Compelling Disclosures

Colonial Violence and the Narrative Imperative in Feminist Anti-Violence Discourse and Indigenous Women's Writing

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Cet essai examine des récits de violence raciale et genrée en relation avec une idéologie libérale plus large qui utilise des révélations douloureuses et des redressements de torts en guise de stratégies pour occulter le pouvoir colonial. Cet essai est écrit en deux parties, d'abord le discours dominant qui met en place des textes de femmes sollicitées pour leur aptitude à l'éducation dans le but avoué de faire la promotion de la diversité multiculturelle et de la sensibilité transculturelle dans les groupes féministes luttant contre la violence. D'autre part, l'article continue à explorer comment la littérature des femmes autochtones est reçue de façon conforme aux impératifs libéraux dominants pour promouvoir la réconciliation avec le passé génocidaire du Canada.

On Wednesday, June 11, 2008, Beverley Jacobs of the Native Women's Association of Canada stood before the House of Commons to deliver a statement—a statement, she said, about "respect [for] [A]boriginal women in this country" ("Official Hansard" 6857). In a performative moment of "collective reconciliation" (6851) overdetermined by a host of irreconcilabilities (not least of all, the state's pursuance of "post-colonial" resolution in a present shaped by both historical and ongoing colonialism), Jacobs answered the government of Canada's official apology to former students of residential schools *not* with a conciliatory expression of rapprochement, but with a request. Specifically, she said: "We have given thanks to you for your apology…. But in return, the Native Women's Association wants respect" (6857). With this, Jacobs effectively reconstituted the apology's ostensible narrative of closure, and shifted the disproportionate burden of responsibility back to the apologizer. In redistributing the logic of uneven exchange implied by this public act of contrition—we say we're sorry, and you grant "forgiveness" (6850)—Jacobs seems almost to say: no; in *return for your apology*, we ask for your respect.

This moment has a number of implications for how we might read statements of and responses to public apology in this, what Pauline Wakeham has recently termed Canada's contemporary "culture of redress" (1). We might ask, as Elizabeth Povinelli does, how moments like this demonstrate the extent to which "national pageants of shameful repentance and…new recognition of subaltern worth remain inflected by the conditional" (17)—something Jacobs here underscores (and undercuts) by subtly tempering her "acceptance" of the apology with a conditional statement of her own.[1] Indeed, Canada's national display of repentance stages reconciliation as the self-evident outcome of an apology at once conditioned upon and guaranteed by the state's unqualified redemption for "past" wrongs. What interests me in this performance, then, is how the inclusion of Indigenous peoples (and their testimony) serves not the interests of dialogic exchange in the pursuit of social justice, but is rather insidiously structured in service to the hegemonic interests of the state. Public apology offers evidence of the nation's supposed largesse—its willingness to make amends (Wakeham 2-3)—while the testimony of Indigenous respondents is used to solidify a script of gracious benevolence (on one hand) and grateful absolution (on the other). In this formulation, even statements outwardly critical of colonial power can be recast to serve a broader narrative of "post-colonial" reconciliation. For instance, National Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of First Nations stood in the House of Commons and declared, "Brave survivors, through the telling of their painful stories, have stripped white supremacy of its authority and legitimacy. The irresistibility of speaking truth to power is real" (6855). But what if we understood the telling of painful stories as sometimes bolstering, rather than straightforwardly dismantling, white supremacy? What if, by Fontaine's "speaking truth to power," we understood not only the resistive sense of "speaking back to power" with the "truth," but also the Foucauldian sense of speaking truth *as an effect* of power (Foucault 60)?

