

WEST COAST LINE # 74

RECONCILE THIS!

Copyright 2012. All rights revert to the artists and authors upon publication.

**EDITOR** Jeff Derksen

**ISSUE EDITORS** Jonathan Dewar and Ayumi Goto

**ISSUE COPY EDITOR:** Flora Kallies

**MANAGING EDITOR** Michael Barnholden

**ADVISORY EDITOR** Jerry Zaslove

**FOUNDING EDITOR** Roy Miki

**EDITORIAL BOARD** Sabine Bitter, Colin Browne, David Chariandy, Stephen Collis, Glen Lowry, Ashok Mathur, Kirsten McAllister, Roy Miki, Henry Tsang, Rita Wong

**COVER ART** Tania Willard—Hiawatha Indian Insane Asylum

**DESIGN** Ross Milne, Abi Huynh, Easton West, Kristy Lawson, Megan Stagg, Stacey Hall, Jordan Boos, Jennifer MacDonald and Tina Lo

**PRINTING** Printed in Canada by Hignell Books, Winnipeg, MB

**TYPESETTING** Michael Barnholden

**SUBSCRIPTION RATES**

CDN & US \$20 for students, \$40 individuals, \$60 institutions / libraries per year (US outside Canada)

INTERNATIONAL \$20 US for students, \$40 US individuals, \$60 US institutions / libraries per year

**BACK ISSUES** \$12, GST included. Outside Canada, please pay in US funds

**CORRESPONDENCE** c/o west coast line, 6079 Academic Quadrangle, 8888 University Dr., Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC, V5A 1S6, Canada. wcl@sfu.ca, www.westcoastline.ca

**LIBRARY SUBSCRIPTION AGENTS** SMS Canada, Box 2382, London ON N6A 5A7; Blackwell's, Box 40, Hythe Bridge St, Oxford UK OX1 2EU; Faxon, 15 Southwest Park, Westwood MA 02090; Ebsco & Canebsco, 17-19 Washington Ave, Tenafly NJ 07670; John Coutts Library Services, 6900 Kinsmen CT, Box 1000, Niagara Falls ON L2E 7E7; SWETS, 650 Swedesford Rd, Box 517, Berwyn PA 19312; Readmore, Box 1459, Blackwood NJ 08012.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT** *West Coast Line* is grateful for the support of the Simon Fraser University Publications Committee, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Government of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council.



SIMON FRASER  
UNIVERSITY



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA  
ARTS COUNCIL  
Supported by the Province of British Columbia

# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

4 Jonathan Dewar and Ayumi Goto

## ALEX JANVIER: REFLECTIONS (REMARKS AND INTERVIEW)

12 Interviewed by Jonathan Dewar

## RESIDENCY WITH GALLERY GACHET 2008

22 Tania Willard

## IMAGINARY SPACES OF CONCILIATION AND RECONCILIATION

28 David Garneau

## RECONCILIATION...REALLY? FROM MACDONALD TO HARPER: A LEGACY OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE

40 Steven Loft

## PICK UP STICKS

48 Nigit'stil Norbert

## HEATHER IGLOLIORTE

56 A Conversation with Jonathan Dewar

## SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN

68 Adrian Stimson

## WRITING LANDSCAPE

80 Vanessa Dion Fletcher

## RAVENS FLYING UPSIDE AND OTHER STORIES

88 Peter Morin

## SONGLINES, STORIES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT— A CONVERSATION WITH

94 Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Elwood Jimmy and  
Chris Bose

## LITTLE NOTEBOOK

108 Bo Yeung

## CROSSING WATER and GROUND BENEATH MY FEET

124 Cecily Nicholson

## FATHER'S DAY: THE MISSING CONVERSATION

138 Jeff Thomas

## RISKY BUSINESS

148 Meeka Morgan, Karine Ng and  
Jayce Salloum

## (OFFICIAL DENIAL)

## TRADE VALUE IN PROGRESS: UNSETTLING NARRATIVES

162 Leah Decter and Jaimie Isaac

## CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

180

# INTRODUCTION

>> JONATHAN DEWAR AND AYUMI GOTO



What is the role of art and artist in reconciliation? This straightforward but hardly simple question has brought together groups of artists, curators, scholars, and thinkers in various ways within the current Canadian context of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). This edition of *West Coast Line*—playfully titled *Reconcile This!*—is one example. It has grown out of a series of related events and is, in turn, one step within another series toward... well, that is a question, too.

In this issue we have asked artists and curators to tackle that hardly simple question, though not with the intention of definitively answering it once and for all, as that seems impossible. Rather, here we have attempted to broaden the circle(s)—some deliberate, some happy accidents of circumstance or necessity—of previous engagements with the role of art, including artistic, curatorial, and research practice, in reconciliation discourse and practice.

This publication, in large part, grows out of an event hosted by the Centre for Innovation in Culture and the Arts at Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, BC, October 7–8, 2011. As part of a project funded in part by a TRC research grant, a small group of artists and curators joined a research team to help think through possible approaches and avenues toward effective and ethical research practice, not only grounded as necessary in reconciliation theory but also contributing to reconciliation *practice*. One of the key themes from this discussion was *complexity*. How could we work through all the complexities of history, legacy, and trauma—all of which exist simultaneously within the Residential Schools issue and art history in Canada?

One suggestion was to acknowledge that reconciliation is a *work-in-progress*, a theme the editors of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation's *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*<sup>1</sup> played with, constructing one of their section titles as: "Reconciliation: A Work in Progress" [emphasis in original].<sup>2</sup> Other participants to the discussion noted, with some mirth, how familiar artists and curators are with the concept of a *work-in-progress*. It was at this point that the group hit upon the concept of incubation as a way to approach these complexities. What if, the group concluded, we invited artists, curators, and other thinkers to come together equipped with works-in-progress of their own that would touch on, in some fashion, any of the themes and/or complexities within that question *What is the role of art and the artist in reconciliation?* The incubation would combine

---

1 Younging, Gregory, Dewar, Jonathan, & DeGagné, Mike, eds. *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*. (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009)

2 Gregory Younging and Jonathan Dewar, who co-edited *Response* along with Mike DeGagné, were both part of this Kamloops meeting.

art, curatorial, and research practice and question if and/or how any one or all of these things, or the interplay itself, may contribute to reconciliation practice. But first the group advised we would need to bring together people and ideas in some way to provide a foundation for the eventual physical and intellectual gathering, a “pre-catalogue” of ideas. The catalogue is, of course, another play on words/concepts, turning on its head the straightforward arc of artist/curator/space/exhibition/catalogue with which so many of the artists in attendance were familiar.

Thus, what we present here is a pre-catalogue of an “exhibition” that may or may not one day materialize post-*Reconcile This!* For all intents and purposes, this event will lead into *Reconciliation: Work(s) in Progress*, a two-day symposium followed by a five-day incubation artistic residency, hosted by the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre at Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Each contributor for this edition of West Coast Line was asked to bring an idea-in-progress, at whatever stage of its genesis, whether a light bulb moment in its infancy or a mature, robust project engaged in various ways with audiences. The only other direction was to play with the notion of works-in-progress in some way for the purpose of exploring the boundaries of theory, practice, and ethics.

To paint a full picture of the many layers and levels of complexities of the current Canadian context vis-à-vis the Residential Schools legacy and the role of art and artists in addressing concepts of healing, truth, and reconciliation would be a manuscript of its own (mixed metaphor intentional). Indeed, these works are out there in progress as well, and into this well of ideas we float *Reconcile This!* with this brief overview of some of those complexities.

In 2010, the TRC announced an “Open Call for Artistic Submissions,” which includes the following information and criteria:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (“TRC”) believes that artists have a profound contribution to make in expressing both truth and reconciliation. The TRC invites all artists to submit works that relate to experiences at Indian Residential Schools or that relate to the legacy and impact of those experiences on former students, parents, future generations, communities, and on relationships within families and between communities. In addition, the TRC invites artists to submit works relating to apology, truth, cultural oppression, cultural genocide, resistance, resilience, spirituality, remembrance, reconciliation, rejuvenation and restoration of Aboriginal culture and pride [...] The TRC believes that collecting artistic works is an important and meaningful way to express the truth, impact and legacy of the Residential School experience and to assist with reconciliation.<sup>3</sup>

What is unclear in the above is the role of artists, arts administrators, and curators in informing the process—including issues of consent, copyright, and use of works—which is detailed in the document from which this information is taken.

The convergence of truth-telling, reconciliation efforts, and commemoration presents a unique opportunity to test and build critically upon the notion that Aboriginal peoples have a responsibility to Aboriginal community. There are many related theories about the importance of community to Aboriginal artists and their obligations to their community. For example, Jeannette Armstrong has written and spoken at length about *En’owkin*: “[T]his idea of community, as understood by my ancestors, encompassed a holistic view of interconnectedness that demands our responsibility to everything

---

3 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Open Call for Artistic Submissions,” no date, 1. Accessed June 15, 2010: [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/pdfs/TRC\\_Art\\_Submissions\\_en\\_p6.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/pdfs/TRC_Art_Submissions_en_p6.pdf)

we are connected to.”<sup>4</sup> And Jace Weaver’s theory of “communitism” (a combination of *community* and *activism*) proclaims the artist’s “proactive commitment to native Community.”<sup>5</sup>

The last few decades have seen a considerable amount of scholarship, theoretical and practical, focused on concepts of reconciliation between aggrieved parties within nation states, most notably the vast but still recent body of literature spawned by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience. There is also a large international body of literature concerning the role of art and artists in conflict resolution and so-called truth and reconciliation processes, which often come in the form of formal commissions, as is the case with Canada and its TRC. There is a similarly expansive body of literature concerning the role of art and artists in commemoration, another core component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and one that is to be administered by the TRC. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith says, the “‘talk’ about the colonial past is embedded in [...] our humour, poetry, music, storytelling, and other common sense ways of passing on both a narrative of history and an attitude about history.”<sup>6</sup>

It also acknowledges that the concept(s) of reconciliation may or may not be influenced and/or impacted by the changed landscape that is the introduction of a formal Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one that is necessarily specific to residential schools and is, arguably, exclusive—inssofar as the Indian Residential Schools Settlement

Agreement adheres to an approved list of schools and, therefore, an approved “membership” to the experience.

This changed or changing landscape may influence the reconciliation conversation. Artistic engagement pre- and post-Settlement Agreement may be markedly different, eliciting new themes or subjecting the Agreement itself to artistic interpretation, given its exclusive, legal nature and the emotional and social impacts of its components.

Trudy Govier has pointed out that Canada turns away from residential schools and other events of our colonial history because the stories “are unpleasant and incompatible with the favoured picture we have of ourselves, and they imply a need for restitution and redress, threatening our rather comfortable way of life.”<sup>7</sup> She suggests we must all acknowledge that complex colonial systems mean a nation’s population is inextricably linked to oppressive institutions and, further, that we “are beneficiaries of the injustices.”<sup>8</sup> John Paul Lederach offers a strategy for moral action, to “restory” as a creative act: “Embracing the paradox of relationship in the present, the capacity to restory imagines both the past and the future and provides space for the narrative voice to create.”<sup>9</sup> And Dora Apel writes, “Art illuminates traumatic experience through the sideways glance, allowing the viewer to apprehend what can only be shown indirectly, allusively and in sometime surprising ways.”<sup>10</sup>

Martha Minow highlights those elements that

4 Armstrong, Jeanette, “Let Us Begin With Courage” (Centre for Ecoliteracy, 1999) 3. Accessed April 10, 2009: [http://www.ecoliteracy.org/publications/pdf/jarmstrong\\_letusbegin.pdf](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/publications/pdf/jarmstrong_letusbegin.pdf)

5 Weaver, Jace, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) xiii.

6 Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999) 19.

7 Govier, Trudy. “What Is Acknowledgement and Why Is It Important?” *Dilemmas of Reconciliation: Cases and Concepts*, Eds. Carol A.L. Prager and Trudy Govier (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003) 78.

8 Govier 78–79.

9 Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 149.

10 Apel, Dora, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002) 3.

truth commissions cannot offer, including vengeance and closure through prosecution due to the voluntary nature of the processes: “Disappointments with truth commissions are likely to erupt over the reliability and completeness of the reported facts, over interpretations, and over the apparent trade of truth for punishment.”<sup>11</sup> Outside of the necessary reports that relay such information, though, there are other avenues, and Minow moves in the direction of the memorials that often accompany or are integral to the formal reporting of commissions, noting that commemoration initiatives are actually quite common. She also notes that within these initiatives, “[m]ore literal and concrete forms of commemoration and monuments use sculptures and paintings, museums, plays, and poems,”<sup>12</sup> later remarking that art may indeed be a most useful tool in going beyond mere commemoration: “Art of the unthinkable should disturb as well as commemorate.”<sup>13</sup> In Canada, Roger Simon notes there are many examples of art being supported and space created for arts inclusion, which gives rise to a growing reputation for Canada as a place where traumatic cultural memories can be safely explored through critical, creative approaches.<sup>14</sup>

There is also resistance in art. Apel argues that art can present narratives from a survivor’s perspective—a witness in a testimony sense—and provide an avenue for others to witness the atrocities, admittedly second-hand, through the mediated lens of an artwork.<sup>15</sup> Smith, again in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous*

*Peoples*, writes, “For indigenous people, the critique of history is not unfamiliar, although it has now been claimed by postmodern theories.”<sup>16</sup> She explains that the “idea of contested stories and multiple discourses about the past, by different communities, is closely linked to the politics of everyday contemporary indigenous life [...] These contested accounts are stored within genealogies, within the landscape, within weavings and carvings.”<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault acknowledges that Western notions of “art” may be, for some Aboriginal peoples, “a colonizer’s term, a restriction and distortion of the cultural expressions of the past which fails to do justice to the visual culture of the present” but asks if “the conflict between aboriginal and Euro-American aesthetics [has] been both productive and extending.”<sup>18</sup> To that end, she writes that since at least the mid-1980s it is evident that the aim of many works by Aboriginal artists is “to remember, to condemn, to overturn, to instruct, to translate across cultural boundaries, and yet to withhold translation, to make beautiful things, according to various ideas of beauty and, sometimes, riotously and discomfitingly, to entertain.”

In *Reconcile This!* the contributors offer creative critiques of reconciliation, questioning the conceptual and political parameters of ready-made reconciliatory practices. Taken to be both inflammatory and exclamatory, *Reconcile This!* attests to the ways in which artistically oriented deliberations of reconciliation move beyond prescriptive and formally instituted top-down protocols, which are often imposed upon projected recipient communities.

Renowned painter Alex Janvier calls upon

11 Minow, Martha, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998) 129.

12 Minow 139.

13 Minow 142.

14 Simon, Roger, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

15 Apel 5.

16 Smith 33.

17 Smith 33.

18 Townsend-Gault, Charlotte, “Hot Dogs, a Ball Gown, Adobe, and Words: The Modes and Materials of Identity,” *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (New York: Routledge, 1999) 113.

artists and curators to be the social rebels that “change the intelligentsia.” Addressing himself and other Aboriginal people as the landlords of the geopolitical space currently named Canada, Alex places his faith in the abilities of creatives to confront longstanding arrogated colonialist claims to the land. In her prints *Be A Good Girl*, *Hiawatha Indian Insane Asylum*, and *Free Your Mind* Tania Willard answers to that call, presenting dramatic images of ways in which past and present colonial projects to assimilate and annihilate Indigenous lives can be excavated, their strangleholds ultimately released through politically and aesthetically willful acts of cultural remembering and self-respect. In the same vein, in “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation,” David Garneau examines the etymology and performative locutions of colonially and religiously laden terms. David threads the conception of “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” into a vitalizing exploration of conciliation and reconciliation, effectively wresting from colonial control the framework and substance of reconciliation initiatives, with due regard for that which is irreconcilable. His recognition of those who opt not to or cannot give their testimony, the unspoken and the unspeakable, strongly supports his thesis that affective, non-verbal, and artistic articulations surpass verbal expressions of reconciliation.

In *Reconcile This!* many of the contributors address the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the intergenerational effects that reverberate between past and present, parent and child, and teacher and pupil. Steven Loft provides an incendiary argument on how the Indian Act has been used to enforce the absorption of Aboriginal people into the dominant body politic. Of an aphoristic and rhetorical nature, Steven’s voice dares the reader to witness the frightening similarities between past and present governmental policies for Aboriginal communities. Nigit’stil Norbert personifies the

issues raised by Steve in an artistic interrogation of the effects of residential school and the broader project of colonization on her relationship with her father. Nigit’stil inverts the power relationship between the colonizer and colonized, taking on the position of the “decolonizer” who compels aesthetic interactions from viewer to participants in order to elicit disorientation, empathy, and risk-taking in political and art worlds. Heather Igloorte reflects upon the myriad ways in which she has been affected by the legacy of Indian Residential Schools, including the many years she spent collecting testimonies from residential school survivors. Heather speculates on how her experiences have shaped her current ethical and community commitments as an artist and curator, offering deep insights into the im/possibilities of commemorating the survivors’ legacy. Adrian Stimson’s art installations and essay reinforce the idea of re-entering past knowns to unsettle, reframe, and redress gross collective injustices committed by religious institutions and the Government of Canada, which up until now have been buried in the colonial craft of settler memory-making. In asking, “Yet I will continue to question the role of those who lead us into reconciliation —are we all being represented or once again being classified, separated and isolated?” Adrian eloquently moves from conveying his frustrations with policies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to broadening the conceptualization of reconciliation through his own artistic responses to this very question.

The artistic imaginary is ever expansive; the meaning of reconciliation much greater than the terms set by truth commissions and policy-makers. Peter Morin’s lucid dreams of an upside-down raven in flight becomes a lyrical call to restore the spiritual integrity of Aboriginal communities that have been grievously harmed by colonization. In equal parts of wish, certainty, and prophecy Peter

implores his audience to partake in the dizzying transformation of reconciliation that places right-side up the prioritizing of the poetic over prescriptive preoccupations. Meanwhile Vanessa Dion Fletcher grounds her exploration of reconciliation in terms of her relationship to the land, language, and the unspoken/unpeakable in-betweens. The meaning of being *language*d transfigures in Vanessa's relationships to sites of historical lineage and presence; language resonates in her body through movement and visceral re-membering. Her reconciliation with the land signifies the esoteric experience of understanding beyond words, thereby revealing the conceptual limitations set by linguistically framed constructions of reconciliation. In the conversation between Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Elwood Jimmy, and Chris Bose it becomes clear how the unspoken intermingles with speech, as the three conspire to establish songlines that acoustically map ancestral presence in their respective community-building commitments. Songlines reconfigure the landscape so that it is composed of voice, music, and sounds of travel/travail. They circumscribe a sense of cultural belonging that is determined by both familiarity and familiarization, the "sneaking up" that persuades insiders to reconcile with foresworn enemies that have accumulated from past conflicts among different Aboriginal nations. In effect, these contributors artistically render reconciliation into its many diversified formulations and manifestations.

Who is present to witness the expanded conceptualization of reconciliation? Unlike the legal and scientific definitions of the "bystander" or "objective observer," "witnessing" in this context refers to the willful act of paying respectful attention to the lives of others. Yet, the question regarding the consequences of bearing witness remains. What becomes of this experience? In "Little Notebook" Bo Yeung struggles to negotiate making peace with her own traumatic familial past and learning through friends and acquaintances the intergenerational

psychological and social effects of the legacy of residential schools. At the same time she conveys moments of witnessing that exceed both traumas, shared delight in epiphany and laughter, which in turn create new perspectives that pierce through totalizing soliloquys of suffering. Cecily Nicholson brings another level of understanding to witnessing as she presents through poetry and prose the meta-gaze of witnessing the witness. In her imaginative rendering, the subject of her attention, John Freemont Smith, born to emancipated slaves in the mid-1800s in the Danish West Indies, is equally distinguished and disheveled in his longstanding presence as a business owner, nation builder, and Indian Agent on Secwepemc Territory. In introducing this historical figure, Cecily identifies and polemicalizes on the overarching colonialist nature of settler enterprise, accentuating the moral and social ambiguities of Smith's actions all the while conveying care in her criticality, so that she invites others to engage in dialogue to reconsider the persisting problematics of reconciliation.

When understood as a socially engaged activity, witnessing incites creative collaboration. It provokes dialogical intercessions that push up against imposed projections of reconciliation. Jeff Thomas synchronously attends to the intimate relationships between father and son. Through a re-appropriation of Edward S. Curtis's words and photographs he demonstrates how imagined conversations might frame anew relationships that are otherwise ideologically and interrelationally frozen in time and space. Meeka Morgan, Karine Ng and Jayce Salloum, embark on the "risky business" of moving past the decorum of light banter to speak courageously about the personal histories, prejudices, and fears that prevent Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from engaging in much more meaningful and socially transformative interactions. The conversants note that "collaboration still holds a key," and the "act itself is more of an embrace than an attack." They

contend that “to work on reconciliation is to live with communal consciousness” with a strong dose of play, where each and every one is allowed a space for discussion and creative imagining. Leah Decter and Jaimie Isaac speak to this sense of play as well as promoting a pedagogy of discomfort in their piece, “official denial: trade value in progress.” Written from their respective points of view, Leah and Jaimie describe the challenges of bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together through their “sewing action.” The spectacular artifact, a series of Hudson’s Bay Company blankets upon which are inscribed statements made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, serves as a material witness to the socially transformative potential of spirited collaboration.

We welcome and challenge you to *Reconcile This!* with great hopes that these contributions will provoke, discomfit, and inspire you to question how you might participate creatively and politically and be a critical witness to a social movement—artist-led—that is fundamentally transforming the meaning of reconciliation on Turtle Island.

The editors would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for their assistance in the development of this issue: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, for funding *Practicing Reconciliation: A Collaborative Study of Aboriginal Art, Resistance and Cultural Politics*, headed by Ashok Mathur, that led in part to this publication, among others; the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, which provided financial support for the publication of this special issue; the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre at Algoma University for financial and in-kind support; the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for financial support through an Innovation Forum grant; Flora Kallies, for copy-editing; and Michael Barnholden for layout and design. Ayumi Goto would like to acknowledge support from SSHRC’s Doctoral Fellowship Awards program.



# ALEX JANVIER: REFLECTIONS

(REMARKS AND INTERVIEW)

>> INTERVIEWED BY JONATHAN DEWAR

*Editor's Note: For three weeks in October 2011, Alex Janvier was Artist in Residence at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, BC. On October 7, 2011, Alex joined a small group of artists and researchers who had gathered at the Centre for Innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada to explore the role of art and artist in healing, truth, and reconciliation. What follows is a portion of the transcript from the first part of that discussion, followed by a portion of the one-on-one interview that followed.*



The landlord's gotta speak sometime  
I'm tired of assholes making the laws  
Riel said our people will sleep for 100 years and the artists will bring us back  
he predicted something  
if the money comes to Native artists, Canada will benefit  
they have to accept us as part of the big picture and not pigeonhole us

residential school was a low place  
we couldn't pray to our ancestors  
we spoke their language  
I still don't understand English, in courts they have these words on a piece  
of paper and another guy will have another paper with a different version  
you'll never win with their words

there is a tendency to point at other countries, how people are treated, but  
there are three fingers pointing back  
I have been painting on these issues  
that's why I'm not famous  
though I am getting a medal, I'll wear it around my neck, it's better than  
wearing it here (like handcuffs around his hands)

I'm glad to be here with rebels, with people reinstating the landlords  
the old people talked about it  
a few of us remember, residential school wiped it out  
we have to build a better world, a Canada that includes the landlords  
if the artists talk about it, it could be good  
that's why I came here, to say these few words

I'm from Cold Lake, Alberta, Dene  
a residential school survivor, lifted from my home farm on the reserve  
our people are survivors, the winter up north is hard, fishing and trapping  
we didn't need Indian Agents or missionaries, we were self-sufficient

I was privately tutored by a professor at the University of Alberta  
at a very young age, 14 years old, joined an artist's group in St. Paul  
a professor noticed me, arranged for me to spend summers with him

I used my traditional background and language  
am able to do creative work because of this  
grew up with crayons and manila paper from Indian Affairs  
went to college in Saskatchewan

did artwork for the paper  
designed crests for the sports teams

was accepted at OCAD  
went to the Indian Agent for a pass to leave the reserve  
hitchhiked to St. Paul to apply for the permit  
the agent decided instead to send him to the Southern Alberta Institute of  
Technology and Art

I was influenced by winter on the trapline

I didn't understand people at the residential school  
not their language or their culture  
tried to adjust, went to church everyday  
spent ten years at that school  
then I was sent to North Battleford to a boy's college  
the Indian Agent denied my entrance to many schools

in '61 and '62 taught art at the University of Alberta  
but left in order to paint  
was told I would starve

formed a group of eight Native artists  
the media made a mockery of us,  
comparing us to the Canadian Group of Seven  
but Bill Reid knew how to talk to the media,  
helped get their group in the news  
their group of seven changed the world of art in Canada

Max Stern ran the Dominion Gallery in Montreal  
the group sent someone to talk to him, to sell him the idea of exhibiting  
them, of showing Canadian art rather than international art  
when Stern's gallery opened its doors, others followed suit  
both Morriseau and Daphne Odjig have exhibited in the National Gallery  
Morriseau's show outsold Picasso's there

the next generation can push forward  
now that the doors have been opened  
I've been painting about these things  
we're here to change the intelligentsia  
we need more Native curators, who can speak openly against the notion of

two founding nations, an idea that comes from the days of Joan of Arc that  
should have been left over there (in Europe)  
they're in my country, I'm the landlord

I've painted about most things that anyone can talk about  
the younger people can really start painting  
and be the real people in the arts  
go into the best galleries in Canada and the world  
China, Japan, Germany, they want to see our work, they think it's really  
something that we're surviving  
eventually we'll be able to conquer the art world

we're in the forefront of a powerful movement,  
asserting ourselves as the landlords  
we may not get it all back, but we will get something, psychologically  
even if you have a small reserve, it's important to know that you're the  
landlord.

**INTERVIEW WITH ALEX JANVIER, OCTOBER 7, 2011, KAMLOOPS, BC**

Jonathan Dewar: You've talked about your experience and you've painted about your experience. When did this idea of telling truth about residential schools, when did it first come into your life? Were you a child? Were you an artist when it came into your life?

