Abstract

Truth commissions are based on the premise that dialogue about past crimes, violence, and abuse can alleviate the suffering of victims and ease the relationship between oppressed and oppressor. They also assume a certain relationship between history and memory, presuming a duty to remember and the need for a re-articulation of history through memory. This paper examines the context and dynamics of the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRS TRC) established in Canada in 2008. By exploring the uses of testimony at the IRS TRC’s first national gathering, the essay focuses on the interplay between constructs of nationhood and forms of public intimacy. In considering both the public testimony given at the gathering and the larger, nascent narratives formed there, the essay demonstrates how survivors participating in the IRS TRC negotiate and challenge colonial relations of power while also strengthening and repairing intimate, familial relations.

In the moment of (re)telling, we are both witness and testifier, bearing witness to the stories of our ancestors and giving testimony as survivors of the policy of forced assimilation. (Susan Dion [Lenape/Potawatami] 2004: 63)²

The Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRS TRC), established on 1 June 2008, provides a platform for Indigenous peoples in Canada to give their testimony about their experiences under the oppressive, colonial policy of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system.³ Between

¹ This research has been funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
² Wherever possible, I have included the Indigenous identities of authors in this text. For discussion on the role of Indigenous identity and location in relation to research practices, see Absolon (Anishinaabe) and Willett (Cree) 2005.
³ For the purposes of this paper, I use the term ‘Indigenous’ to refer to Inuit, Métis, and First Nation populations in Canada. Each was affected by the IRS system. My intention is not to flatten the differences between these distinct groups. I also use the term ‘Native’ interchangeably with ‘Indigenous.’ The term ‘Aboriginal’ is generally used by government bodies to refer to Indigenous peoples in Canada and is
In 1831 and 1996, there were 130 Indian Residential Schools across Canada, and during this period at least 150,000 Indigenous children went through the schools (see www.trc-cvr.ca). In addition to their removal (often forced) from kin and intimate support networks, students were often punished brutally, including beatings and public humiliation for breaking the rules. They were forbidden from speaking their Indigenous languages and practicing their traditional customs, beliefs, and religions. Numerous former students have spoken of the physical and sexual abuse they suffered in the schools, and some children, estimates range from hundreds to thousands, died while in the IRS system (Miller 1996; Milloy 1999). Many of the schools have cemeteries where small graves, often unmarked, remain as traces of this past (Curry 2008).

As Susan Dion writes above, Indigenous peoples can act as both witness and testifier in sharing their experiences of colonial policies in Canada. As witnesses, they have lived through these policies, surviving violent conflict and injustice. As givers of testimony, they rupture silences about colonial policies of assimilation and oppression, giving voice to long-denied or stifled experiences. One way in which they may occupy this dual role is through the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In sharing their experiences they are ‘(re)telling’ (Dion 2004) or ‘restorying’ (Corntassel et al. 2009) narratives that have generally framed Canada as a benevolent and tolerant nation.

As a key site for public negotiation of the IRS history, this essay focuses on the IRS TRC’s national gatherings. These gatherings, seven in total, will be held across the country throughout the five-year mandate, ending in 2014. Three national gatherings have been held thus far, in Winnipeg (June 2010), in Inuvik (June 2011), and Halifax (October 2011). The national gatherings – generally four-day public events – have become a staging ground for the reconciliation process in Canada. They include the giving and taking of testimony (in both private and public forums), traditional ceremonies, plays, film screenings, and concerts and performances. For the purposes of this essay, I focus primarily on the Winnipeg national gathering (15–19 June 2010). In particular, I explore the ways in which the intimate

also used colloquially by many Canadians to refer to Native populations. For the reasons outlined by Alfred and Corntassel (2005), I use the term ‘Indigenous’ over ‘Aboriginal’ unless quoting sources directly.

4 The original mandate was set to end in 2013. However, within the first year of the commission’s work, the original three commissioners resigned. Arguments regarding the mandate, relationships with key stakeholders, and infighting led to a failed first commission (‘Justice LaForme Resigns’, 2008). In 2009, the commission re-grouped with three new commissioners: Justice Murray Sinclair (Anishinaabe), Chief Wilton Littlechild (Cree), and Marie Wilson. The mandate was extended to 2014.

