

# NARRATIVE HABITUS

Grounded in Roger Simon's pedagogies of remember, L.K. Taylor used Indian Residential School (IRS) survivor testimony and testimonial literature, film, and storytelling with preservice teachers, arguing that "oral histories of difficult pasts" demand something rather different than "historical thinking," not only "critical thinking" but also "receiving, holding, and carrying, as well as learning from the memories of others."<sup>1</sup> Taylor casts residential schools as not only a long-term instance of "singular violence" against the 150,000+ interned children, but also "as a key element in the continuing settler colonial project of extermination, erasure and land dispossession," that "elicits the daily participation of all Canadians."<sup>2</sup>

Teaching "oral histories of systemic violence" can challenge, Taylor suggests, "grand narratives" as well as "modern/colonial epistemologies (including teleological notions of 'progress' and 'civilization') and hierarchical categories of humanity and knowledge."<sup>3</sup> Locating oral history within a "larger project of social history," Taylor asserts it also "legitimizes marginalized experiences, analyses, and cosmologies."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this powerful potential derives from "oral and life histories ... approach [to] the past through the idiom of the personal."<sup>5</sup> Oral history, Taylor continues, "shifts students' attention from questions of 'What happened?' to questions of 'Why does it matter? To whom? For what social projects? In what time or place?'," refocusing students' attention to "the meaning and significance that individuals and communities make from the material and structural conditions of their lives."<sup>6</sup> Moreover:

This shift in focus from the *exteriority* to the *interiority* of historical processes also signals an approach to studying violent pasts that is attuned to the particular qualities of storytelling and the emotional and imaginative experiences that story fosters.<sup>7</sup>

"By humanizing and narrating time and events, stories act upon listeners," inviting them to undertake "meaningful action."<sup>8</sup>

How? Taylor suggests that listening to oral histories can cultivate a "narrative habitus" that invokes "not only the possible or imaginable, but also the most compelling lines of action," restructuring "experience into these potential arcs and futures," thereby "animat[ing] historical consciousness and action with emotional momentum."<sup>9</sup> The "narrative habitus" oral history encourages "alerts us to the complex temporal relations of causality and the delicate contingency in everyday experience and agency," including "how everything could so easily turn out so differently."<sup>10</sup>

“[S]tudying oral history, Taylor continues, “can involve scrutinizing, multiplying, or destabilizing the inherited narrative frameworks students bring to interpreting the historic present, interrogating the imagined collective trajectories structuring and animating daily life.”<sup>11</sup> Predicting their final effects is impossible, as “stories are living entities, morphing dynamically across centuries and continents of retelling.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Taylor continues,

a person’s life story invites listeners to temporarily leave their own life worlds and enter that of the story, to abide awhile with the characters—not walking in their shoes so much as accompanying them intimately, one breath behind.<sup>13</sup>

This specific – and beautifully phrased – outcome Taylor theorizes (after Roger Simon) as forming an “ongoing responsibility to this lived companionship with memories not one’s own and an expanded horizon to one’s memorial landscape.”<sup>14</sup>

Taylor asserts that “stories inhabit mythic time—animated by transhistorical memory of the long arc of human existence as it is woven by the patterns, cycles, and rhythms of recurring, archetypal elements—core enigmas, desires, quests, forms of conflict, loss, redemption, and transformation,” but these are somehow “irreducible to a theme of ‘the human condition’,” although what is described seems to me to depict the human condition rather precisely.<sup>15</sup> Taylor fastens onto stories’ potential for forming an “ongoing relationship that continues to inhabit and act within one’s imagination and interior life, dwelling with the listener as she has with characters.”<sup>16</sup>

