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# Recognizing Settler Ignorance in the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Anna Cook

*University of the Fraser Valley*

Anna.cook@ufv.ca

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## Recognizing Settler Ignorance in the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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### Abstract

The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been mandated to collect testimonies from survivors of the Indian Residential Schools system. The TRC demands survivors of the residential school system to share their personal narratives under the assumption that the sharing of narratives will inform the Canadian public of the residential school legacy and will motivate a transformation of settler identity. I contend, however, that the TRC provides a concrete example of how a politics of recognition fails to transform relationships between Native and settler Canadians not only because it enacts an internalization of colonial recognition, but because it fails to account for what I call “settler ignorance.” Work in epistemologies of ignorance and epistemic oppression gives language to explain sustained denial and provide tools to further understand how settler denial is sustained, and how it can be made visible, and so challenged. For this task, Mills’s articulation of white ignorance should be expanded to a consideration of *white settler* ignorance. Over and above an account of *white* ignorance, such an account will have to consider the underlying logics of settler colonialism. This characterization of settler ignorance will show that the denial of past and ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples, through the reconstruction of the past to assert the primacy of settlers, is not explainable in terms of a lack of recognition but is rather *structural* ignorance.

**Keywords:** Canadian TRC, epistemology of ignorance, settler colonialism, politics of recognition, Native feminisms

*How did you not know this?!*

—Chelsea Vowel, Métis writer and lawyer

*How is it that we know nothing about this history?*

—Paulette Regan, research director of the Canadian TRC

The Indian Residential Schools system has been referred to as “Canada’s greatest national shame” (Stanton 2011, 1). Beginning in the 1880s, the Canadian government sought to assimilate Indigenous children by requiring, under the Indian Act of 1876, their attendance at church-run schools.<sup>1</sup> The result was that 132 federally supported schools were set up in almost every province or territory and functioned for well over a century.<sup>2</sup> Most schools were operated as joint ventures with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, or United Churches. Over 150,000 children were separated from their families and communities to be sent far away to schools where they were forbidden to speak their languages, practice their spirituality, or express their cultures. Physical and sexual abuse were rampant, and at least 6,000 children died while in the residential school system (Vowel 2016, 171).

On June 11, 2008, the (now former) prime minister of Canada Stephen Harper made a Statement of Apology on behalf of the Canadian government for the Indian Residential Schools system: “The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language.” The Canadian government’s 2008 Statement of Apology for the residential school policy came in the shadow of the dissolution of the Alternative Dispute Resolution in 2005 that unsuccessfully settled thousands of residential school survivor lawsuits.<sup>3</sup> The Settlement Agreement came into effect September

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<sup>1</sup> I will use “Indigenous peoples” to refer to the *Onkwehonwe* (original people) of what is now called Canada (Alfred 2005). While it is a term with international connotations, I use the term “Indigenous peoples” to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people living in what is now called Canada (Vowel 2016, 10). I will use “Indian” only in relation to a legal term in Canada, for example, when referring to the Indian Act. The term “Aboriginal” has become the most common official term used in Canada to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people since being adopted in the 1982 Constitution Act.

<sup>2</sup> The last federally run facility, the Gordon Residential School in Saskatchewan, closed in 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Starting in 1990, the violence of residential schools entered the public consciousness when Phil Fontaine, then grand chief of the Manitoba Assembly of Chiefs, spoke about his experience of abuse suffered in residential school on national television. The same year Fontaine publicly spoke out about his experience, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was formed in response to the Oka Crisis. The RCAP held public hearings across Canada, speaking to over 2,000 people and commissioning over 350 research commissions. Its mandate was to develop a research plan on four theme areas— governance; land and economy; social and cultural issues; and the North. RCAP’s final five-volume report was

19, 2007, and provided approximately \$5 billion in compensation, commemoration, and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter TRC).<sup>4</sup>

The Canadian TRC has had the stated purpose of promoting public awareness about the residential school system and educating Canadians about the 150-year history of residential schools, rather than bringing about legal reparations. The TRC was formally established on June 1, 2008, and had a five-year mandate to focus on “a sincere indication and acknowledgement of the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing . . . as part of an overall holistic and comprehensive response to the Indian residential school legacy” (TRC 2015a, 339). As part of the truth-telling and reconciliation process, there have been seven national truth-telling events across Canada that aimed to engage and educate the Canadian public about the history of the residential school system through personal testimony from survivors.<sup>5</sup>

The TRC aims to signal the seriousness with which the Canadian government considers the violations of the residential school system. It seeks to make amends

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released on November 21, 1996. Its findings, in short, were that past and current governmental policies towards Aboriginal peoples were “unethical,” and that there is a need for a complete restructuring of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The RCAP final report changes would have required constitutional change. The federal government’s response to the RCAP report, *Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan*, emphasized *nonconstitutional* approaches to strengthening Aboriginal governance and established the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) to manage a healing fund of \$350 million with particular attention to the legacy of abuse in the residential schools system. This led to the creation of the federal Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada in 2001, tasked with managing and resolving the large number of abuse claims filed by survivors of residential schools. These class action lawsuits resulted in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA).

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the Settlement Agreement, 14,903 survivors had filed claims against the government. The Settlement Agreement set aside \$1.9 billion for the approximately 80,000 living survivors of the residential schools (Stanton 2011, 3–4). The monetary repayment (\$10,000 for the first school year the survivor attended, and an additional \$3,000 for each subsequent school year) has been met with mixed reaction. The repayment process has been criticized by some students whose compensation claims were denied, while others report that the payment was important to them as tangible recognition of the systemic harms they suffered at the schools.

