There is an image of my father that sticks in my mind: he is a child about six years old attending the Old Sun Residential School.¹ As he tells it, he was extremely lonely and wanted to go home. The residential staff would not allow this and would punish him. One day while showering, he decided to go. He ran naked from the school towards North Camp, where his family lived, about 20 miles away. I have this image of my father as a child running naked through the tall grass leaving Old Sun School behind him. This is only one of many incidents that occurred for my father, one that he will tell among many that he won’t—until now, forced through a semi-legal process of recounting residential school experiences cloaked in the ‘healing’ paradigm and financial gain.

As I write this, my father is undergoing his formal interview regarding his experience at the Old Sun Residential School.² It has been a stressful time for him, remembering experiences that he has kept within his being for most of his life. While I can see and have experienced the damage these experiences have caused him, I can only imagine the pain, suffering and psychological damage these experiences have created within him and the intergenerational effects that form a continuum of dysfunctional being. To relive these experiences has not been that easy for a man who is deeply private and suspicious of institutions.

My father questioned the interviewers during the interview: ‘Why do we have to go through this process? The Japanese Canadians did not have to do this as a part of determining their settlements.’ This is a question that comes to my mind and I wonder whether this is yet another layer of ethnocide within the colonial project—a layer more insidious as it provokes individuals to relive painful experiences over and over again in the name of ‘healing’. If you receive a settlement, some funds are set aside for ‘counselling’, which are accessible only should the individual determine to seek psychological help. Isn’t this yet

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¹ Old Sun, an Anglican School founded in 1890, was located on the Siksika reserve near Gleichen in southern Alberta.
² This interview is required of individuals who apply for the Common Experience Payment (CEP). The CEP is part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which recognises the experience and continuing effects of residing at an Indian Residential School.
another way in which the government is telling Aboriginal people ‘how to be’? It seems that the ‘Indian Agent’ ethos of controlling the lives of Aboriginal people is alive and well.

As I was a day-school student for four years, I apply to the Common Experience Program to consider my case. Even though I have heard that day students will not be considered, I am encouraged to apply by many statements including those made by officials in the program and the Assembly of First Nations. After filling out the government forms, then sending more information at their request, I receive months later in the mail a standardised letter from Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada: ‘We regret to inform you that after reconsideration of your Common Experience Payment application, we are still not able to confirm your residence at the Indian Residential Schools indicated on your application.’ For many people who attended day school—having had the same common experience as residents—their applications have been denied. The loss or inaccurate recording of information has been a problem for verification; for many people, their experiences have been invalidated or put into question, creating another class of residential school survivor—one that might never realise their place in the residential school experience commons.

I am not a supporter of the ‘Common Experience’. I recognise that the process might be good for some. I suspect that, in the end, many will not realise its touted benefits. For instance, a physician on my reserve indicates that he has never seen things so bad, that the stress resulting from the reliving of these past experiences has brought about suicides, attempted suicides, depression, alcoholism/drug abuse and violence within the community. It is a new epidemic that furthers the destruction of a people. I am personally frustrated, angered and sad as I see the toll this process has taken on many people, including family and friends. While I understand the intention of the process—to bring closure and a forum in which to expose the horrific stories these schools produced—I cannot help but feel that a new wound is being inflicted.

**Testimony**

In correspondence between J. D. MacLean and Reverend R. MacKay on 4 July 1907, it was noted that ‘Old Sun school [was] founded in 1890...[and] had a death rate of 47 per cent, with the possibility of it being higher’. Historian John Milloy describes abuse at the school:

In 1919, Graham alerted Departmental headquarters to yet another incident of abuse...George Baptiste...had run away from the Anglican Old Sun’s school. On being brought back, the boy was shackled to the bed, had his hands tied, was stripped and was ‘most brutally and
unmercifully beaten with a horse quirt until his back was bleeding’… the accused gentleman who got off, defended by Cannon S. Gould, indicated that ‘such a beating was [the] norm, more or less in every boarding school in the country’.\(^3\)

A slap across my face stuns me. I look into the bus driver’s eyes as he yells at me, scolding me for my behaviour on the bus. For a six-year-old, an adult slap seems like the end of the world. Not really knowing why, I walk home crying in the shadow of Gordon’s Residential School. Slaps across the face become a regular occurrence in the classroom and dorms.

Why some people develop DID [dissociative identity disorder] is not entirely understood, but they frequently report having experienced severe physical and sexual abuse, especially during childhood. Though the accuracy of such accounts is disputed, they are often confirmed by objective evidence. Individuals with DID may also have post-traumatic symptoms (nightmares, flashbacks, and startle responses) or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Several studies suggest that DID is more common among close biological relatives of persons who also have the disorder than in the general population.\(^4\)

At age seven, my personality splits: male and female. Adrian attends Lebret Residential School; Adrianne stays home, allowed to come out only when Adrian goes home. The signifier a white-leather fringed jacket, she flirts among the boys in the playground.