Alex Janvier: I think in my private life, you know, I was disconnected from my family, 1942—43, the fall of '42, I was just thrown in the back of a truck with a bunch of other kids and my parents told me that they were sending me to a school. I had no idea what that was. But I had an idea that my older siblings had been there. Mind you, to me, it didn't look like they fared too well. But that's about the extent of my knowledge of the school. I knew it was run by kind nuns and kind priests, that's what I was told information-wise before I got in there. And when I got in it was just the opposite experience. They were hard as nails and they were just as tough. They had a system that degenerated me immediately from my language, my culture, my beliefs, and anything that I was as a child. It was impossible. I found it impossible to exist. And then I couldn't speak it, I couldn't speak my truth. They spoke French or English and none of my language. They didn't have the ability to understand my language. What really took place was one of the older girls used to speak for me. We'd get her to connect in English. There was always a lady admonishing me to start to follow their rules and then it would be just great. So I started following the rules and nothing great ever happened, except if you did one wrong thing you really got the whip. And the whip was really the most fearful thing that came into my life. Everybody got it and we were all disconnecting from our language and our culture and from who we are. And all of the sudden you're just loaded down with religious prayers and going to chapels and listening to preachings. And you see these nuns all over the place and they keep telling us they're dedicated to God and they do it for the love of God and they keep slapping and pulling our ears and pinching our nose. And I couldn't see the connection, what they were saying and the way we were treated. And then the regulations for how to live in those institutions were so strict. You didn't even have a chance to breathe. The classrooms were just a place to change us over completely, right around. So I was lost in the ranks and what I did was I just followed others who were just as lost as I was. Our procedures and life had come to an end, and a new process started to take place by force. The whole place was uniform in a way that you could get a whipping or a slap anytime—get blamed for something you'd get whacked just as if you were guilty. There was a

lot of that. Some of the kids became a favourite to the administrators and they knew how to be in favour. Tattletale and squeal on someone else and, even if it was a lie, their word was against mine, just like the laws are here today. What we didn't realize then was that we were going to lose our language, our culture, our land, our access to the use of the land. It became so mixed up that the laws now are on a borderline of law. Canadians have their law and there's a law against the natives. You know people I see, they talk a lot about justice and rightfulness and being citizens—being this, being that—and here on the other side, none of those things really exist. I've been on a borderline for a long, long time. And then when I realized that, I began to paint and began to change my view because I've travelled to Europe and the Far East and I see other people, you know, they've been victimized sometime, somewhere along their history and they're survivors and I said, "Oh, other peoples who have survived the crush of another body of minds." I knew the first day it was absolutely different. But I couldn't do anything about it for ten years I was in there. But what I did was during the ten years I began to paint. I found my solace in painting. It was the only time I felt that I was me. Those two hours or three hours and I was lost in there in that process. Most of the kids who were doing art, they were better than I was, by the nun's standard anyway, the way the nuns accepted the artwork. They were not trained art connoisseurs or anything like that, they were just, "A rose is a rose is a rose." And they would hit the table, you know. I saw life was being crushed that way and I don't know why at that point I decided, "Well, I'm going to try to hopefully change this around." So I found I could paint, I could do art, so that became my vehicle of survival without going crazy, you know.

JD: Did you also see your painting as a way to tell

about your experience in the school or tell about losing language and culture, or did that come later when you were a more practised artist?

AJ: No, if there was any sign or anything personal, trying to go into that, it would be changed immediately. In fact, if you went too far you would have to face the principal, the Father principal [pause] yes, and discipline follows. So I had to be careful. I learned how to care for what I thought, you had to masterpiece your own thoughts, you didn't produce masterpieces, but you had to masterpiece your thoughts, how you're going to stickhandle through that. By the time I was fourteen I was already well-schooled in how to manipulate my thoughts, and the art is what helped me to get to that. I was able to express my innermost feelings without having to face the music, like we would say. So I was tortured between that and the regulations. In the meantime they were trying to get us to become good Christians and all that. I remember one story which I have that still amuses me. The nun used to have all the sins of the world, she had it all written on the wall, the blackboard, and then we'd have to go do a confession. There were some of these we had to confess. I got into a confessional, and the girls lined up on this side, and the boys on this side, and you could hear what was going on in the confessional anyway. I got in there, it was my turn and I couldn't remember one single sin that was written there. Finally I blurted out something, "Father, I've committed adultery." That was one of the words. He said, "How old are you?" I said, "Nine." "Ahhh, get out, get out, get out!" All these girls and boys there heard me say it, "adultery," you know? So I was an adulterer. I had that title for quite a few years, "Oh, here comes that adulterer." But nobody did adultery, maybe some of the older girls would have known, but as boys we didn't know much, nothing. Well, during all those years

[after leaving the school] I always kept a small thing where I did my drawing. In those days I would go into space and develop, kind of things beyond, beyond, beyond, you know? What I didn't realize I was developing was what was to become my signature, the style to come. I was working on that, I guess towards that direction without really knowing what I was into. But it turned out that I was always in forward mode, without realizing it.

JD: When did you start thinking about talking about residential schools?

AJ: Well, I used to confide in my mother, strangely enough, on all these matters, really, and she would listen to me, and listen, and listen. She would take the air out of me, you know? What I thought or what I complained or cried about, she used to just smoothly and softly speak to me to the point where I would calm down. That's what would happen in the summer, that's when I would calm down and then I'd be brought back to the same place.

JD: Was there a time when you felt you were ready to start painting that kind of subject matter?

AJ: I probably could have been able to do it earlier, but I had no cause to re-feel all that. What really happened though was that one of my best friends sent me back to the residential school. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. But the strange thing about it, the highway is about half a mile from that school. I would go to Edmonton and back and when the bus would go by there, my gut would get all stirred up. I would automatically feel sick to my stomach, then it would affect me while I was in Edmonton on my business. It would interfere with that because these things kept trying to come out to the surface, until one day one of my friends sent me back and it was tough to go there, holy. I actually went there and there was another group, they had a pipe ceremony and I joined

the pipe ceremony because I was invited to sit in with them. It was all in Cree which I understand enough of to follow. While I was sitting there it was just like something lifted right out of me and a new energy came into my system. I could feel the lift and the receiving of something. When the pipe came to me, it dawned on me, that is what we missed, the culture. So when I smoke I offer to the best of my ability to the Great Spirit for having failed to recognize whatever it is that I was missing out on. I remember while smoking the tears were running down effortlessly. I remember for the first time that stuff that you pack down here start to come out, lift—gut feeling they call it—start to come out. I remember as soon as we finished I went outside and went to the corner of the building where I used to sit and cry. We were all the kids that used to do that, would cry. We didn't know what we were crying about it, but that's what it was. I remember all those characters, most of them are dead. A lot of us didn't get past forty years. Most of them, just past thirty and they're gone.

JD: Do you think art can help you as a person who went through this?

AJ: I've been painting all my life and I've been positively trying to move out of it. Every once in a while I hit a few things but then it scares people.

JD: You did a piece called *Blood Tears*, which I know, and it's a very, very powerful piece. The front of the canvas there's a cross and there's a priest's face and there's a face of somebody... but that painting, it's called *Blood Tears*, the image is very challenging to look at and then on the back of that painting you wrote all the things that you lost, a list—all the things that you lost by going to Blue Quills. So when you wrote those things on the back of the canvas, was that a private thing?

AJ: Well, that was after the man had sent me back

to the school to take a look at my life there, like I said, it was difficult to even go back. I wiped it out of my life. I never ever wanted to be seen there again. That's where I'm coming from and then I go back and face the music and the music wasn't very good.

JD: But you had a ceremony that helped you get through it that day.

AJ: Yeah, I had to get that extra help to have the courage to go and face it as bravely as I can be. Something like that it's hard to be brave. I'm sure all those people that came out of Auschwitz, they understand, people that came out of South Africa under that regime that they tried to survive under. And Canada is no different you know, they're nicely burying us, one person after another, not looking at us. This residential thing they're talking about, they mark it as a residential school and they don't have to do a damned thing about it. This country is as guilty as sin, but they point at South Africa like that, "Oh, there's racial tension." There's three fingers pointing back at that. So how in the world can they be so free from all that? Every time something happened, like India, when they were fighting for their freedom, Canada was pointing fingers at them too. Everywhere things that happened, Canada's always in a pure form, you know, "Well, we deal with the natives this way and that way." Well what about all the land grab? We don't get a thing back on it. All the money that we spend on things in town, we don't get back money on that.

JD: Some people might argue that Canada has done something, you mentioned the apology. You didn't sound too impressed by it. You mentioned compensation, so the settlement agreement, and these questions I've been asking all come back to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that they created. You don't sound satisfied with those as responses.

AJ: Well, the landlord has lost his land and he's got to talk about that. I am the landlord and I'll talk about it. I talk about the loss of a wonderful huge country, an immense country with immense wealth. And who's getting it? Who's using it? We get the breadcrumbs on the table.

JD: Do you think that your art, or the art of some of the young artists we've met over the last couple of days, do you think art can help aboriginal and non-aboriginal people move forward in this?

AJ: The guy they hung, Louis Riel, he said for one hundred years my people will sleep and the artists will bring their spirit back out of it. I think that was a prophetic statement. And I'm not painting because he said that, I'm painting because I'm an artist and I have the opportunity to face up to these challenges. Unfortunately my facing to the challenges can be challenged by people who don't want to. There's more against native notions than for. Usually their term is "dogooders" and they're side-trackers, you know.

JD: Do you have a responsibility to do that through your art?

AJ: Well, I don't know if I would put it that way. I do react to the world I live in and artists tend to do that. I would probably be somebody who does that and I think all Canadians can do that too.

JD: If you are asked as an artist to do something under the theme of reconciliation, is that something you'd be comfortable with? Let's say the TRC said, "Alex, we want you do a series of paintings on reconciliation. We want you to help us achieve reconciliation." What are your thoughts on that?

AJ: I probably could do that quite simply. I'm a man that can waltz into a dancing floor if it happens to be my favourite kind of music. Sometimes people dance by themselves. I believe what must really happen here is this fixture-party system, and you only carry party lines. I think that has to stop. I think we have to think about Canada

and deal with Canada. It has to be natives with full power. We may adjourn a few things, but we might create new things that might work.

JD: There is so much loss largely attributable to the residential schools—languages were lost, cultures were lost, people were lost. They didn't survive sometimes. You've said that on the arts side of things we need to, at the very least, make massive investments in the artists from these communities because it will help repair...

AJ: It will also redeem a lot. Tribes too that start to get their singing and their language, their ways of belief. Like at one time, functions, native functions were outlawed. Whoever institutionalized that is guilty of destruction. So that part has to be. Those were supremely instituted things they were doing and they say it's wrong, they said, "Our God says it's wrong."

JD: So this kind of stuff is advice that you as a senior artist in Canada, you have some advice for those people who might ask, "What can we do to show that we want to reconcile?" But what would you do with a paintbrush?

AJ: I've done a lot with a paintbrush and I back it up with words sometimes.

JD: That's an important piece, I think, you back it up with words.

AJ: But the other thing I've said here is you've got to flip this thing, this disjointed situation. We should get full control, and put a bunch of Indians in there. See how that goes. That's what we're facing today. Say you turn the tables around the other way, let's decorate Canada for you. I think we would do a hell of a good job. We might even change the architectural system. We might even change the way Canada should be.

JD: It would change the way we look at Canada?

AJ: Yeah, and whether we believe it or not, the world looks at us as a really important place where people can feel safe. They come to Canada from some other regimes and come to enjoy freedom.

That we must really treasure, that freedom. I think that privately, myself, I understand that freedom. My little grandson understands it when he says he is the landlord. I want him to grow up like that. He will really be the landlord when he grows to manage his own life. I think that would be a target of every Canadian. I sincerely hope that my life was worth what I thought to have been able to cure an illness that was brought over from other countries. They brought over the fight of Joan of Arc and they're still doing it. They haven't forgiven themselves, the French and English, and they're still carrying on. Why is it like that? I don't know. Here sometimes we sit with our enemies with a peace pipe. They don't call it "peace pipe" for nothing. Enemy tribes have sat down. They say Peace Hill in Alberta was between the Cree Nation and the Blackfeet Nation sat down, smoked a pipe, they made peace amongst themselves. Now why couldn't other nations sit down like that? Smoke a pipe or do something together and make peace. Maybe that's all Afghanistan ever wanted, peace. For centuries they've been invaded, and invaded, and invaded. Maybe they're tired of fighting or maybe they're so well-trained in it, they haven't seen anything else. Maybe we never showed them peace.

JD: Maybe we could put paintbrushes in their hands instead of rifles.

AJ: Yeah. It's really the truth. What's the truth? They want the gas and oil underneath that country.

JD: So even as we're working through the residential school legacy, there's this other big truth as well. "We've apologized for the residential schools. Sorry about that. It was wrong, but you can't have your land back because it's still too valuable."

AJ: Yes, and, "Sorry we can't share it, you've lost it. Here's the treaty."

JD: So can we talk about reconciliation, given that



you and I just talked about this bigger truth behind...

AJ: Reconciliation? It's a long word.

JD: It is. Just a word.

AJ: It's a compaction of feelings in that word. I've thought about it quite a few times. I think the nuns and the priests and other denominations that were involved they have to make peace too amongst themselves. They don't even get along, so how the hell do they expect us to completely say, "It's OK, you just damned near murdered us. It's OK to feel OK." "Here's \$35,000. Enjoy yourself for 10 minutes or 35 hours or 365 days if it lasts that long." The story is so deep that it's going to take more than that to [pause] there's an illness here in Canada that we think we're alright. We think we're better than other nations. That is not true. We're more sicker than other nations because we don't say we're sick. It's like somebody with mental health goes through life and not doing anything about it.

JD: That's a good analogy.

AJ: I think it's in the mind, it's not in the heart. Legally all they've done is give us \$35,000 and it's taken care of. Now they get to take over the land and sell it to the United States, all the natural resources. \$35,000. But I can save that money and build an art gallery with it.

JD: Which you're planning to do, right?

AJ: Well, it's all ready and we can move in sometime this fall.

JD: Yeah, you're having an opening, right.

AJ: So, in that sense, I made use of it. Personally, I didn't benefit from it, but my family may benefit from it.

JD: Well this gallery is a legacy unto itself because you're one of the people who has taken on some tough stuff. So people can come to that and it can, potentially, be one of the ways that people learn about these things that Canada doesn't acknowledge readily. So that's good.

AJ: I would like to think that's part of the change. I'm not sure even if an Indian became a prime minister things would change. I think they still have trouble in Africa.

JD: Even the United States with a black president.

AJ: You can change colour but the colour of the heart hasn't changed. It's still tough, still viciously selfish, and I think that's what human beings have to deal with. It's not just white people, it's not just natives, it's not just blacks, it's not just brown people or yellow people, we're human beings, we've got to deal with that. We did it so we have to deal with it. By amassing wealth it doesn't change anything.

JD: That's a very good point.

AJ: Some of the wealthiest people are probably less happy than I am.

JD: And less healthy.

AJ: And I have no money. I only get what I get out of painting. I don't bum around for money, although I've thought about it sometimes. Put an ad in the paper and see who would contribute to the gallery. I may do that to finish it up. Who knows? I think on the general residential school and so on, if it was meant to slow us down or to end.

JD: It was meant to get rid of you.

AJ: Yeah, it was a smooth way of killing us.

JD: They didn't intend for you to be trained as an artist who would then explore language and culture and history.

AJ: No. And tell them that they're wrong or where's my picture or what's wrong with my picture. Somewhere in there is really going to be the truth that Canada has to face up to. We're not a perfect nation. We're imperfect that we're living under the tutelage of the European notion of how to live.

# RESIDENCY WITH GALLERY GACHET 2008

>> TANIA WILLARD

In thinking about my residency with Gallery Gachet and exploring mental health issues for First Nations people in my work and with a group, I wanted to acknowledge the historical traumas that affect our people. The title grew out of thinking about these issues; substance use, residential schools, colonization, abuse in all of our “crazy-making” history. My approach was not only to reflect on these issues but also to celebrate the strength of aboriginal people and the strength of all marginalized people who have to endure and change their worlds. I am interested in telling stories that are hidden and erased, stories about Indian Insane Asylums, about Mohawk Saints and Native veterans, stories that are full of the paradoxical push and pull between our worlds. My grandfather was of mixed blood, Secwepemc and European roots; he said he lived in two worlds. I wanted to express this tension, this sacrifice and survival that we as Native people navigate and that sometimes (or always in some ways) drives us crazy.



**HIAWATHA INDIAN INSANE ASYLUM, 16X11 APPROX.**



**FREE YOUR MIND, 24X30 WOODCUT**





**BE A GOOD GIRL, 24X30 WOODCUT**



# IMAGINARY SPACES OF CONCILIATION AND RECONCILIATION

>> DAVID GARNEAU



The oil paintings *Aboriginal Curatorial Collective Meeting* and *Aboriginal Advisory Circle Meeting* attempt to picture my memories of two gatherings I recently attended. The canvasses are composed like comic book pages; however, the panels do not show people or scenes and do not follow a conventional narrative sequence. They are arranged circularly without a clear beginning or end, and are only populated by empty speech and thought bubbles and the coloured spaces between them. The bubbles stand in for specific speakers and thinkers and so have the varying flesh tones of individual First Nations, Métis, or Inuit people. Knowing the conventions of comics and meetings, I hope viewers will read emphasis, assertion, withdrawal, attitude, argument, agreement, overlapping dialogue, shared and evolving ideas, and innumerable other things into these abstract shapes and thereby get a sense of the meetings portrayed. I also imagine that many will feel frustrated that their comprehension is limited.

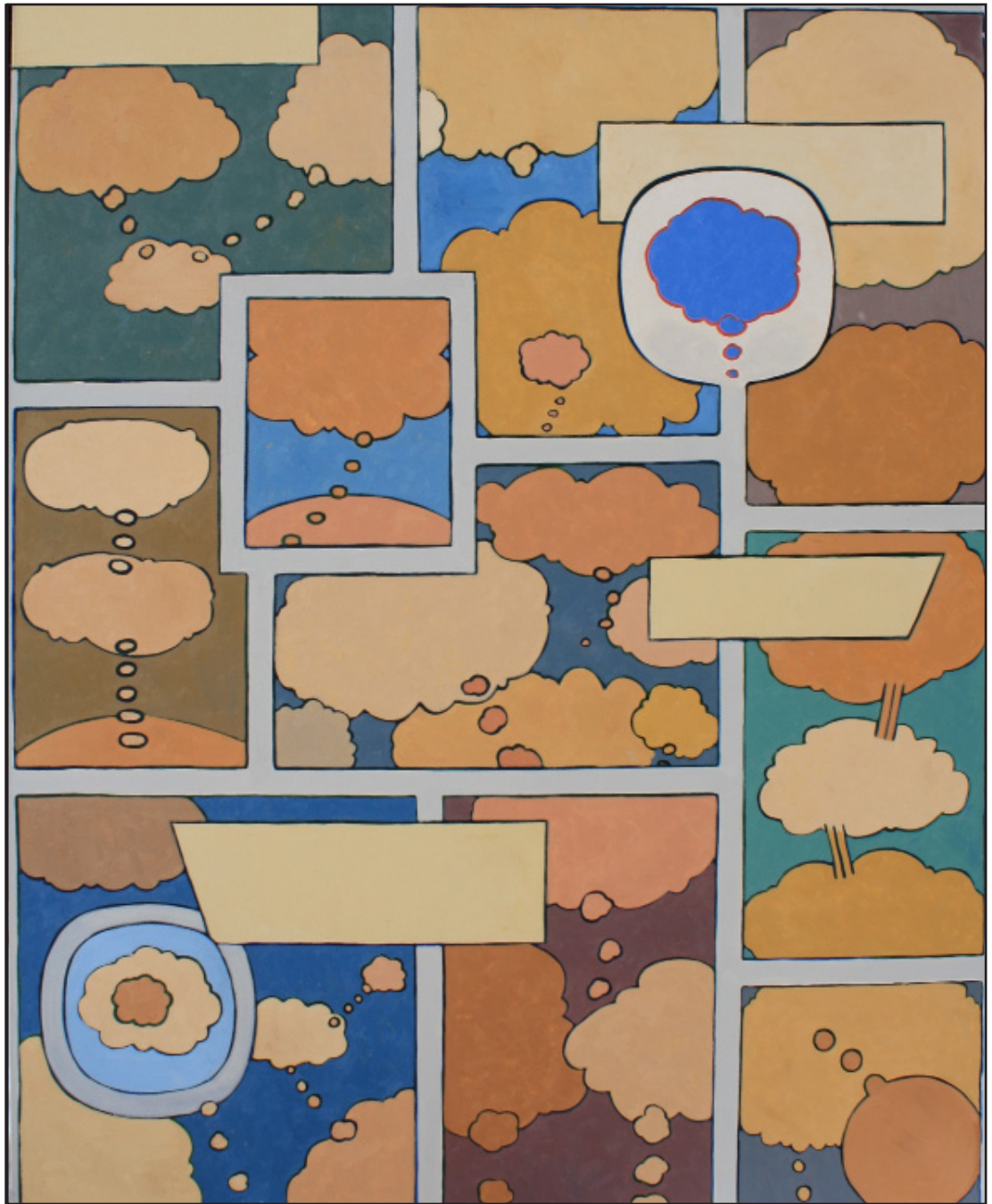
The paintings are mnemonic devices, images that store my perceptions of specific moments from actual councils. Each reminds me of the relationships, exchanges, and affects in the room: who said what, who aligned with whom or what idea, and what I imagined they felt and thought. Perhaps people who attended these events might also recognize a familiar dynamic in these pictures. Most importantly, the paintings allow me to show what happened without giving anything away.

In an article “Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat,” bell hooks explains that the young African-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat’s paintings are like a “vattier, a wall between him and the established art world.” His works are “a barrier,” “designed to be a closed door,” and “like a secret chamber that can only be opened and entered by those who can decipher hidden codes.” His paintings are closed to the “Eurocentric gaze”<sup>1</sup> and are only fully available to those who share like experiences with the work’s creator. The codes are not just signifiers that can be read into denotative signs by a competent reader, though that is an important aspect. They also have empathetic undertones in tune with the felt relationships and wordless understandings shared by members of a culture.

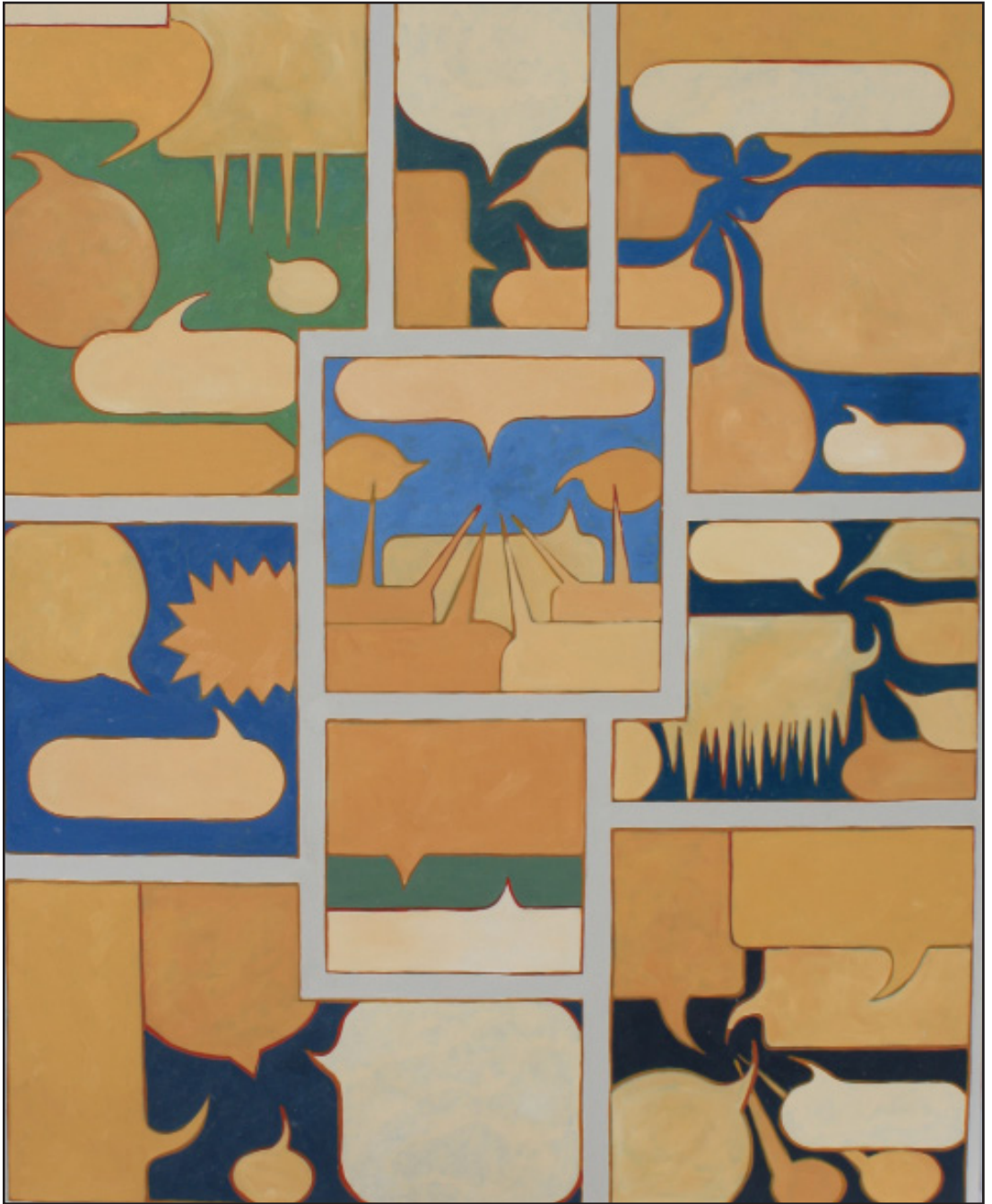
The colonial attitude, including its academic branch, is characterized by a drive to see, to traverse, to know, to translate (to make equivalent), to own, and to exploit. It is based on the belief that everything should be accessible, is ultimately comprehensible, and a potential commodity or resource, or at least something that can be recorded or otherwise saved. Primary sites of resistance, then, are not the occasional open battles between the minoritized, oppressed, or colonized and the dominant culture, but the perpetual, active refusal of complete engagement: to speak with one’s own in one’s own way; to refuse translation and full explanations; to create trade goods that imitate core culture without violating it; to not be a Native informant.

---

1 hooks, bell, “Altars of sacrifice: re-membering Basquiat,” 1993, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 35–48.



DAVID GARNEAU, ABORIGINAL ADVISORY CIRCLE MEETING (OIL ON CANVAS, 5' X 4', 2012).



**DAVID GARNEAU, ABORIGINAL CURATORIAL COLLECTIVE MEETING  
(OIL ON CANVAS, 5' X 4', 2012).**

The oil paintings *Aboriginal Curatorial Collective Meeting* and *Aboriginal Advisory Circle Meeting* attempt to picture my memories of two gatherings I recently attended. The canvasses are composed like comic book pages; however, the panels do not show people or scenes and do not follow a conventional narrative sequence. They are arranged circularly without a clear beginning or end, and are only populated by empty speech and thought bubbles and the coloured spaces between them. The bubbles stand in for specific speakers and thinkers and so have the varying flesh tones of individual First Nations, Métis, or Inuit people. Knowing the conventions of comics and meetings, I hope viewers will read emphasis, assertion, withdrawal, attitude, argument, agreement, overlapping dialogue, shared and evolving ideas, and innumerable other things into these abstract shapes and thereby get a sense of the meetings portrayed. I also imagine that many will feel frustrated that their comprehension is limited.

