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# UNCOVERING HISTORY THROUGH TESTIMONY

A TRAUMATIC ACCOUNT  
OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES  
IN CANADIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS





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*To my parents  
For shouldering my pain and  
giving me love and courage in return*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

9	<i>Acknowledgements</i>
11	Chapter I Introduction 1.1. Background of the Study, 11 — 1.2. Literature Review, 24 — 1.3. Statement of the Problem, 33 — 1.4. Objectives of the Study, 36 — 1.5. Scope and Limitation of the Study, 36 — 1.6. Significance of the Study, 37 — 1.7. Methodology, 37 — 1.8. Structure of the Thesis, 42.
45	Chapter II Methodology
63	Chapter III Hearing the Unheard, YouTube Testimonies 3.1. Introduction, 63 — 3.2. Discussion, 67 — 3.3. Conclusion, 73.
75	Chapter IV Testimonial Anglophone Reminiscences of Schooling, Tomson Highway's <i>Kiss of the Fur Queen</i> , and Basil H. Johnston's <i>Indian School Days</i> 4.1. Introduction, 75 — 4.2. Discussion, 76 — 4.2.1. <i>Indian School Days</i> , 76 — 4.2.2. <i>The Kiss of the Fur Queen</i> , 93 — 4.3. Conclusion, 106.

8 *Table of Contents*

107	Chapter V
	Finding the Lost Ones in Testimonial Francophone Novels, Michel Jean's <i>Le Vent en parle encore</i> , and Sonia Perron's <i>Billydéki</i>
	5.1. Introduction, 107 — 5.2. Discussion, 110 — 5.2.1. <i>Le Vent en parle encore</i> , 110 — 5.2.2. <i>Billydéki</i> , 125 — 5.3. Conclusion, 137.
139	Chapter VI
	<i>Sleeping Children Awake</i> after a Long Sleep
	6.1. Introduction, 139 — 6.2. Discussion, 145 — 6.3. Conclusion, 156.
159	Chapter VII
	Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Studies
165	<i>References</i>



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

May 27, 2021: BBC, CBC, *USA Today*, “New York Times”, and many other newspapers and news channels published the news of the bodily remains of 215 Aboriginal children who were found at Kamloops residential school in Canada. The world mourned for this loss. Those who knew about the residential schools were aware of the fact that the last residential school had been shut down in 1996, but why had those bodies remained at the school without the principal’s acknowledgment? The current research intends to shed light on the facts and truths regarding residential schools in Canada. Facts and truths which have remained unspoken for a long time or, having been articulated, were then left with not much concern or attention.

The legacy of residential schools has affected the Aboriginal communities for generations and, in this regard, Canadian Senator Murray Sinclair argues that «we should never forget... it’s part of who we are as a nation. And this nation must never forget what it once did to its most vulnerable people» (CBC Radio 2017). According to Jordan Fenton, this legacy affected seven generations of Aboriginal peoples, and it needs to be remembered by the survivors and future generations (Fenton 2016). The historians provided their critical stance regarding those past incidents, yet they could be swept up in the passions of the

day. Wieviorka says that the problems with a historical stance occurs when «ethical and scientific concerns at times» are mixed with political issues (Wieviorka XIII). Residential schools are no exception since they were established based on the *Indian Act* enacted by the Canadian federal government.

To fill in the gaps in history, the survivors need to remember the legacy of the residential schools. The act of remembrance is their duty not only to themselves but also to the dead and the future generations. Based on their recollections, the survivors give their testimonies. These testimonies take various forms; manuscripts, books, diaries, audio and videotapes, and drawings. Some of these testimonies were delivered as a response to a personal urge to speak the unspeakable. Others were given in response to requests from various sources, court, media, or the other organizations. By giving their testimonies, the witnesses tell their stories as an individual experience. Testimonies clarify that each experience of residential schools is unique.

«If the *Greeks invented tragedy*, the *Romans the epistle* and the Renaissance the sonnet», writes Elie Wiesel, «our generation *invented a new literature*: that of *testimony*» (Felman and Laub 5–6). We are witnesses of incidents that happened throughout history, and there are many questions regarding those incidents that were never asked. There is a connection between narrative, history, art, memory, writing, reading, and survival, which the following research intends to explore by delving into the history of residential school incidents in Canada. I intend to focus on traumatizing incidents at the residential schools in Canada. Wieviorka claims that

history cannot be written without historians that is to say, without men and women who, in the present time of their existence and of their experience, of their desire to know, seek to understand and to put this understanding into language in order to communicate it to others, interrogating the past based on the traces that past has bequeathed to them (Wieviorka 5).

The presence of the historians, archives, and testimonies makes it possible to write about the silenced historical atrocities.

The current research, on the one hand, will uncover the relation between art, be it literary work or a documentary, and culture; and on the other hand, the conscious and unconscious witnessing of historical events. Art acts as a witness to traumatic historical incidents. When historical incidents are witnessed, they need to be preserved, and this can be done through the process of textualization.