It is with this problematic that I am concerned: that is, how narrative disclosures of colonial violence, solic-

ited in a context of professed mutual understanding and reconciliation, may function as amenable to (rather than always resistant of) colonial strategies of power. And what interests me in particular with respect to this problematic, is the matter to which Beverley Jacobs specifically draws our attention—namely, the matter of *gendered* colonial violence as narrativized in the moment of cultural recognition. In the case of Canada's official apology, the House "recognized" and called upon Indigenous "representatives" (6854) as respondents whose oral testimony could be appropriated, in Andrea Smith and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's terms, as "narratives of 'healing' to promote national (read: federal) reconciliation" (247). In this essay, I want to meditate upon this *mise en discours* as part of a broader liberal ideology that embeds scripts of painful disclosure and conciliatory redress as a strategy for the dissimulation of colonial power. Toward this end, I will pursue this narrative imperative out from the halls of parliament and into another site of cultural recognition—one that likewise secures the participation of its subjects through narrative means, and compels its participants toward the ostensible end of greater understanding and reconciled relations. In doing so, I want to open up a reading of liberal ideology as disseminated not just in the rhetoric of state-mandated multiculturalism, or in the official expression of national apology and redress, but also in the seemingly unlikely quarters of anti-oppression movements themselves.

In this, as in the broader discussion from which this essay is drawn, I consider narrative as an epistemological form used to order experiential knowledges of gendered colonial violence toward certain (often politically and pedagogically) invested ends. Storytelling, as a particular narrative practice of telling the self, has undoubtedly functioned as an important site for the production of knowledge in both feminist-activist and Indigenous epistemologies. I am interested in how narratives of violence are produced and consumed across a multiplicity of sites that, when read in dialogue, point to a dissonance or incommensurability between different kinds of "telling"—a dissonance that belies the liberal *mise en discours* that would "capture" and recast the telling of trauma toward a manufactured moment of conciliatory closure (Smith and Kauanui 247). For this reason, I have organized this essay into two parts, with each taking up a different but related site of narrative disclosure. I first begin with a broader discussion of storytelling as a dominant discursive script through which women's stories have been solicited for their perceived educative capacities, under the purview of promoting "diversity" and "cultural sensitivity" in mainstream feminist anti-violence agencies. I then move into an exploration of how storytelling has been deployed in Indigenous women's writing, in ways that sometimes uneasily conform to, and yet often resist liberal imperatives promoting reconciled relations with Canada's genocidal past. In particular, I investigate the example of Dene writer and activist Morningstar Mercredi's 2006 memoir, *Morningstar: A Warrior's Spirit*. While this narrative chronicles the gendered and intergenerational impact of residential school trauma, and charts the autobiographical subject's "journey" toward healing, the text nevertheless refuses to reproduce closure as a self-evident outcome, and instead ends with reference to the Pickton murders by way of drawing broader attention to the ongoing colonial violences of the present. And so, while I began with Jacobs' statement (and its refusal to reciprocate the apology with forgiveness) as a way of pointing up the colonial asymmetries of power embedded in the moment of conciliatory redress, I want now to turn my attention to a place where the ambiguous impetus of "speaking truth to power" has been problematically ingrained in feminist initiatives now striving to address racialized gendered violence.

Feminist Anti-Violence Discourse

In the past two decades, community-based providers of anti-violence crisis and support services have responded to the need for practice models that are adequately attentive to the multiple and overlapping oppressions experienced by women who have been historically marginalized by mainstream feminist theory and practice (Barnoff and Moffatt 56). For many front-line organizations (including shelters and sexual assault centres), this has meant the institution of policies in anti-oppression service delivery, mandating culturally "sensitive" support to survivors of violence. Under the sometimes conflated banner of "multicultural" anti-racist change,[2] staff and volunteer training sessions have thus been developed to "sensitize" anti-violence workers to the simultaneous oppressions that condition racialized gendered violence (George 116-117; Rafiq 37), while offering strategies toward "understanding" and responding ethically to factors which may not shape the workers' own experiences (Barnoff and Moffatt 58). Taken on its own terms, this push for culturally sensitive programming is wholly grounded in a genuine practical need for services that are appropriate to the women who use them (LaRocque 77). It is moreover informed by legitimate organizational struggles to address systemically maintained exclusionary practices. However, the key assumptions underpinning this, what shelter manager Rita Kohli calls the "intercultural sensitivity training industry" (393), deserve more sustained critical attention.

