Reconciliation or Racialization? Contemporary Discourses about Residential Schools in the Canadian Prairies

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Abstract

The residential school system is one of the darkest examples of Canada's colonial policy. Education about the residential schools is believed to be the path to reconciliation; that is, the restoration of equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada. While the acquisition of the long-ignored history of residential schools has the potential to centre marginalized perspectives and narratives, knowledge acquisition alone is not necessarily a reconciliatory endeavour. The critical discourse analysis offered in this article reveals how dominant narratives about residential schools, cited by well-meaning educators, re-inscribe harmful colonial subjectivities about Aboriginal peoples. Through a post-structural lens and drawing from interviews conducted across one prairie province, I demonstrate how citing popular, contemporary discourses about residential schools continues to racialize Aboriginal peoples while positioning non-Aboriginal peoples as supportive and historically conscious. Readers are brought to think about how learning about residential schools for reconciliation might be approached as the disruption of subjectivities and the refusal to (re)pathologize Aboriginal peoples. Otherwise, efforts

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at reconciliation risk re-inscribing the racism that justified residential schools in their inception.

Keywords: reconciliation, residential schools, racism, discourse analysis

Résumé

Les pensionnats autochtones étaient un outil central d'un génocide culturel à l'égard des premiers peuples du Canada. Il est dit qu'afin de paver la voie à une véritable réconciliation il faut sensibiliser et éduquer le public canadien sur le système des pensionnats et ses répercussions. Malgré que l'éducation au sujet puisse éclaircir un événement souvent mal entendu et ignoré, l'acquisition de connaissances sur les écoles pensionnats ne signifie pas toujours la réconciliation. L'analyse du discours offert par le présent article démontre que les discours dominants sur les pensionnats autochtones, comme appropriés par les enseignants, reproduisent des subjectivités coloniales nuisibles. À travers une vision poststructurale, et à partir d'entretiens individuels avec 13 enseignants d'écoles des Prairies canadiennes, j'explore comment les discours dominants contemporaires sur les écoles pensionnats racialisent le peuple autochtone tandis qu'ils positionnent les non-autochtones de façons favorables. Je constate que tout apprentissage sur les pensionnats autochtones devrait refuser de (re)pathologiser le peuple autochtone. Autrement, les efforts qui visent la réconciliation risquent réinscrire le racisme qu'on a utilisé pour justifier les pensionnats autochtones il y a plus de cent ans.

Mots-clés : réconciliation, pensionnats autochtones, racisme, analyse du discours

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Introduction

The residential school system is one of the darkest examples of Canada's colonial policies implemented to eradicate Aboriginal peoples[1] from settler society. Lasting for over 100 years and ending in the mid-1990s, the extensive government- and church-run school system was "characterized by forced removal of families; systemic physical and sexual assault; spiritual, psychological and emotional abuse; and malnutrition, inhumane living conditions, death, and murder" (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 278). The system accomplished what is today considered cultural genocide against Canada's Aboriginal peoples (Tasker, 2015). Despite the gravity of this historical event, it did not make its way into classrooms and official curriculum until recent years with initiatives such as Project of Heart[2] (2016). Recently released recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) include calls to action for education for reconciliation. Reconciliation is the restoration of an equal relationship between the Aboriginal peoples and the non-Aboriginal peoples of Canada (Sinclair, 2016). Included in the TRC calls to action is a mandatory kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum on the history and legacy of residential schools, and identification of related teacher training needs.

This article contributes to the recommendation of training considerations in regards to teaching by showing how contemporary discourses about residential schools, cited by well-meaning educators, can re-inscribe unequal colonial-settler relations and racialize Aboriginal peoples. Harmful colonial discourses are often reproduced in schools (Tupper, 2014). While there is potential for the acquisition of historical information about residential schools to centre long-erased and marginalized Aboriginal perspectives, careful attention must be paid to the knowledge and subjectivities produced in the process.

1 For the purpose of this article, the term "Aboriginal" is meant to encompass people categorized as non-status, status, Inuit, Métis, and First Nations (First Nations refers to Aboriginal peoples who are neither Inuit or Métis). While recognizing that one term cannot encapsulate the diversity found within Aboriginal cultures and languages, I will follow the direction of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples and use the term Aboriginal peoples. When I quote or paraphrase authors, I shall employ the author's terminology in order to respect the right of people to name themselves. Métis people are of primarily First Nations-French mixed ancestry, who trace their origins to Southern Manitoba but today include other people of mixed ancestry. Canada's Inuit population traces their origins to the far North.

2 Project of Heart is a toolkit designed to engage students in an exploration of Indigenous traditions and the history of Indian Residential schools. It was created by teacher Sylvia Smith in 2010, who believed in the importance of teaching about a century-long event previously erased from official Canadian curriculum and classrooms.

Employing a post-structural discourse analysis of excerpts from interviews with teachers in the Canadian Prairies, I trace the ways in which settler innocence and Aboriginal culpability are (re)produced through discourses about residential schools by positioning settlers as empathetic and critically conscious, and Aboriginal peoples as collectively lacking. I underline how an emphasis on the residential schools as a past event means there are no present-day perpetrators of racism, leaving Aboriginal peoples to shoulder the blame for ongoing inequality. This article demonstrates if learning about residential schools is meant to further the goals of reconciliation and different settler-Aboriginal relationships, then the subjectivities produced alongside this historical knowledge acquisition must be considered; otherwise, educators risk re-inscribing the same colonial subjectivities that justified residential schools in their inception.

