

## **Narrative Robustness, Post-Apology Conduct, and Canada's 1998 and 2008 Residential Schools Apologies**

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On two separate occasions, Canada has made official apologies in response to its past policy of using mandatory residential schooling to separate Indigenous children from their families, communities, languages, and cultures.<sup>1</sup> More fulsome in its historical accounting and admissions than the first, the second apology involved a significant improvement in what I will call narrative robustness. To speak of narratives, in apologies or otherwise, is to speak of accounts that make connections between or among events.<sup>2</sup> An apology of improved narrative robustness, therefore, is one that surpasses a predecessor apology in terms of the detail and connection-making that it provides in relation to the wrongdoing that it addresses, say, by doing more to identify specific wrongs that were done, to outline their impact on victims, or to identify and indict broader ethical failings that led those wrongs to occur.

Now the value of these kinds of improvement may seem obvious to some. After all, an apologetic narrative that obfuscates, temporizes unduly, omits crucial particulars, or otherwise resists “coming clean” in its account is unlikely to serve well the classic apologetic goal of taking regretful responsibility for wrongdoing (Tavuchis, 1991).. At the extreme, and to invoke the three central considerations identified in Ažuolas

Bagdonas's overview chapter on the topic, we might expect such an apology to fail on criteria of detail or fulsomeness, to be rejected as meaningless or insignificant by its intended recipients, and, for these reasons, to be disappointing or even pernicious in its impact.

However, the Canadian case raises tough questions about this presumptive emphasis on narrative robustness. It does so because the second, more narratively fulsome apology was followed not by reconciliation but rather by heightened levels of acrimony and indeed Canadian oppression against Indigenous peoples. Some might cite this perverse sequencing as warrant for dismissing political apologies entirely, seeing them as ineffectual political theatre ("just words" or "merely symbolic," as the charges go) or perhaps even as categorically devious tools of ideological legitimation (e.g. Trouillot, 2000). This essay will explain why I disagree.

### **Residential schools and the struggles for compensation and apology**

Run by Canada's major Christian denominations, the residential schools were mandated, funded, and regulated by the Canadian federal government.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century (the last residential school closed in 1996), they separated over 150,000 children from their families, denied them access to their languages and cultures, instructed them that their communities and life-ways were inferior, and exposed them to disease-ridden environments with rampant levels of physical and sexual abuse.

Unsurprisingly, the schools are linked to a range of intergenerational problems, including family dysfunction, community conflict, poor health, and over-incarceration. The 2015 final summary report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Canada,

2015), an independent body convened as part of a court-ordered class-action settlement involving Native litigants, the churches, and the Canadian federal government, concluded that the system constituted cultural genocide: a deliberate, systematic, and sustained assault on Indigenous cultural and social reproduction.

This finding has significant implications. The TRC's cultural genocide framework situates the residential schools not as manifestations of some singular wrongful policy but as reflections of a broader settler-colonial drive to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their treaty rights, sovereignty, and land. The TRC (Canada, 2015, p. 3) explained the linkages as follows: "The Canadian federal government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources. If every Aboriginal person [were assimilated via residential schools], there would be no reserves, no Treaties, and no Aboriginal rights." I will return to discuss the narrative robustness of Canada's residential schools apologies in light of the TRC's finding that the schools were instruments of cultural genocide aimed at Indigenous dispossession.

Former residential school students and their descendants began to mobilize in the early 1990s. With some success, abuse survivors pressed for criminal charges against specific abusers and then launched civil suits seeking compensation from the state and churches for that abuse (Feldthusen, 2007). Next came class-action claims, involving tens of thousands of plaintiffs, billions of dollars in prospective damages, and a much broader spectrum of alleged harms, the most commonly cited being family separation and loss of language and culture (Stanton, 2011). By the time these class actions achieved court certification in the early 2000s, the survivors and descendants were also mobilized

politically. The leading groups were the Indian Residential Schools Survivors Society and Canada's largest Aboriginal organization, the Assembly of First Nations; although their emphases at times differed, they pressed in the main for financial compensation for all former students, a non-adversarial compensation process for specific abuse claims, a TRC, and an official apology (Nagy, 2014).