For example, in the false starts, slow transitions, and dialectical impasses that characterize the processes by which actual service organizations have historically incorporated anti-oppression mandates, I see not only the genuine attempt to overcome the biases of a system "developed largely with the interests of white, middle-class women in mind" (Smith 2005: 152), but also the underlying ideological forces that have kept these interests intact. For this reason, I want to ask: how might the declared commitment to anti-oppression in both service delivery and philosophy constitute *not* a definitive break from the exclusionary

practices of the past, but also sometimes the subtle continuation of these very practices under the new banner of "multicultural" inclusivity? In this project of inclusivity, the contributions of women of colour are often formalized as part of a predominantly white constituency's educational experience in so-called cultural sensitivity—with statements about the "pain of…living the life of a dispossessed person" (Monture-Angus 16) being sought out as part of a project aimed at allowing women of colour to "educate" their oppressors (Lorde 374). Embedded in this concept of cultural competence is the assumption, now firmly entrenched in liberal education initiatives, that all one needs in order to challenge racism is more knowledge and understanding of "others." As Goli Rezai-Rashti suggests, multicultural education understands racism as "the product of ignorance, which, in turn, is perpetuated by individual prejudice and negative attitudes" (7). In this model, countering racism means simply *learning more* about racial "others" and their experiences—often through a one-sided exchange of stories. It is to this uneven exchange of stories that I now turn. Here, I aim to offer a brief account of the dominant narrative scripts that have shaped the incorporation of "culturally sensitive" programming reform into feminist front-line agencies.

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In characterizing these scripts, I build upon Sarita Srivastava's analysis of the "let's talk" model 2006: 56) or "storytelling" approach (Srivastava and Francis 275) to organizational reform—an approach that uses narrativized personal experience in discussion groups as a way to negotiate and potentially diffuse fractious organizational tensions around racism and anti-racist debate. Srivastava's work is especially concerned to demonstrate how the "let's talk" model shapes discussions in ways that "can deflect, suppress and personalize anti-racist change efforts" (2006: 57). That is, in the consciousness-raising and round-table storytelling sessions of "diversity" workshops, this now-prevalent model for dealing with racism sometimes serves to reinforce (rather than resist) racist injustice in feminist organizations. This is in part because the storytelling method has tended to individualize conflict and shift the analysis away from systemically maintained inequitable conditions, but also because it risks positioning Indigenous women and women of colour as objects of allegedly "authentic" cultural knowledge whose experiences of discrimination can be consumed as an educational exercise for the benefit of white interlocutors. The underlying notion at work is that, by merely listening to the stories of "other" women, white women will become more "culturally sensitive," and will be better prepared—by virtue of their empathetic encounters with these "native informants" (Razack 2000: 41-44)—to carry out anti-racist reform. And herein lies the irony, that what was purportedly designed as a way to legitimize—to *hear*—charges of systemic racism, in many cases has become the method by which these claims are diffused. Like the performance of the nation-state's munificence in the face of challenges to "white supremacy," the storytelling method's mobilization of personal narrative would here seem to recuperate the moment of anti-racist challenge as one in which the attending contradictions of anti-oppression practice are reified, rather than eradicated (Povinelli 29).[3]

Significantly, this storytelling strategy of organizational reform can be linked to a broader historical movement in feminist critique whereby experiential understanding of oppression is validated as a necessarily political form of knowledge (Srivastava 2006: 62). For instance, Indigenous feminist critic Dian Million notes connections between the feminist movement's political reconstitution of the "private" or domestic sphere, and the advent of social and therapeutic practices around "consciousness-raising" in the 1970s and '80s (265). Million moreover points to the affinities between these "talking therapies," originally designed to enable the politicization of white experiences of gendered violence, and the amenability of this storytelling method to Indigenous epistemologies wherein story functions as a crucial site of memory, law, and knowledge (Million 265; Henderson 157-158; Reder 19).