Residential Schools

> Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian problem. (Duncan Campbell Scott, as cited in Thobani, 2007, p. 198)[3]

The term residential schools refers to an extensive school system put into place by the Canadian government and administered by churches, which operated from the 1880s into the last decade of the 20th century. Approximately 150,000 Aboriginal children were separated from their families to attend residential schools (Government of Canada, 2015). While the said goals of the system were to educate Aboriginal children and assimilate them into Euro-Canadian ways of life, the system not only failed to provide Aboriginal peoples with skills necessary to flourish in settler society, but also purposefully destroyed Aboriginal languages and cultural traditions, devastating thousands of families and entire communities. While "the task [of the system] was [said] to transform children from 'savages' to 'citizens' by inculcating the values of Christianity and industry so that the youngsters could take up positions of 'functioning' members of the emerging capitalist society"

3 Duncan Scott was the deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932.

(Comack, 2012, p. 72), "from the outset, the government's educational expectations for residential schools were not high" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 25). Indeed, an 1879 report from the Indian Affairs Branch read, "Little can be done with him (the Indian child). He can be taught to do a little farming, and stock-raising, and to dress in a more civilized manner, but that is all" (as cited in Kirkness, 1999, p. 3). Inferiorizing assumptions about Aboriginal students' capabilities, coupled with the resolve that a minimal education would prevent their competition with white settlers, meant that the curriculum of residential schools was largely based on hard labour for boys and housekeeping work for girls. Formal lessons emphasized religious instruction and rote memorization, and were largely devoid of critical thinking (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012). The residential school system "complemented the imposition of political and economic measures designed to subjugate and render economic competition with white settlers impossible" (Comeau, 2005a, p. 11).

The residential school system marked Aboriginal families for systematic destruction (Thobani, 2007). The policy framed Aboriginal homes as dangerous, and claimed that the separation from deleterious home influences was necessary. "Federal legislation passed in 1894 allowed for fines or jail terms for [Aboriginal] parents who resisted the taking of their children" (Comack, 2012, p. 72). The professed protection offered by residential schools is starkly contradicted by the number of students who died while in attendance: Duncan Campbell Scott noted that approximately half of all students perished in the schools between 1867 and 1912, and another report found that an average of 42% died annually (Thobani, 2007, p. 200). Health conditions in the schools were atrocious, and nutrition was inadequate; survivors recount stories of constant hunger, and their memoirs are often filled with remembrances of death and disease (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

In the 1990s, government and churches began to acknowledge the system was inherently wrong and misguided, and the violent project began to receive widespread attention. Today, the lasting effects of the residential school system are experienced by thousands of Aboriginal peoples across Canada, and non-Aboriginal peoples have been called to engage in processes of reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered a statement of apology to former students of residential schools on behalf of the Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2010). Subsequently, parties to the Indian Residential Schools Class Action

Settlement created the TRC, to determine the truth about Canada's residential schools and establish a reconciliation process. After conducting in-depth research, which included gathering statements from residential school survivors, final reports were released in June 2015 and December 2015. Supreme Court of Canada Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin and TRC Chair Justice Murray Sinclair have found that the report points to cultural genocide (Tasker, 2015). The final report includes calls to action for federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments in the areas of child welfare, health, education, language and culture, and the justice system. While responses to this comprehensive list of calls for change to redress inequality are yet to be known, the hope is that education, as the key to reconciliation, "can pave the path to relationships built on mutual respect and peaceful co-existence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal classmates, neighbors and community members in this country" (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2015, para. 1).

Foregrounding Colonialism and Racism

The geographical location of this study is the Canadian Prairies. While the violence of the colonial past of the Canadian Prairies has been commonly ignored or glossed over (e.g., Daschuk, 2013; Razack, 2015), European settler communities remember peaceful pasts of "hard work and industry" (Schick, 2009, p. 13). Canada's Prairie provinces include Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, which are bordered on the south by Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota in the United States, and on the north by the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Participants are teachers and school administrators, who at the time of the study were teaching in small towns and urban centres in one Canadian Prairie province where First Nations and Métis people comprise approximately 15% of the population (Schick, 2014). The remainder of the population is comprised of settlers, referring to relative newcomers as well as those who have occupied the land for several generations. Before European colonization, Indigenous peoples occupied the land for approximately 11,000 years (Stonechild, 2006). Their descendants are culturally and linguistically diverse nations and communities, including the Ojibway, Dene, Plains Cree, Swampy Cree, Woods Cree, Saulteaux, Assiniboine, Lakota, Dakota, Nakoda, and Métis. Aboriginal peoples are not a static identity category; they are diverse in their tribal

ancestry, geographical locations, linguistic and cultural traditions, family situations, hobbies, passions, and educational experiences.

While St. Denis (2007) concedes Aboriginal peoples are not and have never been a homogenous population, Aboriginal peoples do share "a common experience with colonization and racialization" (p. 1087). The concept of racialization "brings attention to how race has been used and is continually used to justify inequality and oppression of Aboriginal peoples" (p. 1071). In the Canadian Prairies, "First Nations and Métis peoples…are socially, politically, and historically positioned as 'other' to the descendants of white settlers who migrated to this area in large numbers in the early years of the twentieth century" (Schick, 2014, p. 89). Through the stigmatization of Aboriginal peoples, white identity is defined and secured. Present-day inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples is indicative of ongoing colonial relations; colonial systems force Aboriginal peoples to negotiate barriers on all levels for health care, education, housing, employment, food supply, clean water, and within the justice system. Anti-Aboriginal racism on the Canadian Prairies—"the legitimating ideology of colonialism" (Green, 2011, p. 239)—is rampant, and is a daily reality for Aboriginal peoples (Gilmore, 2015; McDougall, 2016). As cited by one Aboriginal teacher, "in Saskatchewan there's nothing lower than being an Indian or looking like an Indian, whether or not you're Métis, you're Indian, it doesn't matter" (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1081). In their encounters with non-Aboriginal society, Aboriginal youth "deal with low expectations, and incidents of outright racism" (Castellano, 2008, p. 8). Despite the problem of racism in the Canadian Prairies[4], educational approaches have long focused on cultural awareness solutions, as opposed to anti-racist approaches, for improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal students (Schick, 2009; St. Denis, 2004, 2007, 2011b).

