

Preface
Tracing Memory in Naomi Angel's Archive

JAMIE BERTHE AND EUGENIA KISIN

I am left with the feeling that reconciliation is an act of creation. It is about new conversations and discussions, about creating new archives, producing artwork, dialogue and new relationships.

—NAOMI ANGEL, tracingmemory.com, October 3, 2012

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on Indian residential schools (IRS), the inquiry that this book chronicles, released its final report in 2015. A massive archive of trauma, affect, and resilience, it testifies to Indigenous peoples' experiences of the brutally violent residential school system in Canada. The release of the TRC's *Final Report* was accompanied by ninety-four "calls to action": recommendations for transforming—indeed, reconciling—settler and Indigenous publics across the nation now known as Canada, primarily via changes in institutions of law, medicine, and higher education. That spring, performative and collective readings of the calls proliferated widely across art institutions in Canada, helping to amplify the recommendations. They have been echoing ever since, intertwined with strong Indigenous critiques of the TRC and its outcomes, as the settler state of Canada continues to reckon with what it means to acknowledge genocide and Indigenous survivance simultaneously.¹

Naomi Angel, the author of this book, died in February 2014, before the commission had completed its work. She did not live to hear the calls to action or to witness the recent iterations of decolonization and indigenization of the academy—profound, incomplete, and full of friction—as generations of Indigenous activism were magnified by the cultural and moral weight of the TRC's findings. Less than five years later, in 2019, the

National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) produced its own final report and calls for justice.² Starting in spring 2021, the unearthing of unmarked graves on the grounds of several former residential schools—increasingly recognized as crime scenes and sites of mourning—continued to bring the TRC’s findings into focus for the larger public. None of this is to say that Indigenous movements and communities required validation through the curious nonjudicial inquiry that was the TRC; rather, we wish only to gesture toward the profound and cumulative effect of the years since Angel’s passing for shifting the conversation in the public sphere toward Indigenous justice.

Angel left us as a young mother and brilliant early-career academic, her research and ideas yet unfolding, her work still unfinished. The manuscript she left behind remains vital and relevant nonetheless. As friends and colleagues who have been affected by her intellectual legacy, our intention in this preface is as much a task of translation as one of framing. We want to explain the significance of *Fragments of Truth* as we understand it, to underscore the manuscript’s most salient contributions as seen from our vantage point writing in 2021, seven years beyond the end of her life and six years out from the conclusion of the TRC. In working with the text, it quickly became apparent that we would not simply be able to “update” her research or bring it into full conversation with the still-unfolding events of the traumatic present, given that we cannot possibly know how Angel’s singular mind would interpret everything that has happened in the TRC’s wake. Instead, we want to suggest that engaging with Angel’s interpretation of events, made at a particular moment of the TRC, can augment our collective understanding of present conditions, specifically with respect to conversations about how to shoulder the “burden of reconciliation” and decolonization’s complex and layered subjectivities.³

This project feels particularly fraught in the present moment. In 2020 the Canadian federal government’s denial of established Aboriginal land titles and the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chief’s objections to a proposed gas pipeline route in British Columbia generated a full-blown political crisis. For much of early 2020, rail transit and trade across the country were shut down by protests in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en, bringing together Indigenous and environmental activists against the state police’s violent attempts to push the pipeline through by attacking and dismantling the land defenders’ encampment. Work continued on the pipeline throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; indeed, protesters reported continued pipeline work by Coastal GasLink employees even amid the province’s declared state



FIGURE P.1 Two hundred fifteen children's pairs of shoes placed on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery as a memorial to the 215 children whose remains were discovered at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, May 28, 2021. The Canadian Press/Darryl Dyck.

of emergency and on-hold negotiations. Given this ongoing struggle, it is important to attend to the wrenching declaration of Wet'suwet'en land defenders who—after witnessing the government's failure to honor its agreement of free, prior, and informed Indigenous consent for resource-extraction projects (signed on to in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples)—declared reconciliation dead (and revolution alive).

