

Acknowledging Canada's Genocide

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Early this summer, national and international media revealed shocking news. On May 27, 2021, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation, near Kamloops, British Columbia, announced that the unmarked graves of 215 children had been found at the former Indian Residential School in Kamloops. On June 23, Chief Cadmus Delorme of Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan revealed that a Cowessess-led investigation found 751 unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Marieval Indian Residential School.¹ Near Cranbrook, BC, home to former St. Eugene's Mission School, "Aqam, one of four bands that make up the Ktunaxa Nation, . . . found 182 unmarked graves, according to preliminary results made public on June 30" ("Kamloops, St. Eugene's, Marieval"). What was shocking to some, however, was not shocking to others. The truths that have been passed down from residential-school survivors to subsequent generations and to those who have been willing to listen were revealed in 2015 in the final report tabled by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which had been established to deal with the history of Indian Residential Schools.²

I quote from Eric Hanson *et al.* to succinctly provide an overview of the residential school system instituted by the Canadian government in the 1880s and administered by churches until late in the 20th century:

The system forcibly separated children from their families for extended periods of time and forbade them to acknowledge their Indigenous heritage and culture or to speak their own languages. Children were severely punished if these, among other, strict rules were broken. Former students of residential schools have spoken of horrendous abuse at the hands of residential school staff: physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological.

While it is uncertain how many Indigenous children will be found in graves at, or near, former residential schools, *PressProgress* reports that the TRC "estimates that between 4,000 and 6,000 children died in residential schools. Causes of death included physical abuse, malnutrition, disease and neglect. Others died by suicide, or by trying to escape the schools. A lack of proper documentation means the true number of those who died is likely much higher, and unmarked burial sites similar to the one at Kamloops will almost certainly be found" ("Why No One Knows"). Further, the Union of Ontario Indians "estimate[s] that over 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, between the ages of 4 and 16 years old, attended" (2) the 139 residential schools operated in Canada by the federal government and/or religious orders (4). These recent findings indicate we are approaching only the tip of things.

As a result of this recent international exposé, ritualized mourning, public acknowledgement, the slogan "Every Child Matters," and the wearing of orange shirts have become more prevalent across the country. Orange Shirt Day, established in 2013, recognizes "the harm the residential school system did to

children's sense of self-esteem and well being, and ... affirm[s] ... commitment to ensure that everyone ... matters." The impetus for this derives from the personal story of "Phyllis Webstad, [who] is Northern Secwepemc (Shuswap) from the Stswecem'cXgat'tem First Nation (Canoe Creek Indian Band)." In her own words, Webstad, who was sent to a residential school at the age of six, explains the origin of this annual recognition: "I lived with my grandmother ... We never had very much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit [including] a shiny orange shirt ... When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! ... I felt like I was worth nothing" (qtd. in "Phyllis' Story")

September 30th, the traditional date of Orange Shirt Day, has recently been declared a statutory holiday, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. But perhaps a more memorable act came one day after the Kamloops findings were made public: "Hundreds of pairs of shoes were lined up along the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery Friday as a tribute to the hundreds of children whose remains were recently found on the grounds of a former residential school" (Mangione).

The photograph that appears on the cover of this issue of *Postcolonial Text*—taken in St. John's, Newfoundland by Ahmed El Gabbour (Basko)—interprets, through image, the damaging colonial legacy of Canada. From the East coast to the West, mourning and acknowledgement have taken place by those who have listened to the words of Indigenous people and believed them.

In St. John's, Margaret Cranford, of the Mi'qmaq First Nation, and her cousin Sylvia Murphy attached 215 squares of felt to the fence surrounding the Colonial Building—one square for each of the 215 children whose remains were found on the grounds of the Kamloops residential school. Cranford indicated that the colors of the squares "represent those of the traditional medicine wheel, a sacred circle of interconnectivity. She said she has relatives who were forced to attend residential schools and she called it an honour to hear their stories"

Cranford said a prayer was said for each child as each square was tied to the fence. A crowd grew to include singing and Inuit drumming before moving across the street to Government House ("St. John's Memorial"). A vigil was then held at the Heart Garden at Government House.³

Ironically, though, and despite the fact that this preface has been written for *Postcolonial Text*, postcolonial theory may not be appropriate in an examination of Indigenous literatures. There is nothing "post" about Indigenous realities in Canada, and the subsuming of Indigenous literatures under a postcolonial canopy disregards the specificities of Indigenous experiences and literary histories, both oral and written.

However, the inclusion of this preface in this issue is not only an important unveiling of Canada's oft-hidden genocide but also a call to become aware of and engage with Indigenous literary theories as outlined by Indigenous scholars. One might consider, for example, a groundbreaking text written by the late Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About*

Indigenous Peoples.

In celebrated Cree author Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, words borrowed from Lyle Longclaws provide the epigraph: "Before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed."⁴ The epigraph of Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which draws on his own experiences in a residential school, is similarly germane. The epigraph quotes Chief Seattle of the Squamish (as translated by Dr. Henry Smith), who provides a stark warning: "At night, when the streets of your cities and villages are silent, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them, and still love this beautiful land. The whiteman will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people. For the dead are not powerless."

Indeed, recognizing those whose lives were taken matters. Acknowledging Canada's genocide matters. The truth matters. Every Child Matters.

Notes

1. Cowessess Chief Cadmus Delorme corrected people's assumptions and press errors when he emphasized that "[t]his is not a mass grave site . . . [but] unmarked graves" (qtd. in Eneas). Delorme noted that while markers may have been placed originally "the Roman Catholic Church, which oversaw the cemetery, may have removed markers at some point in the 1960s."

2. "The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement [is] the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history . . . One of the elements of the agreement was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to facilitate reconciliation among former students, their families, their communities and all Canadians" (Government of Canada).

3. "The Heart Garden is in memory of all Indigenous children who were lost to the residential school system, in recognition of those who survived, and the families of both. The inaugural 'Honouring Memories, Planting Dreams' Heart Garden event took place at Rideau Hall as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's closing ceremonies in 2015. Since then Heart Gardens have been planted throughout the country" ("Unveiling of NL's First Heart Garden").

4. Canada has a long way to go before its poisons are recognized. As Dr. Cindy Blackstock, "a Canadian-born Gitksan activist for child welfare and executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada" notes, "After the news broke of the 215 children in unmarked graves on the grounds of the Kamloops residential school, Parliament voted unanimously on a motion to stop fighting against residential school survivors and First Nations children in court. The Prime Minister denied fighting Indigenous children in court and then he and his cabinet abstained from the vote on the motion."

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Close-up of a felt on the gates of Government House, St. John's, Newfoundland, Sept. 6, 2021.

Photo Credit: Ahmed El Gabbour (Basko).

Bio note: Ahmed El Gabbour (Basko) was born August 20, 1998, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. At seven, he moved to Cairo for the next fourteen years, where he would live through a revolution, complete a degree in Mass Communications, and work as a freelancer in Media. In 2019, he moved to Toronto to study filmmaking. Shortly after enrolling in film school, the pandemic struck his studies short. He now lives in Newfoundland in hopes of continuing his career.