4 On August 9, 2016, in rural Saskatchewan, a white farmer named Gerald Stanley shot and killed 22-year-old Colten Boushie, an Aboriginal man. While events leading to the shooting were and remain unclear, a slew of racist and derogatory comments supporting Stanley followed the shooting. See http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/brad-wall-trent-wotherspoon-call-for-end-of-racist-sask-comments-1.3720774

Theoretical Framework

This study takes up the debates offered by critical race theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and thus begins by questioning the significance of race in education, and foregrounding racism as an explanation for the long-standing low achievement levels of Aboriginal students. Critical race theory is a marginal lens for looking at Aboriginal education, and the predominant discourse is a cultural approach: "The assumption is that the integration of Aboriginal cultural socialization processes… will create links between the home and school cultures and motivate Aboriginal students to learn in school" (Kanu, 2011, p. 5). This study follows the work of scholars who believe cultural explanations are inadequate on their own for understanding inequality, and insist on a race-based analysis (e.g., Green, 2011; Razack, 1998, 2015; Schick, 2009; St. Denis, 2004, 2007, 2011b). "It is not the presence or lack of culture that has failed [Aboriginal] students so much as the structural and systemic racism in which student histories, economics and social lives are ignored and/or vilified" (Schick, 2009, p. 53).

While critical race theory is used to underscore race and racism in the analysis that follows, I use post-structural principles to show how "racism requires language to do its work" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 115). According to these principles, discourses are "bodies of knowledge that are taken as 'truth' and through which we see the world" (Youdell, 2006, p. 35); truth productions are always situated, and are produced for particular interests at particular times (Maclure, 2003). According to Schick (2000), "*That racism exists is not in dispute*, but what is less clearly understood is the construction of 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1980); within which racism is produced and becomes effective; and how subjects are produced within racialised identifications" (p. 83, emphasis added). That is, subjects are not existing naturally and pre-formed but are socially and culturally constructed—"inscribed by the meaning system that is language and discourses" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 16). Subjectivity, a concept used throughout the analysis, implies contradiction and change; it is an individual's sense of herself or himself as well as her or his audience's understanding of who she or he is and can be (Youdell, 2006). On the other hand, identities are the positions people take up and identify with (Woodward, 1997). As post-structuralism is committed to the critique of the "common-sense" assumptions that regulate and organize institutions, coupled with debates from critical race theory,

this provides a powerful framework through which to analyze educators' discourses in a context where racism is most often denied.

Post-structural Interviews and Discourse Analysis

The data for this article were collected for a qualitative, doctoral study titled "In School but not of the School: Teaching Aboriginal Students, Inferiorizing Subjectivities, and Schooling Exclusions" (Gebhard, 2015). For the purpose of this article, the data were used to examine dominant discourses about residential schools within the context of educational settings, where "teachers play a key role in both producing and reproducing knowledge" (Petherick & Beausoleil, 2015, p. 10). Data were generated from 13 semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators. After ethical approval was granted, participants were recruited through professional and personal contacts. I asked former teacher colleagues, university research colleagues, and personal acquaintances to electronically disseminate a recruitment poster to teachers and administrators in their teaching communities. The recruitment poster invited teachers and administrators with experience teaching in schools with a significant number[5] of self-identified Aboriginal students to participate in the study. Thirteen educators volunteered to participate in the study, and the interviews occurred between March 2013 and October 2014. Years of teaching experience amongst participants were between two and 30. At the time of the study, teachers had taught in community schools, band-operated schools, alternative schools, and mainstream schools[6] in different cities and towns across one province. Of the 13 participants, one identified as Aboriginal (Nicole); one as First Nations (Danielle);

5 "Significant number" was not defined because exact numbers were not relevant to the goals of the research. The majority of participants had taught at one point in their careers in schools with a predominant population of Aboriginal students.

6 There are three basic models by which Aboriginal students receive education in the Prairie provinces: (1) federal schools controlled by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada; (2) local schools operated by individual First Nations (also referred to as band-operated schools); and (3) provincial and/or territorial public schools. "Mainstream schools" in this study refer to public schools that are not designated "community" or "alternative." Community schools are predominantly located in lower socio-economic areas and, in addition to their regular curriculum, provide students and families with supports such as food and nutrition programs, extra-curricular activities, and in some cases, on-site social workers and medical clinics. "Alternative" schools are also public schools, but the majority of their student population begins in mainstream public schools. Educators refer students to the alternative schools for academic or behavioural reasons.

four as Métis (Ryan, Melissa, Robin, and Valerie); one as Southeast Asian (Dante); one as South Asian (Jasmine); and five as white (Lana, Jo, Barb, Rock, and Susan). Three were male and 10 were female. The excerpts all use my choice of pseudonyms following the request of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were the method of data collection. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Interviews are rich sources of data made up of discourses; interviews can tell us "crucial things about a segment of society's conversations with itself, about the ways in which the world is typically legitimated, organized, and justified" (Van den Berg, Wetherell, & Houtkoop-Steenstr, 2003, p. 13). They are central to the postmodern emphasis on the social construction of knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This framing acknowledges the power asymmetry between the researcher and the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and that the "interviewer is contributing just as much as the interviewee" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 99). I aimed to conduct the interviews in an interventionist manner, providing responses characteristic of formal talk and questioning assumptions, to access the "wide range of different sorts of arguing that participants may have produced outside of the interviews" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 99). I asked educators open-ended questions on topics relating to their schools, their students, Aboriginal education, and Aboriginal peoples and the justice system. I began formal data analysis once participants gave me permission to use their transcribed interviews, which were provided to them electronically.

