One of the most significant changes in First Nations Studies over the nearly four decades of my engagement with Canadian Aboriginal communities has been the emergence of a public discourse about the residential school experience, shared by successive generations from communities across the country. I have been startled by the extent to which such discourses have become standardized around a generic form. Some years ago at the Algonquian Conference (Darnell 1994), I spoke about the largely masculine generic narratives of healing as a path leading from alcohol and drug abuse to renewed personal agency applied to the healing of whole communities. Residential school experience figured into many of these narratives, and the survivors of the "residential school syndrome" began to bond in common cause.

Alcohol was introduced to Native communities from the outside, making it ironic that treatment for its abuse also drew on White models of healing. The emergent discourse on healing from residential school abuse has borrowed much from the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, both in its rhetorical form and in its reliance on community support through intensely personal supportive relationships. Palmer (2005:137) emphasizes the invariable sequence of the generic narrative: life before alcohol, its first introduction, escalation, inability to deal with life and family, the low point, the decision to maintain sobriety, and recovery. Because the recovery phase from which the narrator tells her/his story eludes closure and certainty, the community of alcoholics depend upon one another, on their shared experience, to move forward. The confessional genre encodes a commitment to use narrativized personal experience as a mode of healing for both self and others. Although backsliding is an ever-present danger, many report that serving as a role model for younger people confronting similar patterns of addiction is both burden and reinforcement.
There is a reciprocal relationship between such narratives and those of residential school survivors who are also recovering alcoholics. Even survivors who are not AA participants learn the generic narrative, hearing other stories before and during their own search for expressive outlets. Each narrative adapts itself to the template, adding corroborating details particular to the speaker. Any given instance of such a generic narrative, therefore, solidifies the genre because it is based on the intense experience of a specific person. That such experiences are difficult to express makes the decision to express them all the more powerful. Much of this, of course, remains implicit. First Nations narrative conventions privilege understatement and indirection. The hearer must read between the lines, as it were. S/he can do so only because of having shared already the generic experience. Each listener will add her/his own particularities, both in biographical events and stage in the process of becoming and remaining sober. Again in line with First Nations narrative expectations, speaker and listener enter into an implicit collusion of interpretation. Emotional responses are least likely to be articulated verbally but most likely to be shared in the exchange of narratives and the process of supporting each speaker’s path.

The more traditional First Nations form of this generic discourse of healing comes from the genre of harangue or lecture, exemplified in the Lac La Ronge lectures of Sarah Whitecalf (Wolfart & Ahenakew 1993). Such lectures traditionally were directed at young people facing points of decision in their lives. The success of the “healing” or maturation depended heavily on accepting responsibility as one whose experience could make a difference for others and thus for the community itself. The breakthrough, I think, came with the realization of many that their personal suffering, and the mistakes or unproductive choices that underlay it, held the potential for positive effect on the youth of their families and communities who faced similar pressures and stresses. Sharing such traumatic experience could build reflexive capacity in the young person.

The emerging elders of this new healing teaching were often living off-Reserve, in urban areas, and were considerably younger than the elders of the communities they themselves came from. Their message was not that the young people should move through their life cycle to become just like the grandparents who were their traditional teachers. Rather, the new teachers suggested that their own ability to serve as role models arose
from their hard-won ability to accept where their lives had gone wrong and the negative consequences for everyone around them. These teachers had to hit bottom before they were able to take charge of the future. The fallings away from a traditional path were not valorized as such, but were reframed in narrative as necessary steps toward a new and different path. By implication, if this fallible teacher could turn his/her life around, then the listener could also turn his/her life around. Comparably, Basso (1996) explicates how Cibecue Apache storytellers use words as “shooting with arrows” to harangue young people. The stories, whether based on traditional knowledge, landscape, or personal experience, are cautionary and serve to warn their hearers about the consequences of thoughtless actions.

