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Short Article

Re-educating representation: Challenging Canada's colonial legacies of care

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Abstract:

Building on a presentation I was invited to share for a Kilbrandon Children's Research webinar on media representations of children and young people in the care and criminal justice system, I discuss here the legacies of Canadian 'care' practices premised on violent assimilation and erasure. Those legacies include the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in state care and the underrepresentation of Indigenous voices in the media. Drawing on the language of residential schooling, which sought to 're-educate' Indigenous children through assimilation, I highlight the work of Indigenous creators to produce 'an epistemic dawn' (Claxton and Winton, 2023) of Indigenous knowing to imagine a potential 're-education' of representation.

Introduction

Across the world, Canada is associated with multiculturalism and bilingualism (Premat, 2024) even while its identity is often oversimplified as a nation of friendly (primarily white) hockey enthusiasts who enjoy a high level of wealth as well as abundant access to nature. (Marland, 2018). These stereotypes shaped my own perception of Canada before I emigrated from the United States in 2018 and, as a critical childhood scholar, sought to better understand the contexts of Canadian childhoods, specifically the mechanisms of cultural inequality. Although I was familiar with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 2008 as a result of a large class-action settlement to inform the Canadian public about what happened to Indigenous children in residential schools. I did not understand the extent to which these colonial institutions, the logics that supported their creation, and their modern manifestations, continued to shape the lives of Indigenous children and families. Canada's historical practice of removing First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation children from their families and placing them under state care has impacted many generations of Indigenous



families, and today Indigenous children continue to be significantly overrepresented in the child welfare system. In 2021, 53.8% of children in foster care in Canada were Indigenous, although Indigenous children only accounted for 7.7% of the child population (First Nations Child and Family Services, 2025). Indigenous children are also more likely to live in poverty and experience food insecurity than non-Indigenous children. These concerning statistics reflect the real conditions of too many Indigenous children's lives, which are not captured by long-standing white, Eurocentric stereotypes of 'Canuck' culture. While these conditions are often covered by news media, such stories about Indigenous peoples often lack context and perpetuate damaging stereotypes (Sison, 2022).

While my scholarship has taken up representations of children and childhoods across a variety of media, it has not specifically focused on representations of Indigenous children and/or communities. However, when I was asked to participate as a panelist in a Kilbrandon Children's Research webinar on media representations of children and young people in the care and criminal justice system, organised by the University of Strathclyde's Department of Social Work and Social Policy, I knew that I could not discuss such representations in Canada without bringing attention to the material overrepresentation of Indigenous in state care. As a white settler scholar, I was unsure whether it was my place to discuss these issues with an international, primarily white European audience. In keeping with the principle of 'nothing about us without us', I first spoke with my departmental colleague at the time, Carmen Robertson, a Scots-Lakota Professor and Canada Research Chair in North American Art and Material Culture in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Carleton University. Professor Robertson, who has a long history of scholarship on contemporary Indigenous arts and constructions of Indigeneity in popular culture, reminded me that many people outside of Canada are not aware of the history of residential schooling or the ongoing issues of representation that continue to impact the lives of Indigenous peoples today. As she shared in a news article about how Canadian media reinforces Indigenous stereotypes, mainstream news media tends to rely on 'stereotypical representations' of Indigenous people as drunk, troubled, childlike, or uncivilised (Lisk, 2020). As Robertson explains, 'There are nice features and stories that we see in the press today, but when there's a flashpoint moment, it just seems like they go back to what they know deep inside them, and that's often demeaning and destructive' (Lisk, 2020).

In our conversation, Professor Robertson encouraged me to use the webinar as a platform to expand awareness of Canada's colonial legacies and the contemporary issues of representation about which she has extensively written. In this short article, I build on that platform with the goal of further expanding international awareness of Canada's colonial legacies of childhood care and bringing attention to the work of Indigenous scholars who are leading the way in Indigenising the media landscape. Drawing on the language of residential schooling, which sought to 're-educate' Indigenous children through assimilation,



I frame what Claxton and Winton (2023) call 'an epistemic dawn' of Indigenous knowing as a potential 're-education' of representation.

