
A Carnival of Truth? Knowledge, Ignorance and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Matt James*

Abstract¹

This article examines the ongoing work of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which is charged with addressing that country's past policy of attempting forcibly to assimilate indigenous children in residential schools. It examines the TRC's mandate and its activities while assessing the Commission's conceptions of truth and reconciliation by placing these ideas in their societal context and explaining how they appear to have been produced. As the article shows, these conceptions reflect the prior struggles of victims against particular Canadian forms of indifference and denial, struggles that have led the TRC to take what recent literature calls a 'victim-centred' and, following Mikhail Bakhtin and Teresa Phelps, 'carnavalesque' approach. Despite the TRC's impressive strengths, the author argues that its approach unfortunately fosters the absence of a more detailed and accountability-promoting examination of the agents and institutions responsible for the injustices. Ultimately, this article is about the underlying sociology of knowledge production that shapes the Canadian TRC.

Keywords: truth commission, Canada, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, indigenous, residential schools

Introduction

Elite control and manipulation are widespread in processes devoted ostensibly to transforming societies marked by gross violations of human rights. States purport to repair their wrongs with half-measures that fail to address the systems of domination that produced the violations in the first place.² Authorities commemorate episodes of mass trauma with memorials and observances that position

* Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Victoria, Canada. Email: mattjame@uvic.ca

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² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'Abortive Rituals: Historical Apologies in the Global Era,' *Interventions* 2(2) (2000): 171–186. Also see, Andrew Woolford, 'The Limits of Justice: Certainty, Affirmative Repair, and Aboriginality,' *Journal of Human Rights* 3(4) (2004): 429–444.

officialdom not as the source of injustice but as the agent of nonrepetition and redemption.³

These are important problems to consider when analysing the response to atrocity considered in this article: Canada's Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As indigenous governance scholar Jeff Corntassel and philosopher Cindy Holder have shown, several recent apology and truth commission processes professing to deal with wrongs done to native peoples have buried indigenous concerns under a preemptive focus on regime legitimization and national unity.⁴ Yet, the Canadian TRC may be less susceptible to such problems of top-down manipulation and control; it takes a more bottom-up or, to use an emergent keyword in the transitional justice literature, 'victim-centred' approach to addressing injustice.⁵

Victim-centred truth commissions eschew the state-driven or expert-directed focus sometimes observed when an elite team is charged with finding answers to particular questions posed, or indeed legally specified, by a transitional regime or intervening international body.⁶ By contrast, victim-centred commissions aim to foster grassroots processes of rebuilding driven by the voices and aspirations of atrocity survivors. While evaluating the Canadian TRC's victim-centred approach is the main purpose of this article, I also raise more general doubts about possible limitations of victim-centred approaches in contexts where the perpetrators and beneficiaries of the injustices continue to be socially dominant.

In Canada, the victim-centred route itself amounts to an undertaking of partial symbolic reparation for the injustices of the residential school system. The boarding schools that indigenous children were forced to attend under a century-long policy of cultural assault were sites of horrific physical and sexual abuse. They also represented a colonial attempt to eliminate self-governing peoples by replacing their ways and knowledge with those of the settler majority.⁷ Thus, by focusing on the voices and truths of former residential school students, the Commission enacts a form of ongoing symbolic reversal of the power relations and colonial

³ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴ Jeff Corntassel and Cindy Holder, 'Who's Sorry Now? Government Apologies, Truth Commissions, and Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia, Canada, Guatemala, and Peru,' *Human Rights Review* 9(4) (2008): 465–489. Also see, Steven Winter, 'Legitimacy, Citizenship and State Redress,' *Citizenship Studies* 15(6–7) (2011): 799–814.

⁵ While not using the terms, Teresa Godwin Phelps' *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) is based on a contrast between victim- and perpetrator-centred approaches. Also see, Alexander Dukalskis, 'Interactions in Transition: How Truth Commissions and Trials Complement Each Other,' *International Studies Review* 13(3) (2011): 432–451; John B. Hatch and Aaron David Gresson III, *Race and Reconciliation: Redressing Wounds of Injustice* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 2009).

⁶ Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁷ Andrew Woolford, 'Ontological Destruction: Genocide and Canadian Indigenous Peoples,' *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 4(1) (2009): 81–97.

knowledge assumptions that were embodied in the schools and that continue to be woven into Canadian institutions and society today.⁸

The TRC's victim-centred approach also reflects the priorities articulated by former residential school students in their struggles against Canadian indifference and denial. Over the course of a decade, authorities first rejected the students' claims of injustice and then attempted variously to resist, evade and callously minimize the country's reparative obligations in relation to the schools. This official intransigence made the struggle for a truth commission one about voice and respect. Residential school survivors demanded that Canada open up, listen, learn and start taking responsibility for the damage caused. The Commission is their victory and tribute.

Yet, this article raises concerns about how this victim-centred approach operates in the Canadian context. As I argue below, the reluctance of a powerful society and state to undertake discomfiting forms of introspection intersects with the TRC's victim-centred focus in unfortunate ways. Official obstinacy, self-interested majoritarian complacency and a sharply delimited investigative mandate make it difficult for the Commission to uncover and convey in appropriately detailed ways the individual and institutional acts of Canadian decision making responsible for the innumerable injustices associated with the schools. In short, these various pressures and limitations all combine to emphasize the experiences of victims over the deeds of perpetrators. The result may well be to sacrifice the kinds of accountability that robust truth commission processes are typically expected to promote.⁹

To be clear, this article is not intended as a critique of the Canadian TRC. Ultimately, what it offers is a basic sociology of the knowledge production arising from the interaction of a victim-centred campaign, a victim-centred Commission and a society dominated by the institutional perpetrators and individual beneficiaries of the injustices.

Canada's Residential Schools Policy and the Creation of the TRC

For more than a century, Canada's federal government operated a policy that took roughly 150,000 children from their families and placed them in residential schools operated by the country's major Christian denominations. The last residential school closed in 1996, although the process of phasing out the schools had begun in the early 1970s. The schools were established to eradicate indigenous languages and cultures, a goal they sought to achieve by separating children from their families and communities, denigrating indigenous traditions and ways and

⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

⁹ On accountability, see, Colleen Murphy, 'Political Reconciliation, the Rule of Law, and Genocide,' *European Legacy* 12(7) (2007): 853–865.

practising punitive forms of quasimilitary discipline.¹⁰ Physical and sexual abuse were rampant in the schools and shockingly high mortality rates from disease and neglect were common.¹¹ The residential schools also advanced a broader agenda of colonization; by attacking indigenous capacities for cultural reproduction, the schools aimed to ensure that distinct self-governing Aboriginal communities would no longer exist.¹²

From at least 1990, survivors and affected communities fought for an official inquiry that would investigate and publicize the outrages associated with the schools. These efforts bore fruit in 2005, when, following the precedent of democratizing regimes elsewhere, the Canadian federal government, the main Christian churches and the official organizations representing Inuit, Inuvialuit and on-reserve First Nations agreed to hold a truth commission.¹³ The present TRC of Canada began its work in 2009.¹⁴

Victim-Centred Truth Commissions and the Idea of the Carnavalesque

Although they have many different emphases and dimensions, victim-centred approaches treat truth as a multifaceted and deeply experiential reality that is best approached by hearing the diverse voices of survivors of state-inflicted trauma on their own terms. The question of victim-centredness is above all a question of how a commission approaches the business of gathering and conveying truth. To say that a commission is victim-centred involves making judgements concerning the direction of the commission's truth-gathering activities and, in particular, looking at the individuals and organizations with which it interacts. This does not mean that the commission has been directed by or is even serving the interests of victims. For example, although the Sierra Leone TRC was clearly victim-focused in terms of the prevailing character of its processes and inquiries, victims have criticized it for taking inadequate account of their needs

¹⁰ J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). Also see, John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999).

