Bearing Witness: What Can Archaeology Contribute in an Indian Residential School Context?

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Abstract**:** *We explore our role as researchers and witnesses in the context of an emerging partnership with the Penelakut Tribe, the aim of which is to locate the unmarked graves of children who died while attending the notorious Kuper Island Indian Residential School on their territory (southwest British Columbia). This relationship is in the process of taking shape, so we focus on understanding conditions for developing trust, and the interactional expertise necessary to work well together, with a good heart. We suggest that, in some respects, this may be usefully understood as a practice of witnessing on several dimensions.*

Keywords: *Indigenous archaeology, community-based archaeology, Indian Residential Schools, Witnessing, Reconciliation*

The Penelakut are a Coast Salish people whose traditional territory is centered on the Southern Gulf Islands, on British Columbia's south coast. Penelakut Island is the present-day centre of the community, but for 85 years (1890-1975) it was also the location of a notorious Catholic-run[1] Indian Residential School (IRS), the Kuper Island Industrial School. While the school buildings have been removed, there remain on the school grounds – now the village centre – the unmarked graves of children who died while attending the school. The Penelakut know that these graves exist, but not how many or where they are located. This is a source of ongoing emotional and spiritual trauma that poses a formidable challenge to those living in and developing the community. The Penelakut are undertaking a constructive process of community healing that is centrally a matter of memorialization and spiritual work. Locating the unmarked graves, we are told, could aid in this process, vulnerable as they are to disturbance or destruction.

In 2018, University of British Columbia (UBC) researchers Andrew Martindale, Alison Wylie, and Eric Simons met with the Penelakut Tribe's Chief and Council and Elders' Committee to discuss the possibility of working together on the legacy of the Kuper Industrial School. The point of departure for this conversation was a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey that Martindale had been asked to conduct on known cemeteries in 2014 and 2016 (Harris, Maass, and Martindale 2017). This had demonstrated the potential of GPR as a non-destructive method for locating graves. We asked if the community would be interested in continuing the work Martindale had begun. At the request and direction of Penelakut leadership we are now conducting additional GPR surveys with a focus on assessing the likelihood of burials within areas designated for future community construction projects.

Our relationship with Penelakut is, by any measure, new. We are outsiders to the Penelakut community, settler Canadian scholars based at a colonial institution,[2] who are acutely aware that the Penelakut have every reason to mistrust us. We have not yet established formal working protocols with the community, but we think we are beginning to understand how we can respond to the foundational question put to us by the representatives of the community: what positive vision could we have to work together? In this chapter we explore our role as researchers and witnesses, our understanding of the trust that underpins this relationship, and the interactional expertise needed to work in a cross-cultural context.

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[1] Sisters of St. Ann

[2] UBC has recently issued a formal apology for its complicity in the harms done by the residential school system and affirmed its commitment to take positive action in responding to the Truth and Reconciliation of Canada's Final Report (Ono and UBC 2018).

What we've heard: Principles for working together

The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) aimed to bring all Canadians into a process of education and to initiate action. Its Final Report sets out 94 "Calls to Action," including a number relating to missing children and burial information (TRC 2015a, 333-335; see also TRC 2015b). These call upon governmental and other institutions to work with Indigenous communities to identify, document, maintain, commemorate, and protect sites at which residential school children were buried. The TRC also emphasizes the importance of ensuring that Indigenous communities take the lead in developing strategies to meet these goals and in establishing protocols for conducting this work appropriately (TRC 2015a, 333 [#76]).

In offering our service to the Penelakut we were motivated by these Calls to Action, specifically the call for non-Indigenous Canadians to seek equitable, respectful, thoughtful, and transparent partnerships with Indigenous Peoples as the primary means through which reconciliation may be advanced (TRC 2015b, 20, 126, 206). This mandate to move beyond the recognition of wrongs done is clear enough, but we grapple with how best to respond. What happens next, now that the realities of the IRS system have been documented and put on record in the TRC report? How do we, as researchers and as non-Indigenous Canadians, move beyond a rhetoric of recognition (sensu Coulthard 2014; Jung 2010) that relegates this brutal history to the past, and take action to change systems of oppression that continue to dispossess and marginalize Indigenous peoples in Canada?