Drafted in late 2005, finalized in early 2006, and court approved in fall 2007, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement suspended the class actions and forced Ottawa and the churches to accept all these demands, save the demand for an apology.<sup>4</sup> Although Ottawa had already issued a weak apology for residential schools abuse in 1998, and the churches had made scattered apologetic offerings starting in the late 1980s (Bavelas, 2004), the survivors, families, and communities continued the fight for an apology after the Settlement Agreement. On 11 June, 2008, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered a parliamentary apology that many observers, including Indigenous ones, viewed positively (Nobles, 2014).

As we have just seen, the 2008 apology came after decades of struggle on multiple fronts by oppressed communities against recalcitrant institutions that were overwhelmingly superior in conventional resources. Two broad clusters of factors seem pertinent to the result. First, the survivors and families benefited from the prior use by Indigenous nations of confrontation and direct action at a time of heightened political opportunity (Coulthard, 2014b). In 1990, Indigenous opposition helped to block the Meech Lake Accord, a failed intergovernmental response to Quebec's historic grievances that excluded Native representatives and ignored their longstanding constitutional concerns. Throughout that same summer, the Canadian military and Kanien'kéha:ka

(Mohawk) warriors engaged in an armed standoff sparked by the attempt of the town of Oka, Quebec to build a golf course on an unceded traditional burial ground.

In this fraught context, the Canadian federal government established the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP).<sup>5</sup> RCAP documented the long history of injustice behind the conflicts, including residential schooling, in a multi-volume 1996 report that called for nation-to-nation relations, land restitution, sovereignty-sharing, and a residential schools apology and inquiry. Prompted by the earlier militancy, the RCAP report thus gave heightened visibility and expert sanction to the demands of the families and survivors.

The second overarching factor leading to the 2006 Settlement Agreement and subsequent apology was the success of residential schools activists in uniting the persuasive power of first-hand trauma testimony with the coercive force of law (Niezen, 2013). After repeated failures to block the class actions, Ottawa and the churches relented rather than face potentially ruinous damages awards and the full airing in court of the litigants' claims, which included genocide (Stanton, 2011; Thielen-Wilson, 2014). The suits also generated considerable media coverage and political debate. For example, in the context of a shaky minority parliament in early 2005, survivors used public hearings of Canada's House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs to mete out a high-profile shaming to embarrassed government representatives and officials; the draft Settlement Agreement was reached later that year (Nagy, 2014). As Paulette Regan (2010, p. 142), a former research director of the TRC, observes, these events revealed "the power of survivor testimonies to break through the silence of our denial." By May

2007, all four of Canada's major political parties had voted in parliament to support a full residential schools apology (Curry, 2007).

### **Canada's residential schools apologies**

Let us now consider the two apologies. Titled the "Statement of Reconciliation" and offered in a low-key office ceremony in 1998, the "quasi-apology" issued by Liberal Indian Affairs Minister Jane Stewart focused primarily on physical and sexual abuse.<sup>6</sup> Although Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was in Ottawa that day, he did not attend; the Statement of Reconciliation was not made part of the official parliamentary or legal record, either. It declared that "we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices." It also acknowledged that residential schools "separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and cultures." But it did not describe in detail any of these actions, explain which institutions or policies might have been responsible, acknowledge that the state intended them to happen, or indeed "say sorry" for them.

Instead, the 1998 statement took responsibility only for "the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse." Immediately after acknowledging "the role [that the federal government] played in the administration and development of these schools," the minister declared of the abuse, "what you experienced was not your fault and should never have happened. ... [W]e are deeply sorry." Stewart also announced a \$350 million "healing fund" to support the health needs of abuse survivors.

The more fulsome 2008 apology of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper came ten years later.<sup>7</sup> Broadcast live on national television, it was made in the House of Commons, was supplemented by separate apologies from the other party leaders, and—in an unprecedented break from parliamentary protocol—was followed by responses on the House of Commons floor from the leaders of Canada’s main Indigenous organizations. Several survivors were also seated on the House floor for the event.

Harper immediately went beyond the 1998 Statement of Reconciliation by admitting that the “two primary objectives of the residential schools policy were to remove students from ... their homes, families, traditions, and cultures and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.” Acknowledging that this course of action was driven by the assumption that Native cultures were “inferior and unequal,” he declared that the “policy of assimilation ... was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.”