5 The traditional ceremonies depend on where the event takes place. In Winnipeg for example, the commission held a Powwow. In Inuvik, certain forms of drumming and dancing, and the lighting of the qulliq (a type of oil lamp) were incorporated. All three of the events included the lighting and maintaining of the sacred fire. At the end of each of the events, a portion of the ashes from the fire was saved to be brought to the following national gathering.
and the national come together on the same terrain at the event. I argue that although much emphasis has been placed on the construct of nation throughout the establishment and implementation of the IRS TRC, the events at the national gatherings also allow for an understanding of reconciliation on the level of the intimate and communal. I focus on where ‘the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness’ (Berlant 2000: 1), where the intimate nation and reconciliation meet. As Anne Stoler (2006) has written, ‘The politics of intimacy is where colonial regimes of truth were imposed, worked around, and worked out’ (36).6 The Indian Residential Schools were one way in which the government of Canada policed intimate relationships between family members. The testimonies given at the national gatherings negotiate these colonial regimes once again. I argue that although the IRS TRC has the potential to constrain and shape the narratives that arise from survivor testimony, the survivors themselves are able to challenge these constraints, asserting their own agency and empowerment through the process.7

The theoretical framework for this essay draws upon the work of several Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and lies at the intersection of cultural studies and critical Indigenous theory. In writing about the Winnipeg national gathering, I pay particular attention to the work of Lee Maracle, a Sto:lo author, poet, and scholar who interlaces different genres of writing (prose, poetry, and theory), allowing for provocative engagements between forms of expression and knowledge that have often been separated or segmented from each other. She has written that: ‘Academic theories / are but the leaky summations / of human stories’ (2000: 107). In including some of the testimony at the national gathering and by constructing a narrative (although fragmented) of the gathering itself, I have kept Maracle’s (1994) emphasis on ‘theory through story’ in mind. Because the IRS TRC is currently ongoing, the purpose of this essay is not to offer definitive conclusions about the process but to raise questions and issues that should be debated as the commission moves forward. In exploring the nascent narratives forming at the national gatherings, the essay aims to explore how survivors participating in the IRS TRC negotiate and challenge colonial relations of power while also strengthening and repairing intimate, familial relations. The guiding questions for the essay are: How is the nation re-imagined through the IRS TRC? How do intimate relationships between family members and within and between communities come into play in the national reconciliation process? And what are the tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to truth-telling, healing and remembrance?

---

6 For a discussion of how these colonial regimes worked in Canada to define ideas of family, gender and sexuality, negatively affecting Indigenous cultures and traditional practices, see Emberley (2007).

7 ‘Survivors’ is the term used by both former students and the Commission for those who attended the IRS system.
National and international context

Since the 1970s there have been over two dozen truth commissions conducted around the world. South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Guatemala are among the many nations that have established a truth and reconciliation commission to come to terms with their violent and contested histories. These commissions are based on the premise that dialogue about past crimes, oppression and abuse can alleviate the suffering of the victims and ease the relationship between oppressed and oppressor. An underlying assumption is that incorporating these narratives into the national imaginary can transform the nation’s political landscape.

In comparison with truth commissions that have taken place in the past, the Canadian commission marks several important firsts. It is the first national truth and reconciliation commission to be established in North America and the first to focus specifically on the treatment of children. What is most distinctive, however, are the historical conditions under which the Canadian commission emerged. Previous commissions were legislated or proclaimed. In comparison, the Canadian commission arose from ‘the bottom up’ through a class action lawsuit. This involved a long process of legal negotiation between the government, the churches that ran the schools, and the representatives of the 80,000 claimants involved in the suit. Additionally, truth and reconciliation commissions generally facilitate moments of radical transition, the fall of apartheid in South Africa or the end of a military regime in Chile for example. In most cases, a smooth transition to a democratic society is one of the main goals of the TRC (Brahm 2004). In the Canadian case, no obvious transition has occurred, prompting the question, ‘Why now?’

---

8 The literature on truth and reconciliation commissions encompasses a diverse range of work. Some of the relevant literature focuses on comparative analysis (Hayner 2002; Grandin 2005), literature and narrative (Krog 2000; Sanders 2007; Slaughter 2007; Comnastessel et al. 2009), memory studies (Amadiume and An-Na’im (eds) 2000; Gomez-Barris 2009) and broader legal frameworks and transitional justice (Arendt 1994; Regan 2007).

9 This is not to suggest that preceding commissions conformed to uniform standards. There is variation and difference among the commissions. See also the International Center for Transitional Justice’s Fact Sheet, ‘Canada’s TRC: Special Challenges’.

10 See Magarrell and Wesley’s (2010) Learning from Greensboro: Truth and Reconciliation in the United States for a case study that, although not a national TRC, also arose from the bottom up. In 2007, the Qikqiktani Inuit also established a local, community-based TRC to deal with the treatment of Inuit people by the Canadian government (see www.qtcommission.com). Gacaca courts in Rwanda have also been touted as arising from the bottom up (see Venter 2007; Thomson and Nagy 2011).

11 In May 2006, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement was approved by all parties involved in the lawsuit (initiated in 1998). The Agreement included financial compensation for IRS survivors and called for a national truth-telling commission to bring greater awareness to the history and legacy of the IRS system.
There are several factors that may account for why the IRS TRC was established at this particular historical moment. On a global stage, increasing attention is paid to Indigenous issues around the world, and Indigenous peoples are gaining ground in bringing national and international attention to past (and present) oppression by disrupting and disturbing official histories with differing collective memories. International discourses of human rights regimes continue to gain currency (Ishay 2008; Lauren 2003), and truth commissions, as part of these regimes, are now recognised as one mechanism that deals with a troubled and turbulent past. Within Canada, the truth commission builds upon a history of redress including the landmark apology and reparations for Japanese Canadians who were interned during World War II (see McAllister 2010; King 2005). In the case of the IRS system, a TRC is seen as a way to foster communication and understanding within and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (see Archibald et al. 2008; Younging et al. 2009).

As Ernest Renan (1996) has famously remarked, ‘To forget, and – I will venture to say – to get one’s history wrong, are essential factors in the making of a nation’ (145). In the process of nation building, a unifying collective history is often one of the key ties that bind disparate peoples and communities together. As Renan remarks, in order for the illusion of unity to take hold, there must be a certain amount of collective forgetting. As the process of nation building continues, however, collective memory plays a role as well. Truth commissions revisit violent moments of a nation’s history, forcing a collective reckoning with the past. By playing an active role in writing a national history and furthering the nation building project, truth commissions can act as reminders that, ‘[t]hough national subjects are conditioned to view the nation as fixed, nations are in fact phantasmatic and inherently unstable productions’ (Gomez-Barris 2009: 14).

In Canada, the truth commission marks a crossroads between history and memory. For the most part, the national Canadian narrative has been told in a way that frames the nation as largely peaceful and tolerant. It focuses on a ‘grand narrative of pioneers and waves of immigrants birthing a peaceable nation from a vast, untamed landscape’ (Archibald et al. 2008: 1). In order to construct and perpetuate this myth, particular histories had to be excised from the national narratives surrounding the formation of the Canadian state. In large part, the history of Indigenous peoples and their interactions with settler colonists have been left out or changed to fit this construction. In addition, the two founding cultures of Canada are framed as the French and the British. As Eva Mackey (2002) writes, ‘Issues of multiculturalism and Aboriginal rights in Canada are most often discussed as a sideline to

---

12 I use ‘collective memory’ here to highlight that individual memories are framed through social structures including religion, family, and community (Halbwachs 1992). I distinguish collective memory from official history in that collective memory is often transmitted through ‘unofficial’ means – folklore, oral traditions, ritual and so on (Hirsch 1997). At the same time, it is important to note that this distinction is not absolute and there is much overlap between history and memory (Jelin 2003).
the real fissure in Canadian society between the “two solitudes” between Canada and Quebec’ (16). Or put succinctly by Lee Maracle, ‘The result of being colonised is the internalization of the need to remain invisible. The colonizers erase you, not easily, but with shame and brutality’ (McKegney 2007: 51). Through initiatives including the creation of new curriculum, a new resource center, and a final report, the IRS TRC has the potential to disrupt the myth of benevolence and recognise the country’s violent colonial past. At the same time, however, the commission may function as a superficial marker of separation between the government of the past and the present, and may in fact act to reinforce the myth of a current, tolerant nation-state.

The issue of nationhood is particularly complicated in the Canadian case, as Indigenous populations have struggled for sovereignty and have self-identified as nations within a nation for decades (Deloria and Lytle 1998). But the definition of sovereignty itself is still fiercely debated and remains historically contingent (Barker 2006). Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk) writes that sovereignty, when discussed in relation to Indigenous peoples must be framed ‘within an intellectual framework of internal colonization. Internal colonization is the historical process and political reality defined in the structures and techniques of government that consolidate the domination of indigenous peoples by a foreign yet sovereign settler state’ (2006: 33). The relationship between sovereignty and self is entangled. Colonisation occurs on both national and personal levels. In turn, processes of decolonisation must also occur on multiple levels.

Several Indigenous scholars have argued that discourses of sovereignty and land must be engaged within the context of Canadian reconciliation (for differing viewpoints and discussion see Alfred 2005; Corntassel et al. 2009; Kelly 2008; Turner 2010). Native scholar, Dale Turner (2010) argues that for the project of reconciliation to be meaningful, it must be framed within the context of multiple nations (between Indigenous nations and the colonial nation of Canada). Others emphasise that the community and/or individual needs multiple avenues in which to explore or engage reconciliation. Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee Nation), Chaw-win-is (Nuu-chah-nulth), and T’lakwadzi (Kwakwaka’wakw) describe a research project where testimonies from residential school survivors are taken outside of the context of an official body like the IRS TRC, stressing the need for community-based and community-focused alternatives to the truth commission. They emphasise the need to ‘restory the settler version of history,’ and that Indigenous stories, whether in the form of testimony or ‘sacred living histories’ are a form of truth-telling (2009: 138). Joanne Episkenew (Métis) has also written of the connection between storytelling and empowerment: ‘Telling our stories is an act of agency, of empowerment, and that can be incredibly healing’ (Opikokew 2011). On a larger scale, Episkenew (2009) asserts that Indigenous narratives

---

13 Other projects include Isuma TV’s online channel devoted to residential school survivor testimonies, largely recorded in Inuktitut (with translations in English available), and the testimonies gathered by the Legacy of Hope Foundation (see http://www.isuma.tv/testimony-isuma and http://www.legacyofhope.ca/projects/our-stories-our-strength).
can provide a ‘counterstory’ to the national Canadian narrative that frames it as a benevolent and peaceful nation (2). The gathering of testimonies outside the TRC is an important project that can empower survivors to tell their stories. Still, as the most public attempt at reconciliation, the IRS TRC’s national gatherings offer a key site for understanding the levels of reconciliation occurring in Canada. Although the spectre of nation haunts the discourse at the national gatherings, the engagements with reconciliation at the Winnipeg event also negotiate more intimate terrain. Furthermore, the testimony given at the event transgressed some of the limitations associated with the testimonial genre. Before moving on to some examples of testimony at the gathering, I will first note some of the genre’s many criticisms.

**Truth and testimony**

The testimonial genre has been criticised for over-emphasising the role of language in the process of healing. By promoting a ‘talking cure’, an emphasis on testimony can overlook other forms of healing, including traditional rituals and embodied practices (Kelm 1998; Kelly 2008). It can also turn personal stories of suffering into ‘a banal and overexposed spectacle of horror’ (Jelin 2003: 75). TRCs in general have contributed to ‘the current cultural predilection for confessional trauma narratives’ (Feldman 2004: 167). This predilection can obscure the political agency and call to action these narratives often seek to create. The connection between trauma theory and testimony is also problematic in the Canadian context. Significant qualifiers must be made when using the discourse of trauma in an Indigenous context. Nancy Van Styvendale (2008) proposes the idea of a ‘trans/historicity’ of Native trauma, challenging a concept of trauma that is rooted in a singular event. Instead, she proposes that Native communities have faced a continued form of trauma that ‘takes place and is repeated in multiple epochs and, in this sense, exceeds its historicity, conventionally understood as a singular location in the past’ (204). In other words, the IRS TRC, which focuses on one aspect of the traumas inflicted on Indigenous communities, may not do justice to the trans/historical nature of Native trauma. Also, techniques of coping and healing from trauma emphasise a concept of a ‘Western view of the self as agentic, rationalistic, monological, and univocal’ which do not reflect traditional Indigenous ideas of the self as rooted in intimate connections to both landscapes and kin relationships (Gone 2008: 387). This is not to say that these versions of the self do not evolve or overlap, but to point to some of the difficulties in applying trauma theory in this context.14

Furthermore, the IRS TRC is set up around the principle that people will voluntarily participate in the process. This will undoubtedly result in a lack of testimonies given by perpetrators of violence. For example, in one of the most celebrated (and criticised) TRCs, in South Africa, there was a strong emphasis on both oppressed and oppressors giving their accounts of life under the apartheid regime. Although perpetrators in the South African case also

---

14 See Basil H. Johnston’s foreword in McKegney (2007) for a personal account of an IRS survivor’s frustrations with clinical psychology’s approaches to healing.
voluntarily gave testimony, amnesty could be requested and granted, creating a different set of stakes for participation (Mamdani 2007). In Canada, because the legal proceedings have concluded and a settlement reached, perpetrators cannot be named unless the individual has given their consent or been recognised in a court of law for any wrongdoing. In fact, if an unverified name is spoken in the course of one’s testimony, the commission is obligated to ‘anonymise’ the statement. Specifically, the TRC mandate states that the commission:

shall not name names in their events, activities, public statements, report or recommendations, or make use of personal information or of statements made which identify a person, without the express consent of that individual, unless that information and/or the identity of the person so identified has already been established through legal proceedings, by admission, or by public disclosure by that individual. Other information that could be used to identify individuals shall be anonymized to the extent possible. (Schedule N: 3)

The naming of names is an important step towards justice. But the desire to name names is also important outside juridical settings. In Native Studies for example, ‘the writing and righting of names’ is identified as an important focus for Indigenous history (Kulchyski 2000: 13). Many staff members who committed abuse at the schools have passed away or are unwilling to participate in the TRC. At the Winnipeg event, officials from the Anglican, Presbyterian and United Churches re-iterated apologies for their role in running the schools, but generally did not participate in the public testimony-giving. The Catholic Church has refused to offer a formal apology.

Despite these numerous criticisms, thousands of survivors of the schools still wish to give their testimony to the commission. For some survivors, telling one’s story is one step in the healing process. For others, it is a desire for dialogue that propels them to give their testimony. This dialogue takes place on multiple levels. The IRS TRC national gatherings bring attention to reconciliation on the personal, familial, and communal levels, not in contradiction with ideas of nation-building, but in addition to it.

A gathering nation

‘The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly. We are sorry’. With these words, standing in the House of Commons on 11 June 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologised for the Indian Residential School system (Harper 2008). Responses to the apology were mixed. Jose Amaujaq Kusugak (Inuk), an Indian Residential School survivor, recalls his response to the official apology: ‘For some reason I missed my mother then. I was numb and had an uncontrollable urge to cry, but the residential school had taught me to keep my cry underground’ (2009: 25). Harper’s apology and Kusugak’s response highlight two of the many registers in which the rhetoric of reconciliation occurs. Prime Minister Harper mobilises the language of the state, of forgiveness and moving forward, of making
history through healing and apologies (see Henderson and Wakeham 2009; Dorell 2009). Kusugak engages the language of affect and intimacy, of remembrance and looking back, of family ties broken and unhealing. The national gathering in Winnipeg acted as a staging ground for these two levels of engagements and their intersections.

In Winnipeg, public testimony was given in sharing circles. As opposed to more juridical-style hearings, people telling their stories sat in a circle, and an eagle feather or talking stick was passed from person to person as they shared their experiences. The audience (ranging from dozens to hundreds of people) fanned out around the circle and listened through large speakers set up around the Commissioners Tent or, when it began to rain, in the auditorium or lobby of the Manitoba Theatre for Young People. People spoke of being taken from their families and separated from siblings. Even when siblings attended the same schools, they were often kept apart. Some survivors spoke of life after the schools, speaking of the reverberations and legacies of the abuse in the system. Cree scholar Gregory Younging has written about these reverberations and their relationship to theories of memory: ‘Indigenous peoples often refer to our “blood memory,” meaning that the experience of those that have gone before us is embedded in our physical and psychological being’ (2009: 341). In other words, the aftermath of the Indian Residential School experience still pervades these communities, touching generations who, even without first hand experience of the schools, are affected.

During the Women’s Sharing Circle on 17 June 2010, Barbara Eaton from Kamloops, BC spoke:

I am a survivor, along with my grandmother, my uncle, my brother. I at times have felt alone, since the passing of my grandmother, my mom, and my uncle. I went to the residential school when I was five years old. I didn’t really remember the day that I went there until 2008 when I went to the house of healing and began talking about my life in residential school.

For Eaton, the memories from the school didn’t surface until she started to speak about her past. She spoke of feeling ashamed and silenced, and of the horror of her school experience.

Those who taught or worked at the schools were also in attendance in Winnipeg. In the sharing circle held on the first day, a pilot recounted his experience of taking a young girl away from her Inuit family and home to bring her south to school. He told of her inconsolable sadness and unstoppable tears. He had thought he was doing what was right, but has now come to

15 The official apology was met with mixed responses. At a G20 event in Pittsburgh on 26 September 2009, Prime Minister Harper denied that Canada had a colonial past, adding fuel to debates about the apology’s sincerity. For a greater discussion of the Prime Minister’s remarks see Henderson and Wakeham (2009) and Dorell (2009).

16 Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) writes about these two registers in relation to multicultural rhetoric in Australia.
realise his own role in a system that tore families apart. A teacher told of her own experiences and the difficult conditions at the Indian Residential School where she taught. She read the names of her students in their honor.

The national gathering included testimony outside the sharing circles as well. For example, during a special evening devoted to ‘Writing Truth, Imagining Reconciliation,’ Basil Johnston (Anishinaabe), author of *Indian School Days*, spoke about his experiences at the Spanish Indian Residential School (located in northern Ontario). He also spoke of how he was asked, after his book was released, why he didn’t focus more on the difficult times at Spanish. Although the book mentions some abuse, confusion, and difficulties at the school, it focuses on the more universal tropes of childhood: pranks, camaraderie, arguments, and flirtations. He explained that he wanted to tell one part of the story, and specifically, he wanted to focus on the resilient aspects. He wrote *Indian School Days* for his friends and other survivors of the IRS system. At the gathering in Winnipeg, he took the opportunity to shed light on those parts of the story about which he hadn’t written, and he spoke frankly about the sexual abuse he suffered at the schools. He went on to talk about his life after Spanish, about moving to Toronto, about meeting his wife and their life together. He drew attention to the fact that the experiences shared at these events should not come to represent the totality of the survivor’s life. Or as Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel write, colonisation cannot be the central story of Indigenous lives. ‘It must be recognized that colonialism is a narrative in which the Settler’s power is the fundamental reference and assumption, inherently limiting Indigenous freedom and imposing a view of the world that is but an outcome or perspective on that power’ (2005: 601).

Although the national gathering was structured through the realities of colonial polices (past and present), survivors were able to inject the discourses with reflections about their lives that didn’t place colonial relations at their center. For example, on the third day of the event, there was a ceremony honoring the Unity Riders, a group of men and women who rode on horseback from Virden, Manitoba and arrived in Winnipeg seven days later. Their journey was made in honor of residential school survivors and to show unity between the First Nations in the prairie provinces. Gus Higheagle, one of the Riders, addressed the audience in his Dakota language, explaining that he does so in order to prove to himself that he can speak his own language. He then called his daughter to the circle to sing a melody to commemorate the ride.

The Unity Riders symbolised alliances and connections between Indigenous peoples, not necessarily between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Gus Higheagle and his daughter’s song spoke to the family bonds and ties to the land that have been damaged and are being rebuilt. The song also demonstrated the central role of language re-invigoration in the reconciliation process. After the song, Gus Higheagle explained, ‘I wanted my daughter to be a part of this because our young people can speak our language and it’s very important because that’s what we are fighting for: to keep our language as a nation. I thank you’. Through their use of a range testimony, survivors of the schools have been able to upset the dyadic expectations of the commission, and speak to multiple audiences. Reconciliation, conceptualised as a relationship between Indigenous peoples and the nation, came second to
repairing the intimate relationships between family members. In many cases, non-Indigenous Canadians were not the intended audience for these testimonies. Indigenous family members and communities were often the direct audience, with non-Indigenous Canadians playing an indirect or secondary role as listeners. The testimony in Winnipeg demonstrated that before a new national narrative about the IRS history can be established, intimate truths are necessary.

At the national gathering, survivors also emphasised the labors of listening. During her testimony, one woman repeated the refrain ‘Listen to us’, several times. She said, ‘Listen to us, the ones that suffered in the residential schools. Listen to us when we say this is what we were like … Listen to us … Listen to us. Listen to us’. In his work on Holocaust testimony, Dori Laub has written that, ‘Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for a long time’ (Laub and Felman 1992: 70–71). For Giorgio Agamben, also writing about the Holocaust, testimony lies ‘between the sayable and the unsayable’ (2002: 145). For both Laub and Agamben, there is much work to be done by those who listen. In Winnipeg, listening became an ethical act, entailing responsibilities and active engagement (see Simon 2005). Drawing on her work through the Canadian reconciliation process, Paulette Regan (2010) has written about her own experiences as a settler committed to reconciliation and characterises herself as a ‘settler-ally’. Regan cautions against forms of listening that strengthen rather than deconstruct the settler-Indigenous relationship. Empathetic responses, she cautions, may still be ‘colonial in nature’ (12). To confront forms of colonial listening, Regan maintains that both settler and survivor must commit to a broader decolonisation project. For the settler, this involves ‘unsettling the settler within’ (13). This requires work on the part of the settler-listener, to not only grieve or feel empathy but to recognise one’s own complicity in the theft of lands and sovereignty from the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

Concluding gestures

As I mentioned at the beginning of the essay, I have paid particular attention to the work of Lee Maracle and her writing on ‘theory through story’. I have written not only of the narratives that come through survivor testimony, but have also constructed a narrative of the national gathering as well. I recognise that what I have constructed here is one possible interpretation of the event,

17 For the most part, I have focused specifically on the Indigenous or Canadian issues in dealing with testimony. However, the literature on testimony has largely taken shape through studies on trauma, narrative, and the Holocaust. In addition to Laub and Felman (1992) see Miller and Tougaw (2002), Caruth (1995), and Derrida (2000). See Krog et al. (2009) for one complex example of testimony from the South African TRC and the labors of listening.
and that it is necessarily fragmented. I have outlined some of the major criticisms of the IRS TRC, including its complicated relationship to issues of sovereignty and land; its mandate to anonymise portions of testimony if it deems it necessary; and its potential to re-inscribe colonial relations of power even as it claims to empower Indigenous peoples. I have also attempted to show some of the potential of the truth commission. Through survivor testimony, former students are able to reclaim their stories for themselves. The use of Indigenous languages at the national gathering draws attention to issues of translatability and commensurability in dealing with a traumatic past. The events at the national gathering act as a reminder that reconciliation often occurs in liminal spaces, between and within nations and families. By incorporating traditional Indigenous ceremonies and by using sharing circles as opposed to more juridical styles of testimony gathering, the IRS TRC opens up spaces for dialogue that may not otherwise have occurred. In many ways the IRS TRC expands and challenges our understandings of truth commissions. Because it is not marking a moment of radical change in government, perhaps it can influence our understanding of the types of transition and change that occur in settler nations as they excavate their colonial pasts.

In lieu of a conclusion, I would like to suggest two brief shifts or gestures as a way to keep the issues raised in this paper moving forward. The first shift is one that emphasises the intimate nation, or the recognition that both nationhood and reconciliation are negotiated through intimate relations. Discussion and dialogue about Indigenous sovereignty, land, and restitution must occupy an important role in discourses of reconciliation. At the same time, the intimate work of reconciliation between family members and communities must be given consideration as well. The testimony in Winnipeg illustrates how intimate truths are often a necessary precursor to national truths.

The second shift calls for a broader definition of testimony. Although I have focused on spoken testimony here, other modes of remembrance must be emphasised as well. Memory can be performed, and transmitted through ritual, tradition, and protest, and a TRC can be seen as an archival project, a performance, and a site of struggle. Gus Higheagle’s song, the smudging ceremonies that took place throughout the event, and the lighting of the sacred fire can also be seen as testaments to survival. They are reminders that both language and action are important. They are also a reminder that when some of the original treaties between Indigenous nations and settlers were signed, they incorporated Indigenous rituals of diplomacy (Regan 2010). These treaties have not been honored, and the rituals have been disrespected. When viewed through an optimistic lens, the TRC’s incorporation of these rituals can be seen as one way for their importance and political significance to be recognised. But their incorporation is also a reminder that promises of respect and recognition have been offered and broken in the past. As gestures, these two concluding shifts are meant to leave this discussion open.

---

18 The events in Inuvik and Halifax included simultaneous translation for several indigenous languages for most events. The Winnipeg event did not.
References


**Naomi Angel** is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. Her research focuses on cultural memory, transitional justice and processes of memorialisation, and she is a Memory and Memorialisation Fellow (NYU/CNRS) for 2010/2011. In particular, her research explores how remnants or traces of the past circulate in the context of the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada.