

# Ethnohistory Field School Report

## 2015

### "Baby, you don't know what happened to our people": Conversations with an Educator, Shoyshqwelwhet (Dr. Gwen Point)

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The Ethnohistory Field School is a collaboration of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Stó:lō Nation & Stó:lō Tribal Council, and the History Departments of the University of Victoria and University of Saskatchewan.



## **"You're Walking on the Backs of Your Ancestors"**

Ei:yá asked two young men to tie his canoe to their canoe and row him across the river and "dig a hole and when I die I'll fall into the hole."<sup>1</sup> They were then to burn all of his belongings to prevent the spread of disease. He had smallpox and there was no cure. Usually only bad people were buried in the ground. Ei:yá was respected and well-loved. Upon his death, he should have been wrapped and placed in a tree. The community would then occasionally take him down to re-wrap him until only his bones were left. They would put those bones in boxes to carry the loved one with them. Only bad people were put in the ground. Ei:yá told them to bury him because he wanted to protect his village from smallpox.

On the fourth day after he was rowed across the river, the village heard "four loud wolf-like calls" and then silence.<sup>2</sup> Assuming he was gone, "the women in the village started crying. Everybody loved him."<sup>3</sup> The two young men went back across the river to carry out his final requests, but were surprised to see that he was still sitting up. They thought it might be his ghost or that he might have died with his eyes open. They decided they had to push his body into the hole and bury him. But Ei:yá wasn't dead. He told them not to be scared and to come closer; the smallpox sores had miraculously been cured. "He was clean and he didn't have a mark on him."<sup>4</sup> He told them that a light had appeared in the sky and in this light was a man named Jesus who cured him. Jesus told him to go back to help his community but he was only allowed to accept a little smoked

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, e-mail message to author, September 23, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015.

fish or tobacco for his work: "Meaning you're not allowed to get rich on what you do."<sup>5</sup>

And he did help people.

Later in his life, he remarried. This was a second marriage for both Ei:yá and his new wife. Ei:yá's ceremonial regalia should have passed down through the matrilineal lines. In other words, the regalia should have been passed down to Ei:yá's sister and then to her daughter. Instead, Ei:yá's second wife and her daughter kept the sacred items.<sup>6</sup>

A different man climbed a mountain and laid down, prepared to die. He had syphilis and there was no cure. While he was laying there naked, a snake slithered by and bit the sores off his penis. The snake proceeded to eat three plants and miraculously cure itself. The man realized that if he ate these plants he would live. He now knew a cure for syphilis but, because he did not write it down, this knowledge has been lost.<sup>7</sup>

A boy ran away from the Coqualeetza hospital, wanting to be back with his family. He had tuberculosis. His grandmother wrapped his leg and arm, which were covered in sores, with some medicinal plants. The third time she changed his wrappings, he was cured.

I heard two of these stories of sudden cures from Shoyshqwelwhet, or Dr. Gwen Point, a Stó:lō educator and healer. Ei:yá is her ancestor. The boy whose grandmother cured him of tuberculosis would grow up to become her father. When I asked her if she knew which plants her great-grandmother used to cure her father, she answered simply: "no." These three examples, are more than just stories of miraculous cures; they are also

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015. Salmon is sacred to the Stó:lō and many community members also consider tobacco sacred, although others argue that this is an imported tradition.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015. See also Gwen Point, interview by Keith Carlson, October 23, 1995; Gwen Point, interview by Meagan Gough, July 14, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Bertha Peters, quoted in Keith Thor Carlson, "Orality about Literacy: The 'Black and White' of Salish History," in *Orality and Literacy: Reflections Across Disciplines*, eds. Keith Thor Carlson, Kristina Fagan, and Natalia Khanenko-Frieson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 48.

stories of post-contact epidemics (smallpox, syphilis and tuberculosis are three diseases that have had devastating effects on Indigenous communities); and stories of the physical consequences of the loss of knowledge and culture, in this case the loss of healing knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Although not explicitly stories about the education system, they also demonstrate the ways in which stories themselves are important teaching tools. Finally, these examples forefront a primary theme in Indigenous education stories: cultural loss and its adverse effects.

Drawing from recorded and informal interviews with Gwen, this paper is a rumination on the role of education in Indigenous communities, and the importance of Indigenous stories and Indigenous epistemologies. Twinned with Gwen's biographical and educational stories is an evaluation of our joint efforts in the production of this ethnohistory. By not only reporting what she said in conversation with me, but also in how, where, and why we were in conversation, I hope to demonstrate the importance of continued negotiations and respectful contact between the stories of settler Canadians and the stories of Indigenous Canadians.

Gwen is willing to talk about the power of knowledge and the reclamation of culture with, as she has said, anyone who is willing to listen. I was willing to listen and was honoured when Gwen agreed to share some of her life stories with me, many of them "education stories."<sup>9</sup> Over the next couple of meetings, we talked about our families, she

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<sup>8</sup> Gwen describes the devastation of the smallpox epidemics. Her grandfather's words - "Baby, you don't know what happened to our people" - refer to one of the last smallpox outbreaks. As a boy, he was returning to his community with his grandmother after the summer months. The village was up in smoke and people told them to leave; that people were dying. Their canoe was not allowed to approach. There were so many people dying that they would put the bodies in pithouses and burn them. Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> This phrase appears in Gwen's recently submitted PhD dissertation. Gwendolyn R. Point, "Intergenerational Experiences in Aboriginal Education: My Family" (PhD dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2015).

introduced me to her brother and great-nephew, showed me her old elementary school, and allowed me to follow her as she performed her duties as a speaker and educator. Occasionally, I would record our conversations in a more formal interview setting. Often I just listened, inspired by what Stó:lō education scholar Jo-ann Archibald has termed "heart memory" or "heart knowledge," a form of deep listening and self-reflexive learning.<sup>10</sup> This methodology, similar to the anthropological technique of participant-observer, allows for a deep engagement with community members. In the absence of formal recording technology, however, it also means that people who listen and remember from the heart become dependant on their own memory recall and field notes.

The relationship that developed between Gwen and I should also be noted. Mutual respect and a certain degree of trust informed our conversations. She took on the role of a cultural teacher, educating me on issues that, as an outsider, I was ignorant of. This allowed me to deepen my understanding of her storywork and the scholarly literature. I sent our recorded interviews to Gwen and she also saw a draft of this paper. In this way, by working closely together, she was able to correct any small errors in my re-telling of her stories.<sup>11</sup> However, it also raises a question that is central to the project of ethnohistory: how do we critically engage with and analyse the stories of informants with whom we have personal relationships, while still being respectful of cultural protocols and the informant's own storywork? The answer to this difficult question is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I have kept these issues forefront in my mind and hope I

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<sup>10</sup> Jo-ann Archibald, "An Indigenous Storywork Methodology," in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, eds. J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), 12, 16.

<sup>11</sup> In my re-telling of the Ei:yá story found at the beginning of this paper, for example, Gwen corrected what I had interpreted as "an agonizing cry" to "four loud wolf-like calls." Dr. Gwen Point, e-mail message to author, September 23, 2015.

have struck an appropriate balance between my role as Gwen's student and my position as an ethnohistorian.

Although our conversations and the lessons she imparted to me through her storywork form the core of this analysis, they will be supplemented by information found in her recent PhD dissertation, previously recorded interviews done with other researchers, and secondary sources related to Indigenous educational experiences, including notably the Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada. Based on Gwen's life-history and on the supporting literature, I argue that properly funded and culturally appropriate education plays a key role in the healing journey of First Nations communities in Canada. Through cultural revitalization projects, these communities continue to cope with the traumatic consequences of cultural loss, as demonstrated by the epidemic stories at the beginning of this paper. At the same time, one of the primary historic injustices that necessitates healing and reconciliation was, and remains, education that is insensitive to the cultural traditions and contemporary needs of the individual and the community.<sup>12</sup> Some of what follows will sound familiar to scholars engaged with this literature. It is an argument, however, that needs to be repeated until society's actions match our words. For a Western audience, as I found, Gwen's storywork will likely also dispute commonly held assumptions about education, curriculum and racism. For, although many of her

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<sup>12</sup> For one example of both how damaging residential schools were and how powerfully healing culturally appropriate education can be, see "Anonymous," in *Behind Closed Doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School*, rev. ed., ed. Agnes Jack (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books, 2006), 159-163. This anonymous man recalled the harsh discipline in residential school. He was punished for speaking his language and his relationships with his family and community were damaged by an experiential divide. He also, however, spoke of his "education journey" which included the reclamation of his language, and how healing that process was for him. For more on the importance of language revitalization see Gwen Point, interview by Denise McDonald, February 23, 1999.

experiences with the Canadian education system have been negative, and she did drop out of high school, her life has also been full of remarkable success. She has recently, for example, received her PhD and is the Chancellor of the University of the Fraser Valley.<sup>13</sup>