From these ruminations Taylor moves to “listening to residential school survivor testimony,” a form of “storying history” that “can honour Indigenous ways of knowing and learning that embody, enact, are taught by, and affirm values of relationality ... kinship ... and the sacred ecology among all forms of life ... as well as the pedagogical impulse of Indigenous storytelling traditions.”<sup>17</sup> Taylor notes that “a growing number of Canadian provinces” are including such “stories and oral histories” into the history curriculum, so that the “challenge” becomes “how teachers work with these narratives’ particular qualities and agencies.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps that “how” can be reconceived as entering an ongoing and complicated conversation, as Taylor writes that “survivor accounts might best be understood as an invitation into intergenerational conversations and also a desegregation of memory that demands practices of listening attentive to their particular address.”<sup>19</sup> That “particular address” is “more than” a “personal perspective,” it is a testimonial mode of address that “constitutes them as witnesses and not simply students.”<sup>20</sup> Again referencing the inestimable Roger Simon,<sup>21</sup> Taylor suggests that listening positions “the listener as heir to a difficult past,” a “bequest” that contains “a task,” what Taylor terms “the work of inheritance,” work that is made difficult not by “the past itself—its violence, its inconceivable scale—but rather ... the difficult knowledge that testimony catalyzes and the labour of witnessing it commands.”<sup>22</sup>

Over five years Taylor studied a non-mandatory literature course within a four-year B.Ed. program in a predominantly non-Indigenous, small liberal arts university in Quebec. Taylor found that it “illuminate[d] the pedagogical implications of attending to the narrative and testimonial qualities of oral history when studying difficult pasts,” as the “curriculum combine[d] primary historical documents, secondary historical sources on residential schools, written, video and in-person survivor testimony, video dramatization, a novel, visual art, and photography.” Moreover, assigned “structured response journals and creative writing” were “designed to both amplify students’ experience of the affective force of testimony and explicitly teach reading practices that channel this affective intensity and volatility towards ethical judgment.”<sup>23</sup>

“[I]f the logic of remembrance pedagogies of continuity is recognition and affirmation (finding similarities that form the basis of allegiance),” Taylor writes (again referencing Roger Simon), “the logic of discontinuity can work through the kinds of juxtapositions that provoke moments of shock, curiosity, and speculation.”<sup>24</sup> The “partiality, subjectivity, and often non-linear, poetic methods of oral history accounts lend themselves not only to imagined affinity, but to pedagogical strategies of estrangement and unsettling as well.”<sup>25</sup> Taylor continues: “Oral and life histories tend not to provide a coherent, easily ingested, and reconciled narrative but rather offer up unexpected, often unintended, and surprising juxtapositions whose significance remains uncertain.”<sup>26</sup>

Referencing Winnicott, Taylor points to “several activities [in the course under consideration] aim[ed] to create a holding space” to enable “students to sit with the testimonial force of the accounts heard and read.”<sup>27</sup> One such structured journal activity required students to “reread their initial response to survivor stories, this time as a witness,” another ask[ed] students to compose “letters to those survivors, living or passed away, whose stories they have heard, either in person or through multimedia accounts,” letters emphasizing the “obligations inherent in receiving the gift of testimony.”<sup>28</sup> Questions included: “What am I to do with this story s/he gave me? Why did s/he want to give this story to me? What do I do with a gift that was so difficult for her or him to give me? What of myself or my stories might I give back to him or her, now that their story has brought us together?”<sup>29</sup>

In this essay, Taylor summarizes, the argument has been “that bringing life and oral histories of traumatic pasts into the history classroom needs to be informed by the methodologies, and knowledge traditions of oral history, socio-narratology, historical memory, and remembrance pedagogies.”<sup>30</sup> Taylor wonders “what storying does to historical consciousness, how testimony acts, what kinds of learning and relationality testimony demands, and how pedagogy might condition, ‘hold,’ tolerate, and guide student responses to those demands.”<sup>31</sup> There would seem to be – at least theoretically – a tension between “demands” and the verb “guide,” as students seemed positioned passively; it “story” and “testimony” to which Taylor ascribes “agencies,” almost lamenting the “unpredictability of what will be learned as differently positioned

students engage emotionally and imaginatively with accounts through an array of personal and inherited narrative frames.”<sup>32</sup> Taylor acknowledges the intention of this study was “far from a neutral”; it was “to fully honour and respect Indigenous epistemologies and values of relationality,” reminding Taylor “of the need for pedagogies that attend to ways listeners come to oral and life histories of colonization very differently positioned within institutions and shaped by segregated colonial historical narratives.”<sup>33</sup> Citing Archibald<sup>34</sup> Taylor emphasizes (again) that “stories have their own agency,” concluding that “the challenge of decolonizing history education lies in part in working with both the guile and gifts of storying historical consciousness.”<sup>35</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