Harper also exceeded the 1998 statement in making clear that deliberate state actions were responsible for grave harms to all residential school students, not only those who were physically or sexually abused. As he put it, “The Government of Canada built an education system in which ... students were forcibly removed from their homes ... inadequately fed and housed [and] deprived of the care and nurturing [of their] parents, grandparents, and communities. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited.” Further, and in contrast to the restrictive focus of the 1998 statement, the prime minister framed residential schooling as more than a matter of individual past suffering. Acknowledging residential schooling as an intergenerational harm plaguing communities, he lamented the “profoundly negative” consequences of the

schools, including the loss of “Aboriginal culture, heritage, and language [which] has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today.”

Finally, Harper restated the apology’s three main narrative admissions. These were that the residential schools policy constituted a deliberate assault on Indigenous cultures and languages, that it inflicted grave suffering on students and families, and that it continued to cause individual, collective, and intergenerational harm. The prime minister capped each admission with an identical coda declaring Canada’s regret and its acceptance of causal and moral responsibility: “we apologize for having done this.”

### **Analyzing apologies in the aftermath of 2008**

Therefore, with its ceremonial vigour, inclusion of Indigenous responses, detailed accounting of many relevant wrongs and harms, and acceptance of responsibility, the 2008 case satisfies many of the most commonly noted criteria for political apologies (James, 2008; Lightfoot, 2015; Regan, 2010, pp. 189-90). As a foray in state-sponsored history, it broadened Canada’s official narrative about the residential schools: from unfortunate sites of physical and sexual abuse to manifestations of an agenda of cultural assault that was abusive in its very conception.

Yet the 2008 apology did not seem to lead to any corresponding transformation in Canada’s engagement with Indigenous peoples. Throughout its subsequent seven years in office, the Conservative government failed adequately to fund Native education; loosened environmental protections for Indigenous territories; linked, in rhetoric and security directives, Indigenous activism with jihadi terrorism; increased significantly the incarceration of Native offenders; pursued resource extraction on traditional Native

territories in defiance of the wishes of many of the affected communities; refused to address Canada's shockingly high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls; ignored the pervasive scandal of unsafe drinking water on First Nation reserves; acted with truculence in its dealings with the TRC; and attempted repeatedly to evade its Settlement Agreement obligations of document provision and disclosure (Canada, 2015, pp. 185, 209; Coulthard, 2014a, pp. 127-8; Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014; Wakeham, 2012).

### **Judging the 2008 apology: Narrative robustness and the record**

So what to make of this contrast between increased narrative robustness and a shameful post-apology record? One might say that it highlights the disingenuousness of the very idea of political apology (Trouillot, 2000). On this view, apologies are for states what, say, "corporate social responsibility" policies (Bakan, 2015) are for business: stratagems to legitimate pathologically amoral entities by endowing them with the moral aura of trustworthy personhood.

There is undeniable merit in this view. But there are other ways of understanding the relation between the Canadian apology and the Canadian record. One involves emphasizing not the disingenuousness of political apology in general but rather the continued narrative silence in the 2008 apology on Canadian settler colonialism's core injustice, which is land and sovereignty dispossession. Political scientist Melissa Nobles (2014) takes something of this approach in addressing the apparent challenge posed by the Canadian case to her "membership theory" (2008) of political apologies. The membership theory argues that political apologies are significant because states use them

to “support group rights and ... advance group claims” (p. 119). This, of course, the Harper government did not do. Thus, Nobles defends the membership theory by turning to matters of narrative robustness, arguing that the 2008 apology was crafted specifically to leave the terms of Canadian membership untouched. As she puts it, Ottawa avoided matters of land and sovereignty in its apologetic narrative because it did not wish to encourage “broader changes in Crown-Aboriginal relations” (pp. 134, 124).

Philosopher Cindy Holder (2014) also emphasizes the narrative limitations of the 2008 apology in order to better understand the post-apology record. As she observes, although it was in many respects “extensive, comprehensive, and specific” (p. 207) the 2008 apology failed to contextualize residential schooling as part of a broader, long-run assault on Indigenous sovereignties. For Holder, the problem was not just that Harper failed to “get his history right.” It was that he neglected to identify the core ethical deficiency behind the relevant past actions, which was their attempt to erase Indigenous nationhood. Silent in this way, the apology was a poor candidate for reorienting Canadian officialdom in decolonizing directions. Francesca Dominello’s chapter in this volume on Australia’s “stolen generations” apology exposes strikingly similar interrelationships between narrative weakness, colonial silence, and a shabby post-apology record in that country.

