

# THE THEATRE OF REGRET

LITERATURE, ART, AND  
THE POLITICS OF  
RECONCILIATION  
IN CANADA

David Gaertner



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UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

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## Introduction

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### Bearing Witness to the TRC

The Oxford Dictionary has three definitions for conciliate. The first is to “make calm and amenable.” The second definition is to “pacify,” and the third is to “gain the good will of.” I may be misunderstanding the full meaning of the intent for reconciliation between Aboriginal people and Canadian society, but these definitions communicate a process of manipulation and potential exploitation.

– STAN MCKAY (FISHER RIVER CREE FIRST NATION)<sup>1</sup>

No one would decently dare to object to the imperative of reconciliation.

– JACQUES DERRIDA<sup>2</sup>

Reconciliation is a structure, not an event.<sup>3</sup> On September 6, 2013, the Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia launched *Witnesses: Bringing Residential Schools into the Present*, a collection of contemporary Indigenous art contending with Canada’s history of Indian Residential Schools. *Witnesses* was timed to open just before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) arrived in Vancouver for the sixth of seven national events aimed at educating the public and holding up those impacted by residential schools. As such, it served both as a preparative encounter with residential school history as well as a point of critique for the politics and aesthetics of political reconciliation. Twenty-two Indigenous artists contributed to the exhibition, including Rebecca Belmore, Skeena Reece, Jamasie Pitseolak, Henry Speck, Carl Beam, Adrian Stimson, and Lisa Jackson, among

others. *Witnesses* was the best-attended exhibition ever mounted at the Belkin Gallery (which, at the time, had been open for eighteen years), demonstrating the deep resonances (and, more cynically, the commercial viability) of residential school issues for the university and the gallery-going publics.<sup>4</sup> In its ability to represent at least some of the pain and horror of residential schools, *Witnesses* spoke to a desire – in both Indigenous and settler communities – to contend with this dark chapter of Canadian history more openly and to push the conversation of colonial violence beyond the event of the TRC and the exhibition itself.<sup>5</sup>

At the time *Witnesses* opened, I was a postdoctoral fellow in First Nations and Indigenous Studies at the University of British Columbia. A year before taking up this position, I had written and defended a dissertation on discourses of reconciliation in Canadian and Indigenous literatures, which would go on to form the skeleton for the book you now hold in your hands. By design, my work on reconciliation ran adjacent to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and traced its development (and sometimes collapse) as it established itself as a Canadian political movement. I began my research in 2006, just as the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) was ratified, and I defended my dissertation in 2012, at the time the Commission's interim report was released, and two years before the closing ceremonies in Ottawa.<sup>6</sup>

As the scope of the TRC changed and expanded, so did my own thinking on reconciliation, moving from a generalized account of the international TRC model as it had developed out of Chile and South Africa to a more focused analysis of the thoughts and provocations on reconciliation initiated by Indigenous artists, novelists, theorists, poets, and playwrights. As the TRC became more specific, engaging in more detailed ways with the lives and experiences of individuals, so too did my work, moving from sweeping historical conceptions of reconciliation and redress to close reading of a few lines of poetry, and then back again. As I worked, I began to identify some of the primary tenets of both the general and specific discourses and, with the assistance of Indigenous literature, to develop arguments arising from those tenets. I have structured this book around these ideas, which are acknowledgment, apology, redress, and forgiveness. *The Theatre of Regret* is an interdisciplinary engagement with the discourses of reconciliation as they unfolded – and continue to unfold – out of the first ten years of the TRC, during which I attempted to collect and trace paths through the constellations of voices that have spoken to, against, and just to the side of the reconciliation debates.

I don't pretend to provide a solution to reconciliation in this book, in part because I believe that the insistence on "solution" in the discourse of reconciliation is part of the problem. The chapters in this book raise far more questions than they solve. In bringing many of these voices together for the first time, however, I hope to provide a more rigorous, informed structure in which to think about reconciliation, its consequences, and its possibilities, in a way that decentres and destabilizes the European and Christian thinking that sits at its core. I unsettle and trouble reconciliation by reading it in relation to critical Indigenous studies, Canadian studies, and Canadian and Indigenous literatures.

More specifically, I aim to illustrate why reconciliation, as it has been defined in international politics, is a troubling approach to historical injustice and Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. The emphasis on *reconciliation*, as opposed to Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, is at the core of what I see as my intervention into the literature. The majority of book-length studies that address this topic approach truth and reconciliation concurrently, illustrating how these concepts work together toward (a) transitional justice or (b) nation-state redress for historical injustice.<sup>7</sup> Working in reciprocity with Indigenous scholars and activists, such as Patricia M. Barkaskas and Sarah Hunt, who call for an emphasis on truth in the TRC of Canada, this work aims to illustrate, via a genealogical account of "reconciliation," the ways in which the second half of the TRC formulation has been recaptured by settler colonialism.<sup>8</sup> I argue that, within the Canadian context, truth is obscured in the TRC formulation because settler emphasis on reconciliation obstructs intellectual access to the ongoing histories of settler violence that sit at the core of Indigenous-settler relations. In my emphasis on "reconciliation" in this text, I stand in solidarity with the residential school survivors – who originally called for a TRC in Canada – by illustrating how the logics of settler colonialism work to twist and distort the terms of the conversation by privileging reconciliation over truth.

We are at a point now, in the wake of the TRC of Canada, at which critiques of reconciliation are easy to find, and many of those critiques are pointed and impactful. However, as I tell my students, critics of reconciliation should not overlook the labour – taken up by survivors – that made the TRC of Canada possible. As such, I delineate the TRC that occurred in Canada as the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," rather than "Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," to subvert the possession implied by the latter phrasing. I argue throughout this book that if

reconciliation is possible with Indigenous peoples living in a colonial state, it cannot be the possession of that state or a register of the dominant discourse. While it may often appear differently, “reconciliation” is not a state good – by which I mean it is not a product that the settler colonial government should be able to manufacture, trade, and profit from. Nor is it a Canadian act of goodwill that can be manipulated to act as a demonstration of Canada’s moral superiority in the international state order. Reconciliation in what is now known as Canada was established by Indigenous peoples and survivors of residential schools and, as such, is subject to the sovereignty and self-determination of those communities. Building from this important point, *The Theatre of Regret* contributes to the growing discourse of critique around reconciliation by interrogating settler perspectives on acknowledgment, apology, forgiveness, and redress as a means to hold space for Indigenous authors and thinkers working with – and against – the possibility of reconciliation. More specifically, I aim to illustrate why reconciliation, as it has been defined in international politics, is a troubling concept in a settler colonial state.

### **Bearing Witness**

Like the Belkin exhibit I began with, the methodology of this book is also rooted in the land from which I write and the notion of “bearing witness,” with which I attempt to act in reciprocity. I attempt to do so by holding up the voices that have done, and are doing, the hard work of critiquing reconciliation. Working with these voices, I hope to illustrate, primarily to non-Indigenous audiences, the ideology that confounds reconciliation as it is absorbed into settler colonialism.

In a Western framework, witnessing is rooted in legal contexts and the “juridical imperative of the witness’s oath,”<sup>9</sup> but in Coast Salish traditions, to witness means to give oneself over to a story and to be accountable to that narrative, its history, its teller(s), and the way it was experienced when told. Witnesses are keepers of this knowledge and may be called back to speak to it at future events.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, in a traditional Stó:lō gathering, such as a potlatch or naming ceremony, one of the first tasks of the speaker named by the host family is to call witnesses.<sup>11</sup> The speaker moves counter-clockwise through the Longhouse and, one by one, identifies certain respected guests, calling out to them in halq'eméylem: “Xó:lhmet te syóysthet tset, há:kweles chap itló slát,” which in English translates to, “Please witness,

respectfully watch, and carefully remember the events you are going to see and hear this evening.”<sup>12</sup> It is a great honour to be called to witness in this tradition. After the named individual accepts, a member of the host family clasps their hands and leaves a few coins with them: “Witnesses fully understand,” M. Teresa Carlson, Keith Thor Carlson, Brian Thom, and Albert “Sonny” McHalsie write, “that if in the future any question arises as to what occurred during the ceremony ... they can be called upon to recall what they had seen and heard in an accurate and truthful manner.”<sup>13</sup> After all the witnesses have been called, the ceremony begins. Following the ceremony, witnesses are given the floor and the right to speak: “Each witness comments on the work which has been done, and usually reminds those gathered to keep Stó:lō oral traditions strong.”<sup>14</sup> Following the ceremony, at future points down the road, if an account or history of the event is needed, those witnesses may be called upon to share their experiences.

x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm Elder Larry Grant, who first pointed me toward the Stó:lō text I reference here, and who has taught me much about the ways in which the act of witnessing functions on his territory, further articulates the importance of the witnessing ceremony in x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm, Stó:lō, and Tsleil-Waututh cultures, particularly in reference to his own community:

