart delivered a “Statement of Reconciliation” at a luncheon on Parliament Hill, declaring that “The Government of Canada today formally expresses to all Aboriginal people in Canada our profound regret for past actions of the federal government which have contributed to these difficult pages in the history of our relationship together” (“Canada’s Statement” 354). While the minister’s statement has been considered to fall short of a full apology, what is notable about the speech is its recognition of a broader series of injuries suffered by Aboriginal peoples that included but was not limited to residential schools. As Stewart noted:

As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations that were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed by the dispossession of traditional territory, by the relocation of Aboriginal people, and by some provisions of the Indian Act. (“Canada’s Statement” 353)

Although the 1998 “Statement of Reconciliation,” like the 2008 apology, never invokes the word “colonialism,” this earlier declaration does demonstrate the federal government’s recognition of the role of residential schools within an overarching system of oppression—a recognition that

seems to have evaporated by the time the next *mea culpa* was issued a decade later.

The proliferation of lawsuits against the Government of Canada and particular church organizations prompted these interested parties to negotiate an alternative court-approved settlement with representatives for residential school survivors, Inuit leaders, and the Assembly of First Nations. In 2007, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement came into effect, providing “Common Experience Payments” to former students at the rate of \$10,000 for the first school year plus \$3,000 for each additional year (“Indian Residential Schools”). In addition, survivors who suffered “sexual or serious physical abuses” are eligible to apply for additional funds through the Independent Assessment Process. While the settlement agreement has provided a way to expedite the process of providing reparations to survivors while circumventing expensive litigation for each plaintiff, the agreement has engendered critique for establishing fixed amounts of fiscal compensation which are modest in comparison to what might be obtainable via individual court cases.<sup>11</sup> The intergenerational effects of residential schooling, moreover, are not acknowledged within this compensatory framework as family members are not eligible to collect payments on behalf of deceased students. The Independent Assessment Process’s reliance upon a point-based scale that calculates monetary value via the reduction of traumatic experience to itemization within a clinical taxonomy of injuries has also raised questions about the “reconciliatory” potential of such a juridical tabulation of suffering (“Indian Residential Schools”).<sup>12</sup>

In addition to arranging fiscal compensation, the 2007 settlement agreement establishes a mandate and framework for the five-year-long Truth and Reconciliation Commission that commenced on 1 June 2008. With this provision, Canada embarked upon a future of making history as the first longstanding liberal democracy to initiate a TRC. Since the first truth commission was initiated in Uganda in 1974, this genre of public forum has been the purview of the Global South, whereas the political apology has been the reconciliatory technology of choice of

11 The expected average payment for each applicant is \$28,000 (“Residential school payout”).

12 For detailed information about compensation for sexual and physical abuse, consult “Schedule D: Independent Assessment Process (IAP) for Continuing Indian Residential School Abuse Claims,” May 2006, of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. *Indian Residential Schools Settlement—Official Court Website*. Residential Schools Settlement, n.d. Web. 16 December 2009. [www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/Schedule\\_D-IAP.PDF](http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/Schedule_D-IAP.PDF).

the North—the sphere of those civil societies which imagine themselves to be innocent of the types of human rights abuses that would necessitate investigative commissions often associated with problems such as genocide, apartheid, and dictatorships (Howard-Hassmann and Gibney 1). Thus, Canada has ruptured this geopolitical divide by domesticating the TRC genre. Canada's TRC also breaks new ground as “the first to be established as part of a judicially mediated agreement instead of through legislation and decree. It is also the first that focuses exclusively on crimes committed against children and indigenous groups” (International Center for Transitional Justice).