How, then, did residential school stories, especially those of life experience, become generic? As the veil of secrecy was lifted, people became aware that their negative experiences did not make them personally culpable for what had been done to them. Shared stories resonated for their listeners insofar as they shared the experience on which they were based. Thus, both teachers and listeners came to value most highly the parts of these stories that were shared. Healing would arise not from incommunicable pain but out of the cumulative impact of a series of descriptors that came to stand for the inexpressible damage done to the psychological balance or integration of the residential school students’ lives and worlds. Because these experiences were widely shared by so many otherwise diverse individuals, the residential school experience itself became an icon for the ravages of internal colonialism, forced assimilation, and supposedly benign genocide.

When I first began my work in northern Alberta in the late 1960s, people did not speak of such matters. At the very most, there would be whispered, cryptic revelations, usually late at night in a darkened room, almost always entrusted to me by Plains Cree women who had become close friends. Always, I was enjoined to silence. The women who spoke to me in this vein moved into a more forthcoming mode of discourse only hesitantly and gradually over a period of years. One woman told me years later that she had shared her story with a young relative who needed the caution implicit in the reporting of her experience; “it was easier,” she said, “because I already told it to you.” She continued, “I’ve heard other people talk about that school, people that were there then, when I was. But only the last couple of years. I never knew about that before.” Even
the new, more open, narratives did not proceed directly to the heart of the trauma. First, they spoke of the horror of being forced to surrender personal agency in submitting to the seemingly arbitrary will of the nuns and priests. The trauma theme remained largely implicit in these tentative efforts to verbalize experience of objectification, denigration, and imposed passivity. Anyone who had shared the experience would recognize its cues. Anyone who took the narratives at face value would miss the emotional valence and fail to meet the expectation of empathy that allowed the stories to be shared.

It is crucial to recognize that these early, tentatively shared stories were told in Reserve communities where the church still held considerable authority. Individuals who were decisive leaders in community life suddenly morphed into obedient children when confronted by the agents of their secondary socialization in an alien world, even in memory. They did not aspire to become like these authority figures, but to reclaim selfhood independently of such demoralizingly non-reciprocal tutelage. Nonetheless, it was difficult for an individual to stand up to the system, especially if she (usually in my own experience) thought that she alone was intimidated by childhood bogeymen, even in adulthood. Sharing the stories, even privately among the women of a single community or family, restored the possibility of retrospective resistance through collective agency.

Note that we have moved here from a discourse of individual victimization to one of potential political activism, from the private to the public sphere. When I first begin listening to what I now call generic narratives of healing, I thought there was a gender distinction in their form, content and intended audience. Men seemed to battle alcohol and its domestic consequences of family violence and dysfunction. Women (and their children) seemed to be the victims of this violence, silenced by the threat of life-threatening reprisal. There did not seem to be a model for healthy, balanced family life. No man ever spoke to me about residential school as a reason for the failure of parenting, community responsibility and personal self-respect. Aggression masked the vulnerability engendered by the early school experiences. The passivity of the victim characterized women in their relation to men as well as to the submissiveness learned in the residential schools of their childhood. What was missing, at least in my awareness, was a reflexive narrative encompassing both women’s and men’s experience.
All this was happening at pretty much the same time that Native political organizations were mobilizing at the local, provincial, and national levels. Increasingly, after the Trudeau White Paper of 1968 was scathingly rejected by First Nations peoples across Canada, the surface political issue became one of land. Although there were some exceptions, most of the emerging political organizations were male-dominated. And the public discourse was one of Aboriginal strength in post-colonial resistance to hegemonic power. Personal trauma remained in the background, unacknowledged. To acknowledge the emotional maelstrom resulting from residential school trauma would have posed a threat both to the solidarity of the new generation of politicians and to the self-control of leaders attempting to meet non-Native politicians on equal terms despite the inevitably skewed relations of power. Many of these early leaders were lonely men, because they were compelled to bury their pasts, both individual and collective, unexamined. Political discourse was resolutely focused on land, economic development, and political voice.

