

Anna Cook
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A Politics of Indigenous Voice:
Reconciliation, Felt Knowledge, and Settler Denial

In a global era of apology and reconciliation, Canadians, like their counterparts in other settler nations, face a moral and ethical dilemma that stems from an unsavoury colonial past. Canadians grew up believing that the history of their country is a story of the cooperative venture between people who came from elsewhere to make a better life and those who were already here, who welcomed and embraced them, aside from a few bad white men.

Taiaiake Alfred, Foreword, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth-Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*

On June 11, 2008, the (now former) Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper made a Statement of Apology on behalf of the Canadian government for the Indian Residential Schools system (hereafter IRS)—“The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language” (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada). This Apology finalized the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which was sparked by thousands of lawsuits by IRS survivors.¹ The Prime Minister asserted that the IRS²—which was fundamental to the settler colonial endeavor of culturally, spiritually and legally devastating Native³ populations by separating children from their families and communities—“is a sad chapter in our history [which] has no place in our country” (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada). The official Apology was accompanied by the allotment of lump sums to the survivors of the IRS system, and the creation of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission

(hereafter the TRC).

The TRC was formally established on June 1, 2008 and has had a five-year mandate to focus on “a sincere indication and acknowledgement of the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people [...] as part of an overall holistic and comprehensive response to the IRS legacy” (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada). Crucially, the TRC does not have powers of subpoena to name names of people who have not yet been convicted.⁴ The TRC has the stated purpose of promoting public awareness about the IRS by undertaking a truth-telling and reconciliation process, and producing a report on the 150-year history of residential schools. As part of the truth-telling process, there have been seven national events that aim to engage and educate the Canadian public about the history of the residential school system through personal testimony from survivors.

The final report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, was published in December 2015. The report states that for over a century “the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada” (*Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* 1). It names the establishment and operation of Indian Residential School system as a policy of cultural genocide (under Article 2(e) of the UN’s Convention on Genocide) in that it sought to destroy structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group (3).⁵ The report is accompanied by Calls to Action to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation with respect to child welfare, education, language and culture, health, and justice (*Calls to Action* 2015).

The truth-telling events, as well as the final report seem to express a commitment to foreground the experiences of IRS survivors in order to face the legacy of Canada's colonial past, and to transform present-day relationships between Native and non-Native Canadians. The reconciliatory potential of the TRC rests, however, on how these expressions are heard and remembered.⁶

The creation of the TRC has been met with a fair amount of criticism from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. Paulette Regan and John Milloy have focused on the implications of a model of reconciliation that is grounded in a public confession that performs a form of voyeurism for a mostly settler audience; Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) has argued that the absence of significant material changes and the restitution of tribal lands means that talk of reconciliation is empty rhetoric; and Rosemary Nagy and Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) have respectively pointed out how the TRC positions the ills of colonialism strictly in the past and thus denies the realities of an ongoing settler colonial present.

Paulette Regan, the Research Director of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, sees the TRC as uncovering an uncomfortable "historical amnesia" of the IRS by a non-Native audience, which reveals the "continuing complicity in denying, erasing, and forgetting this part of our own history as colonizers while pathologizing the colonized" (Regan 6). At issue here is that the way non-Natives *hear* the voices of IRS survivors can either maintain this uncomfortable amnesia about past and ongoing colonial violence, or effectively disturb "the benevolent peacemaker myth that forms the basis of settler identity" (Taiaiake Alfred in Regan ix).⁷

The Commission's events meant to incite non-Natives to remember the country's colonial past, have to contend with a sustained ignorance of a settler colonial past and present.

For this reason, we must consider the epistemic conditions of speech that prevent the expression of past and present colonialism to be heard as meaningful, legitimate and self-affirming political expression. Without disrupting these underlying conditions of speech, I argue that the TRC cannot lead to meaningful reconciliation, but rather will end up affirming settler conceptions of the irrationality and pathology of Native communities.⁸ This is an entry point for a larger project of articulating settler denial as a distinct form of epistemology of ignorance. The task of an epistemology of ignorance is to examine the epistemological commitments that sustain what Charles Mills calls “consensual hallucinations” (Mills 18). In other words, I want to make sense of the government’s 2008 official Statement of Apology for the Residential School policy as an evil that has no place in our history, in light of the Prime Minister’s 2009 G20 address in which he proudly claimed that “Canada has no history of colonialism.”