Taylor studied B.Ed. students’ witnessing residential school testimonies. Listening to this “traumatic past,” she asserts, implicates the listener as part of this history. Taylor describes students’ responses to hearing these testimonies and the ways they came to terms with the responsibility of having heard them; students composed letters to the Survivors to articulate the experience and impact. Taylor argues that residential school testimony has important implications for decolonizing history education.

## REFERENCES

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Taylor, Lisa. K. 2020. What Does It Mean to Story Our Shared Historical Present? The Difficult Work of Receiving Residential School Survivor Testimony as Bequest. In *Oral History, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*, edited by K. R. Llewellyn and N. Ng-A-Fook (132-150). New York: Routledge.

Weiser, Benjamin and Schweber, Nate. 2019, March 1. Anti-Semitism Still Plagues Upstate School District. *The New York Times*, CLXVIII, No. 58,253, A21.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor 2020, 132.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor 2020, 132.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor 2020, 133.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor 2020, 133.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor 2020, 134.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor 2020, 134. Surely the questions of “what happened” and “why it matters” are intertwined, as the second can’t be asked unless the first is answered.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor 2020, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor 2020, 134. Maybe so, but oral histories of former slaves in the United States - <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/narratives-slavery/file.html> cannot be said to have produced any social justice miracles; nor have oral histories of Holocaust survivors - <https://hmlc.org/survivor-stories/oral-histories/> - ended anti-Semitism, as it continues, even intensifies: see, for instance, Weiser and Schweber 2019, March 1, A21; Goldstein 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor 2020, 134.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor 2020, 134.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor 2020, 135.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor 2020, 135.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor 2020, 135.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor 2020, 135.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor 2020, 135.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor 2020, 135.

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- <sup>17</sup> Taylor 2020, 135-136. Actually, these suggestions are expansive. My concern is that they overpromise what oral history – and “storywork” (to invoke Archibald’s concept) - can achieve. May I be mistaken.
- <sup>18</sup> Taylor 2020, 137.
- <sup>19</sup> Taylor 2020, 137.
- <sup>20</sup> Taylor 2020, 137.
- <sup>21</sup> Simon’s work has been important to me too: Pinar 2015, 180.
- <sup>22</sup> Taylor 2020, 137-138. Difficult knowledge is a concept associated with Deborah Britzman (whose work Taylor cites), but associating the labour of inheritance with this concept seems somewhat circular. Moreover, it provides no programmatic advice concerning “how” teachers might work with such difficult knowledge. Skeptical that such advice is possible – beyond generalizations and platitudes – I worry that in devaluing the specifics of the past Taylor blunts the impact their study could make.
- <sup>23</sup> Taylor 2020, 138. This sound close to emotional manipulation to me.
- <sup>24</sup> Taylor 2020, 140.
- <sup>25</sup> Taylor 2020, 140.
- <sup>26</sup> Taylor 2020, 140.
- <sup>27</sup> Taylor 2020, 143.
- <sup>28</sup> Taylor 2020, 143. If listening to oral history is a course requirement, in what sense is it a “gift”? See research brief #4.
- <sup>29</sup> Taylor 2020, 143.
- <sup>30</sup> Taylor 2020, 145.
- <sup>31</sup> Taylor 2020, 145.
- <sup>32</sup> Taylor 2020, 145.
- <sup>33</sup> Taylor 2020, 145-146.
- <sup>34</sup> See research brief #41.
- <sup>35</sup> Taylor 2020, 145-146. There would seem to be guile embedded in the gift, no?