

BEYOND RECOVERY:  
HEALING AND CANADA'S TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

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By

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For survivors and their children.

May these words contribute to the prevention of further violence and support survivor efforts for justice.

That they strengthen solidarity across boundaries and borders.

In solidarity.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the concept of healing used by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and survivors as a conceptual tool to address and redress the legacy of residential schools. Using public testimony and selected interviews, I explore how the TRC's statement-gathering process is perceived and experienced by survivors. This thesis also documents the personal tensions and political limits encountered during the implementation of a globalized, institutional process of truth-telling applied to resolve diverse and localized 'traumas' experienced by students enrolled in dozens of residential schools. This approach illustrates the inherent shortcomings of a top-down approach to solving residential school issues, drawing on the public testimonies of survivors to identify tensions between a national process and survivor-led and community-based alternatives for healing. Despite its intention to create a forum that allows survivors to tell their story about residential schools, the TRC has also, often, been used as space of political activism and social critique. Survivors have used the public testimonial spaces offered by the TRC to both critique the Canadian government's commitment to reconciliation and also to demand more effective forms of redress, which have subtly shaped and transformed the TRC during its mandate. Thus, while I draw attention to institutional practices, ideologies and power relations shaping the TRC, I also emphasize how people perceive, engage and transform the process as a result.

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Finally, I am especially grateful to all the survivors and Elders who generously shared their thoughts, knowledge and stories with me throughout this research and beyond.

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## LIST OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

### Aboriginal, First Nations, Indigenous

While many Indigenous people in Canada share common experiences related to residential schools, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit each have a unique historical relationship with Canadian governments and European colonization. Indigenous people in Canada come from a diverse range of backgrounds with great social, cultural, environmental and linguistic differences. Indigenous is used throughout this research to refer to people who identify their ancestry with the original inhabitants of Canada. The words ‘Aboriginal’, ‘First Nations, Métis, Inuit’, ‘Native’, and ‘Indian’ are used in specific references, when others have used them.

### Survivor, former students, victim, victim-survivor

Throughout this thesis I will use ‘survivor’, ‘former student’, ‘victim’ and ‘victim-survivor’ interchangeably. ‘Survivor’ has important political connotations for former students of Indian Residential Schools, who used the term to self-describe themselves and their survival despite the oppression endured in residential schools. It is also the term that TRC uses most often to identify former students both at public hearings and in media announcements. The term ‘victim’ is also sometimes used as many previous truth commissions speak of victims or victim-survivors. In various contexts the term ‘victim’ is preferred by those most impacted by violations, “who see it as enabling identity that can serve to underwrite their claims on the state” (Robins 2012:84n2).

### Ethics

In this thesis, ethics refers to the “the values, principles, intentions, personal sense of responsibility and self-definition that guide behaviors, practices, and actions towards others” (Ermine 2000:18). Giroux (1992) states that ethics “is a social discourse that refuses to accept needless human suffering and exploitation” (Ermine 2000:18).

AHF – Aboriginal Healing Foundation  
CEP – Common Experience Payment  
IAP – Independent Assessment Process  
IRS – Indian Residential School(s)  
IRSSA – Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement  
RCAP – Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples  
RHSW – Resolution Health Support Worker  
TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission

## CHAPTER 1: STARTING WITH THE SPIRIT

Sometimes we listen real hard, but we cannot hear. Sometimes we look real hard but we cannot see.

-Howard Walker, Emcee Onion Lake Cree Nation TRC Community Hearing,  
April 4, 2012

*It is still dark as I drive on the Wascana Parkway from downtown Regina, skirting alongside the glistening Wascana Lake heading towards the First Nations University building. After a warmer than usual winter, the sudden plunge to -50 degrees is hard to bear. I notice several people walking along the bridge, their faces barely visible beneath the many layers protecting their bodies against the potential bite of frost. But at this temperature, the air is still. And as the sun makes its appearance over the eastern sky, I am reminded why I am here, what has brought us together on this crisp wintery morning: stories of residential school.*

*It is just before 9 am. The room is full of mostly empty chairs. Men and women, some with vests, others with name tags – health support workers, Elders and cultural support workers – walk around preparing the room, placing boxes of Kleenex on every few chairs. The distinct smell of sage and sweetgrass fills the room. In the background the master of ceremonies and Elder Mike Pinay from the Peepeekisis First Nation begins his opening remarks. It's interesting how this event, or 'hearing' as it is being called, seems more like a press release event, or perhaps an academic conference, certainly not the setting of what is being described as a community gathering. The president of First Nations University – Dr. Doyle Anderson – is brought up front and introduced to the three Commissioners, Justice Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson, and Chief Wilton Little Child.*

*"My grandparents went to residential school, my parents went to residential school", there is a long pause as Elder Mike begins to speak into the microphone in front of the couple of dozen of people in the beautiful atrium of what Dr. Doyle later refers to as "this Great Institution". Closing this pregnant pause, Elder Mike finishes his sentence, "...and I went to residential school". More people trickle in and take their seats. Elder Mike goes on to say, "We thank the elders and those that got together and prayed this*



*morning, because there is still a lot of hurt out there. A lot of our people are still undergoing the atrocities of residential school; the relatives, the children, the grandchildren are affected”.*

*People begin to take their seats now. I notice how many seats remain empty, almost two-thirds of them. Those who are here appear to be representing the various churches, some media. I recognize some of the people wearing vests as Elders I have met at other community events around Saskatchewan. Still, I wonder why there are so few people here. I overhear a TRC staff person nearby mention that the audience was lower than expected. “Maybe it is due to the weather”, another responds. Or perhaps it is because this is the first of 12 TRC community hearings being held in Saskatchewan. Up until now, most people I have spoken with have heard little to nothing of the TRC and its mandate for healing.*

*“I would also like to especially thank the singers that are going to assist us here”, Elder Mike continues, “as we think of the spirit of that drum. That’s going to help make us feel good, to make us feel better, as the singers cry out to the heavens on behalf of each and every one of us”. Everyone is asked to rise for the ‘Grand Entry’. As the drum begins the grand entry song, the University President, the Commissioners, TRC staff, and several others, including health support workers and Elders enter the room one by one, walking until a circle is created around the hall. As the last drumbeat is heard, I hear Elder Mike say, as the Commissioners get set up for the hearings to begin, “We were given many tools as First Nations people to help us in our process”. As the stories begin to flow, I wonder privately if this hearing, and this process are accepted among those tools.*

After more than 150 years of residential schooling in Canada, a nation-wide Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established as “part of an overall holistic response to the Indian Residential School legacy” acknowledging the “injustice and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing” (IRSSA

2006).<sup>1</sup> Guided by the work of similar commissions worldwide, Canada's TRC invites former students and their families to give their testimony in front of a commission, promoting the link between truth telling and healing. Anthropologist Ronald Niezen states, "more than in any other truth commission, the TRC on Indian Residential Schools is concerned with mental illness, with trauma following from institutionalized violence. It is also concerned with healing from trauma and mitigating its widely ramifying effects in the lives of individuals, communities and the nation" (5). While the TRC process emerged from an international politics of transitional justice and national reconciliation, the Commission remains accountable to the parties of the agreement, which include the survivors of residential school. Thus, exploring how the TRC's statement-gathering process is perceived and experienced by those most affected by the process – the survivors themselves – is essential to investigating how national policies and institutional practices associated with healing the legacy of residential schools support local understandings, needs and expectations of what it means to heal.

There are important ethical questions that need to be asked of a process that assumes that the public telling and sharing of 'truths' will lead to healing both for individual survivors and the nation as a whole. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission aims to uncover and address the legacy of past violence. This mandate relies on a largely unchallenged assumption that truth commissions both enable and support processes of healing. In the telling of stories of trauma, or testimonies, truth commissions assume the psychotherapeutic belief that 'revealing is healing'. What are the ethical implications embedded in the assumption that the truth and reconciliation process contributes to healing? How does this presumption that healing can occur in these very public forums affect the healing that occurs in private and local contexts?

My thesis develops an analysis of the ethics of healing which guides Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission as it attempts to address *and* redress the history of violence associated with residential schools. Informed by the voices and concerns expressed by former students, I explore how the 'storytelling' process promoted at the TRC reveals the tensions between multiple and often conflicting notions of healing.

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<sup>1</sup>As I will describe further in chapter three, the TRC is but one component of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which also included compensation payments, a health support program administered by Health Canada, and a commemoration program.

I acknowledge the personal and political limits encountered during the implementation of a globalized, institutional process of truth-telling applied to resolve diverse and localized ‘traumas’ experienced by students enrolled in dozens of residential schools. This approach illustrates the inherent shortcomings of a top-down approach to solving residential school issues, drawing on the public testimonies of survivors to identify tensions between a national process and survivor-led and community-based alternatives for healing. The national approach to reconciliation has tended to attract more attention than highly diverse, and successful local efforts to heal the aftermath of the residential school experience. Despite its intention to create a forum that allows survivors to tell their story about residential schools, the TRC has also, often, been used as space of political activism and social critique. Survivors have used the public testimonial spaces offered by the TRC to both critique the Canadian government’s commitment to reconciliation and also to demand more effective forms of redress, which have subtly shaped and transformed the TRC during its mandate. Thus, while I draw attention to the influences and consequences of institutional practices, ideologies and power relations shaping the TRC, I also emphasize how people perceive, engage and transform the process as a result.

## LOCALIZING THE TRC

June 1, 2008 marked the beginning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada and its five-year mandate to understand the truth of the Indian Residential School legacy, and inspire a process of healing and reconciliation. The TRC was officially established as a result of a court-approved agreement to settle the legal claims that residential school survivors brought against the Government of Canada and various churches.<sup>2</sup> Established as an independent body, the TRC reports to the parties of the settlement agreement through the courts. Its mandate is to document the residential school experience and create an accurate and public historical record of the policies and operations of Indian residential schools and its legacy. Through national events and

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<sup>2</sup> The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (“Settlement Agreement” or “IRSSA”) was concluded on May 8, 2006.

community hearings, its aim is ‘healing’ and forging a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

TRCs have become a common approach to addressing past suffering and historical injustices. Referred to as a mechanism of transitional justice, TRCs originated out of a larger framework to facilitate the political transition to democracy in countries that had previous authoritarian regimes (Teitel 2000).<sup>3</sup> TRCs have become especially prevalent in the last few decades, alongside increasing calls for apologies, reparations, and public inquiries related to histories of mass violence and human rights violations against Indigenous peoples (Rubio-Marin et al. 2011). Moreover, transitional justice measures such as TRCs are being increasingly used by nation states as a way of processing the demands for justice by their Indigenous communities (Jung 2011).

Made up of anthropologists, political scientists, historians, legal scholars, and peace and development practitioners, among others, the transitional justice field has presented an extensive body of research over the last thirty years. While scholarly debates focus on the limits and possibilities of various transitional justice projects, such as national truth and reconciliation commissions, “these debates are largely fueled by normative conceptions of how such mechanisms should work, with very little analysis of whether they actually do work” (Millar 2010:477), particularly from the perspective of local communities. Often overlooked are studies that examine the effectiveness and impact of TRCs on the everyday lives of those most affected by past violence. In fact, a recent review of the literature excluded a number of significant ethnographic studies that assessed how such mechanisms are experienced for local people (Millar 2010:478).<sup>4</sup> Works by scholars such as Kimberly Theidon (2007, 2010), Rosalind Shaw (2007), and Gearoid Millar (2010) have shown that incorporating local voices, experiences and cultural conceptions of violence, trauma, and healing is essential to creating a more nuanced understanding of how TRCs actually function.

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<sup>3</sup> Although this is the standard category of ‘transition’ many transitional contexts “do not fit neatly in this category...these include, for example, more subtle transitions from a democracy in which human rights are weakly observed to one in which they are more effectively observed” (Freeman 2006:4). Importantly, transitional justice concerns *how* states address their legacies of mass abuse.

<sup>4</sup> See Simon Robins (2012) for a focus on evaluating transitional justice processes on the ‘terms’ of victims through ethnographic research methods.

The analysis that follows draws on such studies in order to consider local experiences, perceptions and understandings of Canada's TRC. Specifically, I explore local interpretations and expectations of the healing mandate of the TRC as a means of investigating how the national reconciliation project is experienced at the local level. Guiding this research is the belief that one "cannot respond to the needs of survivors of mass violence if we do not understand local forms and logics of social relations, their transformation and the cultural expressions of grief, anguish and loss" (Theidon 2007:98). As Theidon (2007) notes in her work in Ayacucho, Peru, national processes of reconciliation "remain largely peripheral to the daily lives of people living in areas most affected by political violence unless these processes articulate with and are informed by local logics and practices" (119). Importantly, as healing is seen as an ongoing process in many communities, greater attention is needed to address how local practices influence or are shaped by the national TRC process, as well as the impacts of 'reconciliation' on people's everyday life.

While the national discourse of truth and reconciliation has been initiated by the state – alongside an international politics of 'reparation' and 'redress' – experiences of violence take place at the individual and community level, as do cultural understandings and local forms of healing. Hence, this research seeks to examine the interaction between local and state-led processes of healing and reconciliation, and how both address individual and collective experiences – as well as the changing nature – of violence (Hamber 2006:208). While the TRC is conceived as a process of 'righting relationships', for individuals and for the nation as a whole, I explore whether and how residential school survivors engage in the national process as a space of healing.

By using local stories and everyday experiences as my starting point, I demonstrate the importance of assessing the effectiveness of the TRC from the perspective of local people, and local conceptions of state power, survival and renewal after violence. Paying attention to local ideas and interpretations of the policies and ethical frameworks for healing embedded throughout the TRC process, I hope to add to the previous critical medical anthropological and ethnographic studies done on truth commissions, creating a more nuanced understanding of the local impact of imported transitional justice projects. Finally, I use ethnographic methods of observing national,

regional and community-based TRC events in order to shed light on how the political and bureaucratic language of healing in the TRC is adopted, resisted, and transformed in local contexts.

## METHODOLOGY – RESEARCHER AS WITNESS

Gearoid Millar (2010) notes that in recent assessments of the “psychologically cathartic effects of truth telling, data is [sic] often collected not from those experiencing the process but from those administering it” (482). While many studies suggest that telling one’s truth about past experiences of violence meets people’s “instinctive need to tell their stories” (Millar 2010:462-3), many conclusions are made based on the opinions and beliefs of TRC commissioners and staff rather than from the experience of local people. While a great number of studies have examined the benefits of TRCs for victims, most of these approaches use methodologies that “reinforce transitional justice as a ‘top-down’ process, with the goals to be evaluated and defined by elites or outsiders” (Robins 2012:85).

Inspired by the work of Kimberley Theidon, Rosalind Shaw, Gearoid Millar, among others, and their focus on ‘local impacts’ of the TRC, I decided to use an ethnographic approach focusing on perceptions and evaluations of the TRC from local community members at both national and community events. Initially the goal was to conduct interviews with former students and their families from one community, however, I quickly realized that I did not have sufficient time to build relationships and understand the complexity of community politics.<sup>5</sup> Instead, I decided to focus on the public aspects of the TRC.<sup>6</sup> From July 2011 to June 2012, I attended a cross-section of TRC national and community events. I tried to nuance my research by attending different types of

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<sup>5</sup> For a good example of the benefits of building personal relationships in ethnographic research see Bourgois and Schonberg 2009.

<sup>6</sup> My decision to focus on public events comes back to an intentional methodological choice of not wanting to ask people to ‘recount’ further their experiences of suffering. Rather, I decided to focus on the public statements given before the Commission, as data that were already publicly available. While I have chosen to focus on the public statements instead of the private ones, I did speak with several of the private-statement gatherers about their experiences and perceptions of the private-statement gathering process. However, the content and analysis of these discussions are beyond the scope of this research.

‘local’ events and experimenting with different technologies for witnessing. I attended two National events, one in Saskatoon (2012) and the other in Halifax (2011), and two regional hearings, in Regina (2012) and Prince Albert (2012). I also attended events in smaller centers in both northern and southern Saskatchewan including a community hearing in Onion Lake Cree Nation (2012), a commemoration in Lebret (2011), and a community-organized ‘closing gathering’ in Lac La Plonge (2011). I also witnessed the Fort Qu’Appelle community hearing via webcast. Additionally, I attended a conference in Vancouver (2011), where experts in transitional justice from around the world met with Canadian researchers, representatives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and survivors to discuss the creation of a National Research Centre.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in 2012 I attended a training seminar for Resolution Health Support Workers preparing for the Saskatoon National Event.

Attending a variety of events at multiple sites and locations allowed me to observe and interact with people and communities with a wide variety of perspectives, and to see the diversity and complexity of the impact of residential school violence on communities. Attending events in both rural settings, such as reserves and smaller centers, as well as larger towns and cities also allowed me to recognize that different perceived needs and conceptions of healing often exist amongst rural and urban groups, and between various social and economic classes. Since I am based in Saskatoon, a regional focus on Saskatchewan allowed me to visit a variety of different gatherings. I was also able to follow the build-up to the National Gathering in Saskatoon, 2012. Although I draw on experiences and testimonies that occurred in other regions, this is primarily a snapshot of the Truth and Reconciliation process in Saskatchewan.

At each public event, I conducted participant observation of the speeches, activities, testimonies and performances, which mainly consisted of structured observation and limited participation.<sup>8</sup> I focused on public testimonies given during Commissioners sharing panels and Survivors’ Sharing Circles, which were digitally recorded and then transcribed. I kept descriptive field notes to capture detailed aspects of

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<sup>7</sup> The forum assembled panels of experts to share expertise with the Commission in gathering and archiving the statements being gathered. The National Research Centre would be the eventual repository for the records and statements collected by the TRC.

<sup>8</sup> See DeWalt and DeWalt 2011 for a discussion of participant observation in non-typical settings.

the TRC hearings and events – such as public conversations, interactions, gestures and emotional expressions, specific actions and surroundings. Although I did not actively participate in any of the TRC activities, I did interact with people in it, mainly in the form of informal open-ended conversations. I conducted one formal interview with the Saskatchewan representative of the TRC survivor committee, and informal interviews with several audience members, particularly health support workers. I wrote jot notes of details I observed during these interactions – recording short direct quotes from memory when possible, and other behavioral expressions. I kept a journal to ‘record’ my observations and reflections as a way of remembering my overall impressions and feelings during TRC events. The combination of audio recordings and field notes was an important methodological choice, as the notes added additional layers of data to the transcribed public testimonies. Analysis of field notes and transcripts used a selective coding approach, where I identified broad analytic themes of my qualitative data as a way of developing a focus for my analysis.

As with any study that touches on violence and its effects, there are great ethical “demands” and “responsibilities” placed on researchers, and this is particularly the case in certain places and contexts “where the powerful formations of inequality endure” (Ross 2005: 101). Many Indigenous people remain distrustful of academic research, and for good reason. Linda Tuwai Smith (1999) observes that Indigenous peoples often struggle to have their knowledges treated with respect: “Research ‘through imperial eyes’ describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and human beings” (56). While researchers have increasingly begun to question the limits of western ways of knowing, academic research still claims the right to create true, authoritative information which is often based on academic analysis and synthesis of indigenous ways of knowing: “It is research which from indigenous perspectives ‘steals’ knowledge from others and then uses it to benefit the people who ‘stole’ it” (Smith 1999:56). As I explore further in this research, many survivors testifying to the TRC speak of a disappointment and frustration that their stories have become, in effect, “data” for others to use at their will, and that their complex stories of social suffering are reduced to simplified,



individualized accounts of violence. Some feel that they revealed more publically than they wanted to, while others express concern that their stories may be appropriated or ‘consumed’ for other’s gain. Indeed, there is an important ethics of representation around testimonies given before the TRC, as “testimonies circulate beyond the immediate and the intimate; their trajectories lie beyond individual control” (Ross 2003:334). As researchers, we need to develop what Ross (2003) calls an “ethical theory of risk and vulnerability” in the exploration and representation of survivor testimonies, one that concerns itself in particular with “the ease with which experience can be subsumed, and the sense of loss that may accompany this” (335-7). As my own research attempts to demonstrate, while the TRC attempts to create a space for people to speak – to reclaim their dignity and to empower – it is often only *after* giving testimony that the ‘public’ nature of the TRC process begins to mean something to people. For instance, much of the data collection for this research involves observation of the testimonies given in a public forum where the public nature of the TRC hearings is advertised.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as I mention in Chapter 4, while participants ‘ought’ to be aware of the public nature of the hearings, many people remain unaware of what this means, and the possible consequences of sharing their testimony publicly. A problem that poses important challenges for researchers, such as myself, and for official institutions, such as Canada’s TRC is: who controls testimony within this public space? As Gready (2008) argues,

to speak or be spoken for is not a one-off event but a process spanning various narrations, interpretations and reinterpretations, the telling and the representation and reception of the telling. The highly selective nature of this process, or why some testimonies get taken up and resonate publicly and others do not, is also an issue with profound political and ethical dimensions (138).

Thus, whether the TRC is accepted as a ‘public process’ or not becomes less important than the tensions that exist between private and the public nature of testimony. Any study of public testimony faces important ethical and methodological challenges, which are brought into focus when we consider the tension between the circulation and consumption of survivor narratives.

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<sup>9</sup> At each TRC Community Hearing and National Event I attended, video testimonies were being simultaneously recorded and broadcast online through the TRC website.

While this work does not explicitly adopt a narrative analysis, Niezen's (2013) recent work on the TRC suggests that we must be aware of the influence that location and context has on statement gathering. Niezen (2013), following anthropologists Garro and Mattingly, warns that we must consider the influence of the "imprint of institutional practice and ideology" on the narratives of survivors who give testimony (60). The space provided by the TRC is not neutral, but rather subtly reinforces through "affirmation and encouragement" the formulation of varied experiences in the IRS system into a "common historical narrative" (Niezen 2013:60). Promotional materials created by the TRC and other survivor testimonials shape survivor narratives. Niezen highlights the 'How to Share Your Truth Information Session' which was featured prominently at National events in Halifax, Montreal, and Saskatchewan and the emphasis placed on sharing painful stories by Commissioner Murray Sinclair and others. These statements and TRC informational materials, "whether intentionally or not, act as template that establish narrative themes and encourage survivors to present their painful memories publicly" (Niezen 2012:60). Niezen (2013) notes that victim-centred truth commissions like Canada's TRC, are more open to witnesses who have confessional narratives to share. Although I go into detail about the unintentional 'silencing' of witnesses who have stories too painful to tell or are unhappy with the process, Niezen uses narrative analysis to draw attention to another important limitation of the TRC statement gathering process: some are silenced because they have 'unsayable' truths. Niezen (2013) suggests that:

The things not being said also tend to be the stories that do not evoke strong emotion. Former students tend not to come forward to publicly narrate ordinary experience in residential schools, the more commonplace, quotidian indignities of excessive discipline, loneliness of removal from families. Those who think of themselves as having suffered only minimally or not at all also often think of themselves as having nothing to say (59).

I do not explore this aspect of the TRC in depth in my thesis, but the degree to which the TRC helps to formalize a regime of truth by creating a space that is more supportive of confessional narratives needs further research. This is especially important for historians and other academics to reflect on as they interpret survivor testimonies and attempt to fulfill the TRC's mandate to "create as complete an historical record as about the IRS system and legacy" (Schedule N).

Ethical research “begins not with an IRB-approved protocol but with researchers’ commitment to engage with difficult issues over time” (Fujii 2012: 722). While I was granted ethics approval to conduct interviews by the university’s Research Ethics Board, this does not presuppose that those with whom I interact in the TRC hearings share the same understanding of ‘research ethics’ and ‘accountability’. As Ross (2005) suggests, “legalistic instruments do not inevitably produce and ensure *ethical* interactions” (100). For instance, it is important to further explore the concept of ‘informed consent’ in ethnographies that focus on public and institutional processes such as the TRC. One approach might be to combine ethnography of ‘public testimonies’ with more in-depth field research, such as conducting further informal interviews TRC participants.<sup>10</sup> In my research, I attempt to protect the privacy of TRC participants by withholding names or identifying information except in cases where individuals would expect their identity to be known – for instance, the TRC Commissioners –or individuals asserted their desire to be identified.

Methods for this research also included a survey of the public testimonies given to the federally instituted Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) to explore how notions of healing and reconciliation are framed and represented. I also explored government reports and texts that have been produced on ‘Aboriginal healing’, such as the RCAP Final Report, *Breaking the Silence* as well as *Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan*, to explore how the texts frame and establish concepts of healing and reconciliation, and how they might serve as a guiding resource for the work of the Truth Commission.

Motivations for this research stem from my experience over the past decade working in the field of community mental health, as well as several years working with Indigenous communities in Guatemala who have experienced mass violence. I see this research as part of a larger study into the shifting cultural, social and political landscape of Aboriginal healing in Canada. Rather than seeing Aboriginal people as ‘subjects’, my research focuses on rendering visible presumptions about the national discourse of Aboriginal healing as one that addresses Aboriginal trauma, rather than the nature of the

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<sup>10</sup> This is an important limitation in my own research, due to the time and resource constraints of a master’s research project.

relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian nation state. To quote Roger Epp (2008) in his book *We are all Treaty People*, my interest lies in rethinking the relationship, and “to recast the difficulties of accommodation, memory and reconciliation as the ‘settler problem’, rather than, as the policymakers once put it, the ‘Indian problem’” (5). found

As a non-Indigenous ally I see this work as supporting the anti-colonial project to challenge the “world narratives” that, through the colonial process, have become “self-legitimizing” (Henderson 2000:72). As Russell Thornton (1978) notes, the challenge for scholars is to shift “from traditional disciplines where Indians were the ‘objects of study’”, to “an ‘endogenous’ framework that examines what constitutes ‘Indian identity’ in America today” (13). Hence, what is needed is recognition of different epistemologies for understanding Indigenous peoples and communities, as well as the important connections between the intellectual academic ‘knowledge’ and local community contexts, such as people, places, stories, histories, etc. The intellectual premise that Thornton describes must include the significance of land, language, historical agency, tribal sovereignty, etc. I see local knowledge as an important complement to the critical theoretical lens that I use in my analysis. It is not knowledge to be ‘taken’ but rather to be used to better my own understanding of complex situations. For instance, as Deborah McGregor (2008) writes, “many First Nations, having suffered the oppressive forces of colonization, are now revitalizing their customs, values, and knowledge so as to re-establish a relationship with Creation based on their own traditions” (26). Crucial to my study, then, is not only a recognition of ‘traditional knowledge’ but also the changing processes, flows, and relations that exist within this concept.

In placing local knowledge(s) and experiences alongside national and institutional processes, this research critically examines the creation of national identities for ‘victims’ of political violence in the contemporary Aboriginal context. Violence and healing are conceived and reflected in cultural and community-based practices, as well as Aboriginal expressions of resistance and resilience, recovery and cultural transformation. Through this research I hope to contribute to a critical anthropology of violence and human rights, as well as contribute to current understandings of Indigenous healing and the politics of victimhood. Finally, by incorporating the voices of Indigenous scholars, activists, and

Indian residential school survivors, I hope to enrich settler understandings of the TRC with Indigenous narratives and perspectives on healing and reconciliation processes.

Although the main goals and guidelines for this research are found within the academic research paradigm, they are also informed by my own background as a long-time community activist and applied researcher addressing social issues within the wider framework of social justice, self-determination and decolonization. In addition, my critical approach to research is grounded in my own specific context, and through my own family history as a settler on this continent.<sup>11</sup> Despite its academic origins this thesis is intimately personal in many ways, representing a long history of reflecting on what it means to be a woman of Jewish ancestry, and to inherit an intergenerational story of displacement, dislocation, violence and discrimination. As an outsider to the Indigenous people and communities that lie at the center of this research, I am aware of my ‘outsider’ position as well as the preconceived notions and ideas that I bring to this research. As Wilson (2008) explains, “researchers, no matter how objective they claim their methods and themselves to be, do bring with them their own set of biases” (16). Inspired by the work of Linda Tuwai Smith (1999), Shawn Wilson (2008), and Marie Battiste (2000), and their contributions to critical and Indigenous methodologies, I perceive this research as containing “both political and moral” (Denzin and Lincoln 2008:2) purposes, and as part of a larger critical dialogue for the sake of social justice. As Smith (1999) asserts, “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (5). I begin by acknowledging my location and participation in this process as a non-Indigenous researcher, ally, and ‘witness’, recognizing up front the gifts, the lessons, the wisdom and the tools that I am receiving for further understanding.

Much of Western research methodologies focus on problems, and often impose ‘outside solutions’, rather than appreciating and expanding upon the resources available within Indigenous communities. My research is conceived within a critical-interpretive medical anthropological framework that seeks to “challenge normative authority (e.g.

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<sup>11</sup> I purposefully choose to use the term ‘settler’, as Epp (2008) does, as “it conveys a sense of historical brevity; it is not so long ago that my ancestors arrived here” as well, “it points to the settler’s historical ‘other’ – the aboriginal – and to the need to remember the relational terms of our settlement that most would prefer to forget” (4).

government authority, privileging of intellect located within university environments) and to place Aboriginal peoples (individual and collective knowledge, experiences and historical relations with one another and Euro-Canadians) at its centre” (Tait 2008:32).

## HEALING TENSIONS

The national therapeutic goals of Canada’s TRC are to address the legacy – or wounds – of residential schools and to inspire a process of healing. As a victim-centered institution, it aims to provide survivors with a culturally safe space to share their residential school experiences. What does it mean that healing has become a central aim of national TRC process? What are the ways in which survivors are being supported? And to what extent is the process informed by local understandings and cultural beliefs of what it means to heal? The language of ‘Aboriginal healing’ has emerged as a key political tool in addressing the troubled and often violent relationship between Aboriginal people and the Canadian state. Mobilized by survivors, community activists, scholars, and policy makers alike, what does the concept of ‘Aboriginal healing’ suggest and make possible? And what are the implications when various advocates adopt similar language with different political and therapeutic goals?