Penelakut elders and IRS survivors have been forthright, in public testimony going back at least two decades (Campbell and Welsh 1997) and in multiple discussions with us, about the profound impact of the Kuper IRS – not only for those who attended the school but intergenerationally and for their community as a whole. They give searing accounts of casual and calculated cruelty, abandonment by authorities, perverse settlement incentives, and the persistent failure of governmental agencies and church representatives to respond to their demands for meaningful restitution with concrete action. They speak particularly of the distress caused by knowing that there are unmarked burials on their land in need of protection, spiritual work and memorialization. There is a strong desire to ameliorate this ongoing suffering, but also concern that this work could "reopen old wounds," and about being let down again. What if, like so many others from outside the community who have preceded us, we don't follow through or, worse, do the work in a way that causes further harm?

In Chief and Council and Elders' Committee meetings, we were asked what stake we researchers have in this work: were we, who were not well known in the community, doing this for our own ends? Would we fulfil our promises, and would we understand and respect the cultural and spiritual significance of the work? In short, could we be trusted to find the missing children, trusted to follow through, trusted to work in a good way? Community members, elders and leaders, in formal meetings and informal conversation, have voiced their concerns and expectations to us. Here is a paraphrase of some of what we have heard and have come to understand:

The community has told their truths, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and others, but have not seen enough real action in return. Is talk of reconciliation sincere? What does "reconciliation" mean, and what does it look like in practice?

We researchers must be transparent about who we are, what motivates us, and how we will handle the information and knowledge we gather.

Community members know what's needed; we must seek cultural and spiritual guidance from them and follow their lead. We must do this work together, in a good way, with a good heart.

If we begin this work, we must stay with it until it is finished. Outside researchers routinely appear, do a bit – as much as serves their interests – and then never come back.

The legacy of the residential school must be resolved now, for the sake of younger generations and while the generation of survivors is still with us.

Witnessing

We have begun to think of our work with the Penelakut in terms of witnessing – as an act of bearing witness. We recognize that this word has complex meanings in Indigenous and Western culture. The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission makes many references to witnessing, both as part of the Commission's own mandate (TRC 2015a, Appendix 5: Honorary Witnesses) and as an imperative for all Canadians. The practice of "witnessing," the report states, "refers to the traditional and continuing Aboriginal practice of calling forth witnesses to validate moments of great historic significance" (397).

The role of the witness is fundamental to many Indigenous legal systems across Canada and is formally recognized as an essential component of Coast Salish ceremonies and systems of law (Hill-Tout 1978, 131; Kew 1970; Miller 2001; Miller 2006). Traditionally, and to this day, Salishan hosts "call witnesses" to observe the work done at a significant event, to approve its social, spiritual and legal legitimacy, and to carry news of the proceedings to those who could not attend. Witnesses are expected to stand ready to testify to the specifics of how the event was conducted and what it signified should it later come into question (Carlson 2010, 203). As the TRC states (TRC 2015a, 397), witnessing means carrying what you have seen back home and carrying that knowledge into the future.

We have not been formally called by the Penelakut to serve as witnesses in the traditional Coast Salish sense, but we find Salish practices of "bearing witness" helpful for understanding the variety of experiences and expectations involved in our work. What we help produce is a record of one aspect of the abuse that took place at the IRS – an indirect form of witnessing of the history of violence perpetrated against Indigenous youth and children at this particular residential school. We are also asked to bear witness in ways that go well beyond the remit of our radar machinery and academic expertise. Many of the elders who guide our work are survivors of the Kuper Island IRS, and everyone in the Penelakut community is related to or knows someone who attended the school. At formal meetings and in roadside conversations we are told about what went on in the 85 years the school operated, and how what remains of the school – physical, spiritual, and in memory – continues to profoundly affect the community. We are sometimes intimate witnesses to sadness and anger, as well as hope and strength. We are asked to listen, to try to understand, and to take that knowledge with us. We bear witness to the complicity of the Canadian state in what the TRC concluded was a systematic program of cultural genocide.

