

# The Inuit presence at the first Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission national event

## La présence inuit au premier événement national de la Commission de témoignage et réconciliation du Canada

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### Article abstract

This paper addresses various forms of healing and reconciliation among Canadian Inuit and First Nations, in regards to the Indian residential school system and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Stemming from fieldwork at the TRC's first national event in Winnipeg (June 2010), I present observations that are supplemented by previous studies on Aboriginal healing methods in Canada. Although Inuit and First Nations healing and reconciliation strategies are based on common themes—tradition and community—in practice they diverge notably, both in their principles and in their applications. First Nations seek healing by activating a sense of community that often transcends their specific cultural group or nation, using pan-Indian spiritual traditions and ceremonies. In contrast, the Inuit most commonly seek to preserve and promote specific Inuit traditions and identity as tools in their healing practices. This divergence could be seen in Inuit and First Nations' participation in the TRC. The creation of the Inuit sub-commission within the TRC in March 2010, resulting from intense lobbying by Inuit leaders, was a first sign of the group's distinctive approach to healing. But the unfolding of the TRC's first national event in Winnipeg showed again how these differences materialise in practice and contribute to a better understanding of Inuit responses to the repercussions of their colonial past and strategies for healing from the legacy of residential schooling.

## Note de recherche / Research note

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# The Inuit presence at the first Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission national event

Marie-Pierre Gadoua\*

**Résumé:** La présence inuit au premier événement national de la Commission de témoignage et réconciliation du Canada

Cet article porte sur les formes de guérison et de réconciliation des Inuit et des Premières Nations du Canada dans le contexte des pensionnats autochtones et de la Commission de témoignage et réconciliation (CTR). Générées par un travail de terrain effectué lors du premier événement national de la CTR à Winnipeg (juin 2010), mes observations sont appuyées par de récentes études sur les modes de guérison des Autochtones du Canada. Bien que les stratégies de guérison et de réconciliation des Inuit et des Premières Nations soient issues de thèmes communs — tradition et communauté — leur déploiement diffère visiblement, tant sur le plan des principes que sur celui des applications. D'une part, les stratégies de guérison des Premières Nations passent souvent par un sens de la communauté qui transcende les groupes culturels ou les nations et qui fait usage de traditions et de cérémonies pan-autochtones. De leur côté, les Inuit font davantage appel à la préservation et à la promotion des traditions et de l'identité inuit en tant qu'outils de guérison. Cette divergence s'observe également dans la participation des Premières Nations et des Inuit à la CTR. La création de la sous-commission inuit au sein de la CTR, fruit d'un lobbying intense de la part de leaders inuit, fut un premier signe de cette divergence. Mais le déploiement du premier événement national de la CTR à Winnipeg a également démontré de façon concrète comment cette distinction s'articule en pratique, contribuant ainsi à une meilleure compréhension de la réponse qu'apportent les Inuit face aux répercussions de leur passé colonial, ainsi que de leurs modes de guérison relatifs aux pensionnats autochtones.

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**Abstract:** The Inuit presence at the first Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission national event

This paper addresses various forms of healing and reconciliation among Canadian Inuit and First Nations, in regards to the Indian residential school system and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Stemming from fieldwork at the TRC's first national event in Winnipeg (June 2010), I present observations that are supplemented by previous studies on Aboriginal healing methods in Canada. Although Inuit and First Nations healing and reconciliation strategies are based on common themes—tradition and community—in practice they diverge notably, both in their principles and in their applications. First Nations seek healing by activating a sense of community that often transcends their specific cultural group or nation, using pan-Indian spiritual traditions and ceremonies. In contrast, the Inuit most commonly seek to preserve and promote specific Inuit traditions and identity as tools in their healing practices. This divergence could be seen in Inuit and First Nations' participation in the TRC. The creation of the Inuit sub-commission within the TRC in March 2010, resulting from intense lobbying by Inuit leaders, was a first sign of the group's distinctive approach to healing. But the unfolding of the TRC's first national event in Winnipeg showed again how these differences materialise in practice and contribute to a better understanding of Inuit responses to the repercussions of their colonial past and strategies for healing from the legacy of residential schooling.

