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By Design: One Book, Among Many

Books are strange objects. Some people talk about books as machines, and there is something to be said for the idea of the pocket book as the prototypical mobile device—powerful, portable, popular. Others think of books as architecture: metaphoric warehouses, prisons, or playgrounds. There is no doubt that books, sometimes a single book, can be many things to many people. In fact, I might argue that the power of books rest precisely in the complex social engagements they engender and reflect. Meeting places, spaces of assembly, the best books have an amazing ability to reach across expanses of time and space and to transform (themselves, us) in ways unimagined in the initial acts of writing or publishing.

When I was invited into the Aboriginal Healing Foundation's (AHF) Truth and Reconciliation Research Series (from which the texts of *Speaking My Truth* have been selected), I was brought in as a designer. I was tasked with thinking about the form of the third volume in the series, *Cultivating Canada*. I had to devise an approach that would represent the interplay between image

and text, artworks and commentary. More than this, I needed to find an approach that could speak of and to the fraught history and memories of the Residential School system. Little did I know this would be the beginning of a much longer journey. Little did I realize that taking on this design project would become a point of entry into a much larger and more powerful healing process—my own, among others.

Work on *Cultivating Canada* spread to include a redesign of the three-volume Truth and Reconciliation Research Series for a box set, then a book-club version of *Speaking My Truth* with translations in French and Inuktitut, a website, and now this new scholastic reprint of *Speaking My Truth*, in print and electronic versions. In the process, I found myself involved in a network of connections and interactions that have helped me reposition my work as a scholar, writer, editor, and publisher and to better understand the relationships between these modalities of practice.

This expanding web of AHF projects—a collection of texts and contexts that seems to morph as I type—has offered me the good fortune of participating in a vibrant, vital assembly of people and ideas. It has both enabled and challenged me to radically reconsider the way I understand literature and my role in teaching, learning and producing it. As an English scholar and teacher of Canadian literature, I came to the larger AHF research project burdened with knowledge that books can and have been violently misused. As a post-colonialist, I recognize that literature has been made to do the work of empire and nation, colonizing the minds of young and not-so-young readers. I remember that the study of

literature—whether Shakespeare, Arnold, or Atwood—can be used as a blunt instrument to beat readers into submission.

These misgivings are highlighted when I think of artist-curator Jeff Thomas’s multi-faceted exhibition *Where are the Children* (Legacy of Hope Foundation). Thomas provides viewers with an exacting presentation from the archival records of Residential Schools. Selected photographs show glimpses of Aboriginal, Inuit and Métis students learning to read and write. These images remind us that, in context of the Residential school system, literacy played a crucial role in a larger assimilationist project, in which children were forced by teachers, administrators, staff, clergy and laity to give up their language and traditional teachings for English instruction. The photographs of boys and girls sitting in rows rehearsing the alphabet or a line of prose, a few of which are reproduced in this volume, suggest a powerful perversion of the educational experience. They remind us—educators and students—of our privilege and ethical imperative.

Among the devastating materials included in Thomas’s exhibition, those I find the most difficult to process are sample texts from the teachers’ manuals and reports. These texts hinge on the language of “civilization” and “progress” and help describe the systematic brutality of Canada’s colonizing approach to the children of Aboriginal, Inuit, and Métis communities across the country. Statements outlining the assimilationist goals of educators and ministries—their perceived or predicted successes—suggest the way that a single-minded approach to teaching and learning can be used to obliterate others ways of knowing.

Despite this undeniably violent history, despite the colonial function of the Canadian school system, in which literature and literacy played a crucial role, *Speaking My Truth* stands as a remarkable testament to the power of survivors and the wealth of their stories. The power and generosity of these writers is not to be underestimated. Their ability to share the disturbing experiences of suffering and abuse alongside invaluable teachings on how and why they continue to find strength remain inspirational.

Stopping between chapters to take a breath and to reflect on the strength of the individual voices collected here, the material object of the book gives me hope. As I bend back the spine, thumb the pages, circle phrases, I feel a physical connection to the writers and readers who share these words. As my copy of this text takes on the marks of a living reading, I imagine how the language presented here has found its way back into the archive and has already begun to rewrite and reclaim teaching and learning as positive, community forming acts.

I look forward to hearing from new generations of readers and to learning how you carry these important ideas with you.