It is with this concern about settler denial in mind that I argue that a Native feminist intervention is necessary in order to more fully identify and destabilize settler ways of hearing Native expressions of hurt, pain and anger. Such an analysis extends Coulthard’s criticism of the TRC’s framing liberal politics of recognition, insofar as it forcefully raises questions as to whose voices are heard as politically meaningful in a context of ongoing settler-colonialist, capitalist and heteropatriarchal violence.⁹ For this task, I turn to Dian Million’s (Tanana Athabascan) felt theory, which exposes the way testimonies of abuse and emotional expressions of internalized colonialism are heard as evidence of pathological victimhood. Million’s felt theory is especially insightful in locating the epistemological commitments that effectively limit the TRC’s decolonizing potential. Her analysis uncovers an internal tension within the TRC, which invites personal testimonies of abuse within the IRS, on the one hand, and pathologizes and depoliticizes these subjective and emotionally-charged accounts, on the other. Felt theory provides resources

to interrogate how settler-colonial conditions of speech prevent testimonies of abuse from being heard in *unsettling* ways that disturb the settler myth of Canada as a non-colonial nation.

Part 1: Felt theory and TRC's conditions of speech

Glen Coulthard's criticism of the TRC's model of reconciliation is situated within his systematic denunciation of Charles Taylor's politics of recognition that has framed Indigenous claims for self-determination in Canada.¹⁰ He rejects this recognition-based model of liberal pluralism whereby Indigenous claims to nationhood are reconciled through the "accommodation of Indigenous identities in some form of renewed relationship with the Canadian state" insofar as it *reproduces*, rather than transcends, a colonial structure of dominance (Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire" 438-9). He draws on Frantz Fanon's criticism of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic of recognition whereby self-consciousness arises through the process of externalization and mutual recognition, that is, through the recognition of another. Fanon contends that the dialectic of recognition breaks down in a colonial context in which "the terms of recognition [are] usually determined by and in the interests of the master (the colonizer)" (*Red Skins, White Masks* 148). Insofar as subjectivity is defined in terms of the recognition of the colonizer, the colonized's sense of self develops through the internalization of colonial recognition. Fanon affirms that this internalization often leads to psycho-affective attachments to these "master-sanctioned forms of recognition" ("Subjects of Empire" 439). In short, then, Coulthard affirms that a liberal politics of recognition can never address or dismantle relations of settler colonialism, but rather is doomed to reproduce them.

Although the Hegelian model of subjectivity favors ocular language—that is, it tells us that I recognize you as a subject to the extent that I *see* you see me—I argue that the model of

mutual recognition can be reframed in aural metaphors—I recognize you as subject to the extent that I *hear* you hear me. This reframing extends Coulthard’s criticism of the politics of recognition to a consideration of the conditions that prevent Native expression from being *heard* as politically legitimate forms of knowledge by a non-Native audience. This shift provokes an exploration of how emotional expression is taken up in the TRC. Coulthard affirms that the TRC defines ‘reconciliation’ as a necessary overcoming of reactive negative emotions, and as such, assumes the “‘good’ of forgiveness over ‘bad’ reactive emotions, unhealthy, irrational political violence” (*Red Skins, White Masks* 108). He affirms that this model of reconciliation draws on the Nietzschean characterization of pathological *ressentiment* as a form of negative dwelling in the past. Under this definition of reconciliation, Native expressions of the devastating impact of the IRS are heard as “reactive, backward and a passive orientation” (111). Importantly, he is concerned with the way in which the TRC locates the traumas of settler colonialism in the past, such that Native testimonies of the impact of the IRS are heard as a dwelling in the *past*, rather than as an expression of the impact of the ongoing violence of settler colonialism.¹¹ Against the characterization of Native expression of anger and pain as pathological *ressentiment*, Coulthard argues for the self-affirmative power of righteous anger that leads to direct political action (as exemplified in the Oka crisis, the Idle No More movement, and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement, amongst others). He maintains the importance of *transformative praxis* in purging the “psycho-existential complexes battered into [Indigenous populations] over the course of the colonial experience—a process of strategic desubjectification” (“Subjects of Empire” 450). Such on-the-ground practices are self-affirmative insofar as they reject the colonial master’s power of definition.

While Coulthard’s analysis of pathological *ressentiment* is helpful in understanding how

certain forms of expression are taken to be an unhealthy dwelling in the past (rather than as a reaction to a colonial *present*), his analysis falls short of interrogating the underlying epistemological commitments of the TRC. Importantly, we must consider the material and epistemic conditions of speech that create social and political barriers for the expression of past and present colonialism to be *heard* as meaningful, legitimate and self-affirming political expression. In this vein, I turn to Million's felt theory as a way to think through the way Native women have born "witness to felt colonial experience" (Million, *Therapeutic Nations* 75).¹² She argues that Indigenous Canadian women's embodied narratives that describe the "felt colonial experience" have fuelled a discursive shift in the histories of residential schooling (75).¹³ Their first person and experiential narratives of past and future pain, grief, and hope create a new language for communities to reveal and analyze "the moral affective heart of capitalism and colonialism" (55). In exploring the embodied, gendered and sexual nature of their colonization, these narratives of a felt history present a powerful challenge to the social control of internalized colonialism.

Million locates the decolonizing power of these voices in the fact that they bring out the private, and often shameful, experiences of sexual violence into the public conversation of Indigenous self-determination. Writers such as Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle and Ruby Slipperjack invigorated political discourse of Native self-determination with emotional knowledge in ways that disrupted settler-colonial silencing, and defied the logic of state recognition that pathologizes Native expression. In this respect, these narratives presented issues that "were thought to be politically *unspeakable*" (57—my emphasis). Importantly, they challenge the historical truths of "settler truth," and as such push the boundaries of what "the Canadian public [is] willing to hear" (58).¹⁴ Million writes, "our voices rock the boat and

perhaps the world” (55). She tells us, however, that the embodied knowledge of how colonialism is *felt*, such as first-person narratives that describe the felt experience of being raped by a priest at ten years old, has not been characterized as legitimate historical knowledge (72). Rather, they have been segregated as a “feminine” experience, as a polemic, or as evidence of pathological distress (they were too “bitter” or “biased”).¹⁵

This Indigenous feminist analysis reveals how underlying epistemological commitments play a role in replicating colonizing attitudes about the pathology of Indigenous communities in ways that maintain historical amnesia and settler denial. This has serious implications for an evaluation of the TRC, insofar as it considers how the settler audience may fail to hear Native experiential testimonies of colonial violence as a call to fundamentally rethink and remember their past. Unless settler denial—the willfully sustained ignorance of complicity in past and present settler colonialism—is challenged, the personal testimonies of sexual violence will fall on deaf ears, that is, on settler ears.¹⁶

One way to understand the TRC’s limited ability to disrupt settler denial within non-Native communities has to do with how the Statement of Apology has been read as the recognition of a historical wrong that marks the *resolution* of reconciliation, rather than the beginning of it as a meaningful process.¹⁷ Million argues that the TRC represents both a politically palatable and politically ineffectual approach to addressing the IRS legacy. It is palatable in that it reaffirms narratives of Native pathology in such a way as to frame the IRS as an ongoing *Native* problem, rather than as an ongoing settler colonial problem. It is politically ineffectual in that it individualizes these experiences without the possibility of legal action against the governmental bodies and churches responsible for systemic assault.

Such a critical evaluation of the TRC exposes the pressing need to trigger a non-Native

audience to hear testimonies of settler colonial violence in ways that disrupt settler denial. The underlying epistemological framework is such that subjective felt experiences of IRS survivors can be easily dismissed as overly emotional, or as a sign of individual pathology. While the TRC provides a national platform for IRS survivors to share their lived experiences, it does so within a context that does not validate these experiences as expressions of *ongoing* colonial violence and land dispossession. The decolonizing potential of the TRC in provoking a social accountability of past and present colonial violence is thus heavily mitigated.¹⁸ In this respect, the TRC amounts to the request of IRS survivors to perform a form of ‘colonial-exorcism’ for a non-Native audience in order to maintain the settler myth of Canada. As such, the TRC does not shatter this nation-fiction, but rather *performs* the narrative of Canada as benevolent peacemaker. It acknowledges the need for reconciliation, but in ways that limit the possibility of inciting meaningful conversation about ongoing settler-colonial violence.¹⁹ It thus assuages settler guilt, while perpetuating ignorance of the colonial past and present.

Million’s account complicates the TRC’s underlying epistemic claim that a collection of facts and testimonies can and will reconcile relationships between Native and non-Native Canadians. This is crucial to an understanding of settler denial as a form of epistemology of ignorance. Million’s analysis of felt theory exposes the underlying epistemological commitments of the TRC in ways that trouble the relationship between truth-telling and reconciliation by highlighting its performative contradiction of both encouraging emotional expression *and* dismissing it as apolitical non-knowledge. Although the final report of the TRC names the establishment of residential schools as a policy of “cultural genocide” (*Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* 3), that is, a policy that set out to destroy the political and social institutions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, it is not a report that can bring about

reconciliation²⁰ within current dominant epistemologies that support settler denial.

The epistemic presumption of the TRC is that the problem of settler denial is simply a lack of information, that we just need more information about the evils of the residential school system, since the government and the general public are just *unaware* of the violence perpetrated against Native peoples in Canada. Epistemologies of ignorance (that of Charles Mills and Linda Alcoff in particular) tell us, however, that the problem of settler denial is not explainable in terms of a *lack* of access to resources for knowledge and information. It is, or appears to be, a willful ignorance. There are mechanisms of ignorance that complicate the assumption that non-Native Canadians simply need to hear testimonies of residential school survivors in order to challenge their historical amnesia. Crucially, sustained settler denial in the face of the testimonies of IRS survivors relies upon an epistemology that delegitimizes emotional expression, in addition to sustaining a willful ignorance of Native tribes, treaties, and the violence of ongoing land dispossession. Over and above a lack of information, settler denial involves complicity in erasing and forgetting the “inconvenient truths” of past and ongoing settler colonialism.

Million’s felt theory, however, with its emphasis on first person and experiential narratives can better help disrupt Canada’s actively maintained historical amnesia. Felt theory articulates the possibility of hearing the experiential, subjective, and emotionally-charged testimonies in *unsettling* ways in that it provides an epistemology of emotional expression that recognizes and supports Indigenous self-determination.²¹ That is to say, felt knowledge can provoke settlers to become ethical witnesses and learn to listen differently—with a decolonizing ear—to the accounts of IRS survivors. Felt theory is essential in articulating how emotional expression can provoke “decolonizing, transformative learning” for a non-Native audience, insofar as it provides a framework for alternative ways of expression and knowledge (Regan 13).

The inclusion of felt narratives in Canadian history curriculum legitimates them as forms of embodied knowledge and expressions of profound social distress. In this vein, Regan calls for the need to “restory” the dominant version of history by making decolonizing space for Indigenous history through counter-narratives of diplomacy, law, and peacemaking practices as told by Indigenous peoples (6).

In sum, Million’s critical diagnosis of the de-legitimization of emotional expression has implications for the kinds of knowledge that are heard as politically meaningful. Moreover, I argue that her analysis implies that the personal testimonies of colonial violence within the TRC are not heard in ways that disrupt settler denial and actively sustained ignorance of Canadian’s colonial past and present. Felt theory provides resources to navigate this paradox, all the while provoking a settler audience to bear ethical witness to the first person and experiential accounts of ongoing settler colonialism. Although the current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has recently issued a statement saying that “as a father and a former teacher, I am overwhelmingly moved by these events, and that this is a time of real and positive change [towards] a total renewal of the relationship between Canada and Indigenous peoples [and that] we have a plan to move towards a nation-to-nation relationship based on recognition, rights, respect, cooperation and partnership,” I believe that the calls to action within the final report of the TRC first require this important shift in epistemic practices in order to disrupt settler denial (“Statement”).

Notes

1. The Statement of Apology came in the shadow of the dissolution of the Alternative Dispute Resolution in 2005 that unsuccessfully settled thousands of survivor lawsuits. At the time of the Settlement Agreement, 14,903 survivors had filed claims against the government, making it the largest out-of-court settlement agreement in Canadian history.

2. The Indian Residential Schools system has been referred to as “Canada's greatest national shame” (Stanton 1). Beginning in the 1880s, the Canadian government sought to assimilate Indigenous children by requiring, under the Indian Act of 1876, their attendance at church-run schools. Over 150, 000 children were separated from their families and communities and sent far away to schools where they were forbidden to speak their languages, practice their spirituality or express their cultures.

3. I will use the terms “Indigenous,” “Aboriginal” and “Native” interchangeably.

4. Rosemary Nagy has traced the origin of the TRC as a hybrid model between a judicially-based public inquiry and a truth commission (Nagy, “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada”).

5. The report affirms that for over a century, the goal of Canada’s Aboriginal policy was “to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada” (*Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* 1).

6. Christine Koggel explores the TRC’s model of rebuilding relationships with respect to Sue Campbell’s account of relational remembering. She is critical of the TRC’s motive to recognize the harm of the IRS by attempting to put the ills of colonialism behind ‘us’ (Koggel

502).

7. The denial of Canada as a colonial country can be forcefully seen in Stephen Harper's 2009 G20 address in which he proudly claimed that "Canada has no history of colonialism".

8. This line of criticism remains in dialogue with Taiaiake Alfred and Glen Coulthard's respective criticisms that the absence of significant material changes and the restitution of tribal lands means that talk of reconciliation is empty rhetoric that remains entrenched in liberal politics of recognition.

9. This follows Andrea Smith's analysis that a Native feminist analysis is one that critically engages settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy and capitalism (Smith).

10. Coulthard cites the 2005 policy position issued by Canada's largest Aboriginal organization, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), in which self-determination is defined "around a vision of the relationship between First Nations and Canada which would lead to strengthening recognition and implementation of First Nations' governments" (Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire" 438).

11. Such an example of ongoing colonial legislation is the passing of Bill C-45, which introduces significant changes to Canada's Navigable Water Act, the Indian Act, and the Environmental Assessment Act among other pieces of federal legislation, and which unilaterally undermines Aboriginal and treaty rights (Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks* 127).

12. Million borrows the language of "bearing witness" as it is used by survivors of the Jewish Holocaust (75).

13. Million focuses on Maria Campbell's (Métis) 1973 *Halfbreed*; Ruby Slipperjack's (Ojibwe) 1987 *Honour the Sun: Extracted and Revised from the Diary of the Owl*; and Lee Maracle's (Stó:lō Nation) 1990 *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*.

14. Matt James contends that Canada's victim-centered TRC performs a carnivalesque "symbolic reparation" that reverses the dominance-submission logic by foregrounding the voices of survivors in ways that trouble settler truths (James 189). This, however, can only happen within a context in which these voices are meaningfully heard.

15. It is for this reason that Million worries that the emphasis on historical trauma can situate Native communities as static victims in ways that obscure ongoing activities of self-determination.

16. Recent work in the epistemology of ignorance, as developed by Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan, argues that ignorance is not a lack of knowledge, but is rather actively produced and maintained, often to one's social benefit (Tuana and Sullivan).

17. Nagy tells us that Chief Robert Joseph, head of the Indian Residential Schools Survivors' Society, affirms that dialogue of reconciliation must be placed within a spiritual context, as "an intervention in settled understandings of identity and place" (Nagy, "The Scope and Bounds of Transitional Justice" 69).

18. This is not to suggest, however, that the sharing of experiences of violence cannot be empowering for IRS survivors. But rather that the focus on individual experiences fails to address the *structural* violence of the IRS (Nagy, "The Scope and Bounds of Transitional Justice").

19. This can be seen in the Canadian government's defunding of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) in 2010. The AHF supports Indigenous healing programs through 145 community-based projects (Nagy, "Truth, Reconciliation and Settler Denial" 358).

20. The final report notes the amorphous definition of reconciliation throughout the truth-telling events, yet officially defines reconciliation as "an ongoing process of establishing and

maintaining respectful relationships” (*Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* 16).

21. This is not to suggest, however, that a change in epistemology in itself will bring about political change. Rather, a consideration of the political role of embodied knowledge is crucially in identifying the epistemological limitations of the TRC, and the structural paradox of both asking for emotional expression, and for pathologizing that very same emotional expression.

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