Felt Theory
An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History

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An ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of.

—Pierre Machery

We were not normal children at these schools, we were more like robots, always taking orders, never involved in decision-making of any kind. We were never asked what we thought or even encouraged to think for ourselves. We learned soon after arriving at the schools not to express ourselves. We got into trouble when we spoke our minds, expressed feelings, or dared to question anything.

—Bev Sellars
In this essay I make the case for remembering and understanding the impact of Canadian First Nation women’s first-person and experiential narrative on white, mostly male mainstream scholarship. I argue that these narratives were political acts in themselves that in their time exploded the measured “objective” accounts of Canadian (and U.S.) colonial histories. First Nations women in Canada changed the actual conditions for what could be said about the poverty and discrimination that were their daily fare. I wish to discuss the conditions under which these women spoke at all: of sex discrimination in their lives and communities, of what it took to challenge their own families, particularly the men. It is these women’s acknowledgment of their actual experiences that illuminated a space for both men and women to speak one of colonialism’s nastiest “domestic” secrets. First Nation men’s and women’s personal testimony in the early 1990s put Canada in an international spotlight for genocidal child abuse spanning a century. Their personal testimonies shamed Canadians’ simple belief in the benign nature of their child education–assimilation policies. But their stories hadn’t magically appeared. They were at the heart of the struggle. Native women’s personal narrative explored the racialized, gendered, and sexual nature of their colonization. In doing so, they transformed the debilitating force of an old social control, shame, into a social change agent in their generation. I explore here their sixth sense about the moral affective heart of capitalism and colonialism as an analysis. A felt analysis is one that creates a context for a more complex “telling,” one that illuminates the deeper meaning of their “education” in Canada.

By exploring the early work of Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle, Ruby Slipperjack, and others, I suggest ways that Indigenous women participated in creating new language for communities to address the real multilayered facets of their histories and concerns by insisting on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and futures. It is also to underline again the importance of felt experiences as community knowledges that interactively inform our positions as Native scholars, particularly as Native women scholars. Our felt scholarship continues to be segregated as a “feminine” experience, as polemic, or at worst as not knowledge at all.

I also argue that academia repetitively produces gatekeepers to our entry into important social discourses because we feel our histories as well as think them. How is it that our oral traditions and our literary and historical voices are suppressed? What are the arguments that have been used to reduce what we say to the margins of public and academic discourse in the United States and Canada? Our voices are still positioned in a particular way, definitely reminiscent of the past silences we know so well, contingent
to our colonized position now. Indigenous women have spoken and written powerfully from experiences that they have lived or have chosen to relive through the stories they choose to tell. Our voices rock the boat and perhaps the world. They are dangerous. All of this becomes important to our emerging conversation on Indigenous feminisms, on our ability to speak to ourselves, to inform ourselves and our generations, to counter and intervene in a constantly morphing colonial system. To “decolonize” means to understand as fully as possible the forms colonialism takes in our own times.

**VIOLENCE IS THE GAME AND SEX ABUSE IS ITS NAME**

What finally broke the seal on the residential school system . . . making public the story of neglect and physical and cultural abuse, was, ironically, the deepest secret of all . . . the pervasive sexual abuse of the children.

—*The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993*

If abuses that Canadian priests, teachers, and caretakers committed against First Nations children remained “private” in earlier years, it was because they were part of a familiar custodial sphere separated far from any “public” domain. Residential school life and its narratives were once positioned within domestic space—quiet, obedient, and gendered passive. But Canadian views on what constituted a “social” problem had been drastically challenged by the mid 1980s. A primarily Euro-Canadian and American feminist movement successfully reordered the political significance of familial “privacy.” Acts that had been nominally “private,” such as wife beating, child sexual abuse, and conjugal rape, were named, politicized, and criminalized, becoming charged public issues. Still, these seemingly successful feminist campaigns in the United States and Canada did not immediately empower First Nations women, nor did they reorder their lives. Women’s civil rights became an important topic in Canada, beginning with the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970, where Indian women testified on the blatantly sexist Indian Act of 1876. During the years that followed, white Canadian Women’s Rights groups were slow to recognize the double indemnity of racial and sexual discrimination, much less the necessity for solidarity with sovereignty and self-determination positions.

Indian women saw mainstream women’s domestic issues politicized by this newly constituted discourse on gender and sexual abuse. Their own conditions remained buried deep in the colonial apparatus that bound colonizer and colonized. If Native women were to speak, they would need to create their own space. On their part, First Nations
women in Canada often distanced themselves from white feminism, choosing strategies and language that located them within the heart of their own experiences. They ran a tightrope act between their need to organize on intimate issues and the need to argue for self-determination in their communities. These sovereignty movements led by Native men often mirrored dominant patriarchal values. There had been no conversation that represented a Native view of the “private sphere” or the “domestic” community conditions that were a daily part of women’s and children’s survival. Women’s testimonies revealed an incredible chaos that had followed Western interventions into Native lives. These intimate stories became empowered through an unlikely collaborator.

A range of therapeutic interventions had grown in the Indian communities over the 1970s. Alcoholics Anonymous, along with community health discussions on alcohol abuse and incest in rural areas, offered individuals new possibilities and language to narrate life experience. Many of the social and therapeutic interventions that had enabled white rape victims to politicize their experience were amenable to Native communities who had always richly storied their experience. Personal narrative and personal testimony empowered individual experience, and “bearing witness” was a powerful tool. The growth of this emancipation narration occurs in a complex political moment. Certainly, in the beginning it was a celebratory moment. Women and men who chose to speak their experience often revealed social distress that has been equated with individual pathology. The mainstream white society read Native stories through thick pathology narratives. Yet the same stories collectively witnessed the social violence that was and is colonialism’s heart. Individually or collectively, these stories were hard to “tell.” They were neither emotionally easy nor communally acceptable. Women (and men) who organized against family violence and politically sanctioned sex discrimination in their communities balanced the necessity to change things and constraints to “silence” their pain and experience. To “tell” called for a reevaluation of reservation and reserve beliefs about what was appropriate to say about your own family, your community.