<sup>5</sup> Winnipeg in 2010, Inuvik in 2011, Halifax in 2011, Saskatoon in 2012, Montreal and Vancouver in 2013, and Edmonton in 2014.

for the past wrongs of governmental policies in the hope of establishing a new relationship between the state and Indigenous communities. It offers the promise of communicating previously unknown information to many settler Canadians.<sup>6</sup> While truth commissions differ, they share the basic commitment to investigate and publicly disseminate information about past human rights abuses and to provide a public platform for victims to tell their stories.<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, though, the TRC responds to a legal situation that was invisible and unknown to most Canadian citizens. Unlike the South African TRC or the Argentinian TRC, there was no public consensus that motivated the creation of the Canadian TRC on the Indian Residential Schools.<sup>8</sup> Before the TRC, only one in two Canadians were aware of the existence of the Indian Residential Schools system (Niezen 2016, 923). A general lack of awareness of the schools, and of the experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada more broadly, shaped the Canadian TRC in specific ways. For this reason, the Canadian TRC has both an educational and publicity-oriented goal of raising awareness about the residential school system and the experience of victims of the schools more specifically. The TRC does not have legal power, and it is primarily aimed at educating settler Canadians by creating a unified counterhistory of the residential school legacy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Unless specified, I will use the term “settler,” as Chelsea Vowel does, to refer to non-Indigenous peoples living in Canada or the United States who form “the European-descended sociopolitical majority” (Vowel 2016, 16). For this reason, “white settler” and “settler” are meant to be synonymous. When I use Sherene Razack’s term “white settler,” I do so to explicitly draw attention to the intersection of settler colonialism and white supremacy, especially when this intersection has been undertheorized.

<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Teresa Godwin Phelps emphasizes the potential of *storytelling* as a nonviolent means of achieving retribution that avoids cycles of revenge. She acknowledges, though, that not all ways of sharing personal testimony will be effective. In particular, she notes the limitations of both the Argentinian and Salvadoran truth commissions in their general framework that perpetuated an us/them distinction between innocent civilians and guilty soldiers (2004, 97–104). She contends that the South African truth commission’s “carnival-like” approach, whereby victims shared their stories in their own ways was more effective (2004, 105–110).

<sup>8</sup> For a comparison of the Canadian and South African Commissions, see Nagy 2012.

<sup>9</sup> The TRC’s final report is accompanied by Calls to Action to “redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation” (TRC 2015b). These 94 calls for action include concrete steps that can be taken by the governments of Canada, Indigenous peoples, churches, educators, the business sector, civil society

It would be hard to overemphasize the cultural, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and political lasting devastation of residential schools.<sup>10</sup> Yet the schools and their former students remain “comfortably invisible” to most settler Canadians (Regan 2010, 5). The central question is, thus, how can settler Canadians remember what former prime minister Stephen Harper called in his Statement of Apology “a sad chapter in our history,” when we settler Canadians have so selectively forgotten this part of our history? The TRC assumes that the testimonies will be heard and recognized by settler Canadians in a politically meaningful way. I am critical of this assumption and, in response, this paper argues that this model of recognition is an inappropriate framework to challenge and transform settler identity. In this article, I argue that a politics of recognition fails to transform relationships between Indigenous and settler Canadians not only because it enacts an internalization of colonial recognition but because it fails to account for what I call “settler ignorance.” I go on to explain how settler ignorance functions to discredit Indigenous speakers by hearing their emotional testimonies as (i) an expression of *past* wrongs and (ii) evidence of individual pathology.

### 1. TRC’s Politics of Recognition

The language of recognition has become a dominant framework to discuss political struggles in multicultural liberal democracies. In particular, Indigenous self-determination efforts in Canada have been couched in terms of recognition, and in Charles Taylor’s politics of recognition more specifically.<sup>11</sup> Taylor’s identitarian model of recognition rests on a holist ontology in which the self arises dialogically through reciprocal recognition of oneself as separate and equal.<sup>12</sup> For this reason,

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organizations, and others. The calls include subsections pertaining to child welfare, education, language and culture, health, and justice (2015b). Insofar as the Calls to Action frame problems of settler-colonial violence in the *present*, they have a potential to bring about meaningful change.

<sup>10</sup> Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s *Reclaiming Connections: Understanding Residential School Trauma Among Aboriginal People: A Resource Manual* (2005) documents the impact of humiliation and shame as tools of aggressive assimilation.

<sup>11</sup> Glen Coulthard cites the 2005 policy position issued by Canada’s largest Aboriginal organization, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), in which self-determination is defined “around a vision of the relationship between First Nations and Canada which would lead to strengthening recognition and implementation of First Nations’ governments” (Coulthard 2007, 438).

<sup>12</sup> In the liberal-communitarian debate on the nature of the self and the role of political institutions to promote the flourishing of the self, the terms of this debate

Taylor characterizes recognition as a “vital human need,” such that nonrecognition or misrecognition is “a form of oppression by inflicting crippling self-hatred” (Taylor 1994, 26). Taylor argues that a politics of recognition must accommodate value pluralism and support the survival of minority cultural groups. Individual identity does not occur in isolation but is formed through “dialogue with others, in agreement or struggle with their recognition of us” (1994, 45–46). Cultural communication is the horizon for individuals to develop their identities. For Taylor, recognition is required on both the intimate plane for acknowledgement of an original identity and on the social plane for a healthy democratic society.

Taylor’s liberal politics of recognition affirms that relations of recognition can have either a positive effect (when recognition is mutual or affirmative), or a negative effect (when recognition is unequal or disparaging) on “our status as free and self-determining agents” (Coulthard 2014, 17). Accordingly, in the context of Indigenous self-determination, proponents of a liberal politics of recognition seek greater “state recognition” and “accommodation” of Indigenous identity claims in order to enable more mutual Indigenous-state relationships.<sup>13</sup> It is through *state* recognition that Indigenous culture is affirmed and legitimated.<sup>14</sup> In practice, Glen Coulthard tells us that this results in “institutional accommodation by the settler state apparatus” (2014, 38). Indigenous claims to nationhood are reconciled through the “accommodation of Indigenous identities in some form of renewed relationship with the Canadian state” (2014, 3). Consider, for example, the White Paper of 1969,

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stem from Kant and Hegel’s respective definitions of freedom and self-determination. Kant’s emphasis on the respect for the equal dignity of autonomous beings gets articulated in the liberal position, whereas Hegel’s recognition model of identity comes to form the basis of the communitarian position.