What all these firsts might mean for effecting social justice for Indigenous peoples in Canada remains, thus far, undecided. More than a year and a half since the TRC's commencement, little is known about how close the commission is to fulfilling its mandate and what that process even looks like. This is partly due to the fact that the TRC was halted with resignations by commissioners not long after it began. While the TRC has since gained renewed life with the appointment of Justice Murray Sinclair as the new Chief Commissioner, the commission's mandate—as outlined in “Schedule N” of the settlement agreement—might continue to limit the forum's impact. The TRC's mandate renders it distinct from the public inquiry initially envisaged by RCAP and Aboriginal leaders: the commission has no subpoena powers, and survivors who wish to name specific abusers must do so via in camera hearings, thereby placing constraints on the ways and extent to which Indigenous peoples can make their stories heard. Although the TRC is charged with writing a final report and recommendations, that document is prohibited from articulating “any findings or expressing any conclusion or recommendation, regarding the misconduct of any person” (“Mandate” 3). While many past TRCs have had more robust investigatory powers and influence upon the judicial prosecution of perpetrators, Canada risks shifting the TRC model away from a justice-based focus and toward a more symbolic emphasis upon witnessing and national healing—an emphasis that seems not so far after all from Western democracies' typical uses of apologies as rhetorical gestures of

13 In the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the “Commission was given the power to grant amnesty to perpetrators, but only vested with recommending authority with regard to victim reparations” (Llewellyn 299). Despite the important limitations on the latter form of authority, the fact that the Commission was even mandated to speak to both of these issues constitutes a much stronger scope of authority than that vested in the Indian Residential Schools TRC. Moreover, the South African TRC guaranteed that the testimony was made public (Llewellyn 297).

contrition that may evade more substantive reforms.<sup>13</sup> While Canada's TRC holds the potential to prompt other Western nations to grapple with their own histories of injustice, whether for reputation damage control or a more chastening recognition of the failure of liberal democracy's ideals in political practice, Canada's particular domestication of the TRC model might also risk setting a precedent for diluting such commissions' potential for exposing human rights abuses and effecting social reform. Moreover, within the domain of Canadian politics, the shift toward a symbolic or performative enactment of national reconciliation risks occluding the crucial need for redistributive justice for Indigenous peoples as well as a reckoning with the overarching and ongoing structures of colonialism. Such a reckoning would involve addressing the many problems raised by the heterogeneous Indigenous constituencies across Canada, including, to name only a few, calls for an apology for the forced relocation of Inuit community members to desolate parts of the High Arctic during the 1950s, petitions by Aboriginal war veterans for reparations for the discriminatory land allotment and financial allowance policies implemented against Indigenous people who served during the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War, appeals for funding for language restoration and official status for Aboriginal languages in the Constitution, and, perhaps most significantly, ongoing campaigns for adequate compensation for and/or the restoration of territory regarding the staggering number of outstanding land claims across the country.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the limitations of the TRC's mandate, the terms of the settlement agreement cannot be understood simply as the result of ideological manoeuvring by the state to substitute symbolic atonement for material reparations. Jennifer Llewellyn, a former legal advisor to the Assembly of First Nations and member of the external expert review panel for the Indian Residential Schools TRC, notes that the AFN, RCAP, and the Law Commission of Canada each issued calls for an alternative dispute resolution process focused on restorative justice and "restoring relationships" (289). The TRC's mandate reflects such calls by seeking to establish "new relationships embedded in mutual recognition and respect" (1). Indeed, in this case it is possible to speak of a demand for reconciliation as having been formed, in part, by representatives of Aboriginal peoples themselves. However, that demand for reconciliation has been subject to some significant translation, as we have seen. In response to the translation or even

14 For a detailed discussion of the many claims for reparations by Aboriginal peoples in Canada, see Bradford W. Morse's "Indigenous Peoples of Canada and Their Efforts to Achieve True Reparations."

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co-optation of reconciliation by dominant state apparatuses, Aboriginal scholars have been among those who have called for serious questioning of the TRC's mandate to effect a national reconciliation. As Roland Chrisjohn and Tanya Wasacase have argued, reconciliation

is an attempt to insinuate a revised and bogus history of Indian/non-Indian relations in Canada. It implies that, once upon a time, Indigenous peoples and settlers lived in peace and harmony, working collaboratively towards shared long-term goals, only to have residential schooling (which began with only the best of intentions) rear its ugly head and drive a wedge between Canadians and Indigenous peoples. The job of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, like that of a good marital therapist or (more appropriately in this instance) a concerned priest, is to mend the rift, heal the split, and make two conjoin again as one. (222)