An intimate realignment of Indian social relationships through the Indian Act was at the core of what colonization meant in practice. The strongly gendered training in residential schools coupled with the 1876 Indian Act radically reorganized Indigenous familial relations to conform to a uniform patriarchal order. Those societies that were matrilineal, or those in which both mothers’ and fathers’ lines had determined identity, property, and responsibility, were brought into a firm hierarchy, with Indian men positioned in a descending order of authority, with white male Indian agents and male priests at the top. Priests often told men and women whom to marry. Old lineages were disenfranchised as Indian women and their children in interracial Indian/white marriages were banned from membership in their own communities and sometimes from their own
families. Out marriage among the men meant that their white spouses became tribal members. The Indian Act left community resources, such as housing and aid to women and children, in the hands of men who could marry white women and make them into instant Indians. After 1970, the provision disenfranchising Native women for interracial marriages in the marriage clause of the Indian Act, Section 12.1.b, became a rallying point.

To speak about conditions for Indian women and children, Canadians began to discuss issues that were thought to be politically unspeakable. Indian women's own activist voices were the core of these discussions. Key to this articulation were grassroots organizations such as the Tobique Women’s Action Group, which cited changed gender relations in the bands as dangerous to their lives and any sense of community. The Tobique Women’s group was a dynamic band of multigenerational women from a small New Brunswick reserve, some of whom had lost Indian status through marriages to whites. They had first organized around their right to have homes in their birth communities and to regain their band status. Their initial efforts were taken to improve local living conditions for women and their children. They recognized how lopsided power relations were in their community. Originally, they did not intend to wage a major national (and then international) campaign and win it, but they did. Despite their lack of resources (some were on welfare) and their inexperience with white Canadian local and national politics, they learned to organize. After they successfully accomplished what they had set out to do, they returned home and became involved in their communities in an attempt to live the changes. Enough Is Enough (1987) personally narrates their daily actions to rearticulate power with these men who were their own fathers, uncles, brothers, and cousins. As Sandra Lovelace Sappier recalled, “The really painful stuff was right here at home.”

Often during the fifteen-year effort to amend the Canadian Indian Act’s blatant sexual discrimination, Indian men, both local band leaders and national political organizations, moved to thwart the women’s claims. This struggle between national male political leaders’ sovereignty positions and First Nations women’s positions on community conditions and gender abuse continued to escalate. But, in an unprecedented move, Native women had changed the tenor of these discussions. Indian women had not been allowed to vote in band elections until 1951, when the same amendments that gave them a vote made the consequences for their out marriage much harsher. Any respite was a long time coming. The first case against sex discrimination in the Indian Act (Lavell-Bedard, 1970) failed in the Supreme Court, when the Justices set aside race and sex discrimination issues ruling that the Indian Act had precedent over the newly enacted Canadian Bill of Rights. The National Indian Brotherhood and the band councils took a strong stance against Indian women’s rights on the grounds that it interfered with basic sovereignty issues. In doing so, whether consciously or not, Indian men reinforced colonialism’s strongest
defense: silence. At times the conformity between Indian and white men was overt, which Kathleen Jamieson, a Canadian legal historian, described as a “gentlemen’s agreement” … a powerful blanket of silence … temporarily imposed on discussion of the status of Indian women. It became taboo and unwise in certain circles even to mention the topic.6

Indian women made their issues public by waging a vigorous national and international campaign that resulted in a successful case (Lovelace) before the United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1981, embarrassing the Canadian government in the process. There, Canada was found in violation of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Canada promised to amend the Indian Act by mid 1981, which it then ignored for four more years. Bill C-531, the amendment that abolished the Indian Act’s most deliberate sex discrimination, was not passed until 1985. C-531 has never fully alleviated the issues of band membership that the women sought. Still, the discussions on gender abuses that the women successfully linked to community stress, change in gender roles, and responsibilities revealed the high rates of discrimination and, until then, unnamed gender violence in their communities. In doing this, they portrayed for the first time just exactly how much deeper colonization went than any standing law or even the Indian Act itself. While the white feminist movement opened Pandora’s box when it successfully politicized the “private,” showing it to be a wholly political space, providing discursive models for “telling,” Canada and the United States resisted the truth in the emotional content of this felt knowledge: colonialism as it is felt by those whose experience it is. Ending the silence in the communities was a significant political action. This would not be fully appreciated until the residential school narratives had explosively shook Canada by the late 1980s and early 1990s as the same communities began to narrate the larger systematic attack that had been perpetrated on both their minds and their bodies. In between were years in which women honed and developed a profound literature of experience.

BEARING WITNESS

Preceding and joining the community voices such as the Tobique women’s were individual women who published personal narratives first as autobiography and later as fiction. What they were willing to tell and what the Canadian public was willing to hear would become a contentious issue. In 1973, Métis activist Maria Campbell published Half-Breed, her partly fictionalized, partly autobiographical exposure of personal and community poverty articulating colonialism as systemic abuse.7 She also chronicles her growth from someone who lives pain to someone who learns to act from a political consciousness, who produced a vital critical voice for the times. Describing her text, originally an unedited two thousand-page “letter to herself,” Maria Campbell’s story, unlike any
political or academic tome of this time, contained plain language colored by every unabashed emotion that she was able to get printed. Campbell's book established a certain testimonial voice crossing certain boundaries that had kept individual accounts “sanitary.” Maria Campbell’s account of Métis disenfranchisement precedes Howard Adams’s 1975 text *Prison of Grass.* Adams, also Métis, speaks of *internalized colonization* as the pain of self-hatred absorbed in a racist society. While history and personal story were attributes of both Adams’s and Campbell’s texts, and Adams’s personal narrative conveys his anger, in the end he chooses to remain within his academic voice. Campbell’s *Halfbreed* uses a personalized language; it is a plain-spoken narrative that appeals as a history that can be *felt* as well as intellectualized. *Halfbreed* successfully took down the barriers between the personal and the political.

Lee Maracle also risked one of these early testimonials, the autobiographical *Indian Rebel: Struggles of a Canadian Native Woman.* Like Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle detailed her emotional journey from a brutal poverty in childhood, bouts with self-destruction, and her changed self-awareness and growing political consciousness linked to the emerging Indian movement. The original was a text Maracle narrated under the pseudonym Bobbi Lee as an "as-told-to" monograph written and edited by two young socialists in a Vancouver activist group she worked with at the time. This narrative was not initially identified as her voice until she reclaimed her text later in 1990 as *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel.* While published, *Indian Rebel* was not widely distributed, and Maracle’s voice was partially silenced by the yawning voids that existed as minefields for any Native narrative. Campbell’s account, widely distributed, opened a door. Janice Acoose wrote, “Maria Campbell encouraged many Indigenous people to begin writing.”

After *Halfbreed* and *Bobbi Lee,* Canadian Native women created fictional characters informed by their lives. Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* appeared in 1983, followed quickly by Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* (1985) and Ruby Slipperjack’s *Honour the Sun* (1987). As a tour de force, these three novels established particular powerful statements on Native experience while establishing models for an emerging First Nations literature. Literary critic and teacher Helen Hoy, writing self-reflexively on this period in *How Should I Read These: Native Women Writers in Canada,* admits an almost visceral reaction to Native women writers’ stories. Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* gives the first full account of the lived racialized duality of Métis experience, tracing the felt consequences through the lives of two sisters, one phenotypically Native and one who, “white” in appearance, valorizes being white. It is a story of family disintegration and the State’s abuse of children. In Culleton’s novel, almost everyone is acting on a different register of “truth.” Sister lies to sister under the illusion that her lie is an act of “protection,” while the State only believes and rewards those who lie well, such as self-serving foster parents. The crux of the tragedy in this novel is the suicide of the younger
sister, Cheryl, who is unable to live with the “truth” that emerges from her reconciliation with her destroyed father, a truth she is ill prepared to deal with because she believes the necessary “white” lies her sister tells. The narrator of the story, April, the older sister, for a long time lives a lie, trying to remake herself into a person and a role that could never be her reality, which in actuality from the beginning was laden with falsehoods and self-deceptions. No truth is available to these sisters anywhere—in history books, from the mouths of the system’s surrogates, or even within their beleaguered family. But what becomes most striking in this novel is how many “truths” can be in play for these lives. Each sister’s perception of the other’s intentions are lost in the lies, silences, and misconceptions that inform and necessitate chains of equally blinded actions. April is gang raped by three men who mistake her for her sister, Cheryl. April seeks justice and, in telling her truth, another is revealed—Cheryl’s prostitution, which undermines everything April wants to believe about her sister while supporting all her own deeply misguided fears about the nature of “Indian-ness.” Cheryl, “revealed,” begins the slide that ends in her suicide after she meets her father, whom she holds as her last illusion of a childhood that never existed. In the end, no matter what, at no time in their lives do these ill-used Métis children who become troubled women have their own truths honored. They are repeatedly punished for speaking their own truths, either directly or as a consequence of other “truths” in play that they cannot anticipate. April on the witness stand testifying to her abuse—while being judged for her “truthfulness”—is a profound metaphor for the conditions of Native discursive autonomy.

Culleton’s April and Cheryl as occupants of the colonial spaces “Indian” and “women” are already known. They inhabit an old Western colonial “knowledge” of Indian women’s immoral “nature.” They are Indian woman versus the white patriarchal state, a state that first destroyed and then substituted itself for their family and that can then sit in paternal judgment of their “morality.” They occupy the Canadian state’s and the perpetrators shared social knowledge/imagination of their deviance. Thus, the burden of “truth” on April is the same as it is on Cheryl, on Indian women, to prove they are not already guilty of being what the state believes them to be. In fact, in order to get justice in Canada or any other Western state, it is illustrative of the nature of colonialism today. Indian people who must tell their alternative truth go against the same state that is the protector of the civil truth that abuses them both in thought and deed.

Ruby Slipperjack’s story does something very different. Honour the Sun illustrates a child’s passage into womanhood in a rural Ojibwa community using small brushstrokes of daily life, the chores and pleasures related to finding, making, and eating food, the banter of children, and the sometimes alarming, violent, and gross actions of adolescents and adults, mostly men, to create a world. She never directly points these actions to any “outside” or other “truth.” It is a “show” rather than a “tell,” because any
“telling” has very different context, both for Slipperjack and for the Ojibwa community of people whose lives she stories. From about ten years of age to the age of sixteen, Owl comes to some adult awareness of what seems to be the underlying order of the place where she lives. Women attempt nurturing in this story; they attempt to take care of themselves and children, but they are often assaulted, sometimes with devastating surprise, in the middle of the night by drunken men. Some adults drink and some do not, including women, and Owl has the benefit of a sober woman for much of her childhood. On the edge of her own maturity, symbolized by the onset of her menstruation, her own mother begins the trek into drunkenness. Bewildered, Owl has to face the increasing sexual taunts and physical harassment of the village boys, now men, without her mother’s protection. As she spends more time away at residential school, she reflects on the changes in her own life and the lives of her friends, some of whom have the village elders’ patterns down, even at a young age.