For over a century, Canada's Aboriginal policy was to eliminate the Aboriginal race and they intended to reach this goal by ignoring Aboriginal rights and the treaties, and also assimilating them into Euro-Canadian culture. They intended to erase the Aboriginals as an individual culture, religion, and race and the establishment of residential schools was the main policy to reach that goal. European countries claimed Aboriginal lands; in some places through negotiation and treaties and in others by occupation of the land. The negotiations for lands and properties were not always honorable, but they were «often marked by fraud and coercion» (TRC, v. 1, 18).

The land taking was part of the policies which led to elimination of Aboriginal peoples and their assimilation into new rules and policies. While establishing residential schools, the federal government claimed that the Aboriginal parents were not fit to take care of their children. One Truth and Reconciliation report mentions that «the parents often kept their children out of schools because they saw those schools, quite accurately, as dangerous and harsh institutions that sought to raise their children in alien ways» (TRC, v. 1, 20). The expansion of residential schools, one after another, could be seen through the lens of imperialism that was set long before the first residential school had been established.

Canada was first colonized by Spain and Portugal and then France and later Britain claimed the land. Even though the Norse voyages of the late 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries must be taken into consideration, Europeans were not aware of the discovery. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans discovered the New World due to Columbus' misperception. He believed that he had reached India, and the misnomer "Indian" was given to the Natives of Canada. The differences between the Europeans and the Aboriginals were very significant and Bothwell notes that «if the Natives of America were a surprise to the Europeans,

the Europeans were a wonder to the newly dubbed Indians. The Stone Age was meeting the Iron Age, juxtaposing two cultures so different that in some places the Europeans were thought to be supernatural» (Bothwell 34).

The fact that the Aboriginals were not Christian gave the colonizers a better reason to justify their exploitation. Since the Europeans settled in Canada, they assumed that their culture and civilization were superior to the natives. They believed that Canada's first inhabitants were savage, ignorant and wild, and they needed to be civilized and educated. Therefore, the government intended to civilize the Aboriginal people. They believed that «1) the Christian God had given the Christian nations the right to colonize the lands they discovered as long as they converted the Indigenous populations, and 2) the Europeans were bringing the benefits of civilization (a concept that has been intertwined with Christianity), [...] underlying every one of these arguments was the belief that the colonizers were bringing civilization to savage people who could never civilize themselves» (TRC, v. 1, 30–33). At the beginning, the relationship between the Native peoples and the colonists was based on the interests of both parties, yet slowly the balance of power changed. At the beginning of the European contact with the Aboriginal peoples, the Aboriginals were in power and the Europeans were dependent on them for food and protection against harsh nature. However, slowly the Aboriginals were outnumbered due to their exposure to diseases carried over by Europeans, to which they had no immunity, fights over their lands with the colonizers, and changes in their diets.

Since the Aboriginals were outnumbered, their rights over lands were slowly erased and they were pushed into reserves and away from decisions over their lands or even their lives. While the maritime explorers discovered the land, they found the sources of wealth for the monarchs in Europe. The newcomers intended to take the lands through establishing some treaties with Native people which slowly led to marginalization, exploitation, and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples. They were claiming that the Aboriginals were not capable of cultivating the land and they needed to intervene to improve the situation.

As the colonizers reached their goals through the establishment of residential schools, these schools must be studied through the lens of

imperialism and its policies. One of the treaties which forced Aboriginals to send their children to residential school was the *Indian Act*. Hele claims that “«the coercion and aggressive assimilation policies found within the *Indian Act* from 1884 to 1951 rested on five planks»: pass laws, governmental laws, ban on cultural practices, obligatory education, and land policies (Hele 3). The Truth and Reconciliation report mentions that «the Canadian residential school experience is part of the history of imperialism of the past 500 years. In particular, it is part of the history of settler colonialism» (TRC, v. 1, 38). Reconciliation cannot be achieved until the legacy of colonialism is acknowledged. What happened at those residential schools that gave them the title of cultural genocide?

Residential schools operated for over a century in Canada, from 1831 to 1996. However, not many people heard about those residential schools. The questions are, who went to those residential schools, and what was the purpose behind the schools?

Although one could write a history of Aboriginal boarding schools in North America that dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlateloco, histories of those schools typically focus on a period that began in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This era was marked by the convergence of three phenomena laws in the United States and Canada that made education mandatory, assimilationist education models designed to create uniform citizenries and scientific racism (Dawson 81).

As I mentioned before, based on Canadian Policy, the children were taken away from their parents and sent to schools where they were forbidden to talk about their culture, language, or community. These students were very young; sometimes, they were just four years old. For any minor mistake that they made, they were punished severely by the staff. Over 150,000 children passed through the system of 125 schools over a century (MacDonald 1001). At residential schools, Aboriginal children underwent physical, sexual, and mental abuse. The training was not sufficient for those children to be prepared for white-collar jobs; it focused on manual labor and domestic work.

Aboriginal culture was overlooked and belittled by the residential school system, and this attitude affected the Aboriginal community for