Then, in May 2021, on the heels of this crisis, the remains of 215 Indigenous children were uncovered on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia (see figure P.1). Members of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation had known about the burials and missing children for many years but were able to confirm the locations of the bodies only after bringing in specialists who were able to locate the remains with ground-penetrating radar. In late June the Cowessess First Nation undertook its own search and confirmed 751 unmarked graves at the site of the Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan. Several days later, in Cranbrook, British Columbia, another 182 graves were confirmed at St. Eugene's Mission School. These grim findings—which are likely to be the first of many as communities continue to search other school grounds—led

to an outpouring of public grief and political mobilization on both sides of the US-Canada border. In the United States, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Pueblo/Laguna)—the first Indigenous woman to serve in this position—has, in explicit response to these events, commissioned a federal investigation to examine the sites of former residential schools on US territory. In an op-ed published by the *Washington Post* on June 11, 2021, Haaland expressed the need to bring this trauma to light in radically personal terms, for both of her grandparents were survivors of boarding schools: “Many of the boarding schools were maintained by the Interior Department, which I now lead.”⁴ Haaland’s words point to the ways that these histories are alive and resonant through time and across borders. The proposed federal investigation, and even Haaland’s complicated relationship to state power, echo some of the tensions that animated the TRC, pointing to both the political anger and the sense of hope that national, state-sponsored attention can bring to the process of collective reckoning.

In dialogue with this present, Angel’s manuscript suggests that if there is anything to be salvaged from Canada’s project of reconciliation, returning to the TRC’s earlier moments offers one potential way to recover some of those fragments—particularly through images, testimonies, and gatherings—and to understand their revolutionary portent. Angel set out to examine how various, often conflicting, notions of “truth” were deployed and mobilized by the IRS TRC, focusing in particular on the role played by visual media in the reconciliation process. Compelled by the affective pull, ideological instability, and provocation of a wide variety of visual phenomena—including archival images, Indigenous artwork and films, the national gatherings, and the physical structures of former residential schools themselves—Angel sought to consider the historical pathways that have been traversed by disparate visual artifacts and technologies, as well as their potential trajectories into unknown futures. Most importantly, she noted how visual culture troubles and complicates the authority of state discourses, suggesting a different set of criteria for evaluating reconciliation’s efficacies. This is especially visible in her analysis of the national gatherings as sites for Indigenous communities to reconcile within themselves and to rediscover the shared connections that have animated many forms of pan-Indigenous activism in both the past and the current moment.

Over the course of her research at the TRC national gatherings, libraries, and archives, Angel kept a blog, *Tracing Memory*, as a public repository of her witnessing of the TRC’s unfolding and concurrent Indigenous cultural activism. She used the blog as a place to work through thoughts and

impressions that didn't quite fit into her dissertation chapters, to write more publicly and immediately about the landscape of the TRC, and, at times, to reflect on what coming to terms with historical responsibility meant to her. As a Jewish-Japanese-Canadian woman, Angel approached her work consciously, closely attuned to how the weight of these multiple identities shaped her understanding of historical trauma.⁵ She was also deeply uncomfortable when well-meaning archivists and librarians read her mixed-race appearance as Indigenous, prompting a thoughtfulness about what it means to be a subject of desire to do right and about the complicated demands of allyship.⁶ Writing of a reconciliation event in Sault Ste. Marie, Angel's revelations come after "most of the academics packed up to leave," while artists stayed on to "work through many of the points of conversation (and contention) that were raised throughout the few days of the event." Angel writes about being drawn to this idea, of "collaborative creation" as both a method and an outcome of the TRC, one that is not necessarily the purview of the academy. It is significant that we do not know from her story whether Angel left or stayed; either way, she makes space for collaborative creations to be the outcome that matters.⁷

In her public and scholarly writing, Angel followed both an intentional and inadvertent ethics of being a vulnerable observer.⁸ She was pregnant for much of her research and later sick from the genetic breast cancer that declared the Ashkenazi heritage living through her body.⁹ Following her diagnosis, she started a new blog, *Everybody Hearts*, documenting her treatment and providing updates to her many friends and colleagues. "I used to write a lot: short stories, a personal journal, academic papers, and I enjoyed it. But I was always somewhat nervous about sharing my writing," Angel explains. "When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in December, this fear began to fade away. (It was, unfortunately, replaced with plenty of other fears.) I had always wanted my writing to be as *polished* as possible before sharing, now I just want it to be as *honest* as possible."¹⁰

This simple statement might be read not only as a paring-down response to illness but also as a trace of the practice of writing about truth in conversation with Indigenous interlocutors that clarifies her idea of creative collaboration. Indeed, an important aspect of calls to make space for Indigenous critical thought in the academy and to "decolonize mastery" has to do with honoring affect that isn't particularly polished and with valuing honesty over other conventions of academic style.¹¹ Dylan Robinson, Stó:lō ethnomusicologist, one of Angel's research collaborators and coeditor of this manuscript, has written eloquently of the dangers of transforming Indigenous

anger into an aesthetic resource for performance studies.¹² For Robinson this aestheticization risks both an extractive relation to research—mining experience to perform an academic function—and missing the everyday texture of social movements as they are lived. It is this kind of honesty, we argue, that Angel was after in her practice as a writer and researcher, evincing a sensitivity to the material that is deeply felt.