The great difficulty in this story for critics such as Hoy and Lutz is Ruby Slipperjack’s “silence.” Slipperjack never “tells” us her community is in the midst of something someone not them might read as chaos. Hers is a palette patiently painted with portrayals without explanations. You are there. You become aware of your own framing, but Slipperjack does not tell you what to think. Hoy makes a suggestion that Slipperjack’s portrait has another order, or pays attention to other orders that are there but that outsiders cannot necessarily discern. Slipperjack speaks to the limitations in any “telling” in her interview with Hartmut Lutz, who asks her directly about any “political” statement she might be making:

Well, it says, “this is how I feel,” “this is what I am feeling,” “this is what is happening around me” and “this is how I am reacting,” “this is how I am dealing with the situation.” That is where it stops. I cannot tell you why this and this and that happens, you figure that out yourself. Who am I to tell you something? It is there for you to see.¹⁶

She is not interested in how he may position what he “sees,” since it is not her concern. Her concern is that Lutz keeps in mind the way a child perceives, “remind you . . . of that person you once were.”¹⁷ This immediately transgresses the way Western knowledge works and the way most academics operate, but she shows what she knows, and what she knows is what it feels like to be an Ojibwa child caught in circumstances that they (her community) and she do not analyze or position to the seemingly obvious “truths” that people who write in a Western academic mode think they readily “see.” What she feels are her frames and no two of us can “see” them distinctly the same way; thus, feelings are theory, important projections about what is happening in our lives. They are also culturally mediated knowledges, never solely individual.
Jeannette Armstrong’s Slash occupies a place of mediation between women’s and men’s voices, speaking to the need for such a synthesis in energies. Armstrong’s Thomas Kelasket tells a story that has resonance with all the voices I have discussed here. Armstrong, like Maria Campbell and Lee Maracle, portrays the way poverty and racism warp and weave personal decisions. White Canadian contempt and the seeming powerlessness of elders lure Thomas into a downward spiral of drugs and jail. Thomas is like many of his generation, drawn into the Indian Movement, looking for answers. It’s a path known well by the mid 1980s, when experience with the American Indian Movement and Red Power Movement in Canada had informed many politically but had not nourished them spiritually. Armstrong is unique in portraying that Thomas’s continuing struggle to political consciousness alone had not been enough. Thomas had needed to feel, not only his own pain but also his family’s and community’s. He needed to quell numbing rage and feel emotions that had been thought available only to women. In doing so, he might slowly heal from the fragmentation. He attends a sweat lodge, a communal act for sharing feelings and receiving emotional knowledge: “I came out of there a new person. It was like suddenly waking up, like what those people say about being born again…. I realized I would be able to make it then because there was something worthwhile to live for.”

He returns home and holds ceremonies to heal his ill father:

It was me that took all hurt from him into my own body. When I held him I felt it seep into my arms. I felt it spread throughout my body and center on my chest. I found it hurt to breathe and I felt like letting go and crying in great heaving sobs like a child. But I knew I couldn’t do that. I knew I had to take his hurt from him so he could get the healing he needed.

Structured beautifully as four departures from and four returns to home, each return represents another phase of learning that completes the circle of the journey that Campbell and Maracle and the others begin. Armstrong portrays a return from the personal and social disintegration that is colonialism through knowledge and practice of their own culture, their family, and their people’s history. Thomas Kalasket affirms his own history as a felt knowledge that he must live. The struggle to feel seems paramount to the regeneration of their selves and their communities.

Emma LaRocque, in “Here Are Our Voices—Who Will Hear,” wrote that the Canadian literary establishment had reacted particularly to any anger shown in this new Native literature—a voice that literary scholars called “polemic.” The academic establishment could tolerate only its own measured “objectivity.” Native authors who wrote of a felt subjective truth in their lived experience were branded “bitter” and “biased.” An incredulous Canadian public would ask, “How could all this oppression
happen? How could police, priests, and teachers be so awful?” LaRocque explained the more cogent element of this exchange, their emotion:

Our anger, legitimate as it was and is, was exaggerated as "militant" and used as an excuse not to hear us. There was little comprehension of an articulate anger reflecting an awakening and a call to liberation, not a psychological problem to be defused in a therapist’s room.

LaRocque suggested that no one in Canada seemed to be able to equate their protest or draw any parallels with the Third World decolonization movements (Fanon, et al., or the Black power movement that had been widely celebrated in the United States). She recalled that the Canadian market had only wanted a more "soft-sell" Native literature, and then even that seemed to get negative translation. It was all "too angry." She quotes Alanis Obomsawin, the noted Abenaki filmmaker:

[W]e have a lot to offer society. But we have to look at the bad stuff, and what has happened to us, and why.... We cannot do this without going through the past, and watching ourselves and analyzing ourselves, because we are carrying a pain that is 400 years old. We’re carrying the pain of our fathers, our mothers, our grandfathers, our grandmothers its part of this land.

LaRocque then remarked:

Much of this 400-year-old pain has been expressed in the war of words against us. And to that, we are pressed to explain, to debunk, and to dismantle. To the war of ways against us, we are moved to retrieve, redefi ne, and reconcile our scattered pieces. To the voices of despair among us and in us, we are challenged to dream new visions to bring hope for the future.