These interrelationships exemplify what I think the Dene nation political theorist Glen Coulthard (2014a, pp. 25-49) means when he criticizes what he calls the colonial politics of recognition. Colonial recognition aims to defend state legitimacy, contain Indigenous struggles, and maintain unjust relations by combining limited forms of redress for particular wrongs with silence about the ongoing system of settler domination that

produces them. Thus, as the literary and cultural critics Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham (2009, p. 3) put it, the moves of “strategic isolation and containment” in the 2008 apology reflected a polity interested in burnishing its “global image as a progressive beacon” but uninterested in relinquishing its control over Indigenous bodies, resources, and territories.

These relations between colonial recognition, narrative stinginess, and settler attachments cannot plausibly be denied. Yet I still want to argue that the narrative improvements of Harper’s 2008 apology gave the act political value. I will defend this judgment and the more general standpoint on political apology to which I think it leads it after applying two more perspectives from the apology literature to the Canadian case.

### **Judging the 2008 apology: Reparation, reconciliation, and the record**

I will call the first perspective the conduct perspective. Rather than judging political apologies as singular performances, it treats them as ongoing deeds; rather than narrative robustness, it emphasizes post-apology results. In its strongest form, it suggests that regretful statements unaccompanied by appropriate action are not apologies at all. We can distil a version of the conduct perspective from philosopher Nick Smith’s (2013, p. 33) criticism of approaches to apology that are silent on matters of “reform, redress, or other future behaviour.” As Smith (p. 22) points out, on such approaches, an offender can “apologize” fulsomely, immediately re-commit the identical offense, and yet still receive “full credit.” This perverse sequencing is what colonial recognition may hope to effect.

Anishnaabe political scientist Sheryl Lightfoot’s (2015) framework for studying settler-state apologies has the dangers of colonial recognition in mind. It scrutinizes

settler-colonial apologies not only for their contents or performative symbolism but for their *meaningfulness* to Indigenous peoples. A meaningful settler-state apology, Lightfoot argues, is one that is “employed in a way that moves beyond rhetoric and helps reset the relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples away from hierarchical and colonial power relations and toward one grounded in mutual respect” (p. 17). As she explains further, settler-colonial dispossession means that this kind of movement will tend to require substantive reparation in matters of political power and land (p. 24).

Thus, Lightfoot’s meaningfulness approach is a variant of the conduct perspective because it takes substantive reparation as a metric of apologetic adequacy. It certainly provides further warrant for scepticism about settler-colonial apologies. After applying the meaningfulness framework to five different cases, Lightfoot (pp. 33-4) shows that even settler-state apologies that she judges to have been narratively and ceremonially robust—and Harper’s 2008 apology is among them—were major disappointments in substantive terms.

Perhaps more damning is that, even if we abandon the insistence on substantive change, Harper’s narratively improved apology still fares poorly when judged on his government’s subsequent record. Consider political scientist Michael Cunningham’s (2014) approach. Wondering if the search for conclusive criteria with which to judge political apologies is fruitless, Cunningham suggests that we might scrutinize political apologies for their success in effecting reconciliation instead (pp. 10-15; cf. MacLachlan, 2010). Canada is not a hard case in this regard; Harper’s defiant neo-colonialism in the years after the apology caused new lows in Indigenous-state relations. Thus, on the reconciliation perspective the 2008 apology was a failure.

But I have doubts about judging exclusively political apologies on either the reconciliation or the conduct perspectives. The point is not that post-apology results or behaviour are irrelevant, particularly when it comes to evaluating the apologizer. My concern is instead twofold. First, there are important analytic reasons for distinguishing strongly between the apparent robustness of an apologetic act, on the one hand, and the adequacy of the apologizer's subsequent record or the apology's role in effecting reconciliation, on the other. At the extreme, making reparation or reconciliation part of the criteria for political apology risks establishing a tautology in which the relation between apologetic robustness and results disappears as a research question.<sup>8</sup> Second, and this is why I think we should be particularly wary of collapsing judgments about the act and the record into a single judgment about the apology: even an apology that fails quite glaringly on reconciliatory or conduct terms may still have lasting value *as an apologetic narrative*.

### **Political apologies as political resources: The 2008 Canadian case**

If reparation or reconciliation are criteria for judging acts of political apology, then we are presumably to classify apologies that are unaccompanied by such outcomes as failed, meaningless, or simply as non-apologies. By contrast, I want to insist on the distinction between apology and record in order to highlight the underappreciated role of political apologies as officialised symbolic resources for calling out malfeasance and hypocrisy. This emphasis is not only important analytically. It can also attune us interpretively to something of quintessentially political significance: the charged and potent space of

contradiction that may unfold in the gap between a robust apologetic act and a shoddy post-apology record.

