

Summary of session 3: We Were Children

Reflection by Alexandra Brown

I must confess that my colleagues at the race and education film club have shown an enormous amount of patience, in waiting for me to complete this summary. This was not due to the session, being bland and of little interest. On the contrary, the time taken reflects how the documentary and Terra's offerings, saw me holistically witness the narrative of a community who still bares the wounds, trauma and scar tissue of British colonialism.

The session perhaps unwittingly allowed for two important things to transpire. The first, was that in a multitude of ways it acted as a provocation to those who wish to partake in 'authentic and transformative anti-racist work'. Secondly, the session was evidence of the high price those so can be considered children and descendants of empire pay, when such all-encompassing acts of labour, is at the core of their pedagogy, ethics and wider identity.

Before I write any further, I wish to offer some sage and compassionate advice:

1. This summary does not endeavour to disclose all of the issues and themes raised. Owing to the intimacy and trust that was built amongst those who attended, many of the things shared will remain in the space
It is not everything that can and must be shared. Consequently, I will only write on that which I feel is appropriate to share.
2. Before watching the documentary, please ensure that you have the capacity to deal with incredibly heavy and difficult topics.
3. Please ensure you practice self-care before, during and after viewing it. If you/ anyone you think may been affected by the contents of the documentary, please visit our website. We have provided a wealth of signposts to resources and organisations that can provide further support.
4. Some of themes raised within this summary may also be experienced as difficult reading, please refer to the advice given in the previous point

This reflection will segment the discussion into some of the themes raised and discussed.

Acts of resistance

Within the documentary, the film powerfully documented the many ways that the children in the residential school resisted the colonial attempts to erase knowledge of their mother tongue and the significance of their culture and heritage, through emotional, physical and psychological abuse. Some of these acts of resistance included:

- Refusing to speak English, and continuing to communicate in their mother tongue

- Refusing to eat the poor-quality (low nutritional) food that they were served. This also saw some of the children, sneaking downstairs into the kitchen at night and eating the leftover food that the priests and nuns had not finished
- Running away
- In one scene, outnumbering and overpowering the Catholic priest who sought to beat them for running away
- Retreating to their imagination as a coping mechanism and sanctuary

Following our outlining of these acts of resistance, the group invited Terra to weigh in and offer some of her thoughts and musings. Terra powerfully noted how all of these were indeed examples of the resilience and fortitude that children display in the face of oppression. She also noted how they were 'acts of critique, dissent and rejection of injustice from those in authority.' Terra then poignantly encouraged us to consider the acts that the children within our respective schools engage in when they feel like mistreatment and unfairness is occurring.

Gender and colonialism

Within the documentary, there was a subtle covert conversation about the role of gender within colonialism. Typically, within the context of British colonialism, our sole focus is on the interpersonal and structural role of, and violence perpetuated by white men. As typically they are presented as the sole aggressors, but the video subtly explores the role that white women often played.

I highlighted within our discussion that white women (the nuns who worked as teachers in these residential schools) played the role of:

- Enablers
- Disciplinarians
- Justifiers
- Aggressors
- Enforcers
- Normalisers

I then asked Terra to share some of her thoughts on this. Terra powerfully stated that gendered roles, did indeed play a pivotal role. Terra then stated that their ultimate role can be neatly summarised as being one of a 'silencer,' because it was their continuous acts of silencing that allowed for the horrors that occurred to continue, unquestioned and uninterrupted.

Terra powerfully recalled the ways in which the nuns would routinely force the children into 'backbreaking labour' (which had to be completed in silence). She believed that this was a way of freezing the children into a disorientated and defeated state. This could be understood as being the nucleus of the atmosphere of violence, as this physically and psychologically broke them down, and allowed for the continuation of their suffering to continue.

Terra also pointed to the use of tokens (coins that the children were given as a reward when they spoke English. Additionally, the nuns would withdraw food from the children when they were heard speaking to each other in the playground. The

systematic weaponising of linguistic terror, as Terra rightly commented, 'allowed for this system to transpire'.

In an off-piece comment, following her brilliant interrogation, I asked Terra how she felt about the English language. After taking a thoughtful pause, she commented on how she struggles to hold the tension between the historical and ongoing violence of the English language and the fact that she, like many others, benefits from the English imperialism, that comes with her fluency and use of the language.

Intergenerational trauma

This was a particularly sensitive topic that was raised within the discussion. Terra shared many personal anecdotes, however, in my bid to honour the sanctity of the space, I will not share them here. Though I do think it necessary to say that Terra's words acted as a reminder that the legacy of colonialism is very much alive and well.