The paintings are mnemonic devices, images that store my perceptions of specific moments from actual councils. Each reminds me of the relationships, exchanges, and affects in the room: who said what, who aligned with whom or what idea, and what I imagined they felt and thought. Perhaps people who attended these events might also recognize a familiar dynamic in these pictures. Most importantly, the paintings allow me to show what happened without giving anything away.

In an article “Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat,” bell hooks explains that the young African-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat’s paintings are like a “vattier, a wall between him and the established art world.” His works are “a barrier,” “designed to be a closed door,” and “like a secret chamber that can only be opened and entered by those who can decipher hidden codes.” His paintings are closed to the “Eurocentric gaze”<sup>1</sup> and are only fully available to those who share like experiences with the work’s

creator. The codes are not just signifiers that can be read into denotative signs by a competent reader, though that is an important aspect. They also have empathetic undertones in tune with the felt relationships and wordless understandings shared by members of a culture.

The colonial attitude, including its academic branch, is characterized by a drive to see, to traverse, to know, to translate (to make equivalent), to own, and to exploit. It is based on the belief that everything should be accessible, is ultimately comprehensible, and a potential commodity or resource, or at least something that can be recorded or otherwise saved. Primary sites of resistance, then, are not the occasional open battles between the minoritized, oppressed, or colonized and the dominant culture, but the perpetual, active refusal of complete engagement: to speak with one’s own in one’s own way; to refuse translation and full explanations; to create trade goods that imitate core culture without violating it; to not be a Native informant.

Every culture has at its centre a set of objects and spaces that are designated as being beyond trade. They are national treasures, sacred sites and texts, symbols that must be protected because they define the culture. The colonial attitude—the state of mind required to assume control over the space, bodies, and trade of others—begins by refusing the specific contextual, living value of these entities. This is done in one of two ways: either, historically, the colonist refuses the sacred character of the object or site because it derives from a metaphysical system that it rejects in favour of its own cosmology; or, in a recent and more sensitive version, materialist scholars can recognize the semiotic value of sacred objects but not experience their symbolic value; that is, materialists recognize the object’s sociological and instrumental value for the “believers” but not for themselves. Because of their objectivist creed and position as outsiders, materialist scholars do not know the essential, sacred qualities of these entities from within the “believers” lived experience.

If the metaphysical qualities of these things—

---

1 hooks, bell, “Altars of sacrifice: re-membering Basquiat,” 1993, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 35–48.



Incan sacred sculptures or Blackfoot medicine bundles, for example—are not recognized, then they are available for trade and appropriation if, that is, the possessors of the colonial attitude can back their reconceptualization with force. Through the alchemy of the colonial imagination, combined with power, sacred objects are transmogrified into commodities, melted for their gold value, or collected for their artefact or art value (“art” in the Modern Western sense of objects having “universal” and therefore no longer local value; creations that are expressions of man and therefore belong to all of mankind). The desire of the colonist is not just directed at appropriating these material things but at destroying their local symbolic value and, therefore, causing the decay of the culture and the assimilation of the people so the land may be turned into property, colonial holdings.

In the face of alien ideology backed by force, Indigenous cultures have devised since contact ingenious ways to protect their sacred objects through the use of “screen” objects. In Freudian psychoanalysis, screen memories<sup>2</sup> are seemingly insignificant and incomplete memories that both suggest and conceal meaningful but repressed content. In order to satiate Settler cravings for the sacred objects of others, Maori, Haida, and every other Indigenous people produced trade goods specifically for visitors. Screen objects resemble the sacred things they imitate but do not include anything that might animate them. These sculptures, masks, and garments have the patina of the originals but none of the meaning, ritual, or context. They are cultural *artefakes* designed for others and give nothing essential away. The hope is that colonizers might settle for the appearance and leave the essential undisturbed. My favourite example comes from the Haida who carved argillite to look like “authentic” ceremonial pipes, only the holes in the bowl and stem did not meet. Visitors bought signifiers of Haida

culture but could not enjoy full use.<sup>3</sup>

*Aboriginal Curatorial Collective Meeting* and *Aboriginal Advisory Circle Meeting* are from a series-in-progress in which I visualize Indigenous intellectual spaces that exist apart from a non-Indigenous gaze and interlocution. The idea is to signal to non-Aboriginal spectators the fact that intellectual activity is occurring without their knowledge; that is, in their absence and based on Native epistemologies. I think of these as irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality.

Irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality are gatherings, ceremony, Cree-only discussions, kitchen-table conversations, email exchanges, etc. in which Blackfootness, Métisness, Indianness, Aboriginality, and/or Indigeneity is performed apart from a Settler audience. It is not a show for others but a site of being where people simply are, where they express and celebrate their continuity and figure themselves to, for, and with each other in a complex exchange without the sense of feeling they are witnessed by people who are not equal performers. When Aboriginal folks (anyone, really) know they are being surveyed by non-members the nature of their ways of being and becoming alters. Whether the onlookers are conscious agents of colonization or not their shaping gaze can trigger a Reserve response; an inhibition or a conformation to Settler expectations.

This is not to imply that in these spaces our identities are suddenly resolved and constant. Participants are still engaged in the perpetual assessment of their status and other meanings: perceived degrees of Indianness or assimilation, rank in the traditionalist hierarchy, etc.; but these negotiations are performed in relation to like others. The codes are different than the mainstream, and we are different in these spaces. When people gather *as a people* they act not only as individuals but as part of that group—they are, there, Ojibway, Aboriginal artists, or whatever—differently than what they are when they perform themselves for dominant others.

This is a delicate matter. The non-Aboriginal

2 Freud, Sigmund, “Screen Memories,” *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin, 2003) 3–22.

3 I am indebted to Carol Sheehan’s exhibition *pipes that won’t smoke, coal that won’t burn*, 1983.

friends, colleagues, and collaborators who have long worked to raise awareness, to create opportunities, to re-think art and exhibitions, the academy, and ideas of Canada are themselves Other-wise and are essential to our complex struggles. They are front-runners who risk a great deal to be our allies and work toward justice and fundamental change. But they know that the core of Aboriginality is in their absence as surely as the centre of White privilege—or Koreanness or Swedish immigrantness—is incompletely available to most Native people.

Among other things, irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality are sites of epistemological debate. In the exchange of stories, gestures, touches, thoughts, feelings, and laughter the very nature of contemporary Aboriginality is subtly tested, reconsidered, provisionally confirmed, or gently reconfigured, composed, and played in rehearsal. This requires separate discursive territories for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit folks to be themselves and to work themselves out.

These spaces are irreconcilable in the sense that their function depends upon a difference from Settlers. It is axiomatic that their contents are not candidates for reconciliatory discourse. They are also irreconcilable in that they do not have a mythology that places them in previous seamless accord with Settlers or a theory that proposes a future other than one of perpetual struggle with the dominant.<sup>4</sup>

What I am trying to describe without giving away are intervals where, for example, stories and emotions that are not subjects of reconciliation are exchanged. Many residential school survivors will not tell their stories to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Some have not and will never speak of such things even within the safety of autonomous Aboriginal spaces. As Alex Janvier writes on the

4 It is true that for many generations after contact, Aboriginal people in the northeastern parts of what is now North America had equitable trading relationships with people from Europe. The trouble began when the visitors became Settlers, when traders were replaced by colonists, when invading nations decided they would rather have the well than just the water.

back of his painting *Blood Tears* (2001), “Many, many died of broken bodies. Many, many died of twisted conflicting mental difference. Most died with ‘broken spirit.’ Some lived to tell about it. The rest [ ] permanently, ‘live in fear.’ The rest will take their silence to their graves as many have to this day.”<sup>5</sup>

For some, the trauma visited upon their young minds and bodies are a private matter or, rather, these profound dislocations and violations created an impenetrable private space, a sealed cave, a “twisted conflicting mental difference,”<sup>6</sup> an asocial region of shame and despair, a disassociation seemingly beyond both Aboriginal and dominant culture community, or a secret chamber no code can break. For others, hints of these experiences are shared in irreconcilable moments; that is, they are not confessions designed to be reconciled in the sense of being smoothed over or even brought into agreement. They are open wounds shared with intimates for complex and inconclusive reasons. They are not for public consumption; they are not subjects of analysis. Their listeners are not only witnesses but are often fellow sufferers; for example, children of residential school survivors. All this lies behind the play of representations circulated in the national space of reconciliation.

The extraordinary people who do share their residential school experiences with Canada do so for many reasons: to speak the truth, to witness, or to heal. I do not wish to offend these folks, but I do want to discuss a peculiar aspect of the display mechanisms they are caught up in.

As someone raised Catholic, I cannot help but notice an ironic religious nuance in the choice of the word “reconciliation” rather than “conciliation” in “Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Journey.”<sup>7</sup>

5 Janvier, Alex, “*Blood Tears*” (painting), *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*, Eds. M. Brant Castellano, L. Archibald, and M. DeGagné (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008) Plate 1, xi.

6 Janvier.

7 This is a reference to the image used in the title of an

“Conciliation” is “the action of bringing into harmony.” It is an extrajudicial process that is a “conversion of a state of hostility or distrust”; “the promotion of good will by kind and considerate measures”; and “peaceable or friendly union.”<sup>8</sup> The word calls to mind the meeting of two previously separate parties. Applied to the Canadian situation, it allows the picturing of First Nations and Inuit people having an independent existence prior to contact.

“Reconciliation” is a synonym with a difference. *Re-conciliation* refers to the repair of a previously existing harmonious relationship.<sup>9</sup> This word choice imposes the fiction that equanimity is the status quo between Aboriginal people and Canada. Initial conciliation was tragically disrupted and will be painfully restored through the current process. In this context, the imaginary the word describes is limited to post-contact narratives. This construction anaesthetizes knowledge of the existence of pre-contact Aboriginal sovereignty. It narrates halcyon moments of co-operation before things went wrong as the seamless source of harmonious origin. And it sees the residential school era, for example, as an unfortunate deviation rather than just one aspect of the perpetual colonial struggle to contain and control Aboriginal people, territories, and resources.

In theory, the numbered treaties were Nation-to-Nations conciliations. Especially from the point of view of the Aboriginal signatories: treaties recognized the pre-existing and ongoing sovereignty of the conciliating parties. This understanding is eloquently figured in the two row Haudenosaunee treaty wampum belts (1613):<sup>10</sup> two boats—a Dutch

ship and a canoe—go down the river of life together but do not touch. Two communities live parallel to each other, trade, but do not violate each other’s space and way of being. Two states acting as states can establish a neutral space of negotiation—like the Haudenosaunee’s river—in which general conciliation is established without compromising each other’s core spaces. Conciliation is not the erasure of difference. Conciliation is not assimilation.

Re-conciliation implies a very different imaginary, one that carries such profound affective and historical meanings that it seems a deliberate tactic in the ongoing assimilationist strategy of the Canadian empire.<sup>11</sup> Whether the choice of this word, imaginary, and process is an accidental inheritance, it is ironic, if not sinister, that survivors of religious residential schools, especially Catholic ones, are asked to participate in a ritual that so closely resembles that which abused them.

In its religious context, Reconciliation is “the reunion of a person to a church.”<sup>12</sup> Reconciliation is a sacrament of the Catholic Church. It follows Confession and Penance. According to Vatican teachings, “Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labours for their conversion.”<sup>13</sup> This text is found in “The Sacraments of Healing” section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Reconciliation here, as in the secular colonial version, ignores pre-Catholic or pre-contact Aboriginal states. It instead focuses on conversion as the site of Native

---

Aboriginal Healing Foundation book: *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, Eds. G. Younging, J. Dewar, and M. DeGagné (Ottawa: AHF, 2009).

8 *Oxford English Dictionary*.

9 “To bring (a person) again into friendly relations to or with (oneself or another) after an estrangement.” Also, “to purify (a church, etc.) by a special service after a profanation.” “Reconcile,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

10 Accessed April 2, 2012: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

---

#### Two\_Row\_Wampum\_Treaty

11 Canada is a modern empire in that it rules over a vast geography comprised of numerous ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse (First, Métis, and Inuit) Nations.

12 *Oxford English Dictionary*.

13 Accessed April 2, 2012: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm)

origin. In sinning—or, it seems, in being sinned upon!—the penitent is separated from God and the Church. Only by telling their secret to an agent of the Church can harmony be restored and the individual and Church/State reconciled. Reconciliation assumes that the parties were once in harmony (through the contracts of Baptism, Confirmation, and Communion) and only through Reconciliation can the proper stasis be restored. Beyond the pale of Reconciliation is the (im)possibility that the Church could be wrong. Individuals are faulty and in need of reformation, not the Church.

If this imaginary were to affect the secular version of reconciliation, then the relationship would be individual to State, rather than the Nation-to-Nations or person-to-person negotiations of a Truth and *Conciliation* model. The system would appreciate the spectacle of individual accounts (confessions). It would prefer to lay blame on its individual (mostly dead) members, and, while it might acknowledge that the abuses were the result of (past) systemic policy, it would not do anything to risk the integrity of structure. Because the system would not recognize that it is in a perpetual relationship, it would impose a time limit on “healing.” The imagined end result of this restoration project... is “*Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation.*” Truths are told, the destroyed are mourned, the broken repaired, order restored, and the national identity endures.

You can imagine that those removed from their culture, language, and spiritual traditions and who were indoctrinated by religious residential schools would slide rather easily into the similar confessional narratives of such a Truth and Reconciliation system. And that those who retained or regained their cultural and spiritual practices are likely to be suspicious of the homology and resist. Cree artist, poet and oral historian and theorist, Neal McLeod explains that there is no equivalent in the Cree language for the Western notion of an apology. The closest equivalent to “I am sorry” is *nimihta tân*, which means ‘I regret something’. McLeod explains that the word used in reference to the residential school experience is

*ê-kiskakwêyehk*, which means “we wear it.”<sup>14</sup> This is a profound difference. It is visual and visceral rather than abstract. It describes a recognition and acceptance that cannot be washed or wished away.

To be fair, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has developed into a complex organism and has permitted multiple anti-colonial possibilities... for as long as the government entertains them. It (the TRC of Canada) has gone to great lengths to establish sites of healing apart from state monitoring. And the public airing of the outlines of these facts, the government apology, and the work of the Commission have encouraged many people to discuss things they might not have otherwise. However, questions remain: How are we to change sites of reconciliation into sites of conciliation? How do we prevent reconciliation from being primarily a spectacle of individual pain? How do artists and curators contribute to conciliation?

I have been an Alex Janvier fan for a long time, but my interest was primarily formal. I love his designs and appreciate his ability to create a unique synthesis of Western and Aboriginal styles. Then, in 1995, the Glenbow Museum hosted a travelling solo exhibition curated by Lee-Ann Martin, *The Art of Alex Janvier: His First Thirty Years, 1960–1990*.<sup>15</sup> Instead of the usual artist talk and slide show, Janvier toured a small group of us through the exhibition. He spent over an hour and a half explaining every picture. The biggest revelation was that many of these seemingly non-objective works were in fact maps. In one, he pointed out where he lived relative to his *Kookum*, and where the good fishing and hunting spots were. That he invented a way to record his physical, relational, and spiritual territory in a format that could be mistaken for Modernist art was a great lesson. I love the idea that this secret knowledge has infiltrated non-Aboriginal spaces and patiently waits for its Native knowledge to be decoded.

14 McLeod, Neal, Poetry reading, Saskatchewan Writer’s Guild, Regina, SK. May 4, 2012.

15 April 22–June 17, 1995, at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary.



Janvier slowed at the end of the tour, and the group had whittled to a handful. He spent a long time in front of his most recent paintings. They were about his experience in residential school. They contained recognizable figures, buildings, and landscapes; he did not want his messages to be missed. They were addressed beyond the space of irreconcilable Aboriginality. Even so, until he explained the images, until he talked them into life, they remained oblique hints of lived experience. It is the combination of visual art, embodied knowledge, and a gathering of engaged participants that made the experience significant, made it exceed the colonial container.

Exhibitions of Aboriginal art shown within a dominant culture space are always in-formed by the world views of those who manage the resources and the site/sights. Reconciliation exhibitions, if they are held within these institutions, are also likely to be designed within the colonial narrative: reconciliation rather than conciliation; the theory that public display of private (Native) pain leads to individual and national healing; text over speech; etc. If art galleries and other display spaces are to be potential sites of conciliation, they should not meet the dominant culture viewer halfway in their space in their way; the non-Aboriginal viewer who seeks conciliation ought to enter Aboriginal sovereign display territories as guests.

Imagine a keeping house located on reserve land (including urban reserves) that is managed by Aboriginal people and only open to Native people of that territory. That would be an irreconcilable space of Aboriginality. Now, picture the same space, but open to any respectful person that would be an Aboriginal sovereign display territory<sup>16</sup> that could also be a space of conciliation. The first gallery would be directed to the people of the community

by members of the community. If the culture was oral perhaps there would be no written signs or catalogues; your experience would be guided by knowledge keepers. Sovereign display territories might be nearly identical, but they would make some concessions to outsiders. The degree of inclusion and exclusion would be part of what would make these spaces interesting. These Aboriginal managed spaces would include languages of the visitors. Many objects would not be available to all visitors, but clever screen objects would be (photographs, models, etc.), so they would have a sense of the real without violating it. The theme of some of these spaces might be less a revelation of “authentic” Aboriginality and more a working through of how Indigenous people have changed and adapted within contact.

I imagine that such safe spaces would encourage Aboriginal people to make work that not only spoke to their own people but also to visitors. It would probably value (local) meaning over Western notions of (universal) quality, and blur the boundary between art and artefact. However, because it is engaged with the larger world rather than being primarily a keeping house that preserves objects and encourages customary practices, it would also function as a cultural lab where artists would struggle creatively with the contemporary world as well as traditional forms.<sup>17</sup>

Some people might not want to share their experiences because the sites of reconciliation administered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are temporary and privilege text and speech over visual and tactile forms of storytelling. Knowing that an Aboriginal sovereign display territory is permanent and includes visual and tactile objects that are activated by embodied knowledge (their makers and others talking about them) would encourage a slow unfolding of truths. Capital ‘T’ Truth in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation is a Platonic form designed not to be achieved in this veil of tears. These sites, like the Holocaust museums, have a more

16 Garneau, David, “Indian to Indigenous: Temporary Pavilions to Sovereign Display Territories.” Keynote speech: Aboriginal Curatorial Conference, (*Revisioning the Indians of Canada Pavilion: Ahzhekewada [Let us look back] A colloquium for Aboriginal curators, artists, critics, historians and scholars*), Ontario College of Art and Design University, Toronto, ON, Oct 15, 2011.

17 This is an expression of my optimism for Ayumi Goto and Jonathan Dewar’s *Reconcile This!*

modest goal. Because no master narrative could contain these events, the designers of these spaces elect to make room for the many truths to find their form and audiences. There is no definitive story and no conclusion; there must be room, over time, for everything and everyone.

The government apology and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are important, but the deeper work of conciliation will be among individuals who re-cognize themselves as also other than agents of the State. Settlers visiting these permanent sites of conciliation do so as individuals who are conscious that their institutions perpetrated systematic abuses designed to assimilate or destroy Aboriginal people so they could take their land. To use the Catholic metaphor, this is the original sin that made the country possible. It is the Settler's inheritance. And here is where I lose my faith, or at least stretch the metaphor until it snaps. Colonialism is not a singular historical event but an ongoing legacy—the colonizer has not left. The “sin” cannot be expiated. There is no Redeemer in this situation. An apology and cash payments will not remove the stain. The essence of a conciliation project is individual transformation: living with this history and, hopefully, engaging in perpetual conciliation. There is no end result, no conclusion or assimilation, only the Haudenosaunee's river of life with irreconcilable camps on either side and a wide zone of trade and sharing between.

If these possible galleries were like the

Haudenosaunee's river of life, they would not be a (First) nation's display of wealth and power but sites of learning and exchange, cultural laboratories where, for example, Aboriginal curators would invite non-Aboriginal artists to consider their colonial inheritance, or Indigenous artists from other territories to relate their similar experiences.

Art is not healing in itself, but it can be in relation. Art is a stimulant and a balm when taken internally, but dangerous if mistaken for experience. There is a profound difference between reading signs and being engaged by a symbol. Sharing in a discourse about histories, responsibility, and transformation among artworks and with other human beings is a corrective to the colonial desire for settlement.

The paintings at the start of this essay, *Aboriginal Curatorial Collective Meeting* and *Aboriginal Advisory Circle Meeting*, try to picture irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality without giving away any content. I want to signal that something interesting is going on beyond the colonial gaze. At the same time, by using dominant culture vernacular, I want to show that what happens in these spaces is very like what happens in similar spaces but with different people. While the core of Aboriginality is incompletely available to non-Native people, Settlers who come to spaces of conciliation not to repair Indians but to heal themselves, who come not as colonizers but with a conciliatory attitude to learn and share as equals, may be transformed.



# RECONCILIATION...REALLY? FROM MACDONALD TO HARPER: A LEGACY OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE

>> STEVEN LOFT

*I feel fairly sure that I could address the entire world if only I had a place to stand. You [white Americans] have made everything your turf. In every field, on every issue, the ground has already been covered.*<sup>1</sup>

—Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham

“Canada has no history of colonialism.” With these words, Stephen Harper, 27th Prime Minister of Canada, set Aboriginal-settler-Canada relations back several hundred years. It was September 2009, at a G20 meeting in Pittsburgh, when Harper was not just willfully rewriting history but articulating a longstanding policy of federal governments for the Indigenous peoples of this land: that Aboriginal people of “Canada” should not exist. That he never addressed his controversial remark personally (even though his defenders tried gamely to say that his words were taken out of context to the effect that Canada was not a “colonizing” nation) speaks volumes.

In fact, Canada has a viscous, nasty and decidedly devious colonial history. It includes aggressive assimilation policies, willful and purposive neglect and systemic emotional, spiritual, cultural and physical violence. It is hard to imagine the prospect of true reconciliation between First Nations and the settler-Canadian state when its leader, in the words of one news blogger, “makes such a shocking testament to his own profound ignorance to the pervasive racism-fuelled historical amnesia and denial in Canadian society.”<sup>2</sup> But he’s in good “Conservative” company. John A. MacDonald, “father of Canada,” first Prime Minister of the young country and former Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, was a great believer in the extinguishment of “the savages.” He once said in Parliament, “when the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages, he is surrounded by savages and though he may learn to read and write, he is simply a savage who can read and write.”<sup>3</sup> MacDonald goes on to justify a system of education that (although not successfully implemented at that time) would lay the political foundations for residential schools.

---

1 Durham, Jimmie, “The Ground has been Covered,” *A Certain Lack of Coherence*, Ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press, 1993) 137.

2 O’Keefe, Derrick, blog, Sept 28, 2009, accessed April 1, 2012: <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/derrick/2009/09/harper-denial-g20-canada-has-no-history-colonialism>

3 Stonechild, Blair, *The New Buffalo: The Struggle for Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006) 9.

But MacDonald's "war on Indians" was far from over. Shortly after the Riel Rebellion of 1884/85, his government moved quickly to suppress any possible further uprisings by the "Indian Nations." In a move designed to "convince the red man that the white man governs," MacDonald ordered the "show trials" of Indians perceived to have helped Riel. Leaders such as Poundmaker and Big Bear were imprisoned, even though evidence showed they had not risen up against the state, and on November 27, 1885, the largest mass hanging in Canada's history took place at Fort Battleford, Saskatchewan, where six Cree and two Assiniboine men were tried for murder and publicly hanged within the walls of the stockade.<sup>4</sup>

The current Conservative government has recently cancelled all funding to the National Aboriginal Health Organization, the Health Department of the Native Women's Association of Canada, and the First Nations Statistical Institute (established in part to track data relevant to First Nations and address the gaps in information that plague planning and policy-making for Aboriginal Canadians). Funding to the Health Department of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) has been cut by 40%.<sup>5</sup>

Death comes in many forms; some swift, some slow.

### **TREATIES: IT'S A QUESTION OF RIGHTS!**

The treaties were created to establish a system wherein lands of indigenous people could be gained for "settlement" in exchange for certain guarantees. For the Indigenous Nations who signed them, the treaties were meant to outline a broad, expansive and "future thinking" agreement of obligation between sovereign nations. But, as Todd Gordon has pointed out,

4 Stonechild 19, 20.

5 For more information see National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health website, accessed at [http://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/296/Federal\\_Budget\\_Impacts\\_to\\_Aboriginal\\_Health.nccah](http://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/296/Federal_Budget_Impacts_to_Aboriginal_Health.nccah)

*Canada entered into the treaty process in order to facilitate rapid capitalist development in certain parts of the country and, in some cases, as a result of indigenous land expropriation. Canada never sought a fair or equitable negotiation of lands and rights with indigenous people.*<sup>6</sup>

I don't want to get into a long discussion of the history and legal standing of Canada's treaties with Aboriginal people...but I'll quote from a letter Cree chiefs sent to the Prime Minister in 1883, enunciating their frustration with (and growing realization of) the fallacies of the treaties:

*We were once a proud and independent people and now we can get neither food nor clothing nor the means necessary to make a living for ourselves. The treaty is a farce enacted to kill us quietly.*<sup>7</sup>

The Canadian State has always held to the position that "jurisdiction over the land belongs to the settlers,"<sup>8</sup> a view that has been held up by various governments and courts (including the Supreme Court of Canada) over the years. The current government, however, takes this principle (already flawed as it is) to new and dangerous heights by articulating the supposed sovereign right of the state in highly racist and culturally violent narratives. A senior Harper advisor and former Chief of Staff, Tom Flanagan (who was also Reform Party of Canada's Director of Policy, Strategy, and Research), articulates it this way in his controversial 2000 book, *First Nations? Second Thoughts*:

6 Gordon, Todd, *Imperialist Canada* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2010) 69.

7 *Alberta formed, Alberta transformed*, Volume 1: 278.

8 Macklin, Audrey, "Historicizing Narratives of Arrival: The Other Indian Other," *Storied Communities: Narratives of Contact and Arrival in Constituting Political Community*, Ed. Hester Lessard, Rebecca Johnson and Jeremy Webber (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011) 30.

Treaties are an aspect of the state system [...] From this perspective, it is clear that the many agreements made over the centuries between Indians, on the one hand, and Great Britain or Canada, on the other, are not treaties in the international sense. They could not be, because, as shown earlier in this book, Indians were not organized into states and did not possess sovereignty in the technical sense. Great Britain, and then Canada, as the successor state to Britain, have always upheld their own sovereignty by right of discovery and prescription, and they have both regarded Indian tribes as subject people.”<sup>9</sup>

Articulating this same principle, Treaty Commissioner Morris in 1882 put it this way...“the queen wishes her red children to learn the cunning of the white man.”<sup>10</sup>

That there were indeed “Indian states” in the “Americas”<sup>11</sup> that predated contact, and that it is patently ridiculous to claim “discovery” of lands that are already populated by peoples and civilizations, seems to have escaped Flanagan’s (et al.) colonialist and intellectually bankrupt arguments. “These aren’t second thoughts,” says Joyce Green, an associate professor at the University of Regina and a Métis herself. “They’re the same old first thoughts that the colonizers came with from Europe. It’s a celebration of the original arguments that supported the subordination of indigenous peoples.”<sup>12</sup> Known as the “Doctrine of Discovery,” it is the “legal” means by which Europeans claimed preemptive rights in the New World, and it underlies the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to this day.

