

Exploring the Limits of Testimony: Contextualizing Truth and Reconciliation in Canada
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In the last several decades, there has been growing international interest in the process of reconciliation as a means to deal with the legacies of systematic, state-sanctioned violence. Truth Commissions are one way in which the process of reconciliation can take shape. Since the 1970s, there have been over two-dozen truth commissions around the world. South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Guatemala are among the many nations that have employed a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) to come to terms with their violent and contested pasts.¹ Generally, these commissions are based on the premise that dialogue about past crimes, oppression, violence and abuse can alleviate the suffering of the victims and ease the relationship between oppressed and oppressor. They recognize that certain narratives have been left out and/or denied within discourses of national history. An underlying assumption is that incorporating these narratives into the national fabric can transform the nation's political landscape, and provide a means for individual and national healing.

On June 1st, 2008, a truth and reconciliation commission was established in Canada. Entitled the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRS TRC), it focuses on the abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal children who were separated, and in many cases forcibly taken, from their families and placed in Indian Residential Schools (IRS).²

¹ For background information on many of these commissions see Hayner (2002).

² I use the term "Aboriginal" to refer to Inuit, Métis and First Nation populations. Each

Generally, truth commissions rely on the taking of testimonies in order to establish the truth in relation to a contested past. For the purposes of this short paper, I would like to focus on the role of testimony in processes of reconciliation and healing. Because the IRS TRC is still in its early stages, I will use an example from one of the most well-known TRCs, the South African case to explore several questions: What are the structural constraints of these commissions? How do testimonies circulate during and after truth commissions? Can alternative forms of healing and truth-telling be given a voice through national processes of reconciliation? And what are the limits of testimony in reconciling with the past?

While testimonies can allow for new voices to be heard in the public sphere, they can also over-emphasize the role of language in the process of healing. By promoting a “talking cure,” the testimonial genre relies heavily on psychoanalytic theories of trauma and can overlook other forms of healing, including traditional rituals (Kelm 1998; see also Gone 2008). Certain narratives are elicited more than others in truth commissions (Slaughter 2007), and the dominant culture still manages the ways in which these testimonies circulate and reconstruct national identity (Whitlock 2006; Jelin 2003). In many cases, the individual who testifies comes to stand for a larger community, and the testimony may become part of a discourse, separated and disconnected from its origin.³ And even as truth commissions appear to empower oppressed groups, they can also

was affected by the IRS system. My intention is not to flatten the differences between these distinct groups.

³ Many of the discourses of collective trauma focus on the Holocaust as the paradigmatic site of the ethical and moral questions of bearing witness (see Agamben 2002, LaCapra 2001 and Laub 2009 or example). Other authors question this emphasis and draw attention to the ways in which the Holocaust has produced a discourse that has influenced the way in which other genocides or cases of extreme human suffering are dealt discussed (Miller and Tougaw 2002; Rothberg 2009).

define and constrain their possible narratives.

In addition, TRCs often focus on the victimization of a group, not the creative strategies for the continued survival of that group. Aboriginal peoples have shown remarkable resilience in re-invigorating their languages and cultures after decades of policies meant to destroy them (Epps 2003). These experiences are generally not given a voice or audience through TRCs. While most would agree that it is imperative that the IRS history becomes widely known, the ways in which that knowledge is elicited and shaped remains a controversial issue. For example, the commission is set up around the principle that people will *voluntarily* participate in the process. This will undoubtedly result in a lack of testimonies given by perpetrators of violence.

In one of the most celebrated (and criticized) commissions, the South African TRC, there was a strong emphasis on both the victims and perpetrators giving their accounts. In Canada, it is unlikely that this will be the case. In fact, the mandate of the TRC expressly states that unless an individual has given their consent or been recognized in a court of law for any wrongdoing, he or she cannot be named and the commission is obligated to “anonymize” the statement.⁴ The naming of names is an important step towards justice, and the commission may continue to face criticism on this point.

One of the limitations of the genre of testimony is that there is an emphasis on the person who speaks, the person who is giving the testimony. This is, of course, necessary. But what can get lost is a focus on listening. To discuss this dynamic, this relationship between the speaking and the listening of testimony, I want to turn to a specific example

⁴ The IRS TRC mandate is available online at http://www.trc-cvr.ca/pdfs/SCHEDULE_N_EN.pdf

from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (Although I recognize the differences in the Canadian and South African cases, and the difficulties in drawing comparisons between these two different commissions, I do think that there is much to be learned through some comparative work.) In particular, I will focus on one specific, puzzling testimony, given to the South African TRC in 1996 by Mrs. Konile, whose son was killed by apartheid security forces in 1986. A recent book has been published about this testimony, co-authored by Antjie Krog (an Afrikaner poet and journalist), Nosisi Mpolweni (Xhosa lecturer and linguist) and Kopano Ratele (psychologist). The book is entitled *There Was This Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* and the authors spend the bulk of the book discussing one particular testimony, given by Mrs. Konile. This testimony was difficult to understand for many reasons – it did not follow a linear trajectory, it mixed her dream life with her waking life, and made reference to cultural and traditional symbols that would have been difficult for outsiders of her culture to understand. Add to that that her testimony was translated from Xhosa to English and transcribed, and one begins to understand how difficult it may be to comprehend one not-so-simple testimony. The authors of *There Was This Goat*, which is a line from Mrs. Konile’s testimony given to the TRC, embark on a journey of understanding as they imagine conversations about this testimony and begin to discuss with Mrs. Konile her experience of losing her son, with the truth commission and its aftermath. In one section of the text, where the authors imagine a conversation between two black South Africans, one says to the other:

To fully understand our words you have to understand a whole history of fear, hiding, running, evading, and still trying to maintain a sense of dignity and a life worth something. To truly hear Mrs. Konile’s truth, and the truth of most of the black people who testified at the Truth Commission hearings, you have to work

hard to understand it, you have to gain our trust. It's not going to be given to you just like that, because you may turn and use it against us, as happened many, many times under apartheid (32).

This passage deals with the issue of ethical listening. As Borisoff and Purdy (1991) write, ethical listening involves putting forth an “effort to listen as much as we are able and with as much openness and empathy as we can muster” (15).⁵ In the Canadian case, where testimonies will for the large part be taken in private, what does it mean to be an ethical listener? What knowledge is brought to the table by all sides? What requests? What demands? And for what ends? In relation to the South African commission, Krog writes: “We listen to one another’s stories so that we share carrying the truth. But we also listen to stories in order to become, for one brief moment, somebody changed. At the end of the story we do not want to be the same person as the one who started listening” (19). The process can be transformative for both the person who gives the testimony and for those who listen.

In the Canadian context, in part because the IRS TRC is still in its relatively early stages, the emphasis has been on the gathering of testimonies. As the commission moves forward, ethical listening will have to play a role as well. For example, in Prime Minister Harper’s official apology in June of 2008, he discussed the abuse and neglect within the IRS system, and went on to mention the cycles of violence these practices engendered. “The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long,” Harper said.

⁵ At the Breaking the Silence Conference in September, 2008, Roger Simon discussed the difficulties of ethical listening, the power relations involved, and the inequalities in relation to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Robina Thomas also deals with this issue at the same conference. These talks are available online at <http://www.creum.umontreal.ca/spip.php?article938>

“The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country.” With these words he voiced a national duty to remember.⁶ He called upon survivors to share their stories and called on everyone to listen. The IRS TRC has been created to facilitate the sharing of these memories. But the questions remain: what is involved in this process? And who are the beneficiaries when traumatic pasts are shared?

The Canadian commission has the potential to expand what is generally thought of as testimony. Part of the mandate for the IRS TRC involves the staging of seven “national gatherings.” Because testimonies will be taken in private, the national gatherings comprise the public face of the commission. These will occur over the course of the five-year mandate.⁷ As has been discussed by the Chair of Commission, Justice Murray Sinclair, these events will allow survivors the opportunity to share their stories through many means including artwork, dance, song and story-telling.

As has been noted by the Commission itself, reconciliation is a process that will stretch beyond the Commission’s five-year mandate. Consequently, the Commission cannot structure its goals around *achieving* reconciliation, for reconciliation is an ongoing process. Instead, the Commission must focus on creating a *climate of reconciliation*, where the process can be continued after the IRS TRC mandate has been completed. Of course, the IRS TRC is not only about collecting testimonies and conducting research, but can also be about fostering an *environment of listening*. It must be able to produce dialogue within and across communities. It is important that the TRC not decontextualize the IRS system from the larger system of colonial oppression. In other words,

⁶ Further complicating the legacy of the IRS system are those former students and families who recall the system as positive (Whitlock 2006).

⁷ The first event will be held in Winnipeg from June 15 – June 19, 2010.

connections between the IRS system and the *current* cultural and political climate must be made. This is what I hope the preceding South African example illustrates, that the testimonies given at truth commissions have the potential to circulate in unexpected ways, and that ethical listening involves the active engagement of these testimonies. Ethical listening is political as well as personal. It involves drawing connections, feeling implicated, and to grasp at understanding, even when it is difficult.

The opportunities and challenges of the IRS TRC are vast. In Canada, the way in which the IRS TRC unfolds may change the way the nation's history and identity are imagined. It has the potential to help the healing process and change Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. Internationally, the IRS TRC could impact where and how techniques of transitional justice are implemented in other nations, as well as on the strategies that indigenous peoples might mobilize around redress for colonial pasts. Through the use of testimonies (as well as other means) truth commissions may allow new narratives to become integrated into national histories. But it is important to note that it may also potentially create new silences. In any case, the task of reconciliation, if ever attainable, is a process that will take many years, far beyond the five years of the commission's mandate.

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