



Photo: Naomi Angel

## The Nation Gathers

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On June 1, 2008, the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRS TRC) was established in Canada. The commission focuses on the treatment and abuse of Aboriginal children in the Indian Residential School (IRS) system in Canada.<sup>1</sup> During the IRS system's century-long history, at least 150,000 Aboriginal children attended the schools, where they were forbidden from practicing their traditional beliefs and cultures, and from speaking their native languages.<sup>2</sup> Survivors of the system have spoken of the physical and sexual abuse they suffered at the schools. Many students were forcibly taken from their families and communities, and some children never returned home. The last school closed its doors in 1996.<sup>3</sup>



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The former Portage la Prairie Indian Residential School, renamed the Rufus Prince Building

Photo: Naomi Angel

In general, truth commissions rely on particular narratives to re-write or re-frame a contested past. They often elicit experiences of trauma and/or narratives of survival. Although most truth commissions work under the premise of inclusivity, some voices always remain unheard. But truth commissions are not only about what can be told or heard; they are also about what can be seen. In the Canadian case, while many of the testimonies from former students will be taken in private, the IRS TRC's national gatherings (seven in total) will be the most publicly visible aspect of the commission's work. The first of these events, held in Winnipeg, Manitoba from June 15-19, 2010, proved to be a dynamic and complex experience. It was an opportunity to hear, watch, and participate in a public negotiation of collective memory in Canada. As such, there were many moments of tension and contradiction. The four days included the taking of statements, traditional ceremonies, plays, film screenings, an academic conference, and an opening night concert that drew thousands.

On the final day of the event, Governor General Michaëlle Jean arrived in Winnipeg to participate in the reconciliation process. As the liaison between the government of Canada and the Queen of England, the presence of the Governor General signaled executive approval of the events of the day. Arriving with her security in tow, her attendance lent the event a sense of formality. Throughout the day, Jean participated in the offering of the sacred fire ceremony, the youth sharing circle and the Powwow. Although there were many moments in the course of the four-day event that attracted media attention, the participation of Governor General on the final day drew much of it. But even this coverage was fleeting. The G20 summit was scheduled for the following week in Toronto and protests had begun in advance of the event. In the aftermath of both the national gathering and the G20, discussion of the protests in Toronto quickly overshadowed the events in Winnipeg. In this hierarchy of visibility, images of violence trump images of reconciliation.

Instances of police brutality in Toronto against protesters and bystanders at the G20 made visible the violence that the state can enact upon its citizens. In Winnipeg, the state was involved in a very different process, atoning for the violence of the past. On the last day of the event, in the Manitoba Theatre for Young People, Governor General Michaëlle Jean addressed the audience. "This is our duty now," she said of the reconciliation process, of Canada's duty to remember. "It is time for a rebirth."

As many scholars have written in the past, revisiting a controversial and contested history, through truth commissions or other means, can configure and re-configure imaginings of the

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nation-state and its relationship to its citizens.<sup>4</sup> In terms of regulating the national body, exclusionary and inclusionary practices of the state including immigration policies, land claims, rules of citizenship, as well as colonial policies of assimilation define who belongs to the national body and who does not (Gomez-Barris 2009). Truth commissions may also be seen as a form of regulation. In the Canadian case, survivors of the schools are called upon to share their experiences on a national stage. For some former students, sharing their stories may indeed bring healing or relief, but for others it will open old wounds that will be difficult to close.<sup>5</sup>

The national gathering was an opportunity for memory work to be done on a grand scale. But to understand the history of the IRS system, one will also have to look outside the confines of the truth commission and its activities. It is important to remember that sometimes memories can be loud, and sometimes they can whisper. About an hour's drive from the fanfare of the first national gathering in Winnipeg stands the Rufus Prince Building, formerly the Portage la Prairie Indian Residential School. Shortly after the national gathering, I spent a day in Portage la Prairie, and visited the former school.<sup>6</sup>

In 2003, the site had been chosen to house the Indian Residential School Museum of Canada. Originally slated to open in 2008, the museum was meant to tell the history and legacy of the IRS system from an Aboriginal perspective. After the museum lost its funding, the project was put on hold. Many of the archival documents, artwork and photographs are still housed in the school's basement. The building is now being used as the development and tribal offices for the [Long Plain First Nation](#). The remnants of the past are still visible at the school, but the building has in some ways been reclaimed.



Closing ceremony at the IRS TRC national gathering.

Photo: Naomi Angel

While on a tour of the grounds, I stepped into the shed located just behind the school. The walls of the shed had been marked by students who had scrawled their names and doodles on the wood surface. The writing was of the sort one often sees in school buildings, where in moments

of camaraderie or solitude young people leave their mark as a sign of youthful rebellion. A few were simply names: “Walter Cameron,” “Harold Isaac.” Others commented on the school experience: “Indian Starving School.” Others were simply dates that marked the time students spent there. And some were a variation of the common phrase: “I was here,” followed by the date: “1954.” There was something particularly powerful about these declarative statements of presence. Written from within a system that had tried to assimilate the native population, these etchings had lasted over half a century.

The closing ceremony at the national gathering ended with fireworks and fanfare and the promise of more work to be done. The tensions inherent in the Canadian process, and the discourses and counter-discourses of memory circulating through and around it, were apparent at the event. As the process moves forward, it will be important to remember that these tensions come through in other ways as well. In contrast to the IRS TRC’s first national gathering, the writing on the wall of this former Indian Residential School reminds us that truth commissions are only one way in which the past can be revealed or engaged.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The IRS TRC was established through a class action lawsuit, which had over 80,000 claimants. The settlement stipulated reparations as well as the establishment of a TRC. After the first commission resigned within its first year, a new commission re-launched in June of 2009. The commission’s work will come to a close in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “Aboriginal” to refer to Inuit, Métis and First Nation populations. Each was affected by the IRS system. My intention is not to flatten the differences between these distinct groups.

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth history of the IRS system see Milloy (1999) or Miller (1996). For testimonies from a particular school, see Haig-Brown (1988).

<sup>4</sup> For a range of examples in different contexts, see Gomez-Barris (2009), Frazier (2007), Jelin

(2003), Coombs (2006), Bain (2001) or Sturken (2007).

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to foreclose on the potential that comes from sharing ones narrative, nor disregard the important role that oral traditions and storytelling play for some indigenous peoples. I do, however, want to draw attention to the ways in which truth commissions may constrain the narratives told. For examples from the South Africa case, see Slaughter (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Thank you to the Long Plain First Nation community and particularly Ruth Roulette, Barb Esau, Robert Peters and Angela Roulette for sharing your time, memories and experiences.

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