Million's reading of these affinities is provocative, to be sure, and is moreover suggestive of the extent to which positivist conceptions of experience have been vital to the project of theorizing personal and communal knowledges among different, historically minoritized subjects.[4] And yet there are crucial distinctions to be made between the institutionalized storytelling practices of dominant service agencies, as implemented amid the complex push-pull of hegemonic colonial imposition and strategic or resistive appropriation, and those practices which are unassimilable to this framework—as cultural storytelling practices that do not, as Craig Womack puts it, derive authority from "outside" recognition, but rather from "internal" processes of "recognition, practice," and transmission (363). In here gesturing toward the work of critics whose task has been

to theorize storytelling within Indigenous epistemologies, I mean to signal a critical distance between Indigenous knowledges, and Eurocentric frameworks into which they cannot be simply collapsed (Henderson 158). Part of this project, then, is to be to be attentive to those moments in which incommensurable storytelling practices *have* been uncritically collapsed. Though they might be touted as a "culturally intelligible," it behooves us to ask what work this label accomplishes, and if it is not a means for rendering apparently inscrutable the liberal capturing and recasting of experiential narrative disclosures toward hegemonic ends.

With respect to Indigenous storytelling practices, James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson suggests: "The key rule is that the listener must accept that regardless of what information he or she *may have requested*, it is an Elder or Storykeeper that determines the best way to tell a story or convey the teaching the story contains" (158, emphasis mine). Henderson's theorization of storytelling—as a communal practice imbued with responsibility—may be illuminating for how Indigenous conceptions of storytelling practice might actually destabilize dominant narrative imperatives. In this formulation, narratives as requested and consumed in the *mise en discours* of cultural recognition become considerably more complicated when the "listener is [made] part of the event too" (159). Listening here comes with responsibilities of interpretation and understanding that go beyond liberal forms of recognition—toward a witnessing that is instead, in Beth Brant's words, "intense and intentional" (19). Let us return, if only briefly, to the example of Jacobs' statement as delivered in the House of Commons. In this moment of redress that would, as Pauline Wakeham suggests, secure the testimony of Indigenous respondents as evidence of the state's "enlightened" capacity to learn from "past" wrongs (2), I am interested in how Jacobs resists the government's apology as an occasion seeking conciliatory closure on "this sad chapter in our history" ("Speech from the Throne"). As I argued at the outset, Jacobs' statement of request for respect—in return for the government's apology—both reveals and performatively re-distributes the uneven power relation structured by the state's act of contrition. The statement then also quite crucially reconstitutes the status of her testimony—*not* as a disclosure compelled in the moment of cultural recognition, but as a story meriting reciprocal response. Jacobs said: "two generations ago, my grandmother, being a Mohawk woman, was beaten, sexually beaten and physically beaten, for being a Mohawk woman" (6857). Here, the moment of storytelling works against the grain of multicultural recognition by offering information that, although (and perhaps *because*) it was not "requested" (to use Henderson's phrase), potentially conveys resistive knowledge toward political ends—opening up a space from which Jacobs then asks: "[w]hat is it that this government is going to do in the future?….What is going to be provided" (6857)? Although this story is necessarily produced from within the state's hegemonic frame of remorse and pardon, it simultaneously works against it.[5]

Indigenous Women's Writing

I have argued for an understanding of how storytelling has been applied in mainstream anti-violence discourse *not* in the interests of offering cross-culturally intelligible modes for the transmission of knowledge about gendered colonial violence, but rather as a covert strategy for the management of racialized others. I now want to bring these insights to bear on the literary context of Indigenous women's life writing. In both activist and literary sites alike, the personal narrative form has been theorized as "a means for women to employ their own autobiographical accounts as sources of knowledge" (Anderson 34)—particularly to the extent that both forms constitute discursive sites marked by, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson put it, "the coming to voice of previously silenced subjects" (Smith and Watson 27). I want open my discussion of the "storytelling" form out from the activist context of anti-violence service agencies and onto the subject of Indigenous women's life writing—highlighting that in neither the activist nor the literary setting is this "coming to voice" an unmediated or transparent process of resistance. The "let's talk" or storytelling model of anti-oppression pedagogy has been heavily contoured by colonial power asymmetries that necessarily shape the conditions under which some stories get told. The literature of the "still-colonized," as Jo-Ann Episkenew puts it, must likewise be read with consideration to the colonial contexts in which it is written and received ("Applied Literature"). For, just as the "storytelling" method (with its interest in the personal narratives of "other" women) may risk depoliticizing racial conflict and fetishizing the empathetic identificatory processes taken up by listeners, so too has the life writing of Indigenous women often been fetishized for its supposed "artless" conveyance of "the truth" of Indigenous women's experiences (Sommer 198).

