
Review Essay

Commissions as Narratives: A Review Essay

Hedican, Edward J. *Ipperwash: The Tragic Failure of Canada's Aboriginal Policy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, 304 pages.

Niezen, Ronald. *Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, 173 pages.

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It goes without saying that as anthropologists we are interested in the study of human subjects and their interactions with each other. We are concerned with the mechanisms through which culture becomes a means of interpreting events for individuals and for communities; how local narratives compete with metanarratives; and how the narrative form can be used to create barriers or expand relationship. Narrative is an obvious focal point for our work because it acts as a gateway for individuals and communities to explain how they experience events, often without us having to experience the event ourselves. Two works that exemplify the use of narrative as a tool within anthropology are Edward J. Hedican's *Ipperwash: The Tragic Failure of Canada's Aboriginal Policy* and Ronald Niezen's *Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools*.

Hedican and Niezen have written about two different inquiries into the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and two different levels of government, the Ipperwash Inquiry and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Hedican has focused on a single event in which Dudley George was killed. Niezen's focus was, at the time of his writing, the ongoing TRC. Hedican's work does not shy away from dealing with the role of racism in the Province of Ontario and its institutions. He allows us to consider how the fiduciary responsibility of the Crown can be problematically unfulfilled because of racism. Hedican spends the first third of the book discussing Aboriginal policy and rights in Canada, focusing on historical and legal developments before exploring the Ipperwash Inquiry and the failure of Canada's Aboriginal policy.

Niezen's work is a reflection on the relationship between Aboriginal people, the Crown, the churches that ran the schools and the symbolic construction of a particular version of that relationship. Niezen's analysis of how public performance of trauma can act to transfer blame from one actor (the Crown) to another (the Church) is interesting and important. He does this by his focus on the role of indignation as a response to the abuse of children at the hands of those whose care they were in (Niezen 2013:16–17). In this way, actors narrate the events they experienced and the audience converts the narrating actor into archetype characters within the structure imposed by the scope of the inquiry. The end result is a powerful force that the Crown uses to shape the direction of the inquiry's narrative.

Common ground can be found in these two books not by considering the inquiry as a hearing, which ends a series of events, but by focusing on the potential effects of the inquiry on ongoing relationships. Hedican reminds his readers that these inquiries are expensive and, taking a "cynical view," do nothing but buy a government more time and perhaps deflect attention away from real problems (Hedican 2013:203). His point is important. Certainly the Ipperwash Inquiry did not make the land claims process more efficient. The Provincial Crown has little authority to make such changes. In addition, as is evident by a lack of real changes, racism continues to be a problem in Canada. The TRC serves the role of collecting important personal narratives, but the focus on trauma circumscribes the finished product. In addition, the narrowed scope of the inquiry limits the legitimacy of anyone coming forward with a claim who did not attend a residential school as defined by the commission.

However, I wish to focus on the construction of narratives, including Hedican's and Niezen's, as it relates to how metanarratives continue to be created about Aboriginal peoples. Two elements of narrative worth considering here are the roles of actors and how actors become characters. The concept of an actor is definable as an agent who acts (Bal 1997:5). That is to say, an actor is any person or thing that causes a change in events within the narrative by his or her actions. Within the study of the two inquiries in question, actors take on several similar and expected forms along with several unexpected forms. Hedican's work not only introduces the actors present on the night that Dudley George was killed by the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) but also establishes the effect that actors in historical and other Aboriginal protests had on the events that occurred in Ipperwash. Where his work is strong is

in showing how the overall program of Aboriginal policy in Canada is built and maintained by the interconnection of events and actors across time and space. Using the Ipperwash Inquiry as a case study, Hedican is working to access how Aboriginal policy became flawed in Canada and considering what, if anything, can be done about it (Hedican 2013:3). He effectively demonstrates that events are not isolated but are part of a larger, ongoing, repeated series of events and policies that are present in the daily lives of Aboriginal people.

Narrative plays a central role in Niezen's work. Broadly speaking, he concerns himself with the processes of identity formation, how we come to understand our concepts of self and other and how we develop our sense of belonging and being (Niezen 2013:20). More specifically, Niezen explores the TRC as a program in narrative construction. "Indignation" forms a persuasive element in the narrative, driven by a variety of actors from across the country linked by the bonds of residential schools. In his work, actors are used to build a sense of indignation and anger; often school survivors are narrating themselves as victimized children or the actor/perpetrator of the offence is claiming it did not happen. Niezen does an excellent job in establishing how the TRC acts as a circumscribing narrative, reifying actors into character roles and building barriers against those who are considered other to the experience of residential schools.

