

Indian Residential Schools and the Internet: Sites of (De)Colonialization

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Abstract

Using the Indian Residential School (IRS) system as an example, this paper examines the internet as a decolonial site. To do so, I will draw on decolonial concepts as well as ideas from spatial theory. Through the analysis of Indigenous-led organizations and a Facebook group dedicated to the collective memory work of the IRS system, I argue that social media platforms can contribute to revitalize culture and foster communal bonds. Amongst others, digital storytelling, the establishment of common symbols, and the organization of joint actions in the offline world have emerged as digital strategies. These are complemented by collecting and sharing memories and educational materials online.

Keywords

Postcolonial Studies – Digital Resiliency – First Nations – Decolonization

Introduction¹

The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the
Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

Nous le regrettons

We are sorry

Nimitataynan

Niminchinowesamin

Mamiattugut

– Harper (2008)

These *words* by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper marked the official state apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools (IRS) on behalf of the Canadian Government in 2008. 13 years later, 215 unmarked Indigenous children's graves were identified on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. The find started a series of

¹ As the author of this paper, I acknowledge the sovereign existence of First Nations on their traditional territories now known as Canada. Furthermore, I acknowledge their suffering over centuries due to European and Canadian settler colonialism. This, too, includes the Indian Residential School system, which aimed at the extinction of Indigenous cultures. I condemn any colonial activities by the Canadian government that continue to affect Indigenous peoples today and join them in calling for a just compensation for their suffering and the decolonization of their traditional territories. As a student with German citizenship, I will refrain from speaking for First Nations or qualitatively judging their decolonial actions in this paper.

further investigations of other former school grounds. Using ground-penetrating radar, more than 1,300 unmarked graves could be identified on just five former school sites (Voce 2021). It is important to note that the recovery of these graves did not come as a surprise but rather confirmed an atrocity already known among First Nations people for many years. The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – convened at the same time as the state apology – had already confirmed the death of 3,201 IRS students (TRC 15).

In addition to the horrific colonial past of residential schools, it is often noted that a pan-Indian consciousness has emerged from the shared experience and suffering. With regard to the territory now known as the United States, this consciousness has had significant influence on the solidarity and resistance within the Native American community (Gibson 2). In a similar manner, the search conducted on the former school grounds at Kamloops by the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation did not only inspire other First Nations to search former school grounds, but also triggered an overwhelming surge of dismay and support on social media. This article analyzes social media platforms as potential sites of decolonization. Regarding the debate about the IRS system in Canada, I argue that social media platforms can contribute to revitalize culture and foster communal bonds.

First, I will give a short overview of the state of research on IRS in Canada. In a subsequent theory chapter, I will combine decolonial theory with spatial aspects that provide the foundation for my later analysis. It draws on the seminal works by Glen Sean Coulthard, Amical Cabral, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson as well as on Sarah de Leeuw's spatial analysis of IRS. Proceeding from this, I will develop the idea of the internet and social media platforms as decolonial places. Furthermore, this part will also feature sections on strategies of resistance and the usage of the internet and specifically social media platforms among Indigenous nations in the settler colonial state of Canada.

As the IRS system only had and still has negative effects for members of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit,² the subsequent analysis is based on data collected from groups, social media pages, and websites lead by Indigenous people. In contrast to many other scholarly approaches, the materials provided by governmental institutions are secondary in this analysis to acknowledge the unique expertise of Indigenous people. I will especially focus on the activities of the organization *Orange Shirt Society* and the open-access Facebook group *Every Child Matters*. Here, I will conduct a rather broad descriptive analysis of selected contents, as social media platforms, unfortunately, do not provide free access to in-depth quantitative data. In a final section, the results and implications of the analysis are summarized to provide a comprehensive overview of this specific decolonial discourse. Although it is important to critically remember the violence of colonialism and institutions such as the IRS system, this paper will not include a summary of the Indian Residential School system's history. This has already been thoroughly documented elsewhere, in particular by Indigenous scholars such as Glen Sean Coulthard, Phil Fountain and Aimée Craft, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

Reconciliation and Resentment

Research on the history of the IRS system and its far-reaching effects has produced an extensive yet still growing field. The majority of this research has mostly been concerned with the work of

² As not only children from First Nations but also Métis and Inuit had to attend IRS, I will use the term 'Indigenous' to inclusively denote every group suffering from Canadian settler colonialism. If it is applicable, I use the names of specific First Nations (i.e. Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation).

the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) and the TRC as well as their final reports published in 1996 respectively 2015. In short, both commissions were convened to investigate the full and complex history of the IRS system and its effects on the relation between Indigenous peoples and Canadian settlers. To uncover the truth about the violence of the settler colonial state of Canada to the public, both commissions interviewed survivors of IRS, visited sites of former schools, and analyzed documents such as enrollment lists. Based on their investigations, the commissions published final reports, containing calls to action for the Canadian government and public to promote reconciliation.