As university researchers, we have opportunities to speak to a broader public about what we witness in this first sense. As the TRC puts it, "witnesses are asked to store and care for the history they witness and to share it with their own people when they return home" (TRC 2015a: 442); this suggests a second sense in which we may serve as witnesses. We recognize that our voice may carry some weight in our own communities and with non-Indigenous audiences and we are prepared, indeed, we have an obligation to bear witness to a history of institutionalized racism and systemic abuse in the residential school system that Indigenous people know all too well but, as the TRC documents, has been systematically ignored, denied and, deliberately erased by governmental and church institutions. This, however, comes with significant risks, not only of getting things wrong, but also of trading on exactly the hierarchies of credibility that we mean to disrupt. These are the well-documented pitfalls of working as allies (Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network 2019): "speaking for" an Indigenous community we are not a part of, and invoking our authority as settler Canadians and scholars to validate Indigenous histories that should be taken as authoritative in their own right.

Given these risks, there is a reciprocal quality to witnessing in our work that gives rise to a third sense of witnessing: we are witnessed by members and representatives of the Penelakut community, who must continuously evaluate our trustworthiness and hold us accountable. A core requirement of working as a non-Indigenous outsider with an Indigenous community is that we must build ongoing relationships that are capable of sustaining mutual trust (Simons 2017). The question of how to build such trust, indeed, whether it is ever warranted, is especially fraught in the context of IRS work. IRS survivors and their communities are well aware of the role played by the Canadian state and its settler citizens, first in

perpetuating the violence of the residential school system, then in denying these harms, and now, even when acknowledging them, in repeatedly failing to adequately respond. Non-Indigenous researchers who engage in such work carry the legacy of this history of untrustworthiness and face the warranted suspicion that they are complicit in practices that perpetuate colonial agendas and systemic racism. In any context, but especially here, trust is not owed or expected; it must be continually earned. It is entirely appropriate, then, that our work will be closely scrutinized by Penelakut witnesses; they will judge whether they can trust us enough to develop a working relationship, whether we are fit witnesses in general terms and what we are fit witnesses for – what the scope of our expertise and our standing in various social worlds puts us in a position to usefully and responsibly do. Beyond the technical skills we bring to GPR survey work, do we understand enough of the context and what's at stake to do this work well? And are we "of good heart?"

In Coast Salish societies, witnesses are carefully selected. They must be well-respected and reliable, people who can be counted on to perform their role as witness well, in accordance with societal expectations (Miller 2001, 189; 2006). They must also be trustworthy in more specific senses, as is required to bear witness in a particular context. If we are to understand our role working with the Penelakut community as one of witnessing – we who do not have the life-long, immersive knowledge of community norms and practices that would be expected of a traditional Salish witness – we have to ask: what is required for us to be worthy of trust as witnesses, and what kind of trust is required?

Trust

Settler culture wisdom, at least that of Anglo-American philosophers (Baier 1986; McGeer 2008; McLeod 2015), has it that trust is inherently risky: if we had a guarantee that those we trust will come through for us, we would not need to trust them. Trust involves a leap of faith. It is not just a matter of reliance on others (McGeer 2008, 247); it leaves us vulnerable in profound ways (O'Neil 2012). Trustworthiness, understood in these terms, brings into focus our fundamental interdependence on one another; it requires more than a strategic assessment of what we can expect of others or a "comfortable confidence" that someone we trust will "act with care and competence in the domain in which we trust them" (McGeer 2008, 248). It requires that we take an active, hopeful stance toward those we trust.

Nonetheless, trusting is not unconditional or all-encompassing, especially when structural, institutional, social and political conditions create radically different degrees of vulnerability and systematically reinforce reasons to be suspicious of one another (Jones 2012, 77; McLeod 2015; Pettit 1995, 221-224). Trust must be discerning; you trust particular people to act in your interest in specific areas of action or competence (McLeod 2015). Responsible trust requires that all parties understand what would count as fulfilling particular trust obligations: what we are each accountable for and to whom we are accountable. This depends, in turn, on substantial background social knowledge. As one trust theorist observes, in societies where "interactions are largely between people one knows," and relationships are typically long-term, other's interests become embedded in one's own and all involved are likely to share social norms and connections that reinforce the good will and understanding necessary to sustain trust and trustworthiness (Jones 2012, 74, 72-73). It is no surprise that it is challenging, at best, to forge relations of trust across hierarchically drawn lines of social and cultural difference.

