

Storying, Resiliency and Transformation in Survivor Narratives

This paper takes an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to exploring how stories and experiences of survival help to establish resiliency among survivors of colonial and cultural genocide. Specifically, this research asks, are there common legacies among groups of peoples who have lived through periods of attempted group destruction? Additionally, what enables individuals and groups to reclaim group and cultural life? Stories have a critical role to play in transforming the relations of destruction and structures of indifference that underpin the logic of settler-colonial genocide.

Our approach to stories of survival shifts the focus from relations of destruction to features of individual and collective resilience that reflect the meaningful movement toward cultural vitality such as language reclamation. As survivors and their descendants re-story the narratives of their lives, they are engaging in forms of commemoration and in the process can re-construct elements of group and cultural life. For instance, testimonies of residential school survivors and their descendants have, in some cases, become the basis for the reclamation of Indigenous languages and cultures while enhancing other forms of individual and collective well-being.

There is a capacity for transformation that is inherent in the practice of storytelling. Recovering narratives of resiliency is an invaluable part addressing legacies of violence. In telling stories about survival there is also an active and creative potential for articulating new relationships based on mutual understanding, meaningful connection around values, and a common stake in creating forms of meaningful solidarity across different identity groups. As we enter an era characterized by rapid ecological change, forced migration, and political polarization, the lessons from genocide survivor communities hold invaluable lessons for society.