For Chrisjohn and Wasacase, the presupposition that survivor testimony in and of itself will "be sufficient to draw the picture of the truth of Indian residential schooling in Canada" is a structural impediment to any potential for achieving justice, which they take pains to distinguish from individual validation or therapeutic catharsis for survivors (223). Indeed, the question of the TRC's relation to justice also seems crucially linked to how survivor testimony will be heard, framed, and circulated. As Roger Simon has asked, how will the TRC process hold on to the ethical singularity of survivors' experiences instead of rendering them interchangeable? How will the process foster a sense of responsibility for social change rather than allow the sympathy felt by spectators to be sufficient proof that the world has been remedied? Perhaps the status of residential schooling will waver, in the TRC hearings, between the state's strategic formulation of it as an isolated error in educational policy, on the one hand, and the truth event that exposes settler colonialism's genocidal truth, on the other. At least one of the things that is at stake in that wavering will be our collective ability to reject a naïve progressivist model of history that "views this past and its violence as, in fact, *past*, and so, no longer pertinent to a present practice of justice" (Baucom 305).

What kind of "first" Canada's TRC will turn out to be is still unknown, but at this juncture of unknowing we think there is an opportunity to rewrite the script of national reconciliation so that it veers disruptively away from a narrative invested, as the Commission's website proclaims, in "put[ting] the events of the past behind us." This is the moment to think about how the setbacks of the past few years might be used to re-frame

reconciliation as an ongoing project of colonial reckoning with a mandate of resistance that extends far beyond five years.

## Culture as Intervention

Rather than construing redress for Aboriginal peoples as primarily the domain of the political and juridical, this special issue of *English Studies in Canada* investigates the vital importance and inseparability of the question of culture from a consideration of both Indigenous injuries and reparations. Culture, broadly construed, cannot be held discrete from political and legal discourse; rather, it is the means through which redress and reconciliation operate as polyvalent symbolic forms which shape and mediate past and present realities through processes of signification. As Arif Dirlik asserts,

To avoid the question of culture is to avoid questions concerning the ways in which we see the world; it is to remain imprisoned, therefore, in a cultural unconscious, controlled by conditioned ways of seeing (even unto rationality), without the self-consciousness that must be the point of departure for all critical understanding and, by implication, for all radical activity. (*Postcolonial Aura* 23)

Addressing the question of culture, however, does not mean a facile or easy release from the “imprisonment,” as Dirlik calls it, of a “cultural unconscious”; rather, it involves a complex and ongoing analysis of culture as both a medium for imagining the world otherwise *and* an uneven site of contestation where different “ways of seeing” and imagining that world jostle for position.

By understanding “redress” and “reconciliation” as culturally mediated symbolic forms, it becomes possible to analyze these concepts in a way that prevents reducing them to sameness or imagining their meanings to be fixed, self-evident, or singular in their sites of enunciation. We generally understand “redress” as a term to describe aggrieved constituencies’ movements from below to achieve state recognition and material forms of compensation for injustices. “Reconciliation”’s more abstract resonances of overcoming differences lend the term to cooptation by governments seeking to cleanse the national image through more symbolic measures. That said, we recognize the malleability of both terms. Around these two r-words orbits a network of affiliated concepts similarly overdetermined as their meanings are shaped through the criss-crossing utterances of a range of political actors and organizations. In the context of residential school

abuse, the trope of healing has become prominent within the discourses of both the federal government and of various Indigenous constituencies. The repetition of this trope on both sides of the settler-culture/Indigenous community distinction might produce a certain reconciliation effect—a semblance of common ground or shared understanding. However, the iteration of the trope of healing might mean different things in different contexts of utterance, ranging from an affirmation of Indigenous lifeways to a potential remedy for Indigenous anti-colonial resistance understood in psychopathological terms as anger to be overcome, to (in what Derrida terms the “Abrahamic” religious tradition) a process of confession and redemption (28).<sup>15</sup> At stake in these differences is the relation of healing to decolonization: whether or not healing means adherence to a normative timeline of the modern, which requires “an absolute and therapeutic mourning of the lost” or, rather, a process “that is at one with the effort to create new communities of survival” (Lloyd 227).<sup>16</sup> In affirming the importance of Indigenous epistemologies and communal practices of healing while rejecting the term’s potential to pathologize Aboriginal peoples and impose a model of individualized, therapeutic subjectivity that denies the systemic illness of colonization, Jo-Ann Episkenew asserts:

