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Story Luminary Phyllis (Jack) Webstad and the Storywork of the Orange Shirt

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Abstract: An orange shirt is synonymous with truth and reconciliation in Canada. How did this symbol spread from a personal story about surviving a residential school, to a children's book by author Phyllis J. Webstad, to a national symbol of Indigenous solidarity and allyship? This paper examines the work of Webstad as a Canadian story luminary, using historical and textual analysis to explore the power of "The Orange Shirt Story" to decolonize, resist, refuse, and transform. The orange shirt reveals the deep connectedness between storytelling, social justice, resilience, and activism.

Keywords: Phyllis J. Webstad; The Orange Shirt Story; story luminary; storywork; story work; Canadian storyteller; Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada; Orange Shirt Society; Orange Shirt Day; counter-story; counter-storytelling

1. Introduction

Over coffee with a friend in the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation, a rugged and semi-remote area in Northern British Columbia with a population of less than one thousand, Phyllis (Jack) Webstad struggled with how to talk about her residential school experience. She was preparing to address a crowd the next morning. It was the spring of 2013. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission had gathered thousands of witness statements from residential school survivors, had declared the experiences of children in Canada's residential school system a cultural genocide, and issued a series of calls to action to redress that legacy. Canada's TRC emphasizes the importance of educating the public about the history and legacy of residential schools, while sharing and honoring the painful experiences of former students and their families.¹ Canada's TRC, like the more than 40 TRCs rolled out worldwide over the past three decades, emphasizes a restorative, rather than retributive justice model, in which the emphasis is on personal and social transformation (Ibhawoh 2019). National resources were channeled into public events, at which communities gathered to hear residential school survivors talk about their experiences. And so Webstad found herself emotionally and mentally preparing to tell a crowd something she had never talked about before, not even to her husband or children (Charleyboy 2020).

"I was to be a part of the media announcement", she told a *Canadian Geographic* reporter. "So there's the Chief, and the mayor, and all these people with big titles, and there's me, unemployed residential school survivor" (Charleyboy 2020).

It was emotionally demanding and painful for Webstad to recount a moment of loss and humiliation from her childhood that stayed with her throughout her life (Webstad and Sorley 2020). But a talented and skilled storyteller knows to home in on moments that hold power. She purchased an orange shirt for herself at a nearby store and steeled herself to tell the original *Orange Shirt Story*.

Since, September 30th has been declared Orange Shirt Day in Canada. What began as a small community event, at which one woman shared a memory of her shirt being taken away on her first day of school, has grown into a national and international campaign. Schools, campuses, communities, and corporations display the "Every Child Matters"



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slogan on orange tee-shirts, banners, artwork, and flags. Elders are invited to speak and share stories. Teachers indoors and outdoors read Indigenous storybooks and Indigenous histories. Kids create commemorative artwork. A proliferation of orange shirts signals that, according to the original orange-shirt-wearer and storyteller, Phyllis Webstad, Northern Secwepemc (Shuswap) from the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation (Canoe Creek Indian Band), Canadians have accepted "a duty to educate ourselves and recognize our painful dark history and to commit to reconciliations, ensuring tragedies like Residential Schools never happen again" (Webstad and Sorley 2020, p. 71).

This paper examines, within a critical paradigm, the orange shirt as a potent symbol and, using textual analysis and historical research, the story work of Phyllis (Jack) Webstad. The history of the orange shirt and its narrative power are explored, positioning Phyllis (Jack) Webstad as a story luminary. The profound impact that the storywork of Webstad and The Orange Shirt Society has on truth and reconciliation in Canada is examined, especially the use of counter-story and counter-storytelling to de-colonize.

2. Literature Review

Phyllis Webstad was identified as the leader of an important movement by local and national Canadian journalists (Charleyboy 2020; Oliveira 2023; Walker 2019). On the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation officially recognized in Canada, the CBC (Canadian Broadcast Corporation) featured a special broadcast hosted by David Chang (30 September 2021), during which Webstad shared her residential school story with the nation.

But beyond the news, Webstad's work has received little scholarly or critical attention.² Despite her important role to Canadians as a public figure, author, and social justice activist, there are only a handful of articles about the impact and significance of Webstad's work. This can certainly be explained by the recency of the orange shirt phenomenon. The work of truth and reconciliation is also relatively recent beginning, if we consider the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada "the start", in 2008. Webstad's first picture book was published a decade later by Medicine Wheel in 2018.