Gwen argues that education, from primary schools to university courses, should be rendered meaningful to Indigenous people and cultures and, in this way, be disentangled from the colonial process. Culturally appropriate education might include a larger role for the community in formal school settings. It also includes meaningful interaction with Aboriginal epistemologies and a validation of oral traditions, some of which challenge Western scientism and atomism. Some Indigenous students, including Gwen, explain that they struggle with the written word because it was not rendered meaningful for them. Others struggle with verbalizing their thoughts in a classroom-setting. This might in part be explained by Stó:lō cultural protocols where "you have to earn the right to speak... we don't speak if somebody older's sitting there."<sup>14</sup> This struggle can be lessened by an education system that acknowledges Aboriginal languages, and ways of knowing, a curriculum that is relevant for the student, and an environment that does not shame a student for their identity.<sup>15</sup> Gwen recalls an elder encouraging her education but reminding her: "go to university but don't forget who you are."<sup>16</sup> Being secure and confident in their own identity should not be peripheral to a child's

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<sup>13</sup> "Gwendolyn Point named new UFV Chancellor," *Abbotsford News*, October 7, 2014, [www.abbynews.com/news/278406471.html](http://www.abbynews.com/news/278406471.html).

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 26, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Willie Ermine, "Aboriginal Epistemology," in *First Nation Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*, eds. Marie Battiste and Jean Barman (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 101-112; Arlene Stairs, "Learning Processes and Teaching Roles in Native Education: Cultural Base and Cultural Brokerage," in *First Nation Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*, eds. Marie Battiste and Jean Barman (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 139-153.

<sup>16</sup> Gwen Point, interview by Denise McDonald, February 23, 1999.

education.<sup>17</sup> In looking at education broadly as not only an intellectual pursuit but also a spiritual, economic, and cultural pursuit, this paper seeks to incorporate Aboriginal concepts of holism into its approach.

Historically, the supposed benefits of Canada's educational institutions have been overshadowed by the harmful impact western schools have had on Indigenous communities – as is most visibly demonstrated by residential schools. Covert racism in the education system and education that is not sensitive to the cultural needs of the child continue to be a problem, although changes to curriculum and funding have already made a difference. Gwen herself never went to a residential school; but her mother and grandmother before her did. Her community's experiences in residential school informed her educational experiences because "the fear still exists in our communities today."<sup>18</sup> As the TRC acknowledged in its 2015 summary report:

Current conditions such as the disproportionate apprehension of Aboriginal children by child-welfare agencies and the disproportionate imprisonment and victimization of Aboriginal people can be explained in part as a result or legacy of the way that Aboriginal children were treated in residential schools and were denied an environment of positive parenting, worthy community leaders, and a positive sense of identity and self-worth.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Two of Gwen's children expressed shame in their indigenous identity soon after entering school. Her youngest, however, supported by an Aboriginal Support Worker, expressed pride in her heritage. See Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 124-126.

<sup>18</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 140.

<sup>19</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," 183, [www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec\\_Summary\\_2015\\_05\\_31\\_web\\_o.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf); For more on experiences in the residential schools and on their generational effects, see Roland Chrisjohn, Sherri Young, and Michael Maraun, *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada*, rev. ed. (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books Ltd, 2006); Agnes Jack, ed., *Behind Closed Doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School*, rev. ed. (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 2006); Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, *Stolen From Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities* (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997); Verna J. Kirkness, "Aboriginal Education in Canada: A Retrospective and a Prospective," in *Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada: Searching for Solutions*, eds. Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard (Brush Education Inc., 2013), 7-25. For more on the resiliency of residential school survivors, see also

The cycle of abuse often continued when survivors themselves became parents, as Gwen's story attests.<sup>20</sup> Her mother was physically, emotionally and sexually abused in residential school. "I grew up with my mother's anger," Gwen explains, "and her anger would be directed at me from time to time in the form of physical abuse."<sup>21</sup> Gwen also speaks of her fear, as a mother, of herself continuing the cycle.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, Gwen remembers her mother as the woman who courageously shielded her children from the authorities when they came to take them to residential school. After Gwen's father passed away, the chief and the local priest approached the family, insisting that it would be beneficial for Gwen and her siblings to attend residential school. Gwen remembers that her mother refused and even threatened them with physical violence if they tried to take her children from her.<sup>23</sup> Because of her mother's protection, Gwen went to the local Indian Day School, although even here she describes the teachers as physically and emotionally abusive. During one incident, she was so scared she climbed out of a second-story window and ran home, rather than stay at the school. In

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Agnes Grant, *Finding My Talk: How Fourteen Native Women Reclaimed their Lives after Residential School* (Calgary, AB: Fifth House Ltd, 2004). In the foreword of *Finding My Talk*, Marlene Starr wrote that "It came as a great relief to me that finally there is a book that does not treat us as 'history' but rather as living, breathing human beings who still exist today." Grant, *Finding My Talk*, xi. It was an important reminder that this "history" is the lived reality of some people today.

<sup>20</sup> For another example, see Fournier and Crey, *Stolen from our Embrace*, 225-227.

<sup>21</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 93.