Both the analytical and interpretive significance become clearer if we consider the following findings from a comprehensive search of major Canadian print media for invocations of the 2008 residential schools apology between 1 January 2009 and 19 October 2015.<sup>9</sup> In 154 instances of individuals either directly invoking the apology in opinion pieces or doing so when quoted or cited in news items, we see two major patterns. First, some speakers or writers, many of them state or Conservative party spokespeople, used the apology to somehow praise or defend the government's record.

More specifically:

- 20 claimed the apology demonstrated the government's goodwill
- 10 stated that the apology stood on its own and required no follow-up
- 5 described the apology as a Harper accomplishment
- 3 even criticized Indigenous peoples for insufficient post-apology gratitude

Second, and conversely:

- 46 argued that bad post-apology conduct made the apology meaningless
- 33 used the apology to criticize specific aspects of the post-apology record
- 26 demanded that Ottawa do more to live up to the apology
- 11 invoked the apology to demand some specific course of action

In short, while 38 media references used the apology as a prop for quiescence, 116 used it to expose Canadian failings. The apology's role as a tool for exposing hypocrisy seems particularly significant given the right-wing bias of the big Canadian print dailies, which were virtually unanimous in endorsing Harper's Conservatives in the 2011 and 2015 parliamentary elections (Tencer, 2015). The Harper apology has been significant in other ways as well. In particular, as I want now to suggest, its improved

narrative robustness contributed to broader changes pushing Canadian discourses of residential schooling towards acknowledging settler colonialism.

### **The struggles surrounding the 2008 apology**

There has been no shortage of shady dealing when it comes to apologies in settler-colonial Canada. Consider the 1998 Statement of Reconciliation. It came after Ottawa had waited two years to respond to the 1996 RCAP report, which called for a new relationship based on major restitution, reinvigorated treaties, and nation-to-nation relations. Instead of heeding the call, the Liberal government offered the quasi-apology and \$350 million healing fund as fig leaves for its inaction on RCAP and its ignoble role in fighting residential school compensation cases in the courts.

But the Statement of Reconciliation failed to silence the struggles over land, governance, and resources that had necessitated the creation of RCAP in the first place (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014). As state-sponsored history, Canada's residential schooling narrative did not unfold in the way that Ottawa might have hoped, either. After winning the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history (Nagy, 2014), the mobilized survivors went on to achieve via the 2008 apology what its quasi-apologetic 1998 predecessor had refused to provide: an official narrative admission declaring that the schools were instruments of a deliberate Canadian assault on Indigeneity that was directly responsible for continued intergenerational suffering. As for the narrative failings in the June 2008 apology, although observers noted its silence on colonialism and genocide, these objections were relatively muted at first (but see Chrisjohn and Wasacase, 2009). Indeed, despite the markedly similar silences in Australia's February

2008 “stolen generations” apology, Canada’s largest Indigenous organization, the mainstream AFN, cited Australia’s as a model for Ottawa to follow (“AFN National Chief,” 2008).

The major public disputes preceding Canada’s June 2008 apology were instead over matters of timing, procedure, and recognizing the intergenerational nature of residential school harms (e.g. Curry, 2008b). After being embarrassed into supporting a May 2007 opposition parliamentary resolution favouring an apology, the Conservative minority government then insisted on waiting until after the TRC’s proceedings, which were slated to conclude in 2014 (Curry, 2007). But this insistence crumbled just weeks later. Thereafter, public debate was dominated by the insistence of Indigenous leaders and survivors on being present on the House of Commons floor for the event and having the immediate opportunity from that location to respond (Curry, 2008a; Regan, 2010, p. 178). Ottawa eventually relented to these procedural and ceremonial demands as well.

In short, therefore, other than the matters of intergenerational trauma and culture and language loss, which Harper’s apology was forced to address, narrative robustness was not a major subject of public dispute in the key public debates in the months preceding it. At least as far as my research has made me aware, Indigenous actors did not target Ottawa in the run-up to the apology to demand admissions of responsibility beyond abuse, family separation, deculturation, language loss, and intergenerational suffering. For their part, right-wing politicians and conservative academics failed to rise up against the apology as well; there was no Canadian version of the German or Australian “history wars” (MacDonald, 2015).<sup>10</sup> This interesting non-happening was probably a legacy of the 2006 Settlement Agreement. With the narrative substance of the apology’s admissions

already *de facto* conceded in a court-supervised agreement, reactionary mobilization in 2008 was blatantly a lost cause.