Gloria Bird, Spokane, poet, essayist, and coeditor of Reinventing the Enemy’s Language, spoke in this vein again: “As I look back to the parallels between my life and the lives of other native women writers, I notice that issues of silence (or shame, as Joy Harjo tells me) affl ict us in the subterranean levels of our being.... Possibly it is most damaging that we are not allowed to express our anger.” She continued:

And while it is certainly true that the realities of our lives are more complicated than simply transcending pain and that pain is not the only measure of our existence, we
cannot deny its impact on our experience. It is a place of beginning, as writing for catharsis is; and it is a place of ending the cycles of abuse, or any of the damaging cycles that are quickly becoming primary concerns in Indian communities.27

Hoy quotes Cherokee author Betty Louise Bell:

As far back as I remember, I belonged to a secret society of Indian women meeting around a kitchen table in a conspiracy to bring the past into the present... They heard, and they taught me to hear, the truth in the things not said. They listened, and they taught me to listen, in the space between the words.28

Métis/Indian/Native women were thinking and problematizing nuances of truth and telling, silence, silencing and their lived truth practices in the 1980s in unprecedented numbers. These works denote important emotional knowledge that became available to individuals, families, and sometimes communities but that did not always “translate” into any direct political statement. However, it is exactly this emotional knowledge that fuels the real discursive shift around the histories and stories of residential schooling. One of the most important features of these stories is their existence as alternative truths, as alternate historical views. Native women told truths that challenged Canadian settler truths. Jeannette Armstrong stated this unequivocally in her essay “The Disempowerment of First North American Peoples and Empowerment through Their Writing,” in which she asserts that we must continue “the telling of what really happened until everyone including our own peoples understands that this condition did not happen through choice.”29 The honesty that informed these literatures also moved to inform women writing in the social sciences and history, where their “legitimacy” would be challenged over and over.

In the last part of this essay, I will argue that academia serves as a gatekeeper, challenging alternative forms of knowing. Because the emotional knowledge of our experience is an alternative truth, it is challenged ferociously. And while it is necessary to understand exactly where and how and why our narratives are contested now, it is more important to understand that World War II and the Jewish Holocaust set a new paradigm for “telling.” Because of our political identity as Natives, or as Indigenous, we are increasingly positioned in this paradigm and challenged when we necessarily speak from it. Finally, “history” is not just a set of individuals who attempt to write narratives that glean the nature of a “past”; it is a bastion.
HISTORY AND VICTIMS

The role of Indians themselves, in the storytelling of Indian [Canada] is as much a matter of “jurisdiction” as is anything else in Indian Country; economics, the law, control of resources, property rights. It goes without saying that it reflects our struggle with the colonial experience of our concomitant histories. If that sounds benign, it is anything but that. On the contrary, how the Indian narrative is told, how it is nourished, who tells it, who nourishes it, and the consequences of its telling are among the most fascinating—and, at the same time, chilling—stories of our time.

—Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

Canadian historian Scott Trevithick’s 1998 “Native Residential Schooling in Canada: A Review of the Literature” reflects on but never understands the shift in narrative agency that Native authors made beginning in the late 1970s. Trevithick, a historian with the University of Toronto, noticed that “[o]vernight it seems, since the early part of this decade Native residential schools have occupied a position of . . . prominence in public and media discourse.” Trevithick conjectures that the residential school historians circa 1970–1980 had typically stayed focused on finding and rationalizing the government’s motivation for aboriginal residential education, one that valorized the theory that the schools had been about “assimilation through Christianization and education” rather than any lengthy and costly military subjugation. Between 1980 and 1990, the histories became punctuated with narratives written from the actual experiences of the children (now adults) who had attended the schools. He attributes this shift to recover and include their narratives to a “general growth in sensitivity towards and awareness of the deleterious effects of the schools on Natives.”

He surmised that his discipline’s scholarship had just grown better. History as a discipline had taken on a certain “eclecticism and sensitivity that reflected a creative historical methodology” that had revealed the insidious violence that residential schooling actually was. Historians had become interested in more nuanced accounts of students’ and parents’ interventions to their experiences aided by the new attention to Indian narrative. Strangely (or perhaps not), when Trevithick shifts his analysis to Native memoir, he begins to judge “temper.” There was a clear “before and after” between moderately “positive accounts” and “negativity,” especially in the narratives of former students. The few before were different than the many that came “after.” Trevithick notes that the early Indian student memoirs were not especially critical of their experience—with the exception of Basil
Johnston’s *Indian School Days*, whom he critiques for “sarcasm” and “latent anger.” He observes that either the earlier accounts (pre-1980s, in particular) do not testify to abuse or the adult speaks of it in terms of his or her own blame. To illustrate, Trevithick compared Louise Moine’s and Isabel Knockwood’s memoirs. In Moine’s account of a fellow student’s whipping, she remarked that, while the punishment was sad, the child had “deserved to be punished.” In contrast, Trevithick thought that Isabelle Knockwood’s memoir called any corporal punishment “sheer brutality.”

Why this difference? Definitely, Trevithick thought the “public and personal revelations of the victims of abuse had played a critical role in the transformation.” The changes in Native people’s accounts of their own experience, he thought, could be attributed “largely . . . to environmental factors”:

> Interpretations changed over time, largely due to environmental factors. As the place of Native people in the nation changed, Native politics came to the fore. Native cultures began to be revitalized, authors came to think differently about their experiences, though the experiences themselves may not have been all that dissimilar.

Trevithick also decided to take a much more critical stand on another trend he saw, the “infiltration . . . of scholarly works by moral indignation.” He began to expound at length on the rise of moral sentiment that seemed to be infecting these otherwise “ostensibly disinterested academic studies.” Trevithick says, “Whether morality should have a place in academic literature is a question over which there is little agreement, at least within the field of history. However when such moral indignation results in a compromise in the professionalism of the study, it is surely regrettable.” What made Trevithick nervous, while remaining oblivious to these trends, was his sense that new battle lines were being drawn in a struggle for self-definition and for “history” itself.