¹¹ Paul Hackett, 'From Past to Present: Understanding First Nations Health Patterns in a Historical Context,' *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 96(1) (2005): 17–21.

¹² Roland David Chrisjohn, Sherri Lynn Young and Michael Maraun, *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada*, rev. ed. (Madison, WI: Theytus Books, 2006).

¹³ In Canada, indigenous or Aboriginal peoples include Inuit, Inuvialuit (both peoples of the far North and Arctic) and First Nations. A distinctive people descended from unions with European settlers, Métis are recognized in Canada's constitution as Aboriginal peoples. For clarity, this article will use 'indigenous' to describe First Nations, Inuit and Inuvialuit peoples.

¹⁴ The current Commission replaces its predecessor, which was established in 2008, but whose chair and two co-commissioners resigned amid strong disagreement. The name was soon changed to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. See, Bill Curry, 'At Reconciliation Commission, Key Positions Remain Unfilled,' *Globe and Mail*, 23 December 2009.

for material reparation.¹⁵ More broadly, contributors to the 2007 special issue of this journal on gender and transitional justice point out that a general blindness to the experiences of women in conflict and to their postconflict needs still tends to characterize what might be regarded, at least ostensibly, as victim-centred processes.¹⁶

It is important to emphasize that there is also considerable variation within the universe of victim-centred commissions. Famously, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's victim-centred approach featured public hearings at which victims or their loved ones could confront perpetrators with their pain, anger and questions.¹⁷ The Argentinean National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons began by focusing on the military junta's 'disappeared' victims, but wound up unearthing unexpectedly detailed information about the perpetrators and architects of the injustices.¹⁸ For its part, the Liberian TRC used diverse civil society partnerships, workshops and art projects to access the multifarious truths of victims.¹⁹

Despite this diversity, victim-centred commissions are analytically distinguishable from those that take a primarily perpetrator-centred approach to gathering and conveying truth. In the latter approach, the commission in question tends to focus less on the voices, needs and experiences of victims and more on their witness testimony to ascertain the deeds, conduct and levels of responsibility of perpetrators.²⁰ A typical example of this focus is the Nuremberg Trials, which dealt with Holocaust survivor testimony only to the extent that doing so was relevant to securing the criminal convictions of those who had been charged.²¹ While Nuremberg was not a truth commission exercise, pointing to its singular concern with determining questions of wrongdoing and responsibility is a way of highlighting the basic focus that distinguishes perpetrator- from victim-centred commissions.

In her landmark study, legal scholar Teresa Godwin Phelps argues that the very nature of a perpetrator-centred commission is likely to marginalize survivor perspectives and needs.²² This concern reflects a broader contemporary

¹⁵ Gearoid Millar, 'Assessing Local Experiences of Truth-Telling in Sierra Leone: Getting to "Why" through a Qualitative Case Study Analysis,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4(3) (2010): 477–496.

¹⁶ See, Ruth Rubio-Marín and Pablo de Greiff, 'Women and Reparations,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(3) (2007): 318–337; Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Eilish Rooney, 'Underenforcement and Intersectionality: Gendered Aspects of Transition for Women,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(3) (2007): 338–354.

¹⁷ Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson, eds., *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Emilio Crenzel, 'Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons: Contributions to Transitional Justice,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 2(2) (2008): 173–191.

¹⁹ Ezekiel Pajibo, 'Civil Society and Transitional Justice in Liberia: A Practitioner's Reflection from the Field,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(2) (2007): 287–296.

²⁰ Phelps, *supra* n 5.

²¹ Ruti Teitel, 'Transitional Justice Genealogy,' *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 16 (2003): 69–94.

²² Phelps, *supra* n 5.

dissatisfaction with traditional transitional justice mechanisms, which, as Jay Aronson observes

have tended to be designed primarily to facilitate political transition and enable the rehabilitation of existing political and social institutions rather than to ameliorate the suffering of ordinary people who were directly exposed to daily violence and deprivation during times of conflict.²³

With respect to truth commissions, then, a focus on using victim testimony solely as a basis for establishing forensic, and perhaps legally or politically usable, perpetrator-related ‘facts’ means survivors are only heard to the extent that they are answering the questions or addressing the issues that prosecutors, public historians or other truth commission personnel have deemed relevant. In Chile, for example, survivors wishing to testify about experiences of politically motivated rape were ignored by the National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, which had decided that the urgency of gaining forensic information about state-ordered murders trumped other considerations.²⁴

As the Chilean case suggests, the problem with perpetrator-centred approaches is not necessarily one of bad faith. It is more fundamentally one of treating survivors as mere instruments for uncovering perpetrator identities and misdeeds, leading to a downplaying of their perspectives and hopes. By instrumentalizing the voices of victims, a perpetrator-centred focus risks attempting to transform an unjust political community while maintaining the same patterns of exclusion and silencing that may have riddled the old. Mindful of these considerations, Phelps praises the Argentinian and South African Commissions for their attempts to honour the authentic and diverse voices of victims.²⁵ As the South African Commission put it, a need for ‘reclaiming victims’ spaces’ meant that the commission ‘wanted to ensure that [its] summaries [would] tell the stories of the victims and . . . not become about the perpetrators.’²⁶ Several recent commissions have been inspired by the South African example. They have moved beyond expert-directed and forensic truth-gathering processes to emphasizing self-directed survivor testimony, diverse civil society participation and grassroots projects.²⁷ In addition to the South African, Sierra Leonean and Liberian examples cited above, Uruguay and Peru are notable cases.²⁸

²³ Jay D. Aronson, ‘The Strengths and Limitations of South Africa’s Search for Apartheid-Era Missing Persons,’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5(2) (2011): 262.

²⁴ Phelps, *supra* n 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 7 (Cape Town: Juta, 1998), 3.

²⁷ Teitel, *supra* n 21.

²⁸ For a description of the activities of the two Commissions, see, Cynthia E. Milton, ‘At the Edge of the Peruvian Truth Commission: Alternative Paths to Recounting the Past,’ *Radical History Review* 98 (2007): 3–33; Eugenia Allier, ‘The Peace Commission: A Consensus on the Recent Past in Uruguay,’ *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 81 (2006): 87–96. While Jeff Cornstassel and Cindy Holder criticize the Peruvian commission for ignoring indigenous concerns (*supra* n 4), the point here is simply that its focus on individual voices and diverse modes of truth telling cleaved to the victim-centred model.