In keeping with critical race theory, the problematic of race and racism is used to underscore the discourse analysis of this study. I examined discourses—truth patterns—across transcripts to conduct the analysis. The difficulty of analyzing discourses about residential schools is the risk of downplaying the devastation the system has wreaked on the lives of Aboriginal peoples. I recognize Aboriginal students and families in participants' schools are living with the effects of past and ongoing forms of colonization, which affect students in varying ways and are context-specific. However, the point is not to refute or validate any claims educators make about Aboriginal students' lives. The aim is instead to examine what is sayable about residential schools within a community of teachers, analyzing the ways in which some discourses are taken as truth while others are excluded, constrained, or limited. In doing so, I highlight the groups of statements about residential schools that are taken for granted and that produce similar effects in that they are intimately connected to the maintenance of inequality.

In what follows, I use the expression "produce as truth" in keeping with the post-structural theory that "the criteria for truth (what counts as correct description) are negotiated as humans make meaning within language games and epistemic regimes" (Van den Berg, Wetherell, & Houtkoop-Steenstr, 2003, p. 12). Different from a thematic analysis, discourse analysis does not seek to provide a summary, or prove/disprove participants' descriptions, narratives, and explanations. Of interest are the accomplishments of the discourses in terms of their consequences and social significance (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The focus is not on the statements alone but on "the rules whereby [the] statements are formed and the processes whereby those statements are circulated and other statements are excluded" (Mills, 2003, p. 63). These theories are drawn from the work of Michel Foucault (1982) who emphasized the usefulness of discourse analysis for examining "the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, [and] its relations to power" (p. 781). The accent on how educators and Aboriginal students occupy multiple subject positions within residential school discourses is in keeping with a feminist post-structural lens on discourse analysis (Weedon, 1997; Petherick & Beausoleil, 2015).

I provide a minimal amount of information about participants because the individual teachers are not the focus of analysis. Wood and Kroger (2000) explain: "The discursive approach allows for strong condemnation of the utterance but does not require condemnation or exoneration of the speaker; it provides a conceptual foundation for the popular injunction that we should criticize the 'behavior,' not the person" (p. 14). While the educators are the speakers, they are not the originators of the discourses. Of interest "is analyzing discourse as an impersonal system which exceeds the individual…and not the individuals interfacing with the system" (Mills, 2003, pp. 65–66). In the same vein, "what [teachers] say is not attributable to certain individuals but is owned by communities of speakers. In this regard, their language is [mostly] unexceptional… It is the utter unexceptionality of the remarks that I am interested in observing" (Schick, 2000, pp. 100–101). While the analysis does at times highlight participants' gender and racial identities, this is in keeping with a style of discourse analysis that examines the limits and forms of the sayable, as defined by rules at a given time and associated with institutions or sites of power (Mills, 2003). Some discourses are open to all while others are limited; power relations are mapped out through who is authorized to make knowledge claims and who is not, and whose knowledge counts as legitimate. By exemplifying how discourse is connected to the production and maintenance of inequality between Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal peoples, what follows offers important considerations for teaching and learning about residential schools for reconciliation.

The Difficulty of Race Talk

Racism is a daily reality for Aboriginal students whose identities have been ignored, misrecognized, and vilified in school (Battiste, 2013; Higgins, Madden, & Korteweg, 2015; Schick, 2009; St. Denis, 2010; Zinga & Gordon, 2016). According to Leonardo (2013), racism does not have to be willful acts of hatred to be formidable forces in the lives of students. Educators in the study were reluctant to consider how racism underpins exclusionary school practices and in some cases denied that it exists at all. Speaking of racism is taboo, "a form of prohibition [that] makes it difficult to speak about certain subjects such as [racism] and constrains the way that we talk about these subjects" (Mills, 2003, pp. 58–59). While several educators elaborated on normalized differential treatment for Aboriginal students, including low expectations and over-discipline, they were very apprehensive about naming the discrimination as a problem of racism. Participants were extremely uncomfortable with the suggestion that racism is an issue in schools today and deployed rhetorical manoeuvres to evade talk of racism. Dante cites the closure of residential schools as evidence of the impossibility that racism continues to be perpetrated against Aboriginal students. The below excerpt showcases the unease provoked by talk of something that is not supposed to exist in the Canadian Prairies—even in the residential schools of days past.

> Interviewer: Do you believe racism is a factor in Aboriginal under-education?
>
> Dante: I mean if I was a First Nations student and I had a negative experience, I hope I wouldn't say it's because of the colour of my skin. And we all got choices to make, but you know a lot of it, like I don't know, that's a tough—I mean residential schools are gone, right, they weren't working. I know some students that did very well with residential schools, like adults that I talked to and then some of the hardships that happened there…I don't know it's, I mean, it's sad that people have to deal with that, but we tried our best. I mean it depends, that's a tough question. I haven't dealt with a lot of racism to be honest, but I'm not Caucasian, I mean I'm not—so I've been very fortunate. But it's how I conduct

> myself though, too. I mean I try not to discriminate. The students that are, that feel discriminated, we try to help them. I mean I try to help them. I'm totally against it, discrimination.