Certainly, this would seem to be the case in the reception of activist-writer Morningstar Mercredi's *Morningstar: A Warrior's Spirit*—a memoir that has often been positioned as providing readers unmediated access to its author's ostensible journey of healing from intergenerational residential school trauma. According to a review by historian Ken Tingley of the *Edmonton Journal*, the memoir is rendered in an "unadorned style" punctuated with purportedly "simple declarative sentences" that "powerfully convey" the "honest[y]" of this "affecting account" (Tingley D12). Of course, "style"—"unadorned" or not—would still constitute a calculated stylistic *effect*. For example, Morningstar employs a number of aesthetic techniques—including, notably, a shifting between first and third person narration, and between italicized and non-italicized typescript, as a way to textually mark a

dissociative split in the autobiographical subject's narrativization of traumatic memory. This technique moreover functions as a way to turn the colonial gaze back on itself. Reflecting upon how the dominant public receives stories of Indigenous "women who are exploited or abused" (158), Morningstar addresses her readership directly: "What do you see when you look at me, standing cold and alone on the street?" (158-59).

The voyeuristic act of looking, and the experience of being *looked at*, are here (and elsewhere) placed in evocative tension as embodied practices necessarily contoured by the uneven relations of power that condition each subject's relative position in the storytelling exchange. In this way, the memoir encodes a problematic of (re)viewing practices—of the power asymmetries that shape the telling and "hearing" of painful stories—from the outset, refiguring the moment of cultural recognition through a visual metaphor. Ken Tingley's review, for its part, strategically deploys the second person pronoun as a way to re-embed the memoir within a frame of metaphorized spectacle to be consumed from a safe distance. The review opens in this way:

> Your car rolls along one of those streets found in every Canadian city. It's night, and people stand in the alleys and shadows. You unconsciously check to ensure that the doors are locked. You don't really look too carefully at the passing scene, a bit apprehensive about what you might see. You may not want to know the stories behind the faces you … see in those shadows. Morningstar is one of those stories. It is certainly not a pleasant reading experience, but it is an important one. (Tingley D12)

With this, the review effectively interpellates its readership within a touristic gaze at once not wanting—and yet unable—to look away. Morningstar's text is here arguably appropriated as providing a depoliticized account of violence, while the reader is situated as a benevolent (if cautious) viewer whose engagement with this memoir constitutes a kind of unpleasant but necessary labour in which an atonement for Canada's colonial "past" is realized in the act of reading itself. Indeed, the text is frequently assimilated into an imagined trajectory of colonial relations recounted, lamented, and then "overcome" (Smith 2006: 60). And yet, if this is a text that, by Morningstar's own estimation, understands interpersonal and domestic forms of violence in terms of the broader, ongoing effects of residential school abuse, then there are significant stakes involved in claiming, as one review does, that this "legacy of survival … allowed her to heal and forgive both herself and those who abused her" (Smith 2006: 60). For whose benefit is this healing deployed, and for whose gain is this supposed forgiveness granted?

For, while both the reviewing public and the text's marketing overwhelmingly characterize this narrative as telling "one woman's victory over abuse" (back matter), this sits rather uneasily with Morningstar's own insistence on her memoir as being *as much* an account of the ongoing intergenerational impacts of colonial violence, as an individual disclosure toward healing and forgiveness. For instance, during her participation on a 2007 panel at a literary festival session on "truth-telling," Morningstar responded to a question about "self-examination" and "healing" with the following statement: "I live in a country that is in denial of its own history." Not unlike Jacobs' statement as delivered in the House of Commons, Morningstar's pronouncement here works against her narrative's emplacement in a spectacularized script of trauma disclosed toward conciliatory closure, and moreover draws attention to the potential place of literary production in challenging the country's state of "denial" (Mercredi 2007).