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## **Introduction**

In June 2010, the first national event of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) took place in Winnipeg, bringing together Inuit, First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal Canadians to acknowledge the experience of former students of residential schools. The TRC is organised by the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement, the largest class action settlement in Canadian history, which was brought by former students against the federal government and Canadian churches. The aim of the settlement is to begin to repair the harm caused by residential schools throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, notably through compensation to former students and establishment of the TRC.

Indian residential schools were founded by the federal government in the 1870s and operated by Canadian churches of various denominations (Roman Catholic, Anglican Church of Canada, United Church of Canada, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Methodist) throughout the entire country until the 1990s. Based on the boarding school system of the United States, Canada's Indian residential schools aimed to educate Aboriginal children and assimilate them into mainstream Canadian society and culture. Over a span of 100 years, about 100,000 Aboriginal children attended (Miller 1996; Milloy 1999). They were forbidden to speak their Aboriginal languages and were taught a Canadian curriculum entirely in English (or French in

Quebec). Daily life followed a rigorous routine and forms of discipline that were foreign to most Aboriginal ways. Owing to their intensely programmatic structure, Indian residential schools are often described as (sociologist Erving Goffman's) "total institutions" (Kelm 1998). Children were taken away from their parents and abruptly removed from their traditions and language. As a result, they often left school feeling ashamed of their origins. In addition, many were physically and sexually abused in these institutions. Now adults, they are often traumatised, and the ongoing impacts are transmitted to subsequent generations. Rates of alcoholism, violence, sexual abuse, and suicide among Canadian Aboriginal communities are often linked to this legacy (Chrisjohn et al. 1997; Haig-Brown 1988; Johnston 1989; Knockwood and Thomas 1992; Lomawaima 1993; Millow 1999; O'Neil 1993).

In the Arctic, the residential school era lasted from 1955 to 1970, when the Department of Northern Affairs ran education before handing it over to the Northwest Territories government. In 1955, only a small proportion of Inuit children attended the schools (15%), but by June 1964, 75% of school-aged Inuit children were enrolled (King 2006). There were various types of Arctic residential schools: missions, hostels, and boarding schools. Most of them, however, were considered "federal day schools" by Northern Affairs. The Inuit students stayed in nearby small or large hostels that could accommodate eight to a hundred children. Although the federal government did not use the term "residential school," the children who attended these institutions and lived in the hostels nearby, far away from their original homes, were considered residential school students (King 2006).

The Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, established in 1991 to address Aboriginal status issues flowing from the Oka Crisis and the Meech Lake Accord, first made the government and the public aware of the trauma and legacy caused by the residential school system. In its final report, the Commission recommended a residential school public inquiry (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996). After delivering a Statement of Reconciliation in 1998, the Canadian government founded the Aboriginal Healing Foundation to support community-based projects that address the legacy of residential schools. In 2006, the government signed the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and announced a substantial compensation package for former students. The Settlement Agreement also recommended establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

"Truth commissions" are relatively new forms of judicial practices that emerged in the 1970s. Generally, they address national crimes and acts of violence, human rights abuses, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Since 1973, more than 20 truth commissions have been established around the world<sup>1</sup>, by international organisations like the United Nations, NGOs, and churches; most, however, are organised by national governments

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<sup>1</sup> Uganda (1974 and 1986-1995), Paraguay (1976), Bolivia (1982-1984), Argentina (1983-1984), Uruguay (1985), Zimbabwe (1985), Brazil (1986), the Philippines (1986), Chile (1990-1991), Chad (1991-1992), El Salvador (1992-1993), Germany (1992-1994), Ethiopia (1993-2000), Honduras (1993), Rwanda (1993), South Africa (1995), Haiti (1995-1996), Guatemala (1997-1999), Sierra Leone (1999-), and East Timor (1999-2000).