We call witnesses to be the keepers of our history when an event of historic significance occurs in the Coast Salish world. We do this in part because our traditions are oral, but also in recognition of the importance of conducting business, and building and maintaining relationships, in person and face to face ... We call upon all of the members of the audience to record this event in their minds and their hearts and to share the story of what happened here today.<sup>15</sup>

Grant connects witnessing to a long-standing tradition on the northwest coast and emphasizes how bearing witness is both a commemorative and a responsive act. Witnesses are asked to carry events within them as a record. They are asked to hold up those voices and those stories should they ever need to do so if those events were to be called into question or if there were to be disagreement over what occurred.

History is at stake in the witnessing ceremony, but never at the expense of community. Jordan Wilson, also a member of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm community, explains witnessing this way, emphasizing the ways in which

witnessing works to form a living, community-based archive of history and events:

Each witness observes the event from their own perspective. When they recount what they've witnessed to those who hired them, they do so by drawing on their own personal experiences and teachings. The practice of witnessing also serves a role in the biography of individuals, as important events in one's life are recorded in this system. Witnesses must observe and listen closely, as they can be called upon at any point in the future to provide an account of what they observed at a particular gathering. Witnessing is one way of demonstrating how in our community (and in our neighboring communities), knowledge, history, and life narratives are dispersed among many. Thus, gathering together as individuals is akin to bringing together components of a history.<sup>16</sup>

Both Wilson and Grant challenge Western legal definitions of witnessing by putting the responsibility of the act of witnessing on the individual(s) who receive and accept testimony on historical events, as opposed to the individual(s) who directly (and often unwillingly) experienced those events. Witnessing, for Wilson and Grant, is an act rooted in tradition and community, and it demonstrates the collective ways in which history is recorded and disseminated, as well as the ways in which collective memory serves to shape culture and bind community.

This ethic of witnessing, as a means of holding up community voices, is also captured in *Witness Blanket*, a twelve-metre-long art structure assembled by Kwakwaka'wakw master carver Carey Newman and funded by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The witness blanket is constructed from 887 objects, including pieces of residential schools, government buildings, churches, photographs, shoes, children's letters, and locks of hair.<sup>17</sup> The objects have been gathered from seventy-seven Indigenous communities across Canada as a means to "mak[e] a visual representation of reconciliation."<sup>18</sup> I visited *Witness Blanket* when it was being housed at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Woven together, the individual pieces of the blanket provide powerful and deeply affecting testimony to residential schools. Each piece is replete with the history of the schools, inflecting back at the viewer, in their resonant silence, testament to the lives of children and survivors.

By bringing these various objects together – objects which, on their own, might only whisper of the past – Newman generates a context in which

shared experience amplifies and augments stories that may have otherwise gone unheard. Newman himself speaks to the blanket's ability to hold up the truth of residential schools. In an interview with Shari Narine, he states that his "personal view is [that] for us to achieve full reconciliation we need to include all parts of the story ... It's about the actual truth of what happened."<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the witness blanket bears witness with and for survivors by holding space for them and their stories. It also asks audiences to bear witness, to be attentive to the voices that risk being lost in the excitement surrounding reconciliation. Frieda Esau Klippenstein writes that the witness blanket "communicates the illusion of order and beauty, and the need to look closer. It also conveys the startling insight that among the fragmented ruins are people, lives, and communities. The pieces of pain need to be faced."<sup>20</sup>

As the *Witness Blanket* helps to illustrate, witnessing is a vital part of the TRC of Canada. Early in the Commission's life, Commissioner Marie Wilson established that the TRC required "prominent helpers who will not only live out their right to know the truth here, their responsibility to *remember* what they have learned here, but who will also commit to *taking forward and teaching others* and spreading the word" [emphasis added].<sup>21</sup> Paralleling the National Research Centre, which will house the statements, documents, and other materials gathered by the TRC over the course of its mandate, TRC witnesses are instructed to carry with them a living record of residential schools along with the emotional and cognitive impacts of receiving and holding such testimony. While they are never outwardly cited as such, the northwest coast principles of witnessing, as outlined by Grant and Wilson, are implicit here. Honorary witnesses include former prime ministers Paul Martin and Joe Clark, along with former Governor General of Canada Adrienne Clarkson, Grand Chief Ed John, and CBC journalist Shelagh Rogers. Rogers writes about what being an honorary witness means to her:

My mission is to listen, learn and then transmit, and create understanding. As a Witness, you keep the memory and you take the story further down the road and deliver it to more people ... It is bigger than just telling the story – I want to see policy change, curriculum change, to see concrete fixes in civil society that will enable us to have much better partnerships than we have right now.<sup>22</sup>

In his statement to survivors, Maori anthropologist and historian Sir Sidney Mead held up the strength of Indigenous peoples and guaranteed that

strength against the stories that had been told to him: “We acknowledge your bravery. We acknowledge the pain you’ve been through and also draw attention to what may be a miracle. That, after all of those efforts to knock the Indian out of you, you are still Indian today.”<sup>23</sup> Mead’s and Rogers’ words demonstrate the role of the TRC witness as individuals who hold fast to difficult truths and do not simply advocate for their reconciliation. To bear witness is to be pulled toward truth and to resist the centripetal pull of reconciliation.

Unlike Rogers and Mead, however, I have not been called to witness by the TRC of Canada. Although I live and work on x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm territory, I am not from this place and I have no personal connection to the witnessing tradition. While I draw on much of what has been shared with me about witnessing on the northwest coast, how I am using the concept in this work comes more directly from its application in Indigenous studies contexts than from x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm protocol. In Indigenous studies, the act of bearing witness is generated in the reciprocal act of listening to and sharing stories and the active deconstruction of settler colonial narratives.<sup>24</sup> Witnessing in this sense is, therefore, about reinterpreting the past relationally, holding up the stories and histories of those who do not have the same platform for voice that I am privileged to have as a white, cis male academic. Métis scholar Judy Iseke refers to this type of witnessing, which aims to unsettle colonial memories of an event, as “pedagogical witnessing.”<sup>25</sup> For Iseke, pedagogical witnessing “allows my reading, viewing, or listening to be an event in which I allow the understanding of someone’s life to interrupt my own life.”<sup>26</sup> Witnessing in this sense is an act of unsettling accomplished in the act of sharing stories.

In its academic formulation, the movement of story between individuals shakes the foundational narratives that shape our worldviews, thus opening the potential, not just for empathy, but – more radically – for structural change. Indeed, for Iseke, much as it does for Rogers, bearing witness means proliferating Indigenous voices and therefore undoing the colonial narratives that dampen and silence those perspectives. In this sense, “witnessing can be a powerful form of recovery from a colonial past.”<sup>27</sup> In bearing witness, according to Iseke, we mobilize our privilege as academics to push back against silence. Sarah Hunt builds on this idea. She writes that “Witnessing ... might be understood as a methodology in which we are obligated, through a set of relational responsibilities, to ensure frameworks of representation allow for the lives that we have witnessed to be made visible.”<sup>28</sup> In the sense that Hunt develops it, bearing witness is not simply

about the one who sees or directly experiences an event. It is also about the one who propagates testimony: who shares and disseminates it.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as a scholarly methodology, witnessing carries this responsibility: “It is in witnessing the stories,” Hunt writes, “[that] I am obligated to ensure they are not denied, ignored or silenced.”<sup>30</sup>

Ensuring that stories are not silenced is a particular kind of academic work, which can take on different forms. Settler colonialism works actively to repress and silence Indigenous voices, particularly those who would speak truth to power. Even in the era of reconciliation, perhaps even because of the era of reconciliation, Indigenous voices and stories continue to be unheard. Bearing witness, as a scholar and teacher, is therefore about our responsibility to hold space for the Indigenous thinkers, activists, and community members who are already doing the hard work of speaking truth. But it also means, as Hunt highlights, doing so while being in good relation to those communities and people. It means being accountable to community, even when doing so means being “in tension with the values underlying academic knowledge creation within universities.”<sup>31</sup>

Building from Iseke’s and Hunt’s work on what it means to bear witness as an academic, I attempt to bear witness in this book by writing in reciprocity with some of the many Indigenous voices that have rigorously contributed to the critique of reconciliation and its primary tenets: acknowledgment, apology, redress, and forgiveness. As articulated by the state, “reconciliation” is too often a story of a necessary good. And the primacy of this narrative – and who tells it – has the potential to shut out critique. Jacques Derrida makes this plain when he writes, in one of the passages I use as an epigraph for this introduction, “no one would decently dare to object to the imperative of reconciliation.”<sup>32</sup> The threat of silence that reconciliation carries with it, which Derrida points to here, has material effects on the ways in which truth is engaged and proliferated. If “reconciliation” becomes that which is unobjectionable, then to bear witness means to object and to stand in solidarity with those who would dare to do the same.