An important book by Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, was published in 2010, urging Canadians to stop thinking of ourselves as peacemakers and to acknowledge the harms of the residential school systems. Personal storytelling is essential to the persuasiveness and impact of Regan's book, cited thousands of times by scholars (Regan 2010).

Scholarship about Webstad is most likely just getting started, with a paper by Roxanne Harde, in 2019: *Talking Back to History in Indigenous Picturebooks*. What can we learn now about the way Webstad's work enters academic discourse? Existing articles that analyze Webstad's work are from diverse disciplines: children's literature (Harde 2020), education (Creaser 2020), postcolonial studies (McKenzie 2021), library studies (Boisvert 2023), Foucault studies (Tyson 2021), Indigenous studies (Skelton 2023), and cultural studies (Fung 2023). I would expect research in gender studies, history, social work, intercultural communication, and multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary fields as well. We will likely see scholarship proliferate more in one discipline than others, but that has not happened yet.

Several scholars in the existing research speak to a sense that Webstad's storywork does not fit neatly into the dominant discourses of their respective fields (Harde 2020; Boisvert 2023; McKenzie 2021).

In a preface to *Postcolonial Text* (Vol. 16, No. 3, McKenzie 2021), S. McKenzie describes the "ritualized mourning, public acknowledgement, the slogan 'Every Child Matters,' and the wearing of orange shirts" becoming more prevalent following the national and international media coverage announcing that 215 unmarked graves of children who had attended the former Indian Residential School in Kamloops had been found. Writes McKenzie:

Ironically, though, and despite the fact that this preface has been written for *Postcolonial Text*, postcolonial theory may not be appropriate in an examination of Indigenous literatures. There is nothing "post" about Indigenous realities in Canada, and the subsuming of Indigenous literatures under a postcolonial canopy

disregards the specificities of Indigenous experiences and literary histories, both oral and written (McKenzie 2021).

I am not convinced that McKenzie is accurately describing “irony”, but she is aptly identifying some serious issues, limitations, and inadequacies of postcolonial theory to engage with, describe, and make meaning of truth and reconciliation in Canada.

In “Colonialism in Libraries: The Disparities of Categories and the Organization of Materials”, Boisvert writes that while researching libraries as spaces that preserve colonial narratives, she “found that nearly all books about Indigenous communities were placed in the history section”, relegating the contemporary knowledge production of living Indigenous communities to the past (Boisvert 2023, p. 2). Boisvert asserts:

Another problematic issue is that information about Indigenous peoples of Canada in the history category written by white authors was found in the non-fiction sections, whereas many books written by Indigenous authors or books that were in collaboration with Indigenous communities were categorized as fiction. For example, *Orange Shirt Day*, by Phyllis Webstad, is in the fiction section even though it is based on the true story of her first day in residential school. . . (Boisvert 2023, p. 2).

It seems unlikely that this very literal problem of mis-categorizing and mis-placing Indigenous books in spaces designed to house and organize books, “places where colonizers could preserve their narratives, ideologies, and knowledge” (Boisvert 2023, p. 1) would not be evident in academic disciplines as well.

Where do academics “put” analyses and interpretations of Webstad’s oral storytelling, activism, and books? What draws *me* to document, describe, and understand Webstad’s trajectory as a Canadian story luminary is the sheer power of her storytelling to galvanize a nation. I feel that I am drawn to it as one is to a warm fire. But her story work spans oral storytelling for personal and community healing, social justice and activism, and authoring books for children. Does my research fit into the social sciences then, because I am historicizing and interpreting her story work as a social justice hero? Or does it fit into the humanities because I am analyzing her stories as literature and engaging with their esthetic and theoretical power? The editorial and collegial feedback received while developing this paper included mention that while the orange shirt movement is an important topic, my research “doesn’t fit” comfortably under the umbrella of social sciences, nor arts, nor fine arts. It makes sense to understand Webstad’s books as children’s literature, a field in the humanities, but Webstad is not only a children’s author. Her work is also activism and she comes from a strong oral tradition.

“It’s always been our way, it’s all about our oral history”, says Elder Louis Thomas. “The only writing you see is the petroglyphs, until the Jesuits came and they developed a written language around our Secwepemc (Shuswap) people”. To limit Webstad’s story work to that which appears on the printed page in English is reductionist and colonial.

The field of “children’s literature” does not seem expansive enough to engage with Webstad’s story work in a holistic way. I am not Indigenous and could not claim to be working in the field or tradition of Indigenous studies. Nor does it seem fundamentally right to expect that only Indigenous scholars should engage with the work of truth and reconciliation. As Chief Justice Minister Murray Sinclair, chair of the former TRC and another luminary of truth and reconciliation in Canada, famously pointed out, “Reconciliation is not an aboriginal problem—it is a Canadian problem. It involves all of us” (Fedio 2015).