(Avruch and Vejarano 2001). In general, their mandate is to gather official documentation of acts of violence perpetrated by national institutions and to promote reconciliation between these institutions and their victims. Although some name individual perpetrators, the vast majority are concerned with the “institutional responsibility” of the states (Wilson 2003). Unlike tribunals and courts of law that render verdicts and order punishments, truth commissions cannot by their nature deliver such forms of justice. They provide an alternative form of justice, commonly called “transitional” or “restorative,” based on forgiveness and reconciliation (Minow 1998; Tutu 1999).

The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been mandated to record testimonies of experiences in Indian residential schools, to teach the Canadian population about this past, its impacts, and ongoing legacy, and to guide and inspire First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and non-Aboriginal Canadians in their process of healing and reconciliation. Its regular activities include local events where Aboriginal communities invite the commissioners to hear and record statements by former students. The latter are also invited to share their stories in a “memory book,” available on the TRC website. The TRC also plans to build a national research centre accessible to former students, their families and communities, the general public, researchers, and educators who wish to study and use this historic material in their curricula. Finally, the TRC has been holding national gatherings in various parts of the country. Unlike the local events and the recording of statements through memory books, these national events are public and allow everyone to learn about residential schools and to hear the stories of former students. Different Aboriginal groups are invited to meet and share their experiences in residential schools.

From June 16 to 19, 2010, hundreds of Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, and church officials from all over the country gathered at The Forks in Winnipeg for the first of these national events. I had the opportunity to attend as the principal research assistant of Dr. Ronald Niezen, Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology of McGill University, who conducts research in legal anthropology and on Indigenous rights and identity (e.g., Niezen 2003, 2004, 2009, 2010). Since 2008 I have been participating in his research activities, notably the ones pertaining to truth commissions, closely following the establishment and unfolding of the Canadian TRC, and organising and/or conducting interviews with former residential school students, priests, and nuns who were or are involved in residential school activities and the TRC process (see Niezen 2010, chapter 6).

I attended the national event in Winnipeg with a mandate to observe and record the public sharing of testimonies by former students, the exhibitions and information sessions about residential schools, and various ceremonies and cultural demonstrations by Aboriginal groups. During fieldwork, I was struck by the Inuit presence. Their discourse and healing practices diverged notably from mainstream activities held by other First Nations groups. I witnessed a significant physical (on-site) divide between Inuit and First Nations’ public demonstrations, as well as some essential disparities in their discourses and conceptualisations of their healing and reconciliation processes. In

this paper, I ask how we can make sense of these distinctions at the TRC event. The suggestions I put forth are inspired by the healing strategies, which serve not just to confront the injustices and legacies left by a history of colonisation, but also to form and reaffirm collective identities as a means of political and social activism.

### **Healing and reconciliation strategies among Canadian Aboriginal groups**

In the context of truth commissions, the concept of reconciliation is crucial and intimately linked to the notion of healing. Here, reconciliation can be considered in terms of the community (or nation) and the individual. On the national level, reconciliation is the desired outcome of a restorative justice system. Its purpose is to correct past mistakes and to restore (reconcile) relationships between national institutions (or the state) and victims of institutional violence (Blackburn 2007; Minow 1998; Montville 1989; Wilson 2003). Reconciliation is also about the national state reconciling with its own self, and its past policies and crimes. It implies a view of the state as an organic body in need of healing, a societal healing, that will be carried out by the truth commission. On the personal level, reconciliation is made with one's (traumatic) past, one's relatives and community, and one's culture, traditions, and ancestors. It implies forgiveness (Hope 1987; Tutu 1999), and is mainly achieved through healing ("healing journeys") that often takes years, if not an entire lifespan. Truth commissions may, or may not, play a role in individual healing journeys. In general, communal sharing and recognition of suffering, as well as community support, are crucial for personal healing processes, especially for Aboriginal peoples, as I will demonstrate in the discussion below. Despite some scepticism about how the shift between individual healing and societal healing occurs during truth commission processes (Goodman 1999; Ignatieff 1996; Lerche 2000; Winslow 1997), it can be argued that both the individual level and the community level (societal and/or national) are in many ways intertwined and interdependent (Lederach 1999; Tutu 1999).