Glen Sean Coulthard, however, challenges the politics of recognition and reconciliation. In his extensive work *Red Skin, White Mask*, he argues “that Indigenous peoples’ individual and collective resentment [towards reconciliation]” is to be understood as an “awareness of and unwillingness to *reconcile* ourselves [Indigenous peoples] with a structural and symbolic violence that is still very much present in our lives” (126). The “structural and symbolic violence” (126) Coulthard refers to is settler colonialism and its ongoing effects, established by European colonizers and the Canadian government. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson offers a similar approach to Indigenous resistance. She, too, rejects the politics of the TRC as it was “controlled entirely by the state” and only serves “to placate Indigenous resistance and to appease the moral concern of Canadians” (239). In her book *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson offers an approach to resistance, based on Indigenous cultures, with the aim “that Indigenous grief can[not] be managed, exploited, and used by the state to placate Indigenous resistance” (238). Even though criticizing the TRC for enacting a “transitional justice for indigenous people in a non-transitional society,” Courtney Jung also points out the potential of the commission to emphasize that “the scope of Canadian government obligation toward its indigenous population extends far beyond the legacy of the residential school system” (26).

Apart from the scholarly writings about Indigenous resistance and the TRC, research also focuses on a growing body of testimonies by residential school survivors.³ The testimonies are often used to emphasize Indigenous voices and to provide educational materials, but they also offer insights into the psychological aspects of the IRS system. Hence, a number of research projects collectively emphasize the traumatic effects not only on a personal but also on a communal and intergenerational level (Burrage et al.). With regard to trauma, additional research on coping mechanisms and explicitly Indigenous strategies for coping with traumatic experiences has been conducted (Molyneux et al.).

Decolonization and Place

In order to understand decolonization, the extent of colonialism must be recognized first and foremost. Amílcar Cabral describes colonialism as the “theory of progressive *assimilation* of native populations, which turns out to be only a more or less violent attempt to deny the culture of the people in question” (54). Turning this definition around, it is evident that Cabral sees culture as the essential vehicle for resistance against the oppressor. To him, “culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated” (54.) Hence, from a colonizer’s point of view, the destruction of Indigenous cultures through the IRS system in what is considered Canada today seemed to be an effective measure of

³ To name only one example, *Behind Closed Doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School*, edited and published by an Indigenous organization, collected stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School where the 215 unmarked graves were recovered in May 2021 (Agnes S. Jack).

assimilation which would break Indigenous resistance to colonialism. Paired with the deprivation of Indigenous land, unjust treaties, and economical negligence, European settlers thus implemented the structure of settler colonialism on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit territories by attempting to destroy Indigenous cultures.

Hence, just like colonialism, national liberation and decolonization emphasizes the role of culture. Following Cabral, the ultimate goal of national independence movements has to be “[reclaiming] the right, usurped by imperialist domination, namely: the liberation of the process of development of national productive forces” (56). This liberation will then lead to the revitalization of culture as a whole and national liberation is thus “an act of *culture*” (56; emphasis in original).