### **The iterative development of Canada's residential schools narrative**

At least one of the class-action lawsuits had argued that residential schooling constituted an act of genocide; the ground for the claim was that the system forcibly removed children from their parents in a program of cultural assault that aimed to eliminate Indigenous peoples as distinctive groups (Thielen-Wilson, 2014). Ignored by the mainstream Canadian media, the claim was further submerged when the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement ended the class actions. But as we have already seen in the work of Coulthard (2014a) and Lightfoot (2015), Indigenous critics were keenly aware of the colonial recognition dynamic. For example, Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) political scientist Taiiaki Alfred (2009, p. 181) called out state-led reconciliation initiatives as "weak-kneed ... half-hearted measures," while Athabaskan feminist theorist Dian Million (2013, p. 8) warned that the new developments were part of a broader discourse of trauma and healing that fit ambiguously with the politics of collective self-determination. This kind of critical awareness intersected with the 2008 apology, in both its significant narrative limitations and its significant narrative improvements, in ways that facilitated a new stage of struggle.

Let me draw on Jennifer Henderson's (2013) work to develop the point. Citing Million, Henderson observes that settler Canada was disposed to be more receptive to discourses of residential schooling trauma and healing than to claims of colonial dispossession. But Henderson also notes the discursive availability of residential

schooling as a synecdoche, an educative shorthand referent, for Canadian colonialism *tout court* (pp. 66-9). To move from the language of literary theory to communications studies and social psychology, residential schooling could serve as a condensation symbol (Edelman, 1964, pp. 6-9): an evocative discursive tool for amplifying deeper, interlinked clusters of claims. We can explicate this role further by returning to the question of narrative in the 2008 apology.

Thanks to the struggles of the mobilized survivors, the 2008 apology declared officially that the schools were manifestations of a deliberate assault on Indigenous cultures, languages, and families. Resisted for more than a decade by the Canadian state, this move facilitated subsequent narrative reconsiderations. In the first instance, the apology helped to do so by moving public opinion. As Regan (2010, p. 179) reports on one company's series of related polls on the topic, only 42% of respondents supported the idea of an apology in March 2008; in May, as the political momentum for apology increased, the figure rose to 53%; two months after the June 2008 apology a full 67% of respondents was in support.

Now let us turn to more qualitative considerations. Although the shift was sometimes tentative and contradictory, transitional justice scholars Rosemary Nagy and Emily Gillespie (2015) find that, during the life of the 2009-2015 TRC, the mainstream media began to abandon the former tendency to treat the schools solely in terms of abuse. Indeed, in contrast to earlier treatments, which were often disbelieving, patronizing, and outwardly racist (Henderson, 2015), some of the new mainstream media representations situated the schools as tools of colonial violence whose project of dispossession could be seen in the over-incarceration, systemic poverty, treaty-breaking, and unredressed land

theft of the present day (Nagy and Gillespie, 2015, p. 22). Thus, my claim is that the apology helped to facilitate the narrative advances of the TRC. The 2008 apology helped not only to raise awareness and advance public opinion; by redressing the narrative silences in the 1998 quasi-apology about government responsibility, deculturation, and intergenerational suffering, it helped to open space for new criticisms and concerns. To cite the TRC's 2015 Final Summary Report (Canada, p. 268), it "created an opening for Canadians to begin a national dialogue."

Recall the expansive understanding of residential schooling from the TRC report (Canada, 2015, p. 3) quoted at the outset of this chapter: "The Canadian federal government pursued [a] policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources. If every Aboriginal person [were assimilated via residential schools], there would be no reserves, no Treaties, and no Aboriginal rights." Now recall Canada's earlier official narratives, that is, its earlier discursive offerings of historical detail and connection-making in relation to the schools. Regrettable sites of abuse in the 1998 quasi-apology, the schools were resituated in the 2008 apology as deliberate, state-inflicted instruments of family separation, deculturation, and language loss. This narrative expansion, driven by the creative and tenacious work of survivors, was a vital bridge to the expressly anti-colonial understanding in the TRC report.

