

Unsettled ground: The ruins of closed residential schools and Canadian identity

The physical spaces of closed and now deteriorating Indigenous residential schools in Canada carry enormous discursive and cultural weight. Decades after their closure, the ruins of residential schools are physical reminders of the colonial violence committed through the residential schools program. My research examines the meaning-making role of residential schools within the post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) era of Indigenous-state negotiations.

CLOSED YET POWERFUL

Canada's state-sanctioned residential schools (frequently run by religious groups) upheld inherently racist colonial objectives and attitudes that resulted in systematic genocidal violence (Anderson, 2012; Carter, 2003; Kelm, 1996; Milloy, 1999; Haig-Brown, 1988; de Leeuw, 2009; Alfred, 2010). Within residential schools, all expressions of Indigenous cultural identity were fiercely punished (Alfred, 2010; Furniss, 1992; de Leeuw, 2009; Regan, 2010; Chrisjohn & Young, 1997). Founded on colonialism, expanded through violence, and defined by the relentless evictions of Indigenous peoples from their land, Canada's national history is one of genocidal and cultural violence against Indigenous peoples (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997; Miller, 2000). Residential schools are essential sites of these processes. Although they are no longer in operation, the physical presence of these structures allows the attitudes, norms, and violence of these spaces to continue. My research is premised on a recognition that although the residential schools are closed (the last one in 1996), the schools, even as deteriorating structures, hold significant power.

Sunera Thobani's conceptualization of "exalted subjects" meshes well with

BY KATHERINE MORTON

Katherine Morton is a PhD candidate and researcher at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She is interested in anti-colonial theory and colonial violence in Canada, and her research work is focused on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and residential schools.

Decades after their closure, the ruins of residential schools are physical reminders of the colonial violence committed through the residential schools program.

the meaning-making functionality of residential schools. National subjects are produced through a ritualized and ongoing project that she refers to as "exaltation" (Thobani, 2007). By being defined as Others, or non-exalted, Indigenous people are written out of the national narrative. They are not only excluded, they are actually constructed as antithetical to the norms, values, and identity of the Canadian national subjects (Thobani, 2007). This exaltation process allowed for, and even necessitated, the establishment of residential schools. The residential schools created exclusive spaces where exalted subjects were able to self-define their role through paternalism as a protector/discipliner in relation to the helpless Indigenous other.

Canadian exalted subjects are characterized as "responsible citizens, compassionate, caring and committed to the

values of diversity and multiculturalism" (Thobani, 2007, p. 4). This national identity—characterized as kind and tolerant—ironically fuelled the "child-saving" practices of seizing Indigenous children and forcing their attendance at residential schools (Thobani, 2007, p. 109). In what Thobani describes as the "ethic of compassion," Indigenous families had their children forcibly removed, and in many cases the intergenerational damage of this collapse of family units is still being experienced (Thobani, 2007, p. 109).

ELIMINATION—ASSIMILATION—RECONCILIATION

Closure didn't extinguish the social meanings and consequences of residential schools. They continue to have deep implications for Canadian identity constructions and how Canada continues to engage with and govern over Indigenous peoples through a variety of state interventions. The underpinnings of the residential schools that are rooted in a colonial desire to eliminate indigeneity through assimilation to serve the colonial-capitalist labour and commodity needs of the home state continue to affect the policies, programs, and mandates of the government of Canada of the present day.

The idea of reconciliation has become the dominant method and narrative for Indigenous-state relations (Coulthard, 2007). Echoing Dene researcher and activist Glen Coulthard, I reject the apparent neutrality and innocence of the language of reconciliation, and the taken-for-granted nature of "reconciliation" as a strategy (Coulthard, 2007; also Alfred, 2010). My work will encounter the narrative of "reconciliation" at various points, but will approach reconciliation as one among many politicized and value-laden concepts invoked