Victim-centredness is more than a matter of dignity and respect. It is also a matter of transformative potential. Phelps conveys this point by discussing the notion of the ‘carnavalesque.’²⁹ The idea of the carnivalesque, developed by the anti-Stalinist Soviet cultural critic and touchstone for the cultural studies movement, Mikhail Bakhtin, evokes the transgressive potential of medieval festivals, with their antiauthoritarianism, reversal of hierarchy and suspension of routine.³⁰ In using the descriptive term ‘carnavalesque,’ Phelps does not portray the victim-centred commission as a mere flight of fancy or some playful site of recreation; she means instead to highlight the dramatic reversal of dominant assumptions and routines that victim-centred approaches typically entail. Just as the medieval carnival was a ‘world upside down,’ where the popular and polyphonic trumped the monologic and official, so the carnivalesque truth commission rejects the sterile legalism of the bureaucratic state and its fora. It puts victims of injustice in charge and makes room for diverse truths and diverse forms of truth telling. It does not seek to impose closure or create for nation-building purposes some kind of singular, official truth. Indeed, it reverses the dominance–submission logic of state-inflicted atrocity by foregrounding the voices and truths that atrocity sought previously to stifle. Its promise is that repudiating the assumptions and modalities of the original injustices with symbolically potent, grassroots processes of political prefiguration might allow new kinds of politics to take hold.

Considering the potential of the carnivalesque helps us to grasp the importance of a victim-centred approach in the Canadian context. Changing Canada’s colonial relationship with indigenous communities – a relationship that has deprived those communities of the freedom to pursue their own destinies – requires not just standard, elite-driven methods of historical inquiry and redress, but also methods that, in their design and operation, repudiate colonial assumptions. A victim-centred truth commission could be an important instance of this kind of purpose and focus.

Yet, there are also good *a priori* reasons, which we can distil from earlier debates in cultural studies, for at least some scepticism about the carnivalesque political imaginary. Consider, for example, literary critic Terry Eagleton’s disdain for the temporary and licensed nature of the liberty found in the medieval carnival, or political anthropologist Georges Balandier’s warning: ‘The supreme ruse of power is to allow itself to be contested ritually in order to consolidate itself more effectively.’³¹ Analogous concerns have been raised in the transitional justice literature about the apparent move away from traditionally perpetrator-centred retributive

²⁹ Phelps, *supra* n 5.

³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

³¹ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso 1981); Georges Balandier, *Political Anthropology*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Allen Lane, 1970). Both authors are cited in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 13–14.

processes. For example, Ruti Teitel wonders whether a diminished emphasis on legal truths and definitive judgements brings with it a correspondingly diminished focus on redesigning institutions and redistributing property and power.³² In indigenous-settler contexts, then, one could ask whether a carnivalesque truth commission might amount to a ‘politics of distraction,’ yet another exercise of ‘affirmative repair’ or ‘settler magic’ aimed at staving off demands for the restitution of stolen lands.³³ What can we learn by examining the Canadian TRC?

Canada’s Victim-Centred TRC

At the time of writing, the TRC was three years into its five-year mandate. It is expected to complete its work by March 2013, with the possibility of a six-month extension.³⁴ The TRC is unique among truth commissions in that its mandate emerged not from a process of transition to democracy or from a pact among previously warring parties, but rather from a court-supervised conclusion to a class-action lawsuit launched by victims. The ensuing Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement of 2005 suspended the class action of almost 15,000 former residential school students, initiated a global scheme for compensating students based on their years of attendance, provided an independent assessment procedure for victims of specific abuses and, most notably, established the TRC mandate itself. The mandate negotiations were shaped by the dissatisfaction of all the parties with the adversarial nature and slow pace of the conventional legal process on the one hand, and by the longstanding desire of victims for a broader societal focus on their experiences on the other. Although the precise role played by individual survivors is unknown, their status as the core driving force behind the settlement negotiations is crucial to understanding the commission mandate. According to law scholar Kim Stanton, for example, the negotiators tended to ‘emphasize the focus on victims and . . . reduce the focus on the skill of legal counsel to shape the information gained.’³⁵

At the same time, the mandate has been criticized for weakness with respect to the classic goals of wrongdoer identification and political accountability.³⁶ As noted in the section of its mandate describing the ‘Establishment, Powers, Duties and Procedure of the Commission,’ the TRC lacks subpoena powers and is prohibited from naming any individual accused of misconduct in

³² Teitel, *supra* n 21.

³³ Woolford, *supra* n 2; Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁴ Many argue that the earlier delays mean that the mandate should run at least until June 2014, but at the time of writing the Canadian federal government appeared resistant.

³⁵ Kim Stanton, ‘Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Settling the Past?’ *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 2(3) (2011): 5.

³⁶ Roland Chrisjohn and Tanya Wasacase, ‘Half-Truths and Whole Lies: Rhetoric in the “Apology” and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ in *Response, Responsibility and Renewal*, ed. Gregory Younging, Jonathan Dewar and Mike DeGagné (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009).

its report, activities or events, unless the identity 'has already been established through legal proceedings, by admission or by public disclosure by that individual.'³⁷ This ban on naming means that even the limited sanction of negative publicity for the architects and perpetrators of abuses – often important to the idea of transitional justice as conventionally understood – is unavailable to the Canadian Commission.³⁸

Of course, not all truth commissions have been empowered to name perpetrators or wrongdoers, but their proscriptions on naming have typically been compromises in contexts of explosive immediacy where outing perpetrators could threaten lives and imperil fragile transitions. The Canadian context lacks any such comparable considerations that would make such a proscription prudentially justifiable. It stands instead as a naked reminder of the country's manifestly nontransitional circumstances.³⁹

The TRC has investigative responsibilities. It is charged with detailing the 'history, purpose, operation and supervision of the IRS [Indian Residential School] system' and creating 'as complete an historical record as possible of the IRS system and legacy.'⁴⁰ A determination of how the TRC ultimately fulfils these responsibilities must wait until the final report appears. However, the above-noted emphasis on the residential school *system*, as opposed to a stress on the deeds, decisions and forms of agency involved in operating it, suggests that a victim-centred focus drives even the investigative aspect of the TRC's mandate.

In the interim, not much more can be said; because the considerations involved are so sensitive, the TRC has refrained from publicizing whatever traditional documentary activities its inquiries might entail. For example, responding early in its mandate to reports of hidden gravesites on residential school grounds and to the fact that many children appear to have simply vanished from their schools without a trace, the Commission established a Working Group on Missing Children and Unmarked Burials.⁴¹ A TRC research team is now undertaking investigative work pursuant to the Working Group's recommendations, but the nature of that work, which itself may be primarily focused on the whereabouts of victims rather than on the decisions and identities of perpetrators, has not been made public.

³⁷ The mandate is Schedule 'N' of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 'Our Mandate,' <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=7> (accessed 8 March 2012) [hereinafter 'TRC Mandate'].