## **Conclusion**

It is true that these moves towards increased narrative robustness had not at the time of writing led to major substantive change from the Canadian state. They also had their own

internal limitations. For example, they were silent on the patriarchal character of Canadian colonialism and its implications for Indigenous women (Grey and James, 2016). The use of the qualifier “cultural” before “genocide” in the TRC Final Report also fails to summon the international legal censure that leading experts believe Canada deserves (Hinton, Woolford, and Benvenuto, 2014). But I think the narrative improvements have been significant.

In a profoundly unfavourable political environment (the right-wing Conservative minority government was re-elected with a parliamentary majority in 2011 and the national press was resolutely pro-Conservative throughout), the 2008 apology served as a valuable symbolic resource for exposing hypocrisy. As the TRC Final Summary Report (Canada, 2015, p. 268) observed: “In their evaluation of where things stood in the years immediately following the apology, Aboriginal leaders identified a post-apology gap between the aspirational language of Canada’s apology and Aboriginal peoples’ continuing realities. Closing this gap is vital to reconciliation.” We have also seen that the TRC built on the post-apology context, which was one of heightened public awareness of Canadian wrongs and of intensified Indigenous criticism of settler-state duplicity. As a result, there has been made available for further struggles an official Canadian narrative that recognizes residential schooling as part of a cultural genocide framework for dispossessing Native peoples of their lands, cultures, governance structures, and treaty rights.

Thus, I have argued for an iterative view of political apologies as narrative admissions that can be used to hold apologizers to account and to produce more adequate collective understandings of injustice. This view differs from both the conduct and the

reconciliation perspectives. These perspectives see heightened post-apology acrimony and the absence of appropriate restitution, respectively, as evidence of failure or meaninglessness in the 2008 apology. Where they judge the apology by the record, therefore, I suggest that the record can also be judged against the apology. Certainly, the iterative view may be thin gruel against colonialism's ongoing wrongfulness. But changing a system of domination built over hundreds of years requires multifaceted conflict; better official narratives that provide better normative benchmarks can be useful tools in the struggle.

Let me conclude by noting how the TRC Chair, Murray Sinclair, invoked the 2008 apology at the formal unveiling of the Final Summary Report. Sinclair accused the federal government of “failing the apology.”<sup>11</sup> I find the accusation striking. In a world of limited attention spans, information saturation, and the ubiquitous double-speak of officialdom, the occasional yardstick of moral clarity—which improvements in apologetic narrative robustness can provide—seems no small thing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For helpful comments on this chapter, thanks to Joel Bakan, Sam Grey, Cindy Holder, Sheryl Lightfoot, Rosemary Nagy, and the editors of this volume. For research assistance, thanks to Janice Dowson and Mark Willson.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief introduction to the concept from the standpoint of literary theory, see Eagleton (1983, esp. pp. 105-106).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all information about residential schooling in this chapter, as well as numerous useful further citations, can be found in Canada, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec\\_Summary\\_2015\\_05\\_31\\_web\\_o.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf), accessed 03 February 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The Settlement Agreement is at <http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/IRS%20Settlement%20Agreement-%20ENGLISH.pdf>, accessed 03 February 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) at <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014597/1100100014637>, accessed 03 February 2017.

<sup>6</sup> This and the following paragraph are adapted James (2007); the Statement is at <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015725/1100100015726>, accessed 03 February 2017.

<sup>7</sup> The text of the apology is at <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649>, accessed 03 February 2017; a video is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e72Z-XGk7Jc>, accessed 03 February 2017. I treat the video version as definitive.

<sup>8</sup> In past work (2008) I treated reparation as a criterion for judging the sincerity of an apology at its issuance, which is different from using reparation to judge *post facto* an apology's meaningfulness.

<sup>9</sup> The search was performed by Janice Dowson between 7-15 October 2015. It used the ProQuest Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies Database to study opinion pieces or news stories yielded by the search command, residential schools apology (quotation marks were not used in order to garner the largest possible sample). The search yielded 154 instances in 131 stories or opinion pieces that involved individuals somehow invoking the 2008 residential schools apology to make or buttress a political claim (defined here as a claim for or against a particular course of public action or inaction or for or against the conduct or record of a person, institution, or group).

<sup>10</sup> In fact, a Conservative parliamentarian who spoke about Native peoples in racist terms just days after the apology was forced to apologize; see Lightfoot (2015, p. 19).

<sup>11</sup> Author's notes from public session, "Release of TRC findings on Indian residential schools," 2 June 2015, Delta Hotel, Ottawa, Ontario.

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