Dante produces as truth that the closing of residential schools means racism is a non-factor in the lives of his Aboriginal students. The topic of residential schools enables Dante to both answer and evade the difficult question. He repeats several times that I have posed a "tough" question and he is unable to provide a straightforward response. The answer suggests he is not accustomed to being asked about racism and that he feels unauthorized to speak on the topic. Dante's disavowal of racism is complicated by his own identity as a racialized man; his denial can be read as a coping mechanism for dealing with the overwhelming dynamics of racism (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). His response emphasizes the social milieu; simply the suggestion that racism occurs in Canada is considered taboo and risks provoking outrage (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). As a racialized person, Dante is more likely to be the target of this outrage. Dante may also be invested in denying racism because he himself has been successful in mainstream society (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) and as a Southeast Asian man, Dante may not face the same levels of discrimination as Aboriginal peoples: As Schick and St. Denis (2005) concede, while several visible minorities make the Prairie provinces their home, the racial "other" is typically understood to be Aboriginal peoples.

While it is impossible to know Dante's personal intentions for denying racism, of interest are how his truth claims are legitimized and what they accomplish in terms of subjectivities for himself and his Aboriginal students. The residential school system is an easier topic for Dante because it relieves him of trying to formulate the "right" response about the difficult topic of contemporary racism; the racism of the residential schools can be constructed as belonging to people of another time period. While the first part of Dante's response suggests he accepts as truth that racism occurred in residential schools, his elaboration is in keeping with the discursive rules that guard the heroic subjectivities of settlers in residential schools. Dante's disinclination to speak in negative terms about the residential school system is again telling of the social milieu; suggesting racism occurred under any circumstances in Canada is deeply disruptive to settler-colonial narratives that present Canadians as committed to diversity and good-willed toward Aboriginal peoples. Dante's claim that residential schooling was in some cases a positive experience renders

the inherent racism of the residential school system up for debate, and calls into question whether any wrongdoing actually occurred. The statement that "we tried our best" tells a whitewashed version of the residential school story. In this version, colonial subjectivities are (re)secured; settlers remain innocent do-gooders and Aboriginal peoples a difficult population in need. Dante's expression of empathy—"it's sad that people have to deal with that"—further secures his position of innocence. Ironically, this is also a version that borders on becoming a feel-good story for settlers who are positioned as empathetic onlookers.

Dante evokes his personal good decisions—drawing on the North American ideal of individualism—to affirm the claim that schools today present equal opportunities to students who make positive choices. Individualism as an ideology "claims that there are no intrinsic barriers to individual success, and that failure is not a consequence of social structures, but of individual character" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 103). The statement that "we all got choices to make" dismisses race as a privileging or disadvantaging factor in people's lives. Racial discrimination is produced as something brought on by the racialized person, who can avoid it by making excellent choices. By imagining racism as something created by poor choices, the role of the teacher is limited to one who is only there to "help"—a subjectivity taken up by Dante, who (re)secures his position as outside of the problem of discrimination by asserting he is "totally against it." Thus, Dante's assertion that racism does not exist in schools can also be read as a move to innocence. Through claims of ignorance, educators can know themselves as non-participants in racism. The evasion of a "race analysis of education should not be represented as [teachers'] nonparticipation in a racial order. In fact, it showcases precisely how they do perpetuate the racial order by turning the other cheek to it or pretending it does not exist" (Leonardo, 2009, p. 231). Statements that residential schools are "over" are taken as evidence that schools today are devoid of their oppressive past elements. Throughout the study, naming racism as it occurs in the space of the school emerged as a faux pas. The assumed neutrality of the space of the school—and of the teachers inside—was therefore left intact.

Knowing as Evidence of Commitment

Several teachers in the study named the residential school system when asked to discuss contemporary reasons for inequality in Aboriginal education. Making knowledge claims

about the effects of the residential school system on Aboriginal families is a way for teachers to know themselves and be known by others as supporters of Aboriginal students. Ubiquitous narratives of downtrodden Aboriginal families make exploring alternative explanations for Aboriginal under-education difficult because such descriptions are at odds with dominant notions of proper parent behaviour embedded in educational discourses. When asked about her perspectives on why high numbers of Aboriginal students do not complete high school, and how her own school is working to support Aboriginal students, Barb provided the following answer:

> Well, I think our province as a whole, first off, it was great to see that Aboriginal culture *must be in our curriculum*. Treaties must be taught first thing, because culture is important. Identifying with culture, the language, you know the food, the traditions, everything is really important. There's two things that I feel severely impacted our Aboriginal kids, and that's residential schools, and the Indian Act. I don't—and I think those are two significant things in our country's history, and definitely our own Aboriginal kids in terms of their education. Residential schools, I mean I think your research will tell you that it was—children did not grow up in a family. So they don't know what a family is. And I think because of that, because of the horrific things that happened, we all know that—the loss of culture, the loss of a language, which is the, I mean, the loss of—terrible things. And having to cope with that loss of, of a lot of issues for families that are not that far removed from us. We're talking grandparents. So, I think, is it a bigger issue than education—absolutely it is. This is about family, and that's—family and education are absolute partners, and some families of Aboriginal youth, the residential schools have been a horrible, horrible price for that family.

