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‘Killing the Indian in the Child’: Truth and Reconciliation in the Cultural Construction of Indigenous Childhood

This paper examines the construction of childhood in Canada’s national narrative of truth and reconciliation regarding the residential schooling of Aboriginal children. In particular, it focuses on how the phrase ‘killing the Indian in the child’ has become resonant with the recent formation of the Indigenous Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the official Apology by the Conservative government in Canada. I discuss the metaphorical and material dimensions of aboriginality and childhood as codes of nation building, their significance to the historical formation of government policy on residential schooling and to the contemporary process of “reconciliation” as outlined in official Canadian government documents such as the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. I also examine other strategies of decolonization in Aboriginal storytelling and testimonial initiatives. In the latter case, I outline the philosophical principles involved in Indigenous storytelling by Indigenous writers and artists, including Jo-ann Archibald, Jeannette Armstrong, Beth Brant, Douglas Cardinal, and Thomas King and how these foundational principles are being taken up as a way of gathering and producing testimonial narratives by survivors of residential schooling. One of the key aspects of these testimonial stories is the construction of childhood experience. In my discussion of these testimonial stories I focus on how they construct childhood identity in relation to notions of kinship, community, and language. While such narratives cannot elide the realities of colonial violence, I argue that they provide different frameworks for the construction and documentation of childhood, memory, and experience in the current context of decolonization.