<sup>22</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences." The psychosocial consequences of the Residential Schools has sometimes been termed "Residential School Syndrome" and refers to "low self-esteem, alcoholism, somatic disorders, violent tendencies, and other symptoms of psychological distress." Many of these so-called symptoms have been passed down generationally. Others, however, argue that "Present-day symptomology found in Aboriginal Peoples and societies does not constitute a distinct psychological condition, but is the well known and long-studied response of human beings living under conditions of severe and prolonged oppression," and that pathologising individuals does not get at the root causes of institutional discrimination. It denies Euro-Canadian accountability in ongoing discrimination. See Chrisjohn, *Circle Game*, 19-22.

<sup>23</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 96.

another case, the teacher, Mrs. "Sickhouse" as the students called her, hit her so hard her eardrum broke.<sup>24</sup>

In Gwen's words: "the physical arrangement and locations may have changed, but the abuse continued at different levels, along with discrimination and racism on all levels of the education system."<sup>25</sup> Discrimination in the education system is both a legacy of the residential schools and a continued reality for most Indigenous people in Canada. Neither of these have been fully addressed by the Canadian government.

Beyond the physical and emotional abuse, Gwen's formal schooling was fraught with instances of discrimination and a lack of understanding of Stó:lō culture and ways of life. This meant that, at best, the educational material was irrelevant to her life as a member of a Stó:lō community. Gwen remembers learning "about Dick and Jane, we learned how to square dance," not how to weave cedar baskets.<sup>26</sup> At worst, Gwen had to contend with ongoing racism, even at the university level. She remembers a history professor "who more or less told me he didn't want me in his class, pointedly told me, hoping that I'd leave."<sup>27</sup> Experiences like this discourage Indigenous students from pursuing their education. Irrelevant educational material and outright racism are rooted in a history of colonialism that continues and is still often poorly understood today.

As demonstrated by debates surrounding the content of the newly opened Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR), Indigenous history, especially the acknowledgement of colonial genocide, challenges the public narrative of Canada's role as a human rights' leader. A former curator of Indigenous content at the CMHR laments

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<sup>24</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015; May 26, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 8. Gwen told several stories of abuse and fear at the school, see Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Gwen Point, interview by Meagan Gough, July 14, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Gwen Point, interview by Meagan Gough, July 14, 2003.

that "[r]arely do the histories of 'Canada as safe haven' and of immigrant homesteading become fairly aligned with the parallel histories of Aboriginal eliminationism and massive dispossession."<sup>28</sup> This history of dispossession is an important, although generally untaught, lesson of Canadian history. Residential schools were a part of larger colonial policies that marginalized Indigenous people economically and spiritually from their land, culture and traditional hunting and fishing rights.

Gwen's stories seamlessly jumped from education stories to lessons about current hunting and fishing rights to examples of racism in the job market. For her, there seemed to be little distinction between the problems many Indigenous students face in the education system and the problems they face economically. For me, there seemed to be two key ways in which education and stories of economic dispossession overlapped.

In the first place, it is crucial that both Native and non-Native Canadians be educated about this history of colonialism and its continuing effects. For Indigenous people, this type of education program could be part of the healing process that would allow them to better understand their own lives and to best reconnect with their culture and move forward in their life journey. For non-Indigenous Canadians, it could provide the foundations for empathy and solidarity, important immunizations against racism and complacency. Well-researched history can challenge harmful stereotypes, such as the "lazy Indian."<sup>29</sup> In the end, a historically nuanced understanding of colonial-Indigenous relations holds the potential to help implement policy changes to such politically fraught

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<sup>28</sup> Tricia E. Logan, "Memory, Erasure, and National Myth," in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America*, 152.

<sup>29</sup> For a deconstruction of the "lazy Indian" myth, see John Sutton Lutz, "Making the Lazy Indian," in *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 31-47. See also Gwen Point, interview by Meagan Gough, July 14, 2003 - "People think we're a burden, that you're dirty, that you're lazy."

and poorly understood debates as treaty rights, hunting and fishing rights, education, and the reserve system.

The second conceptual link between education and socioeconomic experiences is that poor educational results can be directly linked to historic injustices and to the current social climate in many schools, despite the valiant effort of some school districts to better fund Aboriginal culture, language and support services.<sup>30</sup> Poor education outcomes continue the cycle of economic poverty. Culturally appropriate education can be an uplifting tool, helping people find employment, inculcating resiliency, and helping them overcome trauma. It is a powerful method of combating many of the socioeconomic difficulties that Indigenous communities face today. These two conceptual links between education and socioeconomics, although distinct, are difficult to isolate from each other and from lived experiences of racism and cultural disassociation. These links will be further deconstructed in the following sections.