First and foremost, Barb names Aboriginal culture in the curriculum as crucial to the success of her Aboriginal students. In a context where teaching Aboriginal culture in schools is frequently met with resistance (Schick, 2014; Zinga & Gordon, 2016), Barb's position can be read as a refusal to engage in such opposition. The naming of the treaties, the Indian Act, and the residential school system produce her Aboriginal students as historical subjects. Rhetorical manoeuvres such as "I think your research will tell you that" and "we all know that" ensure the historical events are foregrounded. Yet while her students are produced as subjects shaped by history, this is a version that leaves colonizers

out of the story. The narrative turns to the topic of downtrodden Aboriginal peoples, and left out of "the price" paid by Aboriginal peoples are the non-Aboriginal peoples who learned superiority and entitlement through colonial systems. Despite Barb's obvious disdain for the residential school system, this version lets those who are in positions of dominance *today* off the hook by excluding their learned racism against Aboriginal peoples as an effect of the residential schools.

Similar to the version of the residential school narrative told by Dante, Aboriginal peoples remain subjects in need and the colonizers are left out from this version of the story. Barb believes residential schools and the Indian Act have impacted Aboriginal peoples to the point that "they don't know what a family is." The knowledge claim of the devastation caused by residential schools justifies this statement. While at several other points in the interview Barb emphasizes the Aboriginal parent community's support of education, the subject position of family remains inaccessible through residential school discourses that produce Aboriginal parents as always and already a lost population.

Overwhelmingly, teachers in the study expressed negative sentiments about Aboriginal parents and families. While some teachers claimed the negative sentiments as their own and others spoke of defending Aboriginal families from their colleagues' racist remarks, a clear finding is that within the regulatory discursive norms of the school, Aboriginal parents are deemed outside of the bounds of acceptability. As exemplified in Barb's excerpt, such discourses bump up against the truth claim that "families and education are absolute partners" and signal trouble in the space of the school. Devaluative narratives about Aboriginal parents position teachers as helpers of Aboriginal families in need, leaving colonial subjectivities of the knowing settler and the degenerate Aboriginal person intact. These subject formations echo those of the residential school era and are difficult to trouble because they are frequently produced alongside statements of sympathy and care.

Aboriginal Culpability and Settler Innocence

Teachers also named the effects of the residential school system as a factor in Aboriginal over-incarceration and youth contact with the justice system. While residential schools are no longer in operation, more than 60% of inmates in the Prairie provinces are of Aboriginal descent (Wilson, 2013). High rates of incarceration are often perceived as

connected to residential schools, but only insofar as how colonial histories have made Aboriginal peoples vulnerable. Mainstream narratives rarely make the state accountable for continuing the colonial project of residential schools through the justice system (MacDonald, 2016; Razack, 2015; Samuelson & Monture, 2008). A popular version of truth is that residential schools have left Aboriginal peoples broken, and addicted, unable to parent: resultantly, they choose to commit crimes. When the problem is located within Aboriginal families, proposed solutions are individualizing imperatives rather than an analysis of the racism in Canada's justice system and wider society. Jasmine answers the question of why she believes high numbers of Aboriginal youth come into contact with the justice system:

> Interviewer: Can you talk to me about why more Aboriginal youth than non-Aboriginal youth come into contact with the justice system?
>
> Jasmine: I think circumstances form, and also you know, it's generational. The abuse that they've had to, you know, the residential schools, and addictions, like they don't have a very stable family. So I feel that's the main reason. Like the kids, Aboriginal kids who get in trouble would be the ones who don't have a very strong family. Like parents are not, there's not supervision, there's no—it's just not a solid family…
>
> Grades 4 and Grades 5 sometimes, you know when you talk to them, they're out at 10, 10:30, their parents won't even know that they're out… So and maybe, because the parents, because addictions maybe. Drugs and alcohol involved. And also I'm sure, and I know for sure that there are lots of our kids that have been abused. Sexually. And we know, you know for them to feel, there's no self-worth, and they go out and do things to I don't know to hurt other people maybe because they've been hurt. I think just the pain that they've gone through. It's going to take a lot of years for them to heal. It's generational. Like I think residential schools have had a big part, have played a big role in you know kind of for First Nations people to feel and behave the way they do now. Like I think addictions is the main reason. So. And poverty too.

Similar to the last excerpt, it is the citing of knowledge about residential schools coupled with displays of empathy that justify sweeping statements about unfit Aboriginal

parents and families. Above, Aboriginal homes are imagined as degenerate spaces; such discourses echo those of the residential school system, which "institutionalized the idea that Aboriginal families were incommensurable with the national ideal and that the 'welfare' of Aboriginal children was in conflict with that of their families and communities" (Thobani, 2007, p. 199). The adjectives strong, stable, and solid describe what Aboriginal families are *not*, which are imagined as what the homes of non-Aboriginal peoples *are*—broken, weak, and unstable. Given such circumstances, "getting into trouble" for Aboriginal peoples, whose values are produced completely at odds with the imagined law-abiding community outside of their homes, is taken for granted. The statement that the residential schools have played a big role in how "First Nations people…feel and behave the way they do now" calls up an unspoken list of inappropriate behaviour belonging to Aboriginal peoples, including a problem of low self-esteem. The residential schools are taken as evidence for the pathologizing assertions that call for solutions focused on fixing Aboriginal peoples. It is to the advantage of the status quo if addressing the legacy of the residential schools is limited to interventions for healing and recovery for Aboriginal peoples, with no recognition that the wounding of Aboriginal peoples continues today. According to St. Denis (2007), such individualizing approaches let "those in positions of dominance off the hook for on-going discrimination" (p. 1085). The educator and the school instead remain the protector and the antidote to the Aboriginal family, which is still constructed not only as unsafe but also leaning toward crime.

