

Appropriating Guilt: Reconciliation in an Aboriginal Canadian Context

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IF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WAS, in Elie Wiesel's words, "the age of testimony," the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries might be called "the age of forgiveness." In the last twenty years, forgiveness and reconciliation have become part of an international discourse. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–98), Tasmania's apology to the Stolen Generation (2006), and Britain's apology to the Maori (1995) are just a few recent instances of reconciliation across different national contexts. In Canada, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) represented a similar gesture as the country confronted its colonial past and awakened to the insistence of that past in the present. Two years after RCAP released its 1996 report, the Canadian government issued a "Statement of Reconciliation" to former occupants of residential schools, stating it was "deeply sorry" for the collective and personal damage of these institutions on indigenous communities ("Statement"). Shaped by global politics, these attempts at reconciliation reflect a current sensibility of revisiting national history.

More buried in these public attempts at reconciliation are questions about their ideological underpinnings and the interests they serve. In what ways does reconciliation function as a way for the nation to re-

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imagine and perform itself—less, that is, as a deconstruction of national master-narratives than a reconstruction of one? To what degree does the process of reconciliation satisfy wronged parties? Ten years before RCAP, the Royal Commission on the Donald Marshall Jr. Prosecution (1986–88) undertook a public inquiry into the wrongful conviction and eleven-year imprisonment of Donald Marshall (Mi'kmaq).¹ The Marshall Inquiry was not void of value: the commission and its subsequent report identified a crisis in the criminal justice system, particularly in its treatment of racial minorities. Beyond recognizing problems like cultural misunderstandings between defense counsel and clients, the foreignness of the courtroom to defendants of different cultural backgrounds, and institutional racism in policing bodies and the courts, the commission made a number of larger structural recommendations. On a local as well as a national scale, the Royal Commission set the ground for constitutional reconsiderations and legal reform by sounding a call for self-government, respect for treaty rights, and the implementation of indigenous, community-based models of justice.²

Yet, the Marshall Inquiry, like RCAP and other reconciliation processes globally, can also be read as part of a national narrative. Baldly criticized

1 Before the Royal Commission Inquiry, the province had granted Marshall a sum of \$270,000 for wrongful imprisonment. At the time of that offering, Marshall had lawyers' fees amounting to over \$100,000. In the wake of Donald Marshall's overturned conviction and the meagre compensation he received for his wrongful imprisonment, the Union of Nova Scotia Indians, the Black United Front, opposition politicians, and concerned citizens applied pressure to the Nova Scotia government for an inquiry into Marshall's case. The province maintained that compensation was not its responsibility since Marshall was convicted under the federal Criminal Code and that, as an Aboriginal person, he was the responsibility of the federal government (Wall 19). It was amidst mounting public pressure and charges of the provincial government's stonewalling that the Royal Commission was formed. Police misconduct was left off the table in Marshall's 1982 appeal hearing; many parties petitioned for public discussion about the role of police in orchestrating Marshall's conviction and the reasons for Marshall's protracted prison sentence when Sydney police and RCMP long had evidence pointing to another suspect. Hearings began in Sydney's St. Andrews Church Hall in 1987. Ninety-three days of public hearings followed, producing fourteen thousand pages of recorded testimony by over one hundred witnesses. A total of eight million dollars was spent on the inquiry and its subsequent report.

2 The Marshall Inquiry made eighty-eight recommendations, some of which summarily led to the restructuring of legal-judicial institutions in Mi'kmaq communities. One of the developments spawned by the Marshall Inquiry was the 1997 establishment of the Mi'kmaq Justice Institute (MJJI). While primarily a native court worker program, the MJJI became an umbrella organization for

as “Canada’s favourite substitute for action,”³ these commissions are often seen as offering only a discursive balm for historical injustices that have profound, and potentially unsettling, political implications. Arguably, the Marshall Inquiry was motivated more by the hope of restoring public faith in the federal government (epitomized by Brian Mulroney’s election promise of a public inquiry and a million-dollar compensation package for Marshall) than by a willingness for various parties to admit responsibility for the personal toll suffered by Marshall and his community. Some contend that the Royal Commission on the Donald Marshall Jr. Prosecution originated from the Nova Scotia government’s desire “to find scapegoats” (Wall 20), to redirect responsibility to other parties. On one level, then, the commission elided notions of guilt and responsibility as federal, provincial, juridical, and policing bodies looked to other places to assign blame.

In addition to questioning its efficacy, one might also ask how the reconciliation process violates the understanding of forgiveness as a reciprocal act. In determining the notion of reparation and change—indeed, in deciding what the appropriate response of the wronged party should be—how does “reconciliation” erode the wronged subject’s agency? What happens to guilt—and, specifically, the owning of guilt—in the process? Is reconciliation’s function strictly performative? Is it capable of producing more than an affective response from the national community? That is, if reconciliation is a largely performative process, how might otherwise genuine feelings of guilt become merely the performance of guilt? Can guilt be turned into tangible political action? Put in more practical terms: how much does the process of reconciliation help those who have been unjustly treated?

While public attempts at reconciliation signify an alternative hearing for individuals and communities to testify to injustices, they also serve as

other justice initiatives. Controlled by state funding, the MJI struggled to develop sustainable pilot projects and eventually ceased operation in 1999. Some of the initiatives that emerged in tandem within the MJI, however, continued after its collapse. A current driving force of community-based restorative justice for Aboriginal peoples in Nova Scotia is the Mi’kmaq Legal Support Network, which operates a customary law and court worker program. While improvements in housing and educational opportunities, along with developments in self-government, have also followed from the Marshall Inquiry, the province of Nova Scotia remains decidedly conservative in its implementation of the inquiry’s central recommendations. One of the key recommendations made by the commission that has not been implemented is an indigenous criminal court. For further information on legal-judicial developments post-Marshall, see Don Clairmont and Jane McMillan’s *Directions in Mi’kmaq Justice*.

³ “A Forum for Native People.” Editorial, *Edmonton Journal*. 25 April 1991.

a means for a broader national community to work through its implication in the blighted parts of its history. Guilt, in effect, becomes a dissolute concept, swept into colonial history, attributed to past government policies, or directed at faceless institutions rather than being individually or personally owned. At times bypassing the attribution of responsibility altogether, the process of reconciliation overlooks the logic that asking for forgiveness does not imply the granting of it. The success always implied by the act of reconciliation dissolves the wronged subject's agency as the public, the government, and its institutions forgive themselves.

For Aboriginal communities, literature has been an important forum for testifying to past and present injustices and for setting the interpretive framework of such articulations. The proliferation of residential school writing in the 1980s and 1990s provided an outlet for individuals and communities to work through the effects of these institutions. In his 1998 work, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Tomson Highway uses the novel's heteroglossic potential to stage a mixing of Cree and non-Cree frameworks. Highway draws on indigenous concepts like the Windigo and Trickster to represent trauma and the potential for moving beyond that trauma. Anishnabe author Basil Johnston, in his 1988 memoir *Indian School Days*, retells this part of public history in a way that departs from an emphasis on tragedy and loss. A curiously nostalgic work, *Indian School Days* emphasizes above all else the resilience of the boys. Both writers emphasize renewal in their narratives—Highway in the resilience embodied in the Trickster, and Johnston in affirming the collective solidarity of his community of peers who, he insists, were not broken by the residential school.

Reading literature in the current tenor of reconciliation, this paper looks at how Aboriginal authors explore guilt in their writing and how, in turn, recent public discussion appropriates and transforms that guilt. Within and outside of literature, indigenous communities are repositioning themselves under sovereign political identities and conceptions of governance. This repositioning has radical implications politically as well as academically. In the latter instance, critics are proposing new ways of approaching Aboriginal writing with readings that track the influence of indigenous intellectual traditions on indigenous writers and the place of cultural knowledge in their writing. These new methodologies prompt a renewal and self-reflexiveness in literary criticism that are not always well received by its practitioners.⁴ Channeling attention to the influence of

4 For a recent distillation of this debate, see Dean Rader's, Chris Tueton's, and James Cox's reviews of Elvira Pulitano's *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*. Privileging postcolonial theoretical notions of cultural hybridity and

political developments like indigenous nationalism on Aboriginal authors, these emergent approaches are interested in the different critical positions and vocabularies that indigenous writing might generate. Next to these political and intellectual developments is the public dialogue that comes out of the context of reconciliation. This public dialogue also influences the ways Aboriginal authors are read and the types of narratives readers construct. The discussion that followed RCAP and the Marshall Inquiry arguably remapped Aboriginal people under Euro-Canadian ideas of justice by promoting an “alternative” justice that emerged from a framework of reconciliation. Rather than overhauling existing political configurations, reconciliation (as a process rather than an outcome) more often produces an affective response from the national community. Re-enacting a narrative of “victimry,” to use Gerald Vizenor’s term, these affective responses in a sense appropriate guilt. This liberal guilt is not limited to discussions that come out of RCAP and the Marshall Inquiry; rather, it is part of a larger cultural sensibility that underlies academic readings of Aboriginal history and literature. What results is a discursive re-enactment of past roles that overlooks the distance that Aboriginal people are asserting as they redraw notions of governance, political identity, and nationhood.

This paper considers, then, the role that guilt plays in both literature and public discussions. The bifurcated focus of this examination proceeds from the recognition that literature and criticism are not written in isolation from larger public dialogues. Just as Aboriginal writers engage in political discussion, so, too, are academic treatments of literature part of social contexts and familiar discourses. As this paper identifies how the discourse of guilt spills over into academic treatments of texts, it implicitly asks what ethical and intellectual responses might lie beyond guilt and the false promises of “reconciliation.”

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favouring Aboriginal texts that work with Western hermeneutics and intellectual traditions, Pulitano dismisses the methodologies proposed by critics like Robert Warrior and Craig Womack who work from tribal-centred traditions and who are interested in the influence of indigenous intellectual traditions on authors.

Guilt in a Colonial Context

In an Aboriginal context, guilt is indelibly part of colonial history. The fraught relationship between indigenous people and the law—writ large in the overrepresentation of Aboriginal prisoners in provincial and federal institutions—points to that history’s legacy in the present.⁵ Guilt is an ideological construct, produced by a set of processes in which cultural difference becomes transposed as moral difference. The prohibition of indigenous practices like the potlatch from 1885 to 1951 or the threatened imprisonment of parents who refused to send their children to residential school punished cultural difference while criminalizing indigeneity. Many Aboriginal authors expose the ideological and cultural bias of the justice system or, as it has been mockingly dubbed, the “Just Us” system. Justice, notes Kanien’keheka law professor Patricia Monture-Angus, is a word that has no direct equivalent in some indigenous languages (her examples are Blackfoot, Musquem [Salish], and Kanien’keheka [Mohawk]). In the Anishnabe language, the closest equivalent is *ti-baq-nee-qwa-win*, which means “to come before a system for something that has already been done wrong” (238). Monture-Angus interprets this reference to a “system” as a reference to a Euro-American system of law. The Anishnabe word for justice, then, is possibly a postcontact term, the product of a colonial relationship. Justice carries with it a historical “residue,” to borrow Wai Chee Dimock’s term, ensconced in a set of relations in which it can only prevail.

Guilt in a Legal Context

The criminalization of Aboriginal ways of life appears widely in the writing of indigenous authors from the nineteenth century to the present. In her 1973 touchstone autobiography *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell recalls two Mounties visiting her home. Investigating allegations of her father’s poaching, the officers single out the young Campbell for questioning. Caving in to their bribe of a candy bar, Campbell shows the officers where

5 In Canada, Aboriginal people constitute the largest incarcerated minority in federal, provincial, and territorial correctional facilities. While they make up roughly 3 percent of the general population, they account for a just over 20 percent of the prison population. This disproportion is most pronounced in the Prairie provinces and Ontario, where Aboriginal prison populations run seven to ten times greater than the percentage of the provincial populations they represent. Aboriginal women comprise 30 percent of the female prisoner population and in Saskatchewan and Manitoba account for roughly 85 percent of all female admissions.