³⁸ Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁹ Matt James, 'Uncomfortable Comparisons: The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in International Context,' *Les Ateliers de l'Éthique/The Ethics Forum* 5(2) (2010): 23–35. Also see, Courtney Jung, 'Canada and the Legacy of the Indian Residential Schools: Transitional Justice for Indigenous Peoples in a Non-Transitional Society' (April 2009), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1374950> (accessed 8 March 2012).

⁴⁰ TRC Mandate, supra n 37.

⁴¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Working Group on Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, *Missing Children and Unmarked Burials: Research Recommendations* (2008).

In any event, the larger point is to highlight the TRC's overwhelmingly prevalent emphasis on the knowledge of residential school survivors.⁴² Its mandate stresses the importance of diverse forms of testimony, embraces as a term of reference the 'Aboriginal principle of witnessing' and requires all public events of the Commission to be driven by the ideas, views and voices of residential school survivors and their communities.⁴³ Accordingly, the TRC's highest-profile work is its ongoing programme of travelling to indigenous and Métis communities, including scores of sparsely populated and remote ones, to gather oral, written and visual statements from former residential school students and others affected by the schools.

The TRC is gathering survivor statements and attempting to share these with the broader public by undertaking or facilitating various public events and initiatives. Most prominently, its mandate requires it to hold seven national truth and reconciliation events, which are intended to honour former residential school students, celebrate indigenous and Métis cultures and educate the broader Canadian public. At the time of writing, three of these events had taken place. At least equally important is the TRC's more grassroots focus on helping communities to establish their own truth and reconciliation events and commemorative initiatives. Such undertakings provide opportunities for former residential school students and others affected by the schools to give statements to the Commission and to describe their experiences.⁴⁴ Commemorative initiatives bring individual affected communities together to develop and share their memories of particular residential schools.⁴⁵

Combined with the ongoing statement-taking activities, this menu of national events, community events and commemorative initiatives suggests that the TRC is a strongly victim-centred commission. We can now ask what this approach to truth and reconciliation involves. How are truth and reconciliation being defined and pursued, and to what apparent ends?

Truth and the TRC

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. The simple fact of proceeding in this fashion is important. The schools, as evidenced by their proscription of native languages and by their concerted pedagogical attacks on native ways, aimed to eradicate indigenous voices and

⁴² Ravi de Costa, 'Truth, Reconciliation and the Politics of Community' (paper presented at a conference at the University of Ottawa, 'The Politics of Community and Identity: Learning from One Another,' Ottawa, Canada, 20–22 May 2009).

⁴³ TRC Mandate, *supra* n 37.

⁴⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), *Community Events Criteria Guide* (April 2010).

⁴⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), *Commemoration Initiative Call for Proposals Guide* (2010).

identities. A considerable body of scholarship has shown the centrality of this kind of large-scale cultural upending to the maintenance and reproduction of colonialism.⁴⁶ It is therefore a fitting attempt at partial symbolic reparation and a necessary push towards societal transformation that the Commission seeks in its very manner of operation to overturn the knowledge assumptions on which settler dominance has been partly based. This quintessentially carnivalesque reversal is essential to the identity of the Commission.

The Commission's chair, Ojibway-Canadian jurist Murray Sinclair, has conveyed repeatedly this knowledge orientation in his public remarks. For example, Sinclair has emphasized that 'the TRC's mandate is . . . primarily focused on the experiences of children'; that its investigative activities deal with the 'unique experiences of children who attended Residential Schools'; and that its public events aim to forge a 'greater understanding of the . . . experiences of those who have lived under the oppressive weight of their memories for decades.'⁴⁷ Rejecting the more drily forensic approach of the ideal-typical perpetrator-centred commission, the Canadian TRC has adopted listening and outreach activities that include a hotline, a website, booths at public conferences and events and community partnerships.

Community events in particular demonstrate the TRC's bottom-up approach. As noted earlier, community events are held independently, but with TRC funding and under TRC auspices. They afford statement-gathering opportunities while focusing on bringing together affected groups and communities to develop their own narratives about the schools. With their public character, these events are also intended to allow nonindigenous people to learn about Canada's colonial injustices from the real experts on the topic: former residential school students. As the organizers of a December 2010 community event in Victoria, British Columbia, put it, the purpose is to provide 'an opportunity for Residential School Survivors to tell their truth about the experiences that have affected their lives.'⁴⁸

The community event programme also tries to vest in survivors and communities the right to decide the means by which their narratives will be developed and conveyed. Thus, while the classic, perpetrator-centred commission focuses on conveying expert judgement via the written word, TRC community events emphasize polyphonic, grassroots approaches. Applicants to the programme are urged to 'include both traditional and contemporary artistic expressions of the

⁴⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2007); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Smith, supra n 8.

⁴⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 'Presentation to the Senate of Canada Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples by the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, September 28, 2010' (handout copy of the speech prepared by the Commission, 2010), 2. See also an interview with Murray Sinclair: 'TRC Announces Plans for Northern Hearings in 19 Communities Leading up to Inuvik National Event, June 28–July 1 2011,' *Canada Newswire*, 12 January 2011.

⁴⁸ See, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 'Past Events: TRC in the Community: Aboriginal Neighbours Event: "Open Hearts, Clear Minds: A Road to Reconciliation,"' <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=117> (accessed 8 March 2012).

residential school experience and impact, such as poetry, writing, painting, sculpting, bead or button work, quilting, song writing, films or plays.⁴⁹

The TRC takes a similarly bottom-up approach to commemorative initiatives, which are occasions for

honoring, educating, remembering, memorializing and/or paying tribute to former residential school students, their families and their communities and acknowledging their experiences and the broad and systemic impacts of the residential school system.⁵⁰

The objectives of commemoration are ‘honoring and validating the healing and reconciliation of former students and their families’ and ‘ensuring that the legacy of residential schools and former students and their families’ experiences and needs are affirmed.⁵¹ The guidelines and funding criteria for commemorative initiatives also stress the importance of traditionally indigenous means of conveying truth: ‘Gatherings and feasts . . . banquets, memorials, talking circles, potlatches, closing ceremonies, pow-wows and welcome home ceremonies.’⁵² Suggested activities at community events include

Aboriginal history workshops . . . drum making, regalia making, design and development of toys and games, drama plays, song, exhibits, displays, histories, documented stories, movies, books, elder and/or youth presentations, taping of elders speaking their own language, cultural camps.⁵³

Finally, applicants under the community event and commemorative initiative programmes must demonstrate that their projects will ‘respect the goal of witnessing in accordance with traditional ancestral principles.’⁵⁴ The idea of witnessing refers to the emphasis in many indigenous cultures on the active responsibility of individuals for incorporating in their lives the knowledge gained from participating in major happenings. As the TRC website explains,

Generally speaking, witnesses are called to be the keepers of history when an event of historic significance occurs. Partly because of the oral traditions of Aboriginal peoples, but also to recognize the importance of conducting business, building and maintaining relationships in person and face to face . . . witnesses are asked to store and care for the history they witness and most importantly, to share it with their own people when they return home.⁵⁵

Thus, for the TRC, gathering and conveying truth means listening to survivors, fostering grassroots outreach activities and relying on a diversity of indigenous meaning-making methods. This approach rejects the elite-driven techniques of

⁴⁹ TRC, *supra* n 44 at 4.