In those halcyon days of the 1970s when political goals long suppressed by restrictive federal policy suddenly seemed attainable, even if not immediately, the retention and revitalization of traditional language was left largely to women. The symbolic importance of language was not considered overtly political, at least in the prairies where the survival of Plains Cree, in the aggregate if not in every community or family, did not seem to be in question. Language still carried a connotation of family, of the private rather than the political domain. Women, as the primary agents of socialization within the family, were seen as the appropriate stewards of language.

I want to argue, as my rather involuted title suggests, that these two streams have come together: language and land, private and public, personal and political. Moreover, these generalized discourses have become inextricably interwoven with one another, largely through the emergence of a generic residential school narrative that has become increasingly explicit, elaborating the traumatic aspects of the experience and laying blame for it upon the colonial oppressor. Women have become more visible in Native politics, and language has become a political issue of concern to community members, regardless of gender. This reframing released the possibility of commensurability of residential school narratives told by women and men.
Returning to the gradual emergence of the women’s stories I listened to through the 1970s, underlying the perceived threats of lost autonomy were intimations of a darker reality of physical and sexual abuse, initially from figures of authority in positions of ostensible trust at the residential schools, and later from Native people, largely men, whose only models for gender relations were abusive. At this point, the men’s stories began to resonate similarly (Whiteye 2005). They too had suffered physical and mental abuse – rendered more traumatic because they were forced to take this as normal, having no experience outside the residential schools, cut off from family and community for long periods of time.

This is where the national mainstream Canadian discourse of culpability for residential school abuse is confounded by the inability of those who have not suffered trauma to understand the experience of those who have. Positivist science raises questions of reliability, validity and sampling; these questions have dominated the public discourse of redress – in what might almost be seen as wilful failure to listen to what Native people say has been taken from them. A more qualitative approach suggests that these are not the appropriate indices to express the legacy of the residential schools or to aid in the healing of the survivors. Questions abound:

Can we take at face-value the self-reported experience of a residential school survivor seeking compensation for long-ago damages? How do we define a statute of limitations on pain? What about the collateral damage to successive generations growing up without traditional family role models? What was it about the context of First Nations politics in Canada that forced these narratives underground and allowed them to be made public only long after the fact? Is what the former victims say about their experience “true?” Alternatively, how can outsiders judge its truth value? How can we decide how many residential school survivors suffered physical, emotional and sexual abuse (especially since many report positive school experiences, while others refuse altogether to talk about their experience)? Who gets to define physical, emotional and sexual abuse? What about false memory syndrome?

Despite all these imponderables, mainstream Canadian public opinion today acknowledges injustice and need for redress, largely by applying contemporary standards of what constituted abuse. That all schools were draconian in discipline and unforgiving of the foibles of children during the heyday of the residential schools does not mitigate the contem-
porary indictment. Official acknowledgement of liability has been coupled, however, with insistence that the applicant for redress must demonstrate the abuse, presumably with "objective" evidence, but necessarily combined with testimony based on traumatized memory. Some, perhaps including the most severely traumatized, are simply unable to do this. The results of post-traumatic stress render unreliable any method based on literal "fact." This does not, however, invalidate the trauma itself.

Others have formulated a different argument, on generic political rather than religious grounds. All First Nations students subjected to residential schools were deprived of access to their own languages and cultures. This kind of loss has not been acknowledged or compensated as abuse. Blanket liability and its accompanying cost have been avoided by separating individual claims for residential school settlement from a more general need for community healing across Indian country in Canada. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) recommended an Aboriginal Healing Foundation, which was established with RCAP co-chair Georges Erasmus at its head. RCAP is distinguished from the mainstream discourse by its respectful attention to narrative, through public hearings and ethnographic documentation. "Healing" was a more general challenge to respond to individual and community trauma than residential school abuse, despite the inextricability of the two issues in practice. This issue remains very much in flux. At this writing, the federal government has proposed compensation to all residential school survivors without the need for testimony and evidence. Churches that ran residential schools will be asked to support healing initiatives in collaboration with Aboriginal communities. Most of the churches are already doing so.

