

RE-STORYING SETTLER-COLONIAL HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Kiera Brant-Birioukov, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook and Kristina Llewellyn worry that teachers who conduct “apologetic readings of a Canadian past ... oversimplify our present and future responsibilities for historical harms,” requiring a “re-storying of settler-colonial historical consciousness” so that it “calls for a praxis of reconciliation that asks citizens, including politicians, curriculum policymakers, historians, and educators, to not only acknowledge the wrongs committed in the past, but to act in relation to how these wrongs continue to have intergenerational impacts on those living today.”¹ They also worry “about educators using survivors’ videos as an objective ‘historical primary source’ for addressing different historical ‘truths,’” asking “*How one might learn to listen to the lived experiences of others as an affective, empathetic, ethics of listening?* What kinds of contributions can *doing* oral history education, as a *pedagogy of listening*, make towards reconciliation and redressing settler colonial historical harms in our future Canadian classrooms?”² They continue: “By engaging in discourse and dialogue that seeks to mourn, honour, and reconcile such historical injustices, we hope to outline ways in which to create pedagogical opportunities for teacher candidates to reexamine their current relations with Indigenous communities, by learning to listen differently to oral accounts of a settler colonial past.”³

Teaching at the University of Ottawa, Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn tried “to balance acknowledging truth with re-visioning Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, as a praxis of reconciliation, responding to suppressions of Indigeneity and to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions’ *Calls to Action* by requiring a course - First Nations, Inuit and Métis Education: Historical Experiences and Contemporary Perspectives (PED 3138) - of all teacher candidates.⁴ During the last two weeks of the course students were required to visit *Where Are the Children?*—a virtual pedagogical exhibit created by the Legacy of Hope Foundation.⁵ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn caution: “Educators must be careful throughout these exercises not to re-marginalize or victimize Indigenous identity as a result of focusing on the horrors of residential schooling. Many survivors consider their stories to be narratives of resilience not victimization.”⁶ As well, students listened to the oral testimonies of Brenda Bignell Arnault and Arthur Fourstar, journaling while listening; afterward they were invited to write letters to each containing (1) a summary of what they learned from the stories; (2) a short narrative about what they learned from the overall exhibit; and (3) an explanation of how they intend to integrate Arnault’s and Fourstar’s stories and/or the exhibit into their teaching, their historical consciousness, and/or their daily lived experiences as Canadian citizens.⁷ Teacher candidates also

traveled to the Kitigan Zibi Cultural Centre where they met four IRS system survivors who attended school either in Amos, Quebec or in Kenora, Ontario.⁸

An analysis of the teacher candidates' letters revealed that listening to survivors' oral history testimonies evoked four categories of responses: (1) Listening as an openness to being touched by the past lived experiences of others as a pedagogical act of remembrance; (2) Listening as a reckoning not only with the stories of others, but also with one's self historically, existentially, and ethically; (3) Listening as ceremony; and (4) Listening as a politics of relationality and in turn a praxis of reconciliation.⁹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn then reflected on these "different kinds of relational and ethical responses to the oral histories of IRS survivors,"¹⁰ wondering "how, then, do we nurture ethical listening?"¹¹ That is, "How do we nurture listeners who not only listen to understand historical events and experiences, but also actively engage with this past and advocate for new relationships in solidarity with Indigenous communities?"¹² Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn point out that "Listening is more than the auditory experience; it is an exchange that demands an emotional, intellectual, relational, and spiritual engagement by the listener."¹³ They allow that: "Such kinds of listening can be pedagogically difficult when attempting to open our hearts to the IRS testimonies of survivors," in part because "the school curriculum has taught us to disavow the content of such stories, then forget them because they do not fit within the narrative compositions of a settler historical consciousness."¹⁴

Not only must the school curriculum relocate students away from "settler historical consciousness," it must also "mobilize" students so they can demonstrate they have been "emotionally affected by survivors' stories."¹⁵ Such a "pedagogy nurtures a humanizing-of-the-other experience in listeners, which in turn makes members of two (seemingly) irreconcilable worlds relevant to each other."¹⁶ Such a curriculum can "forge ethical and collective partnerships for reconciliation between Indigenous and settler colonial peoples," although it is only a "starting point," as "emotional responses alone ... do not make students agents of change" as "transformative thinking" (a result of an emotional response) is required in order to move "forward together."¹⁷

Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn urge "students ... [to] move beyond feelings of sadness, shame, and anger, and instead harness these difficult emotions towards empowering social change."¹⁸ Citing Roger Simon, they point out that "feeling bad is good enough."¹⁹ They remind educators to "challenge damage-centred narratives that pathologize Indigenous communities."²⁰ Both educators and their students might "re-imagine their personal role as one who interweaves Indigenous narratives and settler narratives," including with their own life histories and obligations as citizens.²¹

Both teacher educators and teacher candidates were invited to travel to the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin Cultural Centre to listen to the testimonies of survivors; half of teacher candidates attended.²² Those who made the trip heard testimonies by those

who survived the St. Marc-de-Figuery in Amos, Quebec and the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential Schools; these were followed first by replies to students' queries, then by offerings of "traditional knowledge," e.g. "four sacred medicines" to help "healing."²³ During the week following the fieldtrip, teacher candidates crafted letters to survivors, letters registering "the deep emotional impact that listening to the survivors' stories on the virtual exhibit and cultural centre had for them."²⁴ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn underscore the "ceremonial" nature of the event, its uniqueness - "it cannot be transposed or imitated elsewhere"²⁵ - and its emotional intensity: "we are touched by listening to the past lives of others."²⁶

"[P]rivileged opting-out" is not an option "when we are in the same room as the story and the person telling it."²⁷ It is not only physical but emotional - subjective - presence that enables "an expectation of relationship and of shared experience that comes from being present in the ceremonial processes of sharing in the past lives of others," from which "we are gifted with new knowledge and new responsibilities."²⁸ Moreover, we cannot "sidestep or rush the mourning process—especially when there has never been a process of mourning such injustices in relation to the truths, which were never shared within the contexts of a settler Ontario history curriculum."²⁹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn ask "how might we work with students to critically address instances where Elders' stories are misappropriated as objects to be consumed, remembered, and then forgotten?"³⁰ There is both a "politics" and an ethics of listening, requiring educators and students to "acknowledge the ethical dimensions of unlearning and relearning historical accounts of the past [that] must be part of the politics of redress for Truth and Reconciliation."³¹

COMMENTARY

Focused on a First Nations, Metis and Inuit education course for teacher candidates at the University of Ottawa, Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn address the ethical challenges of teaching oral histories of Indian residential school survivors. Despite these challenges, Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn affirm the potential of these counter-narratives to move students from a space of "witnessing" to a space of "experiencing," a form of "ceremonial witnessing," no memorializing of the past but instead breathing new life into living histories, wherein listeners realize the shared responsibility for redress and reconciliation.

REFERENCE

Brant-Birioukov, Kiera, Ng-A-Fook, Nicholas and Llewellyn, Kristina R. (2020). Re-storying Settler Teacher Education: Truth, Reconciliation, and Oral History. In *Oral History, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*, edited by Kristina R. Llewellyn and N. Ng-A-Fook (107-131). New York: Routledge.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 107.
 - ² Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 108-109.
 - ³ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 110.
 - ⁴ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 111.
 - ⁵ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 113.
 - ⁶ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 116.
 - ⁷ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 116-117.
 - ⁸ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 117.
 - ⁹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 117.
 - ¹⁰ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 117.
 - ¹¹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 117.
 - ¹² Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 117.
 - ¹³ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 117.
 - ¹⁴ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 118.
 - ¹⁵ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 119.
 - ¹⁶ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 119.
 - ¹⁷ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 119.
 - ¹⁸ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 120.
 - ¹⁹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 120.
 - ²⁰ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 120.
 - ²¹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 121. The verb “interweave” echoes Dion’s conception of “braiding”: see research brief #2.
 - ²² Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 121.
 - ²³ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 121-122.
 - ²⁴ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 122.
 - ²⁵ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 122.
 - ²⁶ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 124.
 - ²⁷ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 124.
 - ²⁸ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 124.
 - ²⁹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 124.

³⁰ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 124.

³¹ Brant-Birioukov, Ng-A-Fook and Llewellyn 2020, 126.