The metaphor of healing has become prominent within the discourses of both the federal government and various Indigenous communities. While the adoption of the language of healing may suggest a shared understanding, the use of the concept differs in different contexts. As I spent more time attending TRC hearings, I noticed that throughout the process, healing was understood from multiple perspectives and locations. As a result, healing was not one reality but a shifting concept. For some, healing was limited to mental and physical health or wellbeing. For others, healing was a more expansive idea and included health and wellness, cultural and spiritual recovery, as well as political, social and economic processes of redress, justice and reconciliation. Despite being one of the central components of the process – as stated in the TRC mandate – almost everyone, including the Commissioners themselves, observed that healing was not one reality or united by one meaning that is universally recognized, nor even an end to itself. In fact, the more events I observed, the more I began to recognize a collective mistrust and frustration expressed by survivors when describing their perception of the

TRC's statement-gathering process as a space and process of healing. While some spoke of healing as an important goal and outcome of the TRC, many survivors believed the TRC process could not accommodate or facilitate their healing.

The development of Canada's TRC has led to a process with multiple and contrasting agendas. The TRC model stresses the significance of giving people a voice through the process of giving testimony. Yet, while purporting to respect local knowledge and practices of healing, the TRC deploys a universalizing discourse that requires a particular language to be heard. Guiding the TRC process is an assumption that testimony is sufficient for individual healing as well as social transformation – that 'revealing is healing' (Humphrey 2002:111). The TRC, as "a body and process that in part symbolizes the ushering in of a culture of human rights" (Sideris 2001:157) is also an implicit space of power and authority that reinforces a particular discourse of healing and reconciliation. The political act of framing 'Aboriginal healing' through an institutional and bureaucratic process of truth and reconciliation imposes a culturally specific notion about healing at the local level.

Aboriginal peoples engaging with state institutions like the Commission are embedded in a multitude of power relations that often go undetected. Much has been written about the regulation and control of individuals and social bodies – "and the ability to regulate populations (the social body) and to discipline individual bodies" (Lock and Scheper Hughes 1996:45). The intellectual contributions of Michel Foucault (1977), offer ways of understanding the intricacies of political violence, especially how it operates on a local level. Linda Green (1999) writes, that from Foucault we understand "how structures of violence in societies come to be embedded in social institutions and cultural conceptions that may be reproduced locally and revealed in everyday life" (7). As Michel Foucault (1977) reminds us, "power is not wielded overtly, but rather 'flows' through the very foundations of what we recognize as reason and scientific progress" (Bourgeois and Schonberg 2009:18), operating through processes of governmentality. Institutions act subtly, and regulate and govern the population through power and knowledge, and notions of what constitutes a healthy or 'normal' citizen. However, as I will explore, testimonials presented to the TRC continue to act as spaces of resistance where

Indigenous peoples refuse to be categorized simply as victims, or peoples without political agency.

Willie Ermine's (2000) thesis on 'ethical space' provides an important theoretical framework to ground this research in an Indigenous research methodology. He argues that the introduction of the Indigenous worldview<sup>12</sup> into the theoretical process illustrates a different and contrasting perspective to the Western idea of knowledge and its production. Ermine (2000) adopts the term 'ethical space' – introduced by Roger Poole in 1972 – to describe the symbolic encounter of contrasting worldviews, “a place between worldviews, where the intentions of each are submitted for negotiation” (131-132). The ethical space opens up the possibility of mutual collaboration and respect between two groups with distinct worldviews, creating new forms of linkages and dialogue. This space, he notes, “affords the opportunity to be reflective about personal convictions and how these formed perceptions influence our intentions about the ‘other’” (Ermine 2000:18). Facilitating ethical space requires reconciling Aboriginal understandings of health with Western scientifically based knowledge, paying special attention to the distinct contexts in which the respective knowledge systems are based. By exploring the concept of 'ethical space' in the TRC, I highlight the multiple, and often-conflicting expectations of healing embedded in the process. I also ask how the TRC “represents a location from which a meaningful dialogue can take place” (Ermine 2000:122) between 'communities' with different conceptions and approaches to justice and renewal after violence. While my analysis begins with a focus on the divergent knowledge systems and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples and Western institutions, it ends with an exploration of the 'ethical spaces' of possibility that can emerge. As Ermine notes, within these 'ethical spaces' exists the potential for transforming “entrenched ways of thinking towards more inclusive, valid, and useful understandings” (Tait 2008).

Tait (2008) seeks to “operationalize” the concept of ethical space as a useful tool in the development and implementation of mental health and addiction policy and programming for Aboriginal communities. She puts forward the idea of creating ethical

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<sup>12</sup> Ermine (2000) describes worldview as the “principles or codes we acquire and utilize to construct our reality of the universe and to interpret and make sense of the world around us in a holistic way. Worldview provides people with a sense of location and identity in the cosmos and with a set of values as a cognitive map” (21).



guidelines “that can both inform and guide the design and delivery of front-line community-based programming and services” in order to “close some of the gap between those who use a service and those responsible for designing, delivering, and evaluating it” (Tait 2008:55-56). While ethical review processes for research have emerged and developed over several decades,<sup>13</sup> a similar process for the design, delivery, and evaluation of policy and program development does not exist (Tait 2008). Without such ethical guidelines or formal avenues for critiquing institutional policies and practices, as they currently exist, “the experience of the program’s clients, mentors, and the broader community is silenced” (Tait 2008:55). Tait (2008) advocates for the application of specific ethical or moral guidelines and protocols based upon “Aboriginal knowledge frameworks” replacing “outdated policy and funding practices with a framework for cultural safety and moral governance that is client and community centered (56).

Developed in New Zealand within a nursing education context, the concept of cultural safety introduces the idea “that to provide quality care for people from different ethnicities and cultures, nurses must provide that care within the cultural values and norms of the patient” (Brascoupé and Waters 2009:7). Since its first application in the early 1990s, with respect to health care for Maori people (Williams 1999) the concept has been expanded to define new approaches to health and healing that recognize the contemporary socio-political and post-contact historical context within which Aboriginal people find themselves.<sup>14</sup> Cultural safety challenges the widely adopted notion of cultural competence, by “focusing less on the benefits of cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity, and more on the risks associated with their absence (Brascoupé and Waters 2009:9). Thus, effectively shifting the focus from “cross-cultural” understanding and knowledge of the health care worker to the point of view of the Aboriginal person receiving care – “the determination of success is by the recipient, who defines the care received as culturally safe, or not” (Brascoupé and Waters 2009:21). Recent literature supports the view that

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, the OCAP principles – ownership, control, access and possession – that were designed in the late 1990s as an expression of self-determination in research. According to Tait (2008), the “underlying premise of the principles is to assert a clearly defined and ethically sound approach to research that privileges the vested interests of Aboriginal peoples in ensuring accurate research concerning their communities” (40).

<sup>14</sup> In the context of Indigenous communities in Canada, cultural safety also involves recognizing, for instance, “the interconnectedness of physical, mental, spiritual and emotional needs, and the interconnectedness of individuals with their family and community” (Galen et al. 2009:9).

power is central to the concept of cultural safety – as well as notions of social justice, prejudice and attitude (Ramsden 2002:5) – seeing Aboriginal people, not as passive receivers of services, but as powerful players in a relationship. According to Anderson et al. (2003), cultural safety is, therefore not merely about static, essentialized cultural categories or practices, it also involves critical self-reflection and critical questioning of the interactions between Aboriginal people in Canada and White settlers and an appreciation for their disparate sociocultural, economic and historical locations. The concept carries an “explicit political component” and the emphasis is focused on drawing attention to the historical legacies of race relations and racism, discrimination, and colonization in Canada that have led to communities facing social, psychological and economic crisis (Brascoupe and Waters 2009:28).<sup>15</sup> Scholars have also used the concept to challenge the dominant myth of “multiculturalism” in Canada pointing to the need to make visible racial attitudes in Canada, and the invisibility of White privilege (St. Denis 2007). Finally, Castellano (2008) further explains the importance of ‘safety’ to Indigenous healing methodologies – as healing begins in an environment of safety and an attitude of trust.<sup>16</sup> In fact, evaluations of community-based healing projects identified cultural safety as critical to healing, since trust lost by colonization and residential schooling is regained through a ‘non-linear process’ that begins with personal and cultural safety (Castellano 2008)

Cultural safety provides a useful lens to evaluate the TRC’s approach to statement-gathering. In the present context of national efforts to promote healing, does Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission create a culturally safe space and foster a process based on ideas of respect, trust and mutual sharing? This is an important question to answer because the desire to create a culturally safe space is featured as one of the main goals of the TRC. The mandate states that the TRC’s goal is to “provide a holistic, culturally appropriate and safe setting for former students, their families and communities

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<sup>15</sup> The notion of cultural safety is viewed as a direct ‘antithesis’ of the concepts of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘universalism’: “multiculturalism considers all cultures in Canada as having an equal claim on government and societal attention, and universalism downplays differences between individuals and communities into a single citizenry and seeks common interests based on general human rights. In contrast, cultural safety requires the explicit and detailed recognition of the cultural identity of the Indigenous people and the historical legacy of power relations and repression” (Brascoupe and Waters 2009:14).

<sup>16</sup> Castellano (2008) also points to evidence for cultural safety in traditional teachings such as the medicine wheel.

as they come forward to the Commission” (Schedule N). The mandate promises to support statement-gathering by honoring “the Aboriginal principle of witnessing” in an effort to “witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels” (Schedule N).

The concept of cultural safety can be used to help examine the effectiveness of the TRC’s goal to support survivors as they share their stories of violence before the commission. The TRC’s mandate states that it will build upon principles in the 1998 ‘Statement of Reconciliation’ and developed by the Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation and the Exploratory Dialogues (1998-1999) that pledge that the TRC will be:

Accessible; victim-centered; confidentiality (if required by the former student); do no harm; health and safety of participants; representative; public/transparent; accountable; open and honourable process; comprehensive; inclusive, educational, holistic, just and fair; respectful; voluntary; flexible; and forward looking in terms of rebuilding and renewing Aboriginal relationships and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (TRC mandate, “Principles”).

Although the TRC’s goals include promoting awareness about the Indian Residential School experience and creating an accessible and authoritative historical record of the IRS system and its impacts, this study will focus on how the TRC process hopes to contribute to “healing”. The ‘Principles’ found in the TRC Mandate—including ‘accessible’, ‘victim-centered’, ‘do no harm’, ‘health and safety of participants’, ‘respectful’, ‘voluntary’, etc.—offer a lens through which to evaluate the TRC’s efforts to create a culturally safe space for witnesses to give testimony. Therefore, this study does not focus on whether Truth Commissions heal but rather whether the statement gathering process benefits—or ‘heals’—those giving testimony.

Cultural safety “inform a series of moral questions about the ‘rightness’ of policy decisions and actions...for example, do current mental health services fit well with the aboriginal understandings of health and illness, or are they at odds with them given the current sociopolitical environment?” (Smye and Browne 2002:49). Smye and Browne (2002) argue that cultural safety addresses the “broader agendas” driving institutional policies and program reforms, for instance, whether they meet individual and community needs, as well as support Aboriginal self-governance. (52). In this research, I use the

notion of ‘cultural safety’ to explore whether and how the TRC creates an ‘ethically safe space’ for stories to be shared and received. How are the complex experiences of poverty, addictions, suicide, and ongoing experiences of violence addressed in the process? To what extent does the statement-gathering process put people’s health at risk? Finally, in what ways does the process engage Indigenous voices, perspectives, and knowledge(s), not only symbolically, but also meaningfully? As Smye and Brown (2002) note, “in unraveling the complexities of the policy process, cultural safety becomes a reflective device/interpretive lens for the process of policy analysis” (52). Cultural safety “prompts us to ask a series of questions to unmask the ways in which current mental health policies, research, and practices may be perpetuating neocolonial approaches to healthcare for Aboriginal peoples” (Smye and Browne 2002:47). Viewed both as a concept *and* an outcome (Brascoupe and Waters 2009), cultural safety helps us, as students and as researchers, to better understand how complex notions of institutional violence, racism and discrimination contribute to the contemporary conditions of many Indigenous peoples and communities. It also encourages us to reflect critically about whether and how the TRC creates an environment that is ‘safe’ for people – not only with respect for culture, knowledge and experience, or the explicit recognition of cultural identity, but also in terms of appreciating the potential vulnerability and risk associated with engaging in the process of giving testimony. Cultural safety, among with notions of self-determination and social justice “are the building blocks for moving forward within the ethical space” (Tait 2008:46).

My research recognizes the complexity and heterogeneity of human suffering, as well as the different epistemologies and ‘theories’ underlying practices of healing. There is a danger in exaggerating the power of the state and its ability to shape subjects as it pleases. One of the challenges of a study on institutions and discourses is how to acknowledge the role of agency and resistance within various contexts. The conceptualization of the TRC as an ethical space where multiple worldviews come together in one symbolic place is fundamental to examining different systems of knowledge production and different theoretical perspectives. Despite the pervasiveness and ‘power’ of healing within the TRC discourse, this research places the critique within a broader framework that allows for the examination of the resilience of peoples and

communities, resistance to assimilation and the possibility of reconstructing identity in the face of violence and suffering.

The TRC itself is a complex instrument, bringing long sought after resolution for some while sparking frustration and anger among others who see it as yet another ‘government-run’ process. Testimonies given by residential school survivors are raising critical questions about the personal and political limits of a national process that aims to give survivors a voice as a way of letting go of suffering and grief. For many survivors, healing from a history of violence goes beyond telling their individual story of trauma and includes more communal goals such as seeking recognition and redress for injustices endured by Indigenous peoples in Canada. Listening to the personal accounts given by survivors before the Commission, I often wondered: what are the ethics involved in asking people to remember and publicly recount private experiences of violence and grief? What are the ethics of witnessing truths?

The TRC places great emphasis on individual testimonies and the pursuit of truth. Expanding on the works of previous scholars, I suggest that Canada’s TRC pays insufficient attention to local and everyday experiences of survival and renewal after violence. In the following chapters, I will focus on the divergent cultural meanings, assumptions and interpretations of healing in the TRC process. I consider how the TRC is perceived and experienced as a space of healing, and the implications for people involved as witnesses and as storytellers. In chapter two, I offer a synopsis of the residential school experience as a way to contextualize the discourse of trauma and healing that has become essential to Canada’s TRC. In chapter three, I continue my analysis of the adoption of the language of healing by TRCs around the world as an attempt to address moments of extreme injustice and violence. I also offer specific insight into the healing mandate of Canada’s TRCs and the way it differs from previous models, and the limits of the TRC mechanism as a tool for lasting political and social reconciliation. In chapter four, I explore the limits of the TRC statement-gathering process through the testimonies of survivors. The statement-gathering process in Canada’s TRC reveals the complex politics and ethics around publicly soliciting stories of violence and loss in a space where many voices, and ideas about healing, continue to go unheard. Finally, chapter five moves beyond a consideration of the limitations inherent in the TRC process and considers

instead how survivors have used the TRC forum as a space for political activism and community building.

## CHAPTER 2: THE LANDSCAPE OF ABORIGINAL HEALING

Healing, in Aboriginal terms, refers to personal and societal recovery from the lasting effects of oppressing and systemic racism experienced over generations. Many Aboriginal people are suffering not simply from specific diseases and social problems, but also from a depression of spirit resulting from 200 or more years of damage to their cultures, languages, identities and self-respect.

-Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, vol. 3:109

Aboriginal healing is a complex phenomenon with multiple meanings and origins. Much has been written on the topic, yet it remains a concept without any concrete description, as its meaning and expression varies depending on the context in which people live. Derived from a wide variety of knowledge sources and understandings, the concept is often based on the values “that people themselves identify as meaningful and effective” (Fletcher and Denham 2008:129). Its complexity lies in the varying interpretations and beliefs for what should be a proper ‘way’ of recovery, reflecting the diverse range of locally based beliefs, attitudes, and practices. In fact, trying to isolate a simple, working definition of healing misjudges the complexity of the process. For example, some Indigenous people view healing as *naturally* occurring, suggesting “no single model would apply to all communities” (Warry 1998:206-207).

In a study of the meaning, experience and processes of healing in an Inuit community in Nunavut, participants involved in a community-based healing program “were not comfortable trying to articulate a specific set of terms describing what it means to heal” (Fletcher and Denham 2009:103). The authors go on to say, “in effect, there is no single term in Inuktitut that corresponds to the English use of the term”; healing was described as a “movement from one place of pain to another of well-being” (Fletcher and Denham 2009:103). Overlooking the range of locally based beliefs and practices can also lead to false assumptions that healing is understood, experienced and perceived equally by all members of any given community (Waldram et al. 1995). Likewise, it would be potentially dangerous to assume that “any one program of recuperation would transcend these differences” amongst community members and within communities (Adelson 2009:274).

Healing is a contested term. As investigators, we should be asking not simply ‘what does it mean to heal the legacy of residential school’ but rather we need to reflect on what healing that legacy means to different people in different cultural and geographic contexts. Understanding the diverse meanings of healing reinforces the importance of examining the contexts in which meanings are produced and of the material consequences of meaning (Jacobson 2004:xi). Ideas about healing and what it means to heal are shaped by socio-political and historical factors. Importantly, all of this has implications for how the term is understood and utilized in the TRC today. Exploring the diverse landscape of Aboriginal healing is central to understanding contemporary efforts by Indigenous people and communities to address the impact of violence, suffering and the legacy of historical injustices brought on by residential schools (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2002, Kirmayer et al. 2003). In the following pages, I provide a brief history of the residential school system and its devastating impacts on Aboriginal communities. The multi-generational legacy of residential schools has troubled communities and scholars, both have struggled to define the problem—i.e. ‘trauma’—and the solution—creating a diverse healing landscape.

#### ON VIOLENCE: WEAPONS AND WOUNDS

Put simply, the residential school system was an attempt by successive governments to determine the fate of Aboriginal people in Canada by appropriating and reshaping their future in the form of thousands of children who were removed from their homes and communities and placed in the care of strangers.

-Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, vol.3:335

We were treated like dogs... we’re still treated like dogs.

-Residential School Survivor, TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 3 April 2012

How do you write or speak about violence in a way that does not overlook, silence or simplify human experience? As of 2006, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation indicated that some 86,000 “survivors” of the residential school system were then still living, while an additional 287,350 Indigenous people (First Nations, Métis and Inuit)



were estimated to have experienced the “intergenerational impacts” of these institutions (Reimer et. al 2010). One of the many challenges of providing a historical account of Indian residential schooling is that student experiences varied across the country, and even within each individual school. Understanding the complexities of the history of violence and abuse in residential schools therefore must begin with recognizing the diverse interpretations and narratives from survivors, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars.

The devastating legacy of violence and abuse from the residential school experience has been well documented (Episkenew 2009, Milloy 1999, Grant 1996, Miller 1996, RCAP 1996, Furniss 1995, Assembly of First Nations 1994). The “residential school era” as it is often referred to, has had and continues to have profound effects “at every level of experience from individual identity and mental health, to the structure and integrity of families, communities, bands and nations” (Kirmayer et. al 2003:18). Many of the over 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children that attended educational institutions developed a deep sense of loss from being separated from their families and communities, in some case, for many years. In particular, that these children were prohibited from speaking their language and participating in traditional ceremonies resulted for many in a complete disconnection from their spiritual life. For many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, spirit involves a connection with one’s identity and culture, “if one lose[s] connection with one’s spirit, then one is losing connection with oneself” (Assembly of First Nations 1994:55). “My spirit was raped”, noted one survivor in front of the TRC, “My spirit – that’s what the Indian Residential School took from me” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 17 January 2012].

The legacy of Indian residential schools is the result of a complex history of systemic violence in Canada. For over 150 years, Indigenous children were taken from their families and communities and placed in institutions under the “care” of the Canadian government and various Christian churches. Historians and anthropologists and others have noted that residential schooling was an attempt by successive governments “to separate children from the influences of their parents and their community, so as to destroy their culture” (TRC 2012:1).

Dominant attitudes and beliefs held by Canadian society that Indigenous cultures were “inherently inferior” to that of the European settlers underpinned the development of the residential school system.<sup>17</sup> Beginning as a series of “benevolent” colonial and then Canadian government policy decisions, its goals reflected widespread attitudes of the day, generally held by missionary teachers, government officials, and the general public that Indigenous people needed to be “civilized” and “Christianized”.<sup>18</sup> For instance, as described by an Indian agent in 1913:

It is considered by many that the ultimate destiny of the Indian will be to lose his identity as an Indian, so that he will take his place fairly and evenly beside his white brother. It is only by systematically building from one generation to another that this will be accomplished (Barman et. al 1986:124).

The overall objective according to Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent-General for Indian Affairs, was “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” (Haig-Brown 1988:27). From the mid-1880s until the last school closed in Saskatchewan in 1996, over 130 government-funded and church-run schools were set up across Canada to “fix the Indian problem” through assimilation (Haig-Brown 1998).<sup>19</sup>

Canada’s policy of residential schooling was modeled after the American industrial school system, and their policy of “aggressive civilization” (Milloy 1999, Miller 1996). The Davin Report, released in 1879, recommended that the federal government implement a parallel policy for schooling Aboriginal children “to take away their simple Indian mythology” (Titley 1986:77). While missionaries had long sought to convert Indigenous peoples, the Davin Report was a watershed moment in signaling the cooperation of government and church in a systematic plan for assimilation: “Acceptance of the Davin Report formalized the policy of assimilation in a systematic and all encompassing way through the implementation of residential schooling and a cooperative

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<sup>17</sup> See James (Sa’ke’j) Henderson (2008) for a detailed overview of the Eurocentrism and the intellectual framework of European colonialism – one that believed in the “superiority of Europeans over the colonized” (21).

<sup>18</sup> According to RCAP (1996) report, “selfless Christian duty and self-interested statecraft were the foundations of the residential schools system. The edifice erected by a church/government partnership that would manage the system jointly until 1969” (335).

<sup>19</sup> Although most residential schools were closed by the mid-1980s, a few continued to run until mid 1990s (Assembly of First Nations 1994).

relationship between ‘church and state’” (Assembly of First Nations 1994:14). An 1887 annual report from the Department of Indian Affairs that preceded the Davin Report, admired the “industrial institutions” as an effective model for widespread education of Indigenous children. The report advocated the proliferation of industrial schools guided by Christian religion as vehicles for “the emancipation of the Indian from his inherent superstition and gross ignorance” (Department of Indian Affairs 1888:lxxix). Liberation for “poor children of the forest or of the prairie” required a “transformation of the outward appearance and manners of the children” and education in trades or farming. Ideally, students would be strongly discouraged from returning to their communities following their education, and instead be set up with work in “towns, or, in the case of farmers, in settlements of white people and thus become amalgamated with the general community” (Department of Indian Affairs 1888:lxxix-lxxx) Thus, as RCAP noted, the policy of “civilizing” Aboriginal peoples was to “make them good, useful and law-abiding members of society” (RCAP 1993:24). Residential schools played a major role in the expansion of the Canadian state, as they were seen as important tools in “the process of nation building and the concomitant marginalization of Aboriginal communities” (RCAP 1996, vol. 1:335).

Controversy emerged in the early part of the twentieth century. According to Milloy (1999), the government discovered that the policy of assimilation was not working and that residential schools were “wasting time and spending money and getting no results” (186). As a result, a policy of Aboriginal education shifted from one of assimilation towards one of isolation and segregation. In 1920, the *Indian Act* was amended to include compulsory school attendance for all Aboriginal children between ages seven and fifteen (Miller 1996). As one survivor noted in his testimony, “I found out later that we were compelled by policy and by law to stay in residential school until we were 15. I didn’t understand this until later in life” [TRC National Event, Saskatoon, 22 June 2012]. Church and government officials also believed that the homes of Aboriginal people were “unhealthy and so fashioned themselves as the only appropriate models of parental authority and care for Aboriginal children” (Kelm 1998:80).

Residential schools created conditions where many children were subjected to physical, mental, sexual and spiritual abuse (Episkew 2009; Milloy 1999; Miller 1996,

2000). Many children were frequently denied the right to speak their Indigenous language or cultural practices, and forbidden from seeing their parents for years. Children were taught that their cultural values and spiritual traditions were evil, and many were punished for practicing their long-valued practices and beliefs. Characterized as “total institutions”,<sup>20</sup> residential schools created unsafe environments and conditions of strict discipline and surveillance over all facets of the lives of the Aboriginal children who attended them (Assembly of First Nations 1994). Speaking of the strict discipline that he experienced at school, Elder Campbell Papequah (2011) writes, “I remember when I was taken to this four story building that would become a prison and a place of fear... Their rules were stern and their rigorous religious teachings, customs and protocols had to be followed sternly... for disobeying their rules you were disciplined and penalized” (34-36). Inadequate funding and substandard facilities, as well as overcrowded living conditions where students were often underfed, overworked and abused, also led to high rates of infectious diseases and morbidity and mortality rates in the schools (Milloy 1999, Kelm 1998).<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, many Indigenous people opposed the residential school system, and criticized the department for allowing unhealthy conditions and abuse to go on at the schools.<sup>22</sup> Speaking in front of the TRC, one survivor remembered, “We as Indian people went through a lot, when we were taken away. When I was taken away I saw my kokum cry, I heard my mom cry, I saw my dad turn away with his head down. But he was told that ‘if you don’t let them go to school, I can put you in jail’” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012]. Kelm (1998) explains that some parents “endured jail sentences in order to protect their children from further abuse” (78).

Federal policy made residential schools central to eradicating Indigenous people and cultures. Removing children from their home environments effectively “eliminated parental and community involvement in the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual

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<sup>20</sup> Ervin Goffman (1961) first used the term “total institutions” when writing on the sociology of psychiatric hospitals (Chrisjohn and Young 1997:69). Chrisjohn and Young (1997) explain that Goffman’s definition of the term can be extended to describe the institutional tactics of residential schools, such as the staff’s complete control of the psychological and physical environments.

<sup>21</sup> In many cases, children with diseases, such as tuberculosis, were admitted to the schools, despite the policy of the Department of Indian Affairs to bar all TB cases (Kelm 1998:68).

<sup>22</sup> Resistance to the schools took many forms. From the beginning, parents refused to send their children, and children resisted by running away, stealing food and setting fire to school barns and buildings (Dickason and McNab 1992:307-308).

development of Aboriginal children” (TRC 2012: 1). One of the most significant measures of “destroying” Indigenous cultures through residential school policies was through the systematic suppression of all forms of cultural expressions, namely dress, food, spiritual beliefs, and in particular, language. In most schools speaking any Indigenous language was forbidden, and enforced often with severe physical punishment and violence. The insistence on English or French came out of belief that these languages carried with them the “culture of civilization”, and that “so long as he keeps his native tongue, so long will he remain a community apart” (Milloy 1999:38).

Prohibiting students from speaking their language silenced generations of Indigenous peoples. As one survivor shared in front of the TRC at a community hearing, “because it was then that I learned that as a human being, that I had to be quiet. And to get by, I had to listen to the rules, I had to listen to the English” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January 2012]. Or as another student shared, “We were like in jail, we were kids; this was jail. We were kids. We didn’t know any better. And this is how it kept, and this is how I’ve become. I’ve become like what they wanted me to be. I’ve become silent” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January 2012].

It is often noted that the silence has only recently been broken, yet reports of abuse and mistreatment at residential schools are not new. As Chief Wendy Grant noted in her testimony on residential schools in front of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People in 1993:

As far back as September, 1886, the Montreal Gazette reported general resistance by parents to having their children taken away from them because of reports of abuse, particularly the physical abuse of a boy whose identity is reported only as ‘Charlie No. 20’...Reports of widespread negligence appear throughout the Indian Affairs Department documents, citing ‘wretched conditions’, ‘really dangerous’ buildings, severe fire hazards, chronic sickness and disease, and in one case a doctors’ report on prairie schools suggesting that conditions were so bad that one could be led to think that they were deliberately designed to incubate and spread disease (RCAP 1993:30).

Nevertheless, though reports of the violence go back almost to the policy’s initiation, public acknowledgment of the “evil” of residential schools began in the late 1980s. Arguably, one of the first to speak publicly about the prevalence of the abuse at residential schools was Phil Fontaine, then head of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. In

an interview with CBC's Barbara Frum, Fontaine spoke about his experiences of being physically and sexually abused: "In my grade three class...if there were 20 boys, every single one of them...would have experienced what I experienced. They would have experienced some aspect of sexual abuse" (CBC 1990).

Following Fontaine's testimony, increasing numbers of people came forward with stories of physical and sexual abuse that they suffered or witnessed as students in the schools, and together with Fontaine, called for an inquiry into residential school abuses. Several survivor autobiographies and memoirs were published documenting their experiences at the schools, as well as novels, poetry, plays and films.<sup>23</sup> Regional and national conferences began to be held focused on the residential school experience, such as the ones held in Victoria and Saskatoon in 1991. After the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was established in 1991, an increasing number of scholars began documenting the impact of residential schools on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit families, and exploring ways of healing. According to Stanton (2011), over the course of RCAP, "the 178 days of public hearings in 96 communities, many survivors gave testimony recounting the abuses they had suffered" (2). Many First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals and political organizations began to launch lawsuits against the federal government and the churches involved in running the schools. Increasing public discussion of residential school experiences raised awareness of the individual and collective impacts of the schools, and in various ways – spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically.<sup>24</sup> As one former student said before the TRC, "I think a lot of us left the school...crippled in life – not only physically but mentally" [TRC Community Hearing, Prince Albert, 31 January, 2012].