The literature to date responding to Webstad’s activism reveals broadly interdisciplinary responses, with mentions in diverse trade journals, websites, newsletters, and academic theses on physical education, business management, religious studies, geography and mapmaking, etc. Vastly multidisciplinary responses make sense in the context of truth and reconciliation: it is a call to every Canadian to engage with the realities of settler colonialism. But there is likely something about the way Webstad’s work resists categorization that points to the limits of the systems created to perpetuate colonial ideals.

As Boisvert writes, “We have become so accustomed to the hidden systematic colonialism within the organization of information, that it has become hard to notice” (Boisvert 2023, p. 5). In understanding academic institutions as colonial systems that perpetuate colonial ideologies, it makes sense that work that de-colonizes, refuses, transforms, and resists is hard to categorize within those systems.

3. Truth and Reconciliation Is Storywork

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was launched in 2008 as part of a national effort to understand the impact of residential schools on an estimated 150,000 Indigenous residential school attendees, their families, communities, and the country as a whole. The work of the commission included hearing, gathering, documenting, archiving, sharing, and commemorating the stories of residential school survivors (Moran 2015). After six years of travelling throughout Canada and listening to more than 6500 witnesses (GOC 2022), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada described the legacy of residential schools as “cultural genocide” (TRC 2015a). The TRC issued a series of historical reports as well as practical recommendations: 94 calls to action to redress the legacy of cultural genocide and to build a more just Canada (TRC 2015b). In 2015 the committee dissolved, with thousands of stories and millions of historical documents generated in the process, “the resulting collection of statements, documents and other materials now forms the sacred heart of the NCTR”, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR 2023).

The work of truth and reconciliation in Canada is, in so many ways, storywork. It is the work of telling, hearing, and honouring the tragedy, sorrow, and losses of so many Indigenous children, those who survived the residential school system as well as those who did not. It is storywork in the sense of this working definition by Brooke Hessler: “the use of stories and storytelling as a form of inquiry toward personal and social transformation” (Lambert and Hessler 2020, p. 245).

TRCs gather stories as a method to reach the goal of social transformation. “TRCs have a fundamental narrative aspect. ... A core assumption is that TRCs contribute to the healing of survivors of violence” (Androff 2012, p. 40). There is the expectation that formally hearing survivor’s stories will transform the survivors. And there is the phenomenon of some survivor stories moving beyond the judicial sphere into the public too: the importance of Sally Morgan’s autobiography “My Place” (Morgan 2010) to Australians, for example, and Nelson Mandela’s memoir “Long Walk to Freedom” (Morgan 2010; Mandela 1995). Scholars around the world, including New Zealander M. Jackson (Jackson 2002) and South Africa’s J.L. Gibson (Gibson 2006) have explored the complex relationship between storytelling, colonial violence, and TRCs.

More than a decade after the work of truth and reconciliation in Canada has begun, healing is ongoing, not complete, and “the vast majority” of the 94 calls to action to redress harms “have yet to be fully implemented, much to the frustration of Indigenous experts, leaders and activists” (Nardi 2021). The storywork carried out by residential school survivors to date, however, is substantial, and has impacted and continues to impact Canadians. There are story luminaries within the truth and reconciliation movement. One Indigenous Canadian story luminary is Phyllis (Jack) Webstad.

4. Webstad Is a Storyworker

“I coined the term ‘storywork’” writes the visionary, author, and Indigenous activist Jo-Anne Archibald, “because I needed a term that signified that our stories and storytelling were to be taken seriously” (Archibald 2008, para. 4).

De-legitimizing the knowledge and authority of Indigenous storytellers is part of the harm done by settler colonialism in Canada and worldwide. Refusing to accept that de-legitimization by stepping into the limelight, even after being indoctrinated to believe she did not matter, is precisely the act of courage and mettle that makes Webstad a luminary.

Indigenous storytellers and activists like Webstad and Archibald construe storytelling in a way that does not fit neatly into the dominate discourses of colonialism. Stories are not artifacts to amass knowledge around, they are knowledge. Stories are not the opposite of facts and information, they are truth. Stories are not trifling and unimportant when they are for children. Stories are considered sacred teachings, especially because they are for children, when educating children is understood as not a chore but a sacred duty. In Indigenous traditions, storytelling is crucial to a cycle of building “healthy, caring communities” which “produce healthy, caring, responsible children”, who become “healthy, caring, responsible people” who “create healthy, caring communities” (Williams 2006, p. 89). Settler colonial systems work to stop that cycle: to “erase [Indigenous] histories, stories, and songs; break their cultural traditions, and sever their relationships with the land and their families in order to civilize, Christianize, and Canadianize them” (Williams 2006, p. 88).