Emphasizing the gravity of the effects of the residential school system bolsters Jasmine's knowledge claims and forestalls the discussion of contemporary injustices perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples. When schools locate students' behavioural problems within abusive parenting and low self-esteem, educators need not examine unfair disciplinary practices that target students of colour and often lead them into the justice system, a well-documented pattern described as the school-to-prison pipeline (e.g., Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Meiners, 2011). The continued subjectivation of Aboriginal families as broken, dysfunctional, and abusive, always and only because of the residential schools, erases the possibility of an analysis of the continued and ongoing processes of mistreatment and inequality faced by Aboriginal students and their parents in the justice system. Aboriginal peoples remain broken subjects and the settler the upstanding and law-abiding onlooker. Left untold is the ongoing history of racism faced by Aboriginal peoples at the

hands of a justice system that has been set against them at every step (Comack, 2012; Green, 2011; MacDonald, 2016; Razack, 2014, 2015).

Education: Imagining Distrust and Aversion

The topic of a strained relationship between Aboriginal parents and the school came up repeatedly in interviews, echoing Kaomea's (2012) findings that "Indigenous families are often perceived by teachers and school administrators as disinterested and uninvolved in their children's education" (p. 1). The residential school system is taken as evidence that Aboriginal parents should always and already be produced within negative terms. In popular residential school discourses, Aboriginal parents' aversion to school can be taken for granted, as expressed by Barb: "And why would some families trust a school? My goodness." While educators cite the popular narrative of the Aboriginal parent wounded by the residential schools to explain parent and school disconnect, the next excerpt suggests educators are also aware of the inadequacy of residential school history for explaining the perceived disengagement. Jo highlights her awareness of the contradiction between dominant productions of Aboriginal parents and the "supportive" parent valued by the school, and the incommensurability of these subject positions within regulatory discourses of education.

> My perception is that because their parents or their grandparents or their guardians are struggling with living day to day, and meeting their basic needs, and probably also struggling with the effects of their families having experienced residential schools, they perhaps don't have the parenting skills or are worried about living day to day rather than supporting their children at home with things like take-home reading, or any kind of work that would be associated with school. Or even having the time to be able to read with their children. So the effects of poverty, well that's interrelated I think, with the struggle with addictions, and so our children are experiencing challenges associated with parents who are struggling with addictions who are doing their best, but they're struggling with addictions. So, they perhaps don't have a stable home life for one reason or another. Stable in what *I* would think is stable.

The discourse of Aboriginal parents experiencing the effects of the residential schools and therefore unable to support their child's education is one that risks simultaneously producing Aboriginal parents as being averse to education. This is a subjectivity with which Jo is uncomfortable. As she points out in a later part of the interview, she strongly desires to provide a more complex explanation for why she feels so many of the students in her predominantly Aboriginal school "struggle with learning." Citing residential schools is a relatively easy way for Jo to explain why she perceives a home and school disconnect amongst Aboriginal families because this is a narrative that maintains innocence in the space of the school. However, Jo is not fully satisfied with her answer and counters the idea that having experienced residential schools means that Aboriginal parents do not value education. She adds,

> I'm not saying that the parents at this school do not value education. They do. I know they do. We've talked with the parents. What we experience is that parents for whatever reason don't, or are unable to communicate to their children the value of education let's say. That's not—that's not the way I wanted to say that.

Her use of "That's not the way I wanted to say that" and her tendency to rephrase and elaborate her explanations are indicative of her discomfort with the topic at large, but also her pushback in accepting the dominant discourse that Aboriginal parents do not value education. Jo's careful words can also be read as a desire to keep her own subjectivity as a supporter of Aboriginal students and their families intact.

The above responses from Jo's interview transcript were given in one form or another throughout the study: That is, the realization that the subjectivation of Aboriginal parents as uncaring directly influences how Aboriginal children are treated at school came up repeatedly in transcripts. These findings are consistent with Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, and Hernandez (2013), who contend that educators often conclude that children whose parents are perceived as uninvolved are undeserving of a quality education. Educators provided numerous examples of differential treatment of Aboriginal students they perceived were justified by negative social imaginaries of their parents. Susan described being chastised by her colleagues for putting too much effort into her lesson planning, Valerie described the practice of ignoring Aboriginal students' absences, Ryan narrated stories of unfair disciplinary practices, Jasmine described a culture of disregard for Aboriginal parents' concerns, and Rock and Nicole spoke of lowered academic expectations.

While counterdiscourses emerged suggesting teachers were aware of the racial inequalities occurring in their school, and several teachers attempted to disrupt the dominant discourse of Aboriginal parents as anti-school and position Aboriginal parents otherwise, countering this discourse is made difficult by residential school discourses that insist on the degeneracy of Aboriginal families. School problems continue to be located within Aboriginal families who are produced as incommensurable with the ideals of the school—a subjectivity largely unchanged from the residential school era.

