

## SILENCE IN NARRATIVES OF THE INTERNMENT, SETTLER LIFE WRITING

Pamela Sugiman draws upon oral history and personal memory to explore the “silence” and the “empty spaces that it has filled in narratives of the internment,” and “how the spoken memories of the *Nisei*’ suggest that the disruption of silence does not necessarily result in empowerment.”<sup>2</sup> She suggests that “redress ... is not synonymous with reconciliation with or in memory.”<sup>3</sup> “After listening to the narratives of well over one hundred *Nisei*,” she reports,

I recognize that many memories continue to exist outside of the collective public history: the personal memories of the deported who never returned to Canada, those who left and returned, women and men who were married to *Hakujin* (the Japanese word used to refer to white Canadians) during the war years, individuals who witnessed the death of a friend or family member in a site of internment, those who experienced sexual violence, and a small number of Japanese Canadians who were never uprooted from their BC homes.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, “much” remains to be written regarding the 1950s and 1960s, the “so-called resettlement years,” during which racism against Japanese Canadians was “most intensely experienced.”<sup>5</sup>

As have other “truth and reconciliation” narratives, Sugiman notes, Japanese-Canadian redress narratives have focused on “victims” of government policies, ignoring “non-Japanese Canadians who also experienced the internment as bystanders to racism,” who remain “without voice and agency, if not culpability.”<sup>6</sup> Acknowledging the “growing body of literature that addresses *perpetrators* and *bystanders* during the Holocaust and in contemporary Germany,” Sugiman “recently redirect[ed] the focus of my internment research,” gaining a “nuanced understanding of what non-Japanese Canadians, for decades silent, remember about the internment and how they narrate their memories.”<sup>7</sup> How did “ordinary *Hakujin* Canadian citizens situate themselves in the wartime and post-war events,” and

What do they remember and what have they forgotten? Decades later, how do they locate themselves in this chapter of Canadian history? In what ways does remembering implicate them in the past? More generally, how do experiences of racism, racial privilege, and racial identity shape personal memory and historical consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Sugiman moves from the abstract to the concrete, acknowledging that it is her own “family’s direct and communicated memories” that “have inspired me to reflect on the implications of silence for historical knowledge and consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition to giving “voice” to those who had yet spoken or been heard, oral history (Sugiman suggests) enables understanding of the “role of silence in personal memory and the public narrative,” adding: “Silences permeate oral history and shape historical consciousness,” disclosing “relations of power and privilege in a racially unequal and unjust society.”<sup>10</sup> Moving from the concrete back to the abstract she concludes: “Oral history then is not simply a collection of words and voices,” as “it offers us a theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which structured relationships shape social experience and human expression.”<sup>11</sup>

For the past several years, Jennifer A. Tupper has been attempting—through her research, scholarship, and teaching—to “understand, unpack, and transform the settler imaginary that shapes my identity.”<sup>12</sup> Tupper is aware that the term “settler” provokes “discomfort in many Canadians unless it is used only in reference to the distant colonial past and to celebrate the pioneering spirit that was believed to be integral to nation-building.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Tupper’s use of the term “is intended to centre coloniality ... as a present-day structure through which settler dominance is maintained,” as “colonialism is at the heart of inequitable relationships between settlers and Indigenous peoples.”<sup>14</sup> She considers it “imperative” that, as a “white settler living on the Canadian prairies, that “I continually map and remap the ways in which my many privileges are made possible through colonial structures and in relation to the land.”<sup>15</sup> Such subjective labour is necessary if she is not “to slip back into the comfort of my dominant identity position, of the settler imaginary, to embrace settler narratives and the prolific evidence of these narratives that surround all of us who occupy land that was never ours.”<sup>16</sup>

Tupper suggests that “settler historical consciousness” not only “normalizes and celebrates the settler experience” but “render[s] the past and present experiences of Indigenous peoples either invisible or as distinctly separate from what is worth knowing.”<sup>17</sup> Such unconsciousness (one might say) “fails to make connections between present-day structures of oppression and racism (often a result of government policies) experienced by Indigenous peoples and our shared colonial past, defining a boundary between settlers and Indigenous peoples.”<sup>18</sup> Also in play is (after Paulette Regan) is the “peacemaker myth,” that imagines settlers as saviors of the uncivilized, not always myth then<sup>19</sup> but now “limits the possibilities for future redress,” as

it does not consider settler complicity in realities such as inequitable educational funding for First Nations schools, lower graduation rates for Indigenous learners, the overpopulation of prisons by Indigenous inmates, the crisis of murdered and missing Indigenous girls and women, Indigenous health issues,

high poverty rates among Indigenous peoples, and the number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system.<sup>20</sup>

In short, “settler consciousness seeks ... the persistence of settler privilege.”<sup>21</sup> If “reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples of Canada is ever going to be possible ... a process of settler life writing, particularly as it considers treaties and the treaty relationship, is necessary.”<sup>22</sup>