As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang state, “settler colonialism is a structure and not an event” (5). This structure may sometimes be invisible to people who are not affected, but it is always in place as long as the oppressor and the structures of their society are still present. The process of abolishing the ubiquitous system of colonization has to be decolonization, not reconciliation. Accordingly, Tuck and Yang argue that reconciliation only serves “settler normalcy [and is] about a settler future” (35), just like colonialism used to be in the first place. Like Simpson, they argue that reconciliation and recognition only serve to ease the settlers’ guilt. This desire for and the acceptance of recognition by the colonizer on the part of the colonized is what Frantz Fanon calls internalized colonialism (*Red Skin* 114). Decolonization, on the other hand, “is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (Tuck and Yang 5) only and does not seek recognition from the colonizer. With this, Tuck and Yang dwell on Frantz Fanon’s idea that decolonization has to be seen as an always evolving process which the oppressed go through, stressing that it takes time and cannot be foreseen. Decolonization is not achieved through a plain apology by the state nor when the settler deems it to be satisfactory (Fanon 36). Following this reasoning, it becomes apparent why members of First Nations like Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reject the work of the state as well as settler-funded TRC or other settler initiatives. To put it in Simpson’s words, “there is no demand upon the state or its citizens other than to get out of the way and respect Indigenous self-determination and nationhood” (237). In line with Tuck and Yang, Rachel L. Burrage, Sandra L. Momper, and Joseph P. Gone identify four central components of decolonization with regard to Indigenous peoples: “a) making the dynamics of settler colonialism visible, b) privileging Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, c) restoring cultural and traditional practices, and d) returning land and resources to Indigenous peoples” (Burrage et al. 28). Considering these four components, it appears that decolonization is closely linked to the production of knowledge. This does not only include knowledge of the colonial history, but also knowledge about Indigenous epistemologies and cultures.

If decolonization cannot be dependent on the oppressor and has to deny its culture, what would “a radical alternative to the structural and psycho-affective facets of colonial domination” (Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire” 546) look like in an Indigenous context? What are possible ways to visualize the dynamics of settler colonialism or to revitalize Indigenous cultural traditions? Following Adam J. Barker, it is crucial to acknowledge that Indigenous resistance against European settler colonialism has always taken place (44). The strategies and ways of resistance are usually culturally embedded but varied and develop over time. Heather Molyneaux et al. single out “social capital, sharing stories, and networking” as major components of First Nations’ resiliency. Kirmayer et al. emphasize especially the power of storytelling among Indigenous groups and the potential of stories “to link generations, [transmit] knowledge, values, and a sense of shared identity” (81).

To offer an example of the potential of storytelling for the creation of a sense of identity, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson gives an insightful example of a traditional Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg story, combined with Indigenous epistemology, in her chapter “Land as Pedagogy.” Additionally, the story breaks with the conventional Eurocentric gender categories and emphasizes Indigenous values (Simpson 145-73). Every time Simpson or any other member of her Nation shares the story, many cultural aspects are taught rather than being suppressed, as was the case in the past. By creating a valuable bond between storyteller and listener, the act of storytelling here revitalizes and reflects on Indigenous cultures and at the same time refuses to normalize the colonizer’s culture.

Stories such as Simpson’s can also evoke another powerful sentiment that helps to restore continuity in life, namely nostalgia. Originally viewed as a medical disease similar to homesickness, nostalgia is now known as a personal bitter-sweet emotion that can be described as a longing for the past. This longing does not have to be delusional but can rather be seen as a coping mechanism in moments of discontinuity and distress. Although predominantly known as a personal emotion, nostalgia can also be witnessed on a group level (Wildschut et al. 861). A shared nostalgia can create a sense of belonging, foster social bonds, and offer a restorative yet progressive look into a potential future. To this end, it is not necessary that all members of a community have witnessed the remembered event, but rather that the memory or story of the event is meaningful to the group identity (859). Hence, nostalgia – evoked by practices and storytelling from the time before the arrival of the colonizer – may be helpful to reinvigorate Indigenous cultures.

Surely storytelling is only one of many traditional means of resiliency. It is, however, of crucial importance for my analysis. Regarding the desire for recognition based on internalized colonialism, Coulthard for example argues “that Indigenous peoples’ individual and collective resentment – expressed as an angry and vigilant unwillingness to forgive” (*Red Skin* 126) may be an adequate response. However, as already stated above, it is on the colonized to decide what measure shall be taken to decolonize. For us, European settlers and colonizers, there is only one thing to do: “get out of the way and respect Indigenous self-determination and nationhood” (Simpson 237).

(De)Colonialization, Place, and the Internet

Colonialism and decolonization have both been theorized mainly from a historical, cultural, and literary perspective. The discipline of postcolonial studies itself predominantly evolved within these three rather loosely defined fields of research. Thus, Cole Harris’s proposal to conceptualize (de)colonialization from a spatial perspective and “to investigate the sites where colonialism was [and still is] actually practiced” (166) is a valuable intervention that links perfectly with Burrage, Momper, and Gone’s first component of decolonization, namely “making the dynamics of settler colonialism visible” (28).

