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MÉTIS REMEMBRANCES OF EDUCATION: BRIDGING HISTORY WITH MEMORY

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The authors invite a deep listening of memories of Métis people in Alberta that represent an unofficial yet significant account of history. Engaging with a critical pedagogy of decolonization means revisiting history written from the colonizer's perspective (Smith, 1999). These memories are explored for points of connection with official history and mainstream interpretations. We aim for hopeful remembrance by opening up the present to its insufficiencies with history (Simon, 2000). We ask: What Indigenous memories are missing from the official history of your community? What would it mean for you as an educator to really hear those memories?

In this paper, the authors argue for a deep listening of history – one that would mean living our lives as if the lives of others really mattered (Simon, 2002). History is more than the official history of the powerful. Hannah Arendt (1958) has written about meaningful existence as more than the power to enact change but to also be memorable. The authors invite a deep listening of the memories of Métis peoples' experiences with education that contribute to an unofficial account of history that is not often considered nor heard. These are examined for points of connection with the official history of Indian residential schools and mainstream historical interpretations.

Native American scholar and philosopher N. Scott Momaday (1997) considers the act of storytelling to be a ‘sacred exchange’ that involves the storyteller, listener, words and the place including context within which the storytelling event takes place. The act of listening to a story is a subjective experience that delivers the message necessary for each listener, at that point in time. Other indigenous scholars, including Thomas King (2003), remind us that once we have heard a story, particularly a memorable story, we can never return to our uninformed state. Stories carry our memories – real, imagined or envisioned (Archibald, 2008; Panegoosho, 1962). Non-Indigenous scholars too, have noted the power of stories to “make sorrows bearable” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 157). We challenge you to take the stance of a deep listener to the stories that follow. In doing so, we ask you to consider: What memories of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples might be missing from the history you have heard of your community? What would it mean for you as an educator to listen deeply and really hear these memories?

In this study of two Metis women’s experiences with education in the early twentieth century, we recount the less familiar, lived experiences with colonial education, followed by the familiar refrain of official history. We highlight the oral followed by the official account of similar events. The first story, by Rose Durocher, was documented in a digital video format (see *Meaningful Media: An Ethnography of a Digital Strategy in a Métis Community*) and the other story by Angie Crerar appears in a print collection of stories and interviews from Métis people who attended Indian residential schools (see *Métis Memories of Residential School*, 2009). These life stories are counter narratives of the ‘Other’ and challenge the dominant and official version of history. Yet they hold truth. When contextualized within a critical framework of decolonizing methods that invite a deep listening to history, these accounts disrupt our “invested understanding of ourselves, our government and the regulating political, economic and technological frameworks we unconsciously use to negotiate our world” (Simon, 2000, p. 78). Should you hear elements that challenge the dominant version of Alberta’s history and

encounters with Aboriginal peoples, then in Roger Simons (2000) view you have been “summoned to witness” (p. 67). To be summoned requires a sensibility that “instantiates the proximity of self and another, an Other who calls, who summons me, and who thus puts me under an encumbrance in which I must consider my response-ability” (p. 66). Testimony involves bearing witness and as such “one always bears witness to someone, so that in speaking, the witness who speaks summons another to witness this speaking” (p. 67). To accept the summons means that you have accepted a “testimony-witness relation and the burden of being obligated to testimony beyond one’s a priori instrumental concerns and (then you) are approaching testimony with a summoned sensibility” (p. 67).

I’M A SURVIVOR – DIGITAL STORY OF ROSE DUROCHER

In this self-narrated digital story of long-time resident and Fishing Lake Métis Settlement Elder Rose Durocher, we hear about the old days and how Métis people had to work hard to make a living off the land. Yet, because “we would share what we had” with others, they were happy times. Rose tells of how her father taught her, “his only daughter,” about trapping – revealing that women once shared equal standing with men in this small northern community. Rose narrates stories of trapping, farming, gardening, living off the land, and intergenerational teaching and learning in the Metis Settlement. When the daily trip over the frozen lake in sub-zero temperatures made going to school difficult, we “just stayed home.” In the last segment of Rose’s story there is a video clip of her demonstrating and explaining how to make tea and dry fish over an open fire, thereby concluding the storytelling by virtually sharing some tea, fish and bannock. She speaks confidently and fluently in Cree/Michif in this segment in contrast to her somewhat halting use of English in the introduction. Rose’s story ends with a memorable one-liner: “Seems to me things are harder today.”