Canada's Colonial Legacies of Care

Formal child welfare organisations and policy emerged in Canada in the wake of a Child-Saving Movement that emerged from the Second Industrial Revolution taking place in Europe and the United States in the last decades of the 19th century. In North America, this time of rapid change that saw industrialisation, urbanisation, the emergence of a middle-class, and shifting race-relations, surfaced anxieties about the maintenance of elite political power and white supremacy fueled concerns about the conditions of childhood (Garlen, 2019). In response to these concerns, particularly those of white female Evangelical reformers who bemoaned children's factory labour and living conditions in the urban slums of England, new institutions including children's hospitals, orphanages, aid societies, schools, and correctional institutions were established to stave off moral decline (Garlen, 2021).

During this period, a number of 'protective' child-centered interventions arose in Canada. First, a new emigration programmes was launched in the 1860s to relocate impoverished British children to Canada, where they were put to work on farms, mainly in the province of Ontario (Bagnell, 2001). This was the same decade that Confederation occurred (1867), which formally joined the provinces to establish the Dominion of Canada and its parliamentary democracy. Then, in the 1880s, the new federal government became directly involved with residential schools for Indigenous children, which had previously been operating in the provinces as Christian missions. In 1876, The Indian Act made the education of First Nations peoples the responsibility of the federal government, which began funding the church-operated institutions. In 1891, the first Children's Aid Society was established in Toronto, Ontario, and soon after the Children's Protection Act of 1893 was passed. This law criminalised child abuse, gave Children's Aid Societies authority to intervene on children's behalf, established a government office to oversee child welfare and encouraged the placement of children in foster homes over institutionalisation, laying the groundwork for the modern child welfare system in Ontario and across Canada (Dunlop, 2017).

These protective interventions grew into a movement in North America that focused on 'saving' children from moral and physical harm and controlling 'delinquent' youth (Platt, 1969). Under the guise of 'care,' public school systems, children's hospitals, orphanages, children's aid societies, and correctional facilities were established to rescue children from hard labour, poverty, and moral decline (Garlen, 2021). As Landertinger (2017) observes in her comprehensive history of child welfare in Canada, 'Child-savers and other social/moral reformers held that these suspect members of the empire had to be moulded into contributing citizens of the Canadian settler colony' (p. 12). The institutional structures that emerged from this movement were steeped in



colonial logics 'through which Indigenous peoples are rendered subjects to be managed, and white settlers are re-inscribed as dominant, superior, and – despite the enormous violence that underpins their subject positions – as 'caring' (Landertinger, 2017, p. ii).

Residential Schools and Re-Education

Between 1831 and 1996, more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation children were routinely and forcibly taken from their families and communities to attend residential schools, often located far from their homes. Many of those children never returned. As the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has revealed, the adults who were responsible for Indigenous children's care and education subjected them to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (TRC, 2015). It is difficult, perhaps, to reconcile a proclaimed belief in child protection and innocence with such deplorable treatment. However, it is precisely this paradox that illustrates the insidiousness of innocence as a malleable hegemonic (and inherently racist) construct. The innocent ideal is a marker of white privilege that creates a hierarchy of humanity; the further away one is from that ideal, the more violently they are subjected to mechanisms of reform.

Assimilation, framed as re-education, was the explicit goal of residential schools and the theme of one of the most iconic images associated with their history in Canada. A pair of photographs from the 1890s illustrating the transformation of Thomas Moore Keesick of Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nation continue to be widely circulated online and as a part of curricular materials in public schools (Brady & Hiltz, 2017). In the first photograph, an eight-year-old Thomas Moore (surname omitted) is said to be shown on his first day at Regina Indian Industrial School, in 'all the trappings of Indigenous identity that a majority audience at that time might have perceived as 'authentic' (braids, beaded loin cloth, fringes, etc.)' (Brady & Hiltz, 2017, p. 63). He is also holding a pistol, likely added for dramatic effect. In the second photograph, Thomas is shown a few years older, with short hair and neatly dressed in a military style-uniform. At the time of its initial circulation, the photographs were used by the Department of Indian Affairs to represent how successful residential schools were in assimilating Indigenous children into white Canadian culture.