After an introduction that orients readers to the book's primary themes and questions, chapter 1 of *Fragments of Truth* looks at how Canada has been framed as a “nation of tolerance” and at how this narrative can be seen to intersect with the history of both the Indian residential school system and the IRS TRC. Illustrating how the IRS system was initially framed as part of the state's project of “benevolent assimilation,” Angel explores how photographs, illustrations, and films worked to normalize, justify, and perpetuate both the existence of and the horrors wrought by the schools. Having made the relationship between colonial regimes of representation and genocidal practice explicit, Angel argues that any call for reconciliation must also be understood as a call for a profound shift in relations of looking.

In chapter 2 archival photographs produced by and in the IRS system serve as the point of departure for reflecting on how visual representations were used by the Canadian state to further the imperatives of empire. However, the inherent instability of meaning that infuses every image archive unsettles this top-down story, and Angel also insists on the evocative power and complicated entanglements of these photographs to highlight the various ways that Indigenous communities have returned to and reclaimed these archives as their own: “While image archives should be recognized as having been produced through certain contexts and within specific constraints, they are also productive, cultural spaces in and of themselves, where narratives form, coalesce *and* change.”¹³ Although the IRS images were born from a logic of control, containment, and colonial violence, Angel gestures toward the ways that former IRS students, Indigenous artists, activists, and community members have subverted this logic by reclaiming and resignifying the imperial image archive.

The interrelated acts of witnessing and offering testimony, and the role played by both at the national gatherings for the IRS TRC, constitute the focus of chapter 3. As the most public aspect of the commission's work, the national gatherings, Angel tells us, “were in many ways grandly staged performances where ‘embodied culture’ played an important role in producing meaning and negotiating memories of the IRS system.”¹⁴ Angel focuses on what she calls the political affective space engendered by these events,

arguing that “by sharing their IRS experiences at these National Gatherings, survivors often manage[d] to create a space where the public display of affect [became] a powerful mode of political intervention.”¹⁵ Weaving together her field notes from the Winnipeg and Inuvik IRS TRC events with survivor testimonies, the work of Indigenous scholars, performances by Indigenous artists, media narratives, and historical texts, this chapter opens up a conversation around the complicated dynamics of embodied reconciliation work, which, as Angel shows, can be both a contested and contestatory practice.

Chapter 4 moves away from the official work of the IRS TRC and examines the physical sites of several former residential schools as a provocation and invitation to consider how local communities have engaged in their own processes of reconciliation. Here Angel considers these sites as archives in their own right, spaces that evidence their own specific kinds of logic, histories, and memories, spaces where reconciliation is being negotiated in myriad ways. As remnants (and sometimes ruins) of the IRS system, the sites push Angel to ask whether or not it is possible to hear the “stories told by these structures” in order to construct a narrative of relationships between memory and place.¹⁶ Putting the material structures in conversation with various other voices—including literature written by Indigenous authors, testimony of survivors, cinematic representations of the schools, her own field notes, media narratives, and interviews with individuals who lived and worked in proximity to the sites—Angel wrestles with the complexity of what it means to unearth silences embedded within the physical structures of the schools themselves; to do so, she appeals, in part, to notions of spectrality and haunting. Acknowledging both the potential within and limitations of such an approach, Angel encourages readers to consider what it might mean to think about reconciliation as “a ghostly encounter.” Although it is a theme that spans the entirety of the manuscript, in this chapter Angel is acutely concerned with the ethical quandaries and the sometimes uncanny experience of bringing into presence those who are no longer alive to tell their stories. It is worth noting that in editing the book on her behalf, and in writing this preface, the resonance of these ideas has a very peculiar kind of potency.

In concluding *Fragments of Truth*, Angel tells us that her writing and research are not meant to be understood as definitive declarations but rather are meant to gesture toward both a past that needs more attention and a present that continues to unfold. For Angel the most critical question left unanswered by her research is to know whether or not the labors of

reconciliation will lead to meaningful action concerning redress and restitution for Indigenous communities. It is unfortunate but not surprising that years after the publication of the commission's *Final Report*, this question remains as urgent as ever.