With regard to Canada and the IRS system, Sarah de Leeuw responds to Harris’ appeal and offers a convincing spatial analysis of IRS buildings in British Columbia. She argues that the buildings are places of colonialism that symbolized the gendered and segregated settler colonial discourse which Indigenous peoples were exposed to – and still are (de Leeuw 351). They are a constant reminder of the cultural deprivation and the recent recoveries of unmarked graves emphasized this. Even though IRS are places of colonialism, de Leeuw further argues that they are also a reminder of the resiliency of Indigenous peoples, drawing on oral testimonies of solidarity between and resistance by Indigenous students. By burning school buildings, for instance,

“students *used* the very places (residential schools) claimed by the colonial project in order to disrupt the material articulations of colonialism” (353; emphasis in original).

In connection with the uncovering of the graves, the IRS as places of colonialism reappear at the center of decolonial discourse – this time, however, particularly in a virtual space. Due to public and global attention and despite the existence of over 130 different schools, the Canadian IRS has now become one semiotic place that includes many different experiences and physical places on a virtual level. As a semiotic place, it conveys a symbolic meaning to the public and serves as a meaningful foundation in the public discourse on IRS (Dünne 2). Hence, the IRS is now more visible as a settler colonial structure than ever before and offers the opportunity for decolonization through digital means. Making colonial structures visible is a first step but also results in another important aspect of decolonization, namely the emergence of (self-)knowledge. As the following analysis will show, knowledge about IRS and the colonial past in general can be created and shared via the virtual place of IRS.

Making use of digital infrastructure for resistance is not new to First Nations peoples. In 2012 and 2013, the #IdleNoMore grassroots movement gained global attention with its protests against a number of legislations passed by the Canadian government, including changes in the Indian Act and environmental protection. These protests were largely organized online and included public performances of cultural elements such as round dances and drumming (Barker 48). Digital infrastructure is also important in other respects: As Brian Beaton and Peter Campbell show, the Canadian government mainly focuses on the expansion of broadband infrastructure in urban settler regions; Indigenous people living in rural areas are thus structurally disadvantaged. Whether purposely or not, “having unreliable infrastructure weakens the communities’ resilience” (Beaton and Campbell). However, with the help of small, Indigenous-led companies and reciprocal financial support, the First Nations are advancing the development of their own digital infrastructures. Beaton and Campbell consider this to be a further act of decolonization, pointing to the increased opportunities for networking between the nations. The rapidly developing success of the #IdleNoMore movement confirms their reasoning.

It becomes apparent that decolonization struggles are also benefiting from digital processes. Coupled with traditional strategies of resistance such as storytelling and networking, the increased reach of social media platforms might accelerate community-building processes and help to create a sustainable digital culture. This can create a stronger sense of community among First Nations, which is crucial in the struggle for cultural autonomy. To illustrate this point, I will discuss exemplary virtual activism related to IRS below. When it comes to research on digital activism, the latter’s impact is usually determined by the number of clicks and impressions as well as the reach of posts, or the usage of a movement-defining hashtag. This data is unfortunately not provided by social media platforms for free and requires paid third-party services. Thus, only selected contents can be analyzed in this paper. As a result, I focus particularly on content created by Indigenous people with a high number of interactions in the form of likes and comments.

Orange Shirt Society

Originating from a commemorative project and reunion of former students, the Orange Shirt Society was formed in 2013. Its name is derived from the personal story of survivor Phyllis Webstad, who was forced to attend an IRS at age six. On her first day, the new orange t-shirt, given to her by her grandmother, was taken from her forever with her other belongings. What started as a local project is now the most recognized symbol honoring the victims of the IRS system. Inspired

by the first day of the IRS school year, September 30 was declared Orange Shirt Day, and since 2021 a statutory annual holiday in most Canadian states. The orange shirt stands for resistance against the forced cultural assimilation of Indigenous children through the IRS system (“About Us”).

With its work, the Orange Shirt Society wants “to create awareness of the individual, family and community inter-generational impacts of Indian Residential Schools” (“Orange Shirt Society”). In other words, the members of the organization create and share knowledge about the colonial past, make it visible and create intergenerational bonds between survivors of residential schools and their families. The organization makes Canadian IRS known as places of colonialism and they refuse to “get over it” (Coulthard, *Red Skin* 126) and draw a line between today and colonial Canada’s past. It is an active refusal of reconciliation that according to many Indigenous peoples only serves to ease the settlers’ consciousness; at the same time, it is also an offer to any Indigenous people to join in a collective process of healing.