Many Indigenous authors and activists, some of whom I engage with in this book, have spoken loudly against reconciliation. Those authors and activists do not need me to rescue their words, and I do not mean to frame my use of witnessing as an act of white saviourism. Indigenous peoples dare to speak against reconciliation when doing so represents a threat to their well-being or the security of their family. To dare to speak against reconciliation is a much different thing for me, as a white, cis-gendered, straight man with a tenure-stream position in an R1 university, than it is for an

Indigenous scholar, or for a racialized activist or community member. To speak against reconciliation, for many, is to risk violence. The risk I take on in this book, that I “dare” to take on, is relatively small, and this is precisely part of the problem. That is to say, the question of reconciliation is folded within a much larger system of structural racism and violence that renders the dare a threat operationalized by the settler state. As such, being a witness as a settler scholar means mobilizing my privilege to hold up the voices of Indigenous peoples as a means of chipping away at structural racism and white supremacy. Bearing witness, in this sense, means taking up some of the intense labour necessary to object to reconciliation and to together create a space where that reconciliation can and will be heard as the purview of Indigenous peoples.

As such, I have constructed this book around works by the Indigenous authors, activists, and scholars who have impacted me and who have persuaded me that further critique of reconciliation is necessary. Creative writers such as Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe, Thomas King, Marie Clements, Richard Wagamese, Billy-Ray Belcourt, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson have been instrumental here, as well as critical thinkers such as Daniel Heath Justice, Glen Coulthard, Sarah Hunt, Val Napoleon, and Heidi Kiiwetinepin-esiik Stark. Alongside these perspectives, I have also woven in critiques of reconciliation coming from authors of colour, such as Nalo Hopkinson, Roy Miki, and Joy Kogawa. As I hope to illustrate, those who dare to object to reconciliation and redress are often the most vulnerable, and this book is an attempt to hold up the work of those who took on considerable risk to make critiques of reconciliation, such as mine, possible. Writing by activists and authors such as Miki, Kogawa, and Hopkinson brings valuable critical perspective from those who are also impacted by racism and white supremacy; it also bears witness to the fact that critiques of reconciliation are made possible by people of colour. It is my hope that this book bears witness by working *with* these voices in the fight to address the settler colonial ideology that creeps into reconciliation as it has been taken up by the Canadian state.

### **Apparition**

For me, as an academic author and a settler scholar, bearing witness also means being aware of what can't be said and what one does not have the right to circulate. Thus, while this book discusses the many points at which Indigenous knowledges disrupt reconciliation, it is also attentive to the silences that must be respected. This is a lesson I felt most deeply through Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's work, particularly her contribution to

the *Witnesses* exhibit: *Apparition*. *Apparition* was a large-scale video installation that featured Belmore posed against an ethereal white background. The video loop, four minutes in length, began by slowly fading in on Belmore, in a white T-shirt and jeans, kneeling in front of the audience, a piece of duct tape covering her mouth. Belmore stared directly into the camera and therefore directly at those watching her in the video, but her gaze, like the background she was set against, was tabula rasa, contributing to the overall sense that this piece was more a space to collect the projections of the viewer than it was a projection of the artist's thoughts on residential schools. Roughly midway through the piece, Belmore moved from the kneeling position – which emulated the position of prayer that residential school students were forced to assume – to a cross-legged sitting position. Still holding the audience's gaze, she then slowly tore the duct tape away from her lips. Once the tape was removed, she broke the gaze for the first time, stood up, and walked out of the frame. The loop then repeated, returning to Belmore kneeling, her mouth covered once again.

*Apparition* speaks to a number of key issues within the framework of “witnessing” and the conversations I hope to elicit with this book, many of which circulate, paradoxically, around the silence and the cycles of oppression reiterated in reconciliation politics. Key to this in Belmore's work is language. In her artist statement, Belmore acknowledges that *Apparition* “is an artwork that reflects [her] understanding of the loss of our language [Anishinaabemowin].”<sup>33</sup> While the artist grew up around her language, she, like many others from her community, is unable to speak it. Residential schools played a determining role in this loss, interrupting the inheritance of language as it is passed from one generation to the next by punishing students for speaking their mother tongues and generating shame around Indigenous languages and Indigenous epistemologies. Residential schools were built on the idea that “only by removing children from their parents, prohibiting Indigenous languages, and banning cultural practices could students be removed ‘from evil surroundings’ and be relocated in the ‘circle of civilized conditions.’”<sup>34</sup> The tape across Belmore's mouth in *Apparition* is thus indicative of the ways in which Indigenous languages were taken from communities through the residential school system.