In “Using the Past: History and Native American Studies,” Richard White writes, “[T]he response of historians to rivals is imperial. Historians recognize alternative ways of using the past in order to historicize them, domesticate them and make them part of history itself.” White articulates the importance in historicizing:

> To describe a people as being outside history . . . is to naturalize them, to render them powerless. They are not only victims of the modern world—a world that defines itself as historical and always in the act of becoming—but they are reduced to victims who are both incapable of understanding
the narratives of their own subjugation (which are historical) and who are liable to be erased from those narratives themselves. They do not matter.44

White, an ethnohistorian with an intelligence and sensibility that has made him a respected force in Native American studies, has also trained many current scholars in the field. Thus, he has had a stake in what such a field represents. Perhaps this is why White’s most ardent angst was saved for writers in American Indian studies he identified as working from postcolonial or anticolonialist positions, such as M. Annette Jaimes. He presents them first in terms of their emotions as a “far more angrier and complicated attack” on Indian historiography.45 In his critique of the developing American Indian studies literature, he found certain kinds of “history” untenable. Although he reviews other kinds of historicizing and historiographers that are problematic to him, he responds to anger more intensely. While other alternative epistemological positions puzzle him or do not intellectually stand up to his rigor, these scholars are characterized as angry. They are “angrier,” even though in his essay no one else is actually characterized as “angry.” But to momentarily put aside his problem with their emotional state, his larger issue is that their writing is supposedly reductive:

Postcolonial and anticolonialist scholarship praises Native American resistance, but its own concern is with atrocity and victimization. It retains the Native Americans’ status as pure victim and with it the inevitable corollary: the historical status of whites as simple and malevolent aggressors.46

According to White, scholars in Native American studies who write thusly are political. White is not hesitant on this point:

Given the real horrors inflicted on Native American peoples by Europeans, Americans, and Canadians, and the political usefulness of the status of victim in late twentieth-century America, it would be surprising if a history of Native Americans as victims had failed to continue to thrive within Native American studies and Native American history.47

Moreover, White reiterates that those who write the histories of subjugated peoples should not merely “use” the past to intervene in the now.

For history to do effective work in the world over the long term, it has to be true to the complexity of the past. Without some commitment to the past on its own terms...
and a desire to portray its fullness, excursions into the past become an intellectual shopping trip to find what is useful to the present. If historical knowledge is made *simply* tactical, then the past becomes valued *only* as a tool in present struggles. The past loses its integrity. The past as past, as a different country with different concerns and rules, a place where we might actually learn something different from what we already know, vanishes. Such tactical uses of the past discredit those who use them within the academy.48

White does not entertain that the "past" is always already positioned as the field of our contested now. If writing "victim" has become so important politically in late-twentieth-century North America that it is not surprising that such a narrative position exists (as White states above), why evoke its (the discourse of victims) seeming power and not address what the significance of the experience of *victim* has become: the import of victim, its knowledge and historical formation? Why does he elude any mention of what is now an international necessity to articulate such a "victim"? He moves instead to police the multiply narrated, interdisciplinary site of a Native American studies. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis calls Native American studies a topic, not a methodology.49 History cannot colonize American Indian studies' political production just because it does not satisfy its methodology or its theoretical philosophy. If Native American studies and First Nations studies stake out certain territory in academia, how is it permissible for the discipline of history to colonize such a site without criticism? These academic sites were wrought in many places as sites of radical critique. Why question why such an academic endeavor with such a history produces literature that arises from different scholars' differently located critique?

And if we go along with his concern for history, White argues for a cloistered history that can be separate from the consequences of knowledge. If what the discipline of history produces is knowledge, then it cannot, by the terms of its own formation, be apolitical, since knowledge is power and power is always political. There is no history that is not contested or argued into being history, so in alluding to a field of argument he does not share with us, he leaves us stranded at the edge of a tantalizing question that has deep consequence for our times—why there is a necessity for the "victims" of history to rearticulate the terms of history. White’s real task in this essay seems to be to tell us what history is and why certain Native narratives are not *it* or why certain works in Native American studies are not *it* and, even more destructively, which Native writers legitimately write *it* or not. Thus, he avoids responding, for instance, to Angela Cavender Wilson, a historian, who critiques historians and "history" that ignores oral narrative as a legitimate element in historical writing.50
It was in this spirit that White’s most ardent critique in his essay became focused on M. Annette Jaimes, a radical educator and political activist. Jaimes has written numerous critiques on the policing that has gone on in terms of the development of American Indian studies as a discipline. She has been against a model of multidisciplinarity in the field because it does not attempt any holistic approach, with holism as a value that she attributes to an “Indian” intellectualism. That is, American Indian studies scholars should be adept across a variety of fields to gain perspective on their study, with their final loyalty toward Indian or Indigenous knowledge models. In this essay, White attempts to defrock Jaimes by associating her with the American Indian Movement. Of course, he also reams her scholarship as pure “victimology.” Thus, the above criticisms are in the main aimed at Jaimes.

What exactly seems to be the trigger for White’s need to undermine both Jaimes’s scholarship and her political affiliation? Jaimes’s writing that White so soundly dismisses is the introduction to a text she edited in 1990 called *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*. That anthology contains many articles that provide analyses of colonialism in the United States from a distinct position: *Indigenism*. In her introduction, she states that the United States and Canada, by their long and unrelenting attacks on Indian sovereignty, health, and welfare, have attempted a *genocide*. It is the word *genocide* that Richard White reacts to with revulsion. It is a word that arouses in both White and most Western male white historians a flat denial. White is picky. Perhaps some instances of history, such as the decimation of the California Indians, could be considered genocide, but it is in very poor form to evoke it as an American or a Canadian policy.