her father keeps the meat. The guilt that immediately ensues as Campbell sees her father being hauled away to prison lingers over the rest of the autobiography. In Joseph Boyden's recent novel *Three Day Road*, a now elderly Niska tells her nephew, Xavier, about a similar experience watching her father be taken by the North-West Mounted Police. A spiritual figure known as a windigo killer, Niska's father is arrested for murder and dies in prison. His imprisonment marks the shifting world of Niska's community. These changes are reflected not only in the incarceration of Niska's father but, more poignantly, in the fact that other Cree tip off the authorities. "Unspoken law said Cree business remained Cree business and was not to be discussed with the *wemistikoshiw* [white man]," Niska remarks. "But rum is a sly and powerful weapon" (46–47). Like the arrest of Campbell's father, Niska's father's imprisonment is the result of internal disloyalty and, in an uncanny similarity, individual appetite. "I sold out for an 'Oh Henry!' chocolate bar," Campbell self-reproachingly remarks (60). For both Niska and Campbell, this experience is a moment of political awakening, one that develops the antagonistic relationship between Aboriginal people and the law.

The prison looms large in Aboriginal literature, appearing in the writing of canonical as well as less well-known authors. Much of this writing treats incarceration as a collectively known experience, dissolving the boundary between those inside the prison and those ostensibly outside it. In addition to writing that explores the continuities between imprisoned and non-imprisoned populations, the prison narrative stands as a discrete literary genre in Aboriginal literature. Works like Anthony Apakark Thrasher's *Thrasher: Skid Row Eskimo* and James Tyman's *Inside Out: Autobiography of a Native Canadian* are both written about the prison experience by authors who were incarcerated. In such works, the prison is often the site of a nascent political consciousness where the imprisoned subject begins to recognize his experiences as continuous with those of a larger cultural community. Tyman, because of his adoption into a white middle-class family, is estranged from a Métis identity for much of his early life. It is not until he goes to prison that he recognizes himself as Native. From the prison, Tyman gains a profound vantage point from which to understand and critique the social forces contributing to his criminality.

The prison autobiography as a genre extends earlier back to Louis Riel, whose largely spiritual reflections he collected in diary form while awaiting execution. In a recent context, the most immediate indigenous political prisoner to come to mind might be Anishnabe-Lakota activist Leonard Peltier. Peltier, who was convicted of killing two FBI officers on the Pine

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Ridge Reservation in 1975, pleads his individual innocence in the crimes of which he was convicted, but he also insists that innocence does not exist for Aboriginal people within the justice system. Peltier has become, for many, synonymous with the continued persecution of Native peoples and the criminal justice system's failure to prosecute fairly. His *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* is paradigmatic of the prison memoir as a genre. In it, he emphasizes the intersections between his experiences and those of other indigenous people: "My own personal story can't be told, even in this abbreviated version, without going back long before my own birth on September 12, 1944, back to 1890 and to 1876 and to 1868 and to 1851 and, yes, all the way back through all the other calamitous dates in the relations between red men and white" (50). Peltier's story collapses into a larger history to reveal a notion of self that is in metonymic relation to that of an entire people. Identifying the prison as a disciplining mechanism over Aboriginal people, Peltier explores the racialized dimensions of guilt. Like the memoirs of other prison authors, Peltier's work functions as an "alternative hearing," allowing him to respond to the law's authority over his public and personal identity.

Guilt is also a significant consideration for authors writing about the residential school. Peltier speaks about his entry into Wahpeton boarding school as his "first imprisonment" (78). The guilt ingrained in the children, Peltier suggests, would come to characterize their later dealings with legal institutions. In her account of Shubenacadie Residential School in Nova Scotia, Mi'kmaq author Isabelle Knockwood remarks that the very name of the school evoked associations with miscreants and criminals. "Don't do that or you'll be sent to Shubie," was a standard threat to children," Knockwood recalls. "The school was so strongly associated with punishment in children's minds that those who were 'sent to Shubie' as a result of their family's circumstances constantly wondered what crime they had committed" (86). Basil Johnston similarly likens the residential school to the prison when he remarks, "Our treatment implied that we were little better than felons or potential felons" (138). These authors explore guilt as a cultural construct, showing that guilt is not necessarily correlated to criminality. In its forced relocation and confinement of indigenous children, the residential school was historically a precursor to the prison system in Canada, used to control and contain Aboriginal subjects for colonial as well as penal purposes. These narratives testify to the racial guilt instilled in the occupants and to this structure's function as a disciplining mechanism over indigenous people.