Inasmuch as their languages were stolen, there is also a critical epistemological gap in the ways in which survivors can communicate their experiences in these schools – given that English, the language of the perpetrator, becomes the vehicle through which they must bear witness to that violence. Using the *lack* of language as an entry point, Belmore's video installation

intervenes into colonial history – and the colonial gaze more specifically – not by breaking silence, but by mobilizing it: while the audience is captivated by Belmore’s gaze in *Apparition*, the artist offers no words, either in English or Anishinaabemowin, that might fulfill the consumptive desire of a colonial audience. Indeed, Belmore draws attention to that desire when she removes the duct tape from her mouth but continues without speaking. Removing the tape suggests personal agency – the ways in which the artist has freed herself from settler colonial hegemony and the silence of the subaltern – but her continued refusal to speak – to bear witness to the trauma and violence that inflicted her silence – interrupts the survivor/perpetrator dialectic of testimony/apology and subverts settler expectations, which circulate around knowing and consuming the pain of the other.<sup>35</sup> In walking out of the scene, Belmore completes the gesture of refusal, leaving the audience with only a blank canvas, a radical space of lack that refuses recuperation into a settler colonial narrative of forgiveness, apology, or redress.<sup>36</sup>

It is because it refuses access that *Apparition* compels its audiences to consider the implications of their own desire as it relates to the trauma of residential school survivors. In these moments of reflection, Belmore holds space to attend to the stories of survivors and their families as they resonate around her work. To borrow from bell hooks, *Apparition* is thus concerned with critiquing a model of witnessing and testimony that “only speaks from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speaks ... pain.”<sup>37</sup> *Apparition* refuses to offer that deprivation up for consumption to settler audiences who Rachel Flowers, drawing from the hul’qumi’num’ language, identifies as “hwulunitum,” the “hungry people.”<sup>38</sup> In the stillness of Belmore’s work, then, there is a possibility to hear reconciliation from the perspectives of Indigenous knowledge keepers and community members, which, of course, was the larger principle of the *Witnesses* exhibit. Against her refusal and the tabula rasa of the white backdrop, audiences were compelled to hear the testimony that reverberated in and through the Belkin Gallery, to bear witness to the knowledge that Indigenous artists were bringing to the concept of reconciliation.

In this, *Apparition* calls for us to decentre our gaze and draws our attention to the margins, to the work that is happening even as we try to pry answers out of refusal. But then the loop begins again. The tape is back across the mouth. The story remains untold, making the non-telling, and its repetition, one of the primary takeaways. With *Apparition*, we had, as viewers, in this moment of quiet, a small window through which we might challenge hegemonic state representations of reconciliation. Belmore invited us

to use this space to consider Indigenous thinkers, writers, and artists as they spoke to reconciliation. We are now in a different time than when this show first opened, and the window afforded by *Apparition* may have closed. Silence itself may be impossible in the neo-colonial din that has arisen around reconciliation in the years following the Belkin exhibition. But Belmore's silence still resonates as a condemnation of the hwulunitum desire to consume pain.

*Apparition* also made me think more deeply about what it is that I hoped this book could give back, and to whom. From *Apparition* I realized that I did not want this work to be another piece of academic research caught up in the feedback loop that Belmore identifies: a gaze that looks, a gaze that is sympathetic or even outraged, but ultimately a gaze that contributes to the continuation of the cycle. *The Theatre of Regret* attempts to bear witness not only by hearing the pain caused by residential schools, but also, more specifically, by listening to the ways in which the uncritical, self-involved discourses of reconciliation contribute to and continue that pain. In pulling the lens back to the international TRC model, I hope to provide a macroscopic view of the TRC of Canada, which will give Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and activists an even larger tool box from which to unpack, critique, and deconstruct state-centred reconciliation, its mandates, and its goals.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss why settlers are so preoccupied with reconciliation. Why has reconciliation become, in the terms of psychoanalysis, a drive: the compulsion not to achieve a goal but to continually circle around it, thus generating an unending cycle, a feedback loop such as the one Belmore identifies? I consider the ideas, emotions, and history that make the story of reconciliation so powerful and the ways in which its (re)telling can suppress and circumvent certain truths about racism and settler colonialism. I trace reconciliation and the TRC model through its development out of the Nuremberg trials and into national commissions for truth and reconciliation in Uganda, Chile, and South America. I discuss and examine the key terms that supplement and support reconciliation as it develops out of the Second World War and the Cold War – acknowledgment, apology, redress, and forgiveness – and I explore the ideological implications of these terms: the ways in which they enable silence, forgetting, and neo-colonial models of “moving on” and “progress.” I unpack settlers' understandings of reconciliation in relation to colonial models of power and settler definitions of race and Indigeneity, and I look at the ways in which the discourse of reconciliation enables resource extraction and protects settler fragility.