<sup>13</sup> This is most often accomplished through “land claim settlements, economic development initiatives, and self-government agreements” (Coulthard 2014, 3).

<sup>14</sup> Section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act provides constitutional protection of “existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada.” The section does not, however, define the term “aboriginal rights” or define a list of protected rights. As a result of this lack of definition, Indigenous nations must attest their rights in court, such as in *R v. Sparrow*, which defined the Musqueam band’s fishing rights as recognized and affirmed. The Court concluded that existing Aboriginal rights are not absolute and can be encroached upon when given sufficient reason. This has led to the “Sparrow Test” as a way to measure how much Canadian legislation can limit existing Aboriginal rights. Many Indigenous scholars, including Stó:lō author Lee Maracle, worry that Section 35 reaffirms the authority of the Canadian Constitution instead of moving towards a nation-to-nation relationship (Maracle 2003).

the effort to abolish the Indian Act, which was framed as an attempt to turn First Nations people into *ethnic* groups, “to be gradually absorbed into the melting pot” (Manuel and Derrickson 2015, 29–30).<sup>15</sup>

The limitations of the liberal model of recognition—the narrowing of recognition to *cultural* recognition and the overshadowing of structural and economic features of social oppression—are all the more visible and damaging in a settler-colonial context. Nancy Fraser, for instance, worries that, in recent years, identity politics have overshadowed the demand for economic redistribution.<sup>16</sup> The framework of recognition as *cultural* recognition is all the more nefarious, however, in an explicitly settler-colonial context. For one, the narrowing of recognition to culture *depoliticizes* Native relationships to land. As Maureen Konkle notes in *Writing Indian Nations*, “Native people’s connection to land is not just cultural (as it is usually and sentimentally understood), but it is also a political connection about governments, boundaries, authority over people and territory” (Konkle 2004, 12). The effect of this narrowing of recognition means that culture becomes the sole site of indigenous identity and agency, foreclosing a legitimate politics of indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.<sup>17</sup> Cultural recognition here mischaracterizes the harm of misrecognition by failing to consider institutionalized economic inequality

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<sup>15</sup> The 1969 White Paper, formally known as the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, 1969, was a Canadian government policy that attempted to abolish previous legal documents pertaining to Indigenous peoples, including the Indian Act and treaties. Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Jean Chrétien proposed the policy in order to assimilate all Indian peoples under the Canadian State. The proposal’s intense backlash led to its withdrawal in 1970.

<sup>16</sup> In Nancy Fraser’s debate with Axel Honneth, she criticizes identity politics for both narrowly characterizing misrecognition “as a free-standing cultural harm” at the expense of considering institutionalized economic inequality, and also reifying “an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated” collective identity (Fraser 2000, 110–112). Misrecognition, she contends, is harmful when it leads to status subordination. Accordingly, the aim of recognition should not be to revalue cultural self-representations but to overcome subordination by establishing a misrecognized party as a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with the rest (2000, 113).

<sup>17</sup> Following James Tully’s definition of self-determination as “the right of a people to govern themselves by their own laws and exercise jurisdiction over their territories” (Tully 2000, 57).



and settler-colonial and heteropatriarchal violence. Cultural recognition without political and economic redistribution will not lead to self-determination.<sup>18</sup>

Coulthard has insightfully articulated how Taylor's recognition-based model of liberal pluralism perpetuates settler-colonial identification, and so *reproduces*, rather than transcends, a colonial structure of dominance. In *Red Skins, White Masks*, Coulthard (2014) forcefully rejects Taylor's liberal politics of recognition on the grounds that it actually reaffirms the configurations of colonial power that demands for recognition aim to transcend. For this, he draws on Frantz Fanon's criticism of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic of recognition whereby self-consciousness arises through the process of externalization and mutual recognition, that is, through the recognition of another.<sup>19</sup>

Fanon contends that the dialectic of recognition breaks down in a colonial context, which he describes in terms of both objective (political economy) and subjective (affective) levels (Fanon 1967, 11–12, quoted in Coulthard 2007, 444). This account of the dual structures of colonialism moves past the Axel Honneth-Nancy Fraser impasse and avoids a focus on recognition at the expense of redistribution and vice-versa.<sup>20</sup> Given this description of colonialism, Fanon argues that reciprocal recognition is impossible since the terms of recognition are determined by and in the interests of the colonizer. Insofar as subjectivity is defined in terms of the recognition of the colonizer, the colonized's sense of self develops through the internalization of colonial recognition. In this way, settler-colonial recognition involves the creation of "colonized subjects" through a process of internalization whereby the colonized come to accept and even identify with the limited misrecognition granted through state structures. Fanon affirms that this internalization often leads to psycho-affective attachments to these "master-sanctioned forms of recognition" (Fanon [1961] 2005, 148). In practice, this means that state recognition of Indigenous culture through accommodation practices is in the same spirit as Duncan Campbell Scott's 1920 goal of solving the Indian problem

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<sup>18</sup> Taiaiake Alfred contests that "without massive restitution, including land, financial transfers and other forms of assistance to compensate for past harms and continuing injustices committed against our peoples, reconciliation would permanently enshrine colonial injustices and is itself a further injustice" (Alfred 2005, 152).

<sup>19</sup> While Taylor draws on Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) in articulating the role of misrecognition in relations of domination, Coulthard relies on Fanon's earlier *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) to challenge Taylor's argument that colonial misrecognition can be reconciled within a liberal multicultural framework (Coulthard 2007).

<sup>20</sup> See Fraser and Honneth (2003).

by ensuring that every Indian has been “absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian position, and no Indian Department” (quoted in Manuel and Derrickson 2015, 29–30).

In this way, Coulthard contends that contemporary colonial power and hegemony work not through a process of exclusion but rather through the inclusion and shaping of Indigenous peoples and perspectives by state discourses. He argues that self-determination cannot be bestowed upon by the state but must result from Indigenous resurgence<sup>21</sup> that challenges the legitimacy of the Canadian settler state. Recognition practices do not rectify colonial injustice but reaffirm the settler state’s legitimacy. Moreover, mutual recognition in a colonial context is impossible since, for example, the Canadian state does not require recognition from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in order to exist.