⁵⁰ TRC, *supra* n 45 at 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), ‘Honourary Witness,’ <http://www.trc.ca/websites/reconciliation/index.php?p=331> (accessed 8 March 2012).

perpetrator-centred commissions and the knowledge presumptions of settler societies.

Reconciliation and the TRC

The TRC also has a more experiential and nonforensic vision of its other major keyword: reconciliation. Although reconciliation is a complex, multivalent concept, the Canadian TRC's approach is similar to that expounded famously by the chair of the South African Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This is a noninstitutional and predominantly interpersonal conception that emphasizes understanding between former antagonists and forgiveness of wrongdoers by victims.⁵⁶ Thus, as Anishinabe political theorist Dale Turner has observed, the TRC does not appear to be following Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which emphasized the political reconciliation of indigenous and Canadian governance systems, or even the Canadian Supreme Court, whose less accommodating legal vision defines reconciliation as the subordinate recognition of precontact indigenous laws and customs within a Canadian constitutional order.⁵⁷

Instead, Chairperson Sinclair has repeatedly discussed reconciliation in terms of interpersonal understanding and forgiveness. He in fact equated reconciliation with forgiveness in an October 2010 address: 'I have never met anyone that wants to be reconciled with the government. One forgives people, not institutions.'⁵⁸ Also suggestive is Sinclair's use of the moving story of a former residential school teacher and her student to illustrate the kind of reconciliation the TRC hopes to effect. The student and teacher reconnected after many decades when the teacher encountered a record released by the student, a successful professional musician, for sale in a store. Seeing the musician's name on the album sparked memories of the former student, prompting the teacher to contact him. Their subsequent process of personal reconnection enabled the teacher to learn about the impact of residential schooling and abuse on the student's life and, ultimately, to be a source of comfort to him during what turned out to be his dying days.⁵⁹

This emphasis on reconciliation as interpersonal connection and forgiveness can be seen as victim centred. It emphasizes, first, the emotional need for understanding and support of individual residential school survivors and, second, the

⁵⁶ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Image, 1999). Also see, David A. Crocker, 'Punishment, Reconciliation, and Democratic Deliberation,' in *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁵⁷ Dale Turner, 'On the Idea of Reconciliation in Contemporary Aboriginal Politics,' in *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, ed. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Reuel S. Amdur, 'Reconciliation But Not with Government,' *Canadian Charger*, 27 October 2010. For more on this theme from Sinclair, see, Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, *The Journey Ahead: Report on Progress Since the Government of Canada's Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools* (December 2010).

⁵⁹ See an interview with Murray Sinclair, Sian Griffiths, 'Reclaiming a Lost Identity,' *New Internationalist*, 5 January 2011.

remarkable power of the decision to forgive, which can only come from individual survivors and victims. This interpretation is buttressed by the results of interviews conducted at the TRC's Winnipeg national event in June 2010, which suggested that the dominant definition of reconciliation among participating survivors was one that emphasizes personal healing through truth telling.⁶⁰

This sort of emphasis has also been sharply criticized, however, in the case of the world's most famous victim-centred commission: the South African one. Mahmood Mamdani argues that the South African TRC's focus on interpersonal understanding and forgiveness came at the cost of a persistent neglect of structural oppression and inequalities, while David Crocker maintains that the TRC's emphasis on forgiveness underestimated the potential contribution of retributive justice to improving civic relations between victim and perpetrator groups.⁶¹ One could also wonder more broadly whether predominantly interpersonal and affective approaches to reconciliation share the depoliticizing tendencies of naive versions of the 'race relations' approach, which fail effectively to counter the deeply structural character of racist injustice.⁶²

Yet, attitudes and feelings are extremely important, intertwined with structural inequalities as they are in often mutually reinforcing ways.⁶³ Turner tempers his criticism of the TRC's reconciliation vision with a version of this point. He argues that if the Commission is able to promote understanding in the settler society of indigenous ways of knowing and being, progress may yet be made towards the just coexistence of native and non-native cultures and governance systems.⁶⁴ Seen in this light, the more personal and emotive visions of reconciliation – stressed not only by Sinclair but also by many residential school survivors – seem more compelling.

Sinclair himself has drawn the connection between self-determination agendas and reconciliatory approaches that seek to undermine settler ignorance and bias. For example, he told a Canadian Senate committee that pursuing reconciliation means educating non-natives about indigenous peoples, examining indigenous experiences of injustice and strengthening Aboriginal languages and cultures.⁶⁵ Emphasizing that the TRC in its truth-telling activities must confront the

⁶⁰ Dean Peachey, Janna Barkman, Nicki Ferland and Bobbie Whiteman, 'Reconciliation Rhetoric and Realities in the Canadian TRC' (paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada, 16 May 2011).

⁶¹ Mahmood Mamdani, 'Amnesty or Impunity? A Preliminary Critique of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC),' *Diacritics* 32(3) (2002): 33–59; Crocker, *supra* n 56. Also see, Richard Ashby Wilson, 'Anthropological Studies of National Reconciliation Processes,' *Anthropological Theory* 3(3) (2003): 367–387.

⁶² Audrey Kobayashi, 'The Japanese-Canadian Redress Settlement and Its Implications for "Race Relations,"' *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 24 (1992): 1–16. More generally, see, Frances Henry and Carol Tator, *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society* (Scarborough: Thomson Nelson, 2005).

⁶³ Linda Martín Alcoff, 'Fraser on Recognition, Redistribution and Identity,' *European Journal of Political Theory* 6(3) (2007): 255–265.

⁶⁴ Turner, *supra* n 57.

⁶⁵ 'TRC Announces Plans,' *supra* n 47.

different forms of destructive knowledge imparted in Canada's residential and regular school systems alike, Sinclair elaborated this opinion in a video interview. Explaining that the supposed truths of indigenous inferiority and European superiority taught in both systems continue to remain imposing barriers to reconciliation, he insisted that the Commission would have to undermine racist myths of indigenous inferiority, expose the destructive impact of the residential schools and showcase the resilience of indigenous cultures. Only in this way, Sinclair concluded, could better relationships between indigenous and nonindigenous Canadians – and, he added tellingly, their governments – be built.⁶⁶ Thus, visions of Canadian–indigenous reconciliation that emphasize affective awareness and interpersonal understanding are not just simplistic emotional salves. They can also help prepare the ground for more inclusive kinds of democratic deliberation anchored in a more widespread settler awareness of indigenous histories and aspirations.

The TRC's guidelines and funding criteria discuss the notion of reconciliation in quite general terms. The Commemoration Directive in the TRC's mandate speaks of 'enhanc[ing] Aboriginal relationships and [relationships] between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.'⁶⁷ The guide for applying for commemoration initiative funds indicates that proposals will be evaluated in terms of their capacity to 'build better relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, the Churches and government and promote reconciliation.'⁶⁸ The guide on community event criteria states that community events are intended to help communities 'develop reconciliation practices, educat[e] the public and [foster] better relationships with local communities.'⁶⁹ In principle, these references are open to transformative approaches that challenge prevailing settler understandings. The case can even be made for readings that require them. After all, if the weight of colonial wrongdoing is duly considered, it is difficult to conceive of any route to better relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that would not place the burden of introspection on the latter.⁷⁰

Truth, Reconciliation and Settler Society Meanings

It is precisely these power asymmetries, however, that seem to militate against appropriate responsibility taking in the settler society. In this respect, the key challenge to the TRC's victim-centred approach to truth and reconciliation may be the radically tilted ground on which it takes place. The point can be sharpened by considering critical theorist Roger Simon's reminder: reworking political

⁶⁶ 'Justice Murray Sinclair,' *Mark News Video*, 27 September 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDtAbkVOiUs> (accessed 8 March 2012).

⁶⁷ TRC Mandate, *supra* n 37.

⁶⁸ TRC, *supra* n 45 at 5.

⁶⁹ TRC, *supra* n 44 at 1.

⁷⁰ Indeed, this is a key theme of TRC Research Director Paulette Regan's important book. Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

relations among groups is a profoundly mediated project that involves not just particular utterances and events but also more complex questions about how the relevant doings and happenings are interpreted, disseminated and received.⁷¹ These problems of circulation, reception and meaning are particularly acute in the Canadian context. The means of mass communication are largely controlled by corporations representing the settler elite, while the state, with its vast command of personnel, information and resources, has formidable agenda setting and framing powers of its own.⁷²

Accordingly, some deeply rooted colonial aspects of the discursive frames promoted by the Canadian government and media must be addressed. As Oneida psychologist Roland Chrisjohn and his co-authors have explained, government leaders and personnel tend to describe the residential schools as sites of injury that have traumatized indigenous communities across generations. In the legal and health professions, this emphasis has given rise to the widely discussed notion of a 'residential schools syndrome.'⁷³ Of course, Chrisjohn et al. do not disagree with the view that former residential school students and their communities have suffered trauma. Rather, they argue that the highly partial nature of the 'residential schools syndrome' framing, combined with a range of prevailing anti-indigenous stereotypes and biases, pathologizes Aboriginal people as helpless therapeutic subjects who need externally administered healing in order to unburden themselves of their anger and become conventionally productive citizens.⁷⁴ As one might suspect, this framing tends to ignore questions of political self-determination and control of land.

The 'residential schools syndrome' framing also has breadth and resilience. As Michael Radmacher found in studying media coverage of the Canadian federal government's June 2008 apology for the residential schools policy, an historic act that should have been an occasion for settler society introspection, the event led instead to an outpouring of paternalistic commentary about the damaged state of indigenous individuals and communities. In Radmacher's words, the news accounts were consistent with 'constructing a pathological and docile colonial subject that is smashed, broken and in need of state healing.'⁷⁵ In this way, then, Canada's major framework for thinking about indigenous peoples and the residential schools appears to reinforce the country's prevailing unjust patterns of

⁷¹ Roger Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Also see, Paul Gready, 'Culture, Testimony, and the Toolbox of Transitional Justice,' *Peace Review* 20(1) (2008): 41–48.

⁷² Robert A. Hackett and Richard Gruneau with Donald Gutstein, Timothy A. Gibson and NewsWatch Canada, eds., *The Missing News: Filters and Blind Spots in Canada's Press* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 2000).

⁷³ Chrisjohn, Young and Maraun, supra n 12.

⁷⁴ Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham, 'Colonial Reckoning, National Reconciliation? First Peoples and the Culture of Redress in Canada,' *English Studies in Canada* 35(1) (2009): 1–26. Also see, Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁷⁵ Michael Boldt Radmacher, 'Squaring the Circle Game: A Critical Look at Canada's 2008 Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools' (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 2010), 90.

respect and power.⁷⁶ Do the TRC's approaches to truth and reconciliation appear to be altering this framework?

The TRC is undoubtedly an arena for challenging the depoliticized and often self-exculpatory conceptions of truth and reconciliation supported by the residential schools syndrome framing. For example, Carrier Sekani Family Services brought this challenge to the 'Hidden Legacy' conference on healing and residential schools in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The conference, organized by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, featured a strong TRC presence, including daily statement taking and a presentation by Chairperson Sinclair. Carrier Sekani Family Services posters at the conference proclaimed that 'Reconciliation . . . is Honouring treaty rights and processes' and 'Reconciliation . . . is Correcting past injustices.'⁷⁷

However, these alternative conceptions of truth and reconciliation do not appear to be filtering through to the wider Canadian society via media coverage of the TRC. The 'residential schools syndrome' trope continues to dominate instead. For example, a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation news story explained the purpose of the TRC's spring 2011 Northern hearings as allowing residential school survivors to break their past silences about their traumatic experiences in order to come to peace with their feelings. The story emphasized this vision of truth and reconciliation as unburdening and personal healing by quoting Robbie Watt, a co-director of the TRC's Inuit subcommission: 'We certainly don't want to go to any community, open up their wounds and then just leave. We have to make sure that they . . . properly go through the process of moving on forward.'⁷⁸

Similarly, in its account of the TRC's three days of hearings in its community, *Thunder Bay Newswatch* explained the purposes as 'forgiveness,' 'healing' and 'closure.' The story buttressed this account with quotations from an Anglican Church official and an indigenous leader who had both attended the Thunder Bay hearings. The church official felt 'sorrowful for the part the church played in some of those things' but was hopeful that the survivors 'found the healing they needed.' Anishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Stan Beardy was then quoted as being in agreement, saying, 'By holding bitterness and anger within ourselves it prevents us as a race of people, as a group of people, to be able to move forward.'⁷⁹

These two examples are illustrations of tendencies that recur in the several dozens of mainstream media stories about the TRC that I have read. Discourses of therapy, healing and forgiveness get heavy play while colonial dispossession and governance are ignored. A predominantly victim-centred

⁷⁶ See chapters by Taiaiake Alfred, Roland Chrisjohn and Tanya Wasacase, and Waziyatawin in Gregory Younging, Jonathan Dewar and Mike DeGagné, eds., *Response, Responsibility and Renewal* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009).

⁷⁷ Capital letters in original. The pictures can be seen on the conference's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/media/set/?set=a.501265377038.281112.97429247038> (accessed 8 March 2012).

⁷⁸ 'Truth Commission's Northern Tour Begins,' *CBC News*, 14 March 2011.

⁷⁹ Jamie Smith, 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Local Conference Ends,' *Thunder Bay Newswatch*, 26 November 2010.

approach to gathering and conveying truth may do little to disrupt this pattern. Truth telling by individual survivors of the schools is, quite understandably, most likely to focus on particular experiences of wrong, loss and abuse. While crucially important, this procedure is unlikely on its own to produce larger societal understandings of colonialism as a system, or even to situate residential schools as core institutions in a colonization agenda of land theft and political dispossession.⁸⁰ Conceptions of reconciliation that emphasize face-to-face understanding, healing and forgiveness may be similarly unable to do justice to the political and economic concerns of indigenous communities.⁸¹

Truth, Reconciliation and Indigenous Struggles

It is simplistic, however, to attack these predominantly individual-level and psychological-cum-emotive conceptions of truth and reconciliation as imposed fabrications of the dominant society. They reflect, however partially, indigenous aspirations and needs. Or, perhaps more accurately, they reflect how indigenous aspirations and needs have been articulated through the struggles of native activists and communities to force Canada to hold a truth commission on the residential schools. This is a point about the sociology of knowledge underlying the Canadian TRC; it situates the TRC's particular approach to truth and reconciliation as the product of dispersed processes of political interaction and social governance. The approach has emerged from a complex interweaving of Canadian history, the biases and self-interest of the settler society and the needs, circumstances and choices of indigenous individuals and communities themselves.

Healing, in particular, is a major indigenous priority.⁸² The residential schools have left behind tens of thousands of survivors and 'survivors of survivors' with healing needs. Years before the TRC, former students stressed these needs in response to an inquiry by the Law Commission of Canada.⁸³ To better understand how they have shaped the TRC, we need to focus on the decades-long collision between these survivor needs for healing on the one hand, and the disbelief and indifference of the Canadian government and settler society on the other.

When survivors' accounts of the schools first began to surface in the Canadian media in the early 1990s, not only their accuracy but even their basic truthfulness were routinely doubted.⁸⁴ Later in that decade, as the accounts began to be substantiated by the conventions of mainstream media and legal institutions,

⁸⁰ De Costa, *supra* n 42.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Assembly of First Nations (AFN), *Breaking the Silence: An Interpretive Study of Residential School Impact and Healing as Illustrated Through the Stories of First Nations Individuals* (1994).

⁸³ Rhonda Claes and Deborah Clifton, 'Needs and Expectations for Redress of Victims of Abuse at Native Residential Schools' (report submitted to the Law Commission of Canada, 23 October 1998).

⁸⁴ For example, Christian Champion, 'Residential Schools and the Electric Chair,' *Alberta Report*, 22 August 1994.

the Canadian federal government and the churches adopted the tactic of denying institutional and reparative responsibility for the damage.⁸⁵ When Ottawa finally began to pay former residential school students compensation through its alternative dispute resolution programme, it did so meagrely and without any kind of direct admission of responsibility or guilt.⁸⁶ These battles shine light on why so many residential schools survivors appear to see truth and reconciliation as matters of personal voice and Canadian reparative responsibility.⁸⁷ Their truths denied, their healing needs ignored and unmet, survivors and their communities have emphasized conceptions of truth that stress victim knowledge of hurt and conceptions of reconciliation that revolve around community rebuilding, interpersonal understanding and Canadian reparative responsibility.

Truth in this context seems to take on a particularly determinate meaning. It means survivor knowledge of what authorities and the dominant society have refused to hear and then denied: of what happened to students in the schools; of how those experiences have affected their lives and families; and of what kinds of needs and problems they and their communities share today. Thus, while victim groups in many transitional justice contexts engage in the forensic pursuit of information long denied – for example, by demanding that key police and military files be opened to the public – individuals and communities affected by the residential schools have often sought instead to convey to the Canadian settler society information that is already in their possession.⁸⁸ This information tends to be about the experiences, needs and aspirations of former residential schools students, their families and their communities.⁸⁹

This approach was exemplified at the 2005 Assembly of First Nations National Residential Schools Conference, where participants spoke repeatedly of their desires for ‘truth-telling, healing and reconciliation’; ‘speak[ing] the truth’; ‘speak[ing] my truth’; and a ‘national truth telling process.’ They asked, ‘How will we get the truth out to the public so that they have the truth?’ and, ‘What guarantee do I have that the media and television will tell my story truthfully?’ They said, ‘[We must] let our children know the real truth about what happened to us there’; ‘[We need to] rewrite history based on the truth and contributions of

⁸⁵ Bruce Feldthusen, ‘Civil Liability for Sexual Assault in Aboriginal Residential Schools: The Baker Did It,’ *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 22(1) (2007): 61–91.

⁸⁶ See, House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, *Study on the Effectiveness of the Government Alternative Dispute Resolution Process for the Resolution of Indian Residential School Claims* (2005). Also see, Assembly of First Nations (AFN), *Report on Canada’s Dispute Resolution Plan to Compensate for Abuses in Indian Residential Schools* (November 2004).

⁸⁷ Peachey et al., supra n 60.

⁸⁸ To compare, on Eastern and Central Europe, see, Jon Elster, *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On Argentina, see, Michelle Bonner and Matt James, ‘The Three R’s of Seeking Transitional Justice: Reparation, Responsibility, and Reframing in Canada and Argentina,’ *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 2(3) (2011): 1–29.

⁸⁹ AFN, supra n 82; Claes and Clifton, supra n 83.

our ancestors'; and '[We have] to have a national truth telling process in order to come to grips with this history.'⁹⁰

Thus, the effects of the schools, as articulated by former students in their long struggle against Canadian evasion and denial, seem to have combined to produce a vision of reconciliation as interpersonal understanding resting on an underlying conception of truth. If I am right in this presentation, these conceptions of reconciliation and truth are not fabrications of the Canadian state or the TRC. They are seen in a diversity of grassroots initiatives oriented towards understanding, commemorating and conveying to the wider public the truth about the residential schools. Such initiatives involve documentary films about the schools, workshops bringing together residential school survivors and church personnel, museum and photography exhibits, quilting projects, group simulation games, teaching modules, wilderness retreats, webcasts, interactive websites and blogs.⁹¹ These grassroots initiatives are victim-centred and carnivalesque in their approach to gathering and conveying truth. They make room for diverse voices and perspectives, they are attentive to dialogue and other forms that go beyond the written or institutionally authorized word and they associate truth not with official proceedings and bureaucratic procedures, but rather with the voices and personal experiences of individual residential school survivors and others affected by the legacy of residential schools.

By contrast, it seems revealing that the only forensic-cum-retributive yet still grassroots truth-related initiative of which I am aware is a kind of oppositional counter-TRC, whose members and supporters have protested at TRC events. The Peoples' Inquiry into Residential Schools, led by non-native activist and former United Church pastor Kevin Annett, is gathering evidence – in a more quasi-legalistic fashion reminiscent of traditional perpetrator-centred truth commissions – of crimes committed under both domestic and international law in order 'to bring charges against Canada and its churches.'⁹² But, the movement does not appear to have significant support among indigenous communities.⁹³ Thus, whereas the victim-centred model and its carnivalesque hopes have traditionally been arrayed in opposition to the classic, perpetrator-centred commission model, it is the former that appears hegemonic in the Canadian context.