More than anything, however, the Orange Shirt Society exemplifies the power of storytelling. What has started as a local grassroots movement has developed into a nationwide community due to social media, as Phyllis Webstad argues (“Phyllis Webstad,” 02:29-02:40). It has not been about the orange t-shirt of six-year-old Phyllis for a long time. The t-shirt stands for a communal experience of suffering that must never be forgotten. But it also stands for the Indigenous rebellion against Canada’s system of settler colonialism and for solidarity among Indigenous peoples. With the discovery of the aforementioned 215 graves, the movement received renewed attention in the mainstream media. In this context, it seems only appropriate that the Canadian government proclaimed Orange Shirt Day on September 30 as the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2021. The Orange Shirt Society highlights the day as “a time for healing, a time to share knowledge” (“A Time for Healing”). Across the country, thousands of Indigenous people come together with non-Indigenous allies in orange t-shirts for communal actions. Whether in protest marches, traditional dances or spontaneous gatherings, at the center of it is the orange t-shirt as a symbolic means of storytelling that bears a crucial message: every child matters (CBC). To promote the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Phyllis Webstad told her story again on Facebook, along with Rosanna Casimir, chief of Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, who initiated the search at Kamloops (BC Lions).

Facebook Group: Every Child Matters Movement

On June 2, 2021, a few days after the confirmation of the unmarked graves in Kamloops, the Facebook group *Every Child Matters* was created. As of the beginning of February 2023, it counts over 81,317 members, 10,000 of whom have joined within a week after establishing the group. In the first month, 448 posts have been published according to Facebook’s automatically generated group information. On August 9, 2022, the group’s name was changed to *Every Child Matters Movement*.⁴ The group is managed and organized by five administrators. Even though the number of members and posts makes the group look very disorganized at first glance, on closer inspection it serves as a good example of a viral decolonial place. The group aims to be “a community to provide educational resources, generate awareness, share events and actions and work together to create a world our 7 generations yet to come can feel proud to be a part of” (“About This Group”). For this purpose, the group is mainly organized according to three categories: ‘Events,’ ‘Guides,’

⁴ All numbers are based on the group information given by Facebook and were retrieved for the last time on February 08, 2023.

‘Discussion.’ The category ‘Events’ functions as a public calendar, where group members can add events that revolve around the IRS system. These are sorted chronologically so that all group members can see, share or participate in them. In this way, the Facebook group particularly supports networking as a crucial aspect in the struggle for resistance against settler colonialism.

Another means of decolonization is knowledge formation, as described above. In order to make knowledge more accessible to group members in a more organized way, the second organizational category ‘Guides’ is divided into eight guides, which thematically structure the numerous posts:

- Guide 1: Searches Underway;
- Guide 2: Educational Resources;
- Guide 3: Verified Sellers, T-Shirts and More;
- Guide 4: Funding and Compensation Resources;
- Guide 5: Residential/Boarding School Photos;
- Guide 6: Names of Children;
- Guide 7: Survivor’s Stories;
- Guide 8: Every Child Matters Art / Designs / Creativity. (“Guides”)

Guides 1 and 6 have a similar function as news tickers and inform about current searches on school grounds as well as the names of identified children. Their main purpose is to make colonialism visible and to inform people. Guide 2 is also about sharing knowledge, providing educational materials to address the glaring gaps in Canadian society’s knowledge of its colonial past. The lack of knowledge and the need for more in-depth education was alarmingly confirmed by a survey conducted by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) after the findings in Kamloops. In this survey, 67% of the Canadians interviewed stated that they were not at all or only slightly familiar with the past of the IRS system (Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Race Relations Foundation 11).⁵ Composed with the expertise of Indigenous people, this guide is important to amplify “Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies” (Burrage et al. 28) in the process of decolonization. Guide 7 corresponds to the central cultural strategy of Indigenous groups, storytelling. This guide also illustrates the particular advantage of digital formats such as Facebook groups: The powerful exchange between storyteller and listener, as well as the reach of the stories themselves, is multiplied many times over. Members thus have the opportunity for low-threshold interaction with the stories that are being told, and access is also possible at any time. This makes the storytelling strategy even more powerful than it already was prior to the use of social media.