In sum, through the guise of recognizing the distinctness of Indigenous cultures, liberal politics of recognition undermines Indigenous nations’ self-determination. Moreover, recognition makes identity *intelligible* only by creating “colonized subjects.” The process of recognition legitimates the Canadian state’s authority of defining Indigenous identity. While forced dispossession of Indigenous land is no longer politically palatable (yet ongoing), settler-colonial violence continues under the guise of recognition. Relations between nations must be predicated upon mutual recognition of each other’s sovereignty. Insofar as recognition does not emerge from the mutual recognition of sovereignty, recognition by the Canadian state *cannot* challenge the settler-colonial power imbalance but reasserts it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Resurgence emphasizes ways to restore and regenerate Indigenous nationhood (Corntassel 2012), and the “repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck and Yang 2012). Kirby Brown identifies indigenous resurgence theory as committed to “*collective* critique of and resistance to settler-state structures of politics, power, and representation, coupled with—if not motivated by—the revitalization of *community-specific* indigenous traditions” (Brown 2015, 293). Audra Simpson’s politics of refusal serves the purpose of “turning away” from the legitimizing gaze of settler authority and from the “presumed ‘good’ of multicultural politics,” towards revitalized, self-generated, transformative models of self-determination (Simpson 2014, 11).

<sup>22</sup> In this respect, Coulthard is suspicious of projects like Dale Turner’s that aim to engage with the state’s legal and political discourses. Turner proposes a model of Indigenous self-determination that engages with the confines of liberal recognition. He argues, in *This is Not a Peace Pipe* (2006), that Indigenous people need to engage the state’s legal and political discourses in more effective ways in order to have their relationship with the Canadian state informed by their distinct worldview. To this

The TRC, in particular, is immersed in this recognition-talk insofar as it seeks to provide an opportunity for survivors to have their experiences recognized.<sup>23</sup> It invites survivors of residential schools to share their personal narratives under the assumption that this will inform the Canadian public of the residential school legacy and will motivate a transformation of settler identity. In this respect, the TRC proposes a model of reconciliation based on the sharing of personal testimony.<sup>24</sup> According to this view, there must be recognition of the experiences of survivors of residential schools in order to have reconciliation. It is believed that the problem of settlers' historical amnesia is due to a lack of information, a lack of recognition, and so the remedy is more information, more recognition. As such, the TRC's underlying epistemic claim is that a collection of facts and testimonies can and will reconcile relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians. It assumes that settler Canadians simply need to hear testimonies of residential school survivors in order to challenge our historical amnesia about the role residential schools have played in the creation of the settler-colonial nation-state now called Canada.

The TRC, insofar as it is framed by a politics of recognition whereby the state recognizes the cultural distinctness of Indigenous peoples as a group in Canada, provides an opportunity to examine the limitations of recognition. These limitations play out in the TRC in the particular way that settlers fail to hear testimonies of residential school survivors. The TRC illustrates how recognition attempts to include diverse voices in the political sphere but simultaneously fails to challenge prevailing power relations that silence these voices.

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end, he affirms that certain members of the community should become what he calls "word warriors," who are fluent in the language of rights. Coulthard, however, is critical of Turner's approach insofar as it minimizes the discursive power of the state, such that Turner's proposal risks the assimilation of the word warriors (Coulthard 2008, 164).

<sup>23</sup> Recognition of shared experience fulfills the Canadian state's legal responsibility of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) between the government of Canada and the approximately 86,000 Native Canadians who were enrolled in residential schools. The five main components of the IRSSA are the Common Experience Payment (CEP), Independent Assessment Process (IAP), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Commemoration, and Health and Healing Services.

<sup>24</sup> What reconciliation means, however, remains murky and tenuous. The final report notes the amorphous definition of reconciliation throughout the truth-telling events, yet officially defines reconciliation as "an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships" (TRC 2015a, 16).

## 2. Settler Ignorance

*The treatment of children in Indian Residential Schools is a sad chapter in our history. . . . We recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.*

—Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Statement of Apology 2008

*Canada has no history of colonialism.*

—Prime Minister Stephen Harper, G20 Address 2009

A politics of recognition fails to transform settler-colonial relationships not only because it enacts the internalization of colonial recognition but because it fails to account for, or challenge, structural settler denial. As such, I contend that the liberal model of recognition cannot *hear* testimonies of settler-colonial violence. I argue that the denial of settler colonialism does not come from a *lack* of information but rather emerges from a particular kind of knowing that undermines the testimony of Native peoples.<sup>25</sup>

In order to explain an account of settler ignorance, I expand Charles Mills's account of white ignorance to a consideration of *white settler* ignorance. This characterization of settler ignorance shows that the disavowal of past and ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples is not explainable in terms of a lack of recognition but is rather *structural* ignorance. My explanation of white settler ignorance emerges from an engagement with social epistemology, settler-colonial studies, and Native feminisms. I begin with an overview of developments in social epistemology with an emphasis on ignorance. Secondly, I show how settler ignorance functions by (i) distancing present testimonies to the past and (ii) by discrediting emotional expressions as signs of individual pathology.

In particular, I want to make sense of the prime minister's 2009 G20 address, in which he proudly claimed that "Canada has no history of colonialism," in light of his 2008 official Statement of Apology for the Indian Residential School policy, which

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<sup>25</sup> By settler denial, I mean both the explicit and implicit denial of past and ongoing settler colonialism. Settler denial has been explicit—in the denial of ongoing settler colonialism in the 2008 Statement of Apology, which positions the ills of colonialism strictly in the past and thus denies the realities of an ongoing settler-colonial present, or in the denial of past settler colonialism in Harper's 2009 G20 address, in which he proudly claimed that "Canada has no history of colonialism," or in Sen. Lynn Beyak's recent remarks on "the good deeds . . . and remarkable works" of the residential school officials, or in the governor general's comments in June 2017 that Indigenous people are immigrants.

called the policy an evil that has “no place in our country.” What was this evil if not the evil of (settler) colonialism? How can we make sense of this seeming contradiction by a man supposedly educated and informed by residential school survivors? This seems, at first glance, to be a set of contradictory statements in which one of the two statements must be false. Does former prime minister Harper believe that (i) residential schools were part of a violent settler-colonial project, or (ii) Canada has no history of colonialism? It seems that he can hold one belief, but not both.