The residential school experience needs to be understood as part of a larger system that repeatedly sought to dismember First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, using political, psychological and physical violence to achieve this goal. Although there have been an increasing number of studies on the topic of residential schools over the last

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<sup>23</sup> Some notable examples include, Isobel Knockwood's (1993) "Out of the Depths", of her experience at Shubenacadie Residential School in Nova Scotia, Linda Jaine's (1993), "Residential Schools", Rita Joe' (1978) poetry, "Poems of Rita Joe", and Tomson Highway's (1998) novel, "Kiss of the Fur Queen".

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed exploration of the history and personal reflections of truth and reconciliation processes in Canada, see the two-volume edited series published by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal* (2009) and *From Truth to Reconciliation* (2008).

several decades, much of the research simplifies the residential school experiences into ‘one’ story of cultural violence and mistreatment. Problematically, there is a tendency to view residential schooling as the principal cause of contemporary social suffering among Indigenous peoples. This focus on residential schooling threatens to overshadow the long history of policies intended to regulate and control the activities of Indigenous peoples. For instance the *Indian Act* legislation (1876), attempted to suppress and make illegal Indigenous spiritual and traditional practices – integral to family and community life. Consecutive attempts to reform Aboriginal people into assimilated citizens resulted in pulling apart culture and spiritual practices, subjugating nations and ignoring their history. Importantly, as Jung (2011), notes, “the residential school system was not an aberration in Canadian government policy...the system was of a piece with other racist and discriminatory practices that have structured Aboriginal life and life chances for the past three hundred years” (230).<sup>25</sup>

As highlighted in the influential report, “Breaking the Silence”, released by the Assembly of First Nations (1994), “the life of an individual, family or community is the outcome of a complex web of historical and contemporary events which cannot be reduced to one factor” (5). The report concludes, “interpretive work is like building a story made up of many parts where characters and events may reappear in different ways” (Assembly of First Nations 1994:6). As a result, a discussion of both the impact and recovery of residential schools may proceed in a number of ways, each one fundamentally incomplete without consideration of the personal history of individuals and communities during the residential schooling era and afterward. Research into the residential school system provides only partial insight into the experience of political and racialized violence in the lives of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.

One of most significant early studies on the residential school impacts was done by the Cariboo Tribal Council in the early 1990s. In their study, the Cariboo Tribal Council (1991) found no statistical evidence that attending a residential school affected the outcome of one’s life, such as level of educational attainment and employment. The

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<sup>25</sup> Henderson (2008) states that colonization, imperialism, and forceful oppression were masked as progress, as “in the eyes of the colonist, the empire brought European civilization and culture to Indigenous peoples” (23). Thus, in the actions and beliefs of the European colonizers, the creation of false categories of race and racism and the violence associated with asserting Eurocentric thought and superiority were considered “natural and beneficial” (Henderson 2008:17-22).

interpretation of this finding, according the study's authors, was that "there are many factors other than residential school, for example, the *Indian Act*, as well as racism and poverty which have impacted, and which continue to impact on the lives of First Nations people (Cariboo Tribal Council 1991, Assembly of First Nations 1994). For many Indigenous peoples, the 'story' of residential school serves to explain many of the challenges they have faced throughout their lives since leaving the schools, but it also "epitomizes on a small scale the deep-seated historical problems that have permeated Indian-white relations in Canada for centuries" (Furniss 1995).

The residential school experience often serves as a keystone in a larger story of personal tragedy imbricated in a complicated history of colonialism. However, Aboriginal health literature has too often resorted to explanations that are reductive, referencing a 'generic colonialism' that flattens the cultural and experiential elements of personal struggles into a catch-all explanation (Maxwell 2011). As Maxwell (2011) points out,

Research in the field of "Aboriginal health" commonly invokes colonialism as generalized experience of "culture loss", with a particular emphasis on residential schools as the ultimate experience of colonization, in ways which convey a misleading impression that widely diverse peoples endured identical experiences which have rendered them helpless victims in the present (2).

The tendency to create an "essentialized experience of colonization" leads to a limited critical understanding of local contexts and social processes, and, most troublingly, means that experiences of resistance and transformation are also often neglected (Maxwell 2011:5). As Sto:lo writer and activist Lee Maracle writes "[c]olonization is such a personal process" (Maracle 2002:216). The inclination to generalize the workings and effects of colonial violence, such as the violence associated with residential schools, has important political and practice implications for how Indigenous suffering and healing is conceptualized and addressed.

While the policy of residential schools was federally mandated, it is evident from testimonials given by people testifying before the TRC that every residential school was characterized by its own unique dynamics. As I have demonstrated, the Indian Residential Schools system was a project with the goal of 're-enculturation'. Still, there are many complex and diverse stories that are told about residential schools, and any



process of healing has to respect the local dynamics and elements inherent in the abuses. As I will explore below, there are political interests that profoundly shape how healing is defined, and by extension what ‘healing’ means. Broadly speaking, for Indigenous peoples healing has historically been defined more holistically as ‘righting relations’ whereas settler definitions of healing have tended to emphasize individual recovery.

## THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF HEALING

There needs to be a healing in the land and in the people. There needs to be reconciliation, restoration and restitution. Because of our relationship with the Creator in this land, this is a *spiritual* process, a *sacred* process, and this is the reason why we have called a *Sacred Assembly*.

-Elijah Harper 1995

We have witnessed over the last several decades First Nations communities actively addressing and dealing with the devastating consequences of residential schools, including the emotional, physical, cultural and spiritual effects. Naomi Adelson (2009) describes this period as one of *recuperation*, “a time both of ‘taking back’ (not simply retrieving) a lost or damaged past and of regaining the individual and community health and strength in the process” (274). Adelson (2009) notes that many Indigenous peoples refer to this recuperative process in terms of healing; a dynamic process of recovery from an “extensive burden of social, cultural, spiritual, political, and economic losses, as well as the physical recuperation of bodies and minds” (275). Many Indigenous people in Canada, and indeed around the world, speak of healing as a renewal of Indigenous spirituality (Gone 2008, Waldram et al. 2008, Adelson 2009). In recent years, more people are turning to ‘traditional ways’ and intervention activities by Aboriginal healers for psychosocial and spiritual healing (McGabe 2007). Broadly conceived, healing is undertaken to “reaffirm cultural values” (McCormick 1997:174), traditions, and to repair “the ruptures and discontinuity in the transmission of knowledge and values” (Kirmayer et. al 2009:440) that were undermined by colonization, including experiences of residential schools.

Many Indigenous communities in Canada, and indeed around the world, place a great emphasis on community as one of the crucial building blocks for personal health. Outspoken Indigenous scholars and activists like Gregory Cajete (2000), Willie Ermine (1995), and Winona LaDuke (2005) insist that ‘indigeneity’ is founded upon relationships with human and non-human environment, and broken relationships are perceived to negatively affect individual and collective wellbeing. While there are important distinctions among different traditions, many share a common understanding of healing as an interpersonal and spiritual process of restoring those relationships, seeking balance and wellness, and connecting to a sense of cultural and collective identity (Castellano et. al 2008, Dei et. al 2000, Episkenew 2009, McGregor 2008).<sup>26</sup> Indigenous healing is most often defined “not only in religious or spiritual terms but also in relation to the community and the land” (Kirmayer et. al 2009:228). Among many Indigenous peoples, healing is viewed as a life-long developmental process, or a ‘journey’, that is “complex, involving interplay between individuals and their social environment” (Reimer et al. 2010:2). There is also a growing body of literature that recognizes healing as a social movement, and initiatives that address collective rather than individual expressions of social suffering (such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse, depression, and suicide). Tanner (2009) explains that “without rejecting a concern for the particular difficulties faced by individuals suffering from behavior problems, the healing movement takes the position that it is the local group that needs ‘healing’” (252). With a focus on “strengthening and renewing local social relations”, the healing movement, and local healing initiatives “are essentially forms of community building” (Tanner 2009:252).

Conceptualizations of healing are not limited to mental and physical health or wellbeing. Rather, the language of healing is used at once to speak of issues of health and wellness, goals of cultural and spiritual recovery, as well as political processes of redress and reconciliation. According to Jim Waldram (2004), Aboriginal healing “is a metaphor for socio-political change as well as personal recovery and includes both processes of cultural repatriation or revival and political self-determination” (299). Ideas of healing put forward by many Indigenous scholars and activists suggest that healing the

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<sup>26</sup> Here, I refer to Castellano’s (2008) definition of spiritual as “different ways of making connection to something greater than themselves and their individual griefs” (398).

intergenerational effects of residential schools is connected to a larger process of ‘reframing’ “individual suffering within a historical and political context” (Maxwell 2011:20) and collective process of seeking justice and redress. Maxwell (2011) explains that central to the concept has also been a grassroots “socio-political movement towards self-determination” that scholars have noted dates back to at least the late 1960s and continues today (1).<sup>27</sup> Efforts to ‘restore’ or ‘heal’ have not only focused on ‘reclaiming’ Indigenous knowledge and practices, and ‘reconnecting’ with culture and community through education and ceremony, but have also included a “critical analysis of ongoing colonial relations with the Canadian settler state and settler society which Aboriginal activists were developing during the early 1970s, in the context of the international decolonization movement” (Maxwell 2011:147). Finally, according to Green (2012), the healing concept has been used to “critique the deployment of reductive redress strategies as a way to acknowledge the transgenerational effects of the IRS system and policies enacted to “reconcile” First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples with mainstream settler society” (138). Thus, recognized in cultural, political as well as therapeutic and restorative terms, healing is understood as a fundamentally spiritual and collective process of ‘righting’ relationships, for individuals and for society as a whole.

Yet the political mobilization of Aboriginal healing as a concept has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. Arguably the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) marked the beginning of Canada’s engagement with the Aboriginal healing discourse.<sup>28</sup> While ideas of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people initially defined RCAP’s mandate, it was the language of healing that acquired greater importance throughout the four year inquiry process and in the final report itself

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<sup>27</sup> As Krista Maxwell (2011) argues, the movement over the last fifty years towards healing is an example of Indigenous resistance, and response to Indigenous suffering in the context of a broader political struggle for self-determination (for instance, as reflected in the North American Red Power movement as well as international decolonization movements). Therefore, Indigenous healing should also be viewed in light of a resurgence of activism among Indigenous peoples, “articulating their conceptions of their unique rights...insisting on collective rights as peoples...and proclaiming and protesting numerous historical and contemporary violations of their right to self-determination” (Howard 2003:3).

<sup>28</sup> Established in August 1991, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was given a four-year mandate to investigate the troubled relationship between aboriginal peoples (Indian, Inuit and Métis), the Canadian government, and Canadian society as a whole, and propose solutions to the contemporary problems faced by Aboriginal peoples. Facilitating a series of public hearings in more than one hundred Aboriginal communities in Canada, the Commission heard many testimonies detailing the widespread abuses and mistreatment experienced at residential schools. An entire chapter of the RCAP Final Report – *Breaking the Silence* – was dedicated to residential schools and its devastating legacy.

(Conradi 2006). Conradi (2006) writes, “apart from a few instances where reconciliation was evoked, the report virtually dropped the term reconciliation. Instead it is the trope of healing that figures prominently in the portrayal” of a renewed relationship that the Commission sought to define (9). Conradi (2006) points to RCAP’s principal logo, the bear claw, as the framework for developing the idea of healing the relationship between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government, and Canadian society:

[The bear’s claw] represents the healing that must take place during [the inquiry] process. After so much misunderstanding, anger, alienation and division, the time has come to repair the fractures in relations between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society. This healing will occur when the various components that make up Canadian society come together to embrace and affirm the fundamental principles that promote balanced and mutually beneficial co-existence (RCAP, 1996:676).

In adopting the language of healing throughout RCAP’s reports, in the public testimonies, and in government documents, terms such as “balance, harmony, interconnectedness, traditional medicine, wholeness and holistic health etc.” (Conradi 2006:11) were frequently used to describe the multiple meanings of healing throughout the process. Although such terms continue to be used both in First Nations communities and in the mainstream media, comparing the grassroots use of the term with that of academics and state officials provides “insight into some of the differences in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal modes of expression and worldviews” (Conradi 2006:17).<sup>29</sup>

In 1998, the federal government responded to RCAP with *Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan* (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development 1998). Embedded within this policy document was a “Statement of Reconciliation” by the government of Canada to Aboriginal People. The offer of reconciliation read: “Sadly our history with respect to the treatment of Aboriginal people is not something in which we can take pride. Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of

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<sup>29</sup> The language of healing and reconciliation has also been embraced over the last several decades by many of the Christian churches. According to RCAP, by 1992, most churches had apologized for their conduct and also asserted ‘shared responsibility’ with the federal government for the consequences of the residential school system (Jung 2011:224). Since then most of the churches have committed to supporting those affected by church-run residential schools through establishing healing funds and developing educational and relationship-building initiatives to facilitate dialogue, understanding and right relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. The adoption of the healing discourse by various churches, as well as the significant role that they play in the TRC hearings is beyond the scope of this research.

Aboriginal culture and values... We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations”. The statement went on to say that

we have listened and we have heard that the days of paternalism and disrespect are behind us and that a commitment to a new relationship meant coming to terms with the impact of our past actions and attitudes...History cannot be changed, but it must be understood in a way that reflects that people of today are living out the legacy of decisions made in a different time.

Out of *Gathering Strength*, several new Aboriginal organizations were established, including the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), a federally funded, Aboriginal-run, non-profit organization created in March 1998 to support community-based healing initiatives of Aboriginal people affected by the physical and sexual abuse in residential schools, including “intergenerational impacts” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation N.d.). The AHF received \$350 million over 10 years to fund projects to address “the legacy” of the residential schools. The funded projects included healing centers and services, research, traditional activities, and a variety of educational and training programs (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2002). Despite the notable successes of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, the organization was defunded in 2010.

Since RCAP, and the government’s commitment to ‘healing and reconciliation’, the discourse of healing has found its way into the core of public debate over Indigenous issues in Canada. Although initially conceived as a grassroots movement for sovereignty (or self-determination), the discourse has been progressively adopted by the state as an issue of public policy and a responsibility of government bureaucracy. While healing remains a political act for many Indigenous peoples, the term is increasingly less about efforts towards self-determination and societal transformation and more about ‘individual’ and ‘Aboriginal mental health’. Significantly, the Aboriginal healing discourse has not only shaped subsequent policy and programming decisions, but has changed the way Canada relates to and recognizes its Indigenous peoples.

## CONCEPTUALIZING TRAUMA

While there are various ways to approach the legacies of political violence, the discourse of trauma has emerged as a key concept in the Aboriginal healing discourse and

has become a key part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC has been envisioned as a vehicle for reconciliation and healing, one that aims to address the traumas tied to residential schooling. Beginning in the early 90s, trauma became an increasingly common way to talk about the devastating consequences of attending residential school. Many former students speaking in front of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples referred to their experiences of “historical trauma” and “residential school syndrome” as evidence of the ongoing legacy of over a century of state-led violence and abuse. Before we examine the TRC as a tool for healing the legacy of residential school violence, I will examine the limitations of trauma as a concept used to frame the “injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing” (TRC 2011).

Trauma shapes how experiences of residential schools are spoken about and the way that processes of healing are understood. While trauma can be seen as a “normal reaction to an abnormal situation” (Becker 2006:237), in the West, trauma is often “medicalized as an abnormal individual psychological condition” (Humphrey 2002:115). As a result, according to Humphrey (2002), “trauma is calibrated against a cultural landscape of ‘normal’ suffering – bereavement, grief and loss – which individuals are expected ‘to get over’”, despite the fact that in many parts of the world, suffering is viewed as something to be lived with (115). According to Chrisjohn and Young (1997), framing experiences of violence and suffering as ‘trauma’ constructs Aboriginal people as individualized victim subjects that are in need of a ‘cure’. With the increasing prevalence of the categorizations of ‘historical trauma’, ‘post-traumatic stress-disorder’ (PTSD), and ‘residential school syndrome’, residential school experiences are often understood within a “medicalized or psychoanalytic frame of reference that necessitates a ‘cure’ for collective victimization” (Green 2012:135). Used both to describe the experience of individuals (i.e. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and as a metaphor to describe the experiences of whole communities and culture groups, the concept of trauma has become “increasingly normative, making it difficult to think otherwise about violent events and their aftermath” (Theidon 2010:8, Kirmayer et. al 2008, Waldram 2004).

As with all ways of seeing the world, the Western biomedical perspective, while making claims and generalizations, “remain[s] bound by an initial intellectual frame of

reference that predetermines what deserves attention within a given reality” (Corin 1998:108). The biomedical discourse, as illustrated in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), tells a particular story about health and illness, based on distinct models and metaphors, and limited to biomedicine’s biophysical reality (Blaxter 1980:5; Kleinman 1973:85; Young, 1990, 1995). Thus, a closer look at how the ‘trauma narrative’ is shaped in and through a Western biomedical perspective is essential to recognizing the imprint of institutional practices and ideologies on how suffering is perceived, how violence is recognized, and from which discourses and practices of healing are realized. Creating new forms of victimization, institutional responses to ‘traumatized victims’ may unintentionally reproduce socio-political inequalities at local, national, and international levels.

Medical anthropologists have noted that by focusing on the ‘traumatized’ individual, the psychiatric model of trauma ‘individualizes’ the experience of collective violence and ‘medicalizes’ the human experience of suffering (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995; Lambek 2009; Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996). Focused largely on individual symptoms within the individual body, rather than the underlying structural forces of violence, an individualized definition of trauma transforms suffering into a pathological or psychological condition. As a result, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that “trauma is used systematically to silence people through suffering” (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995:175). Because trauma derives from a biomedical model, ‘pathological’ symptoms are often seen as requirements to validate the presence or diagnosis of trauma (Garro 2003). Problematically, traumatic events do not always result in psychiatric distress (Denham 2008). Furthermore, trauma often obscures the fact that violence and suffering are experiences of everyday life (Green 1999). Trauma needs to be understood as more than an individual experience – it occurs within a social, political, historical context.

The biomedical model of health views healing as interchangeable with ‘ridding’ individuals of illness, disease and suffering. In *believing* that trauma, viewed as a diagnosable disorder, is something that can be ‘cured’, a ‘memory’ to be ridden of, or an experience that can be forgotten, biomedicine is doing more than merely naming, classifying and even responding to ‘trauma’; in a sense, it is structuring the experience of

violence, and shaping the form ‘suffering’ takes (Kleinman 1973:86-87). Perceived as a disorder, ‘suffering’ is an experience that goes against society’s perceptions of ‘order’ and ‘normality’ (Taussig 1992), and must be ‘dealt’ with. As such ‘trauma’ in the Western conception is most often perceived as abnormal and therefore requiring ‘treatment’.

## INTERGENERATIONAL ‘TRAUMA’ AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

Trauma feeds on trauma. Once there is a cycle that's started of suicides or crime or physical violence, it begins to feed upon itself and passes from generation to generation... Residential schools are probably the most significant historical trauma that aboriginal people in this country have experienced.

Justice Murray Sinclair, TRC Chair, 2 October, 2013<sup>30</sup>

As a challenge to the historical simplification and individualization inherent in the Western definition of trauma, scholars and activists have increasingly argued that colonization created collective or intergenerational trauma within the Aboriginal population (DelVecchio Good et al. 2008, Duran et al. 1998, Duran and Duran 1995). For example, Indigenous people who never attended a school “have nonetheless suffered from the harms inflicted there due to the interruption of traditional cultural transmission and parenting skills, the loss of skills enabling traditional life on the land... and the loss of language, culture and spirituality” (Stanton 2011:1). Scholars Bonnie Duran, Eduardo Duran, and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998) note that, “unresolved trauma is inter-generationally cumulative, thus compounding the mental health problems of succeeding generations” (1998:64). They also describe the problems witnessed in Aboriginal communities as symptoms of a deeper “soul wound” or “spiritual injury” (Duran et. al 1998). Medical anthropologists use the related concept of social suffering to describe “the embodied expression of damaging and often long-term and systemic asymmetrical social and political relations” (Adelson 2009:275). By connecting notions of ‘suffering’ to ‘power’, violence is re-conceptualized as operating “along a continuum that spans structural, symbolic, everyday and intimate dimension” (Bourgois and

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30 See Puxley 2013.



Schonberg 2009:16). Notwithstanding differences in terminology, studies have clearly shown that oppressive Canadian governmental policies and racist practices have manifested in high rates of interpersonal violence, depression, alcohol abuse and suicides in many aboriginal communities today, with the most dramatic impact on youth due to the breaking of inter-generational ties of culture and custom (Adelson 2009, Kirmayer et al. 2000, Waldram et al. 1995, Warry 1998). As TRC Commissioner Chief Wilton Littlechild commented:

When I reflect back, the most difficult part in terms of trauma was just being separated from family. Your family bond, if not broken, is really stretched to the limit...I knew my brothers and sisters were at the same school, but we were separated. So there was no real family bond or parental bond. In my case, my grandparents' bond was almost severed by residential school. That was a very serious trauma from many perspectives, whether it was the physical separation or the mental isolation from your own family, to the spiritual and cultural separation (Rice 2011).

Many survivors “resist the logic of ‘individualizing’ the harms of residential schools” by focusing on the long-term impacts of the schools on subsequent generations, such as the loss of culture and language, substance abuse, and family violence (Jung 2011:228).

Western medical methods of diagnosis and treatment often overlook the importance of historical, cultural and social context in addressing the needs of Indigenous survivors of violence. Trauma can be an important concept to help Canadians understand the special challenges faced by Indigenous communities and survivors especially. TRC Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair has recently argued for the need to train medical professionals to understand the history and legacy of residential schools, since this can be a barrier to care: “All of those aboriginal patients are being sent to professionals who have not been trained in cultural competence...That's contributed to hesitation on the part of the aboriginal community to seek medical advice when they feel they are not going to be treated properly. That exacerbates the problems that they face” (Puxley 2013).

Problematically, the over-reliance on trauma as a description for the legacy of residential school violence can also result in the marginalization of systemic “social inequities that exacerbate their distress, and the inner strengths of Aboriginal people and their cultures to survive despite ongoing adversity” (Tait 2008:30). As Kelm (1998) explains, many Indigenous people are rejecting and contesting the ways in which

Western biomedical institutions and processes, as well as policies and practices of government have created an ‘Aboriginal health crisis’ as a result of focusing on the negative statistics of violence, disease and dysfunctional communities. As a result, many Indigenous leaders “have situated social and psychological pathologies *outside* themselves, as being part of the European contribution to the North American epidemiological scene” (Kelm 1998:xvii). By using trauma as both a therapeutic but also a political tool, many Indigenous health professionals are recognized as “social actors” that are purposefully “elaborating discourses that link history with healing” (Maxwell 2011:229)

Trauma has been recognized as a grassroots political instrument to legitimate suffering. Yet in embracing the language, ethical and political questions arise around notions of voice and representation. Endless repetition about painful personal stories of trauma can often lead to misrepresentation of the “diversity and complexity of Aboriginal experience by excluding those who survive through extraordinary strength and resilience” (Culhane 2009:166). Dara Culhane (2009) in her research on Aboriginal women living in Downtown Eastside Vancouver cautions that there is a danger that descriptions and representations of distress “may result in confirming the very stereotypes that they seek to subvert” (Culhane 2009:166). Furthermore, Culhane (2009) goes on to say,

in conditions of ongoing relations of radical inequality, focusing on the destructive impacts of historically and socially produced experiences and conditions runs the risk of paying insufficient attentions to the complexities, the wisdom, and the capacity of people to survive disadvantage (166).

Culhane (2009) acknowledges the importance of creating spaces especially for the most marginalized - those living in poverty, with addictions, violence, or mental illness – and “to tell their stories in language that can be heard and understood by those who do not share these experiences” (167).

Although many Indigenous people had “deeply wounding” experiences as a result of attending a school, according to a study released by the Assembly of First Nations (2004),

it does not mean that a child who attended residential school belongs to a distinct category of people...drawing a distinction between those who attended residential

school and those who did not trivializes the complexity of the experience of living as a First Nations person and of the impact of residential school.

Maxwell (2011) describes a tension “between arguments that recognize residential school attendance as a fundamentally and negatively transformative experience, and others that resist this framing as a simplification and flattening of Indigenous experiences” (227). Speaking about the legacy of residential schools and the importance of concentrating on survival instead of victimization, Mohawk lawyer, activist and educator Monture-Angus (1999) writes,

In my opinion, there has been enough written that focuses on the specific harms, often cataloguing the crimes, inflicted on First Nations children. This very narrow focus operates to conceal the outcomes and impacts those schools have had on our families and communities. My point is not to minimize the harms done to individuals but to make clearly the point that that these crimes are just a small portion of the actual impact. One of the things that needs to be considered is that we did survive the genocidal educational attempts of Canadian authorities. Beyond this simple fact, First Nations need to begin discussing the ways in which we survived (25).

## SUMMARY

As I have shown in this chapter, the residential schooling is part of a larger colonial experience that has deeply affected many Indigenous communities and lives. Through the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and in other public forums, Indigenous communities and the Canadians have struggled to come to grips with, and describe, the devastating, and multi-generational consequences of Canada’s Residential School Policy. Trauma has become a by-word used to categorize and describe this experience and its legacy. But what limits does the language of ‘trauma’ put on the experience of violence and social suffering, renewal, recovery and resistance? Or as Theidon (2010) asks in the context of Peru’s truth and reconciliation process, “what does it mean to be asked to narrate your life in an idiom that cannot possibly do you justice?” (14). As Monture-Angus and the Assembly of First Nations remind us, First Nations, Métis and Inuit were more than just traumatized victims in residential schools, they have also become survivors who are all on a journey of healing. As researchers and witnesses of the TRC process, we must continue to discuss how healing is understood by those

whose stories of violence and suffering are solicited by the TRC. What are expectations of healing? And what kinds of healing does a TRC process prefer or bias?

We must be careful in framing the problem as ‘Aboriginal trauma’, and the solution as ‘truth and reconciliation’ because this equation imposes specific concepts about healing on Indigenous peoples. Conceiving contemporary social suffering in terms of trauma, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions often rely on Western scientific categories and frameworks to understand the consequences of violence for individuals and communities. As I will describe further in the next chapter, “truth commissions seek to invert the state politics of pain by shifting the focus from terror to trauma” (Humphrey 2002:106). Attempts to treat testimonies as evidence of individual trauma ignore or downplay radical demands for justice and political change as part of the process of healing. While the TRC often functions as a tool for individual healing, many believe that it fails as a tool for political and cultural reconciliation or rapprochement. As Robyn Green (2012) advocates, “we must trouble categories of trauma and victimhood that may engender outcomes of *cure* and constitute a foreclosure on the past” (130). Healing the ‘problem’ is far more complicated than is suggested by labels drawn from Western medicine like trauma because colonialism was far more complicated than is allowed for.

### CHAPTER 3: THE HEALING MANDATE OF THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

There is an emerging and compelling desire to put the events of the past behind us so that we can work towards a stronger and healthier future... The truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free and pave the way to reconciliation.<sup>31</sup>

-Schedule “N” of the IRSSA, Mandate for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Truth commissions are increasingly regarded as part of “conflict resolution ‘first aid kits’” (Shaw 2005:20). Over the past twenty years, forty truth and reconciliation commissions have taken place across the globe to address the legacies of state-led violence (Hayner 2011). There has been significant study of the work and effectiveness of these Commissions as a truth-telling mechanism (Hayner 2011, Becker 2006, DeLaet 2006, Humphrey 2002, Wilson 2001). Less attention has been given to how Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been influenced by national and international therapeutic discourses around ‘Aboriginal healing’ and ‘national reconciliation’ – healing the individual body, the social body, and the body politic (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996). Initiated alongside an international politics of reparation and redress, Canada’s TRC adopts the problematic language of ‘trauma’ as a way of conceptualizing past experiences of violence, intergenerational impacts and healing processes. TRCs are often caught between the internal needs of survivors and society’s external political needs, including the need for national ‘peace’ and ‘stability’. In the context of addressing and redressing the legacy of violence associated with residential schools, Canada “followed the lead of other settler colonies by linking ‘healing’ and ‘reconciliation’ in public policy discourse, making both implicit and explicit claims to the therapeutic effects of state-sponsored reconciliation processes” (Maxwell 2011:223).

While reconciliation and the prevention of future social suffering may inform Truth Commissions, there remains much debate in the transitional justice literature about the meaning of ‘reconciliation’. Scholars especially disagree if reconciliation efforts

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<sup>31</sup> The mandate for The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is found in Schedule N of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. See <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=7>

should be focused at the national and political or individual and local level. Kimberly Theidon, a noted transitional justice scholar, has argued for the need to focus on the local: “reconciliation is forged and lived locally, and state policies can either facilitate or hinder these processes” (Theidon 2007:118). This chapter explores the healing mandate of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a hybrid of strong international examples—especially the South African Truth Commission—and a distinct Canadian therapeutic discourse that emerged from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

### THE THERAPEUTIC METAPHOR

I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now I – it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you this story.

-Survivor testimony to the South African TRC (Krog 1999:43)

Projects of national reconciliation aim to address the effects of violence by transforming the suffering of survivors “into a question of healing” (Humphrey 2005:208). According to Michael Humphrey (2005), “while political violence has both human rights and health implications, it is the health implications that have been the primary focus of national reconciliation projects” (204). While truth commissions are initiated in the context of addressing the injustices of past violence, the emphasis on health and healing “helps make violence, and therefore the question of rights, disappear from the narrative of reconciliation by focusing on the effects of violence rather than on its causes” (Humphrey 2005:204). The project of national reconciliation, therefore, has often become a political strategy aimed at recovering from a violent past and promoting peace, rather than as a function of pursuing justice.

TRCs, as well known instruments of national reconciliation, are understood as an institutionalized process designed to reveal past histories of violence and its effects through public testimonies of survivors. Over the last twenty years, we have seen an unprecedented rise in the “production and circulation of and demand for testimony” (Kennedy et. al 2009:1). In the context of truth commissions, testimony functions to legitimize claims of historical injustice, through public disclosures of violence committed by the state against its citizens. Through the mechanism of a Truth and Reconciliation

Commission, nation states acknowledge past wrongs in an attempt to ‘heal’ its effects and move toward a ‘healthy’ future.

Guided by the assumptions of psychotherapy and religious confession<sup>32</sup> advocates of truth commissions claim, “telling and sharing narratives of violence in the name of truth can promote healing for individuals and society” (Minow 2000:241). In fact many scholars note that the dominant narrative of ‘truth as healing’ – or ‘revealing is healing’ – underlies the goals and mechanisms of most truth and reconciliation commissions (Robins 2012, Millar 2010, Hamber 2001). As Simon Robins (2012) points out, “public telling of truth leads to healing for victims individually, and, through the broader truths that emerge, healing and reconciliation for the nation as a whole” (84).

Christopher Colvin (2008) suggests that guiding the work of truth commissions, and truth commission professionals,<sup>33</sup> is a ‘therapeutic metaphor’. Distinguished from the ‘retributive’ aspects of the ‘criminal justice metaphor’, the therapeutic metaphor sees survivors of human rights violations as “potential patients whose traumatic suffering has left them in need of medicalized intervention by the state or other expert providers” (Colvin 2008:420). While Colvin (2008) notes that many people continue to suffer the psychological and physical effects of their abuse, the power of this metaphor can “prove constraining” as people are boxed into “the prescribed role of passive patient eager to be healed through testimony” (420), a role he notes, that many tirelessly resist.

In privileging testimony as a mode of transmission and communication (Felman 1995), most TRCs use a particular model of healing founded upon the individual ‘telling’ of stories of victimization and the ‘pursuit of truth’ (Hamber 2006:222). As Shoshana Felman (1995) asks, “what is the significance of this growing predominance of testimony as a privileged contemporary mode of transmission and communication” (16)? A key focus of the TRC is on “individual ‘truth-telling’ as a vehicle for healing the nation”, as the saying ‘revealing is healing’ indicates (Humphrey 2002:111). Yet an important underlying assumption is that truth is both “accessible and expressible” (Humphrey 2002:111), and that such an approach makes ‘sense’ across local and cultural contexts

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<sup>32</sup> Although beyond the scope of this research, TRCs have also been influenced deeply by religious beliefs of healing, mourning and confessional rituals and making public private pain and anger (see Bozzoli 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Those working in the transitional justice field most often include psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health professionals, lawyers, and judges, among others.

and for all people.

In assessing the psychosocial aspects of TRCs, many psychologists and anthropologists share the view that the TRC process is beneficial for healing, and that the process of giving testimony meets people's "instinctive need to tell their stories" (Allan and Allan 2000:462-3). Despite this support, many ethnographic studies done by anthropologists are critical of the effects of the TRC, and the process of giving testimony, on local populations (Wilson 2001, 2003; Ross 2003b; Colvin 2008). For instance, studies conducted by Christopher Colvin (2008) and Alejandro Castillejo Cuéllar (2005) both highlight how the process of providing testimony in front of a Commission was experienced negatively, and in fact may have been re-traumatizing for local populations. Hamber (2001), reflecting on the South African TRC writes: "A truth commission may be a necessary first step, but in itself is insufficient to meet the myriad of psychological needs of individuals... and in many cases the experience of testifying or making a statement 'initiated more than it closed'" (136).

Other scholars suggest that in approaching healing through the lens of 'truth-telling', truth commissions are institutionally inappropriate and ill suited for fostering the healing of individual victims (DeLaet 2006:170). In the promotion of healing, DeLaet (2006) argues,

truth telling needs to be conceived as a *process* emphasizing the need for survivors to tell their stories, to be listened to, and to have their experiences validated, rather than as a means to an end in which the truth is primarily a *product* intended to serve as an authoritative record of atrocity or as a basis for punishing the guilty (170).

Problematically, in the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the methodological and bureaucratic process of gathering testimony stripped down narratives (Wilson 2001), individualized and compartmentalized collective experiences of violence, and oversimplified the multiple aspects of suffering (Ross 2003b). The TRC was also criticized for not acknowledging the needs of victims in their social, political and cultural context and for creating the false impression that healing is a simple and linear process (Hamber 2001:136).

While the scholarly literature focuses on the best mechanism for seeking truth (DeLaet 2006:152), greater emphasis is needed regarding how healing is conceptualized,



represented, and symbolized in the TRC apparatus itself. Using metaphors of illness and health, the “organic state” is viewed as a “sick body that is in need of healing” (Wilson 2003:370). Truth commissions are believed to carry out this healing and promote national reconciliation. Using a model of healing that asks survivors of violence to share their stories of victimizations, the TRC process is grounded in a specific ‘theory’ of healing, one that is constructed and articulated by the dominant narrative of the state. While much of the recent literature on trauma focuses on the local and global power relations that produce and shape sickness (Dein 2007:49), much less attention has been given to the relationship between local and national politics of healing and reconciliation.

#### AN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Canadian policy on Aboriginal healing and residential schools emerged in the context of an international politics of reparations and redress. Over the last thirty years, states have increasingly looked to address and redress the legacies and experiences of state-led violence. As human rights lawyer Martha Minow (2000) writes, more distinctive than the facts of genocides and mass violence marking the twentieth century, is “the search for and invention of collective forms of response” (235). The ‘legacies’ of political and collective violence have been dealt with in different ways. Beginning in the 1980s, there has been a marked rise in the number of war crime tribunals, financial compensation packages, state apologies, symbolic gestures of commemorations, and truth and reconciliation commission worldwide. While nations around the globe have experimented with various processes of reparations and redress – and how societies should attempt to heal the wounds of the past remains an ongoing debate – it is the use of truth commissions that have received the most public and academic attention in the last several decades.

Between 1970s and early 2000s, approximately twenty truth commissions were established (Wilson 2003:369). Today that number is over forty.<sup>34</sup> While the nature and political context of TRCs differ greatly, many of the basic aims remain the same. As

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<sup>34</sup> Priscilla Hayner (2011) documents forty truth commissions that were in operation from 1974 to the end of 2009. Twenty-one of these were initiated in the last ten years in all areas of the globe and in a range of political contexts.

Priscilla Hayner (2011) notes, “in many contexts, they have become the most prominent government initiative to respond to past abuses, and the starting point from which other measures for accountability, reparations, and reforms may be developed” (20). The most straightforward and common objective is that of ‘truth-telling’, “to establish an accurate record of a country’s past, clarify uncertain events, and lift the lid of silence and denial from a contentious and painful period of history” (Hayner 2011:20). By officially and publicly recognizing past violence and abuses, human rights activists note that truth commissions have the potential to “break the silence about widely known but unspoken truths” (Hayner 2011:20).

Truth commissions are generally considered as mechanisms of “transitional justice”, where a nation “attempt[s] to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation” (United Nations 2010:3). The adoption of the truth commission mechanism as a political response to past histories of violence has been especially prevalent in Latin America and Eastern Europe as nations states undergo transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic form of governance.<sup>35</sup> More recently, an increasing number of TRCs have been created in non-transitional states to address large-scale human rights violations and past histories of political violence, particularly in the context of Indigenous populations (Jung 2011).

While truth commissions have often been likened to that of a trial, the distinct difference between trials and truth commissions “is the nature and extent of their attention to victims” (Hayner 2011:22). During a trial the testimony of victims-survivors may play a minimal role, yet for most truth commissions the emphasis is on the victim. The work of most Commissions is centered on providing a space for victims-survivors to tell their stories and obtain some form of redress. Often the focus is on listening to victims-survivors’ stories, through a process of statement gathering at public hearings and by publishing a final report that acknowledges the full range of abuses and suffering. In

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<sup>35</sup> Arguably the field of transitional justice developed as a result of many global developments – including the events and aftermath of the World War II, and prompted by transitions to democracy in Southern Europe (in the 1970s), Latin America (in the 1980s), Africa, Asia and Central and Eastern Europe (in the 1990s) (Freeman 2006:5). Freeman (2006) explains that despite the great differences amongst transitional justice contexts, the unifying feature is the legacy of widespread violence and mass abuse (5). Truth commissions are but one “response or mechanism” in the field of transitional justice.

addition, one of the guiding principles, according a United Nations (2010) policy paper outlining the framework for transitional justice processes and mechanisms, is to “ensure the centrality of victims in the design and implementation” of such processes (6). Another important goal and responsibility of a truth commission mandate is to ‘promote reconciliation’. As I describe more fully below, many people believe that by revealing truths of that past, reconciliation – or healing – will result. Truth commissions are seen as having a healing potential, from a psychological perspective, as they can provide space for survivors of violence to be heard and the abuse they experienced acknowledged (Hamber 2001:134).

Arguably, the TRC with the most widespread recognition is that of South Africa’s and its distinct emphasis on national reconciliation.<sup>36</sup> The South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission was noted for the “innovative and controversial way in which it sought to negotiate its way out of the past into the future through the TRC” (Biggar 2003:xvii). The TRC also recognized “the healing potential of telling stories” (Ross 2003:328), and attempted to combine an investigation into what happened, a forum for victim testimony, a process for developing reparations and a mechanism for granting amnesty for perpetrators who honestly told of their role in politically motivated violence. The South African TRC was also one of the first commissions to make its proceedings public.

South Africa adopted the African concept of *Ubuntu* to describe the collective process of reconciliation – meaning humaneness, or an inclusive sense of community valuing everyone. The TRC sought to take a deeply divided society to a future committed to human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence. One of the chief concerns in the South African TRC case was amnesty for perpetrators – or those who had participated in activities approved and ordered by the apartheid government. Desmond Tutu explains the motivation for focusing on societal reconciliation through its TRC: “While the Allies could pack up and go home after Nuremberg [war crimes tribunals following WWII], we

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<sup>36</sup> Prior to the South Africa’s Commission, much of the focus of transitional justice was on “truth” as a form of serving justice. South Africa was the first to adopt the language of healing and reconciliation as stated objectives of the state-led process, transforming the name “Truth Commission” into “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”. Despite its prevalence in the scholarly literature, the South African TRC and its subsequent report have been widely criticized both for granting amnesties and failing to pay reparations (Wilson 2001, 2003).

in South Africa had to live with one another” (Tutu 1999:21). Accordingly, in the TRC, notions of reconciliation were intimately connected with understandings of forgiveness and healing. Despite the influence of the South African TRC model, it has been criticized for not having sufficiently addressed processes of reconstruction and reconciliation at the community or local level.

While a process of national reconciliation does have a very significant impact on community reconciliation, community conflict dynamics have to be addressed in their own right in order to secure sustainable peace (Merwe 2001:85-6). The South Africa TRC initially portrayed itself as a body to deal with all levels of reconciliation in South Africa – national, community and personal—but because of political pressures it subsequently became a top-down process of reconciliation as it promoted “national unity” and “national healing”. Thus the TRC “represented a forum for the healing of the South African nation rather than one for the healing of individuals” (Brust 2010:84). This tendency to prioritize national unity over more complex reconciliation of local conflicts has characterized many TRC’s after the South African one. The South African TRC’s involvement in local communities and interactions with victims raised concerns about how community and national reconciliation are linked, and highlighted the problems with processes that override local needs in the pursuit of national goals (Merwe 2001:86). While the TRC raised various expectations at the personal and community level, it resulted in “disillusionment and frustration when the expectations were not met” (Merwe 2001:86). As Freeman (2006) writes, there is a sense held by truth commissions that they can “construct a kind of psychological bridge between a country’s past and its future, without which the future remains volatile” (11).

In his critical analysis of South Africa’s TRC, Imke Brust (2010) writes, that while the work of the TRC acknowledged the psychological and intellectual trauma from the apartheid policy, “it was less effective in providing a forum to discuss the particular personal circumstances of violence, and in particular sexual violence against women (and men) under the apartheid system” (84). The TRC represented, as Brust (2010) notes, “a forum for the healing of the South African nation rather than one for healing individuals” (84). As a result, the administrative framework of the TRC enabled a public forum and national dialogue on reconciliation, without providing South Africans with “the tools to

deal with the repercussions of the apartheid system in the private realm” (Brust 2010:83). This represents an important limitation of the TRC: playing a key role in the building process of post-apartheid South Africa, the TRC created its own national narrative of healing and reconciliation but was limited in terms of its ability to foster reconciliation within communities and families.<sup>37</sup> For example, Brust (2010) points to South African literature as an opportunity to “challenge this new dominant national narrative” (84). She focuses on Achmat Dangor’s novel *Bitter Fruit* (2001), which puts forward the argument that “despite the TRC’s public acknowledgement of the atrocities of the apartheid past, repression is still at work in the private, i.e. family sphere”. Brust (2010) suggests that Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* is a metaphor for post-TRC. While the TRC was viewed as an important avenue for people to tell their stories, it also helped to sustain this new “dominant national narrative” through the public telling of what Rebecca Saunders refers to as “hegemonic tales and subversive stories” (Brust 2010:97 n.15).

While some survivors who testified before the South African TRC affirmed the usefulness of truth commissions in contributing to their recovery and healing, many questioned “the long-term ability of a one-off statement or public testimony to address the full psychological impact of the past” (Hamber 2001:135). According to Hamber (2001),

The TRC has undoubtedly begun a healing process for many, and for a fortuitous few it may have spurred on a complete recovery. However despite these successes, it would be an error to exaggerate the ability of truth commissions or public testimony to address en masse the needs the individuals struggling with a personal and social history of human rights abuses (135).

Truth commission, Robins (2012) explains, “operate through the continuing objectification of the victim to support the broader aims of the state” (104). As a result, “it is not clear that the victim, who is the essential performer in the exercise, benefits” (Robins 2012:104). Furthermore, according to Hamber (2001), TRC’s are caught between “the internal needs of victims and societies external political exigencies,

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<sup>37</sup> A 1998 survey conducted by Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and the Khulumani self-help survivor support group, found that most victims of the apartheid era felt that the TRC had failed to achieve reconciliation between black and white communities, and in some cases the TRC exacerbated existing conflicts. Many victims-survivors still felt unsafe in their communities and feared the repercussions of perpetrators. And in some cases, it was felt that the TRC caused further suffering (Colvin 2000, Hamber et al. 2000).

including the need for stability” – as such needs of individual victims and communities are not always viewed as a matter of national priority. Thus in the language of reconciliation, Wilson (2003) argues, “the focus is not as much on individuals, but on the nation-state...reconciliation works at a much higher level of abstraction. The nation-state is to be reconciled with itself” (371). Paradoxically, Swartz and Drennan (2000) note, it was “the individual body which was often the site at which political power was brutally exercised, and yet there seems to be the hope that these abuses can be undone and healed at a more abstract and generalized level”. Referencing Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987), they point to the problematic assumption held by the public as well as mental health professionals, that “healing the body politic will heal the consequences of assaults on individual bodies” (Swartz and Drennan 2000:207). Continuing discussions are needed on how the TRC sees its role in facilitating healing and the expectations and implications for those choosing to participate.

#### CANADA’S MANDATE FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Over the last twenty years, truth commissions, as projects of national reconciliation have been undertaken around the globe with the goal of addressing the political violence and historical injustice “suffered by minorities, especially colonized Indigenous ones, whose loss and trauma have long gone unrecognized and uncompensated” (Humphrey 2005:203). Although TRCs may differ according to the specific political, cultural and historical contexts of each country, they all tend to deal with the violence of the past by “emphasiz[ing] the dimensions of truth telling, apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation” (King 2011:136). Canada’s TRC shares these concepts inspired by other truth commissions, in its mandate to heal and reconcile Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

In May 2006, the Government of Canada announced the approval by all parties of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). The agreement that was developed between the Government of Canada, legal counsel for former students, the Assembly of First Nations, regional Inuit Representatives, and the churches involved in running the schools, was “for a fair and lasting resolution to the legacy of Indian

Residential Schools” (AANDC 2010).<sup>38</sup> Referred to as “the largest class action settlement in Canadian history” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2008), the \$1.9 billion settlement agreement called for a number of individual and collective measures, including: a Common Experience Payment to be paid to all eligible former students who resided at a recognized school; an Independent Assessment Process for claims of sexual and physical abuse;<sup>39</sup> commemoration activities; access to mental health supports through the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program, and a one-time endowment to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the agreement called for the establishment of an independent truth and reconciliation commission, with a budget of \$60-million over five years, “to contribute to truth, healing and reconciliation” (TRC 2011).<sup>41</sup>

While indebted to the international literature on TRC’s and the powerful example of the South African TRC, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1991-1995) has also provided a distinctive “procedural blueprint” for the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Hughes 2012:104). The development of the mandate for Canada’s TRC has followed a “distinct and different path from those of other truth commissions and instruments of transitional justice...at its inception stands the final

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<sup>38</sup> The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement was “in response to numerous class action claims involving over 12,000 individual litigants” (Morse 2008: 283). See Kim Stanton (2011) for a detailed history of litigation by survivors of the IRS system against the Canadian government and churches that ran the schools.

<sup>39</sup> See Schedule N, Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (2006). As part of the IRSSA, financial compensation in the form of a Common Experience Payment (CEP) is to be awarded to former students once they verify their attendance at the schools. According to the IRSSA, the amount of CEP is determined by the

- (1) ten thousand dollars (\$10,000.00) to every Eligible CEP Recipient who resided at one or more Indian Residential Schools for one school year or part thereof; and
- (2) an additional three thousand (\$3,000.00) to every eligible CEP Recipient who resided at one or more Indian Residential Schools for each school year or part thereof, after the school year; and
- (3) less the amount of any advance payment on the CEP received.

In addition to the CEP, an Independent Assessment Process (IAP) allows former students who suffered sexual, physical, or other abuses to apply to receive from \$5,000 to \$275,000 in compensation from the Canadian government. To be eligible for IAP payments, former students must demonstrate harm in terms of serious psychological impairment and even loss of income, and present their case in front of a government-appointed adjudicator.

<sup>40</sup> The Settlement Agreement provides for an additional \$125 million over five years to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) in order support “community healing” projects. The AHF is supposed to use it to fund ‘eligible projects’ that address healing needs of Aboriginal people affected by the legacy of Indian Residential Schools, which could include the intergenerational impacts (IRS Agreement 2007)

<sup>41</sup> In the 2008 Government apology for the Indian Residential School system, Prime Minister Harper referred to the TRC as the “cornerstone” of the Settlement Agreement.

report of RCAP, which recommended its creation” (Hughes 2012:104). The five-volume, Final Report released in 1996, encompassed more than four thousand pages of analysis and over four hundred recommendations. The report began: “a great cleansing of the wounds of the past” is necessary before the work of reconciliation can begin (RCAP 1996:17). Among the recommendations was a call for a public inquiry to examine the origins, purposes and effects of the residential school policies, to identify abuses, and to begin the process of healing. RCAP recommendations pointed to the need to address the trauma of survivors of residential schools, and the importance of healing. Although RCAP began with a broad mandate to “deal with an accumulation of literally centuries of injustice” (Frideres 1996:249), it was unable to accomplish its goal in such a short period of time. Its recommendations eventually spurred the creation of a new, federally funded body known as the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), that would redress the traumas of residential schooling by supporting community based healing initiatives. After the four-year process, healing had replaced the concept of reconciliation as the central organizing principle and governing framework underlying the work of the Commission (Conradi 2006). Healing was adopted as a political metaphor - “healing the relationship between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government and Canadian society”(Conradi 2006). I suggest that the TRC did not innovate or import ideas from abroad, but rather borrowed from our own history of wrestling with Indigenous issues in this respect.

Jula Hughes (2012) expressed the importance of placing Canada’s TRC in a historical framework of government initiatives and public inquiries that have attempted to improve the situation of Aboriginal people,<sup>42</sup> rather than in the international transitional justice literature, since the Canadian TRC “lacks the transitional justice context that typically surrounds the work of a truth commission” (102-103). According to Courtney Jung (2011), Canada’s TRC should not be regarded from a transitional-justice framework as the settler society remains a site of ‘non-transition’. While TRCs have been used by other ‘non-transitional states’ in the context of Indigenous people (see Jung 2011:217), the conceptualization of ‘healing’ in the Canadian context is not as a process of political

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<sup>42</sup> As Hughes (2012) notes, RCAP is “not without its own predecessors” (103). In fact RCAP’s mandate was explicitly designed from some of the recommendations set out in earlier reports, such as the Hawthorn Report (1966-1967), the Berger Inquiry (1977), the Lysyk Report (1977), the Coolican Report (1985) and the Penner Report (1983).



transition nor one of transformation or decolonization. In fact, as Hughes's (2012) argues, Canada's TRC is unlikely to result in "fundamental change in Canadian society" – "there is no realistic risk that the TRC will destabilize the Canadian body politic" (102-104). As a result, she goes on to say, "this has important implications for the work of the TRC, but also for any outcomes that might be reasonably expected from it" (Hughes 102:102).

Assessing the TRC from its historical origins in RCAP, and other past government-sponsored inquiries involving the relations between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state, may indeed allow for a more appropriate framework from which to evaluate whether the TRC has achieved what it was designed to achieve. The influence of RCAP on Canada's TRC has important implications for how the mandate was developed but also how it is being applied. In fact, in a presentation to the Australian Human Rights Commission, Michael DeGagné (2001), Executive Director of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, stated that RCAP "functioned in a manner comparable to a truth and reconciliation commission...by this I mean that its mandate, included among other things, the recording of public testimonies and the making of recommendations to government".

Despite Hughes' insights, I believe that it is also important to situate Canada's TRC in the international context of state and reconciliation processes to allow for a more full appreciation of how narratives of therapy and trauma underlie much of the reconciliation processes worldwide, and its influence in framing the Canadian mandate. While the imposition of the therapeutic language of 'trauma' and 'healing' into state reconciliation processes arguably saw its Canadian origins through RCAP (Conradi 2006), therapeutic strategies have been "problematically imposed" on reconciliation processes around the globe (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Humphrey 2002). In fact, the event I attended in Vancouver in 2011, initiated international participation and expertise to help guide the Canadian TRC in important decisions such as archiving stories. While the Canadian TRC may be unique in many respects, it was developed in conversation with both Canadian history and international discourses about TRC's, their role, and their mandates. Notably, the Canadian TRC mandate shares the same underlying framework as truth commissions internationally – that of using public and private testimony as a way of telling stories of past trauma experiences (Felman 1992; Herman 1992). It also uses the same 'therapeutic strategies' as other truth commissions, combining the "rule of law with

psychosocial goals” in the hope that they will break systemic cycles of violence and facilitate reconciliation (Amstutz 2005:8, King 2012). Understanding the local impact of importing the global TRC mechanism, requires as a starting point, an acknowledgement of the therapeutic metaphor as the underlying function of Canada’s reparation and redress policy.

Research by Robyn Green (2012), reveals the contradictory nature of Canada’s national reconciliation process, one that adopts the settler discourse of ‘cure’ to situate the Indian Residential Schools reconciliation process. As a result of the ‘overuse’ of therapeutic discourses in the Settlement Agreement, notions of trauma may be entangled with notions of justice, potentially displacing justice “as the ultimate goal” (Green 2012:130-132). Furthermore, by focusing on residential schooling through the IRSSA – and the TRC – “the scope of reconciliation ultimately obscures” contemporary struggles and social suffering endured by Indigenous peoples, locating violence associated with oppressive policies and practices enacted by the state in the past rather than in the present (Green 2012:141).

In addition to being the first ‘established democracy’ to initiate the TRC mechanism, Canada’s TRC is distinct in other ways. According to the International Center for Transitional Justice (2008), Canada’s TRC broke 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” (ICTJ 2008: 2). Its mandate was developed from within a legal paradigm – from an agreement between parties to avoid a lawsuit – rather than a political or government action. In contrast to other contexts in which truth commissions have been developed as a result of a peace accord between parties to a conflict, or instigated by a new political regime, Canada’s TRC “is a result of negotiations between multiple parties of class action lawsuits” (Stanton 2011:4). Stanton (2011) argues that Canada’s TRC “was agreed to by their government’s legal advisors in order to settle costly litigation”, and as such, is faced “with the need to prompt Canadians to invest in and take ownership of a process that they did not instigate. That is, the TRC was not created out of a groundswell of concern about IRS survivors by the public” (4), but rather created by the government as a way to mitigate further financial cost.

The unique origins of Canada's TRC also help to explain the widespread ignorance of the reconciliation process that began with the first National Event in Winnipeg, June 2010 and is projected to conclude in 2014. Commissioner Dr. Marie Wilson (2012) commented on the disconnect between Canadians and the TRC process: "At some point we have to ask ourselves: How is it that we as a country devote so much air time to the TRC say in South Africa, but dedicated so little to our own on a sustained basis" (Sas 2012). Despite the unorthodox origins of the TRC, it is important to remember that survivors agreed to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement as an alternative to wearisome legal battles with churches and the Canadian state. In particular, "they wanted to create a process that was less adversarial than the court process" (Stanton 2011:6). According to the "Establishment, Powers, Duties and Procedures of the Commission" set out in the mandate, the TRC is not to act as a process of public inquiry, hold formal hearings, or even conduct a formal legal process (TRC 2011).<sup>43</sup> The mandate also specifically mentions that the TRC may not have subpoena powers or name the names of perpetrators, two commonly allocated powers for truth commissions.<sup>44</sup> With the powers of justice and judgment removed from the TRC, attention has been inadvertently re-directed from the perpetrators to the victims with some unanticipated results that I will explore in the next two chapters. As in the case of South Africa where Desmond Tutu observed that 'we are all victims of apartheid', Canada's national recognition of the 'survivors' of residential schools has made 'victimhood' the foundation "of an inclusive narrative and membership" (Humphrey 2005:209).

The national TRC process aims to inspire healing by allowing survivors to share their diverse residential school memories and experiences, but to what extent is this process perceived and experienced as 'healing' by survivors? What are the implications of framing the TRC through a therapeutic metaphor, one that focuses on the pathology of violence rather than seeking justice for past wrongs? What are the local perceptions and expectations of a process and a framework that sees private narratives of trauma,

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<sup>43</sup> This is despite RCAP's formal recommendation that a formal public inquiry be held on the Indian Residential School system.

<sup>44</sup> However, as Hayner (2001) notes, while most truth commissions have the power to name perpetrators, few have done so (107).

suffering and grief as central to national reconciliation? The national focus of Canada's truth and reconciliation process imposes a model of healing that transforms survivors into victims in a national story about reconciliation between nations. However noble this goal of national reconciliation is—and it is a goal that many survivors actively work toward and speak about in their stories—it cannot mend communities and families troubled by generations of very local conflict engendered by policies of the settler state. Elder Eugene Arcand spoke clearly about the need for a more nuanced approach to healing:

So it's a whole...it's complex, a very complex process, there is no one size fits all. And all of us are at various levels of, of...if you want to call it 'healing' then that's fine...for me, there is a certain extent of it, is yes healing, but a certain extent of it is understanding, comprehending, my everyday behaviors in life, my thought process in life, trying to change it, eh?

As I will show in the next two chapters, testimonies given by residential school survivors are raising critical questions about the limits of healing through the TRC and the need for Canadians to listen and reflect on the stories told by survivors.

## CHAPTER 4: HEALING STORIES AND THE LIMITS OF SOLICITING TRUTH

Advocates of truth commissions argue that the process of ‘giving voice’ – providing a space and a forum for people to tell their story – is helping victim-survivors heal. It is a central tenet of modern-day psychology that expressing one’s feelings, and speaking about past violent experiences is necessary for mental health recovery. Adopting this view, TRCs stress the importance of regaining personal dignity through creating a safe space for victim-survivors to tell their truth – a space they suggest that was not provided before. However, there is no guarantee that all are benefiting from the process, or that all needs are being met. Many survivors with whom I spoke during my ethnographic research regard the TRC’s practice of truth-telling as having the potential to reopen old wounds and further marginalize the very groups in which forums such as truth commissions claim to focus. For many survivors, the relationship between storytelling and healing is neither simple, nor easily expressed.

Charged with facilitating a process of giving voice back to survivors of violence, the TRC is faced with a formidable task. That stories can provide therapy is well known. However, can storytelling in the context of the TRC create a space and a process that are “of value in the wake of such oppression” (Phelps 2004:7), and that take into account the needs and expectations of all survivors? As Phelps (2004) pointedly asserts, “the question of whether storytelling can work over the long term is not a theoretical one and the stakes are high” (7). In other words, what is the danger of implementing a globalized paradigm of truth-telling – a process that assumes that the public telling and sharing of private memories will lead to healing both for individual survivors and the nation as a whole? What is the significance of this practice for perceived effectiveness of the TRC and for local processes of healing? There are important tensions that need to be examined between “the model of redemptive verbal remembering on which transitional justice mechanisms are based” (Shaw 2007:186) and how such a global paradigm has been locally employed through Canada’s TRC. There is a great deal at stake in the process of soliciting survivors’ personal stories of suffering and grief, and in the national process of publicizing and circulating diverse truths. Most importantly, whether for survivors of

residential school, the public act of truth telling is perceived as helpful or hurtful in their own recovery process. As I explore in this chapter, the conditions under which stories are told – or not told – reveals a complex politics and ethics involved in the public context of sharing private experiences.

## THE BURDEN OF MEMORY

So with the advent of the residential school settlement agreement and what that made most of us go through, is we've been forced in a short period of time to remember what we spent a lifetime trying to forget. Or get rid of. So that's what's happened now. So now I've had to revisit the trauma that we went through.

-TRC, Survivor Committee Elder, Eugene Arcand

Narratives of sickness and suffering are central to the work of Canada's TRC. Through its mandate to create a public record of the past, the TRC hopes to educate the 'rest' of Canada through the telling of private stories. In particular, survivors of residential school are invited to remember and publicly recount their stories of residential school. Commissioner Wilton Littlechild expressed at a TRC community event "it is important that [your] story also informs everyone that it is also a Canadian story – not a First Nation, Métis, or Inuit story – it is a Canadian story. This is why your information is so important as a contribution" [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012]. Yet, what are the ethical implications of asking people to publicly speak their truth?

While survivors are seen as central to Canada's TRC process, we must ask: What motivates residential school survivors to come forward to tell their story? There remains a very real tension between people's desire to speak and their need to bury their memories. As one former student shared publicly, "to this day I find it difficult to express my feelings to the people close to me. I was shamed into expressing my feelings. I am scared to do that now. I am scared to get laughed at" [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012]. Many survivors speak to the expectations placed on them to share their stories of trauma, whether they are prepared and wanting to do so or not. Jackson (2002) notes, "every place of violence and social suffering, becomes, for a

time, a place of silence” (132). Storytelling in the context of violence and social suffering has often been associated with breaking this silence, and helping society to finally understand the social and historical truths of what happened. While the TRC aims to give survivors a voice through the statement-gathering process, many survivors feel an expectation placed on them to speak – despite the fact that some would prefer silence.

As expressed through the following testimony, some people feel the pressure to participate in the TRC hearings, despite a reluctance to do so. One survivor shares in front of the TRC, “I don’t know if the truth and the healing will work on me. It hasn’t yet” [TRC National Event, Saskatoon, June 22]. As another survivor reveals, being “a better person” means to engage in a process of healing, which in this context means sharing publicly one’s story of pain:

I want to be a better person; I want to heal. I couldn’t sleep last night. I had a hard time sleeping. I almost backed out today. But I knew I had to come and speak, to share my story with you, what I went through. As I sat here and listened for the last day and half I felt the pain coming from the people. I am tired, physically, spiritually [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012].

Though many people shared their ambivalence and doubts about the healing nature of sharing their stories publicly - especially the most difficult experiences - many chose to participate anyway out of a sense of duty and expectation that their testimony was integral to the process. This leads me to wonder where the healing expectations of truth-telling are coming from: the TRC Commissioners and staff or from the survivors themselves? While most survivors would say that they want to heal, many remain conflicted as to whether speaking publicly at the TRC would help them overcome their pain, or whether it may cause further harm. Expressed in the words of one Elder, “Cause what’s going to start here, it’s not going to be easy. We are going to relive what some of us have been through” [TRC National Event, Saskatoon, June 22].

The public nature of the TRC process is not the only ethical concern. There is a ‘burden of memory’ that is placed on survivors to speak and recount their experiences of violence so that others may understand what happened. While the TRC statement-gathering process is open for anybody who chooses to participate, most of the stories that are being told are from the experiences of former students – mostly from those with First

Nations, Métis or Inuit ancestry.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Canada's TRC invites statements from anybody – “both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians” (TRC 2011), including but not limited to family members of people who had attended a school, religious leaders and church representatives, political leaders and local authorities, and the general Canadian public. Yet it is most often the survivors – the former students themselves – that come and speak before the Commission. Since the TRC began, more than 4,000 statements have been received from former residential school students and their families (TRC 2013). Hoping to elicit testimonies from as many individuals as possible, Justice Murray Sinclair (2009), Chair of the TRC noted in a press release,

As the Chair, I promise you this:

We (Chairperson Justice Murray Sinclair, Commissioners Chief Wilton Littlechild and Marie Wilson) are committed to each other and to the cause of the Commission and we will see this through to the end. I promise you that we will seek out the stories of all those connected to the schools who are still alive, from the students and the teachers, to the managers and the janitors, as well as the officials who planned and carried out the whole thing.

If you have a story to tell about the schools, we will hear it. If you cannot come to us, we will come to you. If you cannot speak, we will find someone to speak for you. We will go to as many communities as we can humanly manage and where we can't go ourselves we will send our delegates armed with our authority to record the stories of those who wish to tell them. And in the end we will ensure that the whole world hears their truths and the truth about residential schools, so that future generations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians will be able to hold to the statement that resonates with all of us: This must never happen again.

There are many factors that influence whether a person decides to share a statement. Throughout the TRC hearings, I observed that many survivors found it extremely difficult to share certain parts of their story publicly, especially the most difficult and painful experiences. As a result some choose to share only the parts of their narratives that they have spoken about before as a way of protecting themselves from experiencing further grief. As one woman shared at a community hearing,

I don't share any real sad stories because just sitting in the crowd listening kinda

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<sup>45</sup> While the majority of former students who testified were First Nations, Métis or Inuit, I did witness a handful of instances when non-Indigenous persons who went to residential schools testified and reported generally positive experiences.



brings back too much. And I thought I'd share this story because that's a story I'd shared a lot of times. I feel comfortable about that story... And as long as I can, I can. I have to say it somewhere else in private [TRC National Event, Halifax, 27 October 2011].

While many see themselves as on a journey of healing, listening to the pain of others is often described as very difficult, and can sometimes contribute to furthering their own grief. Many reiterated the words of the previous testimony that the act of listening to such stories can be very physically and spiritually draining, and often influenced whether people decide themselves to share.

While the decision to participate in the public hearings of the TRC is up to the individual – the Commissioners and the TRC staff will not force anyone to share their story publicly – they do extend the invitation throughout every event, and through media releases. For some former students, that is enough. Others struggle with the decision over the course of the hearings, describing their anxieties of sharing their stories; some for the first time publicly, others for the first time. For many survivors, this is indeed the first time their story will be heard, including by family members. According to one survivor, “These stories that I’m going to tell, fifty years ago, I have kept them for fifty years. And now I finally have the courage to speak. I find it difficult but I still have to tell these stories” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April, 2012].

Embedded in the TRC are multiple pressures and processes related to healing the residential school legacy through providing testimonials of historical violence and grief. The decision to speak publicly often comes from a feeling of *needing* to prove one’s experience of victimhood and survivance.<sup>46</sup> As the following testimony demonstrates, the expectations placed on people to ‘tell their story’ come not only from the TRC but also from the other components of the Indian Residential School Settlement compensation process – in particular, the Common Experience Payment (CEP) and the Independent Assessment Process (IAP). In order to even be considered eligible for monetary reparations, survivors are expected to describe in detail the experiences of violence and abuse that they experienced:<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Vizenor (2008) promotes the concept of Native survivance as “an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry” (11).

<sup>47</sup> Ross (2003) describes the problematic way in which the South African TRC “considered its subject in terms of injury”, and the “legal person” it produced (11-12). Colvin (2004) further identifies the

I find it difficult to talk about these things personally. There are some things which I will not speak publicly, which I spoken about to the IAP. As with other people, I still, I still carry a lot of that hurt. But I was told by health support workers, by Elders, "Tell your story. Relate it all to the residential school experience and the abuse. And that we are who we are because of what happened. Link it to what you have learned and how you were treated. Make it believable. And spell it out". I have done that! I have done that in my own ceremony. I have done that in IAP. But I find it extremely difficult to do that publicly. [Regina Community Hearing, 16 January 2012]

In order to receive the Common Experience Payment, or the CEP, in which the Government of Canada pays a lump sum to former IRS students, survivors are asked to engage in a long process of paper work, in which they have to describe in writing their experience at the school. Former students who suffered sexual or serious physical abuse could additionally go through the Independent Assessment Process “to determine the extent of their abuse, and therefore, the extent of their compensation. As the public notice explaining the residential school settlement states, ‘Awards are based on a point system for different abuses and resulting harms.’<sup>48</sup> The more points the greater the payment” (Jung 2011:232). IAP applications are reviewed and the Indian Residential Schools Adjudication Secretariat assesses whether claimants are eligible for a hearing. During the private hearings, survivors are asked to describe in detail what happened at residential school and to provide evidence that the abuse and the harms they suffered happened and are real, and that they continue to suffer from these abuses today. Many claimants require the use of lawyers to assist them in this process. Hearings are held in front of an ‘independent’ Adjudicator, a representative of the Government of Canada and from one of the churches. Survivors involved in this process are eligible for counseling through the Residential School Health Support Worker program, and they can request an Elder or bring their own support person to attend the hearing (IRS Adjudication Secretariat).

Although much of the pressure to speak comes from the application process itself, Elders and Health Support Workers also play a part in insisting that survivors speak – that they must “spell out” out their pain and grief in order to even be eligible for

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“problematic legalization of the victim subject position” and that the “process of converting injury and suffering into legal and judicial problems could also be a way of interpreting more generally the transformation in South Africa of ‘struggle politics’ into ‘identity politics’” (83).

<sup>48</sup> The IAP application includes a hearing of the claim by an independent Adjudicator, whereas the CEP application does *not* require giving an oral statement, only a written one.

compensation. Throughout their testimonies, many survivors speak about their experience telling their story in front of the adjudicator for their IAP compensation claim. Many spoke of the probing questions into the intimate details of their lives and events of suffering, and the ‘re-traumatization’ that many felt as a result, as illustrated in the following testimony:

And going to see a lawyer for the IAP, she looked at me and she said, “Were you sexually abused?” I thought you were no better than they were. I was going to go there to tell my story. And that’s the first thing she asked me. I hadn’t even built up the courage to say everything at that point, and I said, “Oh, they pay more?” and she said, “Yes”, and I thought “Yeah, big interest for you”. And that really turned me off. Never mind the physical injuries and the emotional abuse you experienced there [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012].

Speaking with a number of health support workers, I discovered that problems surrounding the monetary reparation components of the Settlement Agreement –the CEP and the IAP – continue to threaten the willingness and ability of survivors to participate in the TRC process. In particular, many referred to the invasive and demanding nature of the application procedure: that they were required to divulge painful personal information to various representatives (both in writing and orally in front of an adjudicator, in the case of the IAP); that they were often told that it was either not enough or that they shared the ‘wrong’ information; and the lack of needed culturally appropriate support available. Some survivors suggested that they had difficulty getting the right information about the process – many needed to seek legal advice – and the stressful and often highly problematic requirement that former students obtain documentation that proved that they attended residential schools. Other survivors described their resentment towards the limited time frame to apply for compensation. For many, the application deadline had passed before they felt emotionally ready to apply for compensation; moreover, applicants were unaware that the process would take so much time. Some felt that they revealed more than they desired, and others described a sense of loss of being forced to share their suffering in a process that provides no healing guarantees, as people do not automatically receive financial compensation, nor will this necessarily be helpful for everyone’s process of healing.

Importantly, there is mounting evidence to suggest that the reparations model adopted by the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement has been harmful rather than healing. Research done by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation on the CEP found that most participants saw no connection between money and healing, and that “for almost every CEP recipient whose well-being was improved by compensation, another recipient said that the CEP process and compensation were step backward on their healing journey” (Reimer et al. 2010:93). In some cases, compensation was viewed as causing further pain. From my research, I observed that much of the same distress, if not more, was experienced with the IAP. As many health support workers suggested, listening to the testimonies before the Commission, I quickly realized that the experience of applying, receiving, or in some cases being denied, the CEP and/or the IAP significantly influenced people’s understanding and involvement in the TRC process as well as their feelings towards giving testimony. Overall, it was apparent that the perceived limitations of the IRSSA undermined efforts to inspire and facilitate healing through the TRC.

Elder Eugene Arcand described some of the devastating consequences associated with participation in the Settlement Agreement process, especially with the reparations component:

I’ve seen too much destruction, when people went there. I know people that didn’t drink twenty-five years. They went to there... when they received their money guilt kicked in. You know, that’s when bad things happen. So I’ve seen destruction on it. Sure there is a small percentage of our people that have been responsible and have been able to handle it. The majority of us no, it’s not a norm.

In fact many survivors point to examples of the destructive effects associated with financial compensation on family and community members, as the following testimony demonstrates:

It is very, very difficult when I look around and I see, for example, a relative who received an award of \$100,000 [and] bought a vehicle. A brand new vehicle for \$40,000, and today has that vehicle impounded [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January 2012].

Many survivors point out the shortcomings of the Settlement Agreement especially the lack of a sense that real justice and effective redress was achieved through the

compensation process. “You know the money you get from the Common Experience Payment and IAP, its not going to *heal* you, I know that” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012], expressed one survivor. Or as one Elder noted at a community hearing, “this agreement that we work under, it’s not the best, but it’s what we have” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012]. Arcand argued that the effect of the Residential School system “is like a disease ripping through our communities”. Yet the ‘effect’ or the legacy that he refers to here is not merely the result of having attended a school, but rather having been part of the Settlement Agreement process. “Its not government money, its our money, out of our compensation... but it’s that the perpetrators administer it.” Arcand added, “there is serious breach of trust in this whole process; that’s inherent to us. I have a hard time trusting”.

Mistrust of the TRC’s institutional process is especially pronounced among former students who attended schools or residences that are not included in the Settlement Agreement. Because the schools they attended are not on the list, they are not eligible for compensation under the IRSSA. In particular, the TRC has heard anger and frustration expressed by whole communities whose day-school experiences were excluded from the IRSSA – such as members of the Métis Nation and Labrador Innu and Inuit.<sup>49</sup> The IRSSA lists only those who “*resided in federally run residential schools, and therefore day students and those attending provincially run institutions are excluded*” (Green 2012:143). Despite the fact that many of these former students of these day-schools speak of the same psychological, physical and sexual abuse, and the loss of culture and language from attending these schools, being excluded from the IRSSA effectively “deems these former students ineligible for material compensation and may also deny them access to appropriate counseling and health supports” (Green 2012:142). To the TRC’s credit, they have invited these survivors to share their stories. As the TRC noted in its *Interim Report* (2012), these former students “say that, once again, they are being abused, injured or traumatized because they have been left out and isolated” (9). The

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<sup>49</sup> According to the RCAP (1996) report, although Métis children were rarely mentioned in the government records of the schools, “they were nevertheless there and were treated the same as all the children were” (335). Also see Chartrand et al. 2006 for a detailed examination of Métis history and experience in residential schools.

TRC, while not an official public inquiry, has heard concerns of injustice from many former students, both those who have been excluded from the compensation process, as a result of being ‘left out’ of the official list of residential schools outlined by the IRSSA, as well as those who have been denied CEP or IAP compensation. As one survivor expressed before the Commission in Regina, “according to political decisions made prior to your appointment as Commissioners, I should not be here presenting to you today. According to the current Government of Canada, I never attended residential school”. She went on to say: “Who paid for residential school should have nothing to do with the fact that the hurt, injury, violation and abuse, and the genocide, rape and cultural devastation that happened in so-called Indian Residential Schools also happened to Métis students” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 17 January, 2012]. Many survivors have also testified to the Commission about their disappointment that they were not listened to throughout the negotiation and implementation of the Settlement Agreement.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, in questioning the ethics involved in asking people to speak, we must acknowledge the current and historical context of redress in which many former students find themselves.<sup>51</sup> For instance, listening to the testimonies at various TRC events, I was struck by the lack of distinction that many made between the TRC and the other components of the IRSSA – such as whether they had been denied monetary compensation or whether they were even eligible to apply. As a result, it is not surprising that many view the TRC and its statement-gathering process as both therapeutic and political.

Although the TRC seeks to create an “exemplary performance of truth-telling in the public hearings” (Shaw 2007:185), in practice, many survivors feel that the burden to share their truth is not being fairly distributed. Many feel pressure through the statement-gathering process to ‘move on’ and ‘leave their painful memories behind’, resulting in a

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<sup>50</sup> It is also relevant to note here that many survivors shared that the government was not entirely to blame for the decision not to compensate the Métis residential school survivors. As one survivor noted in Regina, “I acknowledge that the Métis leadership both on the provincial and national level on this and other issues have been absent. They are silent. Our leaders are missing in action... on the residential school, their silence is deafening... where were they when the TRC was being formed?”

<sup>51</sup> Jung (2011) explains that once the settlement agreement was reached residential school survivors had to decide immediately whether they want to stay or opt out of the settlement: “by filling out a claim form and accepting compensation, former students gave up the right to go through the courts” (232), or to ever go about suing the Government of Canada in the future.

common feeling of suspicion about who the TRC is truly benefitting. Historian Steve Stern's (2004) examination of truth and reconciliation in Chile documents the state's attempts to 'close down' or suffocate memories of violence as a way of moving forward rather than dealing with the injustices that remain from the past (xxviii). For critics of the Settlement Agreement, the TRC is no longer a tool for healing it is also seen, in conjunction with the compensation process, as an institution that is appropriating memory and stories to create a perception of redress. There is also a frustration felt by many that the TRC – as a component of the Settlement Agreement – is “raising expectations then leaving them unmet” (Theidon 2007:241). As Theidon (2007) notes, the truth-telling process may have the potential to cause further harm if testifiers “see no concrete benefits in their own struggle for recovery and justice” leading victim-survivors to “feel a deeper sense of deception and neglect” (241). The practice of truth telling before the TRC reveals the inherent political tensions between alternative healing aims: “over the contested content of the memories of those who committed violations and those who survived them” (Shaw 2007:185). This perceived friction between the multiple and often-conflicting expectations of healing and truth-telling embedded in the process, has diverse implications for processes of personal and national recovery – empowering some and hindering others on their journeys to heal.

## TRAUMATIC STORIES IN CIRCULATION

It's my pain; I suffered for it. I suffered for these stories.

-IRS Survivor, TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January 2012

*It's a relatively warm February morning in Saskatoon. I am meeting Eugene Arcand at Tim Hortons to discuss his experiences as the Saskatchewan representative on the TRC Survivor Committee. As the 'representative' Elder of the province I expected he might have a thing or two to share with me about his and others' perceptions of the Commission and how it is received in local communities. Yet, before I even find a chance to ask him my first question, Eugene poses his own question for me, "why do you want to know all this?"*

*“Well, I bring this up right off the hop”, he interjects before I can think of an appropriate and honest response. “I already have come across some experts”, he continues to say, “and you know when I talk to them, they are not experts. They may be experts in the white world that knows little or nothing about this. But at the end of the day they are generating revenue, as either developing curriculums, developing theories, that are got from everyday people like me”.*

*Eugene takes a long sip of his Tim Horton’s tea. He goes on to say, “It’s not rocket science, it’s just a different worldview, and the impact on that worldview of this whole revisiting of this agreement. Right? Not the experience, the agreement has made us revisit. And they are experts and they are getting paid exorbitant amounts of money”. There is a long pause. “I guess that’s where I’m coming from”. Eugene looks at me cautiously, warily; making sure his message has been received. “Put that in your book”, he says with a laugh. I too let out a loud laugh. “You can laugh, it’s good”, he says. “Now we understand each other; now we can begin”.*

Indigenous novelist and scholar Thomas King (2003) famously wrote, “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (9). Stories can have the power to perpetuate myths that can then be held as truths for generations to come, such as the ‘wild and noble savage’ stereotypes that have come to be believed about Canada’s Aboriginal people. What about stories being told *by* Indigenous people? What efforts are being made to privilege Indigenous voices and perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and ensure Indigenous people have greater control over the ways they are represented?

With its ‘victim-centered focus’ (James 2012), the TRC regards gathering survivor testimony as central to its mandate. Seated in front of the Commissioners, former students are asked to describe their experience of violence, suffering and grief. Increasing academic and media interest in the work of TRCs has made the concept of testimony, or the ‘stories’ given before the Commission, the site of much recent attention. Fiona Ross (2003) chooses the word ‘testimony’ over ‘story’ in order to

capture a sense of the narrative formality which adhered to the process in which victim’s were asked to narrate, in a format that soon became standardized, experiences of gross violations of human rights before panelists, audiences present at the hearings and also to a larger media consuming audience (331).



In the Canadian context, memories, experiences, and voices of residential school survivors play a fundamental role at both national and community events, where stories are collected and shared with the broader public. Accordingly, James (2012) argues that “the truths in which the Commission appears most interested are not those produced by professional historians, forensic archaeologists and likeminded professionals. They are instead those of the former residential school students themselves” (191). Yet despite their central role in the TRC process, there are important ethical questions that are not being asked of what happens to the stories or testimonies themselves. For instance, which stories are being recognized, and which ones are acknowledged? Are certain stories viewed as more legitimate than others? What are the ethical discussions surrounding the circulation, dissemination and authorship of stories – are some stories ‘heard’ more than others?

Survivors are allocated approximately fifteen minutes to give their testimony –fifteen minutes to present their personal account of residential school.<sup>52</sup> In some cases, people are interrupted earlier, and told that they had exceeded their allotted time. From my observations at the various community events that I attended, I noticed that the length of time people are given would often vary depending on the emcee facilitating the process, how many people registered to speak, and the time of the day of the presentation.

When I attended the first Saskatchewan community hearing in Regina, it quickly became apparent that many of those giving testimony had already done so, in many cases publicly. Many of those coming forward to participate were well-known political, religious or spiritual leaders and Elders – most of whom came with written out and well-rehearsed speeches. For example, Isabelle Knockwood, a well-known Elder of the Mi’kmaq Nation and author was specifically asked to share her story publicly at the Halifax National event.<sup>53</sup> As the Commission noted, “we feel that her statement, going firstly, would be very, very important, to set the tone, to set the context to the experience here in the Atlantic” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October, 2011]. In other cases,

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<sup>52</sup> Those wishing to share a statement are encouraged to register in advance, either before the event or as soon as they arrive. Participants are told that they will only have a limited time. All statements are recorded with the intention of storing them in an archive for future use by researchers and the public.

<sup>53</sup> See Knockwood (1994).

notable former students were ‘recognized’ for their presence at the TRC by being invited not only to share their story in the standard statement-gathering format, but also in additional sharing circles. For example, Fred Sasakamoose, publicly celebrated as the first Canadian Aboriginal player in the NHL, was invited to take part in a special “Circle of Reconciliation” at the Saskatoon National Event. Yet, despite his fame he shared at a community hearing months before the Saskatoon National Event that he had never told his story of abuse publicly:

It doesn’t matter how many times you talk about that residential school, it will always be there. You are going to get hurt the rest you life. I am hurt. I never forget it, never. Some people say, ‘how do you feel?’ I didn’t want to come here last night, when I sat down and I talked to my wife. My wife doesn’t know nothing about this; I never told her nothing, only the good things [TRC Community Hearing, Prince Albert, 31 January, 2012].

Despite his public recognition, Sasakamoose noted after his testimony in a media interview that he had not intended to share that much information. Yet it was a result of his high-profile status that his testimony was emphasized in the media.<sup>54</sup>

Conversely, some people who chose to speak had never spoken before publicly, and others were not even aware that the TRC was happening until they saw the event publicized in that mornings newspaper or heard it on the local radio. Many individuals decided to participate in the TRC hearings only after the second or third day of a community hearing, after observing the statements given by others, or at the request of friends and family. Several people who decided last minute to participate, made comments about the “great speeches” that they were hearing by others, humbly describing their own speeches as lacking due to their limited English language skills or their lack of education. In particular, several of the women who I met in some of the northern community events – particularly those over 60, where English was not their first language – described the setting as too intimidating to share intimate details of their lives. Sitting in the audience at the Prince Albert community hearing, I was asked by a female survivor in her late 80s whether I thought that it would be okay if she shared one particular story in which she was given only a fish egg for dinner. “Do you think that’s

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<sup>54</sup> According to Payne (2008), observers of the South African TRC noted that “the same kind of [media] reporting is not afforded to victims/survivors, unless they have high-profile images themselves,” and even then the media considers newsworthy only the ‘sensational brutality’ that victims faced” (15).

okay?” she asked me. Leaning over from the row behind me, she said with a thick Cree accent, “I don’t really want to share more than that”. I noticed at the community hearings especially, a reluctance from survivors to share *too* much. Some suggested that their stories were far more complex and would not fit into the time they had allotted to them. Many expressed feeling badly about taking people’s time. As one survivor stated in front of the Commission, “I want to thank you for listening. There’s a lot more I could say, but I don’t want to take too much of your time.” While some survivors feel inspired by the process of remembering, and encouraged by a renewed sense of confidence that they have something important to say, others feel insecure and apprehensive that their story is not ‘important enough’ or ‘good enough’ to be worth telling.

Although there are no formal guidelines about the nature and manner in which stories should be shared, the actions of the Commission and of the master of ceremonies at various gatherings suggest that not all stories or storytellers are considered equally valid. For instance, at one community event in Saskatchewan, a man was asked to leave after his testimony turned into a song. Yet what distinguished this man from the others whose songs before the Commission were warmly received often with great applause? I can only speculate that it had something to do with his unkempt appearance and the mental health or addictions issues with which he was likely dealing. I also heard concerns expressed by some former students about types of stories – and truths – that that were preferred over others. In particular, some believe that stories that mingle personal experience with political observations are often less accepted and valued. As one male Elder stated in front of the Commission at the national event in Halifax, “we are often accused of saying the truth too bluntly – how we were raised; the story of what happened” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October, 2011]. That some stories and storytellers are deemed more permissible and valid than others is not a surprise to many. Yet how this affects the perceptions and experiences of those participating remains a matter of ongoing concern.

What does this tell us about the role of agency and authority over stories given before the Commission when not all stories are given the same legitimacy and recognition once they move from the private to the public realm? While for some there may be a healing power in the act of storytelling, for others this is true only insofar as

their stories are fairly represented. Paul Gready (2001) argues that when traditionally marginalized people speak, they face different struggles. He concludes that these are no “less over the articulation of the subaltern voice than for greater control *over* voice, representation, interpretation, and dissemination. Voice without such control may be worse than silence” (Ross 2003:336-337). While the TRC promises all stories will be listened to, I wonder which stories are actually heard. There are an increasing number of survival testimonies being produced, but how do the TRC, the media, the broader public, and other survivors interpret these stories? There is a risk that instead of opening up space for dialogue about Indigenous peoples and their contribution to Canada, stories reinforce the perception of Indigenous peoples as victims. There is a great deal at stake especially for survivors as they share some of the most intimate details of their lives before a largely unknown public audience. As the Commissioners noted at every event: “your story is being listened to by many around the world”. Although the public nature of the TRC hearings is advertised through large banners at each community and national gathering, according to some of the health support workers that I spoke with, many people remain unaware of what this means. Thus, many survivors expressed concern over what will happen to their story after it is told. For instance, as Eugene Arcand asserted forcefully, “we don’t want pity, we want understanding”.

Where the stories go, and how they are received, remain important questions for many survivors choosing to participate. The mandate indicates after the completion of the statement-gathering process, the TRC will create a ‘National Research Centre’ that will house all of the testimonies collected by the Commission. Yet which ‘truths’ would be selected, how this Centre will operate, and where it should be located has created great debate among many.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the hearings, I noted that many survivors described apprehension about the implications of sharing their stories for ‘others’ to use them.<sup>56</sup> I

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<sup>55</sup> Critiques of the South African TRC reveal the important place of ‘power’ within the process of selecting, summarizing, and distilling the great amount of evidence it accumulated, and which ‘truths’ were deposited in the state archives. Bundy (2001) explains that “the archive becomes the official repository of memory, but is simultaneously a crucial site in the process of forgetting” and thus is “also necessarily an exercise in exclusion, in silencing” (15).

<sup>56</sup> In Vancouver, 2011, stakeholders, academics, and survivors met to discuss how the information collected from survivors during the TRC process would be catalogued and archived for future use. There was concern voiced by some survivors that if the information was not available in communities, it was less likely to be accessed by survivors and their descendants. In June 2013, the University of Manitoba won the right to host the residential schools research center.

heard several people express publicly, “I suffered for these stories”. Many Indigenous people speak of a long and complicated relationship with non-Indigenous researchers ‘taking’ their knowledge, representing Indigenous epistemology through a Western positivist perspective (see Smith 1999). This same concern is reiterated through the TRC process as Indigenous survivors of residential schools see themselves as having little power over the ways in which their stories are depicted and represented, and that they have little control over what happens once their story is told. Some also see their participation as “a mere exercise in data collection” (Theidon 2007:240). As Eugene Arcand emphasized, experts are “generating revenue, as either developing curriculums, developing theories, that are got from everyday people like me”.

The idea that the TRC is contributing to an industry of healing was a very prominent theme throughout the events I attended. As Eugene told me, “Back then, we were an industry. Residential school, we were an industry. It was all about money for them. Destruction of a culture, and again we're an industry”. Many perceive that the TRC, in its work of commissioning truth, is contributing to this manipulation and marketization of traumatic stories, as one survivor pointed out, “by making a gain from our pain and shame” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 27 October 2011]. Several people described the contemporary Aboriginal healing industry that is currently making large amounts of money off of the suffering of survivors, in particular the lawyers, adjudicators (for the IAP), and, especially, the mental health professionals. “People are making careers off us in this agreement and they continue to make careers off us”, said Eugene. He added, “We're secondary recipients of services - we're administered by everyone else. Mental health therapists can make as much in one month as many of our survivors received in compensation to destroy them as a child.”

Christopher Colvin (2006) adopts the term, ‘traumatic storytelling’ to describe an “ever-expanding volume of narratives of traumatic suffering and recovery” solicited of “victim storytellers” by journalists, academics and therapists, as well as truth commissions, (172). These narratives, “now circulate the world through particular relations of production, exchange and consumption and structure”, in what he describes as a “global political economy of traumatic storytelling” (Colvin 2006:172). Working with the Khulamani Support Group, a support group for victims of the apartheid era

political violence, he recognizes a “heavily storied and documented kind of victim-subject engaged in a process of narrative production and exchange” with a range of actors, institutions and interests, locally, nationally and internationally (Colvin 2006:173-175). He notes that some victim storytellers in South Africa – many of whom identify themselves as “victims of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)” – are highly aware of the increasing documentation and global circulation of their narratives, and as a result are “pushing for the recognition of these stories as form of intellectual property and are seeking a range of protections against the manipulation and marketization of their stories of abuse” (Colvin 2006:172).

In the Canadian context, many survivors continue to raise concern over who maintains authorship of the stories solicited by the TRC, and how their stories will be used in the future.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, some of the people speaking in front of the Commission have chosen to ‘control their stories’ by choosing to have them published or replicated elsewhere – either in the form of a memoir, autobiography, scholarly article, documentary. As Hannah Arendt (1958) says, the politics of storytelling “concerns the way in which this passage from privacy to publicity is effected” (Jackson 2002:133). This reluctance to entrust the TRC with ‘possession’ of testimony reflects concern that stories may be “subsumed, redirected, and/or reinterpreted” (Kirmayer 2000:173). Drawing on psychoanalysis, Kirmayer (2000) argues that this personal form of patient “resistance” is in turn tied to “broader political resistance to oppression or hegemonic control” (173).

Exploring the ethics of traumatic storytelling reveals a tension between how stories are represented and how stories are being heard. Despite the complexities heard in most testimonies both the staff and therapists involved in the TRC take such stories as a symbol of psychological trauma and recovery, and of survivors as patients in need of health support. Scant media coverage often homogenizes complex stories of violence, struggle, resistance, and survivance told in front of the TRC, reducing them into simplified, and linear stories of suffering (Ross 2003). Such an emphasis on unresolved trauma masks complex descriptions of violence and struggle, while also influencing public perceptions of survivors as ‘traumatized Aboriginals’ in need of medicalized care.

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<sup>57</sup> While the TRC notes that since stories are given to the Commission voluntarily, participants can, at any time, choose to have them withdrawn. Yet, based on my discussions with health supports workers, few survivors have chosen to do so.

Or perhaps, as Theidon (2007) observes of the TRC in Peru, people are being ‘traumatized’ by the process itself. By this I am referring not only the actual violence associated with residential schools, but to the symbolic victimization that is done to Indigenous communities “by the application of categories of victimhood, and the models of victimization that, while championing the rights of the oppressed, very often give little voice to the very same oppressed, who are seen as victims of larger structural forces that must be righted” (Fischer and Benson 2006:142). As Colvin (2006) notes in his work with the Khulamani Support Group, the problem is not only due to the “overproduction” of traumatic narratives but their “objectification and commodification” (180). The ethical framework advocated here suggests that the TRC should make further effort to privilege Indigenous voices and perspectives, as a way to expand and challenge the simplistic view of survivors, and engaging witnesses to better understand the differences and complexities of their lived experiences. As I demonstrate in the following chapter, many survivors have the view that the process of storytelling in the TRC is as much about the demanding acknowledgment, recognition and a response from witnesses as it is about the representation of their individual experiences.

## SILENCES AND SILENCING

The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for too long. The burden is properly ours as a Government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks for the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

-Canada’s Apology for Indian Residential Schools, 11 June 2008

They don’t take the pain we have. The pain is inside us.

-Residential School Survivor, Regina Community Hearing, 16 January 2012

*The morning session ends and the line up for the food begin. “Elders and*

*Survivors First”, we are reminded. I sit and wait. A man sitting beside me gets my attention, “What are you doing here?” he curtly asks. After replying that I am here as a graduate student, that I am here at the first Saskatchewan TRC event doing research for my thesis, he responds, “Oh”. After a few seconds of awkward silence he says, “I mean there are very few white people that actually believe something like this happened”.*

*I sit with this man for what feels like hours, although it must only be several minutes as the line up for the food continues to remain long. He tells me of his story, how he was taken away from his home, his life, his community to go the residential school. He talks about the pain that is left from that experience, the grief that took his “kid life” away.*

*As we begin to walk towards the food, the man stops me and tells me that it was only a year ago that he had begun to open up the pain inside him. That it was through the settlement agreement that he began to talk about his experiences of mistreatment and abuse. And when his lawyers asked him about this experience, he got quiet. He knew that to speak of his time at residential school, and his life since, was going to hurt. It did hurt. “But I did. I brought it out. I swallowed all the pain”. He continues, “And when the government said, ‘Oh, we’re going to give you money. You know, forget all this’. No. That’s not true. I don’t care how much money they give you you’ll never forget that, because that is something they tortured us with. They took our kid life. You know, a little kid’s life...”*

*We each receive our bowls of soup and bannock, and as we head back to our seats, he tells me about the pain that he is experiencing today as the TRC begins their hearings in Saskatchewan: “You don’t take the pain we have no matter how much healing they’ll give us”, he says, “They don’t take the pain we have. The pain is inside us”.*

For many survivors, the personal and political transformative potential of storytelling through the TRC is limited in several ways. While the mandate of soliciting truths aims to inspire healing, the process is limited “by the socio-political context in which the TRC occurs where the perpetuating regime remains in power and the victims remain politically marginalized” (James 2012). While the TRC emphasizes letting go of



the past in order to move on to a healthier future, many survivors' testimonies reveal skepticism of the process. Speaking with an Elder at the Halifax national event about her experience attending the TRC, I was struck by her lack of trust and respect for the statement-gathering process, and her unwavering view of the TRC as another space of power and control. In response to my question of whether she considered the TRC as contributing to her healing journey, she asked me rhetorically, "how can they make us heal?"

Chrisjohn and Wasacase (2009) warn of the problems of asking residential school survivors to give testimony at the TRC without simultaneous and profound structural change. The space and the process of truth-telling presented by the TRC may bring long sought after resolution for some, while sparking anxiety and frustration among others who question the motivations, in the words of this Elder, "of yet another government process" [TRC National Event, Halifax, 27 January 2012]. Many speak of the TRC as an extension of the ongoing bureaucratic relationships they have with governments, which many speak of as broken or dysfunctional. As one survivor stated publicly, "They don't want us to get ahead, there is always blocks" [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January 2012]. Finally, as the following quotation demonstrates, many survivors express "anger and resentment" at an "unjust" process that is asking people to share what are some of the most intimate details of their lives, while the other parties of the settlement agreement – the Canadian government and the various churches – remain relatively silent. Speaking at the National Event in Halifax, a survivor shared,

I believe this to be a big circus the government, collecting and using our stories, to benefit themselves. Trying to look good in the eyes of the world. I know there has been millions, and millions of taxpayers', money spent, maybe billions by now... What I need is to rid myself of this anger and resentment I have towards the government and the Catholic Church [crying]. Hopefully sharing my feelings and story will relieve some of my torment. I know there is no way I will ever be able to get rid of it all until the government and churches tell the truth to the world. Maybe then I will be able to reconcile. Now, how I feel about this process is that its only lies and pacification. There is no truth from the government. They are only pacifying us with measly compensations. This process is unfair and unjust [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October 2011].

The notion that "money is not the answer" is another prominent theme that I noticed from the testimonies: many people reiterated that compensation, "it's not going to

forget what happened to us”. Many refer to a feeling of mistrust in a process that many see as another government initiative “to make us heal” by providing former students with symbolic and material reparations. In the words of one survivor at the Saskatoon National event,

We’ve got professional psychologists, our own people telling us ‘forget about it, move on’. Telling us to heal, reconcile and forgive... In the Western world of healing and psychology, everybody wants us to forgive, to heal. Health Canada and the government of Canada gave us billions – that’s not going to heal. We aren’t asking for money, all it does is hurt us. [TRC National Event, Saskatoon, 22 June, 2012]

As Green (2012) argues, “offering monetary compensation of ‘pay-outs’ for historical injustices allows the state to neglect the implementation of legislative or constitutional change” (136).

The TRC, as a central component of the IRSSA, speaks of moving forward to a healthier future where memories of trauma are left to rest. Through the rhetoric of healing, participants are invited to share their traumatic narratives as a way to release or ‘let go’ of their pain and grief – what TRC Commissioner Marie Wilson referred to as “setting down bones” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January, 2012]. Yet, just as there is a large burden placed on survivors to share their stories, many feel that there is an unreasonable expectation that they find forgiveness through the process. For many survivors, recent history sheds light on many unmet promises associated with similar aims. For instance, many people used their testimony before the TRC to speak about the false sense of redress from the government’s apology, as the following excerpt from one testimony at the Regina community hearing demonstrates:

So if I apologize and I say, ‘I am sorry’, that implies that I will not do that again. That implies that I would atone for that, I would try to make up for that. And yet today, in the government's apology, in the Prime Minister's apology, this government and the governments of the day, no matter what political stripe they may be will still continue to voice, to impose those same kinds of things that they said they were sorry for [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January, 2012].

The importance that many survivors place on the role of the apology in their own personal healing is well expressed by one Elder at the Halifax National Event.

Referring to the 2008 apology, the survivor notes that, “Canada as a country apologized but I remember key teaching based on oral teaching of forgiveness – it can only happen when one attempts reconciliation. This is a fundamental truth in our knowledge system” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October 2011]. Many survivors critique the apology as another “statement performance of resolution”, which Henderson and Wakeham (2009) suggest is “not one of inadequate closure...but one of repeated, pre-emptive attempts at reaching closure, and ‘cure’” (7-8).

Many people also refer to their disappointment at the state’s political decisions to “de-fund” the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF). Originally created out of the 1998 policy *Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan*, the AHF was formed to promote and fund community-based and collective approaches to healing. The AHF initially received \$125 million as part of the IRSSA to continue its work, providing funding and support to existing and additional healing programs. The AHF received positive evaluations from government as well as “well-documented success and praise for its governance structure” (Green 2012:144).<sup>58</sup> Despite universal attention to its effort and accomplishments, in the 2010 Federal Budget, funding to the AHF was not renewed.

The decision not to extend funding for the AHF created a lot of backlash from Indigenous groups and communities and allies across the country (CBC 2010). According to Green (2012), “from its inception, the AHF was conceived of as a different type of program than those delivered by the federal or provincial governments, and its absence will thus inevitably leave gap in service provision” (146). As articulately expressed by one Elder: “Yes, the government has healing programs, and that’s just what it is, programs. They last only for a short period” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 27 October, 2011]. At almost every TRC hearings that I attended throughout the year, survivors, Elders, and the Commissioners themselves, made reference to a void that has been left by the absence of AHF and its work in enabling community-driven approaches to healing in Indigenous communities.

All former IRS students listed in the IRSSA, and their family members, are eligible to receive services from Health Canada’s Resolution Health Support Workers

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<sup>58</sup> See Indian Affairs and Northern Affairs Canada’s (2007) final evaluation of community-based healing initiatives supported through the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

(RHSW) program. The RHSW program provides mental health and emotional support services at all TRC events in the form of professional counseling. Cultural supports are also provided by Elders and/or traditional healers at the request of individuals, and can include traditional healing, ceremonies (such as smudging), and teachings (see Health Canada 2013). However, individual survivors are often required to take the initiative to “follow-up” with these RHSW workers, and many decide not to. Many view the Health Canada IRS Resolution Health Support Program as a poor substitute, providing individualized counseling and support to survivors and their families. Commenting on the RHSW program, one survivor expressed concerns about the ‘qualifications’ of those hired by Health Canada, stating “I would like it for someone to talk to me too, but what is the point. I wonder if this person knows a lot more than I do”. Further, there is also an uncertainty as to whether the Health Canada program will continue to be funded, and how long the funding will continue once the TRC completes its work. To what extent is healing perceived as being bound by the timelines set out by the TRC mandate and as articulated in the Settlement Agreement? Many refer to a gap in needed support, as one that Health Canada’s RHSW program is not addressing, and likely will not fully address. Despite these limitations, many survivors point to the RHSW program as a positive contribution to supporting ongoing community-based healing efforts because it has offered the opportunity for Elders and other Indigenous people working in the health and healing field to be recognized for their work.<sup>59</sup>

Examining these two components of Canada’s redress strategies for residential schooling – the 1998 state apology and the decision to defund the AHF – reveals a politics of healing that structures the TRC. Effectively, the apology – and the way it is referred to by the government – along with the Settlement Agreement are treated as satisfactory resolutions to residential schooling issues *as a way* of avoiding more difficult conversations about systemic inequalities that persist. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation does not fit in with a healing strategy that prioritizes individual compensation based on individual trauma. Maxwell (2011) explains that “the government is willing to distribute individual financial compensation whilst simultaneously refusing, by its termination of the Aboriginal Healing Fund, to support long-term, Indigenous directed

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<sup>59</sup> Many health support workers are themselves survivors of residential schools.

and community-based healing” (251). The decision not to continuing funding the AHF, according to Green, “shows further control over the reconciliation process by state institutions” (Green 2012:146).

Settler society and First Nations have different protocols and expectations about sharing knowledge that add a complicated racial dynamic to storytelling. As I explore further in the following chapter, First Nations in Canada place equal emphasis on the responsibilities of listener and storyteller. But there is serious distrust and concern at play for those giving testimony in a context where First Nations are disproportionately sharing knowledge, and the recipients are a nebulous Canadian public who are often under-represented in TRC gatherings. In fact, the ambiguous role of non-Indigenous participation in the TRC process was expressed as an important ethical concern for some. One former student at a hearing in northern Saskatchewan shared that he felt uneasy about testifying “in front of so many white people”. Many survivors also expressed skepticism that Canadians were *really* hearing them. While some people had intended to speak, they decided not to after hearing others tell their stories, fearing that the public testimonial form would further expose their suffering, opening them up to criticism by the Canadian public that they “should just get over it already”. Another survivor shared,

Despite the growing recognition of past wrongs, many Canadian remain unaware of the full scope of these injustices and their impacts. It is true. I spoke to people, non-Aboriginal people, they say we’re making up stories – we are not. September 1950 was my first day of hell, my first day in the concentration camp. This is how I see it [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April, 2012].

Marlene Brant Castellano (2008) echoes this survivor’s doubt that the majority of Canadians are aware of the devastating legacy of the Indian Residential School system: “Consensus that residential school experience was injurious in itself, not just in instances of physical and sexual abuse, is shared by only a small proportion of Canadian citizens, in contrast to the view of most First Nations, Inuit and Métis people” (386).

Furthermore, survivor testimonies throughout the TRC events echoed the question of whether “they want us to heal”. While many spoke about how important it was for them and their families to attend, and for some, how significant it was to be able to tell their story, others questioned the underlying motivations of the Canadian government. At the time, Canada had finally endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples after years of criticism by First Nations.<sup>60</sup> Healing is encountered, according to one Saskatchewan Elder in northern Saskatchewan, in a context in which, “racism was and never has been acknowledged” [Community Gathering, Lac La Plonge, July 2011]. While the apology historicizes the colonial relationship, pointing to past evidence of violence and cultural oppression, it also depoliticizes discrimination and racism against Indigenous communities as past action. Such is the landscape on which the politics of healing in Canada is encountered.

“Reconciliation to me is respect[ing] one another,” one survivor shares in front of the Commission. “The government is busy telling us all how to live our lives, dishing out money, although it is not enough, because a lot of our people are still in poor homes, or they are on welfare, you know” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 27 October, 2011]. Many survivors critique the TRC, and the Settlement Agreement from which it originated, as illustrative of “the state’s attempt to place the IRS system securely in the past and to contain the scope (and consequences) of violence imposed on students of residential schools” (Green 2012:136). Characterized no longer as victims but as survivors, former students are encouraged to come forward to share their traumatic narratives of historical violence, despite the fact that for many survivors, their families and communities, violence remains an everyday reality. Stories of immediate struggles and of survival and resistance to ongoing violence reverberate loudly throughout the testimonies shared in front of the Commission.

Despite the TRC’s efforts to create a safe setting for people to tell their truth, many survivors prefer silence. Ethnographic studies of the TRC process in Peru indicate that despite many efforts implemented to assure victims of violence ‘speak’, many, women in particular, chose “silence over speaking about abhorrent experiences” (Theidon 2010:14). Theidon (2013) argues, “It is not only truth commissions or the anthropologist who has a memory project. So do people who have lived through violent

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<sup>60</sup> After much political lobbying, Canada finally endorsed the Declaration in November 2010. See Henderson (2008) for detailed description of the “Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly after a generation-long struggle for the recognition of Indigenous rights. According to Henderson (2008), the Declaration is a major step towards eliminating the “human rights violations suffered by Indigenous peoples and the nation-states’ justification for their oppression” (23). Yet Canada’s recent rejection of a UN call for an inquiry into violence against Aboriginal women suggests that the terrain of human rights in Canada is far from fair for First Nations, especially women (Radia 2013).

times and fiercely guard stories, secrets and silences” (8). In her critique of the South African TRC, Brust (2010) notes that the TRC forum “failed to accommodate women to bear witness about their physical i.e. sexual abuse” (94). Rather than “testifying and exposing herself and her family publicly”, Brust (2010) goes on to say, “Lydia refuses to testify in front of the TRC because through her experiences with her own husband she has come to believe that she would not find empathetic listeners there, who would be able to identify with her heterophatically” (94-95). For many women the TRC “did not appear as a forum where they could overcome the shame of sexual violence and establish the culpability of their perpetrators” (Brust 2010:95). In the Canadian context, many survivors choose not to give their testimony – preferring silence – and a great number of those who agree to speak, do so with great reluctance and anxiety. Choosing silence can be a way to resist closure as they refuse to let go of the suffering they have gone through. In fact, as Brust (2010) explains from the experience in South Africa, there was a great resistance to the TRC’s commitment to nation building because it threatened to close the door on the past. Many victim-survivors did “not want to sacrifice [their] traumatic narratives for the nation” (Brust 2010:87).<sup>61</sup> Another perspective, however, is that people choose silence as a way to prevent stories from being open to interpretation (and misinterpretations), as well as further stigmatization that can be associated with victims of abuse. As Smyth (2001) explains, “the culture of silence and denial that was once a ‘coping mechanism’ for many continues to operate” (127), rendering much of the TRC’s efforts ineffective.

There is blanket of shame and silence that surrounds experiences of violence and abuse. A bi-product of the TRC’s statement-gathering process is a *silencing* of people’s lived experiences, as everyday acts of violence are often ignored or kept quiet.<sup>62</sup> Deciding to testify requires overcoming a personal shame about all the things that pain and grief have compelled one to do, or not do. The immediacy of the violence to body or mind is made much more difficult to resolve because of the long simmering shame that has

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<sup>61</sup> The South African TRC’s final report expresses the recurring ‘healing’ metaphor that was used throughout the process: “However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future” (Bundy 2001:15).

<sup>62</sup> In addition, the focus on past negative experiences often takes attention away from positive or more nuanced experiences associated with residential schools.

seeped into people's lives and become part of who they are in a way that can never be healed in a way measurable to Western therapeutic approaches. Thus, self-inflicted pain as a result of shame plays an important role in silencing the voices of residential school survivors, for instance through drug and alcohol addictions, acts of suicide, and committing further acts of violence. Shame is also mingled in the act of domestic abuse situations rooted in unexplored residential school abuses. Finally, some people choose silence out of fear of experiencing further pain – that sharing their story may indeed perpetuate further violence, such as violence at home and in communities.<sup>63</sup>

In her well-known study of violence and war, Elaine Scarry (1985), describes the inexpressibility of pain. A victim's ability to speak words disappears because "pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it" (4). Although much of her research focuses on torture and war, I extend her idea that pain is language destroying to describe the kind of pain and grief experienced by many residential school survivors. Silence is a legitimate option when faced with the prospect of bearing witness to emotionally charged residential school experiences, and yet the TRC is charged with recording stories so that it can create a national narrative about residential schools and survivors. How does the TRC account for silences? What are the impacts of these silences on how residential school experience is remembered and represented to the Canadian public? Further explorations are required not only of the stories that are told before the TRC but also those stories that remain unheard.

#### POWER OF VOICE OR THE MYTH OF EMPOWERMENT

Those that lived, attended, and worked at the schools will finally be given a voice through the statement gathering process

-TRC Statement Gathering FAQ.

Truth and reconciliation what is it, without healing? What does it mean if

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<sup>63</sup> Referring to the 'vertical' or 'lateral' violence in communities in South Africa, Hamber notes (2001): "it is vitally important to acknowledge that apartheid has left a legacy of violence and mistrust within communities themselves, and not merely between the state and its citizens" (141). He goes on to say, "relatively speaking, the horizontal violence that took place within South African communities was sorely neglected by the TRC" (2001:141). Research by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2006) demonstrates that many Aboriginal communities are struggling to deal with an emerging "culture of violence" that is rooted in unhealthy community conditions and dynamics and that manifests itself in astronomical levels of family violence and domestic abuse at the local level.



Aboriginal people do not heal? Take an exotic bird, chuck it in a cage, leave it here, contain it...what is the expectation of this bird? ...Do they want us to heal? Healing – it's interesting language. Is it healing? Healing – its like a dog being kicked. Aboriginal people in this country don't want to be treated like dogs. Moving ahead and moving forward we all have stories. Some tough. We need to weave these stories into a fabric of a nation.

-Survivor, TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October, 2011

Listening to the testimonies given before the Commission, I realized that for this Elder, as for many other survivors, sharing their personal account of residential school in front of Commissioners, the media, and the witnessing public, is viewed with mixed emotions. Many survivors are divided as to the appropriateness and benefit of such a public process of remembering. Some former students see the therapeutic space that the TRC promotes as restorative and helpful. As one survivor shared publicly at a community hearing in northern Saskatchewan, “to share my story with you, you have helped me heal today” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April, 2012]. While some survivors described a sense of relief and a ‘duty fulfilled’ after telling their story publicly, Elders and health support workers that I spoke with suggest that this relief was short lived. Many survivors question the “desirability and timing” (Shaw 2007:184) of a process that solicits memories of violence and grief following the expectation and assumption that the act of giving testimony to suffering encompasses a ‘healing power’ that is necessary for victim recovery. There exists a great silence and uncertainty around what will happen *after* the TRC completes its work. A common sentiment voiced by one former student at the National Halifax gathering, “We’re opening up a can of worms. Now what? You can either let them out or else they’ll rot. But whereas before the can was shut, now you have to deal with what happened”.

Canada’s TRC seeks to connect dignity and personal empowerment to the practice of testifying to past violence. That is, in ‘giving’ survivors a voice, the TRC statement-gathering process is “a means to restore dignity and identity to those who have suffered grievous harms” (TRC 2012:12). Furthermore, in providing survivors an opportunity to relate their own accounts of abuses of which they were the victims, the TRC is “supporting and facilitating the self-empowerment of former IRS students and those affected by the IRS legacy” (TRC 2011). The South African TRC also emphasized

the importance of giving testimony in order to ‘heal’ the wounds of the past (Moon 2008:129). Archbishop Tutu (1999) explained that the TRC’s healing and reconciliation goals addressed the need to “rehabilitate the human and civil dignity of victims” and it sought to do so by “allow[ing] those who came to testify to tell *their* own story (Coundouriotis 2006:847). Yet critics of the South African TRC have noted that the publicized process assumed an unproblematic link between ‘voice’ and ‘dignity’ and between ‘voice’ and ‘being heard’ (Ross 2003:327).

Although storytelling can be an empowering act for some, it can also create feelings of vulnerability and fear for those who have experienced terrible loss. Jackson speaks of storytelling as a vital human strategy “for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances” (Jackson 2002:15). Yet the act of telling stories has the potential to help individuals rebuild lives, a sense of identity, and community but also offers the possibility of doing unintended “violence to lived experience” (Jackson 2002:11). Some survivors feel that sharing their stories publicly might “condemn them to the kinds of discrimination, prejudice, and violence they had fled” (Jackson 2002:9). Human rights activists often speak of victims’ “rights to recountability” in making memory known, recognized and publicly acknowledged (Ross 2003, Werbner 1998). While the TRC tries to open up a “holistically, culturally appropriate and safe setting for former students, their families and communities as they come forward and tell their stories of harm” (TRC 2011), many regard the public process with great apprehension. This is not surprising given the historical context of residential school abuses and ongoing efforts to address its effects.

The performance of traumatic narratives for the South African TRC, Colvin (2004) argues, “brings with it the attending dangers of reifying as ‘victims’ those who experienced the many violences of apartheid as well as obscuring the social and historical dynamics that produced that violence in the first place” (84). Thus, while the TRC aims to ‘empower’ victims by providing an opportunity to ‘tell their story’, the kind of storytelling that the Canadian TRC encourages focuses on recounting abuses suffered during residential schooling. Kirmayer et al. (2003) argues the emphasis on “past trauma as an explanation for current suffering ignores the pervasiveness of everyday, routinized practices of exclusion and marginalization” (20). There is reason, then, to be aware of the

limitations of the trauma narrative as a vehicle for recounting life stories. Survivors' stories may begin with residential schooling but also often include a range of life events. While many social scientists highlight the importance of narrative as a tool to bring meaning and coherence to violent events, they are also "open to alternative readings" beyond the control of the storyteller (Garro and Mattingly 2000:3). Beyond its inability to effectively communicate "structural forms of violence and suffering...the process of traumatic storytelling itself may contribute to securing relations of power that perpetuate the marginalization of storytellers" (Colvin 2004:85). Colvin notes political disempowerment that accompanies the emphasis on trauma in South Africa where "short, quickly recited stories of traumatic suffering, reduced to the most important, shocking, and morally obvious details of harm, circulated less as specific histories in need of specific interventions more as 'signs of violence'" (Colvin 2004:74). The TRC's emphasis on trauma in the statement-gathering process risks portraying residential school survivors as victims without agency instead of people constrained by systemic discrimination and other forms of assimilation.

There is a misplaced assumption that what preceded the TRC was a 'voicelessness' by survivors and a silence about violence associated with residential schooling. Many have already told their story many times before in an effort to raise awareness about the nature and extent of violence experienced by many First Nations communities. As I described in chapter two, survivor testimony is not a new phenomenon. Over the past thirty years, many former students have come forward with horrific accounts of violence experienced at Indian Residential Schools. Testimonies given by former students particularly in the 1990's revealed the devastating living conditions at the schools, including the high number of students who experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse and mistreatment by those in charge of the schools as well as other former students. Such accounts have been disseminated as published autobiographies, testimonies, films, music, poetry, visual art to name but a few examples. In addition, Indigenous stories – in the form of survival testimonies – "have formed the backbone of nearly all recent challenges to the Canadian government regarding its part in residential schooling. They also underlie the thousands of residential lawsuits currently before the courts" (McKegney 2007:13).

While the TRC process suggests that it is offering a space for healing for people to share their stories and be heard, it is not the first time that this has happened. Importantly, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People followed a similar process – travelling across the country, publicly gathering survivor testimonies or stories. Yet despite the great volume of testimonies given before RCAP, “many still had difficulty talking openly in any great detail about their painful experiences” (Waldram 2004:233). As Waldram (2004) notes, “while the public hearings of RCAP were created as a ‘public space of trauma,’ relatively few embraced the opportunity” (233). Like the TRC, RCAP sought to empower Indigenous peoples to speak. However, not all viewed RCAP as a ‘safe space’ to do so. For instance, Patricia Monture-Angus (1999) writes, “I was not comfortable sharing all my thoughts and ideas on the pathways forward with the Royal Commission because I experienced the Commission as a non-Aboriginal space” (11). Hence, the myth of empowerment promoted by the TRC’s statement-gathering process obscures the reality that sharing one’s story publicly is not actually perceived or experienced as healing for everyone who is given the opportunity. For many survivors, sharing their personal story of pain and suffering is deemed to be more difficult than commissioners and onlookers have allowed.

While the TRC’s healing mandate is perceived as constraining and limiting for some, for others, it is creating a space for a collective sense of empowerment to take hold. Through a continued focus on the “band-aids” of violence, as opposed to the underlying causes and injustices, some perceive the TRC as creating a role for survivors as “passive patients eager to be healed through testimony” (Colvin 2008:420). Importantly, this is a role that many challenge, seeing themselves not merely as victims but rather human rights advocates struggling for justice for themselves and for their communities. Thus while many question the TRC’s healing mandate – seeing it as another space of power and authority – within it are also spaces of resistance, critique, and social transformation. As I will describe further in the next chapter, many survivors see the TRC as a tool to speak back to the state’s redress and reconciliation efforts, which many feel has been unfairly dealt with.

The TRC creates a space for people to ‘let go’ – endorsing a simple notion of catharsis; that speaking out is indeed healing. But can it empower, not only on a personal

but a socio-political level? Can the therapeutic model of testimony put forward by the TRC indeed foster a sense of political empowerment and the rebuilding of cultural and collective identity? Further exploration of this myth of psychological healing extended by the TRC would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how people use, shape, and transform a process intended to enable the recovery of dignity, voice and personal empowerment, to one of connectivity, dialogue, creativity, and ongoing negotiation.

## SUMMARY

Testimony is a powerful tool that, indeed, some individuals have found helpful - one facet in the work of shaping lives and restoring a sense of self. Given the Commission's goal to give people a space to tell their stories, it is not surprising that some speak positively of their decision to 'speak their truth' and to share their testimony of suffering. Importantly as researchers and as witnesses to the TRC process we must not undermine or delegitimize these experiences and positive associations with the process. Yet observing many of the community events, I found that for many survivors, the process did not elicit such positive feeling. For some, it was even perceived as causing further pain and grief. We must acknowledge the multiple expectations and limits of the TRC process, and the possibility that while for some the statement-gathering process is necessary and beneficial for individual healing, for others, it may in fact be 'doing violence' to their experience of suffering. Importantly, we must pay attention to all the various narratives that are being told at the TRC.

As I have shown in this chapter, the impact and consequence of giving testimonies in front of the Commission is far more complex and wide-ranging than the assumption of testimony's healing effects suggests. Through its mandate to create a public record of the past, the TRC hopes to elicit stories of violence from those who experienced residential schools first hand. The dominant narrative of 'truth as healing' is prominent throughout the Commission's work. But what is the response to this integral storytelling process by those whose stories are elicited, documented, and disseminated? What are the ethical implications of asking people to publicly speak their truth? What are the personal and political limits of healing through the TRC? Exploring the power and

dangers of storytelling goes beyond an examination of the Western psychotherapeutic idea that ‘revealing is healing’, or the importance of catharsis for recovery. Rather it is an inquiry into whether and how the nature of storytelling adopted by the TRC creates an ethical space for stories to be shared and received.

As I will explore in the next chapter, at TRC events many former students spoke of the importance of storytelling for building ‘common ground’; for stories to not only be ‘listened to’ but to be ‘heard’. Focusing on how survivors exercise agency through storytelling helps us to look beyond the common sense view that sees the telling of ‘trauma’ stories as a psychological process of catharsis for victims, as the TRC suggests. It also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the healing mandate of the TRC are perceived and experienced at the local level, and the ways in which survivors are resisting and transforming the process.

Importantly, there is a danger that storytelling can lead to the creation of a single narrative of residential schools, or the false representation and categorization of all former students as inherently ‘traumatized Aboriginals’. Stories too can perpetuate the homogenizing notion of ‘victimhood’, and simplify the legacy of violence and how the inner lives of storytellers are understood. Once narratives begin to circulate in the public realm, the importance of voice, dignity and empowerment of survivors becomes easily forgotten as stories become appropriated, commodified and consumed. Continuing to question the perceived role of ethics in the process of gathering stories and ‘giving voice’ remains essential as the TRC continues its work. Finally, we must pay attention to the real sense of risk and vulnerability that accompanies one’s decision to give testimony, and the implications of suggesting that such a process is inevitably an empowering one. While the Commission emphasizes the significance of the power of voice for healing and recovery, many survivors express their uncertainty that this ‘power’ will indeed create social and political change.

## CHAPTER 5: WITNESSING TRUTHS: BEYOND RECOVERY, TOWARD JUSTICE

According to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, in order for trauma victims to heal, “they must ultimately put words to their experiences” (TRC 1998:137). While some survivors eagerly embrace the TRC’s message that truth telling is necessary and beneficial for victim recovery and healing, many remain unconvinced. They argue that healing depends not only on the telling of traumatic stories but also on whether, and how, such stories are heard. Importantly, healing also requires a “receptive audience that bears witness” (Kirmayer 1996:266). As I will demonstrate in this chapter, while the act of giving testimony before the TRC may have some short-term therapeutic effects, for many survivors, this is only insofar as it is followed by tangible outcomes. Survivors share their stories as a way of seeking understanding for the suffering they have experienced in the hope that this will help them attain a sense of justice and effective redress. Importantly, survivors often more than a wish for individual remuneration or justice, they often also express a desire for systemic transformation. In this chapter, I examine the challenges this latter claim makes on witnesses who arrive ready to hear stories of trauma and injustice, but do not always see or acknowledge their complicity or responsibility to rectify the structural discrimination that led to abuses. For many Aboriginal communities, sharing stories unites the storyteller and listener in an ethical relationship where the ‘story’ often has moral and political implications for the listener.

For survivors of extreme violence, telling one’s story has meaning beyond its implications for mental health and trauma recovery, and beyond the potential for catharsis and a feeling of closure. Many of the testimonies reflect people’s individual and community experiences as part of a larger historical narrative. Many also speak of healing in collective terms, as opposed to an individual goal or process. Finally for many, the practice of sharing publicly before the TRC reflects an attempt not only to seek ‘health support’, therapy or treatment, but also to seek effective restitution and redress. In addition to creating a space and a process where stories of violence, social suffering and injustices experienced and endured by Indigenous peoples can be shared, the TRC is also inspiring a process where notions of healing and justice are coming together. Survivors

are transforming the TRC's individual testimonial model to a collective process of social activism and community building, "further challenging Western constructs of both politics and therapeutic healing" (Sandford 2003:242). Many people engage in the TRC, therefore, less for a desire to tell their individual truth and more as a function of demanding justice.

### LEARNING TO LISTEN: NARRATIVES OF SURVIVAL

You never forget your roots. They are the medicine that gives you first breath.

-IRS Survivor, TRC National Event, Halifax, October 27, 2011

Anything you want to know, look in the language.

-Murdena Marshall (2007), Mi'kmaq Elder

On November 14, 2008, a group of prominent Elders from across Canada met to discuss the current state of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).<sup>64</sup> All of the Elders were affected either directly or indirectly by the residential school experience, and shared ongoing concerns of the "spiritual, physical, emotional and moral condition of their communities" (IRSSS 2008). Speaking from their own experiences and knowledge, a statement released by the Indian Residential Schools Survivors Society (IRSSS 2008)<sup>65</sup> began:

We, concerned Elders, call on the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission and those involved with getting it started to remember that if it is to succeed, it must be a process that supports, accommodates and starts with Spirit.

The statement continued:

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<sup>64</sup> The Elders were brought together in Calgary, Alberta by the Indian Residential School Survivors Society (IRSSS) in British Columbia after the resignation of the First Commission Chair Justice Harry LaForme October 2008, 2008. The Elders included Stan McKay, Cree Manitoba, Margaret Keewatin, Saskatchewan, Howard Walker, Saskatchewan, Leo Pard, Alberta, Maggie Hodgson, Carrier, Alberta, Ethel Blondin-Andrew, Dene, NWT, Patrick James, Yukon, Alvin Dixon, Heiltsuk, BC, Robert Joseph, Kwa kwa kewakw, BC.

<sup>65</sup> The Indian Residential Schools Survivor Society (IRSSS) was created in 1994 as a working committee of the First Nations Summit and currently represents approximately 70 percent of the all Indigenous peoples in British Columbia (Corntassel et al. 2009:142 n. 6).



We call on all Elders across the land to aid in supporting and guiding our people as they consider participating in the TRC process... And to Canadians we say: We invite you to participate in the TRC. Come hear our stories. Listen with your hearts and re-examine your beliefs about us (IRSSS 2008).

What does it mean to listen but not to hear? While Canada's TRC hopes to contribute to healing the legacy of residential schools, in what ways is the process informed by local understandings of what it means to heal? Following the call of the Elders, I question the ethical space of healing in the TRC. For instance, where and how are local notions of spirituality integrated in the process; to what extent does it support, accommodate and start with Spirit; and finally, what are the implications of *not* hearing the voices and wisdom of the Elders?

Elder Mike Pinay, master of ceremonies at the Regina community hearing noted on the first day, "We as First Nations people have many tools for healing". Yet I wonder, where and how are these tools represented in the TRC process? Elder Barney Williams Jr. argues that much of this knowledge and lived experience is disregarded in the process (Corntassel et al. 2009). Specifically, the emphasis on providing individual testimony in front of a Commission is viewed as going against local efforts to regenerate cultural, spiritual and family or community-based healing. For many people, healing happens in Ceremony, through righting relationships with family members, and as the quote by Mi'kmaq Elder Murdena Marshall illustrates, through the language itself. Although the TRC aims to *empower* individual survivors through the statement-gathering process, many survivors suggest that empowerment and healing extend beyond individual wellness and psychological health and includes the community.

The form of empowerment<sup>66</sup> that many survivors allude to suggests a local capacity to collectively sustain community healing – which includes a sense of belonging, a validation of community experiences, community empowerment for local action, and local skills in conflict resolution (Sandford 2003). As Victoria Sanford (2003) writes, supporting processes of community healing is particularly important in some Indigenous communities, for instance in Guatemala, where the cultural importance of community identity is high. For many, the power of storytelling is that it provides a safe community

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<sup>66</sup> For a detailed overview of the role of empowerment and empowering settings for community and social change, see Maton et al. (2011).

space where members can express themselves and be heard; a space of trust, acceptance, and understanding; and a collective experience of redefining and rebuilding collective identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, initiatives like the Aboriginal Healing Foundation sought to support diverse, community-based healing initiatives. Canada's TRC process attempts to bureaucratically administer healing through a national process of reconciliation, effectively limiting the space for the 'collective creation' of local healing initiatives.<sup>67</sup>

While the notion of 'truth as healing' may be driving the TRC process, as Robins (2012) explains, "this narrative dismisses local and Indigenous approaches to addressing the impact of conflict, privileging solutions imported from a global discourse" (84). For instance, Robins (2012) explains that in the case of Timor-Leste, "there is no evidence that a western therapeutic approach has any relevance in providing healing for those who suffered from violence" (104). In fact, the imported "therapeutic metaphor" that sees truth telling as healing, "failed" many victims, as it did not address local needs – particularly spiritual needs (Robins 2012:104).

According to Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzi (2009), while the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement and the TRC are intended to address the legacies of residential schools, "they run the risk of framing these questions in a narrow way that doesn't fully appreciate the ongoing impacts of residential schools on communities, families, and individuals and the lived experiences of resilience and resurgence that need to be shared with intergenerational survivors and other Indigenous peoples" (140). Quoting Nuu-chah-nulth Elder Barney Williams Jr., "Our Nuu-chah-nulth methodologies are missing from the TRC - our ways like many other Native peoples ways, have sustained us for centuries and will continue to do so if we continue to use them in our families and communities" (Corntassel et al. 2009:140-141).

Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzi (2009) argue that the TRC fails to provide space for cultural, spiritual and family-based processes of reunification and regeneration - what they refer to as Indigenous and community-centered methodologies. All 7 participants interviewed in their 2010 study stated that while they wanted their

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<sup>67</sup> This is despite recognition that harms were done to families and communities as a whole, not only to individual survivors, as I described in chapter two.

stories told, there was no ‘room’ within the ongoing TRC process for Indigenous-centered forms of storytelling – such as haa-huu-pah, a form of community storytelling for the Nuu-chah-nulth people – and for community perspectives to be heard. Through their research they offer a critical analysis of the mandate of the TRC from a community-centered and an Indigenous perspective of truth telling and justice. They also make the claim that the discourse of reconciliation is grounded in Western ideological and Christian-based values, and has no grounding in Indigenous worldviews. Their research demonstrates the importance of Indigenous storytelling and methods for Indigenous ‘re-storying’ as alternatives to Canada’s state-centered vision for reconciliation presented by the TRC, which it argues, serve to reinforce colonial relationships and seek to legitimize the status quo. Viewing the state-centered process of reconciliation as “further dividing communities – or trapping us in a cycle of oppression” (Cornthassel et al. 2009:156), they offer Indigenous-centered methodologies, such as storytelling, as an accepted alternative process to address the legacy of residential schools. Importantly, it is not just that stories are told, but how they are told, to whom and in what context.

For instance, Nick Thompson, a Western Apache teaches linguist Keith Basso about the responsibility that comes from listening, where the successful storyteller compels the listener to make changes in their own life by connecting them to place and community:

So someone stalks you and tells you a story about what happened long ago. It doesn’t matter if other people are around – you’re going to know he’s aiming that story at you. All of a sudden it *hits* you! It’s like an arrow they say. Sometimes it just bounces off – it’s too soft and you don’t think about anything. But when it’s strong it goes deep and starts working on your mind right away...So you have to think about your life.

Then you feel weak, real weak, like you are sick. You don’t want to eat or talk to anyone. That story is working on you now, making you want to live right. That story is making you want to replace yourself. You think only of what you did that was wrong and you don’t like it. So you want to live better. After a while, you don’t like to think of what you did wrong. So you try to forget that story. You try to pull that arrow out. You think it won’t hurt anymore because now you want to live right...

It’s hard to keep on living right. Many things jump up at you and block your way. But you won’t forget that story... If you don’t see it, you’re going to hear its name and see it in your mind... Even so, that place will keep on stalking

you... (Basso 1996:58-59).

Places have an emotional power that has an important role in healing for many Indigenous communities. The landscape itself is imbued with and animates stories that guide, and sometimes hinder, community reconciliation. There are many cultural subtleties embedded in stories that may escape the outside listener who hears the story, but lacks the specific cultural and local knowledge to understand the full meaning of a story.

In much of the literature on truth commissions, local understandings and theories about the impacts of violence and processes of healing are either disregarded, or, all too often thought of as less sophisticated ‘beliefs’. Theidon (2010) argues that categorizing ways of understanding in these terms, “reinforces the dichotomy between producers and consumers of knowledge – a dichotomy that leaves little room to appreciate the sophisticated theories Quechua-speakers have about violence and its effects, about social life and their struggles to rebuild it” (9). In some cultures, individual therapy may be seen as inappropriate, and instead, participation in ceremony and other cultural rituals may be essential for healing (see Kirmayer et al. 2009). Spirituality is a fundamental element to many Indigenous understandings of healing around the world.

Some TRCs have attempted to adopt local notions of spirituality in guiding their mandate. For instance, the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission adopted the African concept of *ubuntu* to describe the collective process of reconciliation (Villa-Vicencio 2006:61). The Canadian TRC also incorporates ceremonies and practices significant to many Aboriginal peoples, for example sweats and smudging are commonly available for anybody attending hearings. One particularly powerful example of the incorporation of spirituality into the TRC process is a Bentwood Box created by Coast Salish artist Luke Marston in 2009. Formed from a single piece of red cedar, the Box’s carved panels represent the “strength and resilience of residential school survivors and their descendants”. As the Box travels with the TRC to different territories and provinces, individuals are encouraged to make offerings “commemorate[ing] personal journeys toward healing and reconciliation” (TRC N.d.). However despite being grounded in notions of spirituality, the Canadian TRC is structured around a Western notion of truth telling, leaving little room for other cultural theories to play any significant role. While

many spiritual or religious and cultural traditions have been suppressed, and in some cases obliterated through colonial processes – as assimilation policies attempted to do – many believe that it is indeed these local forms of “cultural logic” that are needed for healing to occur (Eisenbruch 2007, Pouligny et. al 2007). Although Indigenous peoples across the globe have distinct languages and histories, they “share similar experiences under colonialism and a desire to heal from those experiences” (Episkewnew 2009:11). Still, there exists a diverse range of traditional healing practices; “some are common to Aboriginal worldviews across cultures, while others are clearly rooted in local customs and traditions” (Quinn 2007:77).

The late Apache Philosopher V.F. Cordova (2007) considers language to be a “window that frames a particular view of the world. Even when the window disappears the view that it framed remains” (76). According to Cordova, when Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in residential schools, “such attitudes and relationships had already been established...there was, in other words, beyond language, a context to being ‘Indian’ that eluded the attempts at eradication” (2007:79). She explains, “behind language there is a ‘pattern system’ of ‘forms and categories’ that consisted of more than words and speech; it included also a way of being in the world” (2007:79). Before a child reaches the age of six the child has already been “taught through attitudes, through practice, and through teaching relationships between people and between people and the Earth” (2007:79). Thus, she believes, despite attempts to eradicate Indigenous languages and cultures, an ‘Indian’ view of the world managed to survive.

Today, many Indigenous peoples living in Canada are no longer able to speak their Indigenous language as a result of the Indian Residential Schools. Consistent with the assimilationist policies to “remove the Indian in the child”, students were not allowed to communicate in any language other than English or French. As a result, Aboriginal children were offered a different worldview – a paradigm that today is recognized as grounded in Western-European thought. According to Cordova, some aspects of this way of being have since been adopted. Yet, as Cordova confidently asserts, despite attempts to eradicate understanding, Indigenous views of the world survive: “We are not assimilated. We live daily with an understanding of our differences, with two or even more processes

taking place at the same time, mentally, emotionally, spiritually” (Hogan 2007:x-xi).

Over the last few decades, Indigenous communities across Canada have begun to find new ways and rediscover old ways of “nourishing the spiritual and cultural well-being of their members” (Warry 1998:206). Speaking in front of the TRC, many survivors speak of healing as occurring back in their community, and through cultural and spiritual-based practices. As one Elder said clearly in front of the commission, “it is only through Ceremony that I have been able to deal with it” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 16 January, 2012]. For many Indigenous peoples, healing addresses not only physical, emotional and mental aspects of individual lives and relationships but the spiritual aspects as well. “I found my spirit; I found myself. Healing was about finding myself” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26, October 2011], notes one TRC participant. Another survivor expressed the importance of cultural revitalization and affirmation, “I give thanks today that I have long hair with braids again. I am proud of who I am” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April, 2012]. However, the legacy of residential schooling is complex. As appealing as traditional beliefs are for the majority of survivors testifying for the TRC, the ‘success’ of the residential schooling system in unraveling worldviews cannot be denied. The confusion wrought by a system that installed shame about culture into minds of young children has been a cause of ongoing pain and anguish that has led many to turn to alternative forms of self-therapy to numb pain and quell confusion, including alcohol and drug abuse. Despite the appeal of Indigenous traditions for many, there are some who believe they are “caught between worlds”<sup>68</sup> and others who believe strongly in the therapeutic power of Western medicine and individual approaches to healing. This is a difficult topic that requires additional research, but it suggests the daunting complexity of the residential school legacy and its divisive effects on communities.

Today, many Indigenous peoples are “witness[ing] the healing power of stories as they have begun to reassert their individual and collective narratives” (Episkew 2009:11). Some of the comments, especially coming from the children and grandchildren of former students, otherwise known as ‘intergenerational survivors’, point to the

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<sup>68</sup> Waldram (2009) points to the problematic nature of explaining Aboriginal mental health in a way that creates a false dichotomy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

importance of sharing stories across generations. For example, one statement given before the Commission at the Onion Lake Cree Nation Community Hearing stressed the knowledge gap across generations, as the stories that used to be shared orally are no longer being told: “They used to know the future a thousand years ago; they used to use the language. They told the stories, they never wrote the stories down. There are a lot of stories that are still floating. And it is us, it is our job to get those stories. We must continue on telling your stories. That is all I can say” [4 April 2012]. The young Cree woman spoke about the importance of sharing stories with one’s children and grandchildren in order “to lift up your hearts; to lift up your minds. And to lift up our children and their minds”. Speaking of the historical importance of language for oral traditions, she said,

The old ones...they had a difficult time, but they had a vision for us: to lift up your hearts, to lift up your minds, and to lift our children and their minds through sharing. Share your stories with your grandchildren. You guys are still here; tell the story. You guys are still here, on this planet, tell the story. Tell them to your children, your grandchildren. And finally we’ll start to get lighter and lighter. The more you tell the story, your heart will be lifted; it will be lighter. Your mind will be lighter.

At every TRC hearing I attend, people speak about the importance of speaking their Indigenous language. As one Elder articulated, “I am thankful that we teach the Cree language here. Everyone that we work with here speaks Cree. Everyday the children speak Cree. And we talk and pray in Cree” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012]. Some survivors, particularly older ones, begin and end their testimonies in their Indigenous language. They explain that their preference to tell their stories in their Indigenous languages, relates back to their relationships with English as being forced upon them through colonial policies, such as the ones that guided Indian Residential Schools. Yet today, as many people no longer speak “their language” most testimonies given before the Commission are told in English, the language that many refer to as the “language of the colonizers”. Still, the importance of revitalizing Indigenous languages for healing was an important theme that often came out of survivor testimonies.

The inherent Western bias of the TRC process was evident in the smallest details of the TRC events. Although translation services are technically available at every TRC

national and community event, there is not always a translator for every Indigenous language. In one testimony at the Regina community hearing, a survivor shared that while she had hoped to give most of her presentation in Michif, there was no interpreter available that is able to translate her presentation into English: “You have on your sign, Métis, First Nations, and Inuit, but you have nothing here [that] would welcome the Métis” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 17 January, 2012]. In response, Commissioner Wilson notes, “I do apologize for the language issue, our resources are limited” [TRC Community Hearing, Regina, 17 January, 2012].<sup>69</sup> Significantly, English remains the predominant language used throughout every TRC event I attended, despite the importance that many people placed on language as a basic “conveyor of culture” and the acknowledgement that “most people are connected to their emotions and intimate thoughts most readily in their first language or language of everyday life” (Kirmayer et al. 2009:463). An Elder at a community event in Lebret also expresses his frustration that no Indigenous language was represented on any of the TRC signage; that it was always in English.<sup>70</sup> The tension between witnessing and healing is evident in the strategies of testimony adopted, or effectively forced, on most witnesses speaking to the TRC. While most survivors share their testimonies – or at least most of it – in English, many refer to the healing power of their ongoing journey of rediscovering their own language, alongside their culture and Indigenous traditions.

As I described in the previous chapter, many survivors express a profound mistrust of politicians and public institutions that purport to be helping former students and their families deal with – or *heal* – the trauma that previous governments and their policies have caused. As passionately expressed by one former student, “We need sustainability in our communities, not programs. Healing from the residential school era and the inhumane treatment of our people, from the Catholic Church, will take a lifetime for me” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 27 October, 2011]. Viewed by many as “yet another government program” or initiative, the TRC is faced with the challenge of instilling in people faith and trust in a process that for many goes against their cultural

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<sup>69</sup> The TRC Interim Report (2012) acknowledges the importance of language and recommended the creation of a “cultural revival fund designed to fund projects that promote the traditional spiritual, cultural, and linguistic heritage of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada” (7).

<sup>70</sup> I am grateful to Sue Bland for pointing this out to me.



understandings of the healing power of language and storytelling. As survivors of residential school continue to go back to their old traditions – revitalizing and reaffirming linguistic and cultural practices – they are increasingly “look[ing] to their own communities to find resources with which to heal traumatized spirits” (Episkenew 2009:11).

Learning to listen to the stories told before the Commission involves hearing the underlying meaning behind the words; for instance, hearing narratives not only of trauma but also of resistance, renewal and survival. As one survivor explained,

We as Indian people have went through a lot, when we were taken away... We went through abuse. We went through being called savage. We went through them calling our language ‘gibberish’. We went through our pipes and our lodges being called evil. We went through that, but we’re still here. We’re still here. And by what we’ve seen here, we are going to be here a long time [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April 2012].

Many Indigenous peoples and communities are beginning to recognize how the ongoing effects of colonization continue to deny Indigenous claims to having a history and to a sense of hope. As Smith (1999) explains, “the past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope” (4).

As non-Indigenous witnesses to the TRC process, we must recognize that healing from the violence experienced at residential school – a system intentionally designed to strip Indigenous people of their languages and cultures – must be guided by Indigenous understandings and ways of seeing the world. If the TRC is to “succeed it must be a process that supports, accommodates and starts with Spirit” (IRSSS 2008). We must begin to see former students not only as individual storytellers who have a story to tell, but also as diverse individuals with deep cultural wisdom. We must recognize that these individuals have the ‘tools’, especially when they work together, to begin transforming the devastating consequences of residential schools and to address the deep sense of loss and grief that has been wrought on many of their communities. We must begin to recognize participants in the TRC as not only survivors of violence but also as agents of change.

*Sitting in a packed room at the Halifax National TRC Gathering Mi'kmaq Elder Murdena Marshall is invited to speak. According to Mi'kmaq thought, she explains, healing does not necessarily come from 'out there' but rather it comes from inside the language itself. "I see a lot of hope for people that are in the mode of residential school survivors", she says. While she notes that she herself is not a survivor of the residential school, she notes that she has been living with one for 51 years. "He was from the residential school", she acknowledges, "and it took a lot of patience and understanding to answer his needs - needs that were more on the spiritual side than anything else".*

*Her cell phone rings, and in the midst of the packed sharing circle, she answers it in Mi'kmaq. "This is my neighbor Ernest", she says in English after a long pause, causing the group to erupt in great laughter. The room is full – although seated around her are mostly non-Indigenous people, some of whom I recognize as fellow graduate students and professors. Most people seem to welcome the change of scenery from the larger conference room where the public testimonies are taking place. The days have been long, as one after another, survivors come up to the stage and share their stories of pain and suffering. This "knowledge mobilization" workshop offers a language of hope and transformation as stories of healing and survival are shared.*

*Murdena continues, "the only way that Mr. Marshall, this here guy [pointing to her husband sitting beside her] was able to continue life as a Mi'kmaq was for him to go back to his old traditions". According to this Mi'kmaq Elder, "we should not dwell on the residential school but dwell on the part of healing. Using our resources, using our stories, using our language, using everything about being Mi'kmaq and let you heal from the inside out".*

*Murdena speaks with elegance, authority, yet with an informal and easy-going nature, speaking from both the perspective of a fluent Mi'kmaq speaker and a Harvard-educated linguist. She goes on to say, "I've been preaching about the language for so long, and I find that our language, the Mi'kmaq language, has a healing tense. It has a past, present, future, spiritual, and healing tense". Murdena explains that this Mi'kmaq verb tense requires a person to take full responsibility for their actions, to put their deeds in front of themselves – like an object – to take ownership over them and say "yes, I was there" or "that's me" within a space of transformation and acceptance.*

*I am struck by the concept of 'hope' that is repeatedly spoken throughout these sessions, and the belief that healing happens by believing, as Muderna says, "in ourselves and our people, to regain and renew and rebirth the traditions and oral traditions". "There is so much hope to be offered by our own people", Murdena exclaims, "they're our only hope. Not any doctors out there, or clinic therapists or anyone... the language that we have as Mi'kmaq people. And we have to use that – what is called a 'tool' now. But there's a lot to offer. The language encompasses everything, and so we can always look to your own language, and see where in the world can I get comfort".*

## THE ETHICS OF RECOGNITION AND REDRESS

The solutions to our problems have to come from us, the Native people. Although we want the religious orders and governments to be held accountable for their part in the residential schools, and we will be expecting them to contribute to the solutions, it will have to be up to us to decide how we want them to contribute. We only have to look at our past history and our relationship with the non-Native to know what we can no longer allow other people to try to decide what is best for us. Only we know what is best for us.

Opening Address by Chief Bev Sellars, Soda Creek First Nation, to the First National Conference on Residential Schools, 18 June, 1991, Vancouver.

Understand, and if you don't understand, ask.

IRS survivor, TRC National Event, Saskatoon, 22 June 2012

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, many survivors see the TRC as a tool to speak back to the state's redress and reconciliation efforts, which many feel, has been unfairly dealt with. In fact, many survivors view that the process of storytelling in the TRC is as much about the demanding acknowledgment, recognition and a response from witnesses as it is about the representation of their individual experiences. As the words of survivor testimonies imply, the TRC's chosen mode of healing is an approach that limits the potential for empowerment and political advocacy by containing truth in an individualized, bureaucratic and court-like setting that reproduces a feeling of testifying to power and about power, without the accompanying promise that gathered testimony

will be used in judgment. Although TRC events and gatherings attempt to create a new vision of the nation, individual stories – and survivors – remain at the center of process. Indeed, survivor testimonies reveal an inherent desire to ‘remember’ so that that justice can continue to be sought.

Over the life of the TRC, it is increasingly apparent that participants in the process - largely former IRS students - are speaking back to these national healing and reconciliation efforts, which they see as largely abstract and paradoxical. As one survivor explains,

The legal term is called 'restitution'. If I understand it correctly, the term means that Canada has to restore the damages that they have inflicted on our people. For reconciliation to be meaningful we need restitution. Compensating individuals helps the Canadian economy. But it will not heal our language. It will not heal our customs. It will not heal our Mi' Kmaq family values. Canada and their churches will need to address these consequences of their wrongs, eventually, in order for there to be forgiveness and reconciliation [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October 2011].

Through the TRC, survivors are speaking back to the national discourse of healing and reconciliation, and a political process that aims to address Aboriginal trauma, rather than the nature of the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian nation state. Courtney Jung (2011) points to the Canadian apology, reparations and the TRC to demonstrate how governments focus on addressing individual human rights violations through ‘truth and reconciliation’, “as an alternative rather than as a complement, to social and economic rights” (227 n.35). According to Jung (2011), mechanisms such as the TRC are often seen as a way to “shut down other indigenous demands, offering transitional justice in exchange for quiescence on other issues...undermin[ing] indigenous demands for collective rights, on the one hand, and social and economic rights, on the other hand” (226).

Survivors place specific demands on the ‘witnessing public’, through an expectation that the meaning and intent of their testimonies are properly received and understood. “I don’t want pity”, Eugene expressed assertively, “that’s the last thing I want is for people to feel sorry for me or pity me”. He explained, “I want understanding that there are reasons for the high incarceration rates of our young people, of our women, and our men, and it was imposed by laws that were meant to destroy us as a people, and

us as a family, and us as individuals.” Or as another survivor shared at the Regina community hearing, “What happened to me Canada? You killed my spirit and in its place you put bitterness, anger, revenge. That’s what you put there” [17 January, 2012].

Paulette Regan (2010) writes that the task ahead is to “re-story” the dominant version of history – perceiving stories as important teachings not only for Indigenous peoples, but also for the rest of Canada to better understand the colonial roots of their nation and mistaken knowledge about Canada’s Indigenous peoples. Episkewnew (2009) explains, “Indigenous narratives serve a socio-pedagogical function in that their objective is to change society by educating the settler readers about the Indigenous perspective of Canadian society” (17). Consequently, these narratives have the potential to “implicate settler readers by exposing the structures that sustain White privilege and by compelling them to examine their position of privilege and their complicity in the continued oppression of Indigenous people (Episkewnew 2009:17). Regan discusses the nature and constraints of engaging non-Indigenous Canadians as ‘ethical witnesses’ in the TRC. Examining the TRC through a moral lens, Regan questions what it means when the TRC claims to honour and respect “Aboriginal principles of witnessing” in its mandate.

Though the discourse of national reconciliation is often viewed as a vague and malleable concept, particularly from the perspective of non-Aboriginal Canadians (Costa and Clark 2011), statements made by survivors bring the idea of the TRC down to a practical level that people can relate to and feel engaged in. Seeing testimonies as a political tool, survivors are attempting to attract public attention and resources to the social suffering and injustices that many Indigenous people continue to experience. Many testimonies make reference to the endemic poverty, ongoing racism, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Saskatchewan, and the widespread violence that happens back in people’s homes and communities, consciously linking the violence of the past with continuing injustices in the present. “Our abuse, Mr. Commissioner”, noted one survivor, “is not a historical fact, but a present reality” [TRC National Event, Saskatoon, 22 June, 2012]. Or as another shared, “we’re still experiencing the hurt everyday, non-stop” [TRC National Event, Saskatoon, 22 June, 2012]. Survivors speak of the government’s recent political decision to build more jails, “knowing full well who’s going to occupy those jails” as one Elder said to me, “its not going to be white people, why aren’t we look[ing] at that? Why

aren't we as a society saying anything about that?" Finally, many also speak about the child welfare system and its relationship to residential schooling. As another survivor noted, "We have more children in care today than we had back then. The only difference is back then we were in a barnyard. Today, it's all over the place."

For many survivors, testimony can be 'healing' when it is perceived as a political tool. Many survivors are coming together to 'walk the path of remembrance' and as a way of pushing for justice (Stern 2004) There is a grassroots power in the politicization of memory as survivors place demands on the state for recognition of their grief, and for more equitable, fair and culturally appropriate forms of redress.<sup>71</sup> "I often ask, what is reconciliation", one survivor shared confidently before the Commission, "I have to stand by and watch our youth struggle and find the place in their society, the society you created. We see the addictions, the violence, the suicides results of racism, poverty and bad educational system and we are slow to overcome them" [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October, 2011]. Or as another survivor shared,

You said you were sorry, and yet you continue to do the same things to me, to our people ... this, this Truth and Reconciliation Commission, yes there will be many truths. There will be much truth that will come forward, but will there be reconciliation? I think very little... until those people decide that they do indeed want to be, want to atone, and want to stop imposing the things that they did in history to our people and to us personally. Until that happens, I don't see much reconciliation coming forward. [Regina Community Hearing, 16 January 2012]

Importantly, while some survivors seek redress in the form of symbolic reparations for the atrocities and harms that were committed – in other words, for the violence they have experienced in the past – others place demands for monetary compensation for the "grinding reality" – the poverty and social suffering –they continue to experience in the present. For instance, many survivors choose to participate "in the hope that this would give them access to economic assistance" (Shaw 2007:184), despite the fact that the TRC is not equipped to do so.

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<sup>71</sup> A report released by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation outlined the aspects of 'residential school resolution' in the circle of a medicine wheel. Four steps were included: "*acknowledgement*, naming the harmful acts and admitting they were wrong; *redress*, taking action to compensate for harms inflicted; *healing*, restoring physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual balance in individuals, families and communities, and nations; and *reconciliation*, accepting one another following injurious acts or periods of conflict and developing mutual trust (Castellano 2008:385).

The TRC has become a space where survivors are coming together to resist and challenge the inequitable relations of power that are embedded in social and political institutions in Canada. Envisioned as a process to empower and give voice to individual survivors, the TRC inadvertently creates a political community of survivors who demand justice. Empowerment for many Aboriginal people suggests a collective struggle for transformative recognition and redistribution, both of power and economic resources. Many suggest that in empowering individuals and communities, people are able to feel a greater sense of coherence and control over their lives. According to a report released by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation,

Aboriginal people in Canada continue to be trapped by social, political and economic policies that promote dependency by preventing self-determination. Healing in a larger cultural context, therefore, requires a commitment to fostering social, political and economic conditions of re-empowerment: a politics of healing (Chansonneuve 2005:42).

According to Monture-Angus (1999), reclaiming Indigenous self-determination or independence “sometimes means remembering, and in other places means putting back into practice, traditional system of governance (or responsibility). It requires the commitment of Canadians to allow Aboriginal peoples to lead the way... Canada does not have the answer for us” (22). She makes the point that a call for self-determination and the ‘right’ of self-governing powers by Aboriginal people “is equally a call for the opportunity to remedy the consequences of colonialism and the corresponding oppression we carry as individuals and collectively” (Monture-Angus 1999:27). Part of the Aboriginal understanding of self-determination that often goes unrecognized is also “what Aboriginal people seek, the right to heal” (Monture-Angus 1999:27).

Thus, the healing power of stories is not only found through the individual telling of stories, but in the spaces of community built around the storytelling process. It is also felt through the spiritual supports, ceremonies, and collective wisdom and activism that continues, and will continue long after the TRC finishes its work. Adam and Adam (2001) point to learnings from the South African TRC: “the communal experience of public hearings, of being heard and being officially recognized as victims, is said to be as important for the healing of trauma as the testimony itself” (41). A process that intends to

give people a voice becomes a voice of collective struggle, one that strengthens solidarity across boundaries and borders, diverse languages, landscapes and histories.<sup>72</sup>

While offering a space of healing through the process of giving survivors a voice, the statement-gathering process is also inadvertently inspiring a sense of community. Through the increased public attention to the effects of social suffering and structural violence (Farmer 1997), individuals and communities have begun to organize around common illness experiences. Paul Rabinow (1996) describes this experience of coming together to advocate for collective rights, recognition, therapy and reparations as “biosociality”. More than “biopolitics”, it is this concept of “biosociality” that helps to explain how the public discourse of trauma is connected to a larger social movement that seeks recognition of past wrongs, and has helped to create the global context of redress of present times. Through the classification of what Lauren Berlant (1997) calls “traumatic citizenship”, individuals find social membership. Kai Erikson (1995) notes that trauma can create community. He writes that “trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can. There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of identity” (Erikson 1995:186).<sup>73</sup> Survivor empowerment is especially evident through the statement-gathering process “in the presence of support systems, which included Survivor families and friends, and also fellow Survivors who were able to attend the event and listen to stories of abuse and neglect” (Petoukhov 2011:103). In the words of one Elder, “those that are sitting here, we don’t know that we are actually giving strength to our family member that is sitting here, who has come to share his or her story. It is good” [TRC Community Hearing, Onion Lake Cree Nation, 4 April, 2012].

Creating a common language, the TRC has worked “to reconcile different people to one another as members of a single commonwealth of humanity” (Jackson 2002:62). “We all come from a nation, and nations,” shared one survivor, “And family is the most important thing” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October 2011]. Seeing their own personal stories as also the story of their community, survivor testimonies, as Bozzoli

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<sup>72</sup> See Gone (2011) on the significance of recovering collective voice, and Indigenous self-expression as “just one manifestation of self-determination” (135).

<sup>73</sup> Hunt (2000) also highlights the strategic construction of ‘illness narratives’ “effectively turn[ing] suffering into a social asset”, or resource, by enacting a “new, more empowered position for themselves” (101).



(1998) notes, “recast personal stories in ways that make them ‘emblematic’ of all who suffered” (Jackson 2002:62). While this can serve to reinforce myths and misconceptions held by non-Aboriginal people, seeing all Indigenous people as victims, many survivors also use the TRC as an opportunity to dispel stereotypes. Many speak out of a hope and expectation that their individual story of suffering is understood as linked to a collective struggle for justice and human rights. They share as witnesses to intergeneration conflict and mass violence and as a means of seeking effective redress and nation-to-nation reconciliation. Jung (2011) explains that the success of the TRC – as a mechanism of transitional justice – in addressing indigenous demands for justice may depend on its ability to extend its definition of “injustice to include not only individual harms suffered by former students themselves, but also collective and cultural harms suffered by aboriginal communities, languages, and cultures” (227). In other words, as many survivors and aboriginal leaders have insisted, this implies “chang[ing] dominant conceptions of who suffered the injustice (whole populations, not individual students) and what counts as injustice “loss of culture and language, not only physical and sexual abuse)” (Jung 2011:227). Although for some survivors sharing their story leads to a sense of loss, survivors are choosing to participate, seeing collective remembering as a way to legitimize the violence they have experienced, and to achieve cultural and political respect from the process (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Survivor testimonies bring attention to the intergenerational effects of the schools and the importance of supporting efforts of ‘community healing’, through drawing “whole communities, and not only survivors, into a common dialogue” (Jung 2011:229). Thus, survivor testimonies carry with them important meanings beyond the personal, “blur[ring] the line between individual and group experience” (Grandin 2011:20). As Jackson explains, “storytelling discloses that which is held in common” (Jackson 2002: 63).

When survivors of violence speak, they experience a loss of their story on two different levels, “first their own personal narrative that makes sense of their lives are silenced and appropriated; second, a false message about their worth is communicated” (Phelps 2004:45). Phelps (2004) explains that for

just retribution, for the world to be put back into its proper order, both must be corrected and rebalanced. For the first, it may be enough that the victims have an opportunity to tell their stories and reshape their own experiences in their own

words. The second, however, requires that the new state actively hear and acknowledge the story, thereby recognizing the worth of the victim” (45).

As one survivor noted at the Saskatoon national event, “To this day, they do not acknowledge or recognize the depth of harm that they did to our family... you don’t have to be dead to be a victim of genocide” [22 June, 2012].<sup>74</sup> Importantly, survivors of residential school participate in the TRC not only as a function of storytelling, but of seeking recognition and redress. That is, survivor testimonies are shared with the expectations that non-Aboriginal Canadians receive the stories as “wake up calls”, placing responsibility on ‘witnesses’ to respond. While the TRC process is seen by some as limiting the political consequences of residential schools testimonies, there is an unexpected and vital resistance that has kept Indigenous people going, in the form of a collective remembering and in a larger struggle for justice and acknowledgement.<sup>75</sup> As Eugene Arcand explained,

Canada can go out and spout off about this being the largest settlement agreement in the history of this country. Give me a break, you know. And people are buying it. So when I have an opportunity to share those thoughts and those realities with somebody like you, that gives you a total perspective of what you came and sat down with, right? Because, I have no reason, I have no reason to lie. What can they do to me? They have already tried to destroy me on numbers of occasions. So, when I share this, I want people to know, this is reality.

One of our jobs, as non-Indigenous witnesses to this process, is recognizing the spaces of resistance, renewal and transformation after violence; seeing survivors not only as victims, but diverse peoples, communities, and nations with complex histories and relevant stories to tell. We must continue exploring the power and capacity of the TRC not only to listen to the stories but also to “hear, understand, support and amplify the voices” (Maton et al. 2011:3) themselves. “We don’t need to be told how to heal,” said one of the survivors at the Halifax event. “What we need is for people, non-Aboriginal peoples, to join the circle” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 28 October, 2011]. Healing, she said, is “keeping the circle strong”. Thus, in extending the notion of healing to

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<sup>74</sup> One survivor noted, “Canada’s educational policy constituted outright genocide”. There is an ongoing effort to have Canada’s treatment of the Aboriginal population recognized as a genocide (Bolen 2013).

<sup>75</sup> For a detailed examination of the politics of acknowledgement see Quinn (2010). According to Quinn (2010), “proper and successful acknowledgement by a society cannot take place unless perpetrators own up to their crimes and their victims admit to having been brutalized” (4).

include the concept of building a just and respectful nation, survivors point to more than just a need to be heard, but rather the need for a space and a dialogue between peoples and between nations. An ethical space of healing recognizes the importance of engaging non-Indigenous people, as one survivor explained, “in the circle to listen to us” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October, 2011]. She added, that recognizing that the schools themselves “were supposed to make our lives better,” efforts towards healing and reconciliation require both “positive action of government,” and ongoing local processes of cultural renewal – that it is through “our own education, our own principles, and our own teachings that we have begun to correct the path and the challenge” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October, 2011]. According to this survivor, “We have to learn to live together in a good way” [TRC National Event, Halifax, 26 October, 2011]. Survivor narratives told before the TRC are not only representations of individual experiences, but “the beginning of a dialogue and social relationship” (Colvin 2006:180), between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

#### MY STORY IS A GIFT

We must carefully assess the nature, scope and intent of Canada's residential school strategy. We must carefully assess the role of the church. We must listen carefully to the survivors. We must thoroughly review the options available to Aboriginal people for restitution and redress. We must carefully consider how it might be possible to achieve justice after all that has been wrought by residential schools.

-Wendy Grant, Vice-Chief Assembly of First Nations Canim Lake, British Columbia, 8 March 1993, RCAP Hearing

Its not rocket science, it's just a different worldview.

-Eugene Arcand

*Several years after the TRC commenced, I am sitting in the school auditorium of Pewasenkwan Primary School in Onion Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6 Territory. Looking out from the audience, I watch and listen as former students of Indian residential schools tell their devastating stories of being forced from their homes to attend Indian Residential*

*Schools. While most of the stories – or statements – touch on the violence and suffering experienced at residential school – the emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual abuses, the mistreatment and cultural violence, etc. – many people go into deep descriptions of their lives, both in the past and until today. Survivors share not only personal accounts of the residential school era, but the impacts of the IRS system and legacy on individual lives and relationships.*

*It is a chilled April morning, and the second day of the three-day gathering. Elder Howard Walker, the emcee of this TRC community hearing, captures the attention of the room. Speaking in Cree he says,*

*We have come to listen to our family, our relations. She had the courage to come and let go of that heavy story that she has been keeping. And now she will feel a lot better, because now she has let that go. But still in the future, I will remember what they are saying. How hard it was, how difficult it was to come and sit here, to come and share some of their stories; their heart-felt stories...The Commissioner, he comes to listen to those sorrowful stories, looking for those stories.*

*Without a pause, the Elder continues: But still, many times, we have been told, ‘Me, I am an expert. This is how you should live in the future. Me, I am expert’. This is what we’ve are told many times. Sometimes we listen real hard and we can’t hear, sometimes we look real hard and we can’t see.” Finally, he says, “we give tobacco for everyone who comes here to share. That tobacco opens our vision, your feelings, your thoughts to life. Not to something specific but to life and how we’re related to everything; how we’re related to everything and everyone. Gift. A present that you enjoy today”.*

After exploring whether and how the nature of storytelling adopted by the TRC creates an ethical space for stories to be shared and received I am left with more questions than answers. While adopting the discourse of healing, the TRC’s statement-gathering process also offers a space for social, cultural and political engagement. Importantly, we must acknowledge how the TRC is being actively resisted and transformed by survivors themselves. The TRC creates a space to voice not only individual, but also collective struggles, to share political disappointments and to ‘re-build’ connections for social dialogue. Hackett and Rolston (2009) explain that “storytelling is both an individual and a collective process, in which consequently, a

transformative potential exists for both the individual and society; and that it is a complicated process and interaction” (356-7). They go on to say that, “the view that storytelling is an individualized process does disservice in particular to those storytellers who are acting consciously as agents of change, whose stories have an intentionally counter-hegemonic purpose, challenging official wisdom, and in particular official representations of the storytellers and their community” (Hacket and Rolston 2009:357).

Thomas King (2003) reminds us that storytelling carries with it social and moral responsibilities: “Don’t say that in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (29). Survivor narratives symbolize more than the evidence of psychological trauma and the devastating consequences wrought by residential schooling, or even of the resilience and transformative potential of the human spirit. Through storytelling, survivors see that “they [are] entering into a social and moral relationship, one that demand[s] recognition and a response from their witnesses” (Colvin 2006:180). Thus, stories that are shared before the Commission are given as “a direct communication, an ethical challenge to their listeners, one that they believed deserved a response” (Colvin 2006:180).

As findings from this research demonstrate, it is not enough to ask whether telling stories is therapeutic or not. We also have to consider *how* stories are told and importantly how they are received. As Kirmayer (2000) notes, “people do not tell their stories in a vacuum. They must fight (be good rhetoricians or debaters) to tell their story and to have it heard and more or less accepted, authorized, or taken up by others” (173). Hence, it is not just a function of ‘having voice’ that empowers, but that of ‘being heard’ – and it is this latter point that is currently the biggest challenge for the TRC. For many Indigenous people, the moral function of storytelling is not contained in the telling of the story, but rather in the sharing of the story. The listener must be attentive to the language and context in which the story is told. In many Indigenous communities, storytellers and would-be-story-listeners are bound by an ethical framework, constructed from cultural and spiritual beliefs and maintained by values and protocols. As we are reminded in the closing comments in “Breaking the Silence”, the Assembly of First Nation’s 1994 study on residential school impacts and healing: “My story is a gift. If I give you a gift and you accept that gift, then you don’t go throw that gift in the waste-basket. You do something

with it”. What is being done with the stories that are being told – with the gifts that are being given to the witnessing public? How do courageous storytellers perceive that their stories are being heard? When survivors speak, they place a responsibility on those listening to respond. Laplant and Theidon (2007) explain that “testimony is a demand for acknowledgement and redress” (231). How people perceive the ‘acceptance’ of these gifts – public testimonies given before the Commission – requires further investigation.

## CHAPTER 6: FINAL THOUGHTS: CLOSURE?

Sometimes we don't hear because some of us have developed an attitude of selective listening, a 'tunnel vision agenda'. When you hear, you understand.

-Elder Howard Walker, IRS Networking Gathering, 7 March, 2012

*In the summer of 2011, I attended a community gathering on 'healing' on the old grounds of the Beauval Indian Residential School in Northern Saskatchewan. While the building itself is no longer standing, the landscape remains rich with memories and emotions. As with any reunion of long lost friends, many stories were shared – of the awful taste of the daily morning porridge, the long winters spent away from family, the 'awful nuns' who would not allow cultural rituals of mourning for the loss of a parent or a sibling, the widespread fame of the school's hockey team, and the story most commonly told, was of the boundaries that separated boys and girls, even brothers and sisters. While there was laughter – the standing joke at the event was that the boys were standing for the first time on the "girls side", i.e. the "forbidden territory" – there were also tears, as people spoke of experiences of loss, isolation, dislocation, emotional neglect and physical and sexual abuse. Located on a large grassy field on Lac La Plonge Reserve, the organizers described the gathering as "the unfolding of a community working together for closure, healing and moving forward. It is to be a time of joy, of remembrance and of moving forward with strength, dignity and awareness". The event was advertised as a space of healing that was articulated through the language of 'closure and moving on' While adopting the discourse of healing, the event offered a space for social, cultural, and political engagement – with the underlying goal of 'righting' relationships. "Closure", as Elder and lead organizer Isador Campbell exclaimed, was about dealing with "the racism that was and has never been acknowledged". "We need to do things our way", Isador concluded, "we need to talk to people and then design our policies. That is how we know how to grow".*

What does it mean to ‘heal’ from the devastating consequences of past violence brought about as a result of residential schools? That is the question that I have asked throughout this research. The TRC is a centralized institution that operates within a mandate to facilitate healing in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and promote reconciliation between Canadian and Indigenous peoples. The Canadian Government has heavily promoted the healing power of the TRC and the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement while ignoring and undermining successful initiatives encouraging local healing and reconciliation. Naomi Adelson (2009) reminds us that large political acts of reconciliation are simply not comprehensive enough to promote lasting healing: “Inseparable from these broader political processes are diverse personal and community acts of recuperation, as people attempt to reconcile the embodied legacy of colonization” (275). The national TRC process has tended toward a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to an inherently complicated problem that engages national, regional, and local issues. Once we recognize this shortcoming in the TRC approach to healing, we can see the tensions and contradictions encountered during the implementation of a globalized, institutional process of truth-telling applied to resolve diverse and localized ‘traumas’ experienced by students enrolled in dozens of residential schools. Exploring the ethical landscape of healing in the TRC reveals some of the personal limits and political limitations of the institutional TRC process.

Though the ‘after-effects’ of the TRC are unknown, what the TRC plans to *do* with the stories that are collected remains a matter of great concern. Anthropology must continue to play an important role in critically examining the interpretation, translation and dissemination of testimonies. Since public testimony is a key component of the TRC mandate, it is crucial to explore how these narratives are embodied and performed, and the significance of these processes for individuals and communities. Although a dominant narrative of the Commission is that of truth and reconciliation, or “more explicitly, truth as reconciliation” (Robins 2010:84), not all survivors see the public telling of their past experiences as healing for themselves, for their families or their communities. Some people do not experience giving testimony at the TRC as ‘therapeutic’ or healing by itself. Indeed, many describe the process as a political one that neither contributes to, nor heals, the interpersonal relationships or the social structures that many describe as broken



because of the legacy of residential schooling and colonization. It is not enough that the stories are shared. Rather, just as important is the language in which the story is spoken, the manner in which the stories are received and the places where they are told. We must continue exploring the impact of Canada's TRC from local perspectives and the diverse social, cultural and political contexts in which survivors live.

Learning how to listen means acknowledging the structural causes of suffering as well as ongoing inequities. Many Indigenous peoples experience the legacy of residential schooling and colonization—processes that sought to assimilate and destroy Aboriginal cultures—as poverty and economic marginalization. Smyth (2001) explains, “poverty compromises health in general terms, and healing from the wounds of the past requires an environment in which safety, respect and willing and sympathetic listeners are available” (127). Yet, according to Fischer and Benson (2006), “there is a danger in the rhetoric of victimhood” as it becomes “easy” to reduce Indigenous peoples and communities “to nothing more than victims, to mere reactants to larger forces” (139). Confining the diversity of lived experiences into the label of victim – or ‘survivor’ – can also mask persistent inequalities that exist, potentially perpetuating and normalizing the very suffering that the institutional TRC process aims to alleviate in the first place. Despite claims that TRCs can legitimize and showcase the stories of victims to create personal healing and societal reconciliation, giving testimony can contribute to the marginalization and further victimization of the storyteller if their story is not ‘heard’ and acknowledged (Hackett and Rolston 2009).

Storytelling, however, can also create spaces of empowerment under the right conditions. As Dossa (2004) notes, “there is another side of the story, revealing that suffering cannot be subject to total appropriation, management and control. The process of marginalization generates alternative discourses, and sufferers continue to give voice to their concerns using multiple means of expression” (3). Having lived through residential schooling and its devastating legacy of violence and abuse “does not necessarily imply that one’s experience is circumscribed by this event, or even that one desires that it be reduced to this event” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:281). Despite the fact that many seek the recognition of ‘victimhood’ in order to receive compensation and public awareness of the injustices and harms they have experienced, survivors often use

testimonial spaces to tell fuller, more complicated stories about their lives that challenge their status as simply ‘victims’.

Learning how to listen must begin with exploring the complexity associated with storytelling and the range of expectations on the potential of ‘telling’ as a way of ‘healing’. We must recognize the strong sense of agency that is heard through storytelling, as survivors tell “their story of injustice and pain even in the face of a societal reluctance to listen” (Hacket and Rolston 2009:358). Survivor testimonies challenge the therapeutic assumption guiding many TRCs; that telling their story is not only about individual healing, but it is about demanding justice and social transformation. Yet through the formalized statement-gathering process, many survivors end up feeling frustrated that their stories may not receive the support and empathy or the societal response that they seek. Storytelling through the TRC may be seen as simultaneously empowering and disempowering depending on whether survivors feel that they are able to tell their stories ‘in safety’ and that their stories are able to ‘mobilize’ those who hear them to work together for societal change. Even the most powerful stories often have a limited effect because ‘official mechanisms’ such as Canada’s TRC, also “have their own agenda...within which the stories of victims can be merely a means to those ends, not fully acknowledged in their own right” (Hacket and Rolston 2009:370). While healing is the language that is being used in the national TRC, many survivors are also seeking ‘reconciliation’ and ‘redress’. As one survivor expressed before the Commission, “healing remains an issue of social justice” [TRC National Event, Saskatoon, 22 June, 2012]. Reconciliation is about redressing social inequities that requires dialogue, engagement and commitment on both sides.

Finally, learning how to listen suggests viewing the TRC as a structural and symbolic space where divergent goals, beliefs and cultural assumptions about healing intersect. LaDuke (2005) explains that “Indigenous spiritual practices and Judeo-Christian traditions are based on very different paradigms” and, as a result, have “over time, become a source of great conflict in the Americas” (12-13). While the healing discourse that frames the TRC is largely based upon Western biomedical conceptions of health and healing, this discourse encounters local and distinct cultural theories and processes of justice, memory, truth, and reconciliation. Bundy (2001) explains that “one

of the difficulties of discussing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission analytically is that one can too easily fail to recognize its power. I am referring to its emotional, cultural and symbolic power, and above all, to the potency and intensity of the testimony it elicited” (9). Thus, as he suggests, if one is to provide a critical analysis of the TRC, it is important “not to overlook its achievements or its political and moral substance” (Bundy 2001:9). Individual testimonies of suffering, as the foundation of the TRC’s work, have their own power, not in a ‘legal’ way, as Humphrey (2002) explains, but in an ‘empathetic’ one (106). The national TRC process constructs what Willie Ermine calls ‘an ethical space of engagement’, where multiple worldviews and local conceptions and diverse practices of healing come together. Notwithstanding significant linguistic, cultural and administrative distinctions among Indigenous peoples across the country, individuals and communities are coming together across the country as a ‘community of survivors’, linking healing to “broader issues of Indigenous self-determination and relations with the Canadian state and settler society” (Maxwell 2011:227). In fact, for many Indigenous people, the act of de-colonization “may be the most profound act of healing” (Cuthand 2009:6). As I have demonstrated throughout this research, elements of policies and institutional practices can, in certain times and places, serve as a space for Indigenous agency.

As researchers, how do we speak ‘with’ and not ‘for’ those whose stories we are being ‘gifted’ through the TRC process? We must recognize survivors both as storytellers and producers of knowledge’ (Dossa 2004:3). We must also reflect on the place of researchers and the responsibilities of settlers as witnesses to the process. As I was reminded throughout, as non-Indigenous researchers we have an ethical and a moral obligation to share the stories in a ‘good way’, by viewing our own responsibility as allies in the process of decolonization. Building a relationship which can serve as the basis for meaningful healing and reconciliation will not be easy, as it requires Canadians to actively foster and build relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit whom they encounter. As Elder Eugene Arcand told me at the beginning of our interview, “You represent that institution to me. You have to prove to me first, because we have been lied to by the administrators of this agreement. Mislead, half-truths, you know”. This deep mistrust can be a barrier to building a relationship, but it is important for Canadians to

remember and know that Indigenous peoples in Canada are more than just mistrustful victims, they are also skilled community builders who are working to knit communities back together even as the TRC works to stitch the nation together.

This thesis is not meant to undermine the positive associations people have of the TRC process or the healing power of storytelling. Nor, do I seek to evaluate the TRC's mandate to educate the general public about the Indian Residential School system. Rather my purpose is to highlight the ethics involved in asking survivors to publically recount their experiences at residential schools, which often recall intense violence, loss and grief. The question I have attempted to answer is not whether or not truth commissions heal, but rather to what extent does the national and public statement-gathering process succeed in creating a 'culturally safe space' that enables and supports diverse and local understandings of healing. The answer is inherently complex. Importantly, many survivors of violence speak out of a sense of obligation, because they were themselves both victims and witnesses of abuses suffered by friends and family in residential schools. As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel notes, witnesses bear a heavy burden: "If someone else could have written my stories, I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. My role is the role of the witness. Not to tell, or to tell another story, is...to commit perjury" (Felman 1992: 204). Despite the TRC's efforts to create a safe setting for people to tell their truth, some survivors prefer silence. Thus, the TRC is faced with the difficult task of creating an environment that appreciates the potential vulnerability and risk associated with engaging in the process of giving testimony, but also that respects and pays attention to local and everyday experiences of survival. As the TRC's statement-gathering process remains underway, we must continue exploring how the process is perceived and experienced by survivors as a space and a process of healing. Although I emphasize the importance of 'learning to listen' to the underlying meaning behind survivor testimonies, this is not a *study* of how testimonies are being received. Thus, an important avenue for future study is exploring how survivor testimonies are understood by the general public and the implications for community healing and 'national' reconciliation. Further research could also benefit from using a narrative approach, which could be a useful way to analyze themes that appear in the thousands of testimonies given to the TRC. In particular, this would help to understand individuals'

distinct and changing perspectives in different contexts. Attention to narratives also allows for a deeper exploration of the notion of ‘truths’ – not whether the events really occurred as they are being reported but rather the changing meaning of events for individuals.

As important as the work of the TRC is—even with all of the limitations and problems I outlined above—it struggles to reproduce a grounded sense of community because so much of the emphasis is on tragedy. As I learned in the four days at the Lac La Plonge community gathering, healing happens not only in testimonies and storytelling, it happens at round dances, comedy routines, and feasts. Lasting reconciliation means more than Canadians hearing stories of abuses at residential schools. It also means visiting reserves, Pow Wows, and when invited, participating in sweat lodges and sharing circles, spaces where First Nations, Métis and Inuit are at their strongest and most vibrant. In these spaces, tears can still be shed, but the power of people cannot be forgotten. These alternative spaces of healing are the most effective ‘ethical spaces’ because they remind us, Canadians, of the strength of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. Without this learning that Indigenous peoples have much to share with the nation and with our communities, without these multiple acts of sharing between peoples and cultures that happen spontaneously, it is hard to believe that meaningful reconciliation will happen. In short, to heal our nation, Canadians need to participate actively in reconciliation. A storyteller needs an active listener, or else the story and its morals fall on deaf ears and have little effect.

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