Storytelling and networking, however, are complemented by the third category, ‘Discussion.’ In this category, which consists of the group feed, group members can post and discuss anything that revolves around IRS; accordingly, the contents in this category so numerous and diverse that sorting them would only be possible with keyword analysis using digital tools. Arguably, Facebook’s existence as a company was made possible by colonial structures; this, however, does not seem to limit the group in its development of content. Nonetheless, the functions and rights of public groups were changed by Facebook in 2022. Since then, members of the group are no longer able to interact in a private group chat. By taking away this feature,

⁵ The survey consists of a random sample of 3.000 Canadian adults. According to the authors of the survey, “The data were weighted according to census data to ensure that the sample matched Canada’s population according to age, gender, educational attainment, and region” (2).

Facebook complicated direct networking within the group. At this point, the power that Facebook and other tech companies have over how tools can be used becomes apparent. One might thus argue that using Facebook and other social media controlled by the colonizer represents a form of internalized colonialism and hinders resistance. The means of decolonization, however, should be chosen and evaluated by the colonized, not the colonizer. Ultimately, the group discussion offers the potential to reach more than 80,000 interested people from across Canada and around the world – significantly more than would be possible at locally organized in-person events.

In the category ‘Discussion,’ members can also share their own stories or those of family members and interact with each other. Depending on the topic, the posts may be assigned to the respective guides by administrators of the groups. This form of interactive discussion mirrors the storytelling that is essential to Indigenous modes of decolonization. It starts with an initial post by a group member, who tells the main story and sets the overarching theme of this particular group interaction. The audience consists of anyone interested or invested in the story or the theme. After the main story is told, the audience can react to and start a conversation about it by commenting below the original post. Unlike unmediated storytelling, where the audience is limited and has to be physically present, virtual storytelling has a potentially bigger audience. The same applies for passing on the story. Unless the original post is deleted by the author or restricted by privacy settings, the whole process of storytelling including the reactions and responses can easily be shared in different feeds and does not have to be re-told. Through the technical affordances of social media, the written story can be complimented by photos, videos, or voice messages. However, the differences between spoken and written language should not be underestimated as filler words, sounds, and body language may also contribute to the overall story. These attributions are usually lost in the digital and written form.

Amber Sherwin’s post about her grandfather’s story, for example, illustrates Indigenous and digital mechanisms of resilience discussed above. In particular, forms of storytelling and sharing of (self-)knowledge can be found here. Sherwin’s post is rather short in comparison, but still informs group members about the IRS her grandfather, who remains nameless in the post, had to go through. Within nine years at the “Mush Hole” (Sherwin), he attempted flight on multiple occasions including one successful attempt at age 15.⁶ Knowing the history of IRS, it is impossible not to imagine the brutal punishments Sherwin’s grandfather had to endure after the failed escape attempts – even though Sherwin does not mention punishment. By not explicitly describing the violence caused by the colonizer, she shifts the focus onto the strength and resilience and does not reiterate the violence onto the Indigenous community. In response, Sherwin receives solidarity by fellow group members in the form of orange hearts in the comment section and additional stories of family members that were forced to live at the “Mush Hole” (Sherwin): “My mother and her 8 siblings were at the mush hole too” (Wood, “Mush Hole”). Other responses express their anger about the colonial history and the state’s politics of reconciliation. However, most of the commentators – and Sherwin, too – commend her grandfather’s bravery and resilience. As Sherwin writes, “the memories and trauma were buried deep until he felt like he needed to tell his story.” The post is accompanied by a picture of her grandfather at a community event where he shared his story with other Indigenous people and participated in the (abstract) process of decolonization. By concluding with “I am here because he survived” (Sherwin), she, too, draws a direct intergenerational line between the IRS survivors and their descendants.

⁶ Mush Hole is a reference used by survivors to the texture of the food served at Mohawk Institute residential school in Brantford, Ontario.

A more recent post by Teresa Wood features another component of resiliency, namely “Indigenous peoples’ individual and collective resentment” (Coulthard, *Red Skin* 126) against settler colonial politics. The orange-colored share-picture with the line “There are just some wounds that apologies don’t heal” (Wood, “Apologies”) supplemented with a broken-heart emoji stimulated a lot of interaction and contributions by other group members compared to similar posts in the group discussion.⁷ In addition to the general agreement by other group members, the underlying tone indicates the unwillingness to accept the politics of reconciliation that only serves “settler normalcy [and is] about a settler future” (Tuck and Yang 35). Rather, the emphasis in the comments below this particular (but also other posts) is on the “Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (5) that is essential to decolonization and does not need the recognition of the colonizers. This is also expressed by group member Gaylene Cromwell: “I agree. I don’t think the indigenous community will ever get a sincere apology from the Vatican or the Canadian Government. I feel it is time for the Indigenous to heal from within the community because outside forces don’t want you to heal.”

