

## THOUGHTFUL WORRYING

In 2013, Roger Simon addressed what he saw as “the potential possibilities and challenges faced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),” wondering if what he worries might happen others will dismiss as “overly pessimistic.”<sup>1</sup> He characterizes his statement as “a form of worrying-in-public,” what he construed as “a hopeful practice” that might encourage Canada to recognize “that the structured inequalities and legacy of violence initiated by its colonial past” could yet “be resolved in a way that could enable us to become a truly just society.”<sup>2</sup>

As did Truth Commissions in other countries, Canada’s Commission will “engage in the pedagogical practice of public history,” leaving Simon worrying about what “possible forms this public history might take, the possible public pedagogies these forms embody.”<sup>3</sup> He asks: “What notions of learning about and *from* the history and consequences of Indian residential school policies and practices might the Commission attempt to engender?”<sup>4</sup> One form of public pedagogy is the “telling” and “listening to the stories of those who have survived systemic violence,” leading Simon to ask: “what then does it mean to listen with ‘an open heart and mind’? and is this listening affected in any way by the form of public history one chooses to undertake?”<sup>5</sup> “Can it be assumed,” he continues, “that when speaking from the heart about one’s own pain, one’s story will be understood in a way that is respectful of the singularity of one’s narrative and affectively sensed as an opening to new thought about a different collective future?”<sup>6</sup> His answer is “no.”<sup>7</sup>

Why? Simon suggests that “when personal histories are intensified by affect, what is heard in these stories can be channelled in a range of ways that are not always positive,” explaining that when “non-Aboriginal Canadians are presented with stories of victimization ... listeners often will reduce the *persona* of that person to one whose life has been over-determined by a history not of one’s own making.” In other words, the person is reduced to a “victim” deserving of “pity.”<sup>8</sup> Pity is not what those who testify before the Commission seek; moreover, such pity (“particularly troubling”) seems to re-inscribe “colonial power relations.”<sup>9</sup>

Simon sees a second risk: non-Aboriginal listeners may come to regard those who testify as “victims living a damaged life beyond repair,” distorted into “images of a problem-ridden, broken existence serving to confirm to stereotypes,” stereotypes that will be passed inter-generationally, including among Aboriginal peoples.<sup>10</sup> Simon distinguishes between “victimhood,” and “victimization,” the latter, he explains, emphasizing “the violence of colonialism” that allows listeners to learn “how the subjection to residential schooling was lived differently by different people.”<sup>11</sup> The former obscures the singular story” so that “all residential school stories start to sound the same and therefore [become] interchangeable, leading to diminishing interest in listening and learning because there is nothing essentially different that might be said,

no further questions to be asked, and nothing new to learn.”<sup>12</sup> “In these circumstances,” Simon continues, “the circulation of stories of pain and loss turns into a spectacle that configures moments of anguish and suffering into a historical thematic in which the accounts collected by the Commission lose their specificity and historical grounded and, even more crucially, lose their transitive force, diminishing the possibility of the repair needed for a more just future.”<sup>13</sup> Relying on such “pathos,” testimonies might, for example, divert attention away from the collusion of church and state in residential school legislation,” even encouraging a more generalized “historical amnesia.”<sup>14</sup>

Next Simon attends to what he terms the “too bad, so sad” syndrome, one implication of which is the commodification of stories of suffering, by which he means the conversion of any sympathetic responses to suffering into confirmation of listeners’ “own humanitarian character,” feeling “good about feeling bad.”<sup>15</sup> The same psychological sleight of hand, Simon suggests, can occur when “schools are seen as the primary vehicle for changing our national narrative.”<sup>16</sup> Truth is, he worries, placing the residential schools story “in the school curriculum is likely to be more a matter of symbolic optics than social transformation”; even if the history of residential schooling were taught as part of a “larger narrative of the colonization and attempted cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples, the force of this history would be muted and too easily confirmed to a now surpassed era.”<sup>17</sup> “Reconciliation,” Simon counsels, “lies not singularly in the transformation of a national narrative, but in the challenges of transforming a sense of civic responsibility and renewing relations of trust.”<sup>18</sup> Such a transformation, he continues, cannot be “dependent on feelings of guilt ... if guilt is split off from the present and attributed to past institutional policies and the people responsible for them.”<sup>19</sup>