### **"So That's Part of Our Reality"**

During our first interview, Gwen took me on a tour of Chehalis, her home reserve. At one point, she pulled over to allow another truck to pass but they stopped instead to talk. She rolled down her window with a laugh: "Hey there, dudes." A conversation about fishing rights followed that had me questioning how society defines criminality. One of

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<sup>30</sup> The Longhouse LEP program in which grade 4 students from Chilliwack school district visit the Stó:lō Nation educational longhouse and learn about storytelling, traditional foods, crafts, fishing, and dancing, is one example. Receiving the support for this type of programming from school districts can often be an uphill battle, however. For Gwen's role in advocating for Aboriginal funding, see Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015. For a more detailed account of the Coqualeetza Longhouse, see Gwen Point, interview by Jonathan Clapperton, May 17, 2005.

the men in the truck asked after Gwen's husband, a provincial judge; Gwen's response demonstrated how layered the short conversation actually was. "I got your message, son, but I didn't get to share it with him." This was obviously the continuation of a previous conversation. "I just got my particulars and they're trying to charge me with bartering," he answered. Gwen confirmed that her husband would not be able to give him any advice or to hear his case because it was a conflict of interest. Her diplomatic explanation was taken in stride: "I don't think nothing's going to happen. I don't know." The situation (one that I, witnessing this exchange, had not yet fully grasped) was summed up in her words: "Our reality, yeah, our reality." The moment when I started to understand at least one of the layers of the conversation was when he asserted defiantly that he was still going to fish. "I wasn't selling no fish," he said dead-pan but with a small grin.<sup>31</sup>

Earlier she had described how governmental regulations on hunting and fishing had been even more draconian during her childhood. It is worth quoting at length, not only for its content but also to bear witness to her voice:

we went into the fishing site and all I remember my dad saying to me and looking right at me and making me look at him. He said: "If I tell you to run, you run." And I looked at him because my dad was just this amazing and loving man, but the way he said it kind of made me look at him. And he said: "Listen to me. If I tell you to run, you run." "Ok, dad." 'Cause he always - I just wanted to please him. He was such a good person, right. But I didn't understand what he meant. And usually we would play by the beach, right on the sand, right. But we played just inside the brush like that. We couldn't go down to the beach. He

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<sup>31</sup> This brought to mind Gilbert Ryle's explanation of the methodology of thick description as reported by Clifford Geertz. The example given for thick description is a thought experiment in which two boys close one eye. In one case, this movement is a twitch; in the other, it is a wink. Both boys use the same muscles to carry out the action; however, the physical movement only becomes interpretable as either twitch or wink because of cultural context. It occurred to me that something similar was happening on that roadside. The fisherman's words said one thing while his expression and conspiratorial laughter said another. Both the illegal sale of fish and the good-humoured verbal flaunting of the rules were minor actions of resistance against a system that bureaucratized and often criminalized a traditional economic activity. See, Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *Interpretation of Cultures, Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.

wouldn't let us. Then all of a sudden I heard shuh! Shuh! Shuh! [hand gestures of shots flying past her]. Right beside us. And I seen the boat and he said: "RUN!" And my mom grabbed the two younger ones and started running. And I just jumped up and started following my mom. And my dad was coming up behind us and then he took off the other way to detract the fisheries guys from us. From shooting at us...Because he's fishing for the family they're shooting at us... So what does it do to a man if you take away his ability to feed his family? ... So if they won't hire you to work and they cut off your food supply - what does that do to a person? You can't provide for your family.<sup>32</sup>

These two anecdotes exemplify governmental limits on fishing rights and, even more potently, they describe the psychological and economic consequences these limits have on individuals and families. From an economic point of view, the dispossession of traditional lands and resources, alongside barriers to wage employment have led to situations of entrenched poverty. From a cultural perspective, this material dispossession has led to spiritual harm and emotional trauma. All of which are factors in how Indigenous students engage with their education.

A child's home life cannot be isolated from their educational experiences. Economic poverty and lack of access to nutritious food are barriers to education; a child may decide to drop out before graduation to work full time and help provide for their family. At the very least, when a child's basic physical needs are not met, it is harder for them to concentrate on intellectual pursuits. At the same time, these complicated socioeconomic issues should not only be reduced to the needs of the physical body. Government policies that have marginalized traditional economic activities have not only made it more difficult for some families to feed their children. They have also cut those families off from important cultural traditions and herded them into an education system that does not reflect their oral histories or lived realities.