Conclusion

The residential school system has had devastating effects on Aboriginal peoples across Canada. However, careful attention must be paid to how these outcomes are transformed into collective deficiencies belonging to Aboriginal peoples. This article has shown how contemporary educational discourses continue to be haunted by those of the residential school era. Expressions of sympathy and understanding for residential school survivors can justify expressions of racism, pointing to who benefits from productions of empathy. Popular residential school stories produce a view of Aboriginal peoples that asks non-Aboriginal peoples to take on roles of helpers and saviours. While Aboriginal peoples continue to be subordinated, non-Aboriginal peoples continue to know themselves as good people. Such is the dual process of identity making revealed by the discourse analysis in this article. Contrary to what the narratives seem to suggest, the analysis highlighted how Aboriginal students and their parents experience racism in multiple forms.

Even though residential school discourses were inadequate for explaining racial inequality, educators still deployed powerful narratives on the topic—sometimes in inconsistent ways. The analysis considered how the citing of residential school discourses is useful for teachers in managing their subjectivities as "good" teachers. The desire to be seen as supportive of Aboriginal students is a noted feature in teachers' identities (Schick, 2000). This desire is not limited to those in the teaching profession; borrowing from Comeau (2005b), "I understand participant talk as reflective of broader social conversations…as such conversations occur [in the Canadian Prairies] and in Canada more generally" (p. 157). Teachers are performing an idealized Canadian subject, one who believes above all in the hallmark traits of niceness, good choices, and hard work. This subject is

not racist and is surprised at the mere suggestion that lives are structured by race; instead of acknowledging racism, this subject shows empathy for those who are positioned as the "other." The analysis of teachers' claims to sympathy highlights that empathy does not necessarily lead to a disruption of unequal subjectivities. Cowlishaw (2003) points out "it may seem perverse to suggest that the national goodwill is itself a source of problems for Aboriginal peoples. But claims to sympathy and recognition can entail misrecognition and authoritarian solutions" (p. 109). Kumashiro (2000) also writes about the limits of empathy in anti-oppressive education; while empathy is necessary, it rarely leads to a disruption of privileged identities. Because empathy can work to reinforce "the binary of 'us' and 'them'" (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 35), empathy development must not be favoured as the end goal for non-Aboriginal peoples in reconciliation.

This research is not about developing strategies that teachers may take into their classrooms; as contended by Sinclair (2016), there are no quick and easy answers to reconciliation. Yet it does suggest some useful points of departure for educators. The analysis has focused on (im)possibilities for reconciliation alongside the discourses available to teachers, and especially those on which settler identities depend, pointing to the necessity of reconciliation to involve the acceptance of uncomfortable knowledge about residential schools. Teacher training and curriculum development on residential schools can accomplish this by ensuring the colonial project is not presented devoid of any political orientation. That the knowledge acquisition about residential schools is important is not in dispute; of relevance to reconciliation is the question of how to produce knowledge about residential schools that will disrupt colonial subjectivities. It is to the advantage of the status quo to frame the role of non-Aboriginal peoples in reconciliation as needing to learn about Aboriginal peoples and *their* experiences in a way that erases racism and colonialism—and the colonizers—from the story. The following quote from a residential school graduate is helpful in illustrating the partial knowledge and the flight to innocence provided by an education limited to learning about the "other": "'When I was asked to do this paper [about my experiences] I had some misgivings, for if I were to be honest, I must tell of things as they were and really this is not my story but yours" (St. Denis, 2011a, vii). Following Kumashiro (2000),

> All of this is not to say I am suggesting teaching about the Other and amplifying voices of the Other should be avoided. Rather, the *uses* of such lessons should be

> reconsidered. Learning about and hearing the Other should be done not to fill a gap in knowledge (as if ignorance about the Other were the only problem), but to disrupt the knowledge that is already there (since the harmful/partial knowledges that an individual already has are what need to change) (Luhmann, 1998)… Changing oppression requires disruptive knowledge, not simply more knowledge. (p. 34)

As underlined by Sinclair (2016), the residential school system has taught non-Aboriginal peoples to view Aboriginal peoples as inferior; this must first be accepted as truth in order to begin the disruption of harmful knowledges that non-Aboriginal peoples believe to be true about Aboriginal peoples. Kumashiro (2000) points out that overcoming the resistance to change and learning that disrupts what we think we already know is imperative for an anti-oppressive education that changes students and society. Disruptive discourses about residential schools include those that foreground the examination of racism and white privilege as the legitimizing systems of a colonial project that continues today, albeit in different forms. Of residential school knowledges and what is taken as truth about colonialism or racism, the following questions might be asked to produce different and disruptive knowledges: How does this knowledge position Aboriginal peoples and settlers? What might be learned from this story about ongoing racism and colonialism, and how can we use this story to learn more about these systems? What are the harmful stereotypes reinforced by this knowledge and which ones do they challenge? Who is missing from this story, and how is white privilege maintained by erasures? How can this story be retold in a way that foregrounds the colonizer? Can it be retold in a way that refuses to (re)pathologize Aboriginal peoples? Approaching reconciliation as the altering of citational practices borrows from Kumashiro (2000), who explains this work is the imperative to repeat with a difference, an "ongoing labor to stop the repetition of harmful 'knowledges' (both partial knowledges like stereotypes, and presumably whole knowledges like…grand narratives), and to construct disruptive, different knowledges" (p. 43).

As I call on educators to embrace discomfort and produce different knowledges for reconciliation, I also recognize the difficulty and unpredictability of engaging in this work. Yet I am inspired by educators' commitment to students, and even more by my students, whose desire to learn about racism and how they can make a positive difference

fills me with hope on a daily basis. I remain convinced that schools are society's most crucial identity-making spaces and that no other profession is equal in its potential to inspire change. The space of the school holds tremendous possibilities for producing disruptive knowledges that might restore equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. I hope this article is useful for reconciliation efforts that change students and society.

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