The implication is that if settler-colonial outsiders like us are to be trustworthy witnesses to Indigenous Ancestors and histories, we must commit to an ongoing process of learning, in culturally-specific and historical terms, what is expected of us, what we bear witness to, and the social norms that govern what we are trusted to do as witnesses. Only then can we hope to be capable of responding appropriately in the context of a working partnership. This requires, above all, a willingness to learn the limitations of our understanding, as well as cultivating the competences necessary to be trustworthy as witnesses.

It is striking that the questions posed by the Penelakut community in the course of their initial witnessing of us track every element of these non-Indigenous accounts of trust and trustworthiness. They asked what competence we bring to the table; what our interests and motivations are; what resources we have, or can get, to do the work and how it will contribute to the community; what commitment we have to follow through; and what will we do to ensure that we know enough to avoid obvious blunders. They also

expressed their hopes and fears about working with settler scholars in powerfully affective terms – a reciprocal process of testing, training, and mutual attunement.

Interactional expertise

In thinking about what is required to do this cross-cultural work, a concept we find useful is that of interactional expertise. A term drawn from science studies, interactional expertise refers to the kind of communicative understanding that participants must develop to function effectively in interdisciplinary partnerships where they navigate not only differences of language and concepts but also of goals, norms of practice, and framework assumptions (Collins, Evans, and Gorman 2007). This does not presume that productive engagement requires full understanding of all aspects of the world view of those with whom you work; interactional expertise is the shared understanding required to make joint action possible. Indigenous people have considerable interactional expertise in working with non-Indigenous people; it is primarily non-Indigenous researchers who lack reciprocal interactional expertise (Wylie 2015). It is no surprise that, as Charles Menzies and Caroline Butler (2019) point out, Indigenous communities have long had to build capacity among settler scholars so we can function as trustworthy partners and witnesses.

As archaeologists who have worked for decades with Coast Salish communities, Bill Angelbeck and Colin Grier (2014) make the case that the persistence of social inequality does not necessarily foreclose the potential for researchers and community partners to identify areas of common concern and develop "horizontal relationships" in which each partner recognizes and draws on the knowledge, skill and experience of others. This is a matter of building interactional expertise through purpose-specific engagements in which researchers become attuned to the values, norms, expectations and, crucially, the wisdom of Indigenous partners. Angelbeck and Grier (2014, 534) emphasize that in the context of Salish traditions of reciprocity these exchanges cannot be understood in contractual terms, as the fulfilment of a one-off obligation. When Indigenous partners share stories and histories that relate to their traditions and protocols, these are gifts, "not just knowledge given, but something given with the anticipation of ongoing interactions and realization of reciprocal benefits"; they are intended to initiate long-term relationships. This reflects broader Salish practices in which gifts are given and received with the mutual knowledge that they create reciprocity, indebtedness and long-term commitment (Suttles 1987). In this sense, sharing cultural knowledge and developing capacity in the form of interactional expertise may begin in the context of a circumscribed partnership in which responsible trust is sharply delimited, but this may become a point of departure for learning what one another can be trusted for in more general terms – for building more expansive relations of trust and trustworthiness.

To be trustworthy witnesses, then, requires serious engagement with Indigenous knowledge-holders as primary experts in their own right, and a recognition that they are, not surprisingly, sophisticated interactional knowers about our expertise. It also requires a capacity to query one's own deeply held assumptions with empathy and an openness to vulnerability (Martindale and Nicholas 2014). In our partnership with the Penelakut, there are multiple ways in which we, researchers and community members, endeavour to work reciprocally between worlds. Archaeological work is grounded in the material world, but the unmarked graves are primarily a spiritual concern, a matter of well-being in a broad sense. It is in those realms that the burials most resonate in the community. From a technical standpoint, we know how to conduct a GPR survey, but the community must guide us on how to safely and appropriately conduct ourselves on burial grounds, and how to responsibly care for what we learn about where Ancestors and children are buried.