9 Flanagan. Tom, *First Nations? Second Thoughts* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000) 134–35.

10 Stonechild 16.

11 For a detailed account see: Mann, Charles C., *1491: New Revelations of the America’s Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

12 Accessed April 2012: <http://tape.atspace.com/t-behind.html>

The chilling response of the government to the crisis in the Aboriginal community of Attawapiskat is just the most recent example of this foundational view of Aboriginal territory rights. This small, already impoverished community faces a critical shortage of housing<sup>13</sup> (a federal responsibility), having been declared a state of emergency in October 2011. The Conservative government was quick to place the blame on the community. John Duncan, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, said during question period in the House of Commons that the community has a problem handling its own finances and that this has hindered its ability to improve the living conditions of its 2,000 residents. “The community has a number of challenges. One of them is its financial challenge,” he said, “It has an indebtedness that is getting in the way of a lot of other progress that could be made.”<sup>14</sup>

To say that Flanagan, Duncan, Harper, Morris and, yes, MacDonald are ideological soulmates is to understand the dynamic of Aboriginal–Canadian government relations in this country.

## THE INDIAN ACT

“Our government has no grand scheme to repeal or unilaterally rewrite the Indian Act,” Stephen Harper said after meeting with Chiefs from across Canada in 2012. “After 136 years, that tree has deep roots. Blowing up the stump would leave a big hole.” A “big hole,” indeed.

Since the British North America Act of 1867 gave

*absolute legislative authority over Indians and lands reserved by Indians” to the Dominion*

13 “The numbers in this community paint a stark picture: 19 families live in shacks with no running water; 122 families live in condemned housing; 96 people live in one industrial-sized trailer and 268 new houses are needed immediately.” APTN National News, accessed May 2012: <http://aptn.ca/pages/news/2011/11/25/attawapiskat-partly-at-fault-for-housing-crisis-duncan/>

14 APTN National News.

of Canada, a fiduciary responsibility was created between Aboriginal peoples and the nation-state of Canada at its very founding. MacDonald, speaking of this and on several other pieces of legislation his government had enacted said, "the great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change."<sup>15</sup>

A famous statement in 1920 by Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, encapsulates the prevailing attitude of his day: "Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department."<sup>16</sup> It seems Harper and his government believe the job has not been accomplished. As John Borrows writes,

Getting rid of the *Indian Act* will no doubt require change—and healing. Some are addicted to its twisted power, in Ottawa and at home. As long as they are under its influence we are all dependent, including those in Ottawa. Yet some people temporarily benefit from the *Indian Act's* provisions because they have mastered its central tenets. The federal government benefits from legislating over Indians because it allows them to set the parameters of our lives. This frees them from the harder work of engaging real participation and consent. The *Indian Act* makes it easier to control us: where we live, how we choose leaders, how we live under those leaders, how we learn, how we trade, and what happens to our possessions and relations when we die. They often talk about changing the *Indian Act* to make us more accountable, and create more opportunities

and freedom, but their language and underlying direction is largely assimilative.<sup>17</sup>

Through the Indian Act, Canada remains in control of our individual legal identities, a fact that continues to affect our communal and national identities. This is not just about one government. Since its inception in 1876, the Act has iterated Canada's approach to Aboriginal peoples. "It cannot be overemphasized that the *Indian Act* and its enforcer the Department of Indian Affairs [now the Department of Aboriginal Affairs] have always had a stranglehold over Indians."<sup>18</sup>

The Indian Act is premised to ensure that all Aboriginal people ultimately disappear. Even though we are the largest growing demographic in Canada,<sup>19</sup> the Indian Act ensures that we will become extinct as "indigenous peoples." In her brilliant book, *Beyond Blood*, Mi'kmaq legal scholar Pam Palmater argues:

What is happening now is a legislated form of population reduction based on the previous goal of assimilation. The ultimate effect of the legislation, despite changes in official policy [ . . . ] is to reduce the number of people the government must be accountable to, in terms of protection, treaty obligations, land rights, self government, and other Aboriginal rights.<sup>20</sup>

15 Stonechild 19.

16 Leslie, John, *The Historical Development of the Indian Act*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Treaties and Historical Branch, 1978) 114.

17 Burrows, John, *Seven Generations, Seven Teachings: Ending the Indian Act*, Research Paper for the National Centre for First Nations Governance, May 2008: 5, accessed May 2012: <http://fngovernance.org/publications/research>

18 Turner, Dale, *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2006) 18.

19 Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, accessed May 2012: <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014298/1100100014302>

20 Palmater, Pamela D., *Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Limited, 2011) 47.



## ENEMIES OF THE STATE

Just days after the 2012 Crown–First Nations Summit (the first time in his six years in power that Prime Minister Harper had officially met with First Nations leaders), the following appeared in an article in *The Calgary Herald*: “The federal government is distancing itself from its own lobbying and public relations campaign to polish the image of Alberta’s oilsands, following revelations that an internal strategy document labeled First Nations and environmentalists as ‘adversaries.’”<sup>21</sup> As Audrey Macklin has written, “the rendering of indigenous peoples as internal other—the alien within—must transpire in order that a settler society can usurp the epistemic privilege of identifying and excluding the external other.”<sup>22</sup>

Adversaries, radicals, terrorists....we’ve heard it all. Whenever it fits the Government’s agenda, we are vilified, denigrated and cast as enemies of (or at best, a burden on) the state. Interestingly, it echoes a similar tactic enacted by John A. MacDonald.

In February 1884 deputy superintendent of Indian affairs wrote, “an example should be made of chiefs or Indians who are guilty of infractions of the law.” As a result, “troublesome chiefs” became the targets of police action. P.M. Macdonald authorized the arrest of chiefs who were considered “agitators” and to use “whatever police force was necessary.”<sup>23</sup>

This kind of enemy identification strategy has long and unfortunate roots. It has been used by autocratic and totalitarian regimes for decades (one need only cite the disgusting propaganda campaigns of the Nazis, for example). It focuses people’s blame (and sometimes hatred) on an identifiable group that seems to be against the “popular will.” It is a

dangerous politic: one that nurtures a dangerous xenophobia that divides and shames us all. And it can have chilling effects.

Simply viewing the “comments forum” on any news story about Aboriginal people or issues is to be confronted with such vitriol, such viscous polemic, and it seems unlikely Canadians will ever come to grips with legacies of oppression, violence and hatred against Aboriginal peoples. That they are hidden in anonymity only serves to underscore the feeling of many Aboriginal people that there is a thriving undercurrent of dangerous racist sentiment in this country.

### A NOTE ON APOLOGIES

I don’t much like “official” apologies. They monumentalize and memorialize reconciliation in a propagandist way that...feels a bit disturbing to me. They are often framed in a nationalist narrative that displaces real accountability. We’ve had three such apologies in Canada...to the Japanese for the internment, to the Chinese for the head tax and to Aboriginal people for the Indian residential school system.

I remember watching the residential school apology. I felt for all the victims, the survivors, and I wanted it to be about them. But in reality, it wasn’t. It was political theatre. As much as I honour the stories of the survivors, and want them to continue telling them, the blatant and overt politicization of suffering that was “the apology” can’t be ignored. This kind of revisionism seeks to assuage settler guilt not only by placing the trauma in the past through a limited (and limiting) act of contrition but also by taking no real responsibility for the aftermath of the residential school genocide.

In their excellent critique of “the apology” in “An Historic Non-Apology, Completely and Utterly Not Accepted,” Roland Chrisjohn, Andrea Bear Nicholas, Karen Stote, James Craven (Omahkohkiaayo i’poyi), Tanya Wasacase, Pierre Loiselle and Andrea O.

---

21 <http://www.calgaryherald.com/business/Ottawa+lists+First+Nations+green+groups+oilsands+adversaries/6059702/story.html>

22 Macklin 41.

23 Stonechild 18.

Smith elaborate:

*Bringing genocide to the table would take the churches, but more centrally the government of Canada, into the exhaustive examination of additional regions of its policies and programs with respect to indigenous peoples, regions that, up until now, it has successfully avoided (or at least, as it is now trying to do with residential school, managed to isolate from other policies). And, what is perhaps even more important, establishing that Canada's policies toward indigenous peoples constitute an historic and ongoing genocide rules out Mr. Harper's statement as an apology, since such would violate the second feature of a genuine apology; someone who is still doing it can't be promising not to do it again.<sup>24</sup>*

Without acknowledging the historic and ongoing colonial violence and cultural oppression committed against Indigenous peoples by the state there can be no peace, no *rapprochement*, no moving forward.

Make no mistake about it, the Harper Government (their preferred nomenclature) despises Indians, and they will not rest until they've eliminated us. To be fair, they're not the first to feel that way, but they may be the most dangerous in a long time. It's clear in their policies and in their continuing support and use of the Indian Act of their demonization of Aboriginal communities and people (as described in the discussion of the Attawapiskat crisis above) and in their adherence to the racist theories of "Calgary school" libertarians such as Tom Flanagan<sup>25</sup> and his ilk. It is hard to see a

way past an antagonistic and ever-more ideological federal government. Harper and MacDonald have more in common than just a shared political party it seems.

Without accepting Aboriginal sovereignty<sup>26</sup> and Indigenous self-determination, colonialist agendas of subjugation and eventual disappearance continue unabated. Sovereignty, when viewed from an Indigenous perspective, is predicated on the notions of communal responsibility, cultural autonomy, traditional knowledge and nationhood.

But what is culture in a hegemonic society intent on a negation of cultural imperatives that do not fit within the colonial construct? Robert Lovelace writes:

*As Aboriginal people we understand what would change our destiny but only through a convergence of our own self-determination and a willingness of Canada to decolonize can real change take place. This is not a partisan or ideological issue. Canadians must be prepared to return original jurisdiction to the Indigenous nations whose homelands the state of Canada rests within. Canadians and Indigenous nations need to negotiate real partnerships of mutual respect and benefit or face a certain future of mutual misery and conflict.<sup>27</sup>*

---

to Aboriginal rights. His book, *First Nations? Second Thoughts*, dismisses First Nations as merely its "first immigrants." Then, invoking the spectre of a country decimated by land claims, he has argued that the only sensible Aboriginal policy was outright assimilation.

24 Marxmail.org accessed May 2012: <http://www.marxmail.org/ApologyNotAccepted.htm>

25 Flanagan, a top adviser and former campaign manager for Harper, is a University of Calgary professor whose writings have, among other things, questioned the heroism of Métis icon Louis Riel. He has argued strenuously against land claims and called for an end

26 For some the term "sovereignty" is problematic. They point to its colonial etymology and usage...meaning "supreme power." ORIGIN Middle English: from Old French *soverain*, based on Latin *super* "above." The change in the ending was due to the association with reign. But the fact is this paper, like many others, is not authored in an Indigenous language, but in English, an enforced language on the Aboriginal peoples of this land.

27 Lovelace, Robert, accessed December

To decolonize is to supplant racist patriarchies in favour of polycultural, intercultural and anti-racist dialogues while understanding and acknowledging the place of an inherent Indigenous sovereignty rooted in land, language, culture and ways of knowing and being. The freedom to be culturally, socially and politically indigenous nations means recognizing, accepting and engaging a philosophical trajectory that is both customary and contemporary. It means negotiating a sense of

---

2011: <http://rabble.ca/news/2011/12/attawapiskat-and-colonialism-seeing-forest-and-trees>

place that is both local and global.

For Jolene Rickard “that visibility begins with the simple recognition of our existence as discrete political and philosophical spaces throughout the world.”<sup>28</sup> Until this occurs we will have no such freedom and continue to be part of a conceptually, legally and socially disjointed system.

But there is hope; hope in the grassroots community struggles, in the legal system and the courts, the artists, activists and everyday Aboriginal people trying against all odds to make a better life for themselves and for “all their relations.” True reconciliation *between equals* is still a long way off. Until the settler state engages in a new understanding of its own racism, deceit and colonial legacy, only in this way can we proceed together.

Never build your identity on what the oppressor has done to you.

Never condemn future generations to ongoing assimilationist agendas.

Never allow your culture to be used against you.

---

28 Rickard, Jolene, “The Local and the Global” (presented at the symposium “*Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity*,” Venice, Italy, December 2005. This paper was published in *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington, DC & New York: NMAI Editions, 2005) 65.

# PICK UP STICKS

>> NIGIT'STIL NORBERT

Author's Note:

*When I first started creating Pick Up Sticks, there was one overriding comment that I seemed to gather from all my mentors and advisors: the work was far too personal and emotional and, because it was like this, no one would relate to it. My whole life I had been told that I was far too sensitive. I would hear this from my family, friends, teachers and employers. Only recently have I uncovered the fact that I am what is called a "Highly Sensitive Person." Also known as HSPs, we make up about 20% of the population; we are creatives, intellectuals and we experience things that no one else can. It's interesting to think that the reason why I am an artist today is actually my greatest weakness. So before even getting into the meat of the essay, I wanted to say to all you artists out there that your voice matters. Don't let people fool you into believing there is only so much room in the art world.*

## **PICKING UP STICKS: COMING TO TERMS WITH SOMETHING I'LL NEVER TRULY UNDERSTAND**

A quiet, pixelated image appears of a white-haired man on a small silver television which sits on top of a pile of wood pallets. The five-minute video segment was extracted from my own father's Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>1</sup> statement video, which I utilize with his permission and with the utmost care and respect. The video is moving at a painfully slow pace so that the viewer can not only see the emotion that is unfolding but it further exaggerates the bad quality of the video itself. For me, the quality of the video seemed to echo the importance of these statement hearings to the general Canadian public. Are they important to anyone other than the survivors and families of the residential school system?

Writing this essay has forced me once again to reflect upon why I was so daunted and inspired to create this incredibly personal, yet extremely important, work which I hope will resonate with many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada today.

Art, in general, has been viewed from a very singular place, as a Western and/or European form of expression. In my opinion, today's contemporary Aboriginal artist is in the exact position they want to be in order to create change and evolve the discourse of the art world. We are free to challenge, interrogate and reinterpret past representations and misrepresentations. Within my art practice I interrogate the idea of the overpraised appreciation for the Western version of art, and place it not in the centre but rather reposition it to allow for a more diverse dialogue to occur. In some twisted way, and I tread lightly here when I say this, I am taking on a power role, such as "the colonizer" has done for centuries. I stand at the helm of this work, questioning and critiquing the cultural and artistic authority which has for far too long been able to define generations of indigenous and Aboriginal peoples. By taking on the role of, what I am calling the "de-colonizer," I am exercising my power over the viewer and ultimately making the case that many Canadians have been and still are targets of modern-day colonization of the mind and body.

Over the last six years of my life, I have been deeply invested in the researching and acquiring of knowledge to further my understanding of both the true and false histories of being an Aboriginal Canadian from a

---

1 The TRC discusses and has these statement gatherings in order to educate the Canadian public about residential schools and their place in Canadian history. The Commission was established by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The agreement was reached in response to numerous class action lawsuits that former students of residential schools had brought against the federal government and the churches that operated those schools in Canada for well over 100 years. See: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=7>

political, personal and artistic standpoint. Within my most recent body of work, *Pick Up Sticks*, I explore these histories—past, present and future—from a Gwich'in, Irish and Russian ancestry in order to shape an experience for the viewer that leads to deeper understandings of the complex and layered reality that exists for people of Aboriginal ancestry in Canada. This research has led me down a “rabbit hole” of official and unofficial accounts of Aboriginal history, some of which Canadians were made to understand quite well, and others that remain and are still uninterrogated. The fact is that all Canadians—from the indigenous peoples of this land, the first settlers and immigrants alike—share an interrelated history which is fundamental to understanding the building of the Canadian national identity. In *Honouring Tradition: Reframing Native Art*, Beth Carter stated, “the history experienced by Native Peoples is not well understood by most Canadians. And yet, it is a shared history that continues to shape our relationships with each other.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the dark histories which I speak of is the residential school system. I come from a long line of former residential school students, including my dad, his five brothers, four sisters and my grandma and grandpa. My father, Lawrence Norbert, once wrote to me in an email:

“You are truly blessed not to have experienced the residential school system—being taken away from your parents who were forced to give you up for 10 months of the year (or in the case of your Grandpa and Grandma, for years), families separated, communities fragmented, childhoods stolen, mothers crying and fathers being stoically silent but breaking inside...”<sup>3</sup>

I want to make this work for my dad and,

---

2 Carter, Beth, *Honouring Tradition: Reframing Native Art* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 2008) 18.

3 Original email from my father, Lawrence Norbert, dated 2010.

ultimately, create a way that I could understand something that I never experienced, something that still has ramifications within my life today. Within each piece I am having a conversation with my father and my ancestors. It's a way for me to deal with and confront the issues surrounding this dark history and past and, at the same time, to celebrate life and the survivors of such events.

An important aspect of the reading of this work is to understand it as working within many Aboriginal cultures of narrative tradition: storytelling. It aims to guide the viewer to his or her own understanding and interpretation. While one image or installation is not going to hold all the important signifiers for reading the work, when read as a whole, the installations work together to tell a story. Also, significantly is the absence of typical cultural signifiers (which I feel have been heavily used within contemporary Aboriginal art). It is time to move past the idea that Aboriginal art has to look “Aboriginal.”

Connections are important within this body of work. Connections on physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and personal levels are the inspiration behind and motivation for the meaning of this work. When envisioning this body of work, the viewer is always on my mind; wanting to create space so the viewer becomes an integral participant in the overall reading. The viewers take a primary and active role and are responsible for their own interpretation and involvement. The degree to which they engage with the work will impact their ability to develop such connections.

The burden of representation is intentionally placed on the viewer, which I believe is the actual entry point into the work. For example, the viewer stands before an old television screen on which is displayed a five-minute segment of my father's Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing. This video is slowed down, almost painfully slow, so that every gesture and blinking eye turns into a

visual poem. In front of this screen is a large stack of papers, which visually represents a monument or totem. The viewer is invited, without words, to take from the stack of paper and is intended to recognize that he or she is in fact participating in depleting this sculpture until it diminishes to nothing.

I believe there is something perverse about a sculpture you're allowed, even encouraged, to dismember. What does this say about the person willing to take from the stack? What does this say about the aural<sup>4</sup> quality of the unique work of art? Rebecca Belmore, one of my all-time favourite Aboriginal artists, has been known for showing no fear, and it has been written about her:

*In the early 1990's there was a moment when, as a storyteller, Belmore felt she was being asked to tell all: to spill forth words that tore open the wounds of colonial oppression and racism. In being asked to tell all she wondered if she was telling too much, and decided to gather stories around her through gestures and objects rather than through words.*<sup>5</sup>

Within *Pick Up Sticks*, and other bodies of work such as *Representation* (2010), there are some questions that are meant to be answered and others left open for interpretation. This was the fine line which I walked when creating this work. Tearing open my insides for what? At first all I had in mind was that I just needed to finish my degree. Or similarly, how wonderful would it be to win the photography award at my school. Until one day all these goals shifted. Something snapped within me, I had finally crumbled and was lying on my kitchen

floor sobbing. Why had this happened to my father? To my family? To my ancestors and to countless people across this country? From that moment on I began to take Belmore's advice and only open as much as I wanted, and leave the rest. Using gestures and objects I assembled what I thought would translate my emotions on a topic that, to this day, confuses and shakes me to the core.

The tree is the building block that I use to investigate history and the past; a past that is aware of both "the colonizer" and "the colonized." Colonial history, which knowingly ignores the reality of the First Peoples and their inhabitation and proprietorship of this land, has continued to mediate colonial narratives of first contact to today's everyday Canadian citizen. This first installation piece begins to look allegorically at this relationship between "the colonizer" and "the colonized." I strip these titles and this relationship down to the bare bones and personify these two trees as both human and animate. They are no longer just trees, which is not such a far idea from the relationship many indigenous cultures have had with the land for centuries. To further clarify and help better understand what I am doing with these trees, we should take a brief look at Rene Magritte's *Treachery of Images* (1928–29), where he would paint ordinary objects in unusual contexts, giving new meaning to familiar things. His famous piece, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe), seems to be a contradiction, but is actually true: the painting is not a pipe; it is an image of a pipe, a representation of a pipe. When considering this framework of Magritte's, I am presenting these two trees in a suggestive manner and questioning the issue of representation. Simply, I use and personify the trees in order to contradict and play with the fact that trees represent different things to a colonial culture in which trees are seen as a commodity, as opposed to an indigenous culture in which trees are sacred and alive. I also take part in the human need to classify, clarify and name, similar

4 Cultural critic Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Schocken Books, 1936) 217–51, in which he theorizes the artwork's loss of aura and how this loss alters the function of art in society. It is also this connection between art and politics that was of interest to Benjamin and whether art could have a positive political function.

5 Tuer, Dot and Barbara Fischer, *Rebecca Belmore: 33 Pieces* (Mississauga: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto, 2001) 32.



to the way a photograph of an indigenous person or work of art would be displayed in a museum.

Beneath these two photographs are two severed tree stumps. As I previously noted, they also bear signifiers of representation as the Aboriginal people who did not survive the colonization and assimilation process. This play of life and death is subtle but important in trying to understand the complexity of such a devastating experience as residential school. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag said that it is impossible to ever understand the pain of others. She states, “on the one hand, narrative and framing confer upon images most of their meaning, and on the other, those who have not lived through such things ‘can’t understand, can’t imagine’ the experiences such images represent.”<sup>6</sup> These two elements, the photographs and tree stumps, play harmoniously together and continue a cyclical dialogue of commodification of culture and the environment and the human need to classify both.

Historically, indigenous “art was concerned with identity and connections[...] the meanings behind these media and images embodied the connections between human beings and non-human beings.”<sup>7</sup> For example, the use of the tree within my work is integral in understanding my interpretation of the contemporary and current relationship between man and woman and nature, a connection that I truly believe in and have felt while wandering through a sunny meadow or trekking through a dense forest. I trust that there is something, a spirit if you will, inside these animate objects, these trees. Convinced by the mystical and spiritual nature of these trees, I in turn acknowledge that they are in fact just trees. It’s a catch-22 that I am battling here; on the one hand they are alive with stories, and on the other they are only there for the taking, having

a material value attached to them:

*The more ancient expressions [of Aboriginal art] are concerned with a world in which human beings understood their role in the universe and the nature of their environment. Contemporary works show an understanding that the environment has been phenomenally altered.*<sup>8</sup>

The second installation element is a video and a paper stack. Sitting on a pile of wood pallets, an older television plays a five-minute segment of my father’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission statement. The TRC was mandated to inform all Canadians about what happened in the schools and to guide a process of national reconciliation. These hearings could leave someone shaken to the core, with stories of rape, starvation and, in many cases, death. Students were commonly denied the right to speak their language and were told that their cultural beliefs were sinful. The residential school “story” is not only one of neglect and abuse but of loss, and for Canada, it is a shameful story.

While some people who worked in the schools were inspired by an impulse to “save” and to “civilize” Canada’s Aboriginal people, the government had other motives. To gain control of Aboriginal land, the Canadian government signed treaties it did not respect, took over land without making treaties and unilaterally passed laws that controlled nearly every aspect of Aboriginal life. The schools were central to the colonization of Aboriginal peoples of Canada. It is important to note that my father attended one of the most notoriously heinous and cruel residential schools, Grollier Hall in Inuvik, NT (which was torn down in the 1990s) for over a decade. It is always shocking to me especially after hearing what he went through that he is still alive, happy and was the best single father a girl could have.

It was last summer that my dad actually gave me a copy of his TRC statement video, and I didn’t

6 Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 126.

7 Carter, *Honouring Traditions* 18.

8 Carter, *Honouring Traditions* 19.





watch it until almost six months later. It took me a while to build up courage to watch it. Once I finally found the courage, I watched it over and over again. Watching my father's expressions and hearing his voice I would break down. There was also an immense amount of pride in my heart because I knew that it took a whole lot of strength to talk about his experience. This was the key! In order for healing we had to talk about it, make art about it, sing about it and cry about it. There was laughter in the video as well, along with tears. It was like I was finally beginning to understand certain, small and incremental elements of my father. It was insightful and made me feel like I was a part of his healing.

The paper stack, which sits in front of the video installation, is largely inspired by the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres's endlessly replaceable paper stacks and candy spills. Gonzalez-Torres's stacks can be viewed as static objects; the stack mimics the solidity and singularity of sculpture, but metaphorically

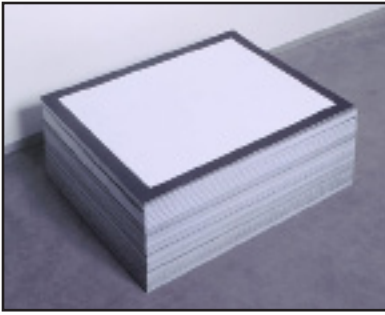
they closely resemble the photographic edition:

*In their defiance of authenticity, the pieces [of Gonzalez-Torres] make literal [Walter] Benjamin's now-famous thesis regarding the diminishing auratic quality of the unique work of art in an age marked by mechanical reproduction and modern means of media dissemination.<sup>9</sup>*

Gonzalez-Torres created work that could essentially disappear by availing itself for the taking.

In the video, my father mentions the importance of movies when he was a kid in residential school. He says that much of how he related to the world was through movies because it was some of the rare occasions when they were not at the school and he could feel safe. When I hear this in the video, I gain so much insight into my father and who he is. Growing up as a child we would watch

9 Spector, Nancy, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995, 2007) 95.



countless movies and, still to this day, if I am going through a tough time he sends me quotes from movies like *Patton* (1970) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939). It is fitting that I present his video in conjunction with the paper stack, and on each piece of paper in the stack are lyrics from the soundtrack from the movie *Drive* (2011):

*I'm giving you a night call to tell you how I feel  
I want to drive you through the night, down the hills  
I'm gonna tell you something you don't want to hear  
I'm gonna show you where it's dark, but have no fear  
There something inside you  
It's hard to explain  
They're talking about you boy  
[Like] you're still the same<sup>10</sup>*

10 “Nightcall” is a song by French electro house artist Kavinsky released in 2010. It was produced by Daft Punk’s Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo and mixed by electronic artist SebastiAn. It features Brazilian lead singer of CSS, Lovefoxxx, on vocals and includes remixes by Dustin N’Guyen, Jackson and his Computer Band and Breakbot. The track was used in the title sequence for the film *Drive*, directed by Nicolas Winding Refn and starring Ryan Gosling and Carey Mulligan.