Epistemology, as the study of knowledge, and propositional knowledge more specifically, uses the schema “*S* knows that *p*,” where *S* stands for some subject who has knowledge and *p* for the proposition that is known from direct observation.<sup>26</sup> For example, “Harper knows that Canada has no history of colonialism” and “Harper knows that residential schools were a violent settler-colonial endeavour” are contradictory propositions, in which at least one of these statements must be false. Traditional epistemology tells us that this conflict must be resolved by determining which individual proposition is false by looking for correspondence with the external world. This determination will answer which statement is a *justified true belief*.

Drawing from feminist social epistemology, I argue, however, that this way of proceeding is an impoverished one. Firstly, in this model of epistemology, it is reason alone, uncontaminated from the unreliability of the body, that leads to objective knowledge. In “*S* knows that *p*” epistemology, the complexity, messiness, and situatedness of life is negated in favor of analytic simplicity and an aspiration for infinite replicability. These claims to objectivity and universality have been intensely disputed in feminist standpoint theory.<sup>27</sup> This feminist intervention eschews assumptions about generic knowers “accumulating verifiable ‘bits’ of information,” and reveals that the supposed generality is in fact a situated position, namely one of a white able-bodied man—“the ‘generic’ *S* does refer to a ‘standard’ white male knower or doer” (Code 2014, 150–153). Neutrality is not so neutral after all but is rather an expression of power and privilege (with its specific interests and values). With this intervention, the stark distinction between epistemology and ethics begins to fade as knowledge practices can no longer be taken to be ethically and politically neutral.

The turn to *social* epistemology emerges from the recognition of the fundamentally relational aspect of knowledge production. This intervention

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<sup>26</sup> The traditional view is epitomized in Thomas Nagel’s *A View from Nowhere* (1989).

<sup>27</sup> The Marxist concept of “standpoint theory” has been further developed in Sandra Harding’s work. See Harding’s edited volume *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (2004), and also Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990).

investigates the epistemic effects of social interaction and takes *testimony* to be central to knowledge production.<sup>28</sup> Testimony does not fall into the “S knows that p” model insofar as it is interactive; there are speakers and hearers. Over and above considerations of truth and justification, a focus on testimony brings matters of “trust, credibility, responsiveness and responsibility, epistemic character and situation” to the fore in knowledge-making and knowledge-circulating practices (Code 2014, 152).<sup>29</sup> Framed in terms of testimony, knowledge production is no longer described impersonally and without social location. Kristie Dotson puts it succinctly: “In short, to communicate we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us” (Dotson 2011, 238).

With these critical interventions in mind, an investigation of Harper’s statement becomes more complicated. In particular, the positionality of *S*, in this case former prime minister Harper, *matters* to an evaluation of his proposition, and his evaluation of the credibility of residential school survivors emerges as an important factor.

One outcome of the turn to testimony has been to seriously consider ignorance, that is, the failure of knowledge-production and knowledge-circulation, as an epistemic practice. The impulse to seriously consider ignorance as a kind of knowledge has emerged as a powerful critical intervention to traditional epistemology. The study of ignorance, and social ignorance specifically, aims to identify different forms of ignorance and examine how they are produced and sustained. It asks which epistemic practices make it such that “S does *not* know p.” In this way, ignorance is not taken to be a “*neglectful* epistemic practice” or simply a *lack* of knowledge but is rather considered as a “*substantive* epistemic practice” (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 39). Ignorance is not simply a result of failed inquiry or “faulty justification practices;” it is structural and is the result of “*practices of ignorance*” (2007, 40). The central claim of an epistemology of ignorance is that an account of knowledge is incomplete without an account of ignorance, and an account of ignorance is incomplete without an account of who benefits and who is disadvantaged by such ignorance.

Over and above feminist epistemologists’ claims about the situatedness of group identities that leads to particular blind spots and specific insights (exemplified

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<sup>28</sup> Testimony here refers to a “range of practices from simply telling one another the time of day to the complex verbal and written reports that are the substance of knowledge-conveying exchanges between and among people in the real world” (Code 2014, 152).

<sup>29</sup> Alcott notes that testimony is broadly categorized as either inferential or noninferential (2010, 129). In the former, testimony justifies a belief by inference, whereas in the latter testimony justifies a belief directly.

in the works of Code and Harding), Charles Mills and Linda Martín Alcoff offer *structural* analyses of ignorance to show how “oppressive systems produce ignorance as one of their effects,” providing an account of ignorance in terms of structural forms of oppression (Alcoff 2007, 40). Ignorance is more than just the individual prejudicial blind spots according to one’s group identity. Ignorance is structural, such that dominant groups not only “have less interest” in criticizing the status quo, but they “have a positive interest in ‘seeing the world wrongly’” (2007, 47). There are concrete benefits to this sustained ignorance. The formulation of an epistemology of ignorance within white supremacy is famously expressed in Mills’s articulation of the “racial contract,” which prescribes for “its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 1997, 18). The racial contract is an epistemological contract. An epistemology of ignorance (or an inverted epistemology) is a requirement for the racial division of the human race into “full persons and subpersons” (1997, 118–119). Ignorance is here defined as a substantive epistemic practice that differentiates the dominant group. It is more than an effect of the knower’s general situatedness but is defined in terms of structures of power.