One of the many things that the residential school system took away from Indigenous children are the stories of their elders, their bedtime stories, their family stories, and a sense that their stories matter, replacing them instead with “important” narratives of one Christian God, nation-building, and empire. Since colonization interrupted cultural transfer and identity-building through storytelling, it makes sense that de-colonization requires re-storying. It makes sense that ground zero of the orange shirt movement is a story.

5. A Starting Place

At the 2013 event in Williams Lake, BC, for former students of the St. Joseph Mission Residential School, survivors and their families gathered “to commemorate the residential school experience, to witness and honour the healing journey of the survivors and their families, and to commit to the ongoing process of reconciliation” (OSS 2023). Speaking to and for the group, Phyllis (Jack) Webstad drew from othered systems of authority and knowledge to tell her personal story. On The Orange Shirt Society’s webpage,³ Webstad describes a “feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, (which) affected the way I lived my life for many years”. To speak publicly at all, Webstad had to overcome decades of indoctrination by powerful colonial systems that told her that she and her story did not matter. As a storyteller, she had to first determine to speak, and then she had to find a beginning. And she did. She returned to her first day of school. She relied on her instincts and knowledge as a storyteller, which told her that moment mattered because it held deep personal resonance for her.

Webstad’s grandmother had bought her a shiny, new, bright orange shirt that she picked out from a store herself. “She felt as excited about the shirt as she did to go to school” (Webstad 2018, p. 10). In her telling, the orange shirt is a vibrant symbol of a little girl’s hope for the future, her individuality, and her connection with her grandmother. On her first day of school, the new shirt is taken away from her by the people responsible for her care and education. The orange shirt becomes, then, a symbol of what was taken away by residential schools: hope for a bright future, pride and individuality, and connectedness to family. Any reader or listener can understand this symbolic act and its consequences on a six-year-old girl.

But Webstad’s story does not end in the St. Joseph Mission Residential School, and it does not end at the commemoration in William’s Lake, B.C. Her story work cannot sufficiently be described by or contained by a singular act of personal storytelling. That her healing is an ongoing, not a complete journey, is something Webstad emphasizes. “Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I do not matter. Even with all the work I’ve done!” (see note 3).

In “Restoring the Balance”, Marlene Brant Castellano writes:

Women often describe their work as healing, in the Aboriginal sense of restoring physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual balance to the lives of individuals, families, and communities. As their work reverberates beyond their communities, they can be seen also as healing their nations, bringing a distinct approach to

renewal that asserts the authority of experience and the wisdom of the heart (Brant Castellano 2009, p. 204).

Story work is storytelling, and it is more. It is storytelling that heals. It is storytelling that “talks back” (Harde 2020). Cherokee scholar Daniel Justice asserts that stories can be good medicine or bad medicine (Justice 2018). Story work is good medicine. It is storytelling that refuses to shut up and stay put.

6. Refusing “The End” and Talking Back

Harde (2020) writes about Webstad’s picture books as being within a tradition of “talking back” to colonialism and using counter-storytelling to decolonize (274). Picture books talk back when they “work to educate all readers, counter the harm of child removal in Indigenous populations, and set a foundation for healing for all of Canada” (Harde 2020, p. 275). Harde points out that the paratext in picture books is that talk back works to bring readers beyond the book’s final pages to learn more. “*The Orange Shirt Story* directs readers to the Orange Shirt Day website where Phyllis Webstad details the multigenerational trauma of the residential school system” (Harde 2020, p. 278). The website also features a “Reconciliation Hub” connecting visitors to learning resources, event planning resources, speakers, merchandise, and events. “The story of her orange shirt became both the focus of her narrative and the foundation for a movement which sees thousands of Canadians observe Orange Shirt Day on 30 September each year” (Harde 2020, p. 284). The *Orange Shirt Story* does not stop at “the end”; it works beyond the final page. In this way, Webstad’s story work resists “the end” to the ongoing work of reconciliation.

Webstad is assuming a traditional role for Indigenous women outside of colonial value systems: the mantle of healer, transmitter of cultural knowledge and storyteller. Brant Castellano asserts that “The insights into healing being generated by residential school initiatives are particularly an expression of women’s knowledge” (p. 232). In this way, Webstad talks back to the gender roles dictated by settler colonialism.