As many other posts within the group discussion, the two posts introduced above encourage general solidarity among group members and stimulate ongoing storytelling and networking among the group members in the comment sections. Through the interactive format of the group discussion, this part of the Indigenous-led group fosters the communal aspects of Indigenous resiliency and decolonial theory. Due to the size of the group and the small number of moderators, it cannot be ruled out that non-Indigenous people may inappropriately interfere in the decolonial discourse and that misinformation and hate speech may be spread. However, if anything this, is a more general problem of social media.

In connection with the more organized aspect of the group – the guides – the previously elaborated decolonial theories and strategies are echoed. These are digitized and applied to the semiotic space of the IRS, developing a virtual decolonial space around a diversity of Indigenous cultures. Especially Guide 3 and 8 demonstrate this aspect. Guide 3, on the one hand, creates a connection to the Orange Shirt Society, and on the other hand, promotes networking between and support for Indigenous-owned businesses. In doing so, they help create a shared and intergenerational bond that works through the common trauma of IRS. It is also beneficial to connect viral movements to gain a maximum reach. Guide 8 champions traditional Indigenous cultural productions and thus inspires to revitalize Indigenous cultures. These productions may serve as a refugium for older generations, but also as an educational resource and inspiration to younger descendants of Indigenous people. This, too, helps “to link generations, [to transmit] knowledge, values, and a sense of shared identity” (Kirmayer et al. 81).

Conclusion

Although all IRS have now been closed, this does not mean that their colonial influence ended with their termination. Especially their intergenerational psychological consequences and their deep impact on the lives of the Indigenous peoples are emphasized repeatedly. The findings at the former Kamloops IRS have once again made this clear and brought the issue back to international headlines. Even though the IRS system is only one component of the Canadian settler colonial structure, the buildings and sites of the IRS are places where Canadian settler colonialism materializes and becomes particularly visible to everyone.

⁷ This includes more than 750 likes or other reactions, 75 comments, and 150 shares over the course of two weeks (last updated on February 08, 2023).

As shown above with reference to Amílcar Cabral, among others, culture, and especially the revitalization of suppressed culture, can play a crucial role in the process of decolonization. With reference to First Nations, storytelling and networking are particularly important factors. Among other things, they enable increased social cohesion by evoking a nostalgia for a better, pre-colonial time and can thus lead to communal mobilization for decolonization processes. The #IdleNoMore movement in 2012/2013 has shown how the internet can be used to achieve greater public visibility for these movements. The example of the IRS system was used to show how cultural revitalization can be organized online as an act of resistance. The IRS serves as a semiotic place where experiences have been retold, mediatized and digitized. Through storytelling and networking on digital platforms, feelings of resentment but also empowerment are kept alive, representing “an entirely understandable [...] response to our settler-colonial present” (Coulthard, *Red Skin* 121). Whereas the Orange Shirt Society has provided a transnational symbol for solidarity with IRS survivors and missing children, the Facebook group Every Child Matters offers a place for creating social bonds and a communal feeling in the form of networking and storytelling. In addition, both champion the production and sharing of (self-)knowledge to create a better understanding of past and present. Combining several important components of decolonization, they exemplify the potential of digital resiliency and represent the Indigenous refusal to yield to the colonizer’s desire to detach the present from Canadian settler colonial structures that are still apparent.

Evidently, the internet can play a significant role in the ongoing struggle for decolonization. The examples chosen here exemplify a posting and interaction dynamic within the group that is as representative as possible. However, the study at hand has its limitations due to the small sample for analysis and restrictions to available data. A quantitative analysis of social media activities would thus be particularly interesting for further research. On the one hand, it would be helpful to examine the reach of and interaction with posts, and on the other hand, it would be interesting to categorize the posts on the basis of keyword analyses. At the same time, of course, the focus must also be on other social platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter, and Instagram to achieve more representative results.

Author Biography

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