Unsettled ground, page 22

by the state in approaching Indigenous-state relations in the contemporary Canadian context. The idea of reconciliation—an idea adopted vigorously by the federal government—is informed by a desire to resolve “Indigenous issues” and to prevent continued threats such as wide-scale Indigenous protests, land claims, and litigation (Alfred, 2010, p. xi). Kanien’kehaka Mohawk academic and activist Taiaiake Alfred questions the language of reconciliation and asks, “[w]hat is the notion of reconciliation doing for Canadian society and what is it doing for Native people?” (Alfred, 2010, p. xi). Indigenous residential schools, as material evidence of the state’s complicity in genocidal violence and destructive assimilation-based policies, conflict with this discourse of reconciliation. Alfred argues that reconciliation obscures how colonial inequalities, racism, and the marginalization of Indigenous people are contemporary issues, not historic ones (Alfred, 2010, p. xi). He finds that reconciliation assumes a completion or a clear finish to these major problems and therefore conceals how they persist (Alfred, 2010, p. xi).

PHYSICAL COMPLICATIONS

The federal government of Canada established the TRC with a mandate to investigate and listen to the experiences of survivors of the Indigenous residential schools program (Regan, 2010). The commission, following multiple sessions across the country and a lengthy fact-gathering process, produced both an interim and a final report, outlining findings and making possible suggestions for next steps in the reconciliation process (TRC, 2015; Regan, 2010). However, within this format and organization of “reconciliation,” there is a prioritization of the individual experiences of survivors, and less attention is focused on the structures and spaces of the schools themselves.

Even as state reconciliatory actions attempt to bracket the colonial past and shape a new way forward, the material-

ity of residential schools maintains meaning-making power within contemporary society. What emerges from this work is a complicated question: What does it mean that the buildings of residential schools (as sites of genocidal violence) remain across the Canadian landscape? As possibly fitting the category of “ruins of modernity,” their physical presence contests and complicates the contemporary politics of reconciliation by demonstrating the intensity of colonial violence that cannot be contained by any closed history chapter. In the current post-TRC era, the questions of what these sites mean socially and how they might be politically managed are pressing, particularly with regard to contemporary Indigenous-state relations. 🍁

REFERENCES

- Alfred, Taiaiake. (2010). Foreword. In P. Regan (Ed.), *Unsettling the settler within: Indian residential schools, truth telling, and reconciliation in Canada* (pp. ix-xi). Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Anderson, Willow. (2012). Indian drum in the house: A critical discourse analysis of an apology for Canadian residential schools and the public’s response. *The International Communication Gazette*, 74(6), 571-585.
- Carter, Sarah. (2003). Transnational perspectives on the history of Great Plains women: Gender, race, nations, and the forty-ninth parallel. *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 33(4), 565-596.
- Chrisjohn, Roland, & Young, Sherry. (1997). *The circle game: Shadows and substance in the Indian residential school experience in Canada*. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books.
- Coulthard, Glen. (2007). Subjects of empire: Indigenous peoples and the politics of recognition in Canada. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 6(1), 437-460.
- de Leeuw, Sarah. (2009). “If anything is to be done with the Indian, we must catch him very young”: Colonial constructions of Indigenous children and the geographies of Indian residential schooling in British Columbia, Canada. *Children’s Geographies*, 7(2), 123-140.
- Furniss, Elizabeth. (1992). *Victims of benevolence: Discipline and death at the Williams Lake Indian residential school, 1891-1920*. Williams Lake, BC: Cariboo Tribal Council.
- Haig-Brown, Celia. (1988). *Resistance and renewal: Surviving the Indian residential school*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Kelm, Mary-Ellen. (1996). A scandalous procession: Residential schooling and the re/formation of indigenous bodies, 1900-1950. *Native Studies Review*, 11(2), 51-88.
- Miller, J.R. (2000). *Skyscrapers hide the heavens: The history of Indian-White relations in Canada*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Milloy, John S. (1999). *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system—1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.
- Regan, Paulette. (2010). *Unsettling the settler within: Indian residential schools, truth telling, and reconciliation in Canada*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Thobani, Sunera. (2007). *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). (2015). *Canada’s residential schools: Reconciliation—The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Vol. 6. Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press.