Today, the widely circulated image, accessible through an internet search using the phrase 'Indigenous childhood Canada', continues to be used by educators when discussing Indigenous issues. As Brady and Hiltz (2017) point out, the contemporary uses of the image to illustrate the erasure of Indigenous culture through colonial power fail to contextualize or complicate the 'highly contrived photos,' and thus perpetuate further erasure by reducing Thomas to a 'poster child for colonial power' (p. 81). To foster more critical, contextualised perspectives, they point to 'radical recontextualizations' such as the documentary about Keesick called 'I am a Boy' (BigEagle et. al, 2015) directed



by Louise BigEagle (Nakota/Cree, Ocean Man First Nations) that 'encourages Indigenous people and larger audiences to think more about who he was (including his Indigenous community)' (p. 81). BigEagle, who is not only a documentary filmmaker but also a journalist with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, is one of many Indigenous creators who are challenging colonial narratives and transforming the media landscape.

Re-Educating Representation

Considering the legacies of colonial violence justified by the 'protective' logics that drove the establishment of residential schools and considering how recently their consequences have come to light through TRC reports, class-action lawsuits, academic research, and heavy media coverage, it is not surprising that Indigenous children continue to be overrepresented in care in Canada. The effects of long-standing child welfare practices premised on racist, ethnocentric logics will be felt for generations to come. Although policies and practices have evolved to reflect an increasing awareness of these deleterious effects, and Indigenous sovereignty over child welfare has been written into Canadian law as of 2019, representations of Indigenous peoples in the media continue to perpetuate racist stereotypes. For example, in their analysis of news coverage in the Canadian media, Burns and Shor (2021) found that Indigenous community members were depicted as incompetent, drunk, and lazy. Similarly, Carmen Robertson (in Lisk, 2020) notes that 'there are far more Indigenous voices in the press, and stories are often more balanced, but we still see daily newspapers that have to fill those pages just fall back on what they already know, which continues to reinforce those stereotypes within people's minds' (para. 22). While, as Claxton and Winton (2023) observe, we are witnessing in Canada 'an epistemic dawn' of Indigenous knowing, in which Indigenous voices are leading in literature, medicine, politics, academia, and the arts, we still inhabit a 'shared ground where both settler nationalism and Indigenous sovereignty continue to wrestle with colonial ghosts' (p. 373). This is the same ground where Indigenous communities continue to lack access to clean water, internet access, and medical care, where First Nations women, girls, and gender-diverse people continue to disappear and die at disproportionate rates.

Although recent years have seen a surge of Indigenous storytelling in Canadian film and television (Randoja, 2024), Indigenous voices remain largely underrepresented, with settler stories and stereotypes continuing to dominate the industry. As Dana Claxton (Hunkpapa Lakota) and Ezra Winton observe in their volume on Indigenous media arts in Canada, 'despite organised Indigenous-led efforts to decolonize the media landscape, the media "insiders" in Canada remain a settler majority of European ancestry who are afforded, among many privileges, the space to create, tell, and share the stories of those who are not part of their kin, community, or shared narrative' (p. 3).



Given these challenges, what might it mean to 're-educate' representation – to dismantle stereotypes that were used to justify forced assimilation and cultural genocide? For white settlers, and especially those of us who are educators, a starting point might be educating ourselves on the ways that the use of decontextualised images and statistics can perpetuate Indigenous erasure and epistemological violence. Rather than relying on the familiar or easily accessed materials to discuss Indigenous issues, we can look to Indigenous-produced media through which Indigenous people tell their own stories about their past, present, and future. However, the media industry, which is responsible for the images that show up in news feeds and internet searches, must also prioritise Indigenous representation. As Claxton and Winton (2023) observe, 'the dimensions of Indigenous representation behind, in front of, and beside/around the camera is vital for the non-Indigenous majority, including those of us yet unable to deprogram the pathological colonial circuitry from mind, body, and spirit' (p. 2). As part of that non-Indigenous majority, in a moment when decades of work to advance equity and fight discrimination across North America are being threatened, I am committed to the vital work of questioning assumptions, seeking out and amplifying counter-stories, and deconstructing the mechanisms of settler colonialism.

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