Healing does not imply that Indigenous people are sick.[...] Colonialism is sick; under its auspices and supported by its mythology, the colonizers have inflicted heinous wounds on the Indigenous population that they set out to civilize. Although Indigenous people understand their need to heal from colonial trauma, most settlers deny that their society is built on a sick foundation and, therefore, deny that it requires a cure. (11)

15 Derrida employs the category of “Abrahamic” religious heritage as an umbrella term “in order to bring together Judaism, the Christianities, and the Muslims” (28). Speaking specifically of the concept of forgiveness (to which, in an Abrahamic formulation “healing” is implicitly articulated), he notes: “This tradition—complex and differentiated, even conflictual—is at once singular and on the way to universalization through that which a certain theatre of forgiveness puts in place or brings to light” (28).

16 It should be noted that the March 2010 federal budget failed to renew funding to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, established in 1998 to finance community-based healing programs for Inuit, Métis, and First Nations residential school survivors and their families. The budget instead allocated funding to mental health services for residential school survivors that will be “funnelled to programs run by Health Canada.” See “Budget cuts.”



Episkenew's striking reversal demonstrates how a dominant colonizing logic might persist through the very disavowal of sickness's relevance to—indeed centrality within—the political and civic life of settler society. Whether or not Episkenew's powerful deployment of pathology and denial to describe the very substance of the nation-state will be heard through the louder, hegemonic deployment of healing which depoliticizes the work of reconciliation remains to be seen.

Another trope overdetermined by different deployments, and connected to that of healing, is “resilience.” Part of the nexus of psychological concepts used to discuss historical trauma, including wound, survival, dysfunction, and healing, resilience produces value out of oppression experienced as adversity, stressing the individual resources developed to survive in the face of this adversity as a surplus store of strength and adaptability, with open-ended potential. Informed by assumptions in behaviouralist psychology, research on resilience tends to focus on the conditions that enable the development of coping strategies. But although it is anchored in an implicit narrative of individual overcoming and sometimes seems to rhyme with a Victorian ethos of strength realized through privation, resilience is also, increasingly, used to describe a collective resource, including the stress on “cultural continuity” which allows some Aboriginal communities to thrive better than others (Chandler and Lalonde 214). The Aboriginal Healing Foundation's report, *Aboriginal People, Resilience, and the Residential School Legacy*, in fact, formulates resilience as a value inherent in Aboriginal culture, specifically, as a key goal of traditional Aboriginal parenting practices (Stout and Kipling iv). The concept of resilience is thus charged with a number of tensions. The individualizing emphasis and normativity of behaviouralist and developmental psychology exerts one pull, while the adaptation of the concept to a focus on the potentialities of “cultural continuity” exerts another. There is a further tension between what might be called the progressive desires fueling the circulation of the concept (the intention to name what is positive and strong in those who have had to suffer, to insist on their dignity) and the way in which resilience seems to validate those qualities which coincide with neoliberal norms of the functional self. These norms centre on the individual flexibility and adaptability required in order to survive harsh labour markets and the disappearance of the social safety net. Gabrielle Slowey's work has suggested that the project of Aboriginal self-determination does not have the luxury of philosophical purity; indeed, she argues, disentanglement from the colonial state may depend on the linking of self-determination to neoliberalism and economic development in the

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context of the global economy (12).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, we think it is worth noting that a less Eurocentric and non-psychologizing alternative to resilience already exists in the concept of “survivance,” coined by literary critic and theorist Gerald Vizenor, who wanted to propose a term with a power equivalent to “dominance,” a term that would insist on the condition of creative presence of Aboriginal peoples.<sup>18</sup> Survivance names “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion. Survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction.... Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance” (Vizenor 1). Like its cognate, healing, then, resilience is, and will be, a site of struggle over interpretations sometimes pulling in different directions. The stakes of these interpretative struggles are high, for the struggles condense questions at the heart of Aboriginal redress and reconciliation, about cultural loss and cultural recovery, and in whose lexicon these should be defined.