Healing and reconciliation among Canadian Aboriginal groups commonly refer to individual and collective suffering caused by colonisation, cultural oppression, forced assimilation, and absorption into a global economy (Kirmayer, Tait and Simpson 2009). These issues have important connections with the residential school system that played a key role in directing government assimilation policies. The processes of healing and reconciliation developed by Canada's Aboriginal peoples are diverse and subject to change. However, they tend to focus on two major themes: tradition and community. These two themes are approached differently by Inuit and First Nations.

During the 1990s, a team of researchers examined specific healing programs across Canada for a study by the National Network for Aboriginal Mental Health Research (Waldram 2008). Their goal was to acknowledge the variety of models and metaphors of healing among various case studies, in order to help launch these initiatives while adapting them along the way to keep them viable in the future. The general observation was that various forms of Aboriginal spirituality were integrated into all programs, often mixed with New Age and non-Aboriginal therapeutic

approaches (Waldram 2008a). The programs often borrow traditional practices from other Aboriginal groups. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as “pan-Indianism,” has political and social roots mostly in Indigenous activism and the encounter between activists in their negotiations with nation-states (Adelson 2000; Lerch and Bullers 1996). There is also a spiritual dimension to pan-Indianism: “Pan-Indian spiritual healing can be described as a culturally generalized representation of indigenous identity, particularly in terms of religious beliefs and spiritual practices; it lacks a specific reference or boundedness to any one Aboriginal cultural tradition” (Brass 2009: 358-59; see also Kirmayer, Brass and Valaskakis 2009; Waldram 1997). In general, it borrows heavily from the traditions and cultural images of the Plain societies, but also Navajo, Hopi, Cree, South American tribes, and others. Waldram noted that this pan-Indian spirituality is key to understanding of the notion of “traditionality,” and that this “whatever works” attitude shows a high flexibility and openness of Aboriginal groups in their healing strategies (Waldram 2008a: 4).

Such borrowing of traditions can be linked to the concept of “invented traditions,” developed by Hobsbawm and observed throughout the world at different times. Invented traditions are “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1). Hobsbawm differentiates between invented traditions and genuine ones. The former, often seen in movements for the defence or revival of traditions, indicate a break in continuity from past to present. Consequently, individuals and/or groups pick elements from a collective past (or here, from a collective pan-Indian identity) to reaffirm themselves as a distinct group (or as a member of this group) and to heal traumas that were part of this break. On the other hand, genuine traditions have not suffered any break; it is their strength and adaptability that we observe in the present. In general, what matters for individuals in their healing journey is not the origin of a practice, but its effectiveness as a “symbolic representation of a holistic way of life that is promoted as a positive Aboriginal legacy” (Waldram 2008a: 6).

By and large these traditional approaches to healing have a strong spiritual component and are generally performed as a ceremonial ritual. Interestingly, the broad concept of “ceremony” has now emerged as a common healing tool, without reference to any cultural group in particular. Whether it be sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, tobacco ceremonies, sacred fire ceremonies, berry ceremonies, or even Christian ceremonies, performing a “ceremony” is crucial to healing and reconciliation among Canada’s Aboriginal groups, regardless of its historical and cultural origins (see Hodgson 2008). In other words, First Nations’ healing programs rely on concepts of community, tradition, and ceremony that go beyond one’s own group or nation. It is very important to be able to share one’s pain, to recount one’s experiences, and to embark on one’s healing journeys with others, to feel understood and supported by a community with similar experiences, whatever one’s nation. The common platform is the lasting legacy of trauma and pain experienced in government-led educational institutions. First Nations make sense of their suffering and value it as part of a larger

collective struggle, thus motivating the reconstruction of collective memory and identity (Kirmayer, Tait and Simpson 2009: 26; see also Adelson 2000). For instance, Friesen et al. (2010) noted that residential schools have become the single most powerful element in Prairie Aboriginal peoples' perception of their 20th-century history. The authors surveyed 100 Aboriginal people in central Saskatchewan. The respondents gave residential schools a major place in their perception of their history and hence a similar role in their identity building. This self-perception thus transcended their specific cultural group or nation.