In colonial narratives, Indigenous children are problems that need solving. They are gathered in institutions that strip them of their identity and sever their connections to love and land. Webstad’s story work talks back when she refuses that narrative. She approaches guiding children through storytelling as a sacred task, and one that she is called to do. But it is not a task that can be considered finished.

It is not enough to put on an orange shirt, listen to a national broadcast, digest a story designed for the youngest readers and listeners on a single day set aside as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Doing so does not allow one to tick both “truth” and “reconciliation” off our to-do lists like chores completed. But neither does that mean that doing those things are not important.

Considering Webstad as an expert, someone with deep knowledge about healing, building community, and storytelling, we can trust the example of her life’s work to assert that sharing a personal story is one right place to start with truth and reconciliation, that, yes, every child matters, that grassroots activism and community-building is essential. The orange shirt, literally and symbolically, is a starting place, not an ending place, but a starting place is what is needed now. Offering all Canadians a way into reconciliation is an act of generosity by Webstad that will surely beget more and more generosity, more connection, more truth, and genuine spaces for reconciliation.

7. Origins of the Orange Shirt Society

Webstad’s story resonated profoundly with listeners at the Williams Lake event and beyond. Her friend Joan Sorely told *Canadian Geographic*, “Phyllis’s story is so simple and yet powerful. And it’s pretty much everybody’s story. You know everybody [residential school survivors] lost their clothes on their first day of School” (Sorely to Charleyboy 2020). Sorely was the first person to hear Webstad tell her story about her orange shirt and her first day of school (Charleyboy 2020). She encouraged her friend to speak publicly and witnessed first-hand the Williams Lake crowd’s powerful reaction. Sorely was instrumental

in beginning The Orange Shirt Society. “I was trying to figure out how we can keep this momentum going”, says Sorely, “And I thought ‘well, there’s Pink Shirt Day [to take a stand against bullying]—why don’t we have Orange Shirt Day?” (Charleyboy 2020).

Webstad, Sorely, and others, formed The Orange Shirt Society, “a grassroots movement that turned global”. (Charleyboy 2020). Their ongoing mission is to raise “awareness of the individual, family and community inter-generational impacts of Indian Residential Schools” (OSS 2023). They have done so through speaking tours, events, campaigns, and design and art-making contests and activities. Phyllis Webstad authored “The Orange Shirt Story”, published by Medicine Wheel Books in 2018, and has since authored four more books retelling the story for different audiences and purposes (Webstad 2018, 2019, 2022; Webstad and Sorley 2020). Webstad received the Distinguished Alumni Award from Thompson Rivers University in 2019 for her “unprecedented impact on local, provincial, national and international communities through the sharing of her orange shirt story” (Walker 2019).

Canadian Parliament legislated A National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2021, 8 years after the legacy event in Williams Lake. 30 September is colloquially known as Orange Shirt Day. Orange shirts are synonymous in Canada with truth and reconciliation. Wearing an orange shirt means supporting the society’s “Every Child Matters” slogan that is fundamentally anti-racist, anti-bullying, and profoundly child-centered.

Out of the 94 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action, 22 (almost 25%) are about contemporary children and education, including the call to “developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal people in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools” (TRC 2015b, pp. 1–11). How straightforward is the task of developing learning resources about the history and legacy of residential schools for young and very young Canadians? Where do educators begin to teach kindergarteners about a colossally painful history and to understand the ongoing and intergenerational trauma of residential school survivors? Storytelling is the approach that The Orange Shirt Society champions. Centering the stories of Indigenous residential school survivors for the purpose of healing a nation and building a better future is an example of Indigenous story workers and storytellers informing a nation in need with their energy and expertise.

With over 5 million children currently enrolled in K-12 education in Canada, The Orange Shirt Society has filled an important role. They have created resources that support educators and made them available freely. They have highlighted the importance of sharing residential school survivor’s stories with school children and made it possible for educators to do so by making stories and storytellers available. Books, speaking tours, and event plans help educators and others work towards truth and reconciliation. The story workers who support Webstad (her publisher, her community, her not-for-profit society, etc.) do not only help Webstad tell her story; they help Canadians who want to work towards truth and reconciliation in their classrooms and beyond to get it right.

Webstad is not boastful about her expertise as a storyteller. “For whatever reason”, she writes, “I was chosen to do this work, whether I was ready or not. Things just happened without a lot of trying on my part. People, places and events just fell into place” (Webstad and Sorley 2020, p. 15). Yet there is so much about her storytelling that galvanizes the people around her. What makes Webstad and her orange shirt such a successful rallying point?