Mills further elaborates on the “inverted epistemology” of the racial contract by describing white ignorance as it is connected to white supremacy. For his purposes of defining white ignorance, Mills uses the term “ignorance” to designate both false belief and the absence of true belief, and *white* ignorance specifically as the false belief and the absence of true belief about “people of color, supporting a delusion of white racial superiority that can afflict white and nonwhite people alike” (2007, 17). White ignorance is both individual and collective and, as such, impacts both individual and social memory. This actively upheld form of ignorance supports the social cognition that distorts reality shaped by white supremacy. For example, the lens shaped by white supremacy causes people suffering from white ignorance to “mis-see whites as civilized superiors and nonwhites as inferior savages” (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 3). White ignorance has the result of cultivating a collective amnesia about the past that undermines the testimony and credibility of nonwhite people. Under this analysis, white ignorance is naturalized as objective knowledge that rebuffs political analysis.<sup>30</sup> In this case, the study of ignorance is primarily tasked

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<sup>30</sup> Consider, for example, Edward Said’s account of the naturalization of Orientalism (1978), whereby the Orient becomes “wholly discrete, stable, and fixed, providing sharp contrast to the Occident” (Alcoff 2007, 56). Said’s account of the naturalization of the Orient is helpful in beginning to articulate an account of how white supremacy

with unraveling the cognitive mechanisms associated with structural racial discrimination.

What would it mean to take Harper’s statement that Canada has no history of colonialism, in the face of testimonies that this is patently false, as belief that is reasonably held? In other words, how might we evaluate the statement “Canada has no history of colonialism” not as presenting a *lack* of knowledge but as asserting a particular kind of knowledge. The task of considering settler denial as an epistemology of ignorance involves looking at how oppressive structures inform the epistemic practices of wilfully denying past and ongoing settler-colonial violence.

An epistemology of ignorance offers both a description and explanation of how structures of domination come to inform what can and cannot be known. Work in epistemologies of ignorance and epistemic oppression can help give language to explain sustained denial and provide tools to further understand how settler denial is sustained, and how it can be made visible (audible), and therefore challenged. For this task, Mills’s articulation of white ignorance should be expanded, I argue, to a consideration of *white settler* ignorance.<sup>31</sup> I broaden an account of racial ignorance to include the particular epistemic logics of settler colonialism.<sup>32</sup> This characterization of white settler ignorance will show that the denial of past and ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples, through the reconstruction of the past to assert the primacy of settlers, is not explainable in terms of a lack of access to resources for knowledge and information but is rather *structural* ignorance.

## 2.1 Settler-Colonial Elimination

Lorenzo Veracini and Patrick Wolfe aim to articulate the underlying aims of settler colonialism.<sup>33</sup> Veracini contends that colonialism and settler colonialism need

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and settler colonialism come to *naturalize* settler knowledge of Indigenous peoples.

<sup>31</sup> While Mills speaks to the role of the “state of nature” in the white settler state, he does explicitly thematize white settler ignorance as part of the Racial Contract’s epistemological contract (Mills 1997, 12–19).

<sup>32</sup> An account of white settler ignorance develops out of an appreciation of the intersection of white supremacy and settler-colonial violence. Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s work on the logic of white possession highlights how racism is “inextricably tied to the theft and appropriation of Indigenous lands in the first world” (Moreton-Robinson 2015, xiii).

<sup>33</sup> In this respect, Veracini affirms that settler-colonial studies aims at articulating *heuristic* tools rather than transformative ones. This is why settler-colonial studies is not a theory of Indigenous resurgence. Veracini contends that an analysis of settler-colonial studies does not prefer one form of Indigenous agency over another and understands radical transformations of Indigenous political structures as both



to be “analytically disentangled” in order to consider settler colonialism in its specificity (Veracini 2011, 1).<sup>34</sup> The dialectical relation between settler colonialism and colonialism can be understood through the identification of their underlying logics—a logic of elimination and a logic of exploitation. Colonialism is exogenous domination whereby colonizers seek to maintain a permanent colonial relation, to reproduce that relation, and to use the labour power of the colonized. Settler colonialism, however, aims to “supersede the conditions of its operations” (2011, 8). For Wolfe, the logic of elimination manifests in both the dissolution of native societies, and in the erection of a “new colonial society on the expropriated land base” (Wolfe 2006, 388). The elimination of Native populations is “an organizing principal of settler-colonial society” (2006, 388). The motivation for the *elimination* of Native populations is, first and foremost, territory: “Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (2006, 388). Whereas colonialism depends upon the reproduction of labour power to augment the colonial power’s wealth, settler colonialism depends upon access to land.<sup>35</sup> Crucially, Wolfe explains that the invasion of Native lands in North America and Australia, for example, is not an event in the past but an ongoing *structure* that is reasserted each day of occupation (Wolfe 2006, 388).

Importantly, the logic of elimination that underlies settler colonialism aims not only at the elimination of Indigenous peoples but also at its very own extinction. As such, colonialism seeks to reproduce itself, whereas settler colonialism seeks to become invisible. Veracini writes: “Settler colonialism justifies its operation on the

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destructive and constitutive processes that are always undermined and positively shaped by Indigenous agency (Veracini 2015, 312).

<sup>34</sup> This distinction arises, in part, in Fanon’s writings on decolonial violence ([1961] 2005). In Fanon’s analysis, colonial and settler-colonial phenomena overlap such that it was “the settler” that had “brought the native into existence” (Veracini 2013, 318).

<sup>35</sup> This contrast is exemplified in the difference of defining Blackness in terms of the “one drop rule” that exponentially increased populations of labour power for the slave owner, and between the blood quantum regulations that radically decreased the Native population (Wolfe 2006, 388). Megan Bang and Ananda Marin trace the fundamental tenet of settler-colonial societies as “the acquisition of land as property, followed by the establishment of settler lifeways as the normative benchmark from which to measure development.” (Bang and Marin 2015, 532). Settler lifeways are accomplished through: (i) erasure of Indigenous presence, (ii) staged inheritance of indigeneity by whites, and (iii) erasure of African descendants’ humanity through the structuration of slavery and resultant reduction to and control of black bodies (2015, 532).

basis of the expectation of its future demise” (2011, 3). In other words, settler colonialism aims to no longer be settler-colonial and to become either “settled” or “postcolonial.”<sup>36</sup> For this reason, settler colonialism, when successful, “effectively covers its tracks” (2011, 3). This covering of its tracks, I argue, requires certain ignorance of its own operation. Insofar as settler colonialism aims for complete *settlement*, it demands both the elimination of Indigenous peoples and the ignorance of its own operations.