An Inuit community from Nunavut also participated in the above-mentioned study by the National Network for Aboriginal Mental Health Research (Waldrum 2008). The results were quite different. Although Inuit also rely heavily on traditions to design and develop healing programs, they do so principally according to their specific cultural practices and worldviews, and without necessarily drawing on pan-Indian references (Fletcher and Denham 2008). While the Inuit remain open to external practices, these must be understood and built on principles inherent to their culture and society, in a way that is meaningful and effective for them. This is the case with healing circles, a common practice of pan-Indian spirituality, which the Inuit had adopted by the 21st century. The basic principles of the healing circles, especially public testimonies, confessions, and reintegration of the suffering person into the community, can correspond and resonate with traditional Inuit practices (Laugrand and Oosten 2010). But the Inuit-organised healing circles have also been transformed through the inclusion of essential Inuit references, such as a constantly lit oil lamp (*qulliq*), drum dancing, singing, and praying. Healing circles are practised mostly in Inuktitut and sometimes organised with travels on the land. The healing circles organised by and for the Inuit have a clear Inuit signature (Lapage 1997)<sup>2</sup>.

The Inuit resist pan-Indian spirituality first because of their strong commitment to Christianity. Among many Inuit, there is much coexistence of traditional and Christian practices (notably Pentecostal and Evangelical movements). They construct and affirm their current Inuit identity using both religious worldviews. Although Christianity was introduced among the Inuit at the cost of total eradication of shamanism, it has nevertheless been incorporated into other Inuit traditions, language, and culture (Laugrand 2002; Laugrand and Oosten 2010).

Contemporary Inuit modes of healing that integrate traditional Inuit and Christian concepts and practices are commonly called "ecocentric," meaning that they attribute a central role to connections between individuals, and between individuals and places (the land, the animals, and other beings that populate it) in personal health and well-being (Kirmayer, Fletcher and Watt 2009; Stairs 1992; Stairs and Wenzel 1992). Thus, Inuit ways of healing are not necessarily ceremonial—they are mostly grounded in everyday life and interactions. For the Inuit, healing is synonymous with living a good life in the community, in close relation to the land. Many practices facilitate healing, and are related to traditional Inuit culture: living, working and sharing with family

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Brass (2009) for examples of Inuit scepticism and discomfort towards pan-Indian healing circles.



members and the community, speaking Inuktitut, travelling across the land, hunting, eating country food, and making traditional tools, clothing, handcrafts, and art<sup>3</sup>.

All of these activities are helpful not only because they are linked to ancestral traditions, but also because they represent the “proper ordering of one’s life experiences, living comfortably in the company of others, being within the proper place on both a social and a physical level, and being fully aware of, and moving in, the appropriate trajectory through the world” (Fletcher and Denham 2008: 127; see also Kirmayer, Fletcher and Watt 2009). Niezen (2009) discussed this link to the past through the concept of “therapeutic history,” i.e., when people refer to their origins through cultural self-discovery and healing from past traumas (e.g., cultural genocide) as a way to build self-esteem and maintain the collective self when facing injustices and rapid change. “It isolates and preferably brings to life through images, artefacts, and ceremonies, a time when one’s people were stronger, healthier, more autonomous, and above all, more respected” (Niezen 2009: 153). This phenomenon is typical of post-colonial contexts, and is directed toward healing from loss of land, cultural assimilation, and economic dependency.

Referring specifically to Inuit, Stevenson (2006) suggested that remembering the past (through the practice of traditions) has become for them a form of “Inuit technology of the self” (following Foucault’s (1997) term), a form of personal ethics aimed at taking care of the self and supporting Inuit cultural survival. It also implies a certain degree of personal transformation because these traditions have to be learned and integrated into one’s (modern) life—a process not necessarily natural or straightforward, especially in urban settings or for younger generations. Culturally specific ecocentric modes of healing are essentially difficult to reconcile with pan-Indian forms of spirituality. Some references can be borrowed, or shared, but they have to be transformed and adapted to Inuit traditions.