Reconciliation and Liberal Guilt

For Aboriginal authors, literature has been an important medium not only of discursive and political resistance but of historical recovery as well. The emergence of residential school narratives in the 1980s and 1990s signified an important recuperation of history. In *The Circle Game: Shadow and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada*, Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young point out a dearth of historical accounts of the residential school:

When it comes to providing details of individuals' experiences in Residential School, or drawing generalizations about the form and function of the institution, there's ... official silence. The churches and federal/provincial governments have produced no histories, incident reports, legal opinions, psychologies, or sociologies of Indian Residential Schooling. There is uniform inattention to these particular details. (27)

A subsequent explosion of residential school accounts by those who experienced these institutions has helped redress the ellipsis that Young and Chrisjohn identify. Works like Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days* and Isabelle Knockwood's *Out of the Depths* perform a collective act of witnessing while also crossing a variety of disciplines—literature, history, and therapy. Emerging in tandem with reconciliation movements, these writings played a crucial part in adjusting public perceptions of these institutions.

While residential school and prison narratives explore guilt as a colonial construct, much of this writing enacts a movement away from this guilt. Rejecting the ideologies that culturally coded guilt, these works reveal an insistent desire to move beyond colonial constructions. Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days*, for instance, foregrounds his classmates' roguish resistance to the priests' authority. Focusing on the social bonds formed in this place, his work refuses to tell a story of trauma. In a 1990 review of this book in *Canadian Literature*, Menno Boldt notes with disappointment Johnston's glossing over the pain of this experience. Boldt criticizes the lack of emotional development in the narrative as well as Johnston's refraining from an explicit indictment of this institution. "[I]t seems the author has evaded or repressed the true meaning of his experience," Boldt concludes (312). Boldt's criticisms are interesting, because they unwittingly reveal the type of expectations formed by the wave of media attention to residential schools. Jamie S. Scott, on the other hand,

finds Johnston's refusal to submit to these preformed judgments to be a strength of this text. Johnston's "delicate balance between justified indignation and considered appreciation for the mixed blessings the school conferred upon its students," Scott maintains, is "a refusal to play upon the guilt-ridden posture" of a liberal readership (151). Johnston, as these authors point out, avoids a scriptedness in the way he represents this experience, submitting neither to assumptions of social disintegration nor to a dominant readership's desire for a cathartic narrative.

In her reflections on her residential schooling, Rita Joe similarly insists that she and others who experienced this place must focus on the good, on the value and instruction that might be wrested from it. Her discussion of the residential school attempts to balance criticism and praise:

I think some of the problems, or a lot of the problems that we see today are really the result of the residential schools. And that must never happen again! ... But let me tell you about the positive part. ... [T]he positive part was: the people that came from it, the good ones, learned a lot from there. And so many people have gone on, and they have become chiefs, counsellors, and social workers, and they went on to learn! (Lutz 257)

In her autobiography, Joe describes telling her husband that they must "forget and forgive" the wrongs that were done (48). Joe's adage to "forget and forgive" is a point with which David Newhouse, reviewing Joe's *Song of Rita Joe* takes issue. "[W]e must forgive, but we must not forget" is Newhouse's response (51). He adds that Joe's writing "will help us not forget" (51). Much of Joe's writing in *Song of Rita Joe*, as Newhouse adeptly points out, admits the damage of these institutions, yet her statement reflects a desire to move beyond guilt and, arguably, beyond the redirection of guilt to a white readership. In the individual ways they choose to reconcile their pasts, Joe and Johnston shape not only the historical narrative but a present and future narrative as well.