Characters in this context are "anthropomorphic figures" created in a narrative when the actor is described as engaging in action (Bal 1997:114). The dominance of metanarratives, as detailed in these two books, demonstrates why it is important to consider the role of how actors are turned into characters. Indeed, it is necessary to consider the characters as antecedents of the events leading up to the inquiries. Without the creation of the character of "savage" or "Indian," there is arguably no need for a narrative that seeks to "kill the Indian, save the child." Certainly this does not make colonization historically unimportant; instead, it focuses on one of the colonizer's most powerful tools. Similarly, the OPP and Harris government in Ontario are shown by Hedican to have depended upon the characters of "drunken Indian" and "trouble making Indian" to solidify the narrative in support of their actions at Ipperwash. Narratives about Aboriginal peoples in Canada have depended upon a certain amount of recycling of character and narrative archetypes, largely with the purpose of the reification of the colonial control of their lives. This plays a significant role in the scoping and effectiveness of inquiries for correcting wrongs done to Aboriginal communities.

Although Hedican does not focus on narrative, the role of characters in his book is still worth noting. Hedican spends a significant portion of his book focusing on the role of systemic racism in the development and maintenance of the policies and social conditions that contribute to the negative social, economic, political and health outcomes facing Aboriginal people in Canada. He also details how this normalized racism can integrate itself into the policies and practices of police, news media and politicians. Arguably this system is maintained by its dependence on archetypal characters. Premier Mike Harris's reported derogatory comments about the "fucking Indians" depended on a long narrative history where individual Aboriginal people are replaced by portrayals of negative characters (Hedican 2013:162). Similarly, Hedican, using recorded OPP conversations and testimony, provides insight into how racism

is maintained by the dehumanization of Aboriginal people into characters who are narrated as tax-free living, alcoholic "wagon burners" or "wahoos" (Hedican 2013:165-168). The argument Hedican puts forward depends on government policies that cannot exist without racism being maintained using narratives containing these negative character types.

Two uses of characters that are worth considering in Niezen's work are the "survivor" and the "perpetrator," both of which are woven into his book with great skill. Based on the individual work of psychiatrists Henry Krystal and Bruno Bettelheim on the Holocaust, the "survivor" has developed into an important character in multiple metanarratives, including residential school survivors. Niezen does an excellent job in discussing the role of the TRC in circumscribing this character within its mandate, while also detailing the complex internal variability within the role. It is a stark reminder that the Government of Canada still has the ability and desire to control all aspects of Aboriginal people's lives. The second interesting character demonstrates how narrative can be used to transfer blame away from the government and onto others. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Niezen's work is how the TRC is able to manipulate the historical narrative into one where priests, nuns and teachers are the perpetrators of crimes seemingly unbeknownst to the government. Sadly, we know from government documents that the Crown was well aware of the elevated rates of death and abuse at least as early as the first and second decade of the 20th century.

So why does this matter? Perhaps it is worth considering that this historical record of the TRC will be with Canadians much longer than the financial payout from the settlements. There are benefits to the government in being able to shape the historical narrative. Niezen was faced with the challenge of writing about events that were still taking place. His ability to shape his narrative as something that is flowing and changing works. He has taken an important critical perspective on the TRC rather than simply reporting events. He, like Hedican, uses the inquiry as a means of viewing the actors involved in terms of the interaction between human subjects. His work deals effectively with why the shaping of that interaction matters. It is in the shape of the developing metanarrative that future generations will come to know the official history of residential schools in Canada: who was involved; what they experienced; and what the outcome was.

Hedican's work deals with the important topic of racism and the failure of Canada's Aboriginal policy. His use of the Ipperwash case could have been more effective if he had integrated it earlier into his work. That being said, his work clearly demonstrates how racism, by depending on archetype characters, contributed to the actions of the OPP and Provincial Government in the events that led up to and followed the shooting of Dudley George. In addition, he contributes to the conversation on why Aboriginal policy in Canada is not changing. Together, these two books are examples of how different forms of inquiry will continue to shape Aboriginal policy and our collective memories about events.

References

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