Memory Work, Learning and Tourism: On a Transformational and Collaborative Journey for Reconciliation in Canada

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Introduction

More than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Canada were removed from their families, displaced hundreds of kilometres away, and placed into residential schools designed to destroy their Indigenous identities (Woolford, 2015). In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided 94 Calls to Action to reconcile Canadians and Indigenous peoples, urging everyone to collectively address and repair residential school trauma (Mas, 2015). Indigenous Tourism Canada supports Call to Action #92, ensuring Indigenous communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic activities taking place on their lands, and this can include reconciliation programs.

Residential schools are a dark history, a dissonant heritage that many wanted to erase. Dissonant heritage is when there is a lack of agreement on how different stories from the past are represented (Fagence, 2024). Tourism can actively embody these negotiated memories, often as counter-narratives, offering agency for those most affected. While this has been considered for memory tourism at slavery heritage sites in East Africa (Adu-Ampong, 2023), this has yet to be investigated in the context of Indigenous heritage and residential schools.

With these processes and objectives in mind, we ask whether former residential schools as dissonant heritage can, through tourism, contribute to the reconciliation process. As non-Indigenous, we do not claim to position ourselves within the realm of residential school trauma. Nevertheless, we can be culturally responsive in presenting ideas and studying these turbulent events, places and memories to provide a practical approach for learning at these places of memory. This is a culturally sensitive research study (Stinson et al., 2022), and we have consulted Indigenous academics and tourism practitioners on earlier drafts of this paper. This is an ongoing research study and the following paper introduces a conceptual framework grounded in literature on memory tourism, transformational learning, and dissonant heritage. A preliminary study consisting of a pre-learning and post-learning survey presents an application of the conceptual model presented at the conference.

Literature Review

Places of Memory and Dissonant Heritage

Several scholars have explored dissonant heritage, with tourism helping to unravel the complexities of these transformative experiences offering hope through the learning process (Corsale, 2020; Derek, 2020; Fagence, 2024; Koleth, 2014). Preserved as places of memory, these sites are particularly important in the preservation and management of dark heritage (De Clercq, 2023; Oren et al., 2021). Memories and places are negotiated by cultural actors, communities, and even nation-states with objectives of power or resistance (Ahmad & Hertzog, 2016). Some events are recent, and places newly discovered, and some are critical of the need to preserve these heritage sites or tell their stories. Others feel that if residential schools are destroyed, tangible historical evidence will be lost, and their associated stories (intangible

cultural heritage) will be forgotten (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Because of this, an investigation into the tourism potential of residential schools as places of memory should be completed.

Learning and Tourism

Previous scholarly work has investigated the learning potential of tourism in a variety of contexts (Arcodia et al., 2021; Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Stone & Duffy, 2015) with visitors acquiring new knowledge that may lead to new actions (Moyer et al., 2016). The highly contextual nature and challenge of learning during tourist experiences may mean that transferring knowledge may not be immediately obvious (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). For unlearning and relearning to occur, the learner needs to reflect on prior knowledge and overcome societal and personal barriers (Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning at sites of dissonant heritage has yet to be fully conceptualized (Roberts, 2018). Tourism at residential school sites may be about unlearning colonial knowledge, but it may be a disorienting dilemma that causes a shift in understanding as one relearns Indigenous knowledge through authentic storytelling (Mezirow, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

Reconciliation through tourism is proposed to exist through the preservation of places of memory (Figure 1). Residential schools are a dissonant heritage, a colonial past that government and religious institutions wanted hidden and that some members of Indigenous communities and residential school survivors want to forget. For others, it is a truth that governments and churches that operated the schools need to share, memories that must be remembered and communicated through Indigenous storytelling. This unveils the challenges of unlearning colonial histories and relearning Indigenous narratives. A process that can reveal new knowledge and hope on the path to reconciliation.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Reconciliation through Tourism

Methodology and Results

This research involves an exploratory case study (Beeton, 2005) designed to get at deeper conceptualizations of the role of tourism in contributing to learning and reconciliation in the context of Indigenous residential schools. It is an interpretive and phenomenological study making sense of individuals' subjective lived experiences, gaining meaningful insights into the significance of residential school dissonant heritage (Bustard et al., 2019). An interdisciplinary review of academic research, grey literature, Indigenous stories and media reports presents a conceptual framework for approaching memory work and learning through tourism (Williams, 2021). An exploratory pilot study (Chen, 2019) was performed to test the conceptual framework. Results of the exploratory research revealed that knowledge gained through Indigenous storytelling allows participants to learn more authentically about residential school trauma.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we ask the question of whether former residential schools as dissonant heritage sites and places of memory can contribute to reconciliation through Indigenous storytelling and the relearning of Indigenous history. Places of memory preserved through tourism can be transformative at both the individual and societal levels by activating plural public memories (Adu-Ampong, 2023). In the case of Indigenous residential schools, tourism has the potential to be a social force through which settler stories can be resisted (Grimwood et al., 2019), support Indigenous agency and realize reconciliatory potentials. Hope can be a way to focus on the educational components of tourism (Jang et al., 2021). Tourism in association with dissonant heritage like residential schools can give Indigenous peoples agency through their truth, and create places of hope, on the path to reconciliation (McCarthy & Stanton, 2017).

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