Doing good work, together

We return to the question, posed to us by the Penelakut, with which we opened: "what positive vision could we have to work together?" How do we prepare ourselves to be trustworthy participants in, and witnesses to, what we hope may be reconciliatory work in a very localized context? Are we capable of being, and behaving as, appropriate guests in this physical, cultural, and spiritual landscape?

Community-led work generates questions that are multi-faceted and frequently cannot be answered by a single academic discipline. Crucially, too, it requires sophisticated cross-cultural understanding; interactional expertise is called for that extends well beyond the interdisciplinary contexts for which the term was originally developed. On the basis of community meetings, and inspired by a growing literature on collaborative practice (Martindale et. al 2016; Wylie 2019), we have begun to articulate a set of aspirations and orienting values that we hope will steer us right as we move toward developing more specific protocols for the survey work we do with the Penelakut Nation at the Kuper Island IRS. These are captured by three principles (Indigenous/Science 2018):

1) Relationships must come first – we aim to forge long-term, equitable partnerships that can sustain this work.

2) Reciprocal capacity and expertise – we recognize that the knowledge and expertise of Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders is crucial to any work we do, and that building capacity is a two-way street.

3) Transparency and accountability – we want to ensure that we are accountable to those we work with, and that our practice is appropriate to the cultural context and interests of our community partners.

We recognize that the need for more detailed protocols of engagement reflects the cultural distance between us but, at the same time, a certain level of trust is required to move toward formalizing our partnership. This we can only build by showing up when asked and doing the work the community needs as carefully as we can, consistent with our own archaeological standards and accountable to Penelakut protocols. So, we work cautiously. Our presence in the community creates opportunities for reciprocal witnessing: it allows the Penelakut to get to know us as individuals and to evaluate our trustworthiness, and it gives us a chance to cultivate the cultural competence we know we need to do this work well. We are committed to staying as long as we are welcomed. We hope that our effort does no harm and does some good, but we are acutely aware of the limitations of our capacity to address something as enormous, complex, and damaging as the legacy of Indian Residential Schools.

Thinking about our role in terms of witnessing also requires us to be activists with respect to the non-Indigenous state, its institutions and its citizenry. This means not only bearing witness to the colonial settler history we help to document, but also taking action to change the structures of institutional power in Canada, including in universities, that continue to disenfranchise Indigenous communities. The incentive structures, funding models, and support structures of conventional academic institutions must be challenged and substantially re-envisioned if they are to support Indigenous community-based work and honour our institution's stated commitment to Indigenous issues. We often hear from Indigenous colleagues and partners that the term reconciliation is overused and misunderstood – "just words," empty of meaning and dissociated from significant action, too often enacted in ways that amount to yet another colonial imposition or appropriation. There is a great distance yet to travel, but we are hopeful that, through a commitment to rebuild trust, informed by the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous knowledge holders, we may succeed in finding new, respectful ways of living and working well together.

Things to consider

- The Indian Residential School system in Canada is just one aspect of ongoing and pervasive eliminationist policies and practices by which a racist settler-colonial state has disenfranchised, and continues to disenfranchise, Indigenous peoples.
- We find witnessing to be a promising way to think about our social positioning, as settler scholars, and the roles we may usefully play in partnership with Indigenous communities and in relation to our own communities.
- Trust is the necessary ground for reciprocal partnership, but Indigenous communities have every reason not to trust settler scholars. The challenges inherent in building trust signals the wide gulf yet to be spanned.

- A cross-cultural form of interactional expertise is required to navigate this gulf. It is a common skill among Indigenous as compared to non-Indigenous communities, signalling the asymmetry of power inherent in such relationships.
- Scholarship is an imperfect model through which to fulfill the TRC's calls to action; it carries with it the risk that, despite the best of intentions, authority with respect to Indigenous histories and experience will be transferred to non-Indigenous scholars—another colonial appropriation.
- The landscape of Indigenous history, including that of the Residential Schools, is a spiritual domain with dimensions of meaning and significance that are routinely bracketed or denied by the disciplinary norms of archaeology, revealing the limitations of our field for the kind of work we undertake at Penelakut.

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