In spite of its ongoing relevance, there are several silences in *Fragments of Truth* that require a response from the present moment in order to let readers in on how the TRC's legacy has continued to evolve in the public sphere. Most pressing, we believe, are the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls inquiry and the Idle No More social movement. In September 2016 the newly elected Liberal prime minister Justin Trudeau launched a national inquiry into the disproportionate number of Indigenous women and girls—sisters, mothers, granddaughters, aunts, partners, wives—who had disappeared without explanation or been killed. The inquiry was not Trudeau's compassionate invention; rather, it responded to years of pressure from community organizations, activists, and scholars to investigate the structural settler violence perpetrated against these "stolen sisters," the earlier moniker for MMIWG that emphasized injustice and kinship. Cultural production was also an extremely important space for organizing political response.¹⁷ In one of her final research blog posts, Angel drew her readers' attention to an ImagineNATIVE film festival project that displayed short films about the Stolen Sisters Initiative on Toronto subway platform screens. Her interest suggests that she was already drawing connections between the TRC and what would unfold with the MMIWG inquiry, even if these ideas did not make their way into the pages of this manuscript. The pan-Indigenous Idle No More social movement started in 2012 to protect land, water, and sovereignty. It grew out of opposition to a proposed piece of Conservative budget legislation that threatened environmental protections. Although Angel documents the initial part of the movement in this text, she did not anticipate how rapidly it would grow over social media as the #IdleNoMore hashtag inspired new generations of activists across Turtle Island in the years that followed. Despite these gaps, we are nevertheless struck by Angel's prescience about the mediated quality of activism, something that her close attention to visual culture allowed her to see and that keeps her work relevant in the contemporary moment, particularly with respect to her analysis of the schools themselves as archives. These kinds of insights continue to tie her work quite explicitly to cultural memory in present-day media worlds.

In editing the book for publication, Dylan Robinson and Jamie Berthe aimed to preserve Angel's voice and the integrity of her ideas while updating the text wherever possible, particularly in ways that they believed would

align with Angel's approach and perspective. In some instances this simply meant revising language to reflect the outcome of the IRS TRC, but in other instances it meant incorporating references that were obviously pertinent but that had been published after Angel's passing. For Robinson, contributing to this book was an opportunity to continue the dialogue that he and Angel had initiated at the TRC events they attended together, formative conversations that also included Elizabeth Kalbfleisch, Peter Morin, and Pauline Wakeham. By returning to Angel's work, Robinson found a way to extend this dialogue, in particular by integrating some of the unpublished writing that he and Angel had exchanged about the national gatherings. In streamlining Angel's original manuscript for publication, Berthe also approached her contribution as a dialogic process. Berthe and Angel started doctoral studies together in 2007 and were both working at the intersection of visual culture and colonial histories; they also lived through the experience of being pregnant, and then new mothers navigating academia, in tandem. The two had spent countless hours discussing their ideas, research, and lives; therefore, editing the manuscript gave Berthe the chance to pursue a new form of creative collaboration and intellectual growth with Angel. Both Robinson and Berthe recognize that if Angel had lived to see the conclusion of the IRS TRC and the subsequent evolutions of the reconciliation process in Canada, this book would be a very different piece of writing; still, they are equally confident that *Fragments of Truth* remains entirely Angel's book and that it represents a significant contribution.

The book both theorizes and is an example of the fragmented truths produced by the reconciliation process. But in its refusal to draw hard conclusions and resolve its own tensions, the text offers readers different kinds of insight. Angel was acutely reflexive about her subject position and how it compelled her to share the weight of what many Indigenous intellectuals in Canada have started referring to as the "burden of reconciliation," which entails serving as a subject called to heal the wounds of the settler state while resisting the tokenism of superficial indigenization strategies that amount to liberal inclusion rather than political transformation.¹⁸ We can see in Angel's work a compassionate refusal to always need to know more; she frequently makes such refusals, along with her struggle to engage with them on their own terms, explicit in her writing. Speaking to the experience of being told not to photograph a particular moment she was witnessing at a gathering, Angel tells readers: "It was also a reminder that there were barriers to what I was allowed to access, that I could not understand everything happening here."¹⁹

In the passage that opens this preface, Angel suggests that “reconciliation is an act of creation,” that the process is “about new conversations and discussions, about creating new archives, producing artwork, dialogue and new relationships.” These ideas undergird and illuminate the insights of *Fragments of Truth*, and as her creative collaborators we would suggest that it is not in spite of, but rather by virtue of, the book’s situated scope that her work makes an important and inimitable contribution to the literature on reconciliation—“fragments of truth” brought together in small gestures, edges, and silences that cannot be reconciled.