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Claiming Remnants: Intergenerational Representations and the Vicarious Pasts of Indian Residential Schools

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The Indian Residential School (IRS) system was operated by the Canadian federal government and various churches from 1879 to approximately 1970, with a few institutions opening as early as 1829 or closing as late as 1996. During this period, 150 000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were separated from their families and cultures and taken to 139 institutions throughout Canada [1]. The end goal—total assimilation of Indigenous peoples into mainstream settler society—was not realized, but the schools and Canada’s other genocidal policies deeply impacted and continue to affect Indigenous communities throughout the country. The isolated settings of the schools, which concealed them from broader Canadian society when they were in operation, have also minimized the visibility of their traumatic aftermath. As foreign, frightening places to the young children taken there, their architecture has inevitably featured prominently in survivor testimonies. The emotional impacts of these intimidating structures can be read in the art and literature of survivors, such as the poetry of Rita Joe (Mi’kmaw), the paintings of R. G. Miller-Lahiaaks (Mohawk, Six Nations), or the drawings of Robert Houle (Anishnabe Saulteaux).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Canadian government became increasingly involved in building and rebuilding residential schools, many of which were first constructed in the late nineteenth century by the

religious denominations that ran them. A dedicated arm of the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa became a centrally controlled apparatus of architectural production, and an obscure government architect by the name of Roland Guernsey Orr spent his entire career, from 1907 to 1936, designing the residential schools that became places of horror and cultural loss for Indigenous nations. He was the architect of Shubenacadie IRS, the school attended by Rita Joe, and designed an addition for the Mohawk Institute, where R. G. Miller-Lahiaaks spent his childhood. In all, Orr completed at least twenty-five schools across the country, several of which still stand today.

The art of the survivors of these institutions transforms the assumed neutrality of their mute walls into representations of space that are simultaneously representational spaces of transgressive power, reinterpreting the former school structures as both sites and symbols of genocidal trauma. In her poem, “Hated Structure: Indian Residential School, Shubenacadie, N.S.,” from the 1989 collection *Song of Eskasoni: More Poems of Rita Joe*, Joe creates a transformed image of the IRS she lived in, moving between present and past in a rhythm that alternates the contemporary return to the site of childhood trauma with the memories it brings to the fore. The cycle is finally broken by taking on the “voice” of the structure, thereby deflating its powerful hold on memory: “I remind,” it says, only “until I fall” [2]. A year after the publication of *Song of Eskasoni*, the building was demolished, revealing Joe’s imaginary destruction to have been a powerful act of premonition. In the absence of the physical structure, the poet’s re-creation depicts it as a crumbling edifice, gradually losing its hold on the people it oppressed.

The persistence of memory described by Joe is echoed in a series of oil paintings from 2008 by R. G. Miller-Lahiaaks. One of these paintings, titled



Old Sun Indian Residential School, Gleichen, AB, 1929 (photo ca. 1950), Anglican Church of Canada General Synod Archives Residential School Photograph Collection, photographer unknown, Engracia de Jesus Matias Archives and Special Collections, Algoma University, previously known as P7538-1023, shelf location 2010-007-001, container number 001

What Was In The Mush, depicts the Mohawk Institute, saddled on top of a skull, floating behind two children holding a bowl. The “Mush Hole,” as the institution was known, is thereby rendered as not just a place, but an all-consuming and terrorizing state of mind, affecting the artist as a young child and likewise as an adult. Miller-Lahiaaks has avoided the term “survivor,” stating, “I haven’t survived residential school. I’m still there. We are all still there. It’s an ongoing process of maintenance, maintaining, learning to fall and then to get back up” [3]. By exhibiting this work at the Six Nations-run Woodland Cultural Centre, which now occupies the former school, the artist has transformed the building by making visible its intangible horror. This layering of past and present, like in Joe’s “Hated Structure,” results in a complex re-creation of traumatic space and emphasizes the importance of process in addressing these experiences.

Robert Houle echoes this need for process in *Sandy Bay Residential School Series* (2009), a sequence of twenty-four drawings in oilstick on paper. The institution Houle was taken to—the Sandy Bay IRS in Marius, Manitoba—

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no longer exists, but its impression endures in the artist’s memory and seeps into the realm of his drawings, focusing on the places where memory has coalesced most forcefully. Like Joe’s “Hated Structure,” *Series* is the product of a literal return, as well as one in memory, to the site of childhood trauma [4]. In their loose, automatic style, the drawings transform the spaces of the school into disintegrating fragments of a larger whole, functioning as testimony but, also, as visual manifestations of a process of re-creating past and present at the site of trauma.

The American art critic Lucy R. Lipard, writing about old photographs of Native Americans taken by non-Indigenous photographers, suggests

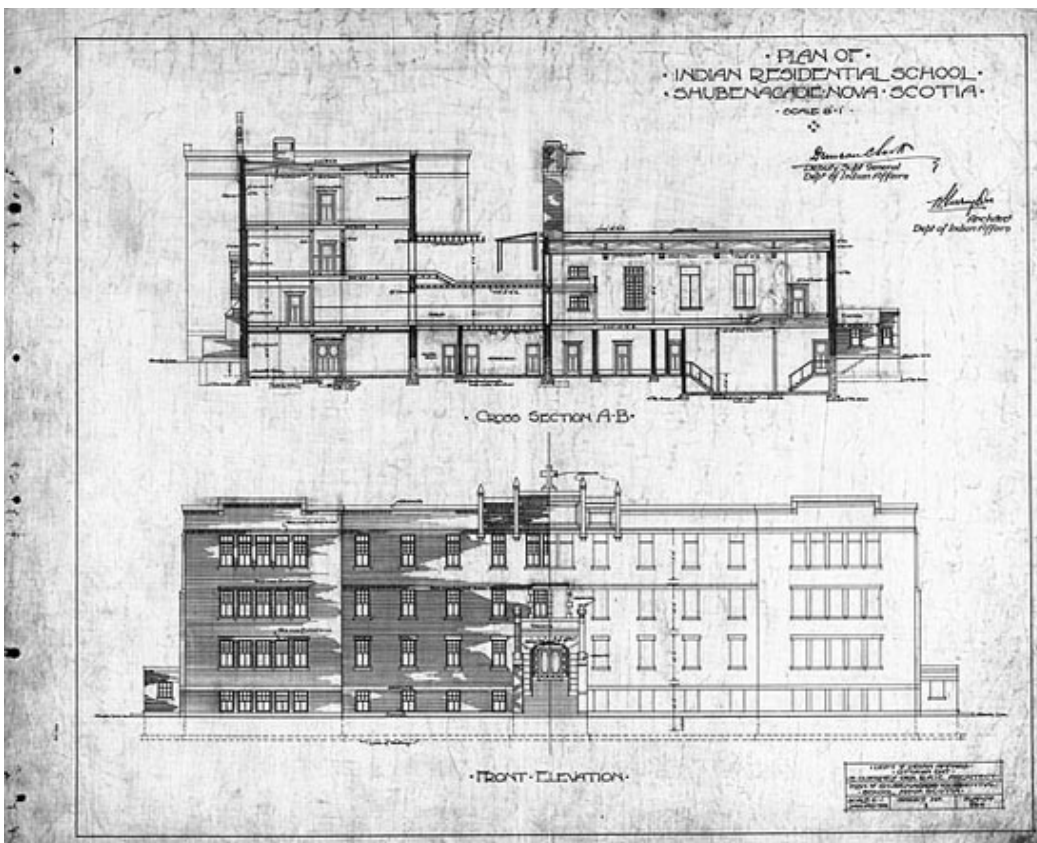
that the reinterpretation of colonial artifacts can facilitate a release of their negative representational power [5]. Likewise, the architecture of residential schools, devised by non-Indigenous architects in the service of a colonial agenda, can be reinterpreted, as well as re-created, in ways that claim agency by those formerly oppressed within their walls. Continuing these transformative processes is a generation of post-IRS artists committed to exploring the ongoing impacts of the IRS system in the context of a society largely ignorant of its own colonial history. Their work shows a particular concern with the physicality of the material remnants of the schools, both as evidence and as visceral connection to the trials of their elders. Whereas the works by Joe, Miller-Lahiaaks, and Houle are profoundly intertwined with IRS space through first-hand experience, the younger artists use the schools’ materiality directly in their work as a means of grappling with the abominable premise of these institutions, and the danger of the older generation’s memories slipping beyond recall. In encountering their work, American scholar James E. Young’s analysis

of art concerned with the “post-memory” [6] of the Holocaust can provide an initial framework for understanding its relationship with the testimony and art of survivors:

By portraying the Holocaust as a “vicarious past,” these artists insist on maintaining a distinct boundary between their work and the testimony of their parents’ generation. Such work recognizes their parents’ need to testify to their experiences, even to put the Holocaust “behind them.” Yet by calling attention to their vicarious relationship to events, the next generation ensures that their “post-memory” of events remains an unfinished, ephemeral process, not a means toward definitive answers to impossible questions. [7]

A similar negotiation emerges between the “testimonial” art of IRS survivors and the work of those portraying residential schools “vicariously,” though it is difficult to draw a hard and fast line between these two modes

when considering the intergenerational impacts of the IRS system. Adrian Stimson, a member of the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation and an interdisciplinary artist known for his performances that critique the colonial narrative of the West, “grew up in and around residential schools” [8]. His father, an IRS survivor, was trained as a Native child care worker while the system was being dismantled in the 1960s, and Stimson himself attended IRS as a day student. The work of First Nations dancer and choreographer Lara Kramer is influenced by the stories of her mother, an artist and survivor of two residential schools, and Kwagiulth artist Carey Newman took in-



Section and Elevation, Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, 1928, R.G. Orr, architect, R. G. Orr, “Plan of Indian Residential School, Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, Cross Section A-B and Front Elevation”, scale 8’ = 1”, January 1928, Library and Archives Canada, RG 22M 912016, item number 985

spiration from his father’s IRS experience for his major recent work, *Witness Blanket*. The concern these artists have for time and process is evident in their use of the meaning-laden materiality of residential schools and their choice of installation and performance as artistic mediums. In relating process to space, British scholar David Harvey argues that “there is no such thing as space outside of the processes that define it. The processes do not occur *in* space but

define their own spatial frame. The concept of space is embedded or internal to process” [9]. Negating the idea of pre-existing, fixed space, these artists continue the very personal struggles of survivors by influencing the understanding of the residential schools as continuously present and problematic, and by facilitating processes that create new spaces by disrupting those of the colonial project.

Adrian Stimson’s installation, *Sick and Tired* (2004), repurposes architectural elements from the Old Sun IRS at the Siksika Nation in Alberta, which was designed by R. G. Orr and built in 1929. Like many former residential schools that have not been demolished, it has been reclaimed by the community, in this case as the Old Sun Community College. As a symbolic and material act of perseverance, the reuse of the building and its reimagining for a community-defined purpose asserts agency over a problematic and colonizing history. Stimson’s installation likewise re-creates the space of oppression in a critical way, producing an abstraction of a child’s space in a residential school. At the center is the metal frame of a rusty infirmary bed with a folded, human-shaped bison robe lying on its springs. Unlike the closely spaced array of beds found in typical residential school dormitories, this one is solitary, referencing the cell-like isolation experienced by many children despite crowded conditions. In the IRS system, siblings and family members were often sent to different schools to separate them, or were separated by age and gender within the school. The prohibition against Indigenous languages blanketed the children with unfamiliar sounds and an inability to express themselves naturally. The installation suggests this overwhelming silence with three twelve-paned wooden windows reclaimed from the old school. Hanging on a white wall behind the bed, each is filled with feathers, the artist’s reference to “confinement similar to being smothered by a pillow” [10]. The greenish light scraping through the near-solidity of the feathers suggests an inaccessible world beyond the confines of the institution. An overhead light illuminates the bed with the bison robe, casting a shadow that resembles a stretched hide. The installation speaks of the natural and cultural devastation wrought by colonial practices, re-creating fragments of these histories into a meditative space centred around what Canadian writer Sarah de Leeuw describes as “the nested relationships between the school structures, body-places of subjects who occupied them, and the thoughts and subjective places of First Nations students” [11].

Whereas the architectural fragment plays a key role in Stimson’s transformation of colonial space, Lara Kramer uses the architecture of the IRS in

its embodied totality in her dance creation, *Fragments* (2009), by referencing “movement research” she performed during a weeklong visit to the former Portage la Prairie IRS in Manitoba. This building, which has since been reused by the Long Plain First Nation as a resource centre, was one of the institutions attended by her mother, Ida Baptiste, whose stories of residential school inspired the piece [12]. Kramer’s intuitive and embodied

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Sick and Tired (2004) Adrian Stimson, Photographer: Rebecca Rowley

process of spatial documentation can be understood, according to American sculptor and scholar Kent C. Bloomer and architect Charles W. Moore, as one in which “the dancer and the space animate one another as partners,” which in turn permits the development of a “critical relationship” with the space [13]. Kramer’s work synthesizes her own experience with history and memory and, according to the artist, expresses “the silent emotions and experiences of the young girls who attended the schools. It is not an attempt to retell any one story, but rather to process the knowledge of these schools. The project aims to build a dialogue around a history too often ignored” [14]. By moving freely within the structure, historically restrictive of the bodies of young Indigenous children, Kramer was able to simultaneously interpret the space without these restrictions and to re-create it in a critical way. Routine, habit, and restriction are reconfigured into dramatic movements expressive of the inner life of IRS inmates, producing body memories that critically disrupt those previously acquired in the same spaces [15]. The centrality of the residential school’s physical space to *Fragments* taps into the mnemonic quality of architecture, which, as Bloomer and Moore suggest, makes accessible previous experiences within the space through its accretions over time [16]. The representational space created through Kramer’s work overlays not just the physical space of the residential school, but the space of the performance area, temporarily conjuring an expression of the faraway institution to narrate its memories.

Whereas the works of Stimson and Kramer each address a specific lo-



Fragments (2009), Lara Kramer, Photographer: Caroline Charbonneau

this way asserts the importance of their origins, of being from a particular time and place [18]. The laborious process of collecting the artifacts, which involved considerable travel, consultation, and acknowledgment of donors, brings to the forefront the geographical scale and widespread impact of the IRS system. The pieces incorporated into the installation include various parts of buildings, demolished and standing, such as bricks (Shubenacadie, Old Sun), but also objects such as dishes (Mohawk), letters (Sandy Bay), and straps (Portage la Prairie) [19]. The *Witness Blanket* is a public artwork of grand proportions; not only were its constituent pieces collected from across Canada, the installation will travel back to those and other communities on a touring schedule that is already booked until 2020. Starting May 18, 2015, it will be installed in Ottawa, where

cation and its memorial vestiges, an installation completed in 2014 by master carver Carey Newman integrates hundreds of material remnants and artifacts from residential schools and other sites across Canada [17]. Amassed by collaborators on gathering trips, almost 900 of these disparate remnants are assembled into a collective *Witness Blanket*, for which Newman created an armature made of red cedar elements strung on flexible steel cables. The metaphor of the blanket suggests protection, as well as unity, through its weaving together of different items and its participatory method of creation. Newman references the objects' ability to witness the events around them, and in

the closing events of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada will be held at the end of May.



Witness Blanket (2014), Carey Newman, Photographer: Graem Millala, Media One Inc.

Stimson, Kramer, and Newman use installation and performance, mediums that emphasize spatiality and bodily experience, to displace and re-create the space of the IRS in order to bring it to the attention of a wider public. Their work complements the more personal work of Joe, Miller-Lahiaaks, and Houle in addressing the invisibility of IRS sites, as well as a corresponding lack of knowledge about this tragic era within wider communities of memory. The importance of process and processing is evident in this art that attends to the space of residential schools, particularly in the absence of a physically demarcated architecture. French his-

torian Pierre Nora notes that memory, unlike history, “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being dormant and periodically revived” [20].

An alternative perspective on reconciliation that takes on this transformative view from an Indigenous perspective was elaborated by David McIntosh, a friend of Robert Houle’s, in the context of Houle’s *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*. It is a reminder of the complexity of negotiating between needs of remembering and forgetting, and the open-ended interplay of the personal and political:

Robert has chosen not to participate in the work of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada], largely due to the prominence of the concept of “reconciliation” in the Commission’s process, a concept Robert describes as “an imposed Judeo-Christian concept of forgiveness” that elides and excludes indigenous people’s concepts of memory and transformation. For Robert, a more meaningful concept than forgiveness is pahgedenaun, an Anishnabe term that translates roughly to English as “let it go from your mind” ... Pahgedenaun is a self-defining and self-determining act while forgiveness is an act of submission to the will of others. [21]

In *At Memory’s Edge*, Young recognizes that art addressing traumatic pasts has the potential to act in a redemptory fashion, smoothing over histories that should, instead, continue to be questioned [22]. This is part of the ongoing, embodied, and participatory work currently being done in the “post-memory” of residential schools, and the work that Canadian society needs to see to deal with its own redemptory view of “reconciliation.” Through the tactility of the remnant, and through everything that it focuses, images are returned to place, bound by an invisible cord of continuous memory: immediate, vicarious, and, potentially, collective.

[1] The official number of residential schools recognized by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement is 139, which does not include schools with no federal involvement. Grollier Hall in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, and Gordon’s IRS in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, were both closed in 1996. The Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario was opened in 1829 by the New England Company, a non-sectarian Protestant missionary organization. It was a settler appropriation of earlier efforts from within the Six Nations community to provide cross-cultural education, namely a day school started by the Mohawk leader Thayendanegea (Captain Joseph Brant) in the 1780s. See:

Kelsay, Isabel Thompson. *Joseph Brant, 1743-1807: Man of Two Worlds*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984.

[2] Joe, Rita. *Song of Eskasoni: More Poems of Rita Joe*. Charlottetown, PEI: Ragweed Press, 1988, 75.

[3] Yates, Elizabeth. “Mush Hole horror.” *Brantford Expositor*. October 23 2008. <http://www.brantfordexpositor.ca/2008/10/23/mushhole-horror>.

[4] Sandals, Leah. “York Wilson Award Honours Robert Houle’s Residential School Art.” *Canadian Art*. September 24 2013. <http://canadianart.ca/news/2013/09/24/robert-houle-york-wilson-prize/>.

[5] Lippard, Lucy R. “Introduction.” *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native North Americans*. Ed. Lucy R. Lippard. New York: The New Press, 1992, 14.

[6] Hirsch, Marianne. “Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory.” *Discourse*. 15:2, 1992-1993, 8-9.

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- [14] Kramer, Lara. "Fragments." Lara Kramer Danse, accessed April 11 2014. <http://www.larakramer.ca/fragments>.
- [15] Casey, Edward S. "Body Memory." *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 200, 146-80.
- [16] Bloomer and Moore, 50.
- [17] Newman, Carey. "Witness: Pieces of History," accessed May 5 2014. <http://witnessblanket.ca/>.
- [18] Lederman, Marsha. "Carey Newman confronts the painful legacy of residential schools." *The Globe and Mail*, August 7 2013, updated October 8 2013. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/carey-newman-confronts-the-painful-legacy-of-residential-schools/article13654569/>.
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- [21] McIntosh, David. "uhpé guhnoodezowan - when i speak to myself." *Robert Houle: enuhmo andúhyaun (the road home)*. Winnipeg: School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, 2012, 3. https://umanitoba.ca/schools/art/media/Gallery_Houle_catalogue.pdf.
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