

TRADING IN MY WHITE PERSON'S GAZE

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I FOUND THE CLASSES IN Hum201 on Indian residential schools to be a view-changer. During my youth, I had a white person's gaze. My interactions with local First Nations peoples were limited to casually knowing two people from the Creston Band. One person was a girl in my English class at the high school in Creston. The other person was a woman named Mary who lived in the same community as my family and myself. I grew up in the East Kootenay area of British Columbia and attended high school in Creston. During my school years, I read many Western novels. All of the stories had white male heroes protecting white ranchers and their cattle from white male outlaws or marauding bands of Indians. Apparently, all the villages and towns were built by white folk. My classmate was bussed into town from the reserve. In the small community where I lived, twenty-five miles (forty kilometres) east of Creston, Mary from the Creston reserve had a home with her white common-law husband.

As a child, Mary had attended an Indian residential school sixty miles (106 kilometres) east of our community near Cranbrook at the St. Eugene Mission on the St. Mary reserve. I once asked Mary what she had learned at the school, and she said "sewing." Mary was a very quiet and polite woman. Sometimes, our family would receive a phone call from a neighbour of Mary's because her husband had locked her out of their home. My Dad and I would drive over to her house and bring her to our home. Mary lived all of her adult life in the community and died in her fifties from heart failure. Many of her relatives still live on the Creston Band reserve land, and one of her brothers was Chief of the Lower Kootenay Indian Band when I was in high school. He had attended St. Eugene Mission residential school.

In February 2016, our Hum201 class saw a film called *Finding Our Way* about residential schools in Canada (Sandercock and Attili).

* Growing up in rural B.C., I had no knowledge that my Indigenous neighbour's schooling had been any different than mine. I was unaware that she had been taken from home to an Indian residential school. My knowledge about her life grew from classes at UBC.

I learned a great deal about what life must have been like for Mary during her years at the St. Eugene Mission school. It was a revelation to see how much those schools were entrenched in Canadian law. Students were compelled to attend. The churches ran schools on behalf of the government. The school must have given Mary's name to her. Sewing was taught, as well as other homemaking skills. That school caused children to be isolated from their families, lose their names, and lose their language; their self-esteem was badly damaged and other horrible abuses sometimes occurred.

A month after watching *Finding Our Way*, I saw a story about the St. Eugene Mission school, as told by former student, Dr. Sophie Pierre (Bohigian). She talked about the nuns at the school taking her clothes when she arrived and giving her other clothes to wear. The nuns said the children's culture was the work of the devil. Sophie was always lonesome at the school. Children cried during the night and none of the children felt important. It was shocking to hear her story. I am sure the experience for Mary was the same as Sophie's experience, or perhaps worse. Sophie concluded by saying that you were left feeling that you didn't fit in anywhere (Bohigian).

In 1970, the St. Eugene Mission school closed down. Dr. Sophie Pierre was Chief of the ʔaq'am (St. Mary's) Band of the Ktunaxa Nation for twenty-six years. The three-storey school building sat closed for a long time. Eventually, it was turned into a 125-room hotel with a casino and golf course, and was called the St. Eugene Resort. "The Golf Course opened in May 2000, the Casino opened in September 2002, and the hotel opened in January 2003 ... There are 250 people working at this resort, and 17 percent are First Nations" ("About Us"). The Christy Clark Liberal government is promoting this gambling complex as a recipient of B.C. Lottery Commission grants. One of the former students has a job at the resort and is in the television commercial talking about having gone to the residential school. He appears to have a maintenance job at the casino/hotel. I have visited this casino a number of times and know local people who often gamble at the casino. People who live on the reserve and also people from the nearby city of Cranbrook often go to this casino. The casino/hotel has two crosses on the top of the building above the entrance, symbolizing the Christian residential school history.

I have seen my view of Indian residential schools change since taking the Hum101 and Hum201 courses. Now, I know that residential schools didn't treat students respectfully or teach them a proper school curriculum. A few years ago, I recall listening to someone pose the question,

why is it taking more generations for First Nations children to reach university than for immigrant children? I know the answer now. In some cases, four generations of First Nations peoples attended residential schools. The academic education at these schools was very poor. There was also the loss of land, language and communities, and local First Nations peoples treated like second-class citizens. As a consequence of all this newfound knowledge, I traded my white person's gaze for a multicultural gaze.

WORKS CITED

- "About Us." St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino. <http://steugene.ca/en/about-us-culture-heritage/>
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- Finding Our Way*. Dir. Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili. 2010.