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<sup>32</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015

Additionally, the Western education model has historically been complicit in colonialism. Historian A. Dirk Moses, for example, challenges Canadian humanitarianism by referencing the foundational policy of residential schools. It is well documented that residential schools intended to "[elevate] Aboriginal children into the full humanity of white civilization," a seemingly noble, humanitarian goal based on the right to education that is, in fact, paternalistic, racist and Eurocentric.<sup>33</sup> Historically, Canadian educational policies have undermined Aboriginal cultures, destroyed Aboriginal languages, and traumatised several generations of Aboriginal communities. Is it any wonder that Aboriginal parents and grandparents, some of whom are residential school survivors, mistrust the education system? Or that their children, many of whom deal with covert discrimination in their classrooms, have poor educational outcomes? In this toxic environment, Gwen asks: "how can our kids survive?"<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Gwen thinks that Aboriginal people should abandon Western education - it is one of the best healing agents Indigenous people have at their disposal. However, its clear that she believes that communities and families must be involved in the education of their children, and this historic link between education and oppression must be acknowledged, studied, and dismantled as we go forward. An honest analysis of the current education system is needed. Strides are being made in British Columbia with Aboriginal-directed funding in some school districts and cultural programming such as the Stó:lō Longhouse Program and Shxwt'a:selhawtxw ("House of

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<sup>33</sup> A. Dirk Moses, "Does the Holocaust Reveal or Conceal Other Genocides?" in *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory*, eds. by Alexander Laban Hinton, Thomas La Pointe, and Douglas Irvin- Erickson (Rutgers University Press, 2014), 24. This argument is similar to the assertion that there is a "long history of the use of education as a weapon of oppression." See Chrisjohn, *Circle Game*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 26, 2015.

Long Ago and Today"), but this should not be the end of continued conversations regarding our educational institutions.<sup>35</sup>

Early on in Gwen's career as an educator, she would do cultural workshops in schools that included dancing and singing, storytelling, and bannock-making. When she began, few schools were interested in the type of education that she was offering. They did not see the benefit to it. Now, the Chilliwack School District has a Grade 4 Longhouse Program where the students spend a day learning about Stó:lō history and culture; the curriculum has Indigenous content; and directed funding is provided for Aboriginal culture, language, and support services in schools. Recently, Gwen told me, the Alternative School, an education program for students who had behavioural problems, was closing its doors because, for the first time since it opened, it no longer has enough students; a positive sign perhaps of improvement in the public school system.<sup>36</sup>

Cultural programming can have a material effect on the education and lives of Indigenous students. Gwen, and other educators like her, spent many years educating School Boards, administrators, and teachers about the value of cultural programming. That effort is now paying off as students get the benefits of more inclusive schools,

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<sup>35</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 26, 2015; Gwen Point, interview by Meagan Gough, July 14, 2003. For other examples of cultural programming in British Columbia, see Fournier and Crey, *Stolen from our Embrace*, 206. In 1984, the Four Worlds Development Project asked a series of questions which remain relevant today: "To what extent are our educational institutions fostering the growth of human potential? To what extent are they centers of learning for community matters in any true sense? To what extent are they counteracting the forces that prevent individuals or a people as a whole from responding creatively and with a sense of purpose to a world they understand and help to shape?" See Judie Bopp et al., *Wholistic Educational Evaluation for Community Transformation: A Preventative Approach* (Lethbridge: University of Lethbridge, 1984).

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015. Gwen also provided some statistics that indicate lower drop-out rates. In her generation, there was a 90% drop-out rate which has since been lowered to about 60%. It is unclear whether she was speaking of across Canada, within Stó:lō Nation, or within the Chilliwack School District. Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015. In 1997, it was reported that 68.5% of Aboriginal youth did not graduate from high school and that less than 1% graduated from university. See, Fournier and Crey, *Stolen From Our Embrace*, 219.

slowly helping to heal the rift between Indigenous communities and the education system. Simultaneously, a larger education project is needed. Alongside cultural programming in schools, the public and the decision makers need to be educated about the value of Indigenous cultures and both historic and ongoing injustices against Indigenous communities.

### **"Dear Canada: Did You Know?"**

Education became a constant theme in my conversations with Gwen, partly because I had met her as a field school student doing ethnohistory research, and partly because of her experience as an educator. Mainly though it was because of the importance, historically, of education in both harming and healing her people, and the importance of educating both non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples in our shared histories. In her PhD dissertation, Gwen writes: "This education history cannot be dismissed or ignored. Education leaders, teachers, and those who work in education must know this history in order to better serve current Aboriginal students. Canadians need to understand that First Nations are still governed by the federal government Indian Act for all aspects of their lives, including education, health, and housing."<sup>37</sup> In this way, it is necessary to educate the public about both Indigenous history and current events, because this history continues to affect Indigenous communities materially and psychologically.

Our conversations often circled back to how Canadians needed to be educated about the continuing legacies of colonialism; all Canadians, colonial settlers, new immigrants and Indigenous peoples needed to be better educated on this history. This history mattered. That point was driven home for me not long after the field school

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<sup>37</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 85.

ended. I had all these experiences crammed into my head and had not yet worked through them enough to be able to verbalize my learning properly. I had dinner with an old friend, now a primary school teacher at a Catholic school. The TRC summary report was mentioned and she reacted almost defensively. I remember being confused by her anger at the report, and her lack of anger at the findings. I found out that her mother had been a teacher at a residential school, "but not one of those bad schools." I tried to explain, disjointedly, that although not all the schools had the same levels of abuse, the very concept of residential school was abusive. They were created and maintained with the explicit purpose of destroying Indigenous cultures. Uncertainly, I posited that assimilative policies were inherently psychologically damaging.

Perhaps feeling attacked, she responded that the Church had been attempting to do some good and had educated a population that no one else was providing services for. She said she was tired of the Church being attacked for the mistakes of the past. That there had been problems but that the Church also did a lot of good. She used herself as an example, describing the training she was receiving on curriculum for social justice. I grew more confused: how, I wondered, could someone who was aware of the issues, who knew at least some of the history, and who had even been trained in issues of social justice, still be so dismissive of the lived experiences of residential school survivors? I stayed quiet.<sup>38</sup>

It was only later that I began to connect that act of silencing between two educated friends to Gwen's stories. If I could not challenge a friend on this topic, how much more difficult would it be for a person of Indigenous descent to challenge a stranger on the street, or a colleague at work? How much more difficult for a student to

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<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, personal communication, June 3, 2015.

speak up to a teacher? Speaking, in the face of ignorance, is an act of courage. The incident reminded me that these hard conversations need to happen and that they are too often silenced. Well-intentioned, well-educated people, such as myself, have something to learn about covert, daily and institutionalized racism. And it starts with an honest conversation about history and our own privilege.

In her dissertation, Gwen asserts that "[a]ddressing the racism and discrimination are trying, tiring, and at times overwhelming, as it has continued to happen to this day. Many people like to dismiss that it happens or deny that racism or discrimination exist today. I experience some form of discrimination and racism on a daily basis."<sup>39</sup> When she spoke of being a young adult and being denied jobs because of her race, I nodded my head but still in the face of everything else I had been learning, I thought: "That was a different time. They wouldn't get away with that now."

It was not until our last meeting that I understood on a deeper level the ever-present threat of racism and the fear that she described as a daily part of her life, the one that sits in the pit of your stomach and that is often braided to anger and shame. She was standing in the longhouse, beside one of the fires, a sacred space where you are always to tell the truth. In front of her sat a group of Bachelor of Education students. These were the next generation of teachers being trained, at least a little, in Indigenous epistemologies. Gwen decided to speak to them about her reality, to try to impart in them why some Indigenous students struggle with school. As she would say later: "It is rude to talk about other people's stories. I tell my story." Sharing her stories is, for her, a respectful educational tool. One of the stories she shared was about being followed around a high-end store, the assumption being that she would not have the money to buy

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<sup>39</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 111.

anything there and that she must be a thief. Although one of the more extreme examples, her lived experiences of racism even in a simple shopping expedition have made her so wary that she now consciously chooses to only shop in stores where she knows the clerks.

That struck me because at the beginning of all of our meetings we would go to a Starbucks just around the corner. She was so friendly to the baristas and they had memorized her order. Before, it made me smile to think how often she must get Starbucks for the baristas to know her favourite drink. After her point-blank statement that she only shopped at places where she was known, I saw the same routine in a different light. It was a survival tactic, a way of reducing the daily stress of going places where you are told both implicitly and explicitly told that you do not belong; a way of minimizing the pit in her stomach. Thinking of those Starbucks' visits and how difficult it is to create safe spaces in the lives of marginalized people, made me realize that I had been distancing myself from the stories of racism she willingly shared with me. I had been placing them in the past, as a strictly historic injustice, when, for her, they were not only her past but her present, a part of her daily life.<sup>40</sup>

Gwens' descriptions of racism are visceral. Despite nationalistic rhetoric of multiculturalism, Gwen's experience of Canada has not always been positive. Covert racism has limited the opportunities in her life - from her decision to drop out of high

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<sup>40</sup> The attribution of racism and colonialism to past generations distances oneself and allows the current generation to wash its hands of what are still problems today. As the authors of *Circle Game* note: "What if the Holocaust had never stopped?...What if the State could depend upon the discretion of other nations, engaged in their own local outrages, to wink at its past, so that the lie told to and accepted by other nations was one the State could tell itself and its 'real' citizens without fear of contradiction?... What if?" See Chrisjohn, *Circle Game*, 17. The continuation of racism and, importantly, institutionalized racism is a seldom confronted problem of the Canadian nation-state. For Indigenous peoples, the injustices are not a matter of historical study but of current events. For a similar analysis of everyday endemic racism in the Williams Lake community and in the school system, see Elizabeth Furniss, *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community*, especially chapter 5, "Indians, Whites, and Common-Sense Racism" (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 126-132.

school because of the discriminatory atmosphere, to her difficulty finding work as a young woman:

Experiencing racism and discrimination first-hand I have come to know what it looks like, what it sounds like, what it feels like... Racism looks like an outright stare, letting you know you are not welcome; or avoidance, especially in places like public restaurants where servers choose not to wait on you. The sounds can be a tone of voice that lets you know you are a bother or not worth the time.<sup>41</sup>

Her fight against racism in all its forms has led her to her work as an educator and a healer. Several times I heard her tell stories of young students who had behaviour problems. She would describe how she would refuse to look at their thick disciplinary files and instead encourage them to be part of the group, when they were ready to participate. At the same time, she would not tolerate bad behaviour such as purposefully pushing another student's work off their desk. She would describe how the student's behaviour could and often did change in her classroom. And she would often end the story with the same question: Why? What's the difference? I hesitantly volunteered the response: Respect. She posited: Kindness. Her stories demonstrate that even covert racism can have a noticeable effect on a child's education. Although not a solution to all the social problems that First Nation students face, changing the atmosphere in a classroom can make a real difference. It can be one small step in dismantling the fear and distrust between Indigenous communities and the education system which is, often unknowingly, a legacy of residential schools.

As a non-Indigenous student, my moment of deeper understanding came in the form of a metaphor that bridged, however imperfectly, our lived experiences: the pit of fear in the bottom of your stomach. Gwen described that pit of fear in her stomach, and I

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<sup>41</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 8.

remembered the frustration of trying to explain continued covert discrimination in my own life and how dismissive people usually are. After one of our meetings, my field notes mirrored Gwen's comment that: "Racism looks like an outright stare...or avoidance."<sup>42</sup> I stated:

I remember that pit of fear when someone made a comment or looked at you wrong. And no one else in the room would notice that anything was going on; no one else would know that someone was being discriminatory but you would be so sensitive to it because that's how you survive. You would be so sensitive to it that all those little, daily, draining type of moments - and you'd have that pit in your stomach. Sometimes you wouldn't be able to speak, you wouldn't be able to verbalize your emotions. It's all that negativity.<sup>43</sup>

In no way do I intend to equate our two situations. These common emotions were my bridge to understanding, but there are some crucial differences between the two situations and it would be disrespectful to imply otherwise. Despite the fact that we reacted to discrimination in a similar manner, I could very easily choose to pass. I could keep my mouth shut and stay safe. Nobody was refusing me jobs or following me around stores.

After one of our meetings, I noted that "blindness is the ultimate privilege." I meant that being ignorant, not seeing others' suffering, how damaging our society can be, is a privilege. It is a privilege that has very real, very damaging effects when it is not acknowledged and confronted. In the classroom, an Indigenous student might experience racism that a non-indigenous teacher is not even aware is occurring.

A second level of privilege comes with invisibility. Being able to pass as part of the dominant group, whether that is defined along racial, religious, political, or sexual lines, is in some situations a privilege because it protects someone from the material

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<sup>42</sup> Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 8.

<sup>43</sup> Erin Gallagher-Cohoon, field notes, May 27, 2015.

manifestations of discrimination (financial, emotional, and physical risks). The right to visibility is only a privilege in a situation where visibility translates to pride, respect, and safety, which is not always the case even in our schools today.<sup>44</sup>

"The discrimination that exists - people like to say it doesn't exist but when you're an Indian it's every day . . . I believe that it's only going to change when every Canadian knows the recent history for Aboriginal people and they're challenged on the stereotypes. And they better understand, you know, why is my grand-nephew being charged for fishing and for selling fish. Why can't we sell fish? Why aren't we part of those decisions regarding the economy?"<sup>45</sup> Fluidly, naturally, Gwen brought our first interview full circle. From health, to cultural pride, to fishing and hunting rights, for her, it all came back to a need for education. A need for the average Canadian to be educated, for the next generation to be educated, for the schools to be educated, and for Indigenous communities themselves to be educated. Ironically, Canada's education history can best be overcome through the education system. This would necessitate a radical re-working of how Canadian history is taught, thought about and experienced, and it would have wide-ranging effects beyond the classroom. It would involve changes to the legal system, to museum policies, to everyday concepts of citizenship. This type of education project might occur at TRC events, community celebrations, university seminars, and, yes, even the casual dinner table conversation. In the end, it would simply entail a new type of contact.

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<sup>44</sup> Gwen noted that when she worked on Aboriginal programming in some schools, some students and parents would not have contact with her at the school because they did not want to others to identify them as Aboriginal. Point, "Intergenerational Experiences," 118.

<sup>45</sup> Dr. Gwen Point, interview by author, May 22, 2015.

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