A final, but nonetheless important difference between Inuit modes of healing and First Nations’ is the sense of community, and more specifically the insistence on Inuit *distinctiveness* among other Canadian Aboriginals. The political and cultural category “Inuit” is relatively new. Before the 1970s, Inuit collective identity and sense of belonging referred to groups of extended families that occupied specific territories across the Arctic. The sudden need to defend themselves in the national political arena, to sign treaties, and to negotiate for their rights on the national and international levels and the modernisation of the means and technology of communication over their vast territory provided the basis for redefining and drawing a collective boundary. They began to focus less on their regional differences, and more on their broad cultural and linguistic resemblances (Hicks and White 2000; Simon 1996; Searles 2006; Stevenson 2006). The first Arctic People Conference in 1973 and the creation of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in 1980 were important initial steps towards their recognition as a unique Inuit nation. The creation of the Nunavut territory played a central and decisive role in this process. Their self-determination has essentially been expressed by

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<sup>3</sup> See Igloliorte (2009) for a discussion on how contemporary Inuit artists have maintained cultural resilience and used their art as an instrument of both personal and collective healing.

highlighting their distinctiveness from other communities within Canada (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups). The notion of *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* ('Inuit traditional knowledge') has been used by the Nunavut government as a way to institutionalise this distinctiveness. Since the late 1990s, *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* has been a key concept and tool for the Inuit in managing their political and social arenas and restoring their collective pride and individual self-esteem (Oosten and Laugrand 2002; Wenzel 2004). Thus, use of Inuit culture and ways is not solely limited to healing processes in the residential school context; it is a general tool commonly used by the Inuit in their political and social strategies to cope with the legacy of trauma, the colonisation of the Arctic, and the multiple stressors of contemporary life (Kral and Idlout 2009).

### **Inuit and First Nations' presence at the TRC national event in Winnipeg**

Before turning to the TRC national event in Winnipeg, we should consider the unsettled relationship that has existed between the Inuit and the TRC since its implementation. The Canadian TRC was officially launched on June 2, 2008, a few days before official apologies expressed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper for the residential school system. Partly due to internal conflicts and their diverging views on the TRC, the Chair of the Commission (Justice Harry S. Laforme) and its two commissioners (Claudette Dumont-Smith and Jane Brewin Morley) resigned in October 2008 and January 2009. In June 2009, a new Chair was appointed (Justice Murray Sinclair) with two new commissioners (Mary Wilson and Wilton Littlechild). Also in June 2009, some Inuit publicly began to raise concerns about lack of Inuit representation on the TRC, among them Peter Irniq, former Commissioner of Nunavut and a former residential school student:

The failure to appoint an Inuk to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a national disgrace. [...]. We Inuit are not Indians. There is nothing safe or culturally appropriate for Inuit about the forum the federal government has created to hear our residential-school experience. Inuit, Indians and Métis are recognized in this country as three distinct groups of aboriginal people. The government of Canada should have made sure that all three were represented on the commission (Irniq 2009).

The president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Mary Simon, also said in *Nunatsiaq News*: "This process is important. It was established by the government of Canada, it is long overdue, and it is tied to the apology. [Inuit residential school survivors] need a place where they can feel comfortable and secure enough to tell their stories in the language they want" (Simon 2009). In addition, Irniq reminded Canadians that the TRC was not the first Truth Commission in which Inuit had participated. The Qikiqtani Inuit Association (Inuit of the Baffin Region) had already organised a Truth Commission in 2007-2008, headed by Jim Igloliorte, a respected Inuk judge from Nunatsiavut (Labrador), to look at the experience of Inuit in the Qikiqtani region and to

deal with the difficult times Qikiqtanimiut experienced in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s<sup>4</sup>.

Irniq's and Simon's claims finally led to creation of an Inuit sub-commission within the TRC. On June 8, 2010, two directors were appointed: Jennifer Hunt-Poitras, raised in Pond Inlet, a former residential school student and an award-winning journalist with CBC North Television, and Robert Watt, a former coordinator of a regional committee for the promotion and amelioration of safety and well-being of Inuit children, whose parents and grandparents had attended residential schools. The Inuit sub-commission aims to offer an appropriate context for testimonies in a setting that is more attuned to Inuit experiences and their remote communities.