While her story may be interpreted as representative of a simpler time, the authors hear instead, a critique on the difficulty of adapting from a collective orientation to an individualist way of living in contemporary times. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) critiqued the modernist notion of

history and the way it is presented as a natural and continuous “development [that] implies progress and that societies advance through similar stages from simple, primitive, emotional to more rational, complex and civilized” (p. 30). From the perspective of a group who knows what its like to have “history erased before your eyes, dismissed as irrelevant, ignored or rendered as the lunatic ravings of drunken old people” (Smith, 1999, p. 29), we know the importance of history for understanding the present. Smith argues that reclaiming history is necessary for decolonization and Rose’s story on education situated within the context of her family and broader Metis Settlement community provides a glimpse into Metis forms of traditional education that are linked to the land. On the other hand, her memories of the school across the lake are scarcely mentioned.

A mainstream perspective on Metis peoples’ history with education can be found in the Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Investigate The Conditions of the Half-Breed Population of Alberta (1936). In particular, this report brought to light that there were differing viewpoints held by policy makers during the Depression era with regard to the objectives of educating the Métis. The appointed commissioners noted that “many are of the opinion that it is advantageous to take the half-breed child into a large boarding school and teach him the conveniences and amenities of modern life” (p. 10), while others felt that this education would be wasted upon their return to colony life. For their part, the commissioners proposed a different policy solution and rationalized that, “[this] controversy cannot affect the desirability of giving to the Métis child an ordinary public school education, coupled with an elementary training in agriculture, and in addition giving the girls elementary training in sewing and knitting” (p. 11). After intense debate with members of the Famous Five about the membership of the Métis population, the commission recommended that farming colonies be established for the destitute northern-based Métis and that these social experiments would also include the provision of basic education to colony members:

The evidence is that in all these settlements where there are no white schools large numbers of children are growing up without any education. Certain church or denominational schools are doing splendid work on a purely voluntary basis. Bishop Guy points out that 100 half-breed children are being educated in the Grouard district without cost to the parents or to the Government. It was stated that 80 percent of the half-breed children of the Province of Alberta receive no education whatsoever. Even those Métis children who live within an area served by a public school are adverse to going to such a school because they are ridiculed and humiliated by the white children. (p. 11)

The report's emphasis on a policy solution of education by volunteer religious organizations in the colonies, at no cost to taxpayers, echoes the Canadian government's preoccupation of how to provide education for First Nations children that began in the late 1800s. With this solution, policy makers could continue to overlook the alarming fact that eighty percent of Metis children in Alberta did not attend public schools due to the racism they experienced there. It is now emerging, that the character of the voluntary work of religious instructors initiated by this commission, was extremely abusive and provides one possible explanation for why Rose was largely silent on her experiences in the school across the lake.

In Miller's (1997) comprehensive history of Native residential schools, the Metis are mentioned only a handful of times, and in reference to the industrial school model, the predecessor to Indian Residential schools. It was Canada's treaty obligations to education for First Nations that initiated the plan for Industrial Schools (Bull, 1991), and the role of Metis children in this original scheme was seen to be important. Nicholas Davin, charged with researching the industrial model of education in the United States, included in his report that "the mixed-blood is the natural mediator between the Government and the red man, and also his natural instructor" (p. 101). But by the 1930s, in Alberta, the Ewing Commission was firm in their resolve to reject the "scheme which would give to the half-breeds the

status of the Indian and thereby make him a ward of the Government” (p. 13) as this was deemed to be too costly. Further, the commission refused to recognize Aboriginal rights for the Métis believing that such a move would “undermine his initiative, destroy his sense of responsibility and prevent his ever becoming a self-supporting citizen” (p 13). The Government of Alberta decision to provide basic education for the Métis through the program of religious voluntarism in their farm colonies was based on cost effective measures. But Metis children did attend Indian residential schools and the degree to which this particular history of Metis peoples’ education has been ignored is particularly apparent in this study of early twentieth century education for Metis peoples in Alberta.