Even as indigenous communities achieve a distance from this guilt and re-imagine themselves politically, the response that comes out of RCAP and the Marshall Inquiry rehearses tragic versions of history. Reconciliation has often been faulted for its failure to recognize the autonomy of the wronged parties. These failures point to a necessary recognition that reconciliation is a cultural concept that may not always respect the ideological and political differences of individuals asked to participate in its process. In 2002, the *PMLA* devoted part of an issue to the topic of forgiveness, urging reflection of forgiveness "not just as a theme in literature or

history, but also as a critical framework” (Rice 278). For instance, several of the contributors to the issue point out the Christian origins of forgiveness.⁶ This Christian framework often emerges in the discourse and teleology of the reconciliation process. In the first meeting of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the TRC, articulated its mandate: “We will be engaging in what should be a corporate nationwide process of healing through contrition, confession, and forgiveness” (quoted in Gallagher 303). Tutu’s statements point to the Christian structure framing the proceedings of the TRC. The object of the TRC, as Tutu articulated it, was a spiritual, national cathexis. Along with its religious associations, forgiveness—or what this paper prefers to call reconciliation—might be regarded in secular terms. It can be seen as a political and ethical response or as a therapeutic act. In an interview on forgiveness, Julia Kristeva points out that many of the problems accompanying reconciliation as it has been rebaptized in a present context are the result of this identity crisis. With its overlapping therapeutic, ethical, political, religious, legal, and historical registers, reconciliation can in fact obfuscate notions of guilt and responsibility. In the contest of these different mandates, the intra-subjective space of mourning can become swallowed up in larger political projects of nation building and the “international politics of restitution” (Weigel 322).

The Marshall Inquiry revealed an insipid desire on the parts of the provincial and federal governments to transform its institutions. Put simply, the Nova Scotia and Canadian governments were less concerned with Marshall than they were with restoring faith in legal, juridical, and legislative process and in asserting the legitimacy of these institutions’ jurisdiction over Aboriginal people. While the Royal Commission on the Donald Marshall Jr. Prosecution represented an alternative forum for seeking justice, its structure and outcome did not, Joy Mannette argues, question the prevailing judicial model, nor did it “consider what kind of justice system Aboriginal peoples could respect” (92). With its quasi-judicial format, the Inquiry adhered to the “juridical epistemology and bureaucratic process” of the legal system it was critiquing (Mannette 65). Mannette concludes that the Royal Commission ultimately served to “allay public doubt about judicial process, state legal coherence, and administra-

6 It is worth noting that the Christian notion of forgiveness centres on a relationship between individuals and God. This framework bypasses the role of the wronged party in granting forgiveness. The assumption would be that a “good Christian” forgives those who wrong him/her without the guilty party asking for forgiveness.

tive rationality” (Mannette 65). The Inquiry, in her thinking, produced a false sense of material change:

Having been seen to publicly and authoritatively take charge of the assignment of blame, the state process of official discourse transforms an ideological phenomenon (that is, eroded public confidence in judicial process) into a material event (that is, the inquiry and its report). The material event is worked up according to principles of administrative rationality and legal coherence (for example, the use of lawyers, judges, quasi-judicial format, etc.). (Mannette 71)

This materiality creates an illusion of intervention and action. Former leader of the Assembly of First Nations, Matthew Coon Come, makes a similar observation of RCAP: while RCAP’s report represents a significant, comprehensive study of the conditions of Aboriginal people, Coon Come laments that it has become “buried and ignored by the government of Canada” (5).⁷ Rather than challenging the framework of the criminal justice system from an epistemological and cultural level, the Royal Commission on the Donald Marshall Jr. Prosecution, Joy Mannette argues, pointed out “that ‘what went wrong’ was a malfunction of an essentially reformable system. The integrity of the judicial *system* was not impugned. On the contrary, it was human fallibility, in the guise of individual incompetence, which caused the apparent systemic breakdown” (65; emphasis Mannette’s). The voices of minority constituents in the Commission hearings amounted to what Mannette further identifies as a superficial sense of inclusion. While Mi’kmaq representation figured symbolically in the consultation process of the Inquiry, she argues that the “tribal voice from the margins did not fracture the ethnic hegemony which the Marshall Inquiry sought to restore” (68). According to Mannette, the Marshall Inquiry failed to question its own epistemological underpinnings. Employing a quasi-judicial process, it assumed a role not unlike the fiduciary authority of the institutions it was criticizing. These observations point to the ways in which reconciliation, paradoxically, can displace the wronged party. Heidi

7 As an example of RCAP’s receding presence in the minds of politicians, Coon Come describes the backlash from former Cabinet member Robert Nault, who criticized Coon Come for his “inflammatory” rhetoric about RCAP at the World Conference on Racism in Durban in September 2001. The then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs demanded from Coon Come an apology for language that, in Coon Come’s words, came “from official reports with which he should be very familiar” (7). See Isobel Findlay’s “Working for Postcolonial Legal Studies: Working with Indigenous Humanities.”

Grunebaum makes a similar observation in her discussion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

While rituals of confession, apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation were facilitated by TRC, encouraged by the faith communities, enacted by individuals, widely disseminated by the national and international media, and assimilated into public discourse, the teleology of such parties transformed reconciliation into a fetishized claim that both devalues and displaces the experiences of those who were wronged. (308)

In a Canadian context, reconciliation has been driven by a public wishing to atone for its colonial past. The process invites an appropriation and subsequent dissolution of guilt through affective responses to history. At the present cultural moment where the media and general public are stalled in tragic narratives of Aboriginal life, the question arises of what political and interpretive possibilities exist beyond guilt—beyond, that is, the colonial guilt attributed to indigenous groups in the past and beyond the liberal guilt that defines the present moment.

While the desire for reconciliation might reflect a changing public consciousness, its process has been criticized for obscuring notions of guilt and responsibility. Some argue that in its statement of reconciliation regarding residential schools, the Canadian government purposefully falls short of acknowledging its guilt in the grief suffered by Aboriginal peoples. John McKiggan, a lawyer representing over five hundred former students from the Shubenacadie Residential School, makes the case that the federal government's 1998 Statement of Reconciliation "does not apologize for government actions. It recognizes the pain. It doesn't admit responsibility for that pain" (W. Cox, "Government Paper"). Many critics maintain that the \$350 million "Healing Fund" created by the federal government for former residents of these schools is an attempt to avert lawsuits and monetary reparation. Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young similarly criticize the rhetoric of healing and the pathologizing of the residential school experience that emerged during the RCAP proceedings. In their view, this focus served to neutralize discussions of legal recourse and monetary redress. Curiously, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission deployed a similar metaphor of healing in its discourse and mandate. As Pierre du Toit summarizes: "The medical metaphor, according to the Archbishop, found expression in the image of old wounds that had to be dressed, instead of being allowed to 'fester.' The process of healing would entail that such wounds be opened, cleansed and then treated with 'balm'"

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(161). Determining not only the format in which one testifies to injustice but also appropriate responses to that grief, the healing metaphor diverts attention away from the agency of the wronged. Peter Brooks's observation that when "the psychotherapeutic model ... leaches into the public sphere, it works some mischief" (298) augurs the tensions that arise from reconciliation's intertwining of personal and public processes.

Literary Criticism and its Contingencies

Given the departures seen in the writing above—these authors' resistance to discourses of guilt and to the public expectations formed by the current mood of reconciliation—we might expect criticism to follow suit. However, criticism has been slower to come, perhaps because of its practitioners' closer ties to institutional structures and thus to the ideological inertia of guilt. Critics like Gerald Vizenor observe that academic discussions of indigenous people and history often dwell on tragic narratives rather than on the ways that Aboriginal people have re-imagined themselves in the present. In "Settler Fantasies, Postcolonial Guilt: The Compromised Postcolonialism of Jane Urquhart's *Away*," Cynthia Sugars queries the popularity of recent writing that explores Canada's settler-invader past. Pointing out the often nostalgic and sentimental tenor of this writing, she asks, "Does the enjoyment of such narratives place the postcolonial critic in a compromised—even guilty—position?" (105). Sugars questions the metatextual implications of the current taste for settler narratives and the role that guilt plays in the popularity of such works. Drawing on Stephen Slemon's argument that the settler subject inherits and internalizes dichotomies of "oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized" (Slemon 238), Sugars concludes that "it is therefore inevitable that settler cultures are never able to fully reject the imperial legacy they inherited, since this is a constitutive element of national—even postcolonial—identity" (104). The discussion that comes out of the process of reconciliation similarly re-enacts these colonial dichotomies of oppressor-oppressed, colonizer-colonized. Rather than exceeding these old dichotomies, such responses repeat and rehearse them. In his work on the connections between nationalism and portrayals of indigenous people, Terry Goldie points out the ways in which the indigene becomes a repository for white settler desires. Such semiotics would prompt us to be wary of affective identifications with indigenous history promoted by the process of reconciliation. At a moment when literary and critical engagements with Canada's colonial past risk remaining caught in "the colonialist machineries they seek to dis-