Tupper reviews those past “government policies” that resulted in starvation, disease, and the systematic decimation of the buffalo,” policies “weaken[ing] ... First Nations peoples, positioning “treaties as a means for First Nations peoples to secure a better future for their children and their children’s children.”<sup>23</sup> Not only did treaties avoid “costly wars,” they constituted “sacred covenants.”<sup>24</sup> Too few Canadians study “this critical aspect of our shared history in school curricula,” Tupper contends; “it is not part of the official story of the nation or our collective memory.”<sup>25</sup> Remembrance is prerequisite to reconciliation, as “real change in Indigenous–Settler relations will not be possible until and unless settler historical consciousness is revealed, disrupted, and radically reconstituted.”<sup>26</sup>

To undertake such remembrance, Tupper turns to “settler life-writing,” a practice she derived from Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers and Carl Leggo<sup>27</sup> that requires “deep analysis of personal experiences to understand how these experiences themselves are shaped by specific cultural, political, and social phenomena.”<sup>28</sup> Tupper positions “oral history” and “memory work” at the “heart of life writing as they require a consideration of how the past is made sense of, how it is connected to experience, and how it is part of the present interpretive moment.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, “with its deep connections to oral history and memory work, settler life writing offers opportunities for deeper and more critical considerations of the construction of self and identity as always in relation.”<sup>30</sup> As a “pedagogical approach to teaching and learning,” such life writing “can challenge the ignorance that dominance deeply depends on to sustain itself, as teachers encourage “students to consider the stories they have been told (formally and informally), and how these stories shape their historical consciousness, they may be opened up to the possibility of hearing other stories, stories that are in sharp relief to Canada’s dominant national narratives.”<sup>31</sup>

Through “shifting settler historical consciousness” - accomplished via “life writing” – Tupper suggests that circumvention of “colonial and racial realities” is possible, so that “ethical relationality, truth telling, and reconciliation become possible.”<sup>32</sup> Key to the process is interrogating the stories non-Indigenous have been told, thereby “dismantle[ing] ‘truth’ and ... creat[ing] entry points for re-storying ourselves, our communities, our relationships, and our nation.”<sup>33</sup> Tupper summarizes, emphasizing that the

intent of settler life writing is not to re-centre the settler experience, although this critique may be made since the process necessarily requires the telling of stories that privilege settler identities. Rather, the intent is to understand how settler and Indigenous histories are intricately woven together, to consider the significance of place, to deeply consider how colonialism shapes our consciousness and the implications of this for how we do live and might live as individuals and as a nation in ethical relationship in the midst of historical harms.<sup>34</sup>

Subjective and social reconstruction are reciprocally related.<sup>35</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

Reflecting on the power of silence, bystanders and privilege, Sugiman speaks to what is missing and unspoken in histories of the Japanese internment and resettlement in Canada, focusing especially on the experience of bystanders. Much of the chapter is comprised of transcripts of those who remember the interment, providing insight into the role of silence in the shaping of historical consciousness. Tupper testifies to the need for shifting settler historical consciousness through life writing, a process that invites students to question the narratives that Canadians have been told (and re-told) about “our” histories, identities, and land. As oral histories which hold in our memories, these stories reflect the “settler imaginary” in which the narrative of settler colonialism is reproduced. As a pedagogical practice, life writing could hold a significant place in educational practices for re-storying life and national histories.

## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> A person born in Canada or the United States whose parents were immigrants from Japan.
- <sup>2</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 71.
- <sup>3</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 71.
- <sup>4</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 77.
- <sup>5</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 77.
- <sup>6</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 78.
- <sup>7</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 78.
- <sup>8</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 78.
- <sup>9</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 85.
- <sup>10</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 85-86.
- <sup>11</sup> Sugiman, 2020, 85-86.
- <sup>12</sup> Tupper 2020, 88.
- <sup>13</sup> Tupper 2020, 88-89.
- <sup>14</sup> Tupper, 2020, 89.
- <sup>15</sup> Tupper, 2020, 89.
- <sup>16</sup> Tupper, 2020, 89.
- <sup>17</sup> Tupper, 2020, 89.
- <sup>18</sup> Tupper, 2020, 89.
- <sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Jan Hare and Jean Barman's meticulous account of Methodist missionaries on the Northwest coast (Hare and Barman 2006).
- <sup>20</sup> Tupper 2020, 89-90.
- <sup>21</sup> Tupper, 2020, 90.
- <sup>22</sup> Tupper, 2020, 90.
- <sup>23</sup> Tupper 2020, 90-91.
- <sup>24</sup> Tupper 2020, 90-91.
- <sup>25</sup> Tupper 2020, 91.
- <sup>26</sup> Tupper 2020, 93.
- <sup>27</sup> See Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo 2009; see also research briefs #10, #11, #36, #37.
- <sup>28</sup> Tupper 2020, 94.
- <sup>29</sup> Tupper 2020, 94.

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<sup>30</sup> Tupper 2020, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Tupper 2020, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Tupper 2020, 100-101.

<sup>33</sup> Tupper 2020, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Tupper 2020, 102.

<sup>35</sup> For me, this insight derives from the practice of the method of *currere*; it is also enacted in Susan D. Dion's Braiding Histories Project (see research brief #2).