Settler colonialism aims to make itself invisible, and as such, settler ignorance is a way of furthering this invisibility. This invisibility comes to form what Mark Rifkin calls “settler common sense,” defined as a set of dynamics for political and legal structures that both legitimates and normalizes the elimination of Indigenous peoples (Rifkin 2013). The settler common sense manifests in a settler everyday in which Canadian sovereignty is taken to be both obvious and natural. This settler common sense forms the affective background that legitimates both ongoing settler-colonial violence and the continued denial or forgetting of settler colonialism by settler Canadians.

An account of settler ignorance as a necessary outcome of a settler-colonial logic of elimination can help us better understand former prime minister Harper’s two statements: “Canada has no history of colonialism” and “Residential school policy . . . has no place in our history.” What do these two statements made by the same person just one year apart signal about how settler-colonial power is maintained and re-legitimated? Examining these two statements in conjunction allows us to better appreciate how the disavowal of colonialism reveals a particular kind of knowledge production and nation memory-making. I argue that settler Canadians’ obliviousness about past and present settler-colonial violence is not accidental but is a structural feature of settler colonialism.

## 2.2 White Settler Ignorance

In the following section, I give an account of structural ignorance by explaining how it functions by discrediting Indigenous speakers and hearing

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<sup>36</sup> Veracini cites Ronald Horvath’s classification of six types of colonization, with type 1 being the closest to settler colonialism: “Type 1 is colonization in which the dominant relationship between the colonizers and the colonized is extermination of the latter. In the extreme sense of the word, to exterminate is to root out totally or eradicate. History provides us with relatively few examples where total extermination of the inhabitants of geographic entities occurred—among them the European occupation of Tasmania and of some of the Caribbean islands—but extermination of the inhabitants of vast areas of America, Australia, Canada, and Tsarist and Communist Russia can also be cited here” (Horvath 1972, 47).

emotional testimonies as (i) an expression of *past* wrongs and (ii) evidence of individual pathology. An understanding of settler ignorance is necessary in order to explain how it is that we settlers fail to know things and remain ignorant in the face of testimonies of settler-colonial violence.

In order to explain what *kind* of knowledge white settler ignorance is, and how it functions, Kevin Bruyneel's account of settler memory is a helpful starting point. Bruyneel argues that the description of the forgetfulness of settler colonialism as a form of "historical amnesia" is not a lack of memory but a particular production and presence of memory that he calls "settler memory" (Bruyneel 2013, 237–240). His analysis resonates with historian Ernest Renan's ([1882] 1992) understanding of the (settler) nation as constituted in moments of violence which must then be perpetually repressed and forgotten in order to effect national unity. As such, settler-colonial nation-building *requires* a certain kind of forgetfulness in order to function. The appearance of collective amnesia is, in fact, a result of the particular manner in which the nation remembers its "past, as facts and myths" (Bruyneel 2016, 351).<sup>37</sup> This supposed historical amnesia plays an important role in the "re-legitimation of contemporary violence, dispossession, and appropriation" (2016, 351).<sup>38</sup> In this vein, Bruyneel tells us that settler memory functions by both seamlessly distancing past injustices from those of the present, and disavowing the political relevance of this memory by refusing and absenting the presence of Indigenous people as contemporary agents (2013, 236).

A feature of structural settler ignorance, then, is its distancing of present testimonies of settler colonialism to the past. Settler ignorance is maintained by hearing testimonies of present settler-colonial violence as an expression of *past* wrongs rather than as an expression of ongoing settler-colonial violence. Consider, for example, the 2008 Statement of Apology that prompted the creation of the TRC. Former prime minister Stephen Harper considered the legacy of the residential school system to be "a sad chapter in our *history* [which] has *no place* in our country," which frames the residential school system as *both* a problem in the *past* (thus erasing ongoing settler-colonial violence) while also diminishing the central

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<sup>37</sup> Consider, for example, the settler nation myths of Canada's sesquicentennial celebrations.

<sup>38</sup> This can be seen forcefully with the defunding of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), which supports Indigenous healing programs in 145 community-based projects (Nagy 2012, 358). Such an example of ongoing colonial legislation was the passing of Bill C-45, which introduced significant changes to Canada's Navigable Water Act, the Indian Act, and the Environmental Assessment Act, among other pieces of federal legislation, and which unilaterally undermined Aboriginal and treaty rights (Coulthard 2014, 127).

role of the residential schools in settler-colonial nation-building (“it has no place in our country”). Harper’s statements in the apology deny a settler-colonial present by situating the damage of settler-colonial violence in the past. His G20 statement continues this process of disavowal by denying the settler-colonial past.

This is settler ignorance at work, habitually invoking settler colonialism in a manner that blurs the line between past and present, and further reinscribing the practices of present-day settler violence and dispossession. Settler ignorance functions by delegitimizing testimonies by relegating these testimonies to the past. Expressions of settler-colonial violence are heard as “reactive, backward and a passive orientation” (Coulthard 2014, 111). Expressions of ongoing settler-colonial violence are taken to be a form of negative dwelling in the past, rather than taken as an expression of the impact of the ongoing violence of settler colonialism. The distancing of the present to the past recalls Mills’s “inverted epistemology,” in which the temporal distancing works to create a “consensual hallucination” of the denial of present-day settler-colonial reality, which is *required* for “conquest, colonization, and enslavement” (Mills 1997, 19).<sup>39</sup>

A second feature of settler ignorance relates to how Indigenous voices are heard as irrational and as a sign of individual pathology. This feature of settler ignorance is most forcefully articulated by a feminist Native intervention, and Dian Million’s felt theory in particular, that describes how ignorance is maintained through pathologizing *emotional* expression. A Native feminist intervention can more fully identify and destabilize settler ways of hearing Native expressions of hurt, pain, and anger, insofar as it raises the questions of whose voices are heard as politically meaningful in a context of ongoing settler-colonial, capitalist and heteropatriarchal violence.<sup>40</sup>

Million’s felt theory, with its attention to the *affective* intersections of heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism, shows us how settler ignorance functions.