place” (Slemon 238), the question is whether or not academic discussions can move beyond its past dichotomies, beyond this economy of guilt.

Recent scholarly developments show the emergence of new methodologies for reading Aboriginal literature. These approaches look to the political developments taking place in Aboriginal communities. Kristina Fagan, for instance, proposes how Aboriginal nationalism might coalesce into academic treatments of Aboriginal literatures. While “[i]t may surprise some to hear the claim that the study of Native literature avoids politics when so much criticism in the area deals with questions of power and colonization,” Fagan points out, “[l]iterary scholars ... have tended to stay away from specific Political (with a big *P*) topics within Native literature, such as land ownership, law, and governance. They tend instead to focus on small-*p* politics—that is, on power relations—and on large-scale issues such as colonization, sexism, and so forth” (14). Aboriginal nationalism has not, in Fagan’s view, made its way into the study of indigenous literature in Canada. Instead, a culturalist approach, or what Maureen Konkle calls the “culture concept,” most often used by literary critics diverts attention away from nationalist impulses and, in doing so, avoids recognizing the political stance of many Aboriginal authors. Fagan furthers:

While it is easy to understand general concepts of colonialism, it is much more difficult and time consuming to learn about the specific traditions, languages, histories, and political priorities of particular First Nations. Moreover, while it is easy for non-Natives to decry Native dispossession, it may be less easy to support Native people’s specific claims to self-determination, claims that have material consequences. (15)

According to Fagan, literary criticism avoids dealing with the larger political issues that may shake at its own foundations. Fagan’s questions about the extent to which Aboriginal authors’ reflections on political organization, governance, and intellectual colonialism are heard apply both to public response that reconciliation has produced, as well as to readings of Aboriginal texts.

A performative rather than a constative process, reconciliation prompts an affective response in the national community. Casting Aboriginal people in a state of victimization, yet simultaneously calling on indigenous communities to “heal” despite continued poverty, differences in education, and a hostile criminal justice system, means that reconciliation’s successes have been more illusory than real. The public dialogue that comes out of reconciliation empties historical experiences of their political valence

while discursively and statically rehearsing such roles in the present. This paper's criticisms of reconciliation are not intended to take away from the value of publicly declaring responsibility, error, or fault but, rather, to question the degree to which that responsibility is felt. Can there be forgiveness if there is no remorse? What happens to guilt in the current postcolonial moment? Reconciliation risks becoming a scripted process that stages a repetition of roles, but which cannot move beyond them.

Reading in the current global moment of reconciliation requires a self-consciousness about the ways that reconciliation movements shape a national as well as historical narrative. Reconciliation might be seen as continuing to strip Aboriginal people of their separate conceptions of political identity. The answer may be, as Fagan argues of literary criticism, that interpretive frameworks need to be rebuilt, and not from the old centres either. While the outpouring of testimony has opened up important inter-cultural dialogue, one of the questions that remains of these commissions is whether or not they can mobilize more than an affective response from its public audience—whether or not they can move beyond the recognition of racism by initiating substantive political reorganization and intervention. Sometimes, as Sarah Brophy, nodding to Derrida, urges, we have to be wary of “the exorcisms that seek to justify self-satisfied assumptions of power” (268) and the way that liberalism continues to hide, sometimes by attempting to exorcise, its troublesome ghosts.

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