Sexual abuse was not simply visited on the individual child in school; it echoed in the lives of subsequent generations of children. A 1989 study sponsored by the Native Women’s Association of the Northwest Territories found that eight out of 10 girls under the age of eight were victims of sexual abuse and 50 per cent of boys of the same age had been sexually molested.\(^5\)

On transformations in society…That future must include making a place for those who have been affected by the schools to stand in dignity, to remember, to voice their sorrow and anger and to be listened to with respect…So as Thomas Prince encouraged…so that they can trust each other and…can walk together side by side and face this world having faith and confidence in one another.\(^6\)

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5  Milloy, A National Crime, p. 298.  
6  Ibid., p. 305.
Art as voice: testimony

While the Canadian Government works through its process and further bureaucratises Aboriginal suffering, I seek another way to reconcile my experience: I do it through my art making.

For this article, I have decided to speak of one installation and of a performance that can be considered testimonies on the residential school experience. The installation at the TRUCK Gallery was called Old Sun and included three pieces: Old Sun, Sick and Tired and Inhumation. The performance was at the Banff Centre, called Desperate Commons: Gym Acts.

‘Old Sun’ or Natusapi was a chief of the Blackfoot and a distant relative of mine. My family has told me that he was a respected leader and distrusted the newcomers greatly; he did not want to sign Treaty 7, preferring war to what at the time he considered the end of our way of life. The Blackfoot Reserve No. 149—or what is today called the Siksika Nation—was divided in half for conversion: the east to the Catholics and the west to the Anglicans. My family camped on the western end of the reserve and by happenstance was claimed by the Anglicans. The school that was built was named Chief Old Sun Residential School. I find it ironic that Old Sun’s name was used, as it ensured the end of a way of life for many of his descendents—my family members. The institution now called Old Sun College has made the transition from residential school to college yet remains a colonising symbol for many of my nation. Over the years, various renovations have created fragments of material culture; I have been privileged to collect many of these fragments.

Old Sun

Old Sun is a sweat lodge replica constructed of metal, with bison-fur fragments arranged in a circle within the lodge; a residential school light is illuminated over the lodge. To represent the reconstruction of cultural icons, I have used the design of the sweat lodge. I had it manufactured from steel—an industrial material that drove imperial expansion.

It is a skeleton, a cage that shadows the struggle most Aboriginal people face in reconciling traditional ways with contemporary Western culture. I often use the bison as a symbol representing the destruction of Aboriginal peoples’ way of life. I have pieced bison-fur fragments together in an attempt at putting things back together, or trying to hold on to something that is rapidly changing. It is placed inside the sweat lodge—the womb—for protection, yet it is also caged. I have placed the Old Sun light fixture above the sweat lodge. It shines downwards interrogating the rest of the piece. As I believe that objects hold energy, this light that once shone above the heads of many children within the
school is a witness to genocide. The shadow created on the fragments of bison fur is the Union Jack. Shadows of history haunt us; illumination of our history can enlighten us and bring us out of the shadow. *Old Sun* is a sculpture that contemplates layers of history, shadows of the past and tension between light and dark.

**Sick and Tired**

*Sick and Tired* (Figure 1) is an installation that explores identity, history and transcendence through the reconfiguration of architectural and natural fragments. It is homage to colonial history. Its elements are three Old Sun Residential School windows, filled with feathers and back lit, and an old infirmary bed from the same school with a bison robe folded into a human shape placed on its springs. The bed is illuminated from the top to create a shadow beneath similar to a stretched hide. This work references material culture and post-colonial issues in Aboriginal art. *Sick and Tired* is a continuation of my explorations into my Siksika (Blackfoot) identity and the reality of cultural genocide. Combined, these elements speak to fragmentation, re-signification and counter memory—ideas that are a part of colonial or post-colonial discourse.

Residential schools were instruments of genocide; they created isolation, disorientation, pain and death and ultimately broke many human spirits. I can imagine many children peering out of these windows, longing to be home with their families. Their reality, however, was confinement similar to being smothered by a pillow. Sickness and disease were and still are a reality for First Nations—a legacy of illness represented by the infirmary bed. How many people lay sick, tired, dying or dead on this bed is not known, yet I feel the heaviness of its presence, a state that exhausts me physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The bison robe configured like a mummy lies on the bedsprings; it is a cultural reference that speaks to another fragment, that of a historically decimated mammal analogous to the people and their culture. A light shines down illuminating robe and bed; the shadow beneath represents a stretched hide and speaks to the duality of life and death or the yet known.