8. The Power and Salience of the Orange Shirt

“The Orange Shirt Story” is right-sized in a way that invites an emotional response. It is right-sized in a way that lets listeners into a much larger story. In Webstad’s own words, “It opens the door to discussion, in a gentle way, about a heavy topic” (Webstad and Sorley 2020).

Working under a critical paradigm, academics are deeply skeptical of things that are too easy or too neat. If Webstad’s story work is gentle, crafted with care to speak to the youngest of us, can it be effective? Is the approachability of her story work and the

acceptability of it by mainstream culture a clue that it, in fact, does the work of colonialism and not vice versa?

Daniel Heath [Justice \(2018\)](#) insists that “[Stories] help us bridge the gap of human imagination between one another, between other human communities, and between us and other-than-human beings”. Bridges must, by definition, be safe in order to be functional. *The Orange Shirt Story* is an effective bridge because it is safe. Webstad’s story is neither all misery, nor is it a journey of pure delight. Her pain and suffering is at least partially felt by sensitive readers and listeners, perhaps more so because it is intermingled with moments of playfulness, humor, and sensory pleasure. *The Orange Shirt Story* is not a palatable story, nor should it be. But it *is* gentle in a way that invites engagement. Gentleness, in this context, is power and strength.

As a symbol, the orange shirt has salience for everyone. Everybody has a first day of one kind or another. And everybody feels vulnerable on that day. We are more likely to remember a first day than the years that follow.

“The Orange Shirt Story” has a scalability. Webstad describes her first day of school and the disappointment and despair she felt. She was in residential school for “300 sleeps” she tells us ([Webstad 2018](#), p. 16), which prompts listeners or readers to do the math and to try to understand how that despair might compound. What would it be like to accept that you and your pain “doesn’t matter” to the people tasked with your “education”? For a day? A week? A year? A decade? What impact would that have over a lifetime?

“Can you imagine going on a 300-night sleepover?” Webstad asks during a school visit in Calgary, Alberta. “That’s what it was like for me going away to this school” (Webstad in [Charleyboy 2020](#)).

Webstad was one of approximately 150,000 children who attended hundreds of residential schools across Canada, some of which ran for more than a hundred years ([Moran 2015](#)). That moment of pain—where a little girl’s orange shirt is taken away—can be multiplied in a way that helps us understand the magnitude of the loss and suffering of Canada’s cultural genocide.

9. Counter-Storytelling and the Orange Shirt

In a 2019 article Brooke Madden calls for “carefully theorized practice” surrounding the ongoing design of a curriculum for truth and reconciliation. Madden insists storytelling is essential to the goals of truth and reconciliation, especially counter-storytelling: stories that counter the settler, colonial, nation-building story that has dominated education in Canada. Writes Madden: “Complex counter-stories have the potential to rupture colonial subjectivities. . .” ([Madden 2019](#), p. 298). She also describes a tradition of Indigenous storytelling for justice and reconciliation. “Most Indigenous nations do not have a word for reconciliation in their own languages. However, spiritual ceremonies, peacemaking practices, and stories have been used since time immemorial to establish and maintain good relationships, restore harmony, heal conflict and harm, and practice justice ([Madden 2019](#), p. 293).

Madden points to stories of refusal, resistance, resilience, restoring, and resurgence as those that de/colonize ([Madden 2019](#), p. 298). Counter-stories of refusal, insists Madden, are those “in which Indigenous peoples have been refusing participation in colonial systems. . .” (p. 298). Counter-stories of resistance are those in which “Indigenous groups and communities have organized and acted to resist dispossession, disenfranchisement, and dismissal by the colonial state and demand recognition of human, Indigenous, and treaty rights” (p. 298). “Counter stories of resilience highlight the incredible ability of Indigenous peoples and Nations to overcome systematic assault on Indigenous ways-of-knowing and -being” (p. 299). “Counter-stories of restoring and resurgence emphasize the healing and reclamation of Indigenous peoples and places that have experienced trauma as a result of Canada’s IRS system” (p. 299).

“The Orange Shirt Story” is one of refusal, resistance, resilience, restoring, and resurgence, especially when considered as part of the greater story of the orange shirt movement.