Increasing public support for the emerging discourse about the generalized need for healing suggests that we need to examine what Native people say was taken from them by the very existence of the schools and by the more or less subtle coercion to attend them. Narrative accounts of the school experience clarify the imbalance of traditional well-being for particular individuals who speak about their memories. I rely heavily here on Christianne Stephens' research on residential school narratives at Walpole Island First Nation (Stephens 2004, 2006). Stephens emphasizes narrative evidence of the movement from the inexpressible experience of the individual, to the capacity to share that experience in narrative, to the...
acceptance by the community of a common obligation to support healing. Her data are remarkably consistent across generation and several different residential schools, suggesting that both the experience and the narrative genre in which it is coming to be expressed are widely shared, at least within this community.

I want to highlight three recurrent themes of loss that appear in the generic rhetoric of residential school narratives but also, increasingly today, in political discourses about land and self-government as about well as healing: traditional food, mobility on the land, and language. Restitution must acknowledge the legitimacy of this threefold indictment.

In describing life at the schools, many narratives centre around the food. Most of the children came to residential school directly from living off the land. These children, no matter how young, already knew that food involved a relationship between land, animals or plants, and people. The food at school removed the students from the land, not just geographically but also spiritually. Their accustomed foods were not primarily agricultural; the ubiquitous porridge of the school diet was unpalatable in large part because it was not considered real food. Both the variety and quantity of food were dramatically curtailed. The seasonal variation in diet was lost. Access to food was regimented in time and place.

This removal from sources of food on and in the land entails a further loss – the freedom to move around on a territory. Most of the traditions inherited by the students were nomadic. Hunting territories ranged widely, even after enforced settlement on Reserves. With respect to resource exploitation, living on the land rendered Reserve boundaries permeable. This continued mobility was removed by the infrastructure of the schools. The crucial balance of the nomadic heritage is solidified by the frequent pattern in residential school records and narratives of students running away and attempting to return to their homes. Elizabeth Furniss (1992) documents the death of two young boys from Williams Lake, B.C. whose attempt to escape from residential school captivity remains a community tragedy encapsulating the colonial experience. To move away is a nomadic solution to conflict resolution which must have seemed reasonable to the students who rejected their enforced settlement.

Finally, there is the question of language. Virtually every student, even the ones who appreciated their education and enjoyed their time at school, speaks unhappily about the loss of language and the disciplinary
coercion involved. The loss of land and mobility, and the trauma of being punished for speaking one’s own language, assume parallel prominence in contemporary narratives. One often hears the rhetorical parallelism of “our land was stolen, our language was stolen.” Together, these double losses define what is being reclaimed today. Language loss created a discontinuity of generations in many communities which has resulted in the permanent loss of traditional knowledge. The need for retrieval of this knowledge is the core of the residential school legacy.

This all seems very obvious, but it is only obvious to those already attuned to its narrative expression. Moreover, the consequences continue. I have always found it hard to understand why nomadic life on the land and the speaking of languages not shared by the colonizers posed such an extreme threat. The residential schools, however, were adamant about eradicating Native languages and turning the next generation of Aboriginal children into settled people, ideally farmers. There was a real fervour in the missionary efforts to eradicate traditional cultures through unremitting discipline. The schools were set up as total institutions exercising panoptic control over students who were expected to internalize the values of their teachers. In retrospect, the abuse consists of the absence of choice and the unnegotiable relations of power between students and teachers. To frame the question of abuse in this way has the additional advantage of eliding the question of individual motivation; what is now understood to be abusive is systemic, not a question of the intentions of often well-meaning individuals.

To be sure, the diversity of First Nations languages and the amorphousness of First Nations land use patterns (at least from the standpoint of the mainstream) posed issues of administrative control for the agents of the thinly spread and far-from-confident Canadian nation-state. Confederation in 1867 only slightly preceded the demise of the Plains buffalo herd and the beginning of often contested settlement on Reserves. The habit of fearing this untameable minority remains even today, although the actual threat in a purportedly pluralistic society may seem moot.