When we as a group reflected on the contents of the documentary, the routine and systematic abuse seemed almost as 'normal' as the teaching of English and Maths. Terra commented on how within the Cree community, when the children had graduated from school and returned home, they struggled to function and cope. On a superficial level, this difficulty could be perceived as being a consequence of not knowing how to adjust to freedom, following years of brutal institutionalisation. However, Terra believed that whilst this of course played a part, the main reason was because, they were now left to confront the abuse that they endured for so many years.

For those who could not bury that which they did not have the capacity to talk about, self-medicating on drugs and alcohol, homelessness and perpetuating the physical, physiological and sexual abuse that they experienced, sadly become common place. Terra powerfully ended her submission with 'that is what Catholicism did to First Nation people.'

Terra then referred to the 'public apology' that the then prime minister of Canada, L S Harper made. Whilst Terra described the apology as 'problematic' for a plethora of reasons, one aspect of the apology that she did agree with was that the creation of the residential schools, 'prevented parents from parenting their children.' This was a particularly powerful moment for the attendees who have children, as this was something that they could empathise with. Terra powerfully spoke of how the residential schools created a schism between the parents and the children that left 'the parents in a broken state.

The taking away of their children left many parents in a trauma and guilt-ridden state, because they had lost their children. This also led to parents self-medicating on drugs and alcohol. It also saw some of the children who stated/ returned begging for food because of their parent's inability to work.'

On a personal note, this was both surprising and heartbreaking to hear, as I had not given enough time, attention and care to the impact the separation would have had on the parents. This very much acted as a necessary reminder that the love, care, safety and identity that parents provide for their children is very much reciprocal.

Education and colonialism

A constant theme that the documentary did well to raise was 'Not being believed.' There is a powerful scene in which two boys flee the residential school and travel for many miles. The intention is that they will reach their aunt's house in the hope that she can provide a resting place, before they continue their journey back to the reserve. The two boys eventually reach their aunt's house, and she prepares a meal for them.

Whilst the two boys do not go into any painstaking detail, they do make it absolutely clear that their reason for running away (which is an act of resistance) is due to the awful conditions they are enduring.

This point is compounded more so, through the fact that she remarks that they ate the food she had prepared, as though they were not being fed. After dismissing their complaints as an exaggeration, she told them that they should be grateful for the opportunity to receive a 'good education'.

Using this scene as a point of departure, I asked Terra, 'In your work with teachers, practitioners and children who experience racism within the education system, not being believed, I'm sure, is a persistent theme. Please could you speak on this?' In response to my question, Terra returned back to the documentary and reminded us that the schools in this context were not created for the primary purpose of 'providing a good education' on the contrary, it was created with the intention of 'breaking the Indian child.' Terra then informed us of the 1925 'Indian Act' and how it sought to outlaw dancing as a means to crush Indigenous culture. The Act sought to control who was legally considered "Indian" and was a further act of dehumanisation.

Along with this, wearing traditional clothing was also prohibited. In a bid to understand this act in more detail, please see below an extract of the Act

Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the "Potlatch" or in the Indian dance known as the "Tamanawas" is guilty of a misdemeanor, and liable to imprisonment for a term of not more than six nor less than two months in any gaol or other place of confinement; and every Indian or persons who encourages... an Indian to get up such a festival... shall be liable to the same punishment.

~1925 'Indian Act'

Terra then unapologetically (and rightly so) described this act and those of this ilk as a 'legal blueprint for genocide.' As this was another cog in the wheel of 'diminishing not only the identity, but the humanity of an entire people.' In an attempt to draw parallels to the work she does, Terra commented on how the 'breaking of the child' is still very much continuing today, and how this continuation is a manifestation and perpetuation of British colonialism. Additionally, within the midst of this is the assumption of moral authority, and this is seen in the reinforcing and excusing of violent behaviour.

Terra added that not being believed is still very much a constant theme that comes up in her work. Additionally, she and I also commented on how in this context racialised adults are infantilised and treated as though they are children who have no clear understanding and perception of reality. We both ended this part of the conversation through the painful acknowledgement that even voicing such experiences can put one's career in a precarious position.

Religious Education and colonialism

Throughout the film we saw the systematic erasure of First Nation spirituality. We witnessed time and time again a white eurocentric colonialised interpretation of Christianity imposed onto the minds of the students, in the form of rote learning and corporal punishment. During the conversation Terra was asked to speak on what she thought was the most dangerous/ destructive practice and theological teaching.