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In this project, Morningstar's text provides an accounting for her family's history (and, in particular, her mother's history) within a legacy of residential school abuse. Morningstar thus begins her memoir by asserting herself as a "survivor of intergenerational impact of residential schools" (iii)—a positioning that is further pursued in one of the text's closing chapters, when she explains:

> I didn't attend the Holy Angels Mission. I wasn't one of the thousands of children over four generations who were forced to. Then again, I didn't have to attend: What Mom, Dad, and Grandma learned—the good, bad, and indifferent— was passed on to me anyway. I remain a survivor of generational indoctrination and abuse. (150)

In this way, Morningstar articulates the abuse suffered throughout her life as part of a broader and ongoing context of state-sanctioned colonial violence. *A Warrior's Spirit* further refuses to be reconciled, to "get over it" as

Morningstar provocatively puts it (2007), by including in the closing pages of the book—pages otherwise dedicated to a recounting of her efforts to "move on in life" (178)—a reflection on what she terms a "killing spree in Canada" that targets Native women and girls (181). Although Winnipeg writer Tevor Greyeyes laments, in his review, "that [A]boriginal women … blame [both] residential schools and white men for all their problems" (D0), I want to suggest that we read Morningstar's memoir as pushing back against a frame that would have it reconciled with either.

Sherene Razack has noted: "Often, women of colour are asked to tell their stories while others do the theorizing and writing up. Yet the chance to speak, to enter your reality on the record, as it were, is as irresistible as it is problematic" (1998: 52). This is in many ways like the "irresistibility of speaking truth to power" to which Phil Fontaine referred in his address to the House of Commons. But what has captured my interest is the even thornier notion of "irresistibility" as coded in the moment of cultural recognition—the doubled meaning of the term as something at once compelled and compelling—and the ambiguous but necessary possibility for resistance within this. As Paula Gunn Allen states: "How does one survive in the face of collective death? Bearing witness is one solution, but it is singularly tearing, for witnessing genocide—as with conversation—requires that someone listen and comprehend" (156).

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[1]Povinelli suggests several "conditions" on which the national spectacle of repentance, with its recognition of "subaltern" others, is predicated: "as long as they are not repugnant; that is, as long as they are not, at heart, not-us and as long as real economic resources are not at stake" (17).

[2]Critics like Goli Rezai-Rashti are concerned with differentiating multiculturalism (with its roots in a "liberal-reformist understanding of racism") from anti-racism (as emerging in the anti-colonial "struggles of racial minorities") (6). By contrast, Sarita Srivastava deliberately uses the conflated term "anti-racist multiculturalism" to describe the manner in which liberal discourses of multicultural inclusivity have permeated many feminist organizational efforts toward addressing systemic racism (2007: 291-292).

[3]For example, in some of the anti-oppression sessions I have facilitated, white participants opt to reinforce rather than critically dismantle their racial or ethnic identities (and privilege) as invisible, assumed, or unmarked. When asked about her ethnic identity and the unmarked privileges that go along with it, one participant told me, "I'm white. So, I'm not anything." In part, I took this to mean, "I'm white. So, I'm everything—the norm against which all difference can be held."

[4]Indeed, this is a point made by Craig Womack in his recent essay, "Theorizing American Indian Experience." He argues: "The validity of experience, both personal and tribal, becomes one of the key issues in Native studies, if not *the* key issue, because a prevalent reality of postcontact life is that Indians have not had the primary role of representing their own cultures to the outside world; that is, others have reported on their experiences" (382). The status of women's experience as a valid "ontological starting point" has of course been a matter of much debate in feminist theory as well (Jansson, Wendt, and Åse 228-229).

[5]In *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*'s recent issue on Indigenous women in Canada, Beverley Jacobs published her "Response to Canada's Apology to Residential School Survivors" with additions to her original statement as delivered in the House of Commons. Of particular relevance to this discussion is the assertion with which Jacobs closes her response: "When such action is taken by the Canadian government to not only apologize, but to create a process in which it actually acknowledges the harms its done, then we can accept the Apology…. When Aboriginal women are no longer targets of violence, then we know that change has occurred" (225).

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