In the context of redress for colonial injustices against Indigenous peoples, the question of culture must be considered in relation to the colonial suppression and attempted extinguishment of Indigenous cultures and epistemologies. The centrality of cultural loss to Indigenous demands for reparations is part of what makes these demands unique in the global context of claims for redress in the post-civil rights era. As Ana F. Vrdoljak observes, Indigenous movements for reparations respond to histories in which “culture and its disappearance through destruction or assimilation have been central” (197). The culture that is at stake in these political struggles is not synonymous with representation or self-expression; rather, it is conceived in “holistic, symbiotic, collective and intergenerational” terms, as intrinsically connected to land and resources and, furthermore, to a right to self-determination that continues to be constrained or denied (197–98). If cultural loss is one of the crucial injuries

17 Thanks to Dian Million, Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies, University of Washington, for pointing us to the work of Gabrielle Slowey. The argument about self-determination could be extended with one about “culture”: as Arif Dirlik has pointed out in a recent issue of *PMLA*, the “dethroning of Eurocentrism” and the “reevaluation of ‘native’ cultural traditions” have “derived additional force from the globalization of capital and the increasing importance within it of non-Euro-American societies that, empowered by their newfound status in a postcolonial world, have reasserted the validity of native cultures and epistemologies even as they partake in the deepening of the cultural practices of capitalist society in production and consumption alike” (“Race Talk” 1374).

18 As Vizenor pointed out in a lecture at Carleton University, his concept of survivance also plays on the term’s archaic meaning of a “right to inherit in case of survival” (*OED*). Something Else Again: 9th Annual New Sun Conference on Aboriginal Arts, Carleton University, 27 February 2010.

of colonialism, cultural affirmation must, according to many Indigenous theorists, be a central aspect of any process of redress or reconciliation. Affirming the inextricable connection between Indigenous cultural systems, sovereignty, and redress, Rebecca Tsosie argues that the “framework for understanding the role of ‘reparations’ for Native nations necessarily must be intercultural. It must account for the different historical experiences of Native nations with the Europeans that colonized these lands, and it must address Native epistemologies. There is no ‘uniform’ theory of reparations that fits all cultures, all nations, and all peoples” (43). Indigenous claims related to cultural loss, however, have had to confront the boundaries of international human rights and humanitarian laws predicated upon Eurocentric legal principles, including the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which came into force in 1951, and emphasizes a “physical and biological” understanding of genocide (Vrdoljak 204). As Vrdoljak notes, in the 1947–48 negotiations over the Convention, settler states successfully opposed broader definitions that “listed various cultural elements of genocidal programmes for possible inclusion,” “for fear that their assimilation policies (viewed as part of nation-building) could be subject to international scrutiny and condemnation” (204). Canada’s more recent refusal to sign the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples speaks to the Canadian state’s continued interest in warding off the sorts of claims that acceptance of a more expansive definition of culture as self-determination might open up (“Canada Votes ‘no’”). At the same time, the appearance of a narrow definition of “culture” as the “rich and vibrant cultures and traditions” (from which Aboriginal children were removed) in Stephen Harper’s 2008 apology for residential schools points to the dangers of forming demands around culture, when control over the means of defining it is not secure (Government of Canada). “Cultural loss,” then, is precisely what is at stake (it is precisely the harm that residential schools policy was designed to inflict), but the phrase can also function as a radical reduction for a state strategy of symbolic gestures that foreclose on redistributive and constitutional change (24).

If, however, the domain of culture has been co-opted for a toothless program of rapprochement that remains vapidly *culturalist* (so that “culture” functions as an alibi for more substantive political reform), then it seems more crucial than ever to consider how cultural producers and critics committed to anti-racist and anti-colonialist work might intervene in these processes. In other words, how might the sphere of culture and the arts be used to critique state-sponsored culturalisms and to give voice

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to counter-hegemonic conceptualizations of redress? Episkenew has suggested that, for Indigenous peoples, the question must go further: not only must cultures be reinvented in defiance of colonial assimilationist policies, they must also—and indeed already do—contribute to the revitalization of Indigenous communities. “Not only does Indigenous literature respond to and critique the policies of the Government of Canada,” she writes, “it also functions as ‘medicine’ to help cure the colonial contagion by healing the communities that these policies have injured” (2). At the same time, as Sam McKegney has observed, Indigenous writing responding to the specific experience of residential schools has put forward “survival narratives [which] signify individual engagements with history, both personal and communal, that are actively and resolutely *non-prescriptive*” (34; emphasis added). In other words, McKegney argues for an engagement with Indigenous cultural production that is careful not to instrumentalize its role in the social and political dynamics of redress and reconciliation. Rather than predetermining the meanings of Indigenous arts, or reducing their effects to paradigms such as “writing back,” Aboriginal cultural texts demand a consideration of the contingencies of their political work as well as their general meanings and effects.

