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PETER MIDGLEY

WRITING RECONCILIATION

What does a literature of reconciliation look like?

2011

Pension day in Grootfontein, a Namibian town at the epicentre of the war zone during the country's War of Independence. The elderly from rural villages squeeze into the tiny local post office to collect their money. As the crowd ingests me, I feel a tug at my shirt. I ignore it. The tug becomes persistent. I sink to my haunches and disappear into an underworld of shopping bags and sweat. There is Elias, a boy of about six. "I can count to a hundred," he informs me. As he speaks, his grandmother's arm circles him protectively—it is difficult to overcome one's suspicion of white people after 20 years of war. I listen to Elias count as we shuffle towards the counter. Eventually, the woman lets go of her grandson and reaches into the bag at her feet. She pulls out a small pot of *oshifima*—millet porridge—and offers Elias and me some. At the counter, she collects her meagre pension; I top up my phone

card. Then we say our goodbyes. All that remains of our encounter is the memory of a brief conversation and the lingering taste of millet porridge.

2013

Shaw Conference Centre, Edmonton. I sit among the stragglers at the back, listening to witness statements at the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings (TRC). Throughout the morning, the woman beside me leans over and tells me about her struggle to reconnect her children with their cultural heritage. At lunchtime, she reaches into her bag and removes a container of bannock. She offers me some. I take a piece, and while we eat, I tell her about Elias.

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AUTHOR PHOTO BY SHAWNA LEMAY

June 3, 2015

Marion Dewar Plaza, Ottawa. I have come from the Honouring Ceremonies at Rideau Hall, and while I wait for Buffy Saint Marie to play, I watch a video of Justice Sinclair calling for an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.¹ When he finishes, everyone in the room rises for a standing ovation. Everyone, except Bernard Valcourt, PC, minister of aboriginal affairs. To his right, we see the head of a woman who is kneeling on the floor. Her hands flutter up, motioning to the minister to stand. He sits.

I want to lean over to the minister and tell him about Elias and his grandmother, about *oshifima* and bannock, but I can't because we are not in the same room, at the same time. Three stories. Three beginnings. Or perhaps they're endings. I'm not sure.

Because I've lived to see two Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in two countries, I am often asked to compare the South African and Canadian commissions, to reveal the lessons we hope to learn; or to tell people how to write reconciliation. As if mere presence in these places at these precise historical junctures can provide me with insight. The political and historical circumstances that led to these TRCs are different, and the world has changed so many times in the decades that separate them that comparison seems impossible, almost futile. Besides, "truth" is a slippery term; as is "reconciliation."

Both TRCs took place in a framework of witnessing. Victims told their stories, made their private abuses public, hoping to find healing. It worked for some. Not for others. The processes were

flawed. Hopefully, others will learn from our fumbling efforts. What remains? A record of statements, bound for posterity, and a list of conclusions and recommendations for officialdom.

The printed narratives reveal the neat binaries required of justice: everything framed in terms of right and wrong, victim and perpetrator. However, the stories themselves, and the ones that appeared after the commissions, counter these binaries, reveal the complexities, ambiguities and complicities found in historical records, archives, and in real life.

Individual memories do not hold up well during a legalistic inquiry. Memory is messy, whereas the law seeks absolutes. The tension between legal absolutes and the ambiguities of memory makes the path to the restorative justice through TRCs more difficult. And yet, memory remains in the aftermath of the Commission.

The French scholar, Pierre Nora, defines what he calls *lieux de mémoire*—sites of memory;² distinguishing between memory and history that, to some extent, informed my own recent effort to write reconciliation, *let us not think of them as barbarians* (NeWest Press, 2019). For Nora, "memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past."³ While "history binds itself to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things,"⁴ memory does not. Memory is "by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual."⁵ The idea that memory is not bound by temporal continuities as history is, and that it can be collective and plural, yet individual, is vital for writing reconciliation.

1 [youtube/-4lk6BgaKRw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lk6BgaKRw)

2 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24. URL: [jstor.org/stable/2928520](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928520).

3 Nora, p.7.

4 Nora, p.9.

5 Nora, p.9.

As a writer, I am more interested in *memory* than I am in *history*, for this is where writing works best: stories tease out the contradictions among these sites of memory; stringing together competing renditions of the past in narrative can be more useful than official reports. Between the sites of memory, there are gaps. Writing explores these gaps, becomes a tool with which we can supplement the work the TRC did.

The South African writer, Njabulo Ndebele, remarked after the South African TRC that one consequence of the proceedings was “the restoration of narrative.”⁶ For Ndebele, what stood out was that because of the TRC, people could “reinvent themselves through narrative.” Ndebele’s remark contains immense power for healing. Narrative, he suggests, provides us with an ability to step away from the past and into a new, re-imagined future. Through story, we can explore who and what we want to become and contrast that with who we were. He is not wrong: we should allow ourselves to imagine in this way, and the possibility of reinvention that became the fiction offered both in Canada and South Africa: the proceedings tell a story of healing, a settling of past wrongs.

However, the danger of such reinvention is that it can cause eliding the past: the TRC is over, let us lay this spectre to rest. The narratives that emerge out of the reports and the pens of the writers who read them reveal the contradictions of truth, memory, guilt, confession and forgiveness. Literature challenges the “official” narrative. Literature will not allow us to lay these matters to rest. Literature asks the critical questions: how much truth is recoverable? How many versions of the truth exist? Whose truth do we believe? Is truth or witnessing a necessary precondition for healing? Through writing, we keep the conversations going and tease out these complexities.

What does a literature of reconciliation look like? That is not for me to predict or dictate to anyone. Writers will tell those stories in their own way, in their own time. If the explosion of new subjects, the plethora of new voices, the renewed passion for writing in Indigenous languages, or the rediscovery and translation of classics written in Indigenous languages in South Africa is an indication, or if the discussions at literary festivals are anything to go by, writers will find their way to write it.

I can only speak to what I have tried to do in my writing. In *let us not think of them as barbarians*, I worked towards a worldview that signals, as Louise Diamond has said, a shift “from a reductionist, mechanistic understanding about how

things are in the world that sees everything as separate, to a holistic, integral view that recognizes the interconnectedness of everything in a larger whole.”⁷

Interconnectedness starts with taking the hand that is held out: hold it and walk together; take the food it offers and share a meal. Acknowledge the land that gave us that food. Walk gently on this land. Together. Togetherness is also where writing reconciliation starts. The hand that accepts these gifts can also write those gifts. Whether we write about *oshifima* or bannock, what matters is not that we open old wounds; what matters is how we tend them. What matters is how we respond to the stories we have heard, and how that drives our actions in the future. *We* need to change before policies or literature can reflect that change. ■

Peter Midgley lives in Edmonton and is the director of STARFest, the St. Albert Readers Festival. His latest book, let us not think of them as barbarians, is published by NeWest Press. Midgley is working on a collection of short stories, tentatively called These Hands. The stories consider hands as instruments of love, hate, violence and reconciliation.

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6 Njabulo Ndebele, “Memory, Metaphor, and the Triumph of the Narrative,” in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, edited by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1998), 27.

7 commondreams.org/views/2011/08/26/reading-writing-and-reconciliation