I see the stack as a dialogue and conversation that I am having with my father about his experience at residential school. Going back to Benjamin’s theory about technological advances destroying the unique and creating a homogenized culture, I am directly applying this to the roles the Canadian government and churches had in turning Aboriginal culture from unique to homogenized and “white-washed.” This stack is a monument, a way for me to pay homage to my father, to the survivors and to the ones who did not survive the residential school system.

The third and final element to the installation is comprised of two large piles of four-inch long hardware nails; one red and one white. They overflow with what seems to be wet paint. The red puddle reminds us of blood and the white puddle of cleanliness and sterility. Nails signify many things—hard work, pain, religion—and it was with this symbolism that I used them. The piles touch upon the fact that Canada holds the secrets to these dark pasts, and it is only through national healing that we can begin to band together as a nation to stand up to the government and fight more coherently for things like the land, culture and freedom.

Because of the long history of colonization in Canada and its lasting legacies in the present, Aboriginal artists in Canada have and continue to be politically engaged and motivated by the Canadian state. Paul Chaat-Smith, a Comanche author, curator and cultural critic says:

This is the challenge facing Indian conceptual artists: being outside the official narratives, to even assert the relevance of an Indian past and present makes one hostage to identity politics, multiculturalism, and other narrow and suspect agendas.<sup>11</sup>

When I first started exploring issues surrounding the history of “Aboriginality,” I

11 Chaat-Smith, Paul, “Luna Remembers,” *James Luna: Emendatio*, Eds. Chaat Smith and Lowe 28.

didn't quite know how and what I wanted to say. Channelling the confidence of Belmore and another one of my favorite artists, Chinese photographer, sculptor, architect and thinker Ai Weiwei, allowed me to realize that not everything has to be spelled out for my viewer and that some of the onus and burden can be placed upon them. This realization changed how I thought about my art practice. I agree with Chaat-Smith when he says that it's going to be a challenge for Aboriginal artists to move beyond what has been so defined for countless generations by the Western art scene of what Aboriginal art

should look like, but I am up to that challenge and do not fear it as much as I once did.

This last September I was at my very first gallery opening at the Ottawa Art Gallery, and a woman came up to me and said, "Wow, your work brought me to tears and I had no idea that that was going to happen. They just started flowing." She continued to thank me, and it was at that moment when it really became clear to me that art is so powerful; that art can change ideas, can shift opinions and move immovable objects. I will continue to create work that moves me, makes me cry and demands change.

# HEATHER IGLOLIORTE

INTERVIEWED BY JONATHAN DEWAR

[September 29, 2011, Ottawa, ON]

Jonathan Dewar: Are you familiar with the concepts of truth and reconciliation as they relate to Indian residential schools in Canada or more broadly?

Heather Igloliorte: I've actually been doing a lot of work around truth and reconciliation in Canada, specifically through the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] and through working contracts with organizations like the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and the Legacy of Hope Foundation. So I've done about two hundred interviews with survivors, working as a contractor with the LHF and the AHF, travelling across the country. I've also curated an exhibition on the Inuit experience at residential schools [*"We were so far away...": The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools*]. I have lectured at universities about the Inuit experience at residential schools and about art practices in general, and I have written several articles on Inuit art and cultural resilience specifically related to residential schools.

JD: OK, now what about your experience as a Labrador Inuk, this concept of "truth" growing up? Your father, for example, has spoken and written about his experience in a residential school, although not one recognized under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement...

HI: But a residential school, nonetheless.

JD: How significant is it that it's not included in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement?

HI: It was deliberately left out of the public apology.

JD: So "truth," as a concept, say, as a child, a young person, a developing scholar, a developing artist, was this something that was sort of stamped on your forehead given your experience as a Labrador Inuk?

HI: Well, I think that there's two sides to truth and [one] is the testimony side—what's being told—and then there's the bearing witness, having someone to witness it and hear it. I think in Labrador it's becoming a contentious issue, although I did just read that the Inuit sub-commission is going to go to Happy Valley-Goose Bay and to Hopedale. So that is an interesting step I think for the Inuit sub-commission. I think that might be a strategic move because, as we know, when Stephen Harper made his apology, he did specifically leave out Newfoundland and Labrador and PEI.

JD: Which you've said in some of your public remarks...

HI: Yes, well, it's something that is very close to my heart because I know a lot of people that were deeply affected by the residential school experience in Labrador, and it did have its own particular circumstances. Under the Moravian missionaries there were church-run schools in the communities, and so then when kids got to what was probably around Grade 8 in the 50s and 60s, they then had to go down the coast to attend the residential school in Northwest River and elsewhere. So while it wasn't exactly like other places across Canada, there was a residential school system in Labrador. This

is a truth that has had a hard time coming into the light, but I think we're going to hear more about it now both in Labrador and in Newfoundland. Now that the Qalipu First Nation has been formed on the island, I think they will also be trying to shed some light on this history. On the east coast, because of the manner in which Newfoundland joined Confederation and everything that happened then with all Native people being excluded from the Indian Act and from any kind of federal jurisdiction, a lot of these things are just being caught up on now. Aboriginal people in Newfoundland and Labrador really didn't get a fair shake when it all came down.

JD: The Labrador Inuit experience is different in many ways, though. In particular, this example you've just given, the Qalipu in western Newfoundland, to their benefit or to their detriment they at least have the Indian Act. They've now been brought into that fold, which is not the case for a Labrador Inuk.

HI: No. And I think it's kind of ironic that we were the last Inuit group in Canada to negotiate our land claims, but we were the first to be self-governing. So in some ways I think being left out of things has been beneficial to us for a number of reasons. I think that like my friend Jordan Bennett was saying at the opening [of the exhibition *Decolonize Me*] this past weekend, there's more to becoming a First Nations group or becoming a recognized Aboriginal group in Canada than just the benefits that come with it. There's a lot more baggage that comes with that.

JD: Would you characterize the Labrador Inuit as also having been the first Inuit group to have experienced colonization?

HI: I think prolonged colonization, absolutely. The Moravians came in 1771 and immediately began setting up permanent settlements along the Labrador coast by building churches and trading posts together at several stations—the first

was in Nain, but then later in Okak, Hopedale and several other places. The Inuit were fairly quickly converted to Christianity, settled into communities. And so all the things we see much later in the central Arctic happened in Labrador very early on. And I think in some ways that was what prevented the Labrador Inuit from getting a lot of the things they had further up north—Inuit in Labrador were seen as “Moravian Inuit” and not really as Inuit peoples. I think that's one of the factors that led to them not being treated as separate from the settler population in Labrador.

JD: When did “reconciliation” as a word or as a concept start to percolate for you?

HI: Reconciliation. Well, certainly it's been in the global consciousness for a lot longer than it has been in Canada. I also think it's been more successful in other places than it has here. I know the TRC isn't quite finished with what they're trying to do yet, so there's still time for reconciliation to be realized. They're halfway through their mandate and we're waiting for the reports at the end that are supposed to change the way that Canadians feel about residential schools. I'm becoming more and more skeptical as the process goes on that the TRC will actually be the ones to do anything about it. But I think reconciliation is possible, depending on how you define the term “reconciliation.” Right now it just seems that a lot of Aboriginal people are reconciling for themselves without the participation of the wider Canadian public who have, for all intents and purposes, lost interest in what is happening with the residential schools hearings and all those sorts of processes.

JD: Well, if you don't mind me asking you sort of a personal question: your father and his experience, that was known in your family, it wasn't something that was hidden in your family?

HI: Yeah, well, I mean he never used the words “residential school,” obviously, but we knew that he had grown up away from his family. He

had been sent down the coast and my dad had a really unique set of circumstances. He's given me permission to talk about this because of my association with residential schools and he's written about his experiences as well. He actually had kind of a unique experience in that after he had been sent away to the school for a year or two years, his older sister, who was several years older, got married and moved into the community where the school was, so then it became like a day school for him and he got to go home at the end of the day. So I think the circumstances were very different for him. As is common to a lot of people who are second and third generation survivors or people who have been feeling the effects of colonization for a prolonged period of time, there were some things happening in his family life that he wanted to get away from. I think that certainly in my experience as an interviewer you hear that a lot. That people were like, "I had to go to residential school and it had its own set of problems, and challenges, but I was also leaving a home environment that was not necessarily safe or that wasn't ideal because of the things that had happened to my parents, and to their parents and to their parents."

JD: Are you familiar with the TRC's call for artist submissions? The other piece, which has a budget of \$20 million attached to it, is commemoration, which is not artist focused, though I think we may safely assume that many artists will probably look at that.

HI: Yeah, I saw the TRC's call for artist submissions, and I didn't like that artists were being asked to provide artwork without compensation, with little promise on how they would protect the copyright of the work, et cetera. I remember reading it and finding it a little bit dubious, to be honest.

JD: So it's not something that you, as an individual, as a person who is intergenerationally affected, if I may say so, by the legacy of residential schools

said, "Oh, I should consider that as an artist."

HI: Speaking as an artist, no, I didn't feel that I needed to. And I think that a lot of artists probably feel the same way. There was a little bit of hesitation around creating art for the TRC, without the TRC having given us anything first. We haven't read the reports, we don't know how they're coming down, and to give art to a project is almost to support that project without knowing that you're going to get that kind of support in return. I think that that is kind of a sticky situation for artists. That was certainly where the hesitancy arose for me because it feels like you're giving art to the government. They are the Truth and Reconciliation Canada, after all—not an arm's length organization as was originally intended—and I think people are a little hesitant to give freely of their work for an organization that has not proven what exactly it is going to be. Not yet, you know, though it might turn out to be great, but where it stands, we just don't know yet, and that is a compromising position to put artists in, without knowing where exactly their work will end up.

JD: When it crossed your desk, did you feel like, "Oh, this is typical," or "This is new, and maybe a departure from the way commissions, bodies of inquiry, governments might approach something"?

HI: I've heard about this quilt project. I was approached. They were looking for curators to take on some of the projects. I think they started to get art and now they need curators to do the interpretation of the work.

JD: The call just says give us your art. No reference to the way the art would be held or archived or used. The application of curatorial practice is not mentioned in this. No archival practice is mentioned in this. Is that a red flag for you as a curator?

HI: It certainly is because I feel like, to a certain extent,



what they're looking for is just illustrations for their book. I could be wrong about this, but I say it because that's how the call was worded—so general, with no specific language around where the art would be displayed (if at all), who it was for, how long it would be used, et cetera. They could be treating this as a complement to testimony, as a way to visually express or culturally express what you cannot put into words, but for that to work you need exhibition spaces, you need to get the art into public places and you need to treat it with the respect of testimony itself. And the artists need to know how it will be seen and engaged with in advance. You know, if I create a video and submit it, I want to know what's going to happen with it. Who's going to see it? Who is the audience that is intended for this?

JD: Do you know of any artists who did mistake or may have mistaken this kind of thing as a way for them to show their work, gallery space-wise, or as a way for them to sell their work and obviously make a living as an artist?

HI: This is what I think: a lot of artists who are already in the contemporary artists' milieu, and are showing and practising, they would probably be very savvy to what's happening here; whereas artists who work in more customary or traditional forms might not be as familiar with this kind of terminology and wording and what the TRC is going to do with their work. The TRC really doesn't say how they're going to use or promote the work, you know, they say, "We will be in contact with many art galleries and museums and filmmakers who may wish to use your art in films and programming. You can feature your work in any of these venues or provide them to third parties who the TRC believe will use them appropriately for education purposes, with proper credit to the artist." I mean that, to me, sounds a number of warning bells, like, I'm going to give you my work and then you're going to approach galleries and

you *believe* they will use it in appropriate ways? I just think this is not being done in what I would consider to be an Indigenous framework for working with artists.

JD: So even the fact that they say, "And you retain all rights to your work..."

HI: Sure, that sounds right, absolutely. But at the same time it seems like although they say you retain the rights, what it seems that they're proposing is really shared rights, because after you sign a consent form then they can do whatever they want with it afterward. So it's not really like you're retaining all the rights to that work. It could still show up somewhere that you weren't aware that it was going to be.

JD: Do you think an artist should consider lawyering up before they do something like this?

HI: [laughs] That is an interesting question. I think that for myself I would probably find another venue if I felt like I had to get this message out there. I think I would probably go through another organization, or perhaps a better idea would be to work with curators who would liaise with artists and thereby be responsible. You know, as curators, we have a certain responsibility to the artist to take care of their work. "Curator" literally means to take care. And we must take care of the work and liaise with the government organization who might not understand the art. The government administrators, if they are policy-makers, then maybe this is not something that is in their forte. I wish there was a name on this [TRC call]. Who is the person who is receiving the art as it comes in? Who is the person who works with the art? I feel that if they're going to do this huge arts project then they should really have some kind of an arts specialist receiving all the works. We don't know that they do or do not because they haven't listed anyone here as a contact person.

JD: Do you think there's a danger in a call under a rubric loaded in a Canadian context as commemoration?



For example, here in the national capital, there are monuments and plaques everywhere, and you know many artists who have been involved in those monuments and responding to those monuments. The literature on commemoration theory and practice is incredibly rich, but I also contend that it's also a bit of a loaded concept. There's certainly a Eurocentric or Western focus to the way things are commemorated in Canada. So, do you think there's a danger to Aboriginal artists to apply for a fund that is administered by a government department that supports a supposedly independent commission of inquiry into an extremely loaded subject like the legacy of residential schools?

HI: Yeah. I mean, commemoration implies a kind of permanence, especially in the Western consideration of the term. You know, it's going to be a monument to an issue or it's going to be some kind of a lasting legacy to remember—a memorialization. That kind of permanence, as you pointed out, is not necessarily the Indigenous way of remembering. Commemoration is very different in the Indigenous world and might exist in very different forms. So I assume what they're looking for is commemoration projects that memorialize, "to remember." I think there certainly is a danger in that. I would hope that the jury for these commemoration works would be a jury of Aboriginal peers—people in the art world. I would hope that there's a jury independent of the organization, absolutely. When the Canada Council, or the Ontario Arts Council or any provincial arts board, has projects of this nature—particularly with this amount of money to give out—they always hold juries of peers to the artist or other applications, and these are government organizations, but in the understanding that it is those people who understand the field the best that will be best qualified to judge each other.

JD: I want to go back to the danger aspect of it because

you've done a lot of work around residential schools and you've written and spoken at length about your instinct to go not just into the work and the artist behind it, but the way the artist or other participants in projects become involved and work with you. So, like interviewing residential school survivors for the "*We Were So Far Away*" project. Do you think there's a danger for an artist to say of this commemoration fund, or something like it, that this is a way to take this existing, developing or conceptualized body of work forward, and they put in a proposal and that proposal is not accepted?

HI: The damage that that could cause to be rejected in your expression of residential school? I hadn't even thought about that. Yeah, that could be a huge issue for artists. I would be surprised if [particularly graphic or challenging work] was accepted for a TRC commemoration project because, as you noted, commemoration projects paid for by the Government of Canada probably have to follow a certain number of protocols about being accessible to the public, to children and to be sort of widely disseminated across the country. What is appropriate to the commemoration jury, to whoever is doing the deciding, may not necessarily translate very well on the other side. Now the question of what that might do to someone there if they are survivors or intergenerational survivors and their work is rejected, yeah, that is a big issue. I hadn't even considered it before.

JD: What if you were the person who is overseeing that jury process and you are the person because of your curatorial and artistic expertise. You're that person. So you have an independent jury who have adjudicated it a blind process and put forward some projects for you to consider and you ultimately put forward to the commission projects for consideration. As a curator, you've done that caring aspect and you've also done that critical

aspect—that’s your role. So, you’ve now done the process, the process that everyone agreed to and you’ve put forward recommendations to this theoretical commission, and they do not take your recommendations. What do you do as an individual, as a person, as a professional, as an artist, as an Aboriginal person?

HI: Well, I think that as an Aboriginal person, if anyone was going to take on this role, the first thing you have to be is accountable. You have to be accountable to the communities that apply for this role, communities that may have applied for this commemoration but expect things from this commemoration project and expect to see themselves reflected in what is there. So I think that anyone who is in charge of this would have to be very forthright about their decisions, would have to have a very clear idea in their minds and in their hearts about what it was that needed to be expressed and what reasons there were for including certain projects and not including other ones, because accountability has been one of the biggest issues that Aboriginal people have had with Canada. —a lack of accountability, a lack of transparency and an imbalance of power in relationships. So I think that would be the key issue in taking on a role like this. The old adage: Nothing About Us Without Us. You know, that the voice of the survivor should be foregrounded in everything that is done while still being inclusive and understandable to the Canadian public from the perspective of Aboriginal people, with the goal of creating understanding in all people. I think the ultimate authority should lie in Aboriginal people. It could be people with experience in museums, experience in intercultural exchange, those with first-hand knowledge of residential schools, intergenerational survivors and professional artists with many years of experience in expressing things cross-culturally. I really would not be comfortable with the ultimate authority

lying in the government. I would rather they made recommendations to me than me make recommendations to them.

JD: Would it satisfy you if somebody articulated, whether verbally or contractually, that the three commissioners are independent of the secretariat, which is a government department, and are advised by an independent survivor advisory committee? Would that satisfy you?

HI: I think ultimately it would because the commissioners are going to be the public face of the TRC, and they will be responsible for everything that happens through this organization. If things go wrong, they will be the ones held accountable.

JD: You’re politically and bureaucratically savvy. Would people in communities necessarily understand that distinction? And is that a defense that you’d be comfortable with? The old “It was the three commissioners over-ruling me.”

HI: [laughs] Again, this is a tough case. I don’t think that I would enter into a contract where I felt like it was going to be taken out of my hands at the very end. I would always feel responsible to it. You know I have a responsibility to my community, whether that is my specific community or to the broader Aboriginal arts or Aboriginal community.

JD: OK, let’s take it up a notch. You’re past the adjudication and proposals, you’re now at the reporting on the status of those proposals that you’ve funded and somebody at the TRC, this theoretical TRC, somebody doesn’t like one of the works, finds it too challenging. So therefore it’s been funded, you’ll pay out in full, but the project will never see the light of day. Because this does happen, you know it happens.

HI: Yes, it does happen. People get paid but the work never comes out in the public. Yeah, I’d have a big problem with that too. I mean I guess it depends on what the issue is. I’m always open to hearing what somebody’s perspective is on an issue, as long as they’re open to having that perspective

countered and having a dialogue about it. I'm not interested in closed channels, but I can also understand concerns about, for example, graphic content about children, but that is a big part of what the history of residential schools is, so it's a question of how to show the truth. I would certainly be open to looking at different ways to disseminate it, but I don't think I would be willing to shut something down entirely. I understand that there are different audiences that are appropriate for various subject matter, but I think if a jury decides and puts recommendations forth that, in all but the most extreme circumstances, that should be respected. There would need to be a very clear mandate, set of rules and agreements made with all the parties who understood what was happening before it began, because it really is too important a history and too difficult a knowledge to have things happen after the agreements had already been made. Who's the biggest partner in this process? Is it the church or is it the Aboriginal people?

JD: That's a very good question.

HI: It is our story to be told and not to be tempered through how any one church might like the message to be disseminated. I think that is an area where we cannot let what happened before happen again, with someone being dismissed from their position because they spoke out against the church. I think we need to [be] very leery of the kind of unfulfilled reconciliation that will happen if something like that happens again. It won't be a full reconciliation if the Aboriginal people feel like they have been conceding and making concessions to the perpetrators.

JD: But this diplomacy thing, is there not a necessity for diplomacy as we try to engage non-Aboriginal Canadians in this story? Like, do we not have to mediate some things?

HI: This is why I am an independent curator and not [laughs] working for the government! This is why

I would probably never take on a position like this because, ethically, I don't think that I could bow to the church for the sake of diplomacy. I think that some churches have been really incredible and admirable in their statements and in their forthrightness and others have been deceitful. Like the work of David King. He tells anecdotes of being in certain archives and suspecting that things have been destroyed or that he's being censored in some way in his research. How can we reconcile if the entire truth is not out there if people are covering up for themselves and their own history? It's not about what's happening today, and I don't think it should be a story about perpetrators and victims, but certainly everyone acting today has a responsibility and they have agency in this history. They have a responsibility to everyone involved to be totally forthright right now, so I don't think I could take on a role like that.

JD: You're drawing a distinction between the independent curator and the curator who works in the institutional setting.

HI: Yeah, because any major institution in Canada receives federal funding—the Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery of Canada, every provincial and regional gallery—all galleries receive public funding of some sort, so you do have to sort of tow the line to a certain degree. But independent curators seem to have a little more freedom because the gallery can always say, "Well, this is a contractor, they don't speak for us."

JD: So it can work for the institution.

HI: Exactly. This is the other side of it. An institution can get away with maybe a little bit more when this person is not necessarily employed through this organization.

JD: What role as an individual artist do you see for art and for artists in truth—that is, truth-telling, uncovering, taking out from the shadows—formally or informally?

HI: Well, I think that art does a number of very important things that can grab the attention of the world. When we're talking about telling "the truth," we're talking about sharing an Indigenous truth to a broader Canadian public. The people who lived through it, know it. This can mean intergenerational survivors as well, those who have experiences of their own related to the legacy of residential schools. So they need to tell people who do not know: their children, their communities and then the broader Canadian public. The great thing about art, and I say it all the time, but art is the most powerful communication tool that we have. Art can instantly communicate a feeling, an emotion, an expression, a circumstance. It can evoke something in a viewer who might not know anything about the artist or the person, or the history, but it still has the power to transfer knowledge instantaneously on levels that are beyond so many other ways of understanding. When we're talking about cross-cultural experiences and knowledge, about things that people did not learn in their history or education while growing up, looking at artwork about residential schools can play a huge role in telling the truth because in many ways it's undeniable. When you see that someone has poured something into the work, that they have given so much of themselves into a film, or a song or visual art, I think that it is in many ways undeniable, whereas the way that we're telling the history of residential schools right now, it's very easy to deny or to diminish or to downplay. When you see art expressed that way I think it's very relatable.

JD: As an Aboriginal artist, are you always engaged in truth-telling?

HI: No, well, I mean some of my work is just paintings of animals, my constant attention is not to political work, but I think that political artwork is a form of truth-telling or revealing.

JD: But by virtue of being Aboriginal, because you were talking about this at the *Decolonize Me* opening, just being an Aboriginal person, it's political. So I think many non-Aboriginal audiences expect, "Oh, this is Aboriginal art, therefore, it is meant to evoke something that they understand and we do not..."

HI: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

JD: So, it sounds like a simple question to ask, but as an Aboriginal artist, is there always truth-telling in the work? Or, as some artists have said, "Art is art. It's about passion first."

HI: Yeah, I do feel like we are always already political, as you said, but that doesn't always have to be the purpose of the work, you know, the purpose is not always to educate others, and sometimes that happens incidental to the work itself. I think most times it's an expression of what someone feels they need to get out. Obviously you can't put a single interpretation on a work, the viewer brings their own interpretation to the work just as the creator of the work does.

JD: So truth is a concept that is linked to reconciliation. What role, if any, do you see for art, or art and artist, in reconciliation processes, whether formally or informally?

HI: When you say art and artist do you mean Aboriginal art and artist?

JD: If you want to take it to the non-Aboriginal...

HI: We've seen some attempts in Ottawa in the last couple of years. Remember there were those two [non-Aboriginal] women artists that wanted to make art about residential schools and people were offended? I think that's a whole other kind of an issue. They went to Library and Archives, right, and they looked at old photographs. For starters, it's just not true that they could only know the history through archival material. They could have tracked down some survivors and spoken to people. It is a living history after all. But they chose to approach the history through archival

images only. I think that the idea behind it, you know, is very legitimate. The wanting to find an inroad to understanding, that's admirable. But mainly I think the problem with these particular artists was they were selling the works, showing in commercial galleries. So no matter what they stated their intentions were, they were also trying to profit off of the history of residential schools. It was very sensationalized in the media too, and so they were also becoming famous based on this controversial body of work, and that's another kind of profit, even if it was not all good publicity.

JD: Would the fix have been a show curated by someone else?

HI: Perhaps. I feel like it's not enough to simply find an issue on your own as a non-Native person, maybe do a bit of reading and then make some art about the issue without thinking about and without making your own subject positioning to the history clear. It behooves the artist to seek out Aboriginal people—even the very people in the photographs or people from the schools or areas where the photo was taken—and learn something. Also to find out how those people feel about someone making art about their experiences because of the approach they took by looking at archives only, for me, there is a serious issue of “othering” survivors, creating distance between the artist, their audience and the subject matter: Aboriginal people, residential schools. To say that this is not their history is to deny that this country is founded on a long history of colonization and imperialism, and that there is a grave imbalance of wealth, health, freedom, opportunity—and every other way you can quantify power—that has benefitted the non-Native population at the expense of the Native population. I think they had good intentions but executed them poorly. It goes back to the idea: nothing about us without us. Great art can be made by non-Native people about our shared past, but they need to be present in

the work as well. I want to know where they locate themselves in relation to this history.

JD: In literature, my background, and fine arts, your background, there are these things, canons, where at one point we were not represented in the canon, and that changed. It changed because people were political about it, people were activist about it, people were professional about it, artists and scholars, political leaders, et cetera, and the situation changed. So whether it was artwork or the work of artists making artwork, the work of artists being activist or political, we saw that change. Is that reconciliation?

HI: Perhaps in the sense that Aboriginal artists and scholars and academics and so on now have gained broader recognition all across our fields. Museums in Canada, certainly, would no longer create exhibitions of Aboriginal art without clear consultation with the communities that they are representing. You wouldn't write a book of stories on Aboriginal people without including Aboriginal authors, and you wouldn't teach a class on Aboriginal art without including any theory from Aboriginal authors—at least I should hope not! Sure, I've had classes where there was very little Aboriginal voice included, but I think that that is changing. That might be an informal act of reconciliation in that we can now demand recognition, and when we don't get it, we have the ground to protest, to complain to the university bodies. We have a legitimate claim to recognition. Is that a form of reconciliation?

JD: So what changed? Did your activism become better or did their enlightenment become better?

HI: Oh, I think activism. Yeah, you can still encounter people who work in museums or who are scholars who are deeply offended by the idea that they might have to consult someone else, you know, that they are not the only authority and that their expertise is not enough alone to create an exhibition. I think it was Aboriginal activism

that brought about the big institutional changes. And there are certainly numerous amazing allies who are non-Aboriginal. I'm not trying to paint everyone with one brush, but I think it's much easier to maintain the status quo than it is to bring about major change. If you look at the history, it's through points of activism, you know, through ruptures that the major changes in policy and procedure, both formal and informal, have been brought about.

JD: In the sense of, like, museum practice, what won out? Political expediency, like "Ooh, it's getting awfully noisy, it would [be] politically expedient for us to kowtow," or was it that your argument was that good and that compelling that it changed museum practice?