The essays in this special issue of *English Studies in Canada* explore the multifarious dimensions of the question of culture in relation to Aboriginal redress. Matthew Dorrell begins this discussion with an investigation of the ways that Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s 2008 residential schools apology reaffirms dominant nationalist mythologies of Canada. Dorrell’s detailed reading of the apology observes the ways in which the statement imagines a present in which reconciliation has been accomplished with finality. The apology obscures a larger and ongoing history of colonial violence and expropriation, even as it enters into the register of official national history a program of violence against Indigenous children. The apology also maintains the unexamined privilege of national subjects to rationally evaluate the culture of Indigenous peoples, as if a previous, denigrating view could be isolated from the pervasive and persistent ideological codes that construct Indigenous peoples as objects of judgement, allowing national subjects themselves to recede from the picture. This resecuring of an invisible normativity explains how a hegemonic idea of reconciliation, with its implied, phantasmatic past of harmony and equitable relations between Canada and First Peoples, could be rendered imaginable as a condition needing only to be restored.

Keavy Martin’s essay opens the question of how Aboriginal literary production may operate in a historical context of redress initiatives and

reconciliation politics by reading Robert Arthur Alexie's recently re-issued *Porcupines and China Dolls* as a narrative that resists the teleological drive toward forgetting implicit in the now-commonplace tropes of "closing a dark chapter in our past" or "turning the page of history." Observing that reconciliation can be less about the well-being of Aboriginal peoples than about relieving non-Indigenous Canadians from responsibility for knowing their history, Martin argues that Aboriginal storytelling has the potential to resist this kind of erasure by working to "keep scars visible." In Alexie's novel, narratives which seem to move toward healing are paralleled by the protagonist's death-drive. This structure not only deprives readers of the "comfort of watching [the] characters recover," Martin argues, it also confronts them with the uncomfortable proposition that not only death but also healing "represent[s] the pursuit of oblivion."

While the Harper apology and the inauguration of Canada's TRC received considerable media attention for a brief moment during the summer of 2008, there has been no widespread popular movement among non-Indigenous Canadians to demonstrate regret for historical wrongs of the kind witnessed by Australia following the 1997 release of its *Bringing Them Home* report. Indeed, regarding the Canadian context of national reconciliation, some Aboriginal scholars have been inclined to predict that "to the extent testimony and [TRC] findings are noted at all in the mainstream, large parts of such acknowledgements will directly or indirectly impugn the testimony provided by Survivors" (Chrisjohn and Wasacase 229 n12). Julie McGonegal's examination of the Australian context of national reconciliation in this issue thus provides a timely and striking point of comparison for the relatively confined, if not complacent, response to the exposure of residential schools policy and its effects in the Canadian public sphere. Through a reading of Kate Grenville's *Secret River* and Gail Jones's *Sorry*, two novels which invite non-Indigenous readers to "speak with their ghosts—to acknowledge the silent and the shrouded," McGonegal discusses the prominence of the trope of the secret in fiction committed to the emancipatory possibilities of truth-telling. Non-Indigenous deployments of the trope of the secret must be carefully distinguished from Indigenous efforts to expose colonial violence. Nevertheless, McGonegal argues, as a metaphor for engaging with the repressed archive of the past, unveiling secrets can work productively in pedagogical spaces to transmit knowledge in a way that mobilizes decolonizing efforts rather than defensiveness and hostility. In Australia the question of effective public pedagogy has been an urgent one, for as McGonegal notes, official recognition of settler violence and the national Sorry Days from 1998 to

2004 seemed to coincide with the return of neo-conservatism and a re-legitimation of anti-Indigenous sentiment.

