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Thoughts and Prayers:
Comparing Public Apologies for Residential Schools in Canada

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established by the Canadian federal government in 2007, was tasked with investigating Indigenous peoples' experiences with the Indian residential school system. Residential schools, run by the state and churches, removed Indigenous children from their homes and communities with the aim of assimilating Indigenous peoples into Canadian society. The TRC and its resulting final report reflect a significant milestone in the work done by survivors, families, and Indigenous nations to bring attention to the realities of the residential school program, extending to broader processes of reconciliation and restorative justice.[1] Through the sheer volume of information collected and reported alone, the TRC made a substantial contribution to our knowledge about residential schools, particularly among settler Canadians, who too often deny or are ignorant of the intensity of genocidal colonial violence. Public inquires, such as the TRC, as well as state apologies—the subject of this article—engage in a similar politics of redress, something that is significant within contemporary responses to settler colonialism. Understanding the TRC as a significant event in settler colonial Canada, in this article I compare two public apologies for residential schools, one made before and one made after this restorative justice process.

Since the 1980s and more intensely since 2008, the Canadian government has been in an "age of apology."[2] Apologies in Canada have also ushered in the language of reconciliation. This first appeared in the written "Statement of Reconciliation" offered by the Canadian government (specifically, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) in 1998.[3] It is also a part of then prime minister Stephen Harper's apology for residential schools in 2008.[4] Although this article is limited to a close reading of the discourse of Indigenous-specific colonial oppression and violence, the apologies made to Indigenous peoples fit into a broader politics of apology directed

at many equity-seeking groups and populations that have experienced extreme state-based violence and oppression.[5] For example, apologies have been offered to the Japanese-Canadian population for the experience of internment during World War II and to the Chinese-Canadian population for racist anti-Chinese immigration policies and taxes, among other equity-seeking and minority populations.[6]

The TRC is a significant milestone within this age, precipitating, in part, subsequent apologies. Canada is not alone in this era of state apologies, with Australia, the United States, and several other nations engaging in similar responses to colonial and racial violence and oppression.[7] As of 2008, the year of the first apology in this study, scholars Jeff Corntassel and Cindy Holder found that twenty-four countries had active truth-and-reconciliation commissions or other forms of restorative justice truth-telling.[8]

What is more important, the era of apology is not just a political strategy that emerged in a vacuum but is the direct result of significant Indigenous activism and advocacy beginning in the 1970s. The apologies discussed in this article are profoundly shaped by the political and social context through which they were crafted. As Thohahoken Michael Doxtator, Sheryl Lightfoot, Audra Simpson, and other Indigenous researchers highlight, apologies are anchored to political contexts of anticipated liability, Indigenous activism, and pressure from either opposition in government or from nongovernmental organizations.[9] These apologies were not offered out of spontaneous benevolence by the state. Instead, these apologies were sought and fought for through consistent advocacy and education by survivors, families, and Indigenous nations. These activists, many of whom were survivors of colonial violence, called for recognition of the residential school experience. In the 1980s, Indigenous activists and survivors called on the major churches (Catholic, Anglican, and United) in Canada to apologize to Indigenous peoples.[10] One early apology that was sought and eventually offered came from the United Church of Canada in 1987.[11] While this study is critical of the age of apology, it is important to recognize that, for many survivors, these apologies are meaningful and positive, offering recognition of their suffering and opening up the possibility of healing. Many within Indigenous nations experience real benefits from receiving an apology, acknowledging this long history of oppression; for others, however, words without actions are not enough.[12]

Through a critical discourse analysis, I examine the apology made in 2008 by Stephen Harper, as the first official apology for residential schools by a sitting Canadian prime minister, alongside Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 2021 apology, made in response to the discovery of unmarked burial sites on the grounds of residential schools on the territories of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation and Cowessess First Nation, to determine if the TRC process affected the nature of these state apologies.[13,14] I also explore what the most recent response/nonresponse may mean for the larger processes of redress and reconciliation in settler colonial Canada. Based on my analysis of these two apologies to Indigenous peoples regarding the violence of residential schools, I argue that, despite the TRC's success in increasing awareness and understanding, the age of apology persists, evidenced by the consistency in the language in both apologies, issued both before and after the TRC.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

After decades of advocacy by Indigenous activists, the federal government established the TRC with a mandate to investigate and listen to the experiences of survivors of the residential schools program.[15] The TRC was developed to address the ongoing litigation and financial risks the state was exposed to regarding compensation to the survivors of residential schools. The commission, following multiple sessions across the country and a lengthy fact-gathering process, produced both an interim and a final report, outlining findings and making suggestions for next steps in the reconciliation process.[16] The TRC is perhaps the most important or most central text within the ongoing discourse on reconciliation and the residential schools program. As such, to position these two apologies within their social and political context required an examination of the power and influence of the TRC within apology politics and within reconciliation. The TRC robustly outlined the history of Canadian colonialism and collected more than 6,000 testimonies and millions of pages of documentation to illustrate the collective and individual experiences of Indigenous children who attended residential schools.[17] The TRC, in its recommendations or "calls to action," stresses the importance of reconciliation, commemoration, and further Indigenous-driven research.[18]