It seems that Simon is less worried about the moral and political burden displaced onto schools when the study of residential schooling is encoded in the curriculum than he is about the “different forms such learning might take,” as what is required is “asking non-Aboriginal Canadians to work out where we ‘fit in’ to Aboriginal history, not just where Aboriginal history fits into the history of Canada.”<sup>20</sup> Sounding for the moment as if he affirms curriculum as *currere*,<sup>21</sup> Simon proposes “a process of reflecting on the experiences of listening to the stories told to the TRC and retelling these stories, not to co-opt them in the service of the self, but interweaving them with one’s own life stories,” the potential of which “is that who I am (as someone always in the process of becoming) is bound up with how it is I will respond to the address of another whose experiences cannot be reduced to versions of my own.”<sup>22</sup> Such dialogical encounter through listening represents, in Simon’s terms, “a practice of public history that, in enacting the circulation of stories told to the TRC, would help support a reflexive, ethical response wherein who I am is conditioned by my response to, and for, the other, the other who speaks not for me (that is, not to and for my self-interested concerns), but nevertheless to me.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, Simon wonders if the TRC can

produce “more” than emotion, namely “active support for substantial political transformation, one in which we might claim a collective, compassionate humanity for ourselves and our community?”<sup>24</sup> For this question to be answered affirmatively, Simon admits (self-chidingly) that “a good deal more thoughtful worrying” will be required.<sup>25</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

In advance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Roger Simon worried – very thoughtfully – about what could go wrong, namely that non-Aboriginal listeners might convert testimonies of suffering into pity, reinforcing stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples as pathetic victims all the while reassuring non-Aboriginal listeners of their own humanitarian character. What Simon wants is a more just society, requiring, he suggests, a political transformation resulting in civic responsibility and relations of trust. All that from the school curriculum?

## REFERENCES

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- Simon, Roger. 2013. Towards a Hopeful Practice of Worrying: The Problematics of Listening and Educative Responsibilities of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, edited by J. Henderson & P. Wakeham (129-142). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Simon 2013, 129.
- <sup>2</sup> Simon 2013, 129.
- <sup>3</sup> Simon 2013, 129.
- <sup>4</sup> Simon 2013, 129.
- <sup>5</sup> Simon 2013, 131.
- <sup>6</sup> Simon 2013, 131.
- <sup>7</sup> Simon 2013, 131.
- <sup>8</sup> Simon 2013, 131.
- <sup>9</sup> Simon 2013, 131.
- <sup>10</sup> Simon 2013, 132.
- <sup>11</sup> Simon 2013, 132.
- <sup>12</sup> Simon 2013, 132.
- <sup>13</sup> Simon 2013, 132.
- <sup>14</sup> Simon 2013, 133. “The collapse of the present,” Pier Paolo Pasolini pointed out, “implies the collapse of the past” (Quoted in Gordon 1996, 73).
- <sup>15</sup> Simon 2013, 133.
- <sup>16</sup> Simon 2013, 135.
- <sup>17</sup> Simon 2013, 135.
- <sup>18</sup> Simon 2013, 135.
- <sup>19</sup> Simon 2013, 136. Guilt becomes embedded in the development of a personal conscience, without which there can be no collective conscience. “Conscience arises,” Christopher Lasch (1984, 259) appreciated, “not so much from the dread of reprisals by those we have injured or wish to injure as in the capacity for mourning and remorse.”
- <sup>20</sup> Simon 2013, 136.
- <sup>21</sup> Pinar 2020.
- <sup>22</sup> Simon 2013, 136. That social reconstruction is dependent upon the subjective reconstruction that Simon describes here is central to the conception of curriculum as *currere*. See Wang 2020.
- <sup>23</sup> Simon 2013, 136-137. Simon (2013, 138) suggests “a de-coupling of guilt and responsibility so that the rejection of guilt does not produce the rejection of responsibility and so that government apology does not dissolve either the responsibility or agency of non-Aboriginal Canadians.”
- <sup>24</sup> Simon 2013, 139.
- <sup>25</sup> Simon 2013, 139. Perhaps I’m cynical, but in 2013 I would have thought a widespread affective response unlikely, and that governmental action (however inadequate) may compensate for it. While any action might be welcomed by the First Peoples, without a widespread affective response – including guilt – backlash becomes possible, even likely.