Following the set of essays on fiction, the issue turns to two essays investigating other cultural forms engaging with naming and recovering from the violence of residential schooling. Kirsty Robertson's essay considers the *Living Healing Quilt Project*, organized by Alice Williams and sponsored by the TRC, as the "knotted or fraught underside" of the metaphor of a national tapestry and compares it to other quilting projects variously aimed at the production of public memory, the reclamation of experience, and healing. Like quilts themselves, which bind dissimilarities together, Robertson's essay holds in tension the multiple registers of home, and its loss, about which the *Living Healing Quilt Project* has something to say. The *Project* is at once "a document of trauma, an intervention into mainstream normative narratives of nation building, [...] part of a feminist rethinking of quilts as emancipatory texts, and a commentary on the role of sewing and handcraft in the attempted creation of docile and assimilated Indigenous children."

Where Robertson's contribution reads the complex articulations of a textile project, Geoffrey Carr's essay turns to architecture and the built environment to ask how the legacy of colonial injustices against Aboriginal peoples is being (re)configured. Carr examines the original architectural plans of residential schools, suggesting that public memory of residential schooling as the instrument of a governmental rationality calculated to produce "disempowered (non)subjects," rather than an isolated policy "error," requires reckoning with the architectural archive of the institutions. He then turns to the question of how the architectural "detritus of the Indian Residential School system" will be incorporated by the state bureaucracy for managing national "heritage." Carr provides an account of one school building's recent conversion into a resort by the Ktunaxa First Nation, aided by substantial government investment only after the failure of a Tribal Council petition to have the building designated a national heritage site. The redevelopment of St Eugene's Indian Residential School in Cranbrook, British Columbia, has been touted by the federal government as the sign of a new, more equitable relationship between the state and Aboriginal peoples, but, as Carr argues, the case demonstrates that spaces of reconciliation contain fissures, failures, and ambiguities.

Through discussions of oral narrative and interviews with seven residential school survivors in Northwest Coast Indigenous communities, the essay by Jeff Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, and T'lakwadzi stresses the great distance between state-driven reconciliation in Canada and Indigenous,

especially Nuu-chah-nulth, concepts and priorities for dealing with the legacies of residential schooling and the ongoing work of decolonization. The essay makes the key point that compensation payments under the 2007 Settlement Agreement and the gathering of testimony by the TRC, while ostensibly constituting repair for the damages caused by residential schooling, will only go so far to help Indigenous peoples rebuild and strengthen shattered families and communities. Elements of Nuu-chah-nulth epistemology and governance, such as “haa-huu-pah” (sacred living stories) and “Quu’asa family way” (a methodology for recovering these stories), offer strategies for restorying and renewing family and community responsibilities, which might serve as “starting points for committing to larger Indigenous movements in pursuit of justice and freedom.”

The concluding essay in this issue, by Alyson McCready, broadens the debate regarding Aboriginal redress out from under the topic of residential schools toward the pressing matter of land claims and the representation of Aboriginal protest in the mainstream media. Examining local and national media representations of the anti-Indigenous “side-show” to the Six Nations’ movement to reclaim land near Caledonia, Ontario, McCready argues that this oppositional current within the hegemonic formulations of redress and reconciliation operates through the appropriation of established tactics and “symbolic politics” of redress. By describing the effectiveness of this instance of a discursive appropriation, McCready provides a reminder that there is nothing inherent in the discourse of redress that links it to justice. Jo-Ann Episkenew then closes our special issue with an Afterword that reflects upon the importance of re-storying the intergenerational impacts of the Indian residential school system through personal memory work and, in so doing, returning Indigenous individuals, families, and communities to a remembered and re-membering sense of home.

Collectively, the essays that follow work to invigorate discussions of redress for Aboriginal nations across Canada by tracing both dominant and counter-hegemonic formulations of reconciliation, reparations, and restitution across a variety of social and political spaces. From the House of Commons to Northwest Coast Indigenous communities, from the media spectacle of protest to the tourist destination of a former residential school, from the archives of history to the present tense, these essays challenge the sense of resolution and closure that some would seek to impose upon the unfinished work of reckoning with colonial injustice.

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