

Haa-huu-pah: Where the Truth and Reconciliation Commission falls short

A synopsis of “Indigenous Storytelling, Truth-Telling, and Community Approaches to Reconciliation,” an article by Jeff Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, and T’lakwadzi

What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was formed by the federal government in 2008 to address the legacy of genocide in Canadian residential schools. The TRC travelled across Canada interviewing residential school survivors about their experiences, and aimed to educate the general public about the residential school system. After the interviews were completed, the TRC published a comprehensive report, along with a list of recommendations based on their findings.

Criticism surrounding the TRC

Several criticisms have been made of the TRC. Some of the language used in their official mandate has been questioned, such as the phrase, “[...] putting the past behind us.” This sentence suggests that colonialism in Canada is an unfortunate historical event, rather than an ongoing issue that continues to impact Indigenous communities today. “Putting the past behind us” also suggests that the government is ready to forgive, forget, and move on, without upsetting or disturbing the nation-state’s position of power, further solidifying the modern day status quo. Indigenous peoples should not be restoring their historically unequal relationship with Canada, but instead pursue justice as a community.

Additionally, the TRC makes no mention of land. How can we discuss the impact of residential schools without factoring the forced removal of children and families from their homelands in order to seize and assimilate the land for settler profit and personal gain?

The historical and modern importance of Indigenous story-telling

Indigenous narratives and historical perspectives have been passed on through oral story-telling for millenia. Sharing stories with younger generations solidifies ancestral connections to Indigenous land and culture. In more recent decades, story-telling has been crucial to share Indigenous history in relation to Canada’s colonial past, and the continuation of the tradition is critical to cultural and political revitalization.

In 2008, the Indian Residential School Survivors Society (IRSSS) responded to the formation of the TRC with their perspective, which included the following sentiments, all pertaining to community-based solutions and spiritual support:

- Canadians must take responsibility for educating themselves and their children about residential schools
- The TRC must recognize that not all survivors or communities are ready for reconciliation
- The TRC must provide spiritual support for those who choose to share their stories and relive painful experiences

A positive example of the last point occurred in 2009, when the Peake Hall Residential School in Port Alberni, BC was demolished. Crowbars and sledgehammers were provided to the local community for those who wanted to burn pieces of the school before it was bulldozed.

Haa-huu-pah and the TRC

Haa-huu-pah is a Nuu-chah-nulth oral tradition. It is lived values and experiential knowledge; core teachings passed to younger generations. Haa-huu-pah has been put forth as an alternative to Canada's version of reconciliation as disclosed in the TRC mandate, not only because it allows Indigenous peoples to share their stories of resilience, but also because it is a way to share perspectives without legitimizing the status quo, as the TRC has been criticized of doing. It's about sharing Indigenous stories, without censorship, while employing a spiritual Indigenous tradition.

Indigenous Responses to the TRC

The authors of the article, acknowledging the political and legal constraints surrounding the state-funded TRC and the power of Indigenous storytelling and haa-huu-pah, decided to interview seven male residential school survivors. The participants were encouraged to focus on spiritual and cultural aspects of their experiences, a juxtaposition with the TRC's macro-scale view of the residential school system in relation to Canada. In their interviews, the participants identified the following core ideas:

HOMELAND

Discussions of Indigenous land was purposely exempt by the government from the TRC. Because the topic was not allowed to be mentioned, TRC reports ignore the fact that many Indigenous peoples no longer reside on or have access to their traditional land, because of the residential school system.

FAMILY

Because of the importance of community, in order to provide support to Indigenous peoples, it is crucial to offer support to everyone, not only residential school survivors. Intergenerational trauma has affected even those born after the last school's closure in 1996.

RESTITUTION

Compensation for years spent in residential school has been offered via Common Experience Payments (CEP), with \$10,000 given for the first year at the schools, and \$3,000 for every year after. However, compared to other cases of childhood abuse and trauma in Canada, residential school survivors are compensated substantially less.

RE STORYING

Colonization is not the only Indigenous story worthy of being told. The best way to learn about Indigenous peoples' experiences with residential schools, as well as Indigenous cultures, is to listen to Indigenous voices. A collection of individual perspectives can teach more about Indigenous cultures than any government website or textbook ever will.

The history of Canada put forth by the nation-state has always differed from the history experienced by Indigenous peoples. In order to achieve true reconciliation, the nation must stop glossing over its colonial legacy and history of assimilationist policies, and end their insistence of maintaining the status quo. By employing Indigenous traditions, like haa-huu-pah, we can introduce alternative strategies to resist ongoing colonialism as well as confront the historical legacies of residential schools in Canada, while reinforcing the importance of community and pursuing justice and freedom.