The TRC's national event in Winnipeg offered an opportunity to observe and appreciate the reasons for creation of an Inuit sub-commission. The main goals of the event were to acknowledge those who had suffered in the residential schools and who were still suffering. Healing and community were central themes. During four days, various events took place at The Forks, a highly symbolic site for Aboriginal groups in Manitoba because it had been a gathering location for them and their ancestors for over 6,000 years. The most popular public activities were the "commissioners' sharing circles." Held during three days, this activity allowed participants to give their testimonies in the presence of the TRC's commissioners. A private space was also provided for those who wished to do so confidentially. Other activities were on a daily basis, notably discussions in the Interfaith Tent by the four major churches of Canada (Roman Catholic, United, Anglican, and Presbyterian), and information sessions in the Learning Tent about residential school history and its impact. In addition, there were movie screenings, plays, exhibitions, and an academic conference on the residential schools' legacy.

The whole event had an intense level of cultural expression and spirituality. Each day started off with ceremonies held by various Aboriginal leaders ("Lightning and Sacred Fire Ceremony," "Pipe Ceremony and Four Directions Drum Calling," and "Releasing Tears Prayers" in the afternoon). The ceremonies took place in the Oodena Celebration Circle, a circular amphitheatre in The Forks. Every day, meditation sessions were held in the Mind, Body and Spirit Tent. Sweat lodges were organised every night at the Whitter and Birds Hill Parks. Spirituality was also very much present during the hearings in the Commissioners' Sharing Circle. During these meetings, sweetgrass was constantly burning, accompanied by smudging. This ritual consisted of

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<sup>4</sup> The mandate of the Qikiqtanik Truth Commission was to: "conduct an inquiry to investigate facts, interview witnesses, hold public hearings and to report to the members of Qikiqtani Inuit Association and to the public, the truth surrounding the alleged 'dog slaughter,' 'relocations' and other decision-making of the Government up until 1980, and its effect on Inuit culture, economy and way of life. The Qikiqtani Truth Commission's main objective was to ensure an accurate history of the events referred to above. The truth and reconciliation process seeks to promote healing for those who suffered wrongdoings, as well as to heal relations between Inuit and the Government by providing an opportunity for uncovering all pertinent facts and allowing for acknowledgement and forgiveness" (Qikiqtanik Truth Commission 2010).

taking the smoke in one's hands and brushing it over the body to cleanse oneself of any bad feelings, negative thoughts, or energy and evil spirits (both physically and spiritually). The ultimate goal was to accomplish the rest of the ceremony (here, sharing stories about residential schools) in a sacred manner, guided by the spirits. For similar purposes, cups of sacred water were given to participants throughout the meetings. Yellow blankets were placed in the middle of the sharing circle, onto which the participants were asked to throw their tissues soaked with tears, and the cups that contained the sacred water. These were to be disposed of with a special ritual involving a sacred fire, as an offering to the spirits. Similarly, special rocks were given to participants, to be held in their hands while giving their statements. The rocks would receive and hold the feelings and pain that came up during the testimonies.

The Inuit organised many public events during the four days. The events featured activities that the Inuit felt were more representative of their culture: throat singing, games, drum dancing, and singing. An Inuit Tent held ongoing public activities, including the exhibition "We Were So Far Away: The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools," featuring photographs and testimonies of eight former students of residential schools in the Canadian Arctic. Additionally, the tent offered Inuktitut lessons and sewing demonstrations for the public. Both activities, as outlined on a panel at the tent entrance, aimed to demonstrate that the language and the sewing traditions, despite the assaults by the residential school system, are still alive and present in Inuit culture, and are being preserved and promoted.

### **Inuit and First Nations' public practices**

The smudging ceremony, the drinking of sacred water, and the sweat lodges have their origins among specific Aboriginal groups in Canada (notably the Anishinaabe, the most dominant nation during the event, as well as some other groups from the Plains). These ceremonies were adopted and practised by the vast majority of participants, regardless of their origin. Some participants in the sharing circles would present themselves as "Traditionalists," alluding to their religious perspective without referring to a specific group, culture, or nation. The various participants were demonstrating their loyalty to a single pan-Canadian Aboriginal community, composed of residential school "Survivors" (as they commonly call themselves) and their families.