Webstad teaches children resilience when she describes how she made it through a year of residential school in which she knew that “the nuns didn’t care if she was tired, sick, hungry, or sad. She had to rely on herself. It felt as though she didn’t matter”. She copes by crying herself to sleep, dreaming of home, singing and playing, and “counting the days until she could go back again. Each day the number got smaller and smaller. She waited and waited” (Webstad 2018, p. 26). Telling her story too is an act of resilience. “Sharing my orange shirt story / and how it made me feel / helped me to know / that I could heal”, Webstad writes in a book for the youngest readers (Webstad 2022, p. 9).

When Webstad returns home after the school year and “never went back to the residential school again” (Webstad 2018, p. 34), her story becomes one of refusal. Readers presume her grandmother honoured her granddaughter’s literal refusal to return to St. Joseph Mission Residential School the following year. Another act of refusal is demanding her orange shirt be returned to her as a child. Though the nuns do not comply, Webstad wears an orange shirt as an adult to recount those events.

10. Symbolic Transformation through Counter-Storytelling

The orange shirt, when Webstad wears it as a survivor, is no longer only a symbol of lost hope, but also of personal power reclaimed. “I wear [an orange shirt] today as a symbol of the healing that is taking place” she writes. (Webstad and Sorley 2020, p. 62). It is a symbol of resilience and justice restored. It is a symbol of healing, transformation, resistance, and resurgence: her choices, her point-of-view, her story; she herself matters.

As an author, speaker, and an activist, Webstad centers herself and her storytelling as important, as worthy. Her story work transforms her. Its transformative power is not contained within the story or the storyteller, however. Transformation spirals outwards from storyteller to community to nation. This transformation is made visible in the proliferation of orange shirts. They signal a relationship, an alliance.

Justice Heath Daniel asserts that the strength of Indigenous texts is that they do not merely react to colonial forces but respond. “They are at least as concerned with developing or articulating relationships with, among, and between indigenous readers as they are with communicating our humanity to colonial society, if not more so” (Justice 2018). The relationality of Webstad’s counter-storytelling, that it is for all Canadians, including the youngest among us, and including those Indigenous Canadians for whom residential school survival stories are inherently more painful to receive because that trauma is their lived reality, is its potency.

But is symbolic transformation ultimately harmful to the goals of truth and reconciliation? Does symbolic transformation pre-empt actual transformation and social change? Does the orange shirt movement give settler Canadians an easy out, a way to consider themselves as “allies” without having to change their behavior beyond wearing an orange shirt once a year? In “Non-Indigenous people and the limits of settler colonial reconciliation”, Clark et al. (2016), write, “Research with self-identified ‘allies’ shows how these can be ‘strikingly disconnected’ from wider movements for decolonization”. Should symbolic change and constitutional change be construed as opposites? Might the goals of substantive reform be derailed by the appearance of change?

11. Narrative Theory and National Storytelling

TRCs are not unique to Canada, though many Canadians may feel like we are doing something new. More than 50 TRCs have occurred worldwide. Some of them, writes a Professor of History and Global Human Rights, “have been used cynically as tools for governments to legitimize themselves by pretending they have dealt with painful history when they have only kicked the can down the road” (Ibhawoh 2019).

Scholars examining truth and reconciliation projects through a critical lens understand them as national storytelling projects. The “narrative perspective is important” writes C. Moon in *Narrating political reconciliation: Truth and reconciliation in South Africa*, “because the TRC explicitly undertook the task of telling a story about South Africa’s transition

from past violence to future reconciliation, and argued that storytelling was fundamental to catharsis, healing, and reconciliation on an individual and a national level" (Moon 2008). From this perspective, subjects of the state are always influenced by the agendas of the state. "Subjects do not independently produce, but are constituted by discourse, and they in turn reproduce the particular assumptions of the discourse within which they are constituted, thus ensuring its hegemony and continuity and also, crucially, the invisibility of its reproduction" (Moon 2008). Moon argues that the TRC in South Africa was one in which they rushed victims of violence to construct a tidy "the end" before financial reparations were made (p. 273).

Scrutinizing storytelling in South Africa's TRC, Walker and Unterhalter (2004) insist that "a narrative is never merely a personal and idiosyncratic story". They conclude that, "central to the Truth Commission were reconciliation and forgiveness as a means to reconstruct a 'new' South African nation. The absence of a gendered (or feminist) analysis highlights one of the central contradictions of nationalism and its ambivalence towards gender liberation as part of national liberation and nation building". Walker and Unterhalter (2004) find that the South African TRC controlled the narrative in such a way that some anti-racist and democratic ends were achieved, but the emancipation of women was forestalled.