ANGIE CRERAR – MÉTIS MEMORIES OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Within the collection of Métis Memories of Residential School, Métis Elder Angie Crerar recounts her personal story of the time she spent at the Fort Resolution Indian Residential School. “I cannot express in any language the horror that I lived. I cannot express or try to explain how I feel about the government, the churches, and everybody that was involved,” (Metis Nation of Alberta, 2004, p. 128). Her acknowledgement of the inability of language to embody the horror of her experience reflects Ricouer’s (2004) understanding that the “suffering of extermination exceeds the resources of narrative” (p. 157). Still she had a lot to say about the current focus on “healing.” “I’d like to know how in the heck they [the government] are going to heal us. How do they heal something that you endured? How can they make it up? There’s no way that they can make it up for those thousands of boys and girls that are buried, who never knew a smile, never knew a hug, never knew those simple words that we all say to each other, ‘I love you’ and to heal,” (p. 127). Angie was brought to the school, along with her two sisters, soon after her mother was stricken with a deadly bout of tuberculosis. According to Angie, the residential school was paid to keep the Crerar children by her widowed father who was ill-equipped to meet the demands of six young children. “And the way they dressed [us], we were not allowed to wear our own clothes although my dad paid for us to be there, we were not government--we were not

attached to government in any shape or form though [as Metis] we were treated worse than the others,” (p. 126). Angie recalls: “As far as I can remember, the nuns, the priests and the Brothers, they were all hypocrites. One minute they tell us, ‘We come here to answer the call of Jesus. We were sent up here to educate you savages with the love of God,’ and [then] they treated us worse than dogs. I have witnessed many, many brutal things that happened to the girls and boys in those ten years. Some were beaten so badly they couldn’t walk,” (p. 126). Angie managed to evade the more horrific attacks that took place in this school because, in her opinion, she stood up for herself. Yet the rod was likely spared for a family of orphaned children who likely represented a source of much-needed income for the school and whose unpaid labour was required to keep the school running. Miller (1997), for instance, found that although the senior bureaucrats in Ottawa wanted to discharge the Metis children from the Indian Residential school in Red Deer, the Methodists insisted on keeping them because ““many of the halfbreed children are the stay of the Institute as far as the routine work is concerned”” (p. 288). This statement alludes to the racial structure or pecking order that was implemented by religious staff to control the residents of these institutions.

In seeking to make sense of this traumatic experience, Angie has committed her life’s work to helping others. Recently, she created a digital story of her own life experience and her continuing pride in her Métis heritage. In this regard, she exemplifies Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) recognition of those “who choose to remain, to wear their identities with pride and work with and for their own communities and nations” (p. 232). In placing her story on the bridge from memory to history, she serves as a catalyst of social transformation from within her community.

CONCLUSION

Our aim in documenting Metis life stories and making them public is to attempt to create what Simon (2002) described as a “sphere of public memory as a transactional space...for mobilizing practices of remembrance learning [where] one’s own stories might be shifted by the stories of others,” (p. 62). As

educators, our challenge to you to re-examine history arrives at a timely point in our history - the time of truth and reconciliation. Without the truth of accounts of our shared Canadian history from First Nations, Métis, Inuit perspectives, we contend that there will be no easy reconciliation. Without these accounts, reconciliation may otherwise prove to be another rhetorical device of manipulation to be used by Canadian governments, just as civilization, assimilation, and integration were rhetoric for previous generations of Aboriginal peoples. This rhetoric can detract from the actions and inactions that governments take (that continue to confine us) while proclaiming a new policy era in education. As educators in Alberta, we have been tasked to shape the minds of our young learners, and future educators, into “ethical and engaged” citizens. As Aboriginal educators, we ask that you take the time to listen deeply - and *remember* - the stories of all. They, and their stories, matter.

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