HI: Are you familiar with *Turning the Page: The Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples*? That came about in reaction to the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. If you recall, there was an exhibition held at the Glenbow of Canadian Aboriginal artifacts from all over the world that Aboriginal people protested mainly for excluding their voices and appearing to locate Aboriginal people in the past. Up until that point, Native people didn't have much of a say in how their cultures were represented in museum exhibits. The protest caused Canadian museums, to their credit, to rethink their approach to exhibiting Indigenous cultures, and so they collaborated with Aboriginal scholars and professionals to write *Turning the Page*, a series of recommendations and best practices going forward for museums. The biggest problem was that it was merely recommendations and not policy per se, so even though the Canadian Museums Association adopted the report it wasn't required or mandated. Still, most museums now follow their guidelines, and consultation and collaboration with communities are the norm today, however imperfectly that might be done.

JD: So is that what changed museum practice or is it

just that it's better museum practice to do the kinds of ethical, Indigenous, world view kind of focus things that you've mentioned?

HI: I don't know if that's why museums have changed, but the fact is that they have changed. It's better museum practice and it leads to better exhibitions, whole new methodologies and approaches for creating exhibitions that the Western art world didn't have on its own—providing more exciting, engaging and interesting interpretations on the arts and cultures. I think it's better for audiences and more interesting, really, to do it in the Aboriginal way.

JD: I'm going to ask you one last question—it's just sort of a personal interest of mine—does this issue need a monument? A national monument? I can see a bunch of them, I can see a bunch of them through the windows here.

HI: Is Ottawa the right place for a national monument?

JD: So that's a subsequent question, but does this issue need a monument?

HI: I don't know if it needs a monument. What kinds of things get monumentalized in Canada? Veterans, Terry Fox, the War Memorial. Is residential schools something that we want to have a monument to the end of?

JD: Should you and I have an opinion, or should Survivors have the final opinion?

HI: Yeah, I don't think that it's something that we can really say for others. And I think that there will never be a resolution. I think this would be a very, highly contentious issue for residential school survivors because some people want to have it behind them and some people don't.

JD: Do you think there will be one?

HI: I wouldn't want to be the artist making it. I wouldn't want to be the person creating the permanent, forever monument, you know, a big sculpture, to residential schools. Indigenous "monuments" are very different from Western ones—songs are a form of monument, performance is a kind



of monument. What would a residential schools monument look like? Perhaps it could be a garden where Indigenous medicines always grow or other forms of Indigenous knowledge is fostered. Yeah, there's an idea. Commemoration. That's really one of the only ways I could see it is if it was a celebration of knowledges and lifeways surviving beyond what residential schools tried to eradicate. It could only be a monument to the Indigenous spirit. I don't think a lot of people would be interested in creating a big solid permanent reminder of what they went through. A lot of the Inuit survivors that I have spoken to at some point say, "I can't deal with this anymore," or "I've done my piece, I can't speak out any more publicly," like Marius Tungilik, who was part of the Inuit exhibition. He had to take a break from it for a while. And [a friend of mine with whom I did many interview tours together], she was told by one Elder, "You know, you should probably stop doing this. I can see that it's really weighing on you." And it's a very weighty issue, you know. I don't think I could go back to doing interviews. I can still work in this kind of field, but one-on-one with the survivors and hearing some of the things that I heard, I don't think that I could do that much longer. I've done over two hundred interviews, I think. Every time I would go out as a sort of professional witness, a story gatherer, it would be weeks after I got home that I would still be depressed, carrying the stories I heard around with me everywhere I went. That's the thing, you know. How can we really talk about reconciliation in this country if there are still Canadians who have never spoken to an actual survivor or witnessed someone's testimony? I know that the things we read in the academic literature is nothing compared to having someone describe in their own words the things that happened to them. And I don't think that I really understood because my father never talked about

his experience in the schools. My dad has a million hilarious stories, but I can only think of one that was from before he was in university. He and his cousin stole a boat and it sank or something. They had to swim to shore and that was it. Like, literally, my dad has stories from every moment in his life but tells nothing about when he was young. I don't know a thing about my grandfather, although I have pictures. I know very little about my grandmother except what my uncles and aunts have told me. He just doesn't talk about that period in his life. And he's not a depressed man, I don't mean to give that impression at all. He's actually a very successful, happy and often joking kind of person. And I think that's one of the ways he copes with it is to not talk about it at all. I think that speaks to how powerful the telling of stories and giving testimony is to the entire experience. The more that I think about what I've learned and how I've come to know the things that I know, the more I feel there needs to be more public testimony or public witnessing. Canadians need to bear witness to this history. But I don't think the government is that invested in making sure that all Canadians come to understand it. And I don't think that Canadians really care that much on their own, you know, they're happy to uphold their misconceptions about what Aboriginal people are like in Canada. There's always hope for change in the future, though. My students have been very receptive to learning about this history, so maybe more education and public awareness is the key.



# SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN

>> ADRIAN STIMSON

*But Jesus called them (unto him), and said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for such is the kingdom of God."*

—Luke 18:16 *King James Bible* (Anglican)

# PRAYER TIME

H  
A  
P  
P  
Y



C  
H  
R  
I  
S  
T  
M  
A  
S

"Suffer little children . . ."

OLD SUN SCHOOL

GLEICHEN, ALBERTA

## OLD SUN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL-GLEICHEN, ALBERTA CHRISTMAS CARD 19??

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. 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 "happened to" my father while being in Residential schools—stories of loneliness, physical, mental, and sexual abuses; stories too hard to imagine yet continue to be a part of his and his children's legacy.

The legacy of the Residential school system will resound for years to come; over 150,000 children were taken away from their families, and more than 80,000 survivors are still alive today.<sup>1</sup> When you consider the intergenerational effects, hundreds of thousands of aboriginal people are still living that experience. I say living, as the cycles of abuse that started so many years ago still affect many aboriginal people and communities today.

I attended Residential schools on the Gordon First Nation and Lebret, Saskatchewan. Unlike my father, I was classified as a "Day school student,"

<sup>1</sup> Statistics from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada.

meaning that I got to go home at night. Like my father, I too was a victim of physical, mental, and sexual abuses; abuse that continues to affect me today. Although I have taken many steps toward understanding what abuse does to the human condition, I am still haunted, and will continue to relive those experiences for the rest of my life. While I believe that I have come to terms with the abuse, I will never know normalcy when it comes to trust and physical or sexual contact. There have been times when this burden has been overwhelming. As a young man, thoughts of suicide were ever-present, one that I was able to keep at bay. Yet, I understand the psychological effects and how it can take over—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it will always be there, it's just how you learn to handle it.

My experience has given me insight into the human condition of our ability to overcome victimization, to build trust and to heal. I am skeptical of the healing industry; I have experienced and heard of many “healing” practitioners’ approaches, from First Nations to New Age and formal institutions. I believe that we do create coping mechanisms that can help us at vulnerable times, yet I have often found the various “healing” ideologies to be suspect, often too expensive, unnecessarily cloaked in religious morals and externally rather than internally focused. The experience has created in me a great distrust of all Western institutions, especially religious, educational, corporate, governmental and the “healing” industry. I see them all as a part of the Colonial Project, systemic approaches that continue to erode indigenous being, one which would otherwise connect me to my Blackfoot culture, one that connects to the natural world and the Great Mystery.<sup>2</sup>

I do not believe that art in itself is healing, meaning art image or object. I do believe that the process of creating art has the potential to heal.

---

2 Great Mystery: for the Blackfoot it is “old man,” the creation of all things, the mystery of the universe.

Healing for me is an unattainable idea, cloaked in Western ideas of success and personal advancement, capitalism and ego. I don't know what healing is, yet when I process, usually when I make art, I go through a series of emotions; anger, frustration, sadness, joy and the like. I believe that art-making can trigger the psyche, an opportunity for those willing to delve within their mind and come to terms with their own and societal histories. In turn, the art image or object I make is a trigger for viewers who want to delve into their own issues, it is not a healer in itself, yet it has the potential to reorganize the mind. I also feel that healing can come from the natural world. When I am in the natural world and observe, I feel connected to the Great Mystery, a connection that brings forth my Blackfoot foundations of balance among the intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual. It is this feeling of balance that calms the mind, connects me to my physical self, lets emotions flow and gives me the sense that I am not alone and connected to the Universe. I believe the Colonial Project is about domination of the natural world; therefore, we have to disconnect from it on all levels, a disconnection that is at the root of societal dysfunction.

My father has undergone his Independent Assessment Process (IAP) regarding his experience at the Residential schools he attended; specifically, Old Sun Residential School. It was and still is a stressful process for him; recalling and sharing those experiences with strangers/adjudicators is not an easy task. The process of revealing the damage in order to receive the Common Experience Payment and Independent Assessment Process compensation is at best perilous. I can only imagine the pain, suffering and psychological damage these experiences have created within him and how they form a continuum of dysfunction for him and, ultimately, his family.

My father questioned the interviewers during the interview: “Why do we have to go through this process?” referencing other Canadian ethnic groups

who had received compensation without telling their personal stories. This is a question that comes to my mind, and I wonder whether this is yet another layer of humiliation, a layer more insidious, as it provokes individuals to relive painful experiences over and over again in the name of “healing.” Apparently, 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 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 still alive and well.

I was a day-school student for four years. I was encouraged to apply to the Common Experience Payment process to consider my case. Even though I knew that day students would not be considered, I entered this bureaucratic process to experience and learn, to be informed. After filling out the government forms, then sending more information at their request, I receive months later in the mail a standard 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 and applied to the Common Experience Payment, their applications have been denied. Residency is the criteria for rejection, creating a second class of Residential school survivors, one that will not receive any justice or feel welcomed to add their voice to this commons. Also, the loss, destruction or inaccurate record keeping has been a problem; for many survivors, their experiences have been invalidated or put into question, and there are many stories that reflect this reality and the injustice it creates.

Needless to say, I am not a supporter of the “Common Experience,” although I recognize that the process might be good for some. I suspect that,

in the end, many will not realize the touted benefits. For instance, a physician on my reserve indicates that he has never seen things so bad and 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. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s *The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement’s Common Experience Payment and Healing: A Qualitative Study Exploring Impacts on Recipients* is a good resource in helping to understand individual and communal impacts.<sup>3</sup> I see the processes as another strategy 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 and that the intended reconciliation is in question.

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

I draw from my own artistic practice those works of art and performances that deal with the legacy of Residential schools and how these works somehow exorcise that history and help me move beyond and into a place of intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual balance. I wish to focus on an installation I created at the TRUCK Gallery in Calgary called *Old Sun*, which included three pieces: *Old Sun*, *Sick and Tired* and *Inhumation*. As well, a performance 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

3 <http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/cep-2010-healing.pdf>





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. It is ironic that Old Sun's name was used, as it ensured the end of a way of life for many of his descendants—my family members. The institution now called Old Sun College has made the transition from residential school to college, yet remains a colonizing 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 structure. To represent the reconstruction of cultural icons, I have used the design of the sweat lodge. I had it manufactured from steel to signify the industrial material that had driven imperial expansion. The lodge 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 onto 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* is an installation that explores identity, history and transcendence through the reconfiguration of architectural and natural fragments. Its elements are three Old Sun Residential

School windows, filled with feathers and backlit, 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. *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 destruction, re-construction, re-signification and counter memory. The destruction of the Bison as a food source is analogous to the destruction of the people, and the process of reconciling this history while re-constructing both the personal and cultural memes is to infuse contemporary meaning and create a space for Indigenous Knowledge and recounting.

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 infirmity bed. How many people lay sick, tired, dying or dead on this bed is not known, yet I can feel the heaviness of its history. The bison robe configured like a human 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 life, death and the Great Mystery of being.

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.

This installation now rests in the collection of The Mackenzie Art Gallery. Interestingly, it was to be a part of the exhibitions for the first Truth and Reconciliation national event that was held in Winnipeg.<sup>4</sup> It was requested then suddenly the commission vetted it, eliminating it from the exhibition, stating that it was “too powerful.” They were fearful that it would trigger too many bad memories for the people who were to attend. While I found their excuse limited and dismissive of my experience, I respected it. Yet, I will continue to question the role of those who lead

us into reconciliation. Are we all being represented or is vetting another way the Colonial Project continues to classify, separate and isolate? It is like internalized racism in which we agree and play into our own oppression.



#### **INHUMATION**

*Inhumation* 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

4 TRC National event, Winnipeg, Manitoba, June 16-19, 2010. Truth and Reconciliation Commission organized.



with a 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 a body 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* examines 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 Sr. 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 pedophiles, 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, adding 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 sports display at the Old Sun School gym. This performance was a process of exorcising history, letting go of the hurt. In essence, it is a process of truth and reconciliation. 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.





**OLD SUN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL, CA. 1950.**

For me, Truth and Reconciliation is not about following the governmental process, it is an ongoing process of coming to understand the effects of genocide, knowing our resilience as indigenous peoples of the Americas, transcending and becoming more than the Residential school experience and changing our colonized minds and assisting the colonizer to see that there is another way. As far as the apology goes, sorry requires

action, The government and the people of Canada have a long journey ahead of them, and there must be a collective, common process of education that breaks down the colonial structures that entrenches systemic racism. We must remind current and future generations that the Colonial Project continues its reckless path of destruction to educate one's self and to be active in making real change. Our collective futures are at stake.



# WRITING LANDSCAPE

>> VANESSA DION FLETCHER

*Writing Landscape* is a series of images that were created between my body and the land. The finished product consists of three parts. The first is a series of copper plates that were marked up when I wore them on my feet and walked over the land. The second is a series of prints that were produced from the copper plates. The third is video documentation of my performance of walking. Together, these images constitute an exploration of the relationship between my identity as an indigenous woman and different places on Turtle Island.

This work begins in my mouth with my voice and moves down to my feet and the earth. My art practice explores themes of communication, identity and the body. My current trajectory is rooted in language, (mis)communications and failures to communicate. This exploration first took shape in the investigation of the parabolic form and of how it could be an instrument for communication, both formally and conceptually. More recently I have been focusing on ideas of fluency and understanding in the context of my Potawatomi and Lenape ancestry. Having no direct access to my ancestral Aboriginal languages has inspired me to explore the notion of communication without words. It is at this point that the work moves out of my mouth. Still wanting to communicate, I leave the world of words behind and begin to move between my body and the land.

The tradition of printmaking is filled with rules of precision and consistency. There are printmakers who relish breaking the rules established by the canon, and I count myself as one of them. I have found my way into the world of art-making and printmaking partially through education. In my art practice I use intaglio and lithography, both traditional European methods of printmaking. Acid biting or scratching groves into copper plates creates intaglio prints. Once the groves are created, ink is scraped over the plate and the plate is then pressed on paper. Lithographic prints are created by drawing on either a limestone or aluminum plate. The print itself is created through a process of oil and water repulsion. A BFA from York University has given me some confidence about producing work; however, within printmaking I feel like the processes of intaglio and lithography have more to offer than what the conventions often allow.

I began looking to my body and the land to adapt these methods and to make them more relevant to my contemporary indigenous existence. One of these adaptations was the method of marking copper intaglio plates. Typically, the plate would be marked through a process of acid biting or scratching with a metal tool, both producing a detailed line drawing. For my project *Writing Landscape* I developed a technique of marking copper plates by wearing them on my feet and walking. In this process the plate was pulled across the land by my body. Together, the land and my body scratched and



dented the plates. It was a kind of writing where my body and the topography of the land over which I walked were both author and subject. I was “writing” the land by recording it, and writing a place for myself on the land. I fall short and am unsatisfied with written and spoken language, as I have no direct access to my ancestral languages and have a disability that severely affects my use of written language. This project has allowed me to reclaim and reaffirm different aspects of my relationship with the land as an indigenous person.

My project took place in three locations: Toronto, Ontario; Thamesville, Ontario; and Pangnirtung, Nunavut. I chose these locations specifically for their historical and contemporary significance to me. At each location I began by walking around without the plates on my feet, getting a sense of the topography and contemplating my connection to that particular place. Conceptually, I considered the place, my relationship to it and why I wanted to communicate and record my conversation with the land in an image. Each location had a different answer, but they were all places with which I felt a reciprocal relationship. Technically, I considered the different surfaces as well as how the weather was influencing my movement. In each location I walked for several kilometres; setting up the shot, walking away from the camera and returning to it. The result of this movement away and returning to the viewer, a kind of ebb and flow that created a sense of coming and going, a cyclical effect where the questions remain: Am I walking away from the viewer or towards the horizon? Am I returning to the viewer or leaving where I came from?

In these unanswered questions I am always moving. It is the movement in this work that creates the marks. In *Writing Landscape* I am taking steps to record and listen to the land that I come from, the land that supports me and the land that inspires me. This process is an affirmation that I am not fixed in the past or the future, but am able to adapt and

create new relationships and connections with new landscapes.

In each location of *Writing Landscape* I found myself beside the water’s edge. Although not my original intention, the boundaries that the water created with the land presented more of a focus. The image comes from the space in between my body and the land. Walking along the shorelines not only provides a path to follow but an in-between space to occupy.

My choice of location in Toronto was related to returning to, and renewing an ongoing relationship with, the land. It is the place where I currently live and the place where I have spent my adult life. I am an aboriginal woman but Toronto is not my people’s territory. Walking along the shore of Ashbridges Bay made me feel as though I were renewing an ongoing relationship with this land where I now felt at home, and I wanted to take time to consider this complex relationship.

In the case of Thamesville, the experience was more one of establishing a connection. My grandmother’s family left Moravian No. 47 Indian Reserve when she was nine years old. This was my first time visiting the reserve. I ended up walking mostly along the Thames River, remembering my grandmother’s story of pulling groceries on a sled along that same river. Where does the river begin and where does it end? What drew grandma away and what brought me back?

While working on the project I was fortunate to be able to visit a friend in Pangnirtung, Nunavut. Since first visiting as part of my undergraduate education program in 2009, I have been returning yearly. Both the trip itself and my project of walking was a renewal of friendships, feeling a sense of solidarity with indigenous people who also have struggles over their land that appear different but are similar to my own. Because the moss and lichen that grow on the tundra are so soft, I once again ended up along the rocky banks of the river, where

under the pressure of my feet the rocks and pebbles would scratch and impress themselves onto the plates.

In each case the project was about establishing, repeating or renewing a relationship to the land and the place. Being limited by my own body's ability to move meant taking time to consider my subjectivities in relation to the place I was walking. The process of walking was important: the physicality of feeling the cold or warmth of the land conducted through the copper. Walking along the water's edge I would immediately feel the chill of wet ground or just as quickly feel the warmth of dry ground, sun-warmed rocks and sand. It was satisfying hearing the sounds that were being created, the scraping and crunching as I crossed the rocks. These were sounds but not words.

This physicality is revealed in the printing process. Once the copper plates had been thoroughly scratched, I began printing the images. The plates themselves are compelling as objects; however, once printed, the images that were produced revealed the intricacies that have been pressed into the plate. It is not an individual tool or hand that made the image. Seemingly insignificant tiny stones and grains of sand imprinted themselves onto the plate and became the printed images. Fine scratches, dents and cracks where the plates split between the force of my body and the force of the land appear on the paper.

I have been influenced by several senior artists in the development of this project, most significantly the work of Greg Staats.<sup>1</sup> I have looked

to his video and photography to inspire and inform my project. His exploration of recording, language and memory within the restorative aesthetic of *Condolence* has directed the ways in which I engage with similar themes in my own work. In his 2011 artist talk at Articule in Montréal, Quebec, Staats discusses the photographs in *Condolence*:

*This series represents a friendship with the landscape that I was trying to express, those boreal markers are there, they are still there for me to return to as a place to be welcomed. That was the beginning of my connection to the landscape, my own personal landscape that I could find solace in.*

In *Writing Landscape*, instead of photographing the markers through the creation of the prints I have created my own markers. In the process of recording the landscape as a marker, I have made my own personal landscape and found reassurance in myself and my art practice.

By visiting Ashbridges Bay, Moravian No. 47 Indian Reserve and Pangnirtung, Nunavut, I was able to consider who I was, where I was and what had brought me to those places. As Staats states, the land is a place to find solace, filled with mnemonics and triggers to remember and create who we are. *Writing Landscape* is a way of engaging with a place by taking time to create marks, not on my body or on the land, but between the two.

---

<sup>1</sup> Staats has provided me with both conceptual and technical guidance on this project. Greg Staats was born in 1963 in Brantford, Ontario. He now lives and works in Toronto. Staats works both in photography and video making. He had solo exhibitions at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff; Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, Owen Sound; Mercer Union: A Centre for Contemporary Art, Toronto; and Gallery TPW, Toronto. His work had been included in group exhibitions at the Ottawa Art Gallery; Canadian

---

Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa; and the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art, Toronto. Staats received the Duke and Duchess of York Prize in Photography. Staats, Greg, and Martha Langford, "Greg Staats Artist Talk," Speech, Artist Talk with Guest Martha Langford, Articule, Montreal, 14 Feb 2011. *Articule*. Web. 13 Oct 2011. <[http://www.articule.org/web/expositions/10-11/Staats\\_en.html](http://www.articule.org/web/expositions/10-11/Staats_en.html)>.



**DION FLETCHER, *When I Whisper Do You Hear Me?*  
INTAGLIO AND LITHOGRAPHY, 16X12IN, 2009**



**DION FLETCHER, *COPPER PLATES*, COPPER, 2011**





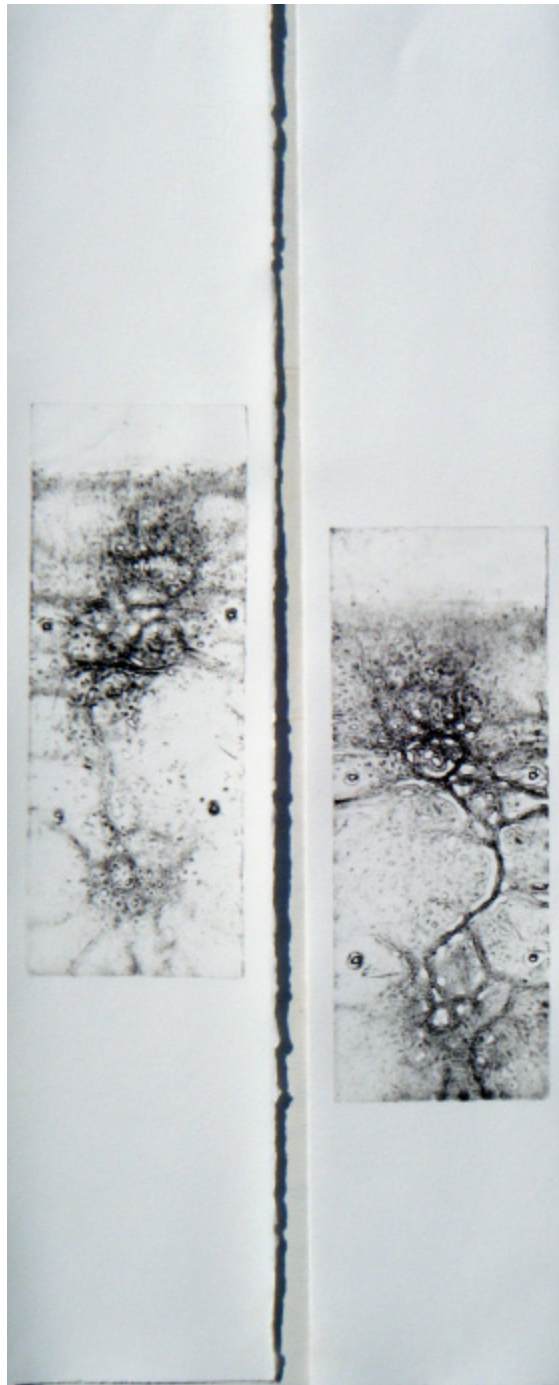
**DION FLETCHER, THAMES RIVER, VIDEO STILL, 2011**



**DION FLETCHER, GREAT LAKE, VIDEO STILL, 2011**



**DION FLETCHER, KUU, VIDEO STILL, 2011**



**DION FLETCHER, *WRITING LANDSCAPE*,  
INTAGLIO, 5 X 30IN (EACH), 2011**

# RAVENS FLYING UPSIDE AND OTHER STORIES

>> PETER MORIN



This writing is my spoken voice.

Colonization does this it silences the art/artists and colonization silences the children's abilities artists have the ability to interface with society in deep meaningful ways the creative act becomes a new reflection of history and a potential future the creative act becomes an invitation for new ways of knowing There is still a lot of silencing in our indigenous communities there is a direct link to the oppressive silences of the Residential Schools there is an implication of this silence that is tied to resource extraction from the lands of indigenous peoples Art again and again has been a useful tool to re-dress injustice oppression genocide and indigenous art connected to this North America/South America and has a history of re-dress the rules connected to creative acts and the cultural practice within indigenous communities are too sophisticated and unique to not document the record of movement on the land

Art can be a document of this history and Artists can become documenters of this history

Part of my story is connect to this history mom went to the Day School and the aunties/great-aunties/uncles/great-uncles/cousins went to the Residential School this history isn't talked about with great clarity there are no dates and no times attached to this history sometimes it seems that there are only whispers and learned behaviours it has been a childhood of silent but full stories stories of survival and no survival

And these stories have helped carve my own full story

My full story is directly connected to the effects of the Residential Schools  
My full story which sits on my chest like a ghost every time I talk with a

Child/

Youth/

Elder/

Family/

social worker/

foster kid/

foster parent/

grandmother/

grandfather/

cousin/

aunty/

uncle/

sister/

brother/

friend/

white person/

person of colour but I feel guilty writing this I didn't physically attend the Residential School (even though I worked as a counsellor at what was left of the Lower Post Residential School in 2005) It's more like the Residential School attended to me the Residential School taught me how to wash floors on my hands and knees the Residential School taught me to scrub walls to get them clean the Residential School taught me to bow my head while I was praying the Residential School taught me that my contributions could be overlooked the Residential School taught me to feel powerless in my culture the Residential School interrupted my ability to talk to my grandmother in meaningful ways the Residential School interrupted my ability to ask questions about how to shape my own learning journey

My story is my dream of Ravens flying upside down In my dream I asked the Raven to return the spirit of childhood back to our villages back to the people and I was not scared to make this request In my dream thousands of crows and ravens flying upside down returning our childhood back to us because I knew we were finally able to use them again

I had a dream about asking Raven (Tsesk'iye Cho A.K.A. Big Crow) about returning the children home that the Raven had taken the spirits of the children to keep them safe during the Residential School time because the Raven knew something we did not I asked the Raven to return the child home and I wasn't afraid to make this request I had another dream about the Raven (Tsesk'iye Cho) In the dream I reached down inside the mouth of the Raven and turned it inside out to reveal the atomic explosion that happened inside the body of the Raven

I had a dream that Tsesk'iye Cho was keeping the spirits of the children safe until it was time to return them back to the community I asked Tsesk'iye Cho to bring them back to fly over the communities and drop the spirit of childhood back into the community to drop goodness back into our land

I remember a story that my cousin David Rattray told David was telling stories to a circle of youth in Watson Lake YT it was during a youth educational conference David talked about a starving hunter and the starving hunter's prayer to Tsesk'iye Cho his family was starving David said Tsesk'iye Cho was also a hunter with a hunter's packsack sometimes the hunter's packsacks are too full David said the starving hunter made his prayer and Tsesk'iye Cho appeared and flew in a straight line the starving hunter followed the black bird then all of a sudden Tsesk'iye Cho

flew upside down like he was spilling out a heavy load to make his flight easier the  
starving hunter walked to the place where he saw Tsesk'ye Cho fly upside down and  
found that there was an animal standing there no more starving an act of kindness from  
this black bird

You might be thinking birds don't fly upside down

In 2009 I make 12 performative interventions in the gallery these performances acted  
as documents for the shared spiritual pain caused by Residential Schools I am naming  
spiritual pain as an interruption in the vibration of the community an example of spiritual  
pain for us to draw upon is a baby's cry when we hear a baby's cry we all  
feel pain the Residential School is the culmination of hundreds/thousands of crying  
children and youth who have learned to push their pain downwards inside their bodies  
this is a spirit in pain

### *12 making Objects A.K.A. First Nations DADA*

The word DADA in the title refers to an artistic movement that was initiated after the  
Second World War

Dada is also a word in Tahltan Dada refers to time

Dada is also a word for father

DADA is also the actions of Tsesk'ye Cho when they turn upside down

DADA Artists (makers of historical documents) were disillusioned by the death of 8 million  
people (during WW2) and created/developed a new-styled artistic response to the death  
machine

DADA was a movement about trauma and grief and spiritual pain

DADA was the end of silent historical narratives (A.K.A. painting on canvas) and the end of  
rules/no rules/death of rules and it was a movement about addressing trauma

DADA also has very specific rules about utilizing chance

Rules/no rules/rules ha!

I chose DADA because DADA changed the world

And I felt that change

DADA also required us to shift our relationship/understanding to the word Art It  
allowed for new locations of knowing/knowledge DADA gave a voice to the people  
and DADA strongly integrated colonial structures of power/power over we needed  
a vehicle for personal agency *to be the change we want to see in the world* and the  
silencing of indigenous artists is a part of Residential Schools is a part of the  
60s scoop (A.K.A. The Stolen Generation) is a part of a foster care system  
which sees aboriginal children 17 percent more likely to be removed from their homes  
is a part of the colonial/land/resource/extraction machine

Art/ists have a specific responsibility to address this history  
And there is a history of art connected to this land this history is thousands of  
years old and there is a record within this art history (this aboriginal art history) (which  
acts as a document) indigenous art has reflected on trauma indigenous art  
remembers

You might say that the artwork documents changes in the community  
Indigenous people recognize change embrace it  
Perhaps if you didn't embrace change and you are a traveller on the land someone in your  
family might die this might be why elders started saying educate yourself in the ways of  
the white man because they were trying to keep us from dying  
The artmaking reflects this organized transformation porcupine quills turn into beads  
turn into buttons turn into blankets turn into silver a flow like the water on the land

I was travelling back from the North travelling by myself I was too tired  
and travelling faster than I should destination bound get home get  
sleep then I saw Tsesk'iy'e Cho flying then I saw Tsesk'iy'e Cho  
fly upside down I remembered David's story there was a deer  
a deer about ready to step out onto the road Tsesk'iy'e Cho gave me enough time to slow  
down and saved my life

I worked with an advocacy group on Salt Spring Island one of my co-workers asked me  
about a story she was told her name was Judy Stevenson she was a writer for the  
Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples she was told a story about how a  
Raven flew upside down

I've found an upside down raven in the pages of *Art of the Northwest Coast* written by  
Aldona Jonaitis This writing accompanies Figure 5.12:

*This chief poses on a box surrounded by his clan's ceremonial regalia and masks.  
He holds two raven rattles, as is conventional, upside down, so that the ravens  
would not fly away.<sup>1</sup>*

Our artists have been documenting our history for thousands of years These artworks are  
constantly interrupted by colonization our documents destroyed by colonization  
indigenous people relive the burning of libraries everyday residential school is an  
act of burning the children are wiped out and behind glass replaced back into the  
community with spiritual pain amongst other things

I end by re-voicing two teachings from a good person named Louise Bourgeois  
Louise Bourgeois was an artist, feminist, teacher, storyteller, textile manipulator, and

---

1 Jonaitis, Aldona. *Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006) 150.

keeper of stories:

*Art is the  
acceptance  
of solitude  
You express your  
solitude  
by being  
an artist  
if you can  
if you have it in  
you.*<sup>2</sup>

*I need my memories. They are my documents. I keep watch over them. They are my privacy, and I am intensely jealous over them.*<sup>3</sup>

I bring Louise into the circle today with me she is one of my teachers and helps me to stay in the world of art and artmaking I bring these teachings into the circle today because they will help shape and guide what I want to share when we talk about the Residential School and art and transformation and healing and reconciliation and return

Louise says *memory is a document*

I say Art is a document

I say Art is written in our language

I say this community memory is our *documents*

And this is here in the circle with me marking my return to Tsesk'iy'e Cho documents and Tsesk'iy'e Cho writing and Tsesk'iy'e Cho art and rows upon rows of upside Ravens with space in their bellies dropping off the spirits of the children that have been kept safe and back to their families/communities/land/histories/art histories

I never surrendered my power to write Tahltan documents of Tahltan history

---

2 Jonaitis 11.

3 Jonaitis 43.

# SONGLINES, STORIES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

>> A CONVERSATION WITH CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE,  
ELWOOD JIMMY, AND CHRIS BOSE

[Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Elwood Jimmy spend a few minutes conspiring (aka breathing together) and reminiscing about projects past while they wait for Chris Bose to join them in an online conversation]

Cheryl L'Hirondelle: Okay, Chris is with us now, so why don't we start with introductions. Who wants to go first? Chris?

Chris Bose: Okay, *Weytk*, Chris *enskweskt*, my name is Chris Bose and I'm a Secwepemc and N'laka pamux war-party baby. Also, I'm a multi-media artist, and musician and writer, and I've been exploring songlines<sup>1</sup> for the past, maybe, year? I've been really interested in them and really fascinated by songs on the land and the shape the sonic profile makes of the land.

Elwood Jimmy: My name is Elwood Jimmy and I recently moved to Toronto to take on the position of Executive Director with the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective. I'm originally from the Thunderchild First Nation up in northwestern Saskatchewan, but I spent much of my life living in Regina. I worked there for a lot of different places but mainly with Sâkêwêwak Artists Collective. A lot of the work that I have undertaken there has connected me with a lot of artists, including both of you, working on different community-engaged projects.

CL: Cheryl L'Hirondelle is my name. I live in Toronto, but I also live on the road wherever I have been asked to come and engage, perform and create. I have also been working as a community-engaged artist,<sup>2</sup> a musician, singer-songwriter, new media artist, performance artist and storyteller since 1995. As of late I have also been getting more into curatorial work, critical writing and cultural theory.

Like you, Chris, I have a deep interest in the concept of songlines. For me it is from this point of view of being nomadic and always wanting to map and echolocate myself wherever it is I am. A couple years ago when I lived in Saskatchewan and I used to tour with my ex and now ndn-adopted brother, Joseph Naytowhow, I recall that every time we were on the highway we always had songs that we were singing as we were looking at the beautiful vistas before us. It wasn't conscious, like, "Oh, we're making a *songline*." And we definitely hadn't read Bruce

---

1 Songlines has become an agreed-upon term that many Aboriginal musicians are using to investigate and implement sonic mapping practices here in this land now known as Canada.

2 "Community Art could be loosely defined as a way of creating art in which professional artists collaborate more or less intensively with people who don't normally actively engage in the arts." <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community\\_arts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_arts)>



Chatwin's book *The Songlines*<sup>3</sup> to be referencing that term.

It wasn't until 2004 in Vancouver, though, when I was going for a walk with an old roommate and she pointed out to me that every time we turned a corner and were going down another street I had a melody that I'd be singing under my breath. I was really grateful that she mentioned that because around that time grunt gallery asked me to come up with a project, and I had been thinking that I wanted to map the city. But because I'm more of a conceptual artist than a visual artist and stronger using my sonic and vocal sensibilities, I knew then that I could make an audio map of the city using my voice. It wasn't until 2007 that I met Some Saami Joikers—Frode Fjelheim, Ulla Pirttijarvi and Per Niila Stalka—who told me how their way of singing was their vocal mapping method. After that when things started to really coalesce that we're reimagining an Indigenous earth-based practice, an alternative to the mainstream of the artist-alone-in-the-room.

CB: Cool.

CL: Elwood, let's go back to you. If you don't mind I'd like to be the older woman who bosses people around [laughter]. Can you go back to what we were talking about before Chris came online about a community-engaged practice? It will set up why we are talking about songlines and the Kamloops area.

EJ: Chris, to give you a background, Cheryl and I met many years ago in 2001 in northwestern

3 Originally published in 1987, "*The Songlines* is a 1986 book written by Bruce Chatwin, combining fiction and non-fiction. Chatwin describes a trip to Australia which he has taken for the express purpose of researching Aboriginal song and its connections to nomadic travel... the text has been criticised for being masculinist, colonialist, simplistic and therefore unreliable as both a source on European Australians and Aboriginal culture." <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Songlines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Songlines)>



### VANCOUVER SONGLINES (2008)

#### NADYA KWANDIBENS PHOTO

Saskatchewan when she was doing her performance run, *Cistēmaw Iyiniw Ohci*.<sup>4</sup> Over time we have developed an awesome working relationship, with me often as the curator/programmer and Cheryl an ongoing guest collaborator and artist. We have developed a few projects over the last several years together working with places like Common Weal Community Arts,<sup>5</sup> Sākēwēwak Artists' Collective<sup>6</sup> and the Godfrey Dean Gallery in Yorkton.<sup>7</sup>

4 Translates to mean "For the Tobacco Being".

5 Common Weal Community Arts—<[www.commonweal-arts.com](http://www.commonweal-arts.com)>—is a Saskatchewan-based organization that links artists and communities to animate long-term positive and social change that Elwood worked with from 2006 to 2008.

6 Sākēwēwak Artist's Collective—<<http://www.sakewewak.ca>>—has a mandate to ensure that Aboriginal artists within the city of Regina and surrounding areas are consistently provided with the space and environment that allows them to develop their self-determined artistic practices through critical exchange with their peers and audiences. Elwood has been involved since 1997.

7 Godfrey Dean Art Gallery—<[www.deangallery.ca](http://www.deangallery.ca)>—is located in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, and has been in operation since the 1950s. Elwood was their Aboriginal Curator in Residence from 2004 to 2006.

I have always admired the work that Cheryl has done with different communities. Most of my work is community-based as well and predominantly undertaken in Saskatchewan, and I feel like that's my home community. When working on these projects it's always a negotiation. Coming into that process, as a curator for instance, I'll have a vision for meaningfully engaging with the community and the artists involved. And I think that is one of the pillars of my methodology is trying to create that space where there is meaningful engagement on both sides, where there is this reciprocal experience that happens. Sometimes those can be tangible spaces, sometimes not. In working with Cheryl, those projects have taken so many different formats. They have happened on city buses, on the radio, on the internet, in people's homes, et cetera. And that is what is exciting to me about these collaborations is that they are never the same. They are always evolving and always fluid and responsive to what is happening in the community at that particular time and place.

CL: I'm like an infiltrator, always doing a sneak-up into someone else's territory. It's not with malicious intentions—more like circumstantial because of the work I engage in and how nomadic I've been. I've approached my art practice from the groundedness of *nêhiyawin* (a cree world view) and that groundedness comes from using echolocation and the language. I definitely could use a t-shirt that says "I come in peace."

EJ: Yes, I think that whole process you just described is really grounding. Not just as a curator, an artist, an arts programmer or a person working in the community but on a personal level too. They go hand in hand for me. Coming to Toronto, the network I had was not big and many of the people I did know were really only in passing. So it is still that process of getting to know the community and individuals. I am starting to make these little connections and knowing that some of those will lead to something more substantial, and some of them won't. I am just trying to find my way within this community and to become aware of where the connections are.

I think about my practice now and how I've been looking and thinking more about subtle types of practices and activities that people might think that because they are so subtle or so quiet, they think they may not have potential for significant impact. But for myself, even just incorporating beading or gardening into a practice, there are stories that can be told there. There are numerous projects there. My intuition and my instinct tell me that there is something really beautiful that can emerge from a small intimate process that can be the foundation for something bigger and something more connected, a bridge between a lot of different communities.



**CISTĒMAW IYINIW OHCI (2001)**  
**ELWOOD JIMMY—PHOTO**

CL: When I think about a community-engaged practice such as we have and some of the projects we've done together and not together, when you think of it, sometimes they are so simple. It's like a puzzle. All the pieces are on the table and they are all right-side up and the community has already done the edges, and all you need to do is to start looking at the different shapes, colours, textures and patterns. If one looks at it everyday maybe you get mesmerized and not know where to start. So it might take an outsider to visit and say, "Hey, look what you've got here." And it takes that person who maybe is not from there to come in and make things obvious by seeing from a slightly different point of view—having an ulterior motive and sneaking up—instead, in this case, with a lateral and friendly, life-affirming point of view. If you think about it, let's look at the Sâkêwêwak Storytellers' Bus project<sup>8</sup> that we did last February in Regina. It was so beautiful seeing how everyone wanted to tell the bus driver literally where to go and take hold of the microphone being passed around the bus so they could share their stories, knowledge and songs. You had a previous working relationship with city transit and you knew ... how many people you'd have at your festival for a lunch presentation on an

8 First held in 2001 as the Distinguished Storytellers Series, the Sâkêwêwak Storytellers Festival evolved into an annual multidisciplinary festival that presents a diverse array of renowned storytellers, artists and academics from around the world, who engage audiences in contemporary cultural expression, thought and dialogue derived from oral traditions. Cheryl L'Hirondelle was the tour guide/performer of the very first Storytellers Bus Tour—an afternoon bus tour featuring a performance and tour of contemporary sites and stories of people living in the city of Regina's core neighbourhoods. Audiences were invited to contribute a story/history about a specific place in the city's core neighbourhood and the city bus driver took us to the location.

extremely cold February afternoon. But maybe it took me to come in as a visitor—though more like an old friend, eh?—and provide a few ideas from what I've experienced on the road or other things I've been inspired by to help you see possibilities from another point of view. From there, we just starting riffing and, voila! We created something that the community really took ownership of! People started saying things like, "next time let's pick up people and for a free ride they have to tell a story." What a beautiful legacy for Sâkêwêwak and the Regina community!

EJ: Yes, and as a programmer, engaging with alternative and emerging practices is exciting.



**SÂKÊWÊWAK STORYTELLERS BUS TOUR**  
—CAREY SHAW PHOTO

CL: I don't see you as a programmer, though, I see you more as a curator and animator and still something more. Hopefully this conversation and this project that we'll discuss here may help to bring what that is into the fore. You've never been just a guy working at an organization. There's a magic you create. Maybe that is just good curating and programming.

Chris, it would be really great for you to talk because I know you've done some community-engaged work as well and that you're very involved in your home community.

CB: Well, right now I'm engaged with the community doing community workshops with youth in the school district—Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal. And but I've been doing this for quite a few years now, different workshops throughout the community, helping curate art shows, bringing together artists to work on projects, to work on group exhibitions, push the next person into a solo show and as well I've also worked with Elders. I've been lucky enough to have a couple of contracts with the tribal council and go around and interview Elders talking about traditional knowledge and just documenting what they know and the stories they have about the land and the Kelmuc, the people. And so I love doing that. And every chance I get to visit an elder and listen to their stories I try to take it. So I'm really kind of, I do a lot of work throughout town, with different organizations, and it's really good because it keeps my finger on the pulse of what is going on. And this summer I'm going to curate a show with Tania Willard, Adrian Stimson, Bracken Corlett and Cease Wyss.

We're going to call it *Official Denial* and it's going to be about the apology. And I'm sort of getting their response to the apology because it hasn't really critically been done yet as much as it should be. It's something we can explore. But as well, I also do a lot of exploring. I go hiking, I go biking, I take my kids out onto the land and I bring my drum or a guitar. And you know I sing out there and try to speak as much of the language, Secwepemcstin or N'laka pamuxstin, that I can because an elder told me recently that we need to go out onto the land and speak our language because the land needs to hear it. The land will remember, and the more it remembers the more songs it will give us, the more knowledge it will share.

Right now I am engaged with the



**URONNDNLAND (2004)**  
**CANDICE HOPKINS PHOTO**

community doing workshops with youth in the school district—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. I have been doing this for quite a few years now as well as curating art shows, bringing together artists to work on projects, present in group exhibitions and pushing the next person into a solo show, et cetera. I have also worked with Elders. I have been lucky enough to have a couple of contracts with the tribal council to go around and interview Elders to talk about traditional knowledge and document the stories they have about the land. I love doing that. I try to take every chance I get to visit an Elder and listen to their stories. They have a lot of knowledge. I do a lot of work throughout town, with different organizations, and it's really good because it keeps my finger on the pulse of what's going on.

CL: In the mid-90s I moved to northwest Saskatchewan. For five years I was a co-storyteller-in-residence for Meadow Lake Tribal Council with Joseph, who I mentioned earlier. We were hired to go and gather traditional knowledge by spending time with old people.

A dear colleague, actually one of Elwood's mentors, the late Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskewew used to always tell me that I got my Master's

in the bush by doing that. And I think that is so true. I was able to learn by washing dishes while there was an Elder sitting and talking at their kitchen table. I think about the stories and the information they shared—whether by just being in their company, by hearing them speak or by going on trips with them—really has influenced all my work since. I realize how previous to that I was picking up on things intuitively, like how the hair on the back of your head stands up to tell you to pay attention. So my antennae were out, but it just didn't have reference points to ground me until I recognized that for me *nēhiyawin* (a Cree world view) is my tool for survival.

EL: Yes. Having that experience of growing up in my own area or region that my family is from, it has been similar. But then coming to a new city, a new territory that is not your own, you have to find those reference points. But as those reference points diverge within each individual community there are some similarities, some points of reference that are universal within our Indigenous communities. Moving across the country now puts me in the different position of being the one that's the visitor, or the interloper [laughs]. I'm trying to find ways to really address and embrace that.

CL: Chris, I think if we're talking about a future project in your territory, if instead of it being songwriters just composing some new tunes whose melodies rise and fall off your horizon lines, what I find fascinating is the groundedness you have in your place. It's really great that you are taking your kids out going to spend time out on the land, to listen, speak and sing to the land. I would like to extend that to a community level, open the process to others. What those old people told you is really important and, while they were sharing it with you, a new generation, it becomes our

responsibility to do the same.

CB: Yes, definitely. I do a lot of traditional storytelling in the schools and for different groups. I learned a couple new ones this year by interacting with Elders—site-specific stories tied to the land and location. I was able to expand the core stories I had and further venture into our territory. Being comfortable here has taken time, but the more I travel the more I am also happy to return home. I know the land really well and I am starting to expand my own knowledge base of sacred places, and I want to share it with my kids and other people, to bring them and relate the story of “this is what happened here” back in the day. Let's breathe new life into it and keep on carrying these traditions.

CL: Yes! I have another project that I'm working on besides the Songlines project called “Prison Songs,” where I'm co-writing songs with women in prisons all across this land now known as Canada. The project has thematic ties to the chain gang songs that were archived many years ago by John A. Lomax and his son Alan Lomax down in the states.<sup>9</sup> So on the one hand I'm carrying on the tradition that there have always been these work songs that help sustain people through really trying times, but on the other hand mine is an inclusive practice where all the attending program staff at the prisons are acknowledged for their contributions. Plus, all the women's names are recorded and song ownership and copyright distributed evenly. So

---

9 “Through a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, Lomax was able to set out in June 1933 on the first recording expedition under the Library of Congress' auspices, with Alan Lomax (then eighteen years old) in tow... They toured Texas prison farms recording work songs, reels, ballads, and blues from prisoners...” Source: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_A.\\_Lomax](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_A._Lomax)>



it is carrying on a tradition while changing the score and raising awareness about how many Native people are incarcerated.

Back to your land and the project at hand, though, what do you think would work? Could it be a process of teaching people a story and then having them go and telling it to the land? Would it be like a visioning? I don't mean anything ceremonial, it could be going out and walking and just having that time with the land. I would really love to contribute to this cultural transmission that particularly the kids will get, since there are so many other things through life they are going to be bombarded with. But it will leave some sort of impression on them, and later they come back to it and reflect and "*remember that summer when...*"

CB: There's only one way to find out and that is to do it. We could gather a group of people and go to some place like the Balancing Rock, Skelep Rock, and I could tell a story that I recently learned about why animals stopped wearing moccasins. Coyote brought that about and the story is tied to that rock. I use a lot of the language so I would really encourage their participation by repeating the words. I'd bring my drum and rattle and get really rowdy and animated. So actually going there physically and getting everyone to learn a little bit of the language and sing the songs that I know...

CL: It sounds brilliant and makes me think of something I heard about—it might have been either the Greek or the Romans who used to

believe that genius was not something that a person could embody but it was a spirit that lived in the walls of the building they were in. And so if someone like a philosopher or a writer showed up and were diligent and focused in what they did, the spirit of genius would come to visit them and channel through them. I really think that there is a lot of spirits and knowledge held in places.



**DEWDNEY AVENUE PROJECT (2008),  
CAREY SHAW—PHOTO**

CB: Yes, for sure.

CL: And it's that process of showing up and being there and that everyone has also an opportunity to contribute to it which is so different than what the mainstream music industry is all about, where only a select few get to be the star.

EJ: I think that what you are saying happens not just in music but in other practices—that notion of director, or visual artist, and how those mainstream models and practices get

privileged and sometimes communities will not see an entry point. That is why I have enjoyed working with both of you because with the community projects we have worked on this hierarchy starts getting flattened. The entry points for engagement are made a little more accessible.

Some of the projects I have done with you, Cheryl, have been so related to site and circumstance, and it ties into what you were talking about where knowledge or genius is embedded in the place. I think about the Dewdney Avenue project<sup>10</sup> we worked on. There is so much history housed in that one particular neighbourhood, land, that area. And not just colonial history that is really evident there currently, but this history that has gone on for hundreds and thousands of years—this unique site of transition and transaction between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous—not just people, but plants and landscapes as well. This is where my interest lies when I do these kinds of community-based projects to unearth these stories, not just for myself but for the communities that I try and work with. Understanding where we came from provides us with this incredible knowledge and awareness that I think really contributes to moving the community forward. When I envision collaborating in Chris’s area, on his land with this piece, I hope that is what I can engage with, what I can learn from and what I can also contribute to.

---

<sup>10</sup> The Dewdney Avenue Project (2007–2008) was an interdisciplinary art project that engaged individuals and organizations housed within the neighborhood of North Central Regina in discussion and interaction around notions of site, circumstance and voice in relation to the history of the geographical space now known as the city of Regina. Dewdney Avenue was chosen as a starting and focal point for the project because of its geographic, social, economic and historical significance within the city of Regina.

CL: When I was doing research for the new media exhibition *RE:counting coup*<sup>11</sup> I curated, I was looking through some books with colour plates of petroglyphs and pictographs. The ochre was so saturated, so rich, it was alive. It really made me think that those pictographs, they want to be noticed. They are calling out, saying, “Look at me, I’m still here.”

CB: I was really obsessed with going to pictograph sites a few years ago. I still am and I got that vibe too. In BC it’s hard to get a sense of permanence like you think of in Europe or other places where you can see an eight-hundred-year-old castle, or a thousand-year-old city. Here we moved around, we’re nomadic, and our structures were ephemeral—nothing really concretely built on the land until I saw my first pictographs sometime in the early 2000s. And as soon as I saw those thought, “man, we’ve been here forever, and everything I have been taught is a lie.” And it immediately cemented me to the land and I had my drum with me so I belted out a song. It was really an awakening experience.

CL: They seem like milestones, like signposts along the land.

CB: A lot of them are border markings, and many are along current-day highways that were our old Native footpaths, our old trade routes. I recently went to Vancouver and stopped along the way at a rest stop where they had an

---

<sup>11</sup> *RE:counting coup* was a new media exhibition commissioned by imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival that looked at the relational history of Indigenous object-making with that of a contemporary visual and new media art practice. Curated by Cheryl L’Hirondelle, the group exhibition profiled innovative works by KC Adams, Jordan Bennett, James Luna, Archer Pechawis and Lisa Reihana. These artists’ work attests to Indigenous ingenuity with the realization of performative objects, installations and events that move far beyond what has been over-simplified as solely an orally centred transmission processes to that of an ever-evolving and inventive multi-media tradition.



information booth that stated that the Coquihalla Highway had only been successfully traversed by ranchers and settlers in the early nineteenth century. I laughed and I said, “Who do you think showed them that road?” [laughter] So I graffitied it up.

CL: Made a pictograph did you?

CB: Yeah, I put in my two bits.

EJ: Since moving to Toronto, I’ve been walking a couple of hours a day—a time to focus and find some clarity. But, walking through downtown and different neighbourhoods, you can’t help but notice the absence of things. A couple of days ago I was walking down University Avenue and all along that street they have these banners that say, “Welcome to Toronto, we’ve been expecting you.” And they have all these different versions of welcome—in German, French, English, Italian and Spanish. And then I wonder where the acknowledgement of this place’s original people is. It’s such a simple thing, but that acknowledgement could start to make a huge difference. I think about the projects that you’ve done with syllabics. To me it’s these small actions that can become the basis for something bigger.

CL: Just having that presence there, it may just be in the periphery that you notice it. But at least it’s there and maybe subtly exists as opposed to the huge glaring omission we have all experienced for long enough now. I think about all the kinds of worldviews and language groups that have been on this land for a long time—the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat. It would be poignant to make a small but meaningful shift and change those welcome signs to include us all.



**URONNDNLAND (2004)  
CANDICE HOPKINS PHOTO**

Chris, Elwood and I were referring to a piece I did in 2004 along the side of the highway that cuts through Morley Reserve. I was writing in syllabics with stones, same as how people do in English as tags like tourists, grads and alumni do. I was thinking more poetically though, how our Indigenous languages are based in the land that we are from. It is this engagement that we have with the land—how the land gauges how we hear, how we sound.

I have a slight bit of trepidation to come into your territory. I was in Creston a couple years ago visiting the Ktunaxa<sup>12</sup> and was told that they used to call the Cree something like *kootski-owee*. It means the deceivers. They told me an old story about how Cree raiding parties would go into their territory and steal women, horses and food—not in that order. Elwood and I would definitely be guests in an area where we were once enemies.

<sup>12</sup> “Ktunaxa (pronounced ‘k-too-nah-ha’) people have occupied the lands adjacent to the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers and the Arrow Lakes of British Columbia, Canada for more than 10,000 years.” <<http://www.ktunaxa.org>>

CB: That happens if you just go over the mountains. There are around thirty-eight different languages here. I recently asked a buddy of mine who is from Chilcotin, “how do you say Secwepemc in your language?” He looked me dead in the eye and he said, “enemy.” [Laughter.] I was like, “peace bro, peace. Those days are behind us.”

CL: This reminds me of the various stages of reconciliation we’re all engaged in—nation to nation. Can you both comment on government’s “apology” and how it impacted you and your communities?

CB: Sure. Well, the apology was personally frustrating and amazing to hear at the same time. It was something I never thought I would hear in my lifetime. Both of my parents went to residential school, and they were never ever the same afterwards. So it has had a direct impact on my life. I think artists are the voice, or a voice for the people, and there has not been enough discourse between artists about the apology. What did it mean? What did it accomplish? What was it really all about? Let’s dig deep and find out because it is in part a way of our own reconciliation. I downloaded it immediately from the DIA<sup>13</sup> website and I chopped it up, and I still keep chopping it up, because I need reconciliation, because I lost my parents in that place. So for me it is a way of moving through what they went through and making peace with them by confronting it. And in doing so I push it towards other people as well, involve the community, involve non-Natives and as many people as I can to see it, explore it, question it and deal with it.

EJ: Yeah, I remember watching the apology. I

<sup>13</sup> DIA is an old acronym for Department of Indian Affairs. The name of the department continues to change depending on reigning political party and is currently AANDC (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada).

was in Kelowna and we were watching it at the Alternator Gallery and it was just such a powerful and really, really emotional experience. I remember being in that gallery watching it on a big screen with a number of other people there. It was just so emotional how everybody was—this room full of Indians bawling their heads off, not for the apology but for the people telling their stories. It was almost this moment of collectively addressing this trauma that I don’t think anybody was prepared for. I think people were expecting to be moved and be emotional, but I don’t think to that extent. The energy in that room was so intense. And having that similar experience of having both my parents go to residential school and having one parent deal with it or address those issues, better than the other.

Although I never went to residential school, I experienced its legacy, being the child of two of these people who went through that trauma. I agree there is a lot of work still to be done. I think about when people from every culture where there has been trauma or loss, one of the things that as human beings we want to do is to incorporate some sort of ritual or process to get us through these traumatic moments of loss.

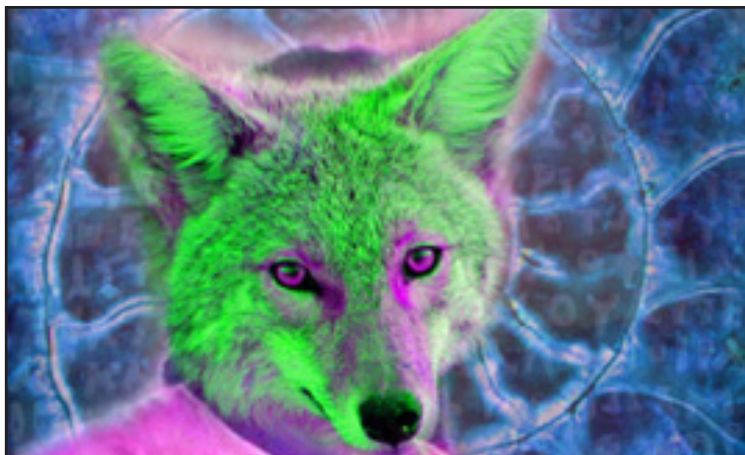
The apology could have been such an amazing foundation and start towards reconciliation and towards a ritual process on a collective scale. I think you are right that more discourse and activity needs to happen. The process started and then ended so quickly and I do not think it is over. It mobilized and got the community together for something really potentially meaningful between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. But again, the ending and non-resolution was so abrupt. I don’t know how healthy that was in the end, just to have a door close as quickly as it was opened.

I am really encouraged by the conversations we have had, Chris, about the work that you want to pursue as an artist and as a curator and as a programmer because there is just so much there. There are layers of history, emotion, personal and collective narrative. It's all so dense. And I think that process and that exploration definitely needs more support and more

rigour and more engagement, not just within our community but the larger community as well. And we need to try to find meaningful ways that engage both sides because there is always that danger when you start going into these contentious areas for non-Aboriginal people where they shut down. It comes down to making those spaces, tangible or not, where everybody feels like they can engage in a really meaningful, honest kind of way.

CL: Maybe that is the part in reconciliation that we as artists do. We are offered these opportunities to create new working models, rituals and essentially Indigenous methodologies, albeit contemporary ones—contemporary in that we are now working in the whole world and must be aware of all we are part of. For me this has always been part of the strength of Cree language in that it has the ability to be inclusive and generous.

One of the models I am using as an overarching meta-narrative in the way I do Songlines is the incorporation of the Cree teepee pole teachings. I want to symbolically place a teepee pole at every new location where I make a songline to eventually erect a giant



**DIGITAL STILL AND QR CODE FROM SHOW  
CHRIS BOSE**

teepee over top of the earth. The thing about the teepee pole teachings is that each pole is associated with a life-affirming value, and the teepee itself is a holistic model, a physical structure based on what is now known as the Fibonacci sequence. It's the same numbering system as much plant life is based on—how things spiral outwards. So this way, even though I'm entering someone else's territory,

instead of raiding I'm bringing a life-affirming value that has the potential to grow as my M.O.

Also, because of my last projects in Vancouver and Toronto that both used varying amounts of technology to both make and demonstrate the projects, I realize the need to now make a Songlines app—some way to document what I'm seeing/experiencing on the land and the melody and lyrics it is inspiring. For Vancouver Songlines, my team created a really elegant website where people could also upload the sounds of that place. But I think that was just scratching the surface, and there's a way others could similarly use it to document their own experience. It would be great to do some beta testing on your land.

CB: We are using QR codes<sup>14</sup> for the group show that's on in Kelowna at Alternator Gallery that we copied and put all over town. If you scan the QR code it will take you to something one of the artists has posted online, either a video, text or some music.

CL: That's great. We could experiment with them for our project too. I like being subversive and experiencing reality from another perspective, so instead of getting people staring at yet another little screen I'd like the app to get people back to nature. It could be a worthy challenge to create something that makes a link between contemporary QR codes and our ancestor's pictographs.

<sup>14</sup> "QR Code (abbreviated from Quick Response Code) is the trademark for a type of matrix barcode (or two-dimensional code) first designed for the automotive industry[...] Although initially used to track parts in vehicle manufacturing, QR Codes are now (as of 2012) used over a much wider range of applications[...] Users with a camera phone equipped with the correct reader application can scan the image of the QR Code to display text, contact information, connect to a wireless network, or open a web page in the telephone's browser. This act of linking from physical world objects is termed hardlinking or object hyperlinking."  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QR\\_code](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QR_code)>

I hate to ask, but are there any areas in your territory that have been completely razed? I know up in northern BC, for instance, there is a mountain that has completely been taken down because it was made of coal. I think about tragedies like that, the loss of a distinct horizon, another song that won't be sung.

CB: There are mines all around us, so yes, they have radically altered the landscape around us. We can't eat the food we grow, we can't drink the water and we can't hunt the game.

CL: This gets back to what you were saying at the beginning of this conversation was about using the language to speak to the land. It would be interesting then, on a lot of levels, to think about what we now need to say to the land and what kind of a song is left to sing. The biggest challenge may be how collectively as a community will we create or bridge the chasm of what was before and what we are left with. Elwood, that is your area of expertise—making those bridges, knowing how to read the community. You also like to walk, so hopefully the songs and the project will have an innate sense of movement and will be at a pace that people will want to keep up with.

EJ: Even though we both have community-engaged practices with what we do, I have been a bit more on the other side, living in my home community for so long and working almost exclusively with that particular community. Like working with North Central Regina, for example, or even surrounding rural First Nations communities and having this sense of their dynamic, their views of where it could go, of just working with something that has become very familiar. And it has brought up a lot of internal questions now that I am living in a different part of the country. It's definitely a challenge for what I think my approach would now be. Would it be different? Would it be the same? It's all

new for me. Those are questions that probably won't get answered until I really just jump right in and actually engage the community or communities here, in an actual project, which I hopefully want to do sooner than later—to be engaged with my own practice and do that in a new community. So it will be an interesting process to be on the other side of the equation and working with you, Chris, who is connected to a particular community. It will take me out of my comfort zone and be the person coming in and learning from that community and also finding our common ground. It's exciting, and it's something that I really, really look forward to.

CB: I've spent a great deal of time in this community without a vehicle, so I have walked so many of

the streets. I know all of the shortcuts and I have also done tons of hiking, exploring, four-by-fours and driving too. It's been a great twenty years of getting to know this place. I'm pretty happy to be invited to do this with you both.

CL: [laughs] I'm laughing because you're saying that you're happy to be invited and really it's you inviting us to your land after we've already sneaked up—typical backwards way of doing things on my part [laughter]. I am really thrilled and honoured, Chris, that you will share so many things with us, your stories, your land, your language.

CB: Sounds good.

EJ: Sounds good.

ALL: Bye.

# LITTLE NOTEBOOK

>> BO YEUNG





**PHOTO TAKEN BY DON LAWRENCE IN OUR FIRST COLLABORATED EXHIBITION *RECKON*, TRU ART GALLERY, KAMLOOPS BC, 2010.**



It started with a night of painting pears in the studio, our friendship. We went to university together and collaborated in art projects. We joined hands very tightly, weaving our stories together and creating new ones. Moving to Dawson City, YT, together after graduating, Megan, she became my witness:

Stories change as time pushes forward, and the past you knew is changed by the stories you learn now.

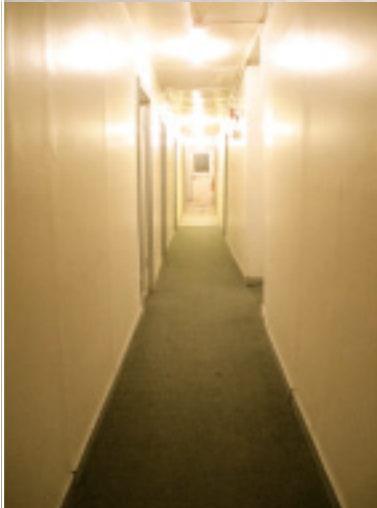
Stories told become mirrors of your own, sometimes only the broken fractured pieces of reflection fit; sometimes it is a backwards idea of your own life. Sometimes you can look a story square in the face and say I know you.

But the point of all this is that you will never really know a story, until you tell it, until you hear it, until you look at it through the eyes and ears of another. Stories change as they are lived, as they are shared.

Bo came to Dawson in mid-July, her second time to the Yukon, but this time, for the winter, this time, looking to make a home. Dawson is full of stories, some tall, some dreamed up, some so deep they are at the bottom of the dirt mud roads connecting the town to the land like a strong, flexible, migrating thread. There is no better place to tell or hear a story in Dawson than at the Westminster Hotel (known as “the pit” to the locals). It’s a place where the walls are full of portraits of those from the past 100 years and then some, and along with them thousands of stories. The place is thick with stories and histories that have changed and skewed just like the building, settling into the permafrost through the many winters. *Being remembered in the telling.* It is here that Bo lived out the winter and started writing this story. Working at the bar downstairs, she sought shelter in a string of iceboxes chalked up as hotel rooms until she found one that kept her water liquid and her breath invisible. Across the street from her new home, she began to witness stories and moments of her classmates. She was one of ten in the HACES (Heritage And Culture Essential Skills) course students at the Yukon College, which was partnered with the Trondek H’wechin First Nations. Many of the people and stories that sparked her journey are from the pit, HACES, or both.

The other part of Bo’s story is in the people and places of her past. She was born in Kaiping, Guangdong Province, China. The first-born and only daughter to her parents, Bo was soon to be followed by two younger brothers. She immigrated with her Aunt, Uncle, and older cousin to Canada when she was six. She lived in East Vancouver for three years, where her family worked in Chinese restaurants in an ever-shifting family system. Aunt and Uncle became Mother and Father, and Bo became the younger sister to her cousin-now-brother. The four of them moved on to Kamloops, BC, where she lived for ten more years with this family until heading out towards Dawson City. She made the journey back to her home village in China four times since her original departure, each visit under a different light of understanding her own history and family, unearthing and evoking her role within it all.

This is her journal, her story, her reflection of how different stories can join hands and walk together.



**LIFE IN DAWSON CITY, YT, 2011-12.**

## **Page 1**

Left blank, too much pressure and anxiety because it is the first page.

## **Page 2**

### ***Carol***

Carol and I began our exploration into shadows for our short film. “Oohhh, it’s getting artsy,” she says as she moves her 49-year-old body in different ways, capturing the way her shadows change shape on the snow. At first we were thinking of making the film about the Yukon River.

I remember picking groups for our year-end project. There were three of us who weren’t native.

### ***Edith***

Currently fighting cancer and can’t attend the class. She sat next to me, around forty, pale, buzzed white hair. First time I saw her, I thought of her to be a motherly turtle in a swamp. Her voice was soft and calming. Later I learned that she had her own trapline and a beautiful log cabin.



**THE TAVERN, DAWSON CITY, YT.**

**Paul**

He was really nervous on the first day of class, his lips quivering as he introduced himself. I recognized him from the pit. He likes Canadian in the afternoon. I was in a rough patch during November and so I went to the tavern side and got myself a pitcher of Yukon Gold. Everyone in the room looked at me..."You want two glasses?" someone asked. "No, just one." I sat against the wall underneath the painting dedicated to Joe and Annie Henry for being the oldest married couple. Paul came over after two glasses. I guess he noticed I was crying. He asked if I was alright. "No," I said, my hands on the glass of beer, thinking how my family had been unable to accept my emotions. And now that I was far away from home I was running loose. He told me how envious he was that I could cry. "I've lost how to show my emotions ever since I went to residential school and now I am slowly expressing it. I was taught the white man's ways in that school, but I always remembered trapping with my uncle. I was homeless in Vancouver for eleven years then slowly came back up. It takes time, you know, to get back." I listened to Paul tell his story, and I envied his strength.

**Kylie**

There's a soup kitchen Monday-Friday at the Trondek H'wechin Community Hall. I went there a lot when I lived upstairs in the bar. I was sitting next to Kylie and Percy Henry, one of the few elders who still know the Han language fluently. Kylie and Tish just finished interviewing him about Chief Isaac, who had moved the Han community upstream from the mosquitoes of gold miners. Most stayed downriver in Moosehide and some were moved to Eagle, Alaska, because of the danger of losing their language and people. Chief Isaac was Kylie's great-great-uncle and Tish's great-grandfather.

Kylie is very slender with long brown hair that covers her bum. She was singing traditional songs when Victor from the other end of the table started dancing with his invisible drum. There was laughter and she glanced at me. "We are going to bring back our dance and language, that is where our culture comes from... maybe I'll be Chief."

**Page 3**

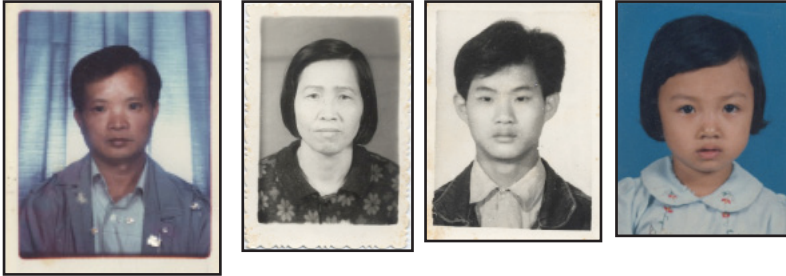
I yelled across the room to Kevin, asked what he thought of shadows, "Shadow is a sunshine that walks backwards." as I saw him stumble into the bar.

Lucy sits at the kitchen table, she's thinking about nothing. Her eyes are glazed, body senseless. The kettle begins to rattle then whistle on the stove. Her eyes shift towards it and her body turns sideways to get up. The silence is gone. Sounds of her feet against the floor and the fury of the whistle grind at

the wall. Lucy lets out a big sigh as she lifts the kettle and pours herself some hot water. Moves back to her warm spot with her one lit lamp on the kitchen table. It is silent except for the gentle hiss of the steam rising from the cup. She blinks at it, caressing the handle of the ceramic cup with her thumb. This was her winter. She tries not to think of it that way, as it usually means that she had wasted a segment of her life doing nothing when she could have done something a little more productive. She sighs again with an added accidental cough. Chuckles to herself. Complete silence. She looks at the dark silhouette on the wall. Turns her head and the shadow copies. Lucy moves closer to the wall concentrating on her shadow. She cannot see her outline anymore as her forehead rests on the wall.

## Page 4

**DAD AND UNCLE      MOM AND AUNT      BROTHER AND COUSIN      ME**



How many people have I told? My story?

I told Brandon last night, it chills my bones sometimes.  
afterwards come guilt and shame.

It started like this

1988, October 24 in the new calendar

I was born. Across the ocean

my uncle was applying to sponsor his family to join him in Vancouver

His wife, son and mother. and my Grandmother.

I lived with her, the house not too big nor small, enough for five people.

My Mom, Dad, little brother, my Grandma and me.

There are two beds. One for my parents and brother,

and the other for Grandma and me... we are in the living room.

The bricks are so old that they have turned grey, moss mingling in the cracks  
and damp places.

I remember nestling my head in Grandma's shoulder, she tells me old stories  
til I sleep.



When I am awake she watches me, every move I make is of great  
humour in her eyes, I smile quietly.  
Both my Aunt and Mother have the same boyish haircut.  
The decision is made that my Grandma stays and I go with my Uncle.  
I am not told.



**IMAGES FROM MY MOTHER'S HOME IN KAIPING**





**LAST VISIT IN 2011; MY DAD, MOM AND BROTHER.**

**Page 5**

*Dear family,*

*What if I told you I wasn't happy as a child?*

*That I watched my little brother's body mangled under the truck, his eyes  
staring back at me?*

*That I didn't go to his funeral or his grave?*

*What if I told you I wanted to kill myself*

*suffocating, nauseating, desperate*

*walking down the road waiting for the next truck to come*

*jump into the river, wanting the pain to choke*

*running along the narrow alleyways to find myself lost*

*that men took my hand and led me to their room?*

*What if I told you that I do feel lucky*

*A gift given to me, in my very name,*

*Bo: to hold, a precious jade.*

*I won't complain.*

## Home away from home



### IMAGES FROM MY LAST TRIP TO CHINA, 2011

Fourth Trip Visiting China: On the plane flying from Hong Kong to Vancouver

From this place, from this time, I watch pockets of waste hidden behind the trees and shattered homes. Factories among factories nestle beside the highway, stained with chemicals and refuse. Smoke clogs my nostrils and swell up my lips as I try to draw out the nearest mountain with its hazed air. The earth-like flesh torn open to be covered up and misused. I watch as the blurry image of trees and buildings pass by. I came to Kaiping by myself, relocated and mapping my mental state. The invisible wardrobe that I create in my mind to understand the sudden shift in space. I remember when my Grandma held my shoulder and she laughed. This is the map I've had in my head, it was too clear and so foreign. I could be in my room in Canada and walk through these tunnels and alleyways til I follow the smell of warm rice

and musky air pulling me straight home. I'm pulling the cloudy parts clear, the little parts that seem clear but so cloudy around the corner. I begin to understand how my origin has shaped my interest in texture. I really want to go back but there is something that I need to do, perhaps to reconcile. I feel guilty to hide so close from home, this seems so wrong and my Grandma's spirit seems to stand silent, watching and patiently waiting for me.



**IN KAIPING, 2002.  
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:  
MY MOTHER AND AUNT.**

**IN VANCOUVER, ON OUR FRONT  
LAWN, 1996.**



**MY GRANDMOTHER TUCKED IN MY PARENTS' MARRIAGE  
CERTIFICATE.**

I remember being in the sharing circle of residential school survivors and generations affected. It was very hard for me to listen. I was crying the most, maybe I am really sensitive. I don't feel comfortable comparing residential school with my childhood, it's very different. The similarity is that I was taken away, without being informed... to a place that is very different from village life. But I still have family, they love me, even though they show it in very traditional, abusive ways. I used to hate my uncle... well most of the male figures in my life. When I was fourteen, I had the guts to tell them I knew. For eight years I kept the truth that they were not my parents. It was my first step to being open with them. I was too tired of being in the dark, manifesting this fire in me. I remember their eyes full of fear, lost. I told them, "It doesn't matter, I'm here and I love you and appreciate what you have given me." My uncle stopped hitting me and my aunt told me later, when I was older, it was then that she stopped trying to kill herself.

Sometimes I feel I shouldn't talk about my story because it is not as bad as what others have gone through. But when I listen to trauma stories, it

makes me have a better understanding of my own trauma. It makes me more forgiving of what my family has done. Listening to stories of others gives me strength to speak up about my own.

I need to realize that I was only a child.

## Page 6

East Vancouver

*I am sitting on the back porch of Fortune Garden, a Chinese cuisine hotspot for celebrities.*

*buckets of broth sit beside me, wasps swarming.*

*Anise, ginger, and piss.*

*I peek my head in the window, where one of the chefs is making fresh ramen  
flour dust dances on the table as he slams the dough and pulls it  
into many long strands, his eyes catch mine.*

*I sit back down.*

Fourth Visit to Kaiping, Guangdong, at my Mother's home

*I see my mother sitting in a stool by the kitchen fire. It is her sanctuary,*

*it makes her feel not as lonely.*

*Turning my head, my brother's eyes are drawn to the TV screen. I sit next to him,*

*I feel like a ghost as I watch him.*

*How's school? Okay.*

*What class do you like? I don't know.*

*Have any girlfriends? No.*

*Sister misses you, call me anytime. Silence.*

In Kamloops with family

*I remember calling my mother in China, my family was in the living room with me. Mother picked up the phone.*

*It's me, Auntie.*

*Call me your mother.*

*I looked around the room.*

*ah ma.*

*Their eyes were staring at me. Guilt. As I watched my words. I hung up.*

*Asking for more money again?*

*No.*

*Telling you to bring your brother here?*



No.  
*Their faces in disbelief.*

**Page 7**

Carol and I

Freeze frame

*5 seconds*

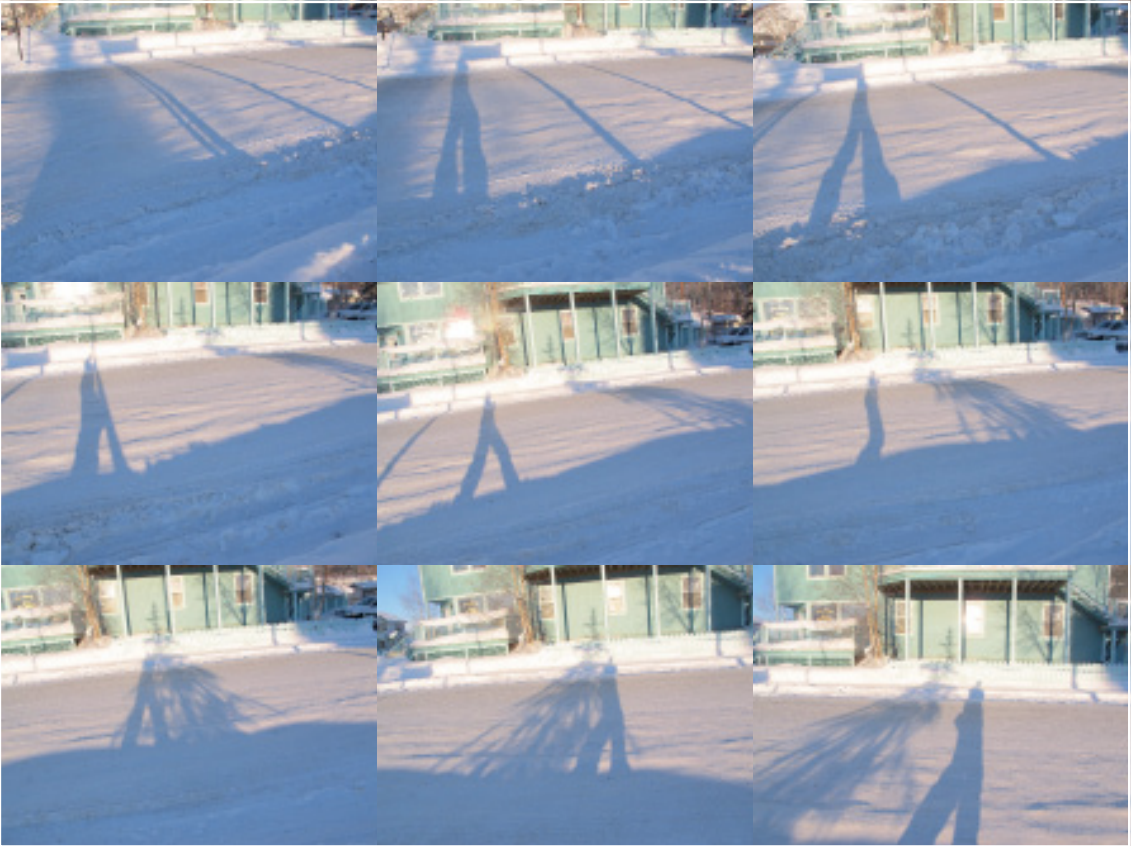
*blurred*

*speaking listening, speaking sparks*

*eyes wide, brows raised*

*we stare at each other*

*words dancing*



**IN DAWSON CITY YT, LOOKING FOR LUCY**



*“that’s a chickenshit answer”  
time isn’t in our dictionary  
devilish laughter echoes  
shoulders chuckling  
“what’s next?”  
as we walk ourselves home  
thinking of Lucy*

**Paul**

*Blocked emotions in his arteries.  
Wisers with two cubes of ice and a Canadian.  
He’s a bushman,  
chugging back the two glasses in his hands  
mind loose, fingers shaking  
eyes blurred.  
I let my tears flow.  
“They took my emotions away.”  
I cried in the tavern  
my uncle’s voice in my head, his eyes watching, lips tight  
heart pumping, stomping, wanting  
mouth dry, throat stiff, spine shaking.  
I want my feelings back.*



**IN DAWSON CITY YT, CLOSING CEREMONY OF MOOSEHIDE GATHERING 2012**

Edith in the circle  
*I watch as she feels the rock between her fingers*  
*shoulders rise as she takes a deep breath*  
*looking back*  
*shocked that it still affects her*  
*remembering the first day of class*  
*Edith the trap lady*  
*I wish she could teach me*  
*now, I have her in my thoughts*

I think of Megan.

CROSSING WATER  
and  
GROUND BENEATH MY FEET

>> CECILY NICHOLSON

This text is indebted to a complement of writings:

*The First White Black Man*, Ashok Mathur

*John Fre[e]mont Smith*, Mary Balf

*No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women*, Dionne Brand  
and poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Derek Walcott & James Weldon Johnson

**crossing water**

*...those heady days*

on the centenary occasion  
from the Freemont Block  
for “the lives of daughters who are distant”

black from the Islands  
trade winds path track or tack

new boat lil mo, salt right

come ya

we must  
we must

articulate

island arch the peopled archipelagos  
one star by one sea by boat in time train

then weren't more than villages  
then was a bustle round the river

more north, still northerly  
other sides of water

not Secwepemc

barriers coloured stranger and civic  
alder man national agent with reputation  
for well-built boots stