

Naomi Angel

*Fragments of Truth: Residential Schools and the Challenge of Reconciliation in Canada*

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022. 240 pp.

Increasing awareness of the violence and trauma of residential schooling in Canada has been accompanied by the emergence of an impressive and growing body of literature. These works, collectively, are telling important stories, introducing additional perspectives, and raising significant questions that have yet to be addressed. Naomi Angel's *Fragments of Truth: Residential Schools and the Challenge of Reconciliation in Canada* makes its presence count in numerous ways. By exploring activities related to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the book highlights performances and testimonies as well as collections of visual images presented at a series of national gatherings organized by the commission in order to demonstrate how residential schools have been represented and what their significance has been and continues to be. These themes are explored in conjunction with accounts provided by participants and other commentators through public testimonies, conversations, and communications with the author, blog posts, media reports, and engagement with popular and scholarly literature. The resulting narrative presents a complex portrait of residential schooling and of efforts to grapple with its legacy within a settler colonial context. The book addresses these issues in an analytically open but empathetic manner, exposing painful experiences and traumatic memories but also important lessons about Indigenous resilience and the strength of Indigenous communities.

The backstory for the book itself is at once unsettling and reassuring. As observed in a preface to the book written by two of her former colleagues, Angel died tragically young in 2014, a year after defending the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based while struggling with breast cancer. At the same time, both her research engagements and the eventual development of the book represent collaborations with diverse individuals and communities of participants. The conversion of the work into book form was completed with great sensitivity, updated to take into account significant developments (including the release of the final report of the TRC, the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and subsequent affirmation of burial sites on the grounds of residential schools in many communities), by the co-editors, Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson and Jamie Berthe, a close associate within Angel's graduate student cohort.

Belying its difficult subject matter and publication story, the book flows in an engaging manner that will inform and appeal to diverse audiences. Chapter 1 sets the stage well with a concise historical summary of relevant federal government policies and events between the initial implementation of residential schooling in the early nineteenth century to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008. Chapters 2 and 3 focus, respectively, on analysis of archival photographs and other visual images, and public testimonies and events framed through the author's participation at two of the seven national gatherings held by the TRC. Chapter 4

then explores the relationship between tangible encounters and more fleeting, often haunting, encounters through the author's visits to the sites of selected former residential schools in western Canada, before the book closes with a concluding chapter offering insights into the challenges and uncertainties associated with understanding and working towards reconciliation.

The book, in accordance with its title, demonstrates many ways in which truth about these matters may be fragmented and elusive. It brings to the forefront the nuanced manner in which individuals come to tell their own stories, especially as they are confronted with images, memories, or events that invite or provoke them to speak about long-shadowed experiences or, alternatively, those that silence them from doing so. The use of visual imagery, incorporating both relatively familiar archival material as well as lesser-known photographs of children attending residential schools, is especially powerful in revealing how the framing and concealing of contexts associated with the images has a strong impact on the messages conveyed to or received by the viewer. This message is reinforced in the accounts of the author's presence and conversations with others at the residential school sites, where material traces along with ghostly expressions—presented in the manner of both chilling reflections as well her accounts of others' capacity to envision and connect with departed students and staff members—draws out the paradoxes and complexities emphasized throughout the book.

Settler colonialism is, by nature, fragmenting—separating Indigenous populations from the land, their cultures, and one another while simultaneously concealing other important truths from both settler and Indigenous populations. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has challenged official narratives of residential schools, contradicting a dominant national imagery that poses Canada as a model of peaceful coexistence; in doing so it has broadened our understanding of the “truths” about colonization. Nonetheless, the book emphasizes, this effort has not succeeded in capturing fully the multifaceted nature of such truths, falling short of probing important retellings of that story explored from standpoints not yet unearthed or articulated. The process of exposing those truths and recovering historical memories and contemporary connections remains partial and uncertain.

Those looking for a definitive work on residential schooling and reconciliation will not find it in *Fragments of Truth* nor, the book suggests, will we find it in any other place given the proliferation of fragments and the innumerable ways in which these may be assembled and reassembled. In all of these respects, the book is recommended reading, offering informative perspectives that will broaden understandings about what happened and what remains to be done in pursuing meaningful pathways towards reconciliation. It is a powerful reminder that it is imperative for us to continue to probe these issues so that the future actions (both collective and individual) are undertaken in a manner that is well-informed, open, and reflexive.

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