Very few Inuit attended the public sharing circles. Actually, the only Inuk that I witnessed was a woman at the "Women's Sharing Circle," one of the activities held in the Commissioners' Sharing Circle in the afternoon of June 17th. The Circle began with a detailed presentation of the meaning and function of the sacred water, the smudging, the ancestor's rocks, and the blankets used for soaked tissues. Every woman who attended the Circle confidently practised the rituals; clearly this was not their first time. The only exception was the Inuk woman who had travelled all the way from the Arctic to tell her father's story. Essentially her statement was not so different from the others—her father had been sent to the Aklavik residential school at a very young age, and she described the pain that he and his family had suffered. However, she ended by

declaring how proud she was to be there, even though she was unfamiliar with the sacred water and the smoke that everyone used during the meeting. She expressed, rather courageously in front of about a hundred participants and spectators, her unfamiliarity and perplexity towards these foreign rituals, and she was warmly applauded.

The Inuit cultural activities at this event were very different and were held separately from other First Nations ceremonies. Their main purpose was to demonstrate that the Inuit culture had survived the residential school system: Inuktitut is still spoken, and sewing, throat singing, drum dancing, and various games are still practised. These activities were used both as healing practices for Inuit former students and their families and as reconciliation strategies vis-à-vis the non-Inuit: Canadians must know about Inuit culture if they want to reconcile their lives with one another in the future. Peter Irniq, who attended the TRC event, gave public talks about Nunavut and Inuit language and culture. During one of his presentations, I asked him whether he had participated in one of the TRC sharing circles, or if he had planned to do so. He replied that for him healing should be done by protecting and promoting Inuit culture and language, i.e., by performing throat singing, Inuit games, and drum dancing and by promoting Inuit culture around the world and, more importantly, within Canada. According to him, performing Inuit dances and songs, and speaking about Inuit culture bring positive feelings. Irniq also felt that for reconciliation to occur more Canadians need to know about Inuit culture and language<sup>5</sup>.

## Conclusion

There was an apparent paradox in participation by Inuit at the Canadian TRC. First, they voluntarily associated themselves with this national project by identifying as “Survivors” of the Indian residential school system. Indeed, they share this common history with other First Nations and the Métis, along with the trauma, suffering, and legacy it involves. However, they joined the TRC process on the condition of having a *distinct* Inuit sub-commission. Accordingly, their participation clearly stood out because it differed from what was said and done by other Aboriginal peoples. This is reflected in the unique Inuit ways of conceptualising healing, both in discourse and practice. Nevertheless, this “yes, but” attitude towards the Canadian TRC becomes less paradoxical as part of an integral and general response to colonial history that the Inuit have shared with other Canadian Aboriginal peoples. To face the traumas of a colonial past and to build a strong future for Inuit communities, their most effective tool is this very *distinctiveness* as a people.

In writing this paper, my aim was to focus on the divergence between the Inuit and the First Nations in their healing and reconciliation strategies, and especially to suggest how it will continue to unfold at subsequent TRC national events. Coincidentally, the next national gathering will be in June 2011 in Inuvik, an Arctic town inhabited by

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Irniq’s public presentation in the Inuit Tent on June 19, 2010, The Forks, Winnipeg.

Inuvialuit, Dene, and non-Aboriginal peoples. How will the event be organised? What will be its general atmosphere? Which specific activities will take place? And how will it compare with the first event in Winnipeg and subsequent gatherings (to be held in Atlantic Canada, British Columbia, Quebec, Alberta, Saskatchewan, plus the closure ceremony in Ottawa)? The geographic location of Inuvik will certainly encourage more Inuit to attend and participate. Consequently, I suspect that the atmosphere of the gathering will differ from the previous one in Winnipeg, with less emphasis on First Nations ceremonies and spirituality and more on Inuit traditions and cultural demonstrations.

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