*Genocide* is a very particular word in Western experience. It has immediate emotional content. White immediately gives *agency* as the reason Indigenes cannot claim genocide. We were always co-actors in our own history. But, really, why can’t Indigenes claim genocide? Perhaps the idea of genocide as it developed from the murder of the European Jews was what Claude Denis called a “limit-experience,” a particularly ecstatic experience for the Western democracies.51

The West claims the Jewish genocide as a moment from which other moments may be counted in a paradigm shift. Before this mass murder, there was no imagination for genocide, no matter how many millions of American or African inhabitants died as a result of civilizing and enslavement campaigns. There was no genocide before the German state mass murdered Jews. It is for this reason that historians such as White can become rigid around the mention of genocide. The conquering of the Americas is refused as primary genocide because Europeans had no compunction about killing humans that were not then considered human (savages and barbarians). This demarcation between the “innocent” killing fields of the fore and what is considered beyond
Western moral imagination is now centered in a very recent “past.” This limit, this difference, is now forever enshrined in the World War II Jewish experience: the events revealed as a victorious Western alliance pushed into what it believed to be a fellow civilized country and confronted a barbarism and savagery that deflated any lingering notions of an innate Western rationality. It is the moment when the European imagination halted and failed, confronted as it was perhaps with the outcomes of its particular logics.

There is a before and an after the Jewish Holocaust and, according to history, the poor Natives lay on the wrong side of this event in the Western imagination. There was only one Jewish Holocaust, but “genocide” is a feature with massive precedent in the Americas and is a practice that continues unabated. I also believe we must understand that we act now in the paradigm for justice that this event defined. The great desire for justice stemming from this limit moment is now enshrined in the form of a human rights agenda that effects how states treat “minority” populations. In addition to condemning any state’s right to murder its citizens without international comment, the Jewish Holocaust established the post–WWII moral ground for relations between those with great power and those who feel its effects, between colonizer and colonized. It doesn’t matter if this human rights infrastructure is largely ineffective; it is now the only show in town. Indigenism both challenges and uses this paradigm. Indigenism also presents founding illogics in Western liberal desires for justice for colonial acts.

Those states that now think they form the most powerful arguments for human rights (i.e., the United States and Canada) were each founded in the very exclusion that created the “minorities” they are charged to protect. In particular, the reduction and inclusion of Indigenous populations to this minority status does not protect Indigenous peoples as much as it threatens to normalize and erase their larger claims. Indigenous claims always point to the fact of their original act of colonialism. Indigenism breaks with the liberal state’s analysis of who and what is a minority because, in this project of “Human Rights,” Indigenism wants more than “rights.” Indigenists make claims for the sovereignty of autochthonous peoples, the “victims” stemming from the creation of Western nation-states that spent most of their formative years trying to extinguish such peoples in futile but cutthroat assimilation programs. All these Western states are now forever impaled on the double horns of a philosophical conundrum embedded in their founding.

Further, Indigenism is forced into a definite paradigm that these claims must take formed by the limit experience of the Jewish Holocaust. Modeled from Freud’s articulation of melancholy, those who have been seriously aggrieved, wounded, have these wounds continuously return. There is no “healing” until these wounds are acknowledged and given adequate attention. This paradigm is now firmly embedded in both
international justice tribunals and in campaigns for justice that Indigenous peoples undertake whose real wounds are denied by history. Natives will return to haunt the states that attempted their genocide. This paradigm of trauma is now very deeply embedded in these relationships between the so-called historical winners and losers. In the residential school abuse literature, trauma, or “victim,” then, is a discourse that becomes positional as an emancipation narrative in the Indigenous discourse Canadian Indians have with Canada as a nation-state. This makes the arena that Native peoples negotiate to enter discourses about their experiences and their histories a volatile and emotionally managed moral arena.

If the terms of oppression of First Nations and American Indian peoples are historical and discursive “narratives of subjugation,” which I agree they are, then the question of agency and victimization will most certainly remain elusive in these conversations, since they are not being addressed for what they are. What are these narratives of subjugation that White evokes and does not identify? Considering the arguments I make in other places, the residential school discourse is a site of contestation where Canada’s historical narratives about “Indians” have been articulated into the present, it is not by chance that this argumentation about sexuality, abuse, and domestic violence emerges now, since these are the nexus of relations that defined Canadian colonialism for most of its existence. An ethical contestation has formed that argument is intergenerational. The intimacy of the “domestic” location that is Canadian colonization in Indian lives renders any conversation about “it” subjective and emotionally engaged. All the constructions of sexuality that narrate gendered colonial space remain charged if repositioned. This ethical contestation resonated within Native communities, informing them emotionally and physically, discursively and politically, where “what” happened and its emotional resonance cannot now be cloistered within a past that stays neatly segregated from the present.

**CONCLUSION**

The Native scholars I have discussed here understood their experience of individual and communal experiential pain as a point of analysis. They are backed by current work in sociology that recognizes emotion as an embodied knowledge. Peter Armitage cites Gillian Bendalow and Simon Williams:

> Emotions have had an “ethereal existence” in sociology because Western rationality has excluded them as unobjective forms of knowing and they have been feminized by a masculine philosophy and historical culture. Emotions are “social things.”

53
Armitage impresses on us the embedded nature of this knowledge:

They are responses to situations... They are embodied and come “from” a body rather than being about a body... An emotion like anger... has a language to describe it... Emotions are distinct from sensation because the known world can only be expressed in language that includes the language of emotion... They are part of our culture and have a “socio-relational” aspect... Emotions are engaged, deeply social, and relational... They can be managed... Emotions connect with social agency... Therefore, without a concept of emotion, cultural analysis is insufficient... The emotional realm is a “public” realm... Once emotions are accepted into sociology, the divisions between private and public, the micro and the macro break down... The social structure itself is both “medium and outcome” of “[e]motionally [e]mbodied [p]ractices.”

