

The memories of Indian Residential Schools in Canada

Call for papers

for a special issue of the International Journal of Canadian Studies

Between 1874 and 1996, the Canadian government sought to educate and assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream Canadian society by promoting, and then requiring, their attendance at church-run Indian Residential Schools (IRS) (Miller, 1996). It is estimated that of the approximately 150,000 children who attended these institutions, at least 3,000 died (Perkel, 2013), while more than half of them were victims of physical or sexual abuse¹. For years, the government of Canada and the churches² that administered the schools refused to acknowledge these mistreatments, and when the government finally did, through a 1998 Statement of Reconciliation, it was without questioning the underlying legitimacy of the IRS system (Llewellyn, 2002). In 2006, in response to increasing legal pressure being exercised by IRS survivors on the government and the churches (Stanton, 2011), the latter finally recognised that the IRS system had unjustly and enduringly harmed Canada's Indigenous population, and in so doing, committed to make amends. The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) that ensued, the largest class action suit settlement in Canadian history, involved: (1) a healing fund and a commemoration fund; (2) a common experience payment (CEP) to every living survivor who attended an IRS; (3) an independent assessment process (IAP) for individual claims related to physical and sexual abuse; and (4) a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) (IRSSA, 2006). It is the work of this commission, and more specifically the memory and identity processes it puts in motion, that this special issue of the International Journal of Canadian Studies will focus on.

The TRC distinguishes itself from other truth commissions that have been set up around the world over the last thirty years -- it has no legal mandate, nor is it the outcome of a democratic transition (as was the case in South Africa) (Goodman, 2009). On the one hand, the commission,

¹ There is no accurate figure of how many students were victims of physical or sexual abuse. The quantification of these abuses is actually the very purpose of the TRC's work and is the subject of conflict, especially regarding the official list of schools covered by the Settlement Agreement. We have nonetheless estimated the number of victims of physical and sexual abuses based on the percentage of former IRS students who have filed individual claims for such abuse as of March 31st, 2013, drawing on figures of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC). According to them, 48% (37 716) out of the 78 859 former students who have been deemed eligible to the Common Experience Payment (CEP) by Services Canada (i.e., recognised as having attended a residential school officially recognised by the Settlement Agreement) have filed those claims (AANDC, 2013). Given that many victims of abuses have mentioned to us not having filed individual claims for a variety of reasons (including not wanting to remember the atrocities they experienced), we estimate that at least more than half of those who attended the schools were victimised.

² These included the Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic and United churches.

through the various national or regional events it organizes across Canada, provides a central place for testimonies of former students to be heard. In so doing, it aims to “liberate their speech”, public retellings of abuses being understood by the commission as key to IRS victims’ healing processes and, more broadly, to those of Indigenous communities at large. On the other hand, the commission’s mandate is to promote a “better understanding” of the history of residential schools among the larger Canadian society (IRSSA, 2006). Its vision statement declares: “We will reveal the truth about residential schools, and establish a renewed sense of Canada that is inclusive and respectful, and that enables reconciliation” (TRC, 2012, p. 2). But what is this “truth”? How is the goal of reconciliation that underlines the TRC’s desire to clarify what “really happened” in residential schools shaping the form and content of that “truth”? Besides, while the reparation programs that derive from the Settlement Agreement have all been restricted to residential students of federally run schools (such as the CEP and the IAP), the TRC, which finds that “[t]he exclusion of these students is a serious roadblock to meaningful and sincere reconciliation” (TRC, 2012, p. 9), has adopted a different approach. It is welcoming the participation of all students, including those from foster care situations, day schools or boarding schools not under the responsibility of the federal government. What is the impact of this more inclusive approach? Has it relieved non-recognised former students from their sense of being once again “nobody’s children” (Cuffe, 2012)? In the end, what tensions exist, if any, between the reconciliatory counter-history of residential schools that the commission has given itself the mandate to establish, and former students and staff’s memories of these schools?

While the negative effects of IRS on Indigenous peoples in Canada have now officially, although partially, been acknowledged by the Government and the churches that ran them through public apologies, or the ratification of the IRSSA, there is disagreement among survivors and their descendants about how the experience in the schools and its legacy should be interpreted and publicly represented. A number of Indian Residential Schools’ survivors have described their experience in the schools as “traumatic”, and its emotional legacy as symptomatic of a “Residential School Syndrome” (RSS). Modelled after the diagnostic criteria of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), this diagnostic is widely accepted and adopted by scholars, clinicians and survivors alike to describe the behavioural conditions that are believed to plague many who attended the schools (Brasfield, 2001; Partridge, 2010). From this point of view, the IRS system constitutes the root cause of the higher rates of interpersonal violence, alcoholism, and suicide that Indigenous peoples are faced with within Canada compared to the non-Indigenous population. Other survivors and indigenous scholars believe that these behavioural conditions should be understood more broadly as the result of “historic trauma”. From this perspective, the IRS system constituted only one among many of the long-standing and on-going colonial injustices faced by and impacting Aboriginal peoples in North America (Bousquet, 2009; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). In their memoirs, some survivors, such as James Gladstone (1987), focus on the positive outcomes of attending residential school, such as English literacy. Others speak to the opportunities opened up by way of the schools, including continuing education, employment, and the development of networks necessary to challenge Ottawa’s on-going control over their lands (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009). Without downplaying the abuses suffered at the schools, a slightly different version of the latter reading emphasizes IRS survivors’ ability to endure hardships of the IRS system as children, and to triumph over negative responses, such as drug and alcohol abuse, as adults (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003). This reading often stresses the

overall resilience of Aboriginal cultures (Tousignant, 2012), by highlighting the extent to which the residential schools system failed in assimilating Aboriginal peoples.

While IRS victims' testimonies are the main focus of the TRC, some survivors or former school employees decry, in the name of reconciliation, the absence of or the little room allocated to the churches during the national or regional events hosted by the commission. Throughout the twentieth century, Indian Residential Schools were considered, by the Anglican Church in particular, as a "sacred enterprise" (Woods, 2012). Missionaries, who then viewed themselves as heroes working devotedly for the welfare of the peoples of North America, saw conversion and civilization as going hand in hand (Hayes, 2004). And if this model, in the eyes on the Anglican elites, gradually splintered, to the point of being fully challenged in the 1960s, the schools' staff may have continued to believe in it, and feel betrayed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a result (Woods, 2012). Thus, alongside the work of the commission, former employees or missionaries who feel that they worked for the "welfare of the children" (L'Heureux, 2013) are denouncing the "Aboriginal truth" as false and questioning the "legalized lynching" (ibid.) to which they feel subject as a result of the commission's work.

How does the memory work accomplished by the TRC, through the regional and national events it organizes across Canada, interact with these obviously divergent interpretations of the IRS system and its impacts? Among those who choose to testify publicly about their experiences in the schools or their legacy, are certain interpretations favoured while others marginalised? Beyond the heterogeneity of testimonies, which counter-history of the IRS system is emerging, as a whole, from the public hearings of the commission? Is this counter-history transforming the ways into which the experience and legacy of the schools are being locally interpreted and addressed? If so, how? We are also raising the issue of the uses to which the TRC's counter-history of the IRS system are being put. What role does this counter-history play, for instance, in defining contemporary indigenous movements' logics of action or the identity of their actors?

In this issue, we will also ponder to what extent the "truth" that the TRC is currently "revealing" is transforming the status of Aboriginal people in Canada. Indeed, as we explained above, the commission has set itself the objective of contributing, through the revelation of the abuses that were committed in schools and their intergenerational impacts, to "a renewed sense of Canada that is inclusive and respectful, and that enables reconciliation". What are the strategies that the commission is deploying in that regard? How is it transforming into a "Canadian problem" what is generally perceived by a majority of non-Aboriginals as a strictly "Indian problem"? Are the various testimonies that it is displaying, whether in the context of public hearings, discussion forums on the theme of reconciliation, or written reports on the progress of its work, able to generate empathy, solidarity among non-Aboriginal Canadians, or even a sense of guilt? And how are these processes of identification with the "Indian Other" transforming the collective representations of Aboriginal peoples among non-Aboriginal people?

Here is a non-exhaustive list of themes that the articles of this special issue could cover:

- The memory of residential schools and the TRC: challenges and conflicts;

- Testifying, or not, at the TRC: experiences and positionings of actors;
- Memories of residential schools, redefinition of Aboriginal collective identities, and re-articulation of Aboriginal movements in Canada;
- The reception of IRS memories by the Canadian civil society.

If you would like to contribute to this special issue, please send us an abstract of 500 words maximum, along with a title, a short biography and a short bibliography, by August 15th, 2013, to kvanthuy@uottawa.ca and briegc@ehess.fr.

We will let you know by September 1st, 2013, if your contribution has been selected for the issue.

Complete versions of the articles will have to be submitted to the special issue editorial board no later than **January 1st, 2014**. The publication of the special issue is scheduled for January 2015.

We look forward reading your abstracts,

The editorial board of this special issue :

Brieg Capitaine, Associate Researcher, CADIS, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, CNRS, briegc@ehess.fr.

Karine Vanthuyne, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Ottawa, kvanthuy@uottawa.ca.

References

- Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) (2013). *Statistics on the Implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*, retrieved at <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1315320539682/1315320692192>, accessed on July 12th, 2013.
- Bousquet, M.-P. (2009). Régler ses conflits dans un cadre spirituel: pouvoir, réparation et systèmes religieux chez les Anicinabek du Québec. *Criminologie*, 42(2), 53-82.
- Brasfield, C. R. (2001). Residential School Syndrome. *BC Medical Journal*, 43(2), 78-81.

- Cuffe, S. (2012) Nobody's Children. Métis Residential School Survivors Continue to Fight for Recognition. Vancouver Media Co-Op, *retrieved at* <http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/fr/story/nobodys-children/11481>, on July 12th, 2013.
- Dion Stout, M., & Kipling, G. (2003). Aboriginal People, Resilience and the Residential School Legacy. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.
- Gladstone, J. (1987). Indian School Days. *Alberta Historical Review*, 15(1), 18-24.
- Goodman, T. (2009). *Staging Solidarity. Truth and Reconciliation in a New South Africa*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Hayes, A., L. (2004). *Anglicans in Canada: Controversies and Identity in Historical Perspective*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Irlbacher-Fox, S. (2009). *Finding dahshaa : self-government, social suffering and, Aboriginal policy in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) (2006).
- L'Heureux, J. (2013, 13/05/15). Présomptions de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation, *Le Droit*.
- Llewellyn, J. (2002). Dealing with the legacy of native residential school abuse in Canada: Litigation, ADR, and restorative justice. *University of Toronto Law Journal*(52), 253-300.
- Miller, J. R. (1996). *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*. Toronto : University of Toronto Press.
- Partridge, C. (2010). Residential Schools: The Intergenerational Impacts on Aboriginal Peoples. *Native Social Work Journal*, 7, 33-62.
- Perkel, C. (2013, 13/02/18). At least 3,000 native children died in residential schools: research, *The Globe and Mail*.
- Stanton, K. (2011). Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Settling the Past?. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 2(3), 1-18.
- Tousignant, M. (2012). La culture comme source de résilience. In B. Cyrulnik & G. Jorland (Eds.), *Résilience: Connaissances de base* (pp. 137-151). Paris: Odile Jacob.
- TRC. (2012). Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Interim Report. Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC).
- Wesley-Esquimaux, C. C., & Smolewski, M. (2004). Historic trauma and Aboriginal healing. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Woods, E., Taylor. (2012). *The Anglican Church of Canada and the Indian Residential Schools: a meaning-centred analysis of the long road to apology*. PhD dissertation, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London.