⁹⁰ Assembly of First Nations (AFN), *A Fair and Just Resolution of the Residential Schools Legacy* (final report of the conference, 'A Fair and Just Resolution of the Residential Schools Legacy,' Vancouver, Canada, 19–21 July 2005). The report is no longer available on the Internet, but the conference notes are on file with the author. Profound thanks to Heidi Darroch for these.

⁹¹ By 'liking' the TRC's official Facebook page, the reader can learn more about these initiatives.

⁹² International Tribunal into Crimes of Church and State (ITCCS), 'The Wall of Holocaust Denial Begins to Topple: Aboriginal Museum is Forced to Display Evidence of Canadian Genocide' (14 May 2011), <http://itccs.org/2011/05/14/the-wall-of-holocaust-denial-begins-to-topple-aboriginal-museum-is-forced-to-display-evidence-of-the-canadian-genocide/> (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁹³ One indicator of the initiative's peculiar status is the residential schools chronology provided in Kevin Daniel Annett, *Hidden From History: The Canadian Holocaust* (Ottawa: Truth Commission into Genocide in Canada, 2001). Of the 35 entries dating from 1990 and beyond, 21 mention Annett.

Conclusion

Canada's victim-centred TRC embodies the prefigurative, role-reversing spirit of the carnivalesque. Its emphasis on victim voices and experiences performatively overturns the basic pedagogy of the residential schools, focused as they were on destroying indigenous truths with settler knowledge and disciplines. This emphasis, then, is a form of symbolic reparation oriented towards transformation. By establishing an agenda of activities and events that reverse the knowledge assumptions of the schools and of Canada's colonialism, the TRC aims to set in motion processes of sociopolitical change. Survivors and their communities are the experts from whom dominant society must learn; whose accomplishments and resilience must be honoured and understood; and to whom are owed massive reparative and reconciliatory responsibilities.

Nonetheless, as with any particular method or set of techniques, the Canadian TRC's particular victim-centred approach too, has weaknesses. My point is not to lament the absence of a more structural focus on the unaddressed land and self-determination claims of indigenous peoples.⁹⁴ The TRC was never charged with and cannot properly serve as a forum for solving these claims, whose furtherance requires more challenging strategies of direct contention – domestic, international, legal and sociopolitical.⁹⁵ Perhaps it is more useful to imagine the TRC as a vehicle that can serve anticolonial objectives by educating the Canadian public about the schools' place in an agenda of unaddressed colonial dispossession.

But, even with this more modest view, an emphasis on first-hand oral accounts and artistically and ceremonially mediated explorations of individual experiences leaves gaps. The residential schools were about much more than individual experiences. They were also about specific Canadian acts and decisions, ones made, in many cases, by still-living individuals and established, ongoing institutions. It was the Canadian settler majority, whose interests the individuals and institutions involved in running the schools, were serving. Practically speaking, that majority remains today as the overarching collective to whom the relevant institutions are answerable and responsible. A more aggressively fault-finding focus on these acts and decisions might serve more effectively to confront Canadians with their historical and ongoing complicity in the residential schools agenda. In turn, this kind of confrontation might stimulate better relationships with Aboriginal communities. For example, a more widespread understanding of the actions and decisions of Canadian institutions and individuals in relation to the schools – as opposed to a highly individualized focus on specific abusers or a broadly generalized one on faceless 'past policies' – might

⁹⁴ See, Bradford Morse, 'Indigenous Peoples of Canada and Their Efforts to Achieve True Reparations,' in *Reparations for Indigenous Peoples: International and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Federico Lenirini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁹⁵ Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

promote more informed debates about contemporary indigenous – Canadian relationships in such areas as child welfare, sanitation services, health provision and education.⁹⁶

Yet, Canadians have heard only vague accounts of the myriad unjust actions taken by their state apparatus, public agencies and religious institutions in relation to the schools. In this context, an exclusively victim-centred focus may function like a ‘quasi-apology’ in which wrongdoer agency is obscured by an emphasis on victim experiences, with ‘sorry for what happened to you’ standing in for ‘sorry for what I did.’⁹⁷ Certainly, the federal government and churches have shown no desire even remotely corresponding to that of the former students to share openly and meaningfully the truths in their possession. These include truths about inhumane and racist medical treatment, deaths and surreptitious burials, the failure of authorities to take even a minimally acceptable interest in student welfare and, above all, about command responsibility, policy roles and decision making ranging from individual officials in the federal Indian Affairs Ministry right up to past prime ministers and federal Cabinets.

Accessing these truths would require participation and full disclosure from a wide range of Canadian institutions. If the federal government’s record in responding to requests for access to information is any guide, it will use the privacy and other legal caveats in the Commission’s mandate to prevent full disclosure.⁹⁸ The apparent resistance of the Catholic Church in this regard has already caused controversy.⁹⁹ It now appears that numerous federal departments and agencies are stonewalling requests for information and records by the Commission with a wide range of delay and obfuscation techniques.¹⁰⁰

This article has raised concerns about how a victim-centred approach functions in a sociopolitical context dominated by the institutional perpetrators and individual beneficiaries of the injustices. Its focus on the interaction of a strongly victim-centred Commission with Canadian biases suggests that the problem is not primarily one of Machiavellian manipulation in an enterprise of putative

⁹⁶ Jerry P. White, Paul S. Maxim and Dan Beavon, eds., *Aboriginal Conditions: Research as a Foundation for Public Policy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003).

⁹⁷ Matt James, ‘Wrestling with the Past: Apologies, Quasi-Apologies, and Non-Apologies in Canada,’ in *The Age of Apology: The West Faces Its Own Past*, ed. Mark Gibney, Rhoda Howard-Hassmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud and Niklaus Steiner (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁹⁸ Stanley L. Tromp, ‘Fallen Behind: Canada’s Access to Information Act in World Context,’ Canadian Freedom of Information Website (September 2008), <http://www3.telus.net/index100/foi> (accessed 8 March 2012). In fact, along with the urgency of public education strategies to teach non-Aboriginal Canadians about the residential schools, this government stonewalling is a major theme of the TRC’s interim report, which had just been released at the time this article was going to press. See, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), Interim Report (2012).

⁹⁹ Brett Throop and Graeme Johnson, ‘Truth and Reconciliation: An Interview with John Milloy,’ *Arthur*, 22 March 2010.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Ottawa, Churches Playing Hardball over Residential School Historical Documents, TRC Says,’ *APTN National News*, 22 November 2011.

historical repair. Instead, the constellation of shortcomings and achievements identified in this article is the product of patterns of political interaction and social governance that reflect not only Canadian injustices but also indigenous struggles and concerns. This is the basic sociology of knowledge production in which the TRC is enmeshed. Identifying it points to important unfinished business: historical accountability in the form of a detailed investigation of the roles and conduct of major Canadian organizations and their leading personnel in relation to the schools.

For practitioners and scholars of transition justice mechanisms, this study may offer a more general caution about what happens when victim-centred approaches intersect with powerful barriers to fault finding. The problem appears to be this: an emphasis on individual voices and experiences may yet leave untouched the routines and relationships that change-oriented strategies also need to contest.