But I also look at the ways in which Indigenous authors, intellectuals, and community members push back against the TRC template. I discuss the ways in which Indigenous poets and playwrights, such as Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe, Thomas King, Kevin Loring, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Cherie Dimaline, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Eden Robinson, Richard Wagamese, Joshua Whitehead, and Marie Clements, undo the narratives of healing and forgiveness that undergird the TRC and challenge the Christian sanctification of personal suffering as a moral good – indeed, the only good available to Indigenous peoples within colonization. I illustrate how Indigenous peoples refuse and interrupt discourses of apology. And I address the ways in which allied thinkers from racialized settler groups in Canada unpack the narratives of redress that preceded the TRC. Together, Indigenous and allied thinkers and authors disrupt and displace the hegemony of contemporary reconciliation discourse and add new depth and complexity to what I call “the theatre of regret” – that is, the political shift toward performances of morality that we see developing, on an international level, out of the Second World War. Reconciliation is not one-size-fits-all. The voices I engage with here demonstrate that fact carefully and rigorously.

The chapters in this book are organized around four of the key stages on the path to reconciliation: acknowledgment, apology, redress, and forgiveness. As a whole, these four stages represent the multiple levels on which survivors and perpetrators work toward addressing and responding to historical injustice. Read separately, each category represents a provocative and rigorous space in which to engage with and challenge the interpersonal relationships encompassed within the reconciliation framework. The categories I provide are not meant to be exclusive, and they do not represent a “true” path toward coexistence, whatever that might mean. However, given the regularity with which they are evoked in the TRC genre, and hence the weight they hold in that discourse, they provide vital spaces from which to unpack and critique reconciliation at a modular level. I examine acknowledgment, apology, redress, and forgiveness in detail in [Chapters 2 to 4](#), respectively. Around these chapters, I provide additional framework that contextualizes those concepts within the global discourses of reconciliation: [Chapter 1](#) provides background and history on the truth and reconciliation model and theorizes its development in settler states such as Canada and Australia; my [Conclusion](#) offers an analysis of reconciliation itself via Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*, and ends with reflections on the TRC of Canada’s Calls to Action.

The *Witnesses* exhibit, and in particular Rebecca Belmore's piece, have helped me to ask what reconciliation wants in a settler vernacular. *Apparition* placed the TRC in a larger constellation of relationships between those who bear witness and those who offer testimony on Indian Residential Schools and Canada's long, violent history of colonialism. It reminded us that reconciliation takes place within certain power structures and in relationship to the other. In so many instances, what settlers believe they know about reconciliation does not resonate with the history of colonialism or the stories and practices of Indigenous peoples and this land. It is my hope that this book compels non-Indigenous readers to hear reconciliation otherwise and, through that, operates in reciprocity with the Indigenous voices that continue to bear witness to the TRC and Canada's history of colonialism.

# 1

## The Theatre of Regret

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### The Politics of Reconciliation after the Second World War

The word “reconciliation” ... is my daily bread. Compromise, accommodate, provide, make space for. Understand. Tolerate. Empathize. Endure ... Without it, no relationship, no work, no progress, is possible. Yes. Piece by piece we die into reconciliation.

– ANTIJE KROG<sup>1</sup>

It makes them part of it; they can be part of the solution without doing anything.

– LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON<sup>2</sup>

We live in a new era of state morality. For the first time, Western governments are compelled to confront their histories, not as inheritors of grand narratives of struggle, perseverance, and conquest, but, as Edward Said once put it, as “representatives of a culture and even a race accused of crimes – crimes of violence, crimes of suppression, crimes of conscience.”<sup>3</sup> Between the time of the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Chile in 1991 and the time of this writing, there have been over thirty TRCs implemented across the globe, which is more than one commission per year.<sup>4</sup> On a superficial level, TRCs change the ways in which governments perform their relationship to state history, but these performances of morality do not necessarily amount to material change for the survivors of historical injustice. Detached from its historical, geographical, and cultural contexts,

reconciliation is precarious at best and injurious at worst. Kevin Avruch and Beatriz Vejarano argue that “notions such as justice, truth, forgiveness, reconciliation ... are always socially constructed and culturally constituted.”<sup>5</sup> Following Avruch and Vejarano, this chapter is about the contexts that made possible the social construction of reconciliation as we know it today – about the history, geography, and legality of reconciliation as it developed out of the Western World and was impinged on Indigenous peoples. It makes plain the conditions that allow for this discourse and interrupts the notion of reconciliation as a floating signifier: a word that points to nothing and has no agreed-upon meaning – a word without history and without relations.<sup>6</sup>

In the autumn of 1945, in the city of Nuremberg, Germany, the ways in which states responded to historical injustice changed forever. In the wake of the moral atrocities committed during the Second World War, the Nuremberg trials (and, to a lesser degree, the Tokyo Trials) drew global attention to the punitive measures that could be levied against state officials who participated in crimes against humanity. Facilitated by media technology (namely, newspapers and radios), the world was made to watch and listen: not only to how perpetrators were held accountable for their actions, but also to the ways in which the rest of the world established itself on the “right” side of history.<sup>7</sup> As I am writing this book, more than seventy years after Nuremberg, states continue to scramble to register their accountability in the theatre of regret established out of Nuremberg, perpetuating not only the necessity of appearing moral in a post–Second World War global economy, but also retroactively determining the founding violence of Nuremberg as a truth of human rights.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is only a small piece of a much larger genealogy of moral politics that developed out of Nuremberg and was consequently naturalized in tribunals, truth commissions, truth and reconciliation commissions, and reconciliation initiatives across the world, most notably in Uganda, Chile, South Africa, and Australia. It is not an accident that in Canada, healing and redress are operationalized out of a TRC model. The truth and reconciliation commission is a very particular genre of redress, and as a genre it carries with it a specific set of codes and procedures that shape the way in which content is processed and imagined. By evoking “reconciliation,” settler Canadians enact, or attempt to enact, a specific kind of healing by appealing to the power of that word. Thus, understanding what “reconciliation” means in Canada necessitates that we understand the history of the TRC itself and the ways in

which it maps onto – and is incommensurable with – Indigenous experiences and the history of settler colonialism. Contending with the TRC in Canada means first unpacking the genre of reconciliation, its history, and its specific development in the Western imagination. It means coming to terms with the ways in which reconciliation and the TRC are performed. This is where *The Theatre of Regret* begins.

In this chapter, I provide a roadmap for activists and reconciliation scholars beginning enquiries into TRCs today, particularly in settler contexts such as Canada. The roadmap is not intended to be a comprehensive or definitive guide to TRCs. Rather, it is an illustration of major moments of reconciliation in the TRC model, moments that demonstrate most clearly the *how* and the *why* of reconciliation: *how* it was defined and *why* it was defined that way. Some of these moments, such as in South Africa, have already been the subject of vast amounts of scholarship. Others, such as those in Uganda, have been largely abstracted from the TRC genealogy, but, for reasons I will demonstrate, need to be brought back into the conversation. The goal in this chapter is to provide readers with a more nuanced understanding of reconciliation as a political tool developed in response to particular times and places, thus providing a critical space from which to contextualize, interpret, and critique contemporary reconciliation as it exists in Canada and for Indigenous peoples.

### **Germany, 1945–46: The Nuremberg Trials**

In order to begin contextualizing the TRC of Canada, we need to look back to the Second World War and the now pervasive human rights model that developed out of the Nuremberg trials, the first international trial for war crimes and, to quote Robert H. Jackson, Chief US Prosecutor, “one of the most significant tributes that Power has ever paid to reason.”<sup>8</sup> Reconciliation is a direct descendent of Nuremberg inasmuch as it was here that the legal foundation for crimes against humanity was established. Without this baseline, TRCs would not have the legal foundation for their interventions nor the external pressure to follow them through.

The Nuremberg trials, during which former Nazi leaders were indicted and tried as war criminals, took place between 1945 and 1946, and were prosecuted by the International Military Tribunal (IMT), a body composed of eight judges, two from each of the war’s Allied powers. The authority of the IMT stemmed from the London Agreement of 1945, which gave the tribunal the authority to declare any individual, group, or organization