Many of the most important findings from the TRC brought the survivors' experiences of residential schools to a broader audience, significantly increasing popular awareness among settlers.[19] The commission's final report is a critically important repository of survivor testimony and historical analysis of the residential schools program.[20] It also legitimizes the experiences of survivors and their families, experiences that have been well known among Indigenous communities for generations but largely ignored or underestimated in the settler colonial majority. The TRC detailed not only the violence faced by children in the schools but also how residential schools were connected to larger projects of colonialism and imperialism; namely, the assimilation and genocide of Indigenous peoples and the theft of Indigenous land and resources.[21] Prior to the TRC, the discourse on residential schools was dominated by the state, with Indigenous survivors attempting to access reparations and give voice to their experiences through the court system on a case-by-case basis.[22] The TRC was an important opportunity to amplify the voices of Indigenous peoples.

Apologies as Political Strategy

There is a long-standing tradition within social theory of unpacking what makes a "good" apology or confession.[23] A consistent feature within much of the existing literature on apology is the emphasis on action and change to accompany the language of apology—that is, material commitments to taking action to change future behavior.[24] An apology without this focus on substantive change is shallow and demonstrates a concern with saving face, or "talking the talk," with little concern for committing to the uncomfortable and challenging work of reparation.[25] For settler colonial Canadian governments, interaction with Indigenous peoples has focused on inquiries, public apologies, and reconciliation—talking the talk—as a means of righting past wrongs, but without action, these words are evacuated of their power; they appear to be just

that: words.[26] The federal government, under both Liberal and Conservative prime ministers, are using the political strategy of apology without providing any substance. At its worst, this political use of the apology can be understood as a means of diverting public attention away from continued colonial violence and complacency in the face of oppression and racism. This is dangerous because these apologies can become lip service as opposed to action, public declarations instead of consistent work, and easy and cost-effective nonaction as opposed to the challenging and expensive (politically, emotionally, and economically) work of reconciliation.

Scholars Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham analyze a critical component of the broader context for Stephen Harper's apology. They note that alongside Harper's official apology, Harper also indicated during a 2009 press conference at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh that "Canada has no history of colonialism."[27] As Henderson and Wakeham indicate, this inconsistency between the official apology and the broader context of political rhetoric regarding settler colonialism and reconciliation demonstrates the political limitations of Harper's apology. Scholar Sheryl Lightfoot has also examined this erasure and intentional disappearing of ongoing social impacts of settler colonialism in Canada by Harper and other government leaders and officials throughout the era of apology, demonstrating inconsistency in how deeply and thoroughly the state is willing to reconcile their history and ongoing colonial violences.[28] Corntassel and Holder describe the "politics of distraction" that the act of apology without a commitment to concrete and measurable action represents.[29] The work of these Indigenous researchers critique the lack of alignment between apology and broader government actions and attitudes.

The Beginning of the Age of Apology

The age or era of apology does not begin with the actions of the federal government of Canada. Indigenous survivors and activists organized and advocated for apologies first from churches associated with the operations of the residential school program and later from government officials. These apologies began in the 1980s and 1990s, but the Indigenous activism that called for them preexisted those earliest apologies. Government officials began to engage in apology work and started to adopt the language of reconciliation as a direct result of Indigenous survivors and their activism.[30]

A decade before Harper's official apology on behalf of the government of Canada, Jane Stewart, then minister of Indian affairs and northern development, released her "Statement of Reconciliation" and, in doing so, brought the language of reconciliation into both the government's vocabulary and the public discourse on residential schools.[31] Other ministers and deputy ministers, speaking both formally and informally at conferences, public gatherings, and in the House of Commons, would echo the same language of apology and of reconciliation. These efforts fed into a broader social and political moment of voicing remorse for what had happened, but overwhelmingly locating the source of that remorse in historical terms and at a comfortable distance from any form of real action or responsibility.[32] Many Indigenous leaders and researchers were critical of the motivations and sincerity of Stewart's statement and

later attempts at apology. Other Indigenous leaders indicated that they would only accept an apology directly from the prime minister as the leader of government. Still others were supportive and welcoming of these early apologies. As is the case with all of the public apologies discussed within this research, Indigenous peoples do not experience apology or reconciliation as a monolithic whole. The diversity and range of responses, critiques, and supports for these apologies are complex and multifaceted. Both support and contestation exist, and there is not one universal Indigenous perspective, as Corntassel and Holder discuss.[33]

That the age of apology began and hit peak saturation in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s is no coincidence. It was not simply that the apologies were overdue or that Canada had achieved a new level of settler self-awareness. Instead, the emergence of apology as a political strategy of crisis management coincides with a number of important social and political developments. First, there was a cascade of legislation change at the provincial level regarding the relationship between apology and fault. Traditionally, apologizing or saying sorry was an admission of personal guilt and responsibility.[34] Professionals, such as medical professionals or service providers, were coached by legal teams and human resource managers to never apologize for anything; saying "I'm sorry" was potentially expensive. Making an apology opened up the possibility of the next logical step: designating responsibility and demanding compensation for wronged parties.[35] However, by the time of Harper's 2008 apology for residential schools, half of Canadian provinces had either passed or were working on "apology" or "sorry" bills to make it possible for individuals, companies, and even eventually government agencies to apologize without fear of activating an automatic financial liability.[36] At this time in political and legal history, residential school survivor–initiated litigation was climbing. By the time of Stewart's statement, there were already 200 litigants making claims against the state.[37] The final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples had called for investigation into residential school abuse, and the Indigenous activism around official state acknowledgement of the violence and increasing support for survivors was growing.[38]

I also argue that Harper's apology was strategically timed, coming at a moment when his administration was being criticized for their refusal to participate in recognizing and signing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which many other states were doing at that time.[39] Following costly and time-consuming court battles and mediations, Harper's apology also marked the beginning of the work of the TRC.[40] Both of these social and political contexts had an especially significant role in determining the timing and scope of Harper's apology. Likewise, the Trudeau apology to Cowessess First Nation occurred following multiple discoveries of possible or suspected unmarked burials at residential schools. It came on the heels of announcements by Tk̓emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation and Cowessess First Nation regarding their research on potential unmarked burials.[41] The mainstream settler media attention on these potential discoveries had hit a fever pitch, with significant and immediate coverage following these initial investigations. Made in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trudeau's apology, unlike Harper's, was part of a broader press briefing that also featured updates on the pandemic in Canada.

The outdoor setting, the scheduled COVID briefing, and the uptake by social and traditional medias are all products of the particular social context of the spring and summer of 2021.

At Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation

That many Indigenous children died or disappeared while at residential schools is not news for Indigenous survivors, families, and nations.[42] Among the calls to action outlined by the TRC in the final report are several calls that refer specifically to the need for ongoing research and to undertake the extremely difficult work of locating where the bodies of missing children may be buried.[43] However, it was not until the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation made a public announcement in May 2021 about the discovery of unmarked graves that the settler colonial media finally started to pay attention. It seemed they finally understood something about the genocidal violence of the residential school system. The mainstream colonial media treated the rediscovery of hundreds and then thousands of potential or suspected unmarked graves as shocking or surprising, but the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation—and many other Nations—knew all along that many children never returned from residential schools.[44] Deniers of the violence of the residential school program were confronted with the fact that the death and disappearance of Indigenous children was inherent to the residential school experience. That many of these suspected graves were unmarked, unrecorded, and only potentially located through the use of ground-penetrating radar, witness testimony, and archival research only added to the outrage and the perceived horror of the discoveries communicated within the mainstream media. Trudeau himself in this apology labeled the findings "shocking," and in doing so ignored the already published volume of the TRC, which housed the testimony and evidence of so many survivors who held knowledge of the unmarked burials and deaths of students at residential schools. Through the news of the discovery of these possible burial sites, the settler colonial majority was forced to face the colonial violence enacted within residential schools. The initial findings at Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation were followed by the discovery of other possible burial sites at Cowessess, Cranbrook, Penelakut, and, most recently, Williams Lake, British Columbia.[45] Researchers detected more than 1,800 anomalies, discovered between May 2021 and January 2022, with more investigations pending or just beginning.[46]

The news from Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation began intense media coverage from coast to coast, and many other First Nations began to pursue similar work, such as ground-penetrating radar scans of the sites of residential schools and archival investigations to uncover what the records say, if anything, about mortality rates at the residential schools.[47] More suspected sites were located, and the number of anomalies and potential burials on residential school properties increased. With each new announcement, the immenseness of the violence of the residential school program became clearer for settlers, and the language of shock, horror, sadness, and anger echoed through the news.[48] Indigenous peoples added to this their frustration with how long it took to get these investigations under way—and their reminder that,

although this information is new and shocking for settlers, it has been well known for generations among Indigenous communities that many of their children never returned home from residential schools.[49] For far too long this truth was ignored and unacknowledged, and no action was taken. Calls finally came from across settler society for an immediate response by the government, including calls for apology from the prime minister, the pope, and other officials across Canada.

The recent apology offered more specifically to the Tk̓emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation and Cowessess First Nation following the rediscovery of suspected unmarked graves on the grounds of residential schools have been met with mixed reactions. While, as I noted earlier, apologies offer the chance of healing for some Indigenous people, many within Indigenous activist and community leadership circles have called for more and clearer commitments alongside the apologies.[50] The expectations surrounding apologies surpass a simple "sorry," demanding instead a more nuanced acceptance of responsibility and clear labeling of the violence perpetrated. For example, critiques levelled by Indigenous researchers of these recent apologies[51] have pointed out that they obfuscate settler responsibility through the empty act of apology with minimal, at best, commitments of money and time.[52] Taking up these critiques, I argue in this article that the act of apology has become the standard government response to shocking instances (the crisis) of colonial violence that become widely known among the general settler colonial public—but that this response is merely a way of talking the talk.

Critical Discourse Analysis

In conducting this research, I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to contrast Harper's 2008 apology for residential schools to Trudeau's 2021 apology regarding the possible unmarked burial sites at residential schools. CDA is a qualitative research approach to content analysis that takes discourses as components of broader social structures and understands them to be deeply power-laden.[53] It breaks discourses open to explore their meaning, locating within them problems of language, method, and social context.[54] Using researcher Norman Fairclough's three-pronged approach to CDA, I examined the discourse of these apologies at micro, meso, and macro levels.[55]

At the micro level of analysis, CDA explores specific word choices and phrasing, examining the intentionality behind how certain identity labels, verbs, and tenses are deployed.[56] At the meso level of analysis, CDA looks at not only metalanguage elements of communication beyond syntax but also at the context in which, and how, the discourse was produced.[57] Finally, at the macro level, CDA positions the discourses being analyzed within broader structures and within the particularities of the society the discourses were created by and for, with attention paid to what they reveal about broader and more persistent power exchanges and imbalances.[58] With this multileveled analysis of the apologies, their contexts, and their deliveries, this research unpacks the two apologies from Harper and Trudeau, given nearly twenty-five years apart, and places them in conversation.

I began with a close reading of Harper's and Trudeau's apologies. I chose these apologies for several reasons. First, analyzing apologies on both sides of the TRC

and its final report allowed for an opportunity to reflect on the social and political importance of this restorative justice–style of public truth-telling. Second, although considerable work has been done on the Harper apology, very little work has reflected on Harper's apology in relation to what is now known and publicly communicated within settler colonial Canada following the TRC process. Finally, a review of the existing literature on the politics of apology, reconciliation, and settler colonialism in Canada shows that little has been done to understand how the age of apology has changed in Canada over the decades, and less still has been done on imagining what future may exist after the age of apology.

To begin my research, I first had to acquire the full transcript of each apology. Harper's apology is freely available; the entirety of the apology was published in written form at the time of the speech in the House.[59] Trudeau's apology is not available in written form, though recordings of the apology are widely available online, so I had to begin by transcribing the statement and reviewing it several times to ensure accuracy.[60] I then coded the texts by hand using both preexisting and emergent themes. Starting at the broadest level and working toward a narrower analysis, initially the apologies were analyzed according to the macro level of CDA. Important topics that emerged at the macro level were the impact of the TRC, the "crisis" nature of the possible location of unmarked burials, and the broader structures of Canadian settler colonial patterns of "reconciliation" and Indigenous-Crown relations. The meso level came next, with consideration for where, when, and to whom the apologies were given and how they were delivered (formal or informal, read from a script, offered in response to a prompt or a media question, and so forth). Finally, the texts were examined at the micro level for syntax, linguistic devices and components, voice, and labels used. Although all three layers of analysis influence each other, a concerted effort was made throughout this work to focus on the particular level and scale of analysis at hand.

Several important themes, as well as points of difference and similarity, emerged from my analysis of these apologies. These critical themes, which include temporal distance, policy as perpetrator, event over structure, and moves toward innocence, are explored in detail below. I end this section with a discussion of the impact—or lack thereof—of the TRC and its calls for reconciliation on state apologies.

Emergent Themes

Temporal Distance

"The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history." These were the opening words of Harper's apology for residential schools. By naming the residential school program a "sad chapter" in Canadian history, Harper effectively communicated that, by apologizing, he was firmly closing that chapter. Eva Mackey, in her analysis of Harper's apology, also closely reads the "sad chapter" expression and suggests that this intentional framing was meant to produce a belief that residential schools are disconnected from ongoing colonial violence and oppression.[61] Indigenous researchers Glen Coulthard and Audra Simpson both also assess the time-bracketing and temporal-distancing work housed within Harper's apology.[62] As readers and

listeners of this apology, many settlers would understand "chapter" to mean a discrete, well-bordered, and succinct event.[63] "Chapter" also conjures memories of lengthy history textbooks that can be both closed and left unattended to collect dust on a bookshelf. Chapters are *over there*—up on that bookshelf, lost in a high school history text, and, overall, comfortably away from the *here* and *now* of settler colonial Canada. The use of the language of "chapter" is misleading, at best, and insidious, at worst, because it obscures how colonial power imbalances and damages to the culture and health of Indigenous peoples persist and continue to actively undermine the lives of contemporary Indigenous peoples. Closing the chapter, as Harper attempted, did nothing to eliminate the inequalities and colonial attitudes that persist to the present day.

In his apology to the Cowessess First Nation, Trudeau uses the word "past" six times, including three usages within the first two minutes of speaking. Trudeau describes the residential school experience as "a piece of our past, of decades past," intentionally placing distance between today and today's apology with the blameworthy "policy" of decades ago. What lacks in this presentation of time is the recognition that all contemporary experiences with harmful Canadian institutions are modeled in the very same structures of colonialism that produced and legitimized residential schools. Harper's apology similarly uses several references to time passing or a more distant past, without outright using the word *past* in his apology. This application of a historical label, placing the injuries in the past, shapes how the audiences of these apologies connect to and understand the violence being apologized for. As Coulthard and Simpson both explore in their critiques of apology and the politics of recognition more broadly, the practice of creating a distance between colonialism of the past and contemporary colonialism is a political strategy to incorrectly position contemporary settlers and leaders as somehow innocent.[64] Mackey identifies how an apology, especially a performative apology such as a national apology in the House of Commons, produces both pre- and postapology times. There is a clear delineation, produced through the apology, of what happened both before and after the apology took place.[65] As Mackey argues, the apology clearly defines the preapology time as done and over. It effectively separates the contemporary moment from the mistakes of the past. The distance between the apology and the act being apologized for matters, and this temporal distance is a construct that is anchored to intentional choices in language within these apologies.[66]

Trudeau indicates that residential schools are "a piece of our past, of decades past."[67] This intentional correction—not just "past" but "decades past"—is another move to distance the apology from the act and lessen the perceived level of responsibility the current government must take on. However, as many Indigenous activists and leaders indicated in response, residential schools and these recent suspected discoveries of burials just further demonstrate how much of a contemporary issue colonial violence and the ongoing trauma of the residential school experience is.[68] Not just in the past but in the present, residential schools are physical and material reminders of the often-invisible structures of inequality and violence that underpin settler colonialism.

Scholar Willow Anderson, in her research on the discourse of the Harper apology, argues that "a textual analysis of the PM's [Harper's] discourse reveals linguistic features that try to distance the government from its responsibility in the residential

school system."[69] Although she does not specifically highlight the words *sad chapter*, as I do, they too are pointing to the way language is used to highlight the distance, both temporal and physical, between the current administration and the residential schools. Anderson further argues that Harper's apology was written in such a way as "to construct a particular reality of both the government's role in residential schools and the nature of Canadian diversity."[70] Harper's apology was designed to close, not open, discussion, and in using the language of a *sad chapter*—definitively naming an end to colonialism and treating residential schools as historical mistakes and not symptoms of the ongoing structures of colonialism and violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples—he revealed a significant anxiety of the contemporary state.

As is the case with the more recent apology offered by Trudeau, the Harper apology must be understood within the context of several important social and political events. First, his apology marked the undertaking of both the TRC and the settlement process for supporting and compensating survivors.[71] As researcher Matthew Dorrell argues, the apology also came as the international community was observing Canada's vote against and subsequent refusal to sign on to UNDRIP.[72] In other words, this apology, although much needed and important, appears to be strategically timed, raising questions about the true motivation or intention behind the apology.

The same question echoes in the hollowness of Trudeau's more recent apology. Although the news of thousands of suspected unmarked burials of children killed at residential schools was a new and shocking piece of information for settler colonial society, the knowledge that thousands were missing and killed was not new to Indigenous peoples. The TRC report contains an entire volume devoted to the topic of missing and murdered children, and generations of survivors, their families, and their communities have also testified to the brutality faced and the number of children killed.[73] This apology did not recognize the Indigenous knowledge, advocacy, and research that led to the announcement that triggered Trudeau's apology, nor did Trudeau mention the entire volume of the TRC that addressed the significant issue of children who were at residential schools but never returned. A sincere apology might have come following the publishing of the TRC report. Instead, Trudeau's apology came when the news of the possible gravesites was covered by the settler colonial media and could no longer be ignored.[74]

Policy as Perpetrator

One important role of an apology is to acknowledge responsibility and take ownership over the actions. Apologies that are considered "good" indicate that the person apologizing is responsible for the act they're apologizing for as well as their responsibility for the repair work moving forward.[75] When Harper said, "Therefore, on behalf of the government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system," and Trudeau said, "We are sorry," they signalled that they were taking responsibility. However, in both apologies, the prime ministers' evoke another guilty party: policy. In the language of these apologies, policy is

anthropomorphized and held up as the true perpetrator of the violence, removed from the settlers who imagined, wrote, enacted, and upheld these same policies.

Harper mentions policy three times in his apology and at each instance names the profound consequences of that policy. For example, Harper said, "The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools *policy* were profoundly negative and that this *policy* has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage, and language."[76] What is not included in these apologies is the recognition that policies are written by people in positions of power and privilege, and that they write and enforce such policies to safeguard their privilege and to validate violence and oppression. Harper's apology suggests that it is "the policy" rather than the architects and administrators of the residential school system that committed the harm. Harper's apology failed to unpack who created those policies and obscured how the same policies that made residential schools legal persist today.

The blameworthy policy returns in Trudeau's apology. Within the opening eighteen seconds, or two sentences, of his apology, Trudeau pointed his finger at "this . . . incredibly harmful government *policy*," telling Canadians that this "*policy* that ripped kids from their homes" existed in Canada's "past."[77] In other words, he implemented the same linguistic strategy as Harper to clearly indicate that it is the policy, not people, who is the real actor. Trudeau's apology to Cowessess First Nation also places blame on Child and Family Services, indicating that this government agency "continued to take them [children] away from their families . . . continued to remove them from their language and culture."[78] Once again, naming policy as the perpetrator places some much-needed distance between the contemporary government and the heinous acts he is (somewhat) apologizing for. By suggesting that it is policy that did these things, policy that hurt Indigenous peoples, Harper and Trudeau demonstrate that, even in the act of apology, they are producing avenues to reduce the blame placed on themselves as well as on settler Canadians more broadly.

Event over Structure

Many researchers examining settler colonialism in Canada stress the importance of viewing colonialism as a structure instead of an event.[79] As so succinctly described by scholar Patrick Wolfe, framing colonialism as a structure instead of an event allows for a consideration of how it persists, changes, and remains largely intact, even while historical context changes.[80] Colonialism is not a moment or event that can be located, it is a structure that coordinates the lived realities of all people who reside in this place. However, what emerges as a central theme within the discourses of the apologies offered by Harper and Trudeau is the opposite. They seem intent on naming colonialism as an event instead of a structure. Within Trudeau's apology, colonialism is variously referred to as "a dark chapter," "a piece our distant past," "Canada's history," and "a terrible mistake." Within Harper's apology, colonialism is not once named; instead residential schools are time-bracketed with time references such as "sad chapter" and the "sad legacy" of residential schools. Harper also places temporal distance between the violence of residential schools and the present government he

spoke for by repeating "we now recognize" twice, close to the end of his apology. In doing so, Harper is establishing that his administration possesses new knowledge and temporal distance that previous governments did not have. However, by failing to name colonialism at all or to recognize how the residential schools experience is tethered within broader interlocking oppressions of the structure of colonialism, Harper places a definitive then/now dichotomy. In both apologies, the prime ministers are clearly defining borders and time to bracket the "event" of colonialism.

To be fair, there is much more work being done on the language of Trudeau's apology to demonstrate the connective tissue that binds the past to the present. However, the focus on the past as something that is over reads throughout the syntax of the speech. Perhaps most striking in Trudeau's language is this phrasing: "the terrible, terrible mistake that we willingly undertook in the past."[81] At this point in his apology, Trudeau is suggesting that the apprehension of Indigenous children was the work of government agencies in the past and that the baggage the word "mistake" carries with it is considerable. Reminiscent of a car accident or a building collapse, calling centuries-old and still-enforced racist policies of child apprehension that disproportionately harm Indigenous children and families a "mistake" is a concerted effort to evacuate the act of any responsibility. The mistake, as constructed in this discourse, is a moment of error, an incident that caused harm; it is not a long-standing and purpose-built structure aimed at assimilation, genocide, and the theft of Indigenous land and resources.

Moves toward Innocence

When analyzing the most recent federal government response and apology regarding the suspected unmarked burials discovered in several residential school sites across Canada, we can clearly see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "moves toward settler innocence" subtly interwoven through the language.[82] As Tuck and Yang describe, the settler state invokes language and makes choices in what they say and what they erase to reconcile a distant past with their current self-purported innocence. In the apologies, both prime ministers demonstrate a desire to show their administrations are different or less complicit in colonial violence. The apology not only functions to acknowledge past violence but also demarcates the violence away from the contemporary, effectively erasing the connections that all historical and contemporary components of colonial violence have to each other. These moves toward innocence are apparent in how Trudeau expresses remorse, not for the ongoing and persistent structure of colonialism but for things that are done, things that happened in the past and cannot be changed. Rather than offering a commitment, the apology offers a beleaguered mea culpa. There is an exhaustion in how the apologies are offered—an exhaustion with the discoveries, with having to answer for them, and, more broadly, with the work of apology.

Part of the challenge for the Canadian government lies in the balancing act it must strike between the seemingly irreconcilable notions of Canada as moral, nonviolent, and tolerant and Canada as the perpetrator of genocidal violence. The apology, at least in theory, must hold both of these narratives in a way that preserves Canada's sense of self. Unfortunately, the virtue-signaling and claims to innocence found within this

most recent apology is not paired with a recognition that the suspected burials are not isolated relics of a time in the distant past but physical evidence of how little has been done to support the ongoing work to dismantle the structures of colonialism. Remorse and regret are settler moves toward innocence when they aren't anchored to the material return of land and resources and aren't mobilized in an effort to reconfigure Indigenous-settler relations. The balancing act between acknowledging violence and simultaneously safeguarding state innocence and morality is a tremendous challenge within the speech act of apology.

The TRC and Reconciliation

As noted at the outset, in conducting this research I was interested in exploring whether or not the TRC influenced the nature of these national apologies. The TRC was an enormous and significant state-based public inquiry and truth-telling process, with survivors, researchers, leaders, and various groups engaging in the difficult work of mapping and bearing witness to the colonial violence of residential schools. The findings, including the calls to action from the final report, are significant texts within ongoing truth and reconciliation work.[83] The TRC therefore became an important landmark that I could use to assess the continuity and the changes within the era of apology.

The TRC has ushered in a state focus on reconciliation as the current method and narrative for Indigenous-state relations.[84] However, Glen Coulthard, in his critique of the politics of recognition, questions how reconciliation without any commitment to return stolen Indigenous land and resources could be achieved and who stands to benefit from its pursuit.[85] Or, as Mackey asks, "What does an apology do for the apologizer?"[86] Coulthard questions how meaningful reconciliation can ever take place when no efforts have been made to disrupt the inequalities and seizures of Indigenous land and resources that are so central to the colonial project, arguing that the discourse of reconciliation does more to protect the interests of that state than to promote the rights of Indigenous peoples. Echoing Coulthard, I reject the apparent neutrality and innocence of the language of reconciliation and the taken-for-granted nature of "reconciliation" as a political management strategy.[87] Unfortunately, reconciliation has been absorbed in many ways into the meaning-stripped and dislocated government-speak of federal politics. The word "reconciliation" in the mouths of settler politicians has been emptied of its power, severed from its active nature. Reconciliation is a relationship and an ongoing responsibility, not an event. Reconciliation is also not a fixed or static concept within Indigenous perspectives and research either. Corntassel and Holder, Simpson, Alfred, and others have shown the complexity and disagreement that exists regarding reconciliation as a concept and as a goal. There is no one unified approach or understanding of reconciliation, and its social and political value remains contentious.

What work is reconciliation doing when spoken by members of the settler government? While this complex question cannot be satisfactorily unraveled in this article, the answer certainly includes how the language of reconciliation is moral signalling and in many ways functions to close rather than open discourses on settler responsibilities. Dorrell frames this as "focusing on closure rather than disclosure" within

apologies, a framing that is strikingly apparent in the beginning of the most recent apology regarding the potential discovered burials.[88] However, there is an important and interesting shift in Trudeau's apology. As he acknowledges the "policy of the past," he couples that with a reflection on the present and the contemporary child-welfare system. He acknowledges the need for more Indigenous-led, informed, and centered child welfare, indicating that these changes are happening. This indication, although fairly subtle, of a connection between past harm and present oppression is an important move in this apology that is different than Harper's apology. Although, as Trudeau's apology continues, he offers "all of the federal government's continued support and partnership." This difficult-to-quantify and, for many, empty offer is weakened by the present obstacles to meaningful partnership and the work of reconciliation, such as significant institutional racism and inadequate funding within health care, education, child welfare, and criminal justice systems.

The End of an Era or More of the Same?

At the time of writing, Trudeau has most recently issued an apology for his surf holiday. Following the much-touted establishment of Canada's newest national holiday, Truth and Reconciliation Day, instead of accepting the invitation of Chief Casimir to be alongside survivors at the first potential unmarked burial site, Trudeau decided it was appropriate to take his family surfing in Tofino, British Columbia, a small, tourism-heavy community well known as a surfing hot spot in Canada. Although Trudeau argued that everyone deserves time off and that, after a hard campaign, he needed time to reconnect with his family, the choice to do this on a holiday designated as a day to reflect on the children who never made it home from residential schools (and therefore denied the opportunity to be with their families at all) reads as tone-deaf and callous. What makes this surf holiday apology interesting, although less so than the two major apologies discussed in this article, is that instead of apologizing on behalf of the nation for his choice not to attend TRC Day with the Tk'emlups First Nation, Trudeau issued his own apology and justification. As is the case in so many components of the apology, there is perhaps distance between the optics of this most recent apology and the spirit or intentions of both the apology and the actions that necessitated it.

Following completion of the analysis for this article, a third important public apology was issued by the pope on behalf of the Catholic Church and those of the Catholic faith. This long-awaited apology was requested many times within Indigenous activist and leadership circles as well as by the Canadian government. The Canadian bishops had already issued an apology and, on a more local level, many parish priests have engaged in apology work, but the silence on the part of the Vatican remained deafening, especially given the social norms and expectations for the public behavior of institutions during this era of apology.[89] This made the apology issued by the pope, although nearly two decades after Stephen Harper's apology, another important instance of settler-based institutions issuing apologies directly to Indigenous peoples. More important, the Pope's apology was also meaningful and desired by many Indigenous survivors and families. Activist Cindy Blackstock has since produced a

list of actions that are needed following the pope's apology to ensure that the desired apology results in meaningful change for Indigenous peoples.[90] Echoing what other Indigenous researchers and activists have reflected regarding Harper's earlier apology and the need for concrete and material change, Blackstock stresses the importance of the efficient return of church records to Indigenous nations, rescinding anti-Indigenous and white supremacist doctrines within the church, and returning stolen property to Indigenous peoples.[91] Despite criticisms of apology articulated in this article, it is essential to recognize the meaning-making housed in apologies and their value if and when they have impact on and are appreciated by Indigenous peoples. Many Indigenous researchers, including Lightfoot, Beverley Jacobs, and Coulthard, although critical of apologies and the lack of meaningful commitment alongside the apologies offered by government officials, also hold space for those Indigenous survivors, families, and activists who fought for these apologies and see them as important markers of recognition and truth-telling within the settler colonial state.[92]

Canada, founded on colonialism, expanded through violence, and defined by the relentless evictions of Indigenous peoples off their land and out of white spaces must recognize that although the residential schools have officially been closed, the attitudes and oppressions that underpin the foundations of these schools remain intact.[93] The crisis of the relocated burial sites has caused shock waves throughout settler colonial Canada and has led to a national moment of reckoning. Reading and unpacking the apologies offered by the state is essential to understanding how settler colonial Canada is making sense of and accounting for this violence committed against children. As discussed at the onset of this article, the potential unmarked burials signal that Canada's national sense of self is in direct opposition to how Canada has always treated and continues to treat Indigenous children, families, and nations. The practices and conventions of official apologies are a window into how the Canadian state grapples with these inconsistencies.

The politics of settler apology are powerful and move largely invisibly, remaining underanalyzed. Apologies are never neutral and principally function to clarify who has wronged and who has been wronged within various historical and contemporary contexts. Beyond assigning these social positions, however, apologies hold great power to either radically change the course of events and relationships or to double down on denials of responsibility and ownership of harms caused. By recognizing the meaning-making housed within apology, this article and the works that it is in conversation with seek to pinpoint the political and social heavy lifting that these apologies are designed to do. Through a close reading of the language, social context, and delivery of these apologies, we can lay bare how settler colonial society and the Canadian government react to and attempt to politically manage moments of crisis regarding colonialism.

Perhaps the age of apology is waning. Viewing things optimistically, even the state may realize that empty apologies will not have positive long-term results. However, maybe the age persists and the nature of apologies are just slowly changing. It remains to be seen, as more possible unmarked burials are discovered, if the government will offer more apologies as public political maneuvers or if the Cowessess First Nation

apology will remain the final public apology associated with residential schools, with future apologies offered privately on a nation-to-nation basis.

In the age of apology, when prime ministers and government officials offer sweeping apologies with very little action, the focus on temporal distance and disassociating the policies from the settler colonial state that wrote and enforced them once again demonstrates how settler colonialism severs responsibility for colonial violence from the state with the aim of maintaining settler myths of innocence and tolerance.

Beyond Apology

As the era of apology continues, the pattern of using apologies in place of substantive change, rather than alongside it, persists. This political deployment of apologies as an *alternative* to action instead of a *call* to action is deeply inconsistent with the Indigenous activism and knowledge that has been successful in initiating these apologies. Despite being often desired and beneficial as a starting point, as expressed by Beverley Jacobs in her response to Stephen Harper's apology, an apology without action is insincere.[94] Apologies must be anchored to concrete and measurable steps toward equity and repair.

Restorative justice models are critically important in the pursuit of reconciliation. The TRC, particularly in the calls to action, presents clear and direct measures that can and must be undertaken beyond the apology to survivors. These calls link into restorative justice that seeks to demonstrate the structural repair necessary following violence and intergenerational trauma. Beyond the TRC, grassroots and community-led Indigenous restorative justice initiatives are happening across all the major institutions in Canada, from education to health care to child welfare to the criminal justice system. If the age of apology continues to persist, future apologies must be tethered to concrete financial and material commitments to restorative justice initiatives that are Indigenous-desired, -led, and -centered. Although this article and research has focused on state-based apology politics, this is not where the solution may be found or where reconciliation is situated. Reconciliation and restorative justice extend beyond and through the settler colonial state. Instead of being reactionary in the way that apologies offered by prime ministers are, restorative justice seeks to reconfigure and balance power relations and structures to radically change the social fabric that allowed for the violence in the first place.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the most recent trajectory of the age of apology, which the settler colonial state of Canada has been in since the early 1990s.[95] I explored how the recent rediscovery of suspected or possible unmarked burials at the sites of residential schools has caused a resurgence of residential school–related apologies. I analyzed how the Canadian state's official apologies have, in some ways, shifted over time, but in many critical ways have remained committed to certain key political management strategies. Using critical discourse analysis, I uncovered some of these strategies used in both Harper's apology for residential schools and Trudeau's more recent apology

for the potential unmarked burials, including a consistent attempt to distance the colonial violence from their administration—in terms of time and in terms of who the offenders and perpetrators of the violence were understood to be. I illuminated language choices that demonstrate that even after a decade of "progress," according to settler colonial notions of reconciliation, certain tactics and framings for discursively managing colonial violence persist across the two apologies.

Echoing Coulthard and Mackey, I also questioned who stands to benefit from these apologies.[96] Evidence within the discourses points to how these apologies are offered within a specific political context to respond to a "crisis" within settler colonial society without ultimately unsettling the structure of colonialism in any meaningful way. This can be seen with the timing and the tone of Trudeau's apology as anger built from coast to coast over the archival and ground-penetrating radar work progressing at the grounds of residential schools. Building on the existing literature on apologies and the politics of recognition, I question whether we are approaching the end of the age of apology, and if we are, what will follow as a new means for the settler state to control the discourses of reconciliation. Ultimately, the similarities in the two apologies, the performative quality of apologies such as these when situated within the context of larger inaction or active oppression by the settler colonial state, and the lack of significant and measurable action following the most recent apology offered by Trudeau leads me to conclude that the era of apology is continuing, albeit with increasing awareness of how apology must be bolstered with actions and measurable change. So, saturated with the language of regret, thoughts, and prayers, the current moment of settler colonial redress within Canada makes the next official apology seem inevitable.

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