This has a powerful suggestive content in contemplating what the nature of social history could be. Native peoples did not necessarily experience contingent historical encounters with Canadian settlers and governing representatives as rational choices. They did not always choose to be encountered and, while they certainly made choices for themselves under circumstances that we have no power today to imagine entirely, the “choices” they were confronted with were already constrained by the discourses and practices of their negotiation. Their “choices,” however purposeful, had to be limited to those offered by the terms of the encounter. It is hard to imagine what kind of choices the children in residential schools really had.

It seems inherent in “doing history” that histories are positioned, and histories that do not understand their own positioning cannot answer to those conditions they perpetuate that require silencing that which by its nature is a contra-histoire: the voice that is always an alternative historical interpretation of “what happened.” Those whose subjective history this is must speak it, since its emotional resonance still lives through them, because we are who we are because of this history that continuously haunts our storied bodies and lands: “[w]e cannot do this without going through the past, and watching ourselves and analyzing ourselves, because we are carrying a pain that is 400 years old. We’re carrying the pain of our fathers, our mothers, our grandfathers, our grandmothers—it’s part of this land.”

Why does the subjective record of these experiences matter? Where, for instance, would the felt experience of being raped by a priest at ten years old be expressed and for whose knowledge would this experience be important? If the child has no words to name it or if her silence is enforced discursively and physically, did nothing happen? If it is not “documented” (legitimated in its own time), how does it exist? Is it silenced or deferred? Why does the adult who speaks of her subjective
history not offer another type of knowledge that would add to the nuanced account of a “happening” that affects us now? What of the children of those who carry this knowledge? What are the resonances that are always present by omitting such knowledge? The issue here must both surpass the issue of agency and extend it; it must return to this pain that had/has nowhere to go. Pain that continuously haunts the edges of all such narratives is not rational. Klein reminds us of Lyotard’s pronouncement of narrative difference:

The scientist questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or [scientific] proof . . . savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children.\textsuperscript{56}

So it is that the Native's subjective, feminized, infantilized, and above all domestically positioned personal or oral narrative can never be proper history inside a disciplinary space protected by its gatekeeper's desire to be a “science,” convinced of its right to police the past. This subjective narrative, with its inappropriate pain, cannot be tested any more than the Native's own culturally positioned narrated oral history. The Native narrative cannot be “objective.” But what is objective except Western science's own wet dream of detached corporeality? Indian narratives of residential school trauma could not remain inactive. Native scholars' judgment that this denotes a form of genocidal behavior by the participating states will not be suppressed.

Native scholars, communities, and individuals were fairly in agreement that this pain that had the power to destroy them, individually and communally, would not be silenced any longer. It became their story. Feelings, including their anger, would and must reenter their accounts, which would be incomplete without them. Their experience was pain that had to be historicized and taken into account in the public record. However, it would be no easy matter to get any settler nation's public or academic practice to give space or credibility to these voices, either in literature or in history. The successful struggle to rearticulate the colonial residential school experience as \textit{abuse} was not a move to articulate \textit{victimology}; it was a move to ground a present healing in a past properly understood, \textit{felt}, and moved beyond. In Canada, the residential school survivors' individual narratives (people's individual testimonies) ultimately would be deferred to the “test” of the courtroom to perform their “truth,” and adjudication would be confined to the present. In court, Canada came up short of officially narrating any historical culpability.\textsuperscript{57} So, if Indians captured public opinion, even momentarily, a case can be made that, for once, their own felt knowledge did speak itself.
NOTES


5. Ibid., 241.


8. In her 1989 interview with Hartmut Lutz, Campbell noted that, besides length, a great deal was cut from her novel for it to be “acceptable” to a Canadian audience: “The decision was made by the publisher—without consulting me!” Hartmut Lutz, ed., Approaches: Essays in Native North American Studies and Literatures (Augsburg: Wissner, 2002).


16. Lutz, Approaches, 209.

17. Ibid.


19. Ibid., 208.


21. Ibid., xvii.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., xxvii. For original, see Maurie Alioff and Susan Schouten.
NOTES


25 LaRocque, “Preface or Here Are Our Voices—Who Will Hear?”, xxvii.


27 Ibid.


32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 52.

34 Ibid., 56.

35 Ibid., 61.

36 Ibid., 63.

37 Ibid., 65. The quotation says: “I think we felt very sorry but she had done a terrible [in trying to burn down the school] and she deserved to be punished.” He is either citing Moine from a work other than the one that he is reviewing and listed in the bibliography or his date appears wrong.


40 Ibid., 65, emphasis added.

41 Ibid., 66.

42 Ibid.


44 Ibid., 229, emphasis added.


46 Ibid., 234.

47 Ibid., emphasis added.

48 Ibid., 236.

49 “Native studies is a topic, not a methodological approach, and although it draws heavily on its anthropological and historical roots, writing about Indians incorporates all the disciplinary boundaries of the fields, which are absorbed within it.” Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, “Indian Country: Negotiating the Meaning of Land in Native America,” in Disciplinarity and Dissent in Cultural Studies, ed. Cary Nelson and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 151.
NOTES


52 Dian Million, “Telling Secrets: Sex, Power, and Narratives in Indian Residential School Histories,” Canadian Woman Studies/La Cahier de Femme 20, no. 2 (Summer 2000).


55 LaRocque, “Preface or Here Are Our Voices—Who Will Hear?”, xxvii.


57 As I wrote this, an Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as part of a $1.9 billion settlement agreement with the Canadian federal government, negotiated and signed in 2006 on behalf of more than eighty thousand residential school survivors. It is the first such “truth” tribunal undertaken by a Western nation-state. As it goes forward, it will also set a precedent in terms of what Indigenous peoples may expect in determining any “justice” from those states that consumed them.