Why are we still so committed to the continuance of a surveillance culture? What will it take for healing to take place throughout Canadian society as well as within Native communities? Will those who have learned to tell their stories to one another find the courage and trust in mainstream capacity for empathy to share them more broadly? There are,
I think, some reasons to be optimistic. Canadian society today is proudly multicultural, with Aboriginal peoples not the only culturally distinct groups. The experience of two world wars and a “war on terrorism” have increased awareness of post-traumatic stress, and there is a public openness to interpreting residential school trauma in this context. Since Hitler’s effort to exterminate Jews, Gypsies and other undesirables, genocide has become an intelligible concept and an ethical anathema. Perhaps we are ready to listen.

In sum, I have suggested that the integrated discourses of land and language are mutually reinforcing, more effective together than either would be alone. Moreover, the conjunction of these variables is deeply embedded in the traumatic legacy of the residential school experience, which itself is rendered generic through the discourses. The circularity and mutual reinforcement embedded in these discourses constitutes their capacity to begin the process of healing.

One more thing seems to follow. As a strategy of discipline and surveillance, the residential school system had positive as well as the obvious and more often recognized negative consequences. The unintended consequences were tactical (de Certeau 1984), initially engaged in a position of powerlessness, of passive resistance rather than direct challenge. But the students who were removed from their home communities in a strategic effort to isolate them from their families and traditions came to know fellow students from other First Nations and regions of the country. For the first time, they shared a common language, albeit that of the oppressor. Both the contacts and the language were adapted creatively to local purposes and used to build wider connections among First Nations.

I personally know the residential school system only through the shared narratives of those who have experienced it. But I do have one memory of observing the underground, rhizomatic emergence and spread of Aboriginal political networks. When I first went to Edmonton in 1969, the Charles Camsell Hospital housed many young radicals, and some of their elders, from the Northwest Territories; they were incarcerated there for TB treatment. These largely involuntary captives learned a lot about political strategy and tactics from the Plains Cree and came to know each other across previously isolated communities. Such contacts substantially preceded, and set the stage for, the higher-tech communications networks of satellite television that, only a generation later, revolutionized group
contacts across the North (although these too were adapted to purposes unforeseen by outsiders who encouraged “progress” (cf. Valentine 1995)).

The set of discourses I have been discussing, I argue, underlies contemporary self-government initiatives. Self-government is a term whose resilience lies in its ability to elude precise definition, to mean different things to different people. Native control of Native issues is its key, drawing on a discourse which emerged in the mid-1970s around national Native education manifestos. The content and specific issues to be addressed by self-government expand and contract situationally. There is a literal reading that is about forms of government and local political control. Difficulties in implementing self-government in this sense should not preclude awareness of other meanings more consonant with individual agency and community solidarity. Self-government also applies to the governance of the self, to establishing and maintaining balance and well-being, both internally and in relation to community. Just as “healing” has expanded from individual trauma to community-shared experience, self-government has emerged from the sense of proper balance that simultaneously affects individual and community.

Indigenous knowledge contrasts with Western rationalism and empiricism because it is tied intrinsically to practices linking human persons to land, language and traditional culture. Self-government is correlated with healing and control over education. Authority is shared throughout the community, just as stories are shared.

Conventional social science discourses have not succeeded in capturing the quality of First Nations experience or valuing the narrative form in which it is expressed. The value placed on “objectivity” and generalization conflicts with the First Nations preference for subjectivity based in personal experience. Anthropologists who have listened to narratives of experience, moreover, all too often fail to reflect in what they write the epistemological and phenomenological teachings shared with them. Insofar as this is true, we have abrogated our professional obligation not to distort the meaning of what is told to us. The changing linkages of narrative offer concrete answers to the perennial mainstream question, “What do the Indians want anyway?” They have been telling us for some time, although we have not always been listening effectively.
REFERENCES