In response to this incredibly thought-provoking question, she responded that it was the doctrine of 'Stewardship', that she believed was most problematic. Terra spoke of the urgent need to 'retract the assumption of stewardship and care, because it is premised on an assumed hierarchy.' Terra's submission here became even more powerful, when we remembered that within this period First nation folks were considered 'Flora and Fauna'. Which meant that they had the same rights and legal status as 'plants and animals.'

Our attention then turned to the comment that one of the protagonists in the documentary made about the indoctrination surrounding Christian eschatology (theology surrounding death, judgment, heaven, and hell). There is an eerie moment in the documentary where we see a very visceral image of what heaven and hell look like, and descriptions of the type of behaviour that would lead one there.

The children are taught that if they act as passive, quiet and meek Christians who practice the faith 'faithfully', they will go to heaven. They are then taught that their ancestors are in hell because they lived barbaric lives and did not receive 'the good news of the gospel'. The protagonist in retrospect of that moment said that she would 'rather be in hell with my ancestors,' because at least she would be with those in my community. She added that she did not want to worship a God that would reward the type of treatment she was enduring.

Terra also spoke to us about the 'Provincial curriculum' and how, there is no standardisation within the context of Canada. As such, the colonial atrocities that was reeked onto the First Nation community, has very much been omitted from the curriculum. Consequently, it is anti-racist teachers who take it upon themselves to ensure, to varying degrees, that this is being taught. This then generative a further discussion about the need and the shortcomings of a national curriculum.

Terra's final words

Wishing to formulate a chapter, on what is an ongoing conversation, I asked Terra if she could advise 'How do we as teachers/ practitioners teach and begin dialogue about unspeakable acts that must be spoken about?'

Terra responded with the following, 'such conversations must be rooted in a duty of care. It's not always about telling these painful stories, it about looking at children and saying, we got you.' Terra then added that as teachers and practitioners, it's we have a duty to remember and tell the stories of those of who are tragically harmed by the system. Terra powerfully closed with the following, 'We have a duty to ask, where did they go?'

The title of the documentary 'We were Children' takes on an entirely different meaning before, during and after watching it. The documentary both brilliantly and painfully debunks the myth that children were nothing more than collateral damage within European conquest in the age of empire. Following Terra's reflections and offerings, I dare say that many of us concluded that the systemic targeting of children acted as a euthanising needle of empire, that its descendants are still fighting against, in its wake.

After writing my initial draft of this summary, I reached out to Terra, as her blessing and approval of my words was essential. After reading the draft, her response, like her was warm, affirming and thought-provoking. Terra gently suggested that the summary should end with me centering the children's resilience and creativity. In her words, Terra reminded me that we must not forget that the

Children sought to escape the abuse via their imagination, this included drawing on memories of the homes they were taken from. I just read a novel that talked about how memory is life's way of speaking to the future. So the little girl's (one of the protagonists in the documentary) memory of the horse is like the life force of her connection with nature, her ancestors (grandfather!) feeding her and holding her through the future abuse she was to experience. I think this is important, because while the familial bonds were in many ways broken, the film showed that the memory of those bonds could still nurture. I think of felled trees which still put out shoots from the trunk. It's important in times of despair to know that we may be overpowered, silenced, even killed, but that even the memory of beauty, kindness, connection will ensure our endurance.

~ Terra Glowach

In line with the race and education film clubs' values of centring the epistemologies (ways of deriving knowledge), from those outside of a white western eurocentric context, I wish to utilise my Womanist sensibilities through ending this summary with a letter to Terra.

Dearest Terra,

I hope this letter finds you well

I hope you have soothed and tended to the pains and aches that you shared during the session.

Though words still cannot express my admiration and indeed gratitude for everything

*that you shared and taught, please know that,
I listened to your words, even when I wished to flee
I watched your tears fall, even as I struggled to suppress my own
I acted on your wisdom knowing that doing so would take me out of my comfort
zone, and make me more susceptible to the backlash and repercussions, that comes
with doing decolonial and anti-racist work. Both my students and I are richer,
healthier and more human for it.*

*The knowledge and wisdom I have learned about the First Nation Canadians is now
embedded in my humanity and will become ancestral knowledge for those I will call
children and students.*

*Please know that the tears we shed and the sweat we bare doing this work,
speaking our truth, honouring the lives of our families and ancestors, are indeed
precious minerals.*

Eternally grateful for all that you are and all that you do

Sending you peace and blessings always

Alex x