How do we know that if Webstad's story is accepted into mainstream culture (aired on national broadcasts by the CBC, for example) that it is not because it does the work of settler colonialism in some way that is so deeply ingrained that it is difficult to see? How do we know it is not what Daniel Heath Justice would call bad story medicine instead of good?

While Justice does write about "Stories That Wound, Stories That Heal" in *Why Indigenous Literature Matters* (Justice 2018), he remains a deeply nuanced writer, someone who tends to problematize rather than reify binaries. Storytelling is a powerful tool that can be wielded for a variety of purposes. In *A de/colonizing theory of truth and reconciliation education*, Madden insists that "scholars remain critical of the 'construction and enactment of reconciliation'". Madden asserts:

Decolonization need not be (and perhaps cannot be) constructed in neat opposition to colonization. Rather, de/colonizing calls for consistent examination of colonial logics and productions that seep into settings like Indigenous education and teacher education, which, our intentions and plans notwithstanding, often become hybrid experiences of colonizing and decolonizing (Madden 2019, p. 287).

Scholars such as Madden warn us to be wary of thinking about the work of truth and reconciliation in binaries as "binary thought collapses and exploits difference" (Madden 2019).

Might it be an artefact of colonialism to disregard symbolic acts and symbolic transformation through story as unimportant? Oversimplifying the storywork of Webstad in particular and truth and reconciliation more broadly, in labelling it as either effective or not effective, symbolic or real, good or bad, the work of government or the work of the people, and as doing the work of either colonialism or decolonizing, may be a very colonial way to try to understand (or misunderstand) it.

12. Conclusions

The Orange Shirt Story is one of not complete, but ongoing, transformation. Much of its narrative power comes from the signaling of a symbolic beginning while resisting a symbolic end. As a symbol, the orange shirt has power and salience. Webstad's story telling is right-sized in a way that invites readers and listeners into a gentle space in which meaningful reconciliation may begin. It does the theoretical work that scholars such as Archibald, Castellano, Harde, and Madden insist Indigenous storytelling does: de/colonizing, resisting, refusing, and transforming. Centering Indigenous perspectives and creating spaces of reconciliation, especially for children, are essential tools of de/colonization.

Canada is one of many countries to attempt truth and reconciliation with the assumption that centering Indigenous stories will result in positive and meaningful social change.

It is too early and likely misguided to try to draw decisive conclusions about the success of Canada's TRC; however, if we accept Phyllis J. Webstad as an expert with deep knowledge about storytelling towards personal and national healing, this case suggests we are on the right track in insisting that Indigenous stories matter, and not only to Indigenous people.

"It is time", Webstad writes simply, in answering the question, "Why is my story so accepted?" (Webstad and Sorley 2020, p. 15, para. 2). "I've come to witness and realize that our future is in good hands. The children in elementary and high schools get it, they are that generation that will change our society for the better and makes sure that this never happens again" (Webstad and Sorley 2020, p. 16).

Textual and historical analysis reveals that while it is too early to calculate the impact of Webstad's story work on truth and reconciliation, response within Canada shows that it is significant. The work of truth and reconciliation is not something that can or should be achieved at only a personal level: Webstad and The Orange Shirt Society, as well as Medicine While Publishing, work toward healing at a national level, developing the important pedagogical tools needed to achieve this end. At every level, the orange shirt reveals connections between storytelling, social justice, resilience, and activism.

The Orange Shirt Story does ask something of Canadians in general, and children in particular. It asks them to listen and to try and understand. Webstad's storytelling is not only an "ask" however, it is very much a "give". The gifts of the orange shirt are a way in. Webstad shows us a starting place. She teaches us how and where to begin, while resisting a tidy end. Stories, universally, need beginnings, and that is part of the hard work of making them.

Phyllis (Jack) Webstad is a storyteller of astounding grace, skill, and power. She is not only successful as a storyteller but as a story worker: someone who advocates for the value of telling and receiving stories, someone who advocates for indigenous storytelling traditions and rituals, and who centers her storytelling in community and children in particular. Because she inspires and influences others, and because she shines as a bright light in darkness, Webstad is a story luminary.

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- ¹ Government of Canada. About the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Available online: <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525> (accessed on 10 October 2023)
- ² Google Scholar search for "Phyllis Webstad" on 6 October 2023 reveals fewer than 60 results (58), only 6 of which are scholarly articles about Webstad and her work. A JSTOR search for "Phyllis Webstad" turns up zero scholarly articles (6 October 2023).
- ³ "Phyllis' Story: In Her Own Words". Available online: <https://orangeshirtday.org/phyllis-story/#story> (accessed on 20 October 2023).

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