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<sup>39</sup> Rifkin argues that dominant settler conceptions of time and space put Native peoples in a double bind: “either they are consigned to the past, or they are inserted into a present defined on non-native terms” (Rifkin 2017, vii). Settlers experience the world made by settler colonialism, experience its temporalities and understandings of space as natural and so, beyond questioning.

<sup>40</sup> Native feminist theory reveals the key aspect of settler colonialism to be “the consistency and thus naturalization of heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism” (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 14). Central to the project of settler colonialism are both the erasure of Indigenous presence on land through physical and statistical elimination, as well as the imposition of gender and kin structures. Settler-colonial violence occurs in the creation and violent imposition of a Christian heteropatriarchal family.

Her work makes visible how settler ignorance functions by delegitimizing and pathologizing emotional expression. She invites us to recognize the way Native women have born “witness to felt colonial experience” (Million 2013, 75). These voices—those of Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle, Ruby Slipperjack, in particular—of a felt history present a powerful challenge to the social control of internalized colonialism, as well as invigorates political discourse of Native self-determination with emotional knowledge. Their narratives disrupt settler-colonial silencing and defy the logic of state recognition that pathologizes Native expression.<sup>41</sup> In particular, Native feminists have worked on making visible the epistemic assumptions of what counts as academic scholarship. Million tells us, however, that the embodied knowledge of how colonialism is *felt*—what she calls felt scholarship—has been denied as a legitimate form of knowledge within academia. Their accounts that describe how colonialism is *felt* are political acts in themselves insofar as they challenge what counts as “proper” history (2013, 54). First-person narratives that describe, for example, the felt experience of being raped by a priest at ten years old, have been rejected as legitimate historical knowledge (2013, 72). Rather, they have been segregated as a “feminine” experience, as a polemic, or as evidence of pathological distress—they were too “bitter” or “biased.”

Million’s work shows how settler ignorance is maintained by discrediting testimonies of ongoing settler-colonial violence by Indigenous speakers. In other words, settlers can remain oblivious to settler-colonial violence because of Indigenous women’s credit deficit (Fricker 2007), such that Indigenous speakers’ epistemic agency, the ability to use “shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community in order to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources” is undermined (Dotson 2012, 24).<sup>42</sup> For this reason, I contend that the settler-colonial logic of elimination necessarily

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<sup>41</sup> Million argues that Canadian First Nation women’s embodied narratives have fuelled a discursive shift in the histories of residential schooling (2013, 67). Their first person and experiential narratives of past and future pain, grief, and hope create a new language for communities to reveal and analyze “the moral affective heart of capitalism and colonialism” (2013, 55). In exploring the embodied, gendered, and sexual nature of their colonization, these Native women’s personal narratives “transformed the debilitating force of an old social control, shame, into a social agent in their generation” (2013, 55).

<sup>42</sup> A knower is discredited as a knower in virtue of their social identity as a member of a socially powerless group (Fricker 2007, 156). In other words, there is an epistemic injustice when a hearer deflates the credibility of a speaker by virtue of their identity.

leads to epistemic oppression (Dotson 2012, 2014).<sup>43</sup> Settler colonialism can remain invisible when testimonies of settler-colonial violence are not heard as factually relevant or politically meaningful.

### Conclusion

The two features of settler ignorance—the relegation of present testimonies to a fixed past and the pathologization of emotional expression—are nonaccidental features of settler colonialism that come to form settler common sense. I affirm that settler colonialism as a structure mandates the ignorance of its own operations. This ignorance is structural insofar as it is a necessary outcome of the settler project of eliminating Indigenous presence. Former prime minister Harper’s statement denying Canada’s settler-colonial past *makes sense* according to settler common sense, which normalizes a denial of settler-colonial violence. This structural ignorance is invisible to itself and exempts itself from critique. As such, Indigenous voices are necessary in order to expose these epistemic structures.<sup>44</sup>

An account of settler ignorance can better evaluate governmental attempts to “move forward” from past wrongs. Furthermore, it shows us that an apparent *lack* of knowledge about residential schools is not a case of misrecognition or a lack of information but is a particular kind of knowing that undermines Indigenous peoples’ epistemic agency. Without challenging these structural epistemic assumptions, governmental apologies and truth commissions will replicate this ignorance.

An account of settler ignorance reveals why a model of reconciliation through recognition, such as in the TRC, is unable to challenge historical amnesia and settler denial. The epistemic presumption of the TRC is that the problem of settler denial is simply a lack of information, that we only need more knowledge about the evils of the residential school system, that the government and the general public are just conveniently *unaware* of the violence perpetrated against Native peoples in Canada. But an account of settler ignorance shows us that an apparent *lack* of memory results from “a particular production and presence of memory” that is central to the settler-colonial logic of elimination (Bruyneel 2013, 237). As such, settler Canadians’ obliviousness about past and present settler-

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<sup>43</sup> Epistemic oppression is characterized by “a persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinders one’s contributions to knowledge production” (Dotson 2014, 115).

<sup>44</sup> This point echoes work in standpoint theory and in José Medina’s definition of the epistemic virtue *meta-lucidity* among epistemically virtuous subjects of oppressed groups, defined as the “capacity to see the limitations of dominant ways of seeing” (Medina 2012, 47).

colonial violence is not accidental but is a *structural* feature of settler colonialism. The legacy of the residential schools does not merely require education in order for settlers to “fill the gaps in our history education knowledge.” The TRC promotes reconciliation through the cure of remembering, but this model fails to see how discourses of forgetting a violent past and present are crucial to the justification and perpetuation of settler violence and the Canadian state. Insofar as state recognition does not call into question the legitimacy and prevailing power structures of the Canadian state, it cannot truly acknowledge the continued violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples.

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ANNA COOK is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of the Fraser Valley (BC). Her dissertation, “Unable to Hear: Settler Ignorance and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” provides an epistemic evaluation of settler colonialism in terms of settlers’ disavowal of past and ongoing settler-colonial violence.