I believe that objects hold energy; the combination of elements—windows, feathers, light, shadow, bed and bison robe—forms objects and ideas that speak to history, culture, genocide, absence, presence and fragmentation. Together they form a space in which to contemplate our present being. In doing so, we can examine our selves and our relationship to the past, present and future. For me, creating this installation has been a way to exorcise and transcend the colonial project, a way to forgiveness, healing and obtaining a state of grace.
Inhumation

*Inhumation* (Figures 2 and 3) is the act of placing a person or object into the ground. I created a facsimile of a traditional Blackfoot death platform and inverted it with a small black coffin attached to the ceiling and a small childlike sarcophagus placed on the underside of the platform; a light shines from the coffin creating a shadow on the floor. A banner reading ‘All One in Christ Jesus’ is placed upside down on the wall behind the platform. A video full of historical Old Sun images of children in the school intermixed with recent video of the exterior of the school projects through the platform onto the wall under the banner. The sound of digging resonates throughout the space. This installation speaks to the act of burying, an act that is in opposition to historical Blackfoot burial practices. In burying, we cover up the past; in placing on a platform to deteriorate, we see a natural process occur—the dispersal of human remains into the environment. It would seem our world has become upside down, where looking up is looking down, our perspective skewed in a world of Christian and governmental doctrine—to ‘kill the Indian in the child’.

Desperate Commons: Gym Acts

*Desperate Commons: Gym Acts* begins to examine residential school histories and my experiences in these systems. The first 12 years of my life were spent in and around residential schools. My parents met at the Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, where my father worked as a supervisor and my mother worked in the laundry. After I was born, my family moved and worked at the school in Fort George, Quebec. After four years, we moved to the Gordon First Nation, Saskatchewan, where I started to attend the day school with the students of Gordon Residential School. We then moved to Lebret, where I attended the day school until grade four. In 1975, we moved back to my home nation of Siksika.

My father was a student of William (Bill) Starr at Old Sun Residential School on the Blackfoot Reserve and was invited by Starr to work as a boys’ supervisor once he was an adult. Adrian senior followed Starr around the country as he moved between schools, as a result of their friendship. Starr became my godfather.

Starr was charged and convicted on several counts of sexual assault on the boys who attended these schools. As is the case with paedophiles, his actions were secret until allegations were brought forward in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many associates of Starr, including my parents, were shocked and felt betrayed.
by his actions—indicating that they never suspected or had any evidence that this abuse was going on. It is a history that adds to the legacy of abuse these schools have come to represent.

Recently, my family received a package in the mail; it was from Starr. The package contained many photos taken in the 1950s of students at the Old Sun Residential School on the Blackfoot Reserve and various trips around Canada and the United States. Many of the photos were of my father, as well as of various family members and school activities, taken by Starr or an unknown photographer. Needless to say, these images are historically interesting yet haunting. I am in the process of researching and speaking to these images. *Desperate Commons: Gym Acts* is the first performance that examines a group of images from a Christmas play at the Old Sun School gym.

This performance is a process of exorcising history, letting go of the hurt; in essence, it is a process of truth and reconciliation. The majority of my family, including my father, attended Old Sun Residential School, which was run by the Anglican Church—a common experience that continues to negatively affect my family. More recently, with the implementation of the Common Experience Payments through the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada, I was informed that I was entitled to apply and seek compensation, which I did not want to do for personal reasons. I did apply, however, after consulting with elders. My case was reviewed and I was informed that I had been rejected as a result of the lack of records.

While the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada is a start in addressing the history of residential schools, the Common Experience evaluation process has its problems. Many records were lost or destroyed, leaving many former students of these schools without proof they attended, and as a result, they are now in a position of having to find evidence of their existence in these schools. It is a complex, psychologically troubling and disillusioning process, leaving many frustrated and feeling re-victimised as they relive and have to prove their past experiences.

One aspect of my art practice is to re-signify history and in doing so exorcise the negative energies that exist. I am in the process of coming to terms with my history. It is a process of personal transcendence, telling stories that expose the desperate nature of these experiences yet also demonstrate our common resilience.
Figure 1, Adrian Stimson, *Sick and Tired* (2004) in Old Sun exhibit (2008). Courtesy of Truck Gallery, Calgary, Alberta.


Figure 4, Adrian Stimson, *Buffalo Boy’s Confessional Indulgence*. Red Shift Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Courtesy of Lynne Bell.
Figure 5, Adrian Stimson, *Buffalo Boy’s Confessional Indulgence*. Red Shift Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Courtesy of Adrian Stimson.