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Introductory Essay: Canada's Own Brand of Truth and Reconciliation?

Joanna R. Quinn
The University of Western Ontario, jquinn2@uwo.ca

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Introductory Essay: Canada's Own Brand of Truth and Reconciliation?

Abstract
The question of how societies might reach some kind of truth or reconciliation is complicated in post-conflict societies, where physical and social devastation is obvious. Yet in so-called "settler" societies, evidence of that kind of devastation, including the gross violation of human rights and blatant abuse, along with the lasting impact of that abuse, remains invisible to many, as outlined by the authors who have contributed to this special edition.

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LETTER FROM THE GUEST EDITOR - *Joanna R. Quinn*

Introductory Essay

Canada's Own Brand of Truth and Reconciliation?

The question of how societies might reach some kind of truth or reconciliation is complicated in post-conflict societies, where physical and social devastation is obvious. Yet in so-called "settler" societies, evidence of that kind of devastation, including the gross violation of human rights and blatant abuse, along with the lasting impact of that abuse, remains invisible to many, as outlined by the authors who have contributed to this special edition. The latter is, unfortunately, the case in Canada, where the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) operated from the 19th Century until the last school closed in 1996. Under that system, Aboriginal children were required to attend schools that would "take the Indian out of the child,"[1] a form of "aggressive assimilation."[2] Nearly 150,000 children of Aboriginal, Inuit and Métis origin were separated from their families and communities and forced to attend the schools.[3] There, they suffered unimaginable physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.[4]

In early 1998, in reporting on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, then-Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Jane Stewart offered "a solemn offer of reconciliation," which acknowledged the role of the Government of Canada in the Indian Residential Schools.[5] Although there had been significant negotiation between Aboriginal groups and the churches that had, in many cases, run the schools, the Government of Canada did very little until it finally signed the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* in 2006.[6] Among other things, the Settlement Agreement included the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC). And in 2008, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a "Statement of Apology," which stated: "Therefore, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this Chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal

[1] Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004).
[2] CBC News, "A history of residential schools in Canada," [FAQ on-line]; available from http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2008/05/16/f-faqs-residential-schools.html; accessed 21 April 2011.
[3] CBC News, "A history of residential schools in Canada."
[4] Indian Residential School Survivors' Society, "History," [article on-line]; available from http://www.irsss.ca/history/; accessed 21 April 2011.
[5] "Notes for an Address by the Honourable Jane Stewart, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, on the occasion of the unveiling of *Gathering Strength — Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*," Ottawa, Ontario, January 7 1998, [speech on-line]; available from http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/rqpi/apo/js_spea-eng.asp; accessed 21 April 2011.
[6] "A Condensed Timeline of Events," in *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*, eds. Marlene Brant Castellano, Linda Archibald, and Mike DeGagné (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008), 64-65.

peoples for Canada's role in the Indian Residential Schools system."[7] Stanton's essay in this collection clearly traces the events that led to the creation of the Settlement Agreement and, eventually, the TRC, as well as the lasting damage that was ultimately done by the Indian Residential Schools.

The TRC of Canada was finally appointed on June 1, 2008, with a five-year mandate.[8] That mandate is very clear about the seven goals of the TRC:

to acknowledge residential school experiences, impacts, and consequences;
to provide a holistic, culturally appropriate and safe setting for people to come forward;
to witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation;
to promote awareness and public education of Canadians about the Indian Residential Schools;
to create an historical record of the IRS system and its legacy;
to produce a report including recommendations;
and to support the commemoration of former IRS students and their families.[9]

The TRC Secretariat has been working to carry out these activities, through a series of national and community events, and through the gathering of statements, as well as through a rigorous research and documentation effort.

As the paper by Bonner and James in this collection demonstrates, however, the Canadian TRC is seen by many as a marked departure from truth commissions held in many other places across the globe. For example, it will not hold public hearings where witnesses are compelled to come forward, at least not in the manner that is traditionally understood within the transitional justice scholarship. Optimists view this as opening up space for a dialogue without fear of sanction on the part of those who will testify and otherwise provide information. Likewise, the TRC will not name the names of those who are responsible for the abuses that were carried out. The TRC's mandate prohibits this. Even without the naming of names, however, the Commission will still be engaged in the gathering of evidence that can help to build a narrative of truth, and that can fill in the many gaps that exist in the historical record. The research that is conducted and received, and the testimony that is gathered, will bring the abuses suffered in the Indian Residential Schools into sharper focus. This information can be of real benefit to the community.

The main difficulty is that while the Aboriginal community knows all too well what took place in the Indian Residential Schools, the dominant, "settler" community knows precious little—as

[7] "Prime Minister Harper offers full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian Residential Schools system," 11 June 2008 [speech on-line]; available from http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/rqpi/apo/index-eng.asp; accessed 21 April 2011.

[8] Justice Harry LaForme was appointed the first commission chair, but resigned in October 2008. Claudette Dumont-Smith and Jane Brewin Morley were appointed as commissioners, and stepped down June 1, 2009. The new chair is Justice Murray Sinclair, and the new commissioners are Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild.

[9] "Schedule 'N': Mandate for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Indian Residential Schools Agreement*; available from http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/pdfs/SCHEDULE_N_EN.pdf; accessed 31 May 2011.

Stanton points out in her essay, the dominant community was never consulted in the Settlement Agreement process. The stories that are emerging from the work of the TRC are simply not reaching the dominant community. For all the speeches, the remarks, and the agreements signed, the sum total does not seem to have impacted the wider Canadian society in any way. It is confounding that a developed society such as Canada has had no real uptake of these important issues, the recognition of which might spark the beginnings of a real transition within the broader society. Czyzewski points out in her essay in this collection that the TRC's educative function does not yet seem to have had any broad impact—nor has it lead to what Bonner and James call "reframing". As Czyzewski notes, "if Indigenous peoples are opening up and sharing painful stories to inactive ears, or not being heard at all, who is doing the transforming?" Canadians still seem wilfully unaware of these events.

The lasting impact of the TRC on the Aboriginal community as a whole in Canada is astonishingly small. The Government of Canada seems not to be prepared to alleviate the problems that the Indian Residential Schools system created, including unfulfilled treaty obligations, the non-recognition of rights, re-writing the *Indian Act*, re-working the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and other development-related issues. The Government is reluctant, even, to engage with Aboriginal peoples in a meaningful dialogue about what the issues are that are most important.[10]

The real benefit of the TRC process can and should be the acknowledgement and recognition of what happened in the Indian Residential Schools system—by the community from which the abuses were perpetrated. Czyzewski's argument about knowing the other's experience, demonstrates exactly that. My own work in the area of acknowledgement[11] and recognition has demonstrated the acute need for this kind of acknowledgement, and how it can contribute to the social well-being of communities and the broader society.

It is important for people in all parts of the broader society to begin to support the work of the TRC, by promoting a deeper understanding of what it can do, how it might begin to do that, and by engaging in its activities.

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[10] Christian Aboriginal Infrastructure Developments, "Meaningful Consultation in Canada: The Alternative to Forced Aboriginal Assimilation," [submission to Government of Canada on-line]; available from http://caid.ca/MeaCon092409.pdf; accessed 21 April 2011.

[11] Joanna R. Quinn, *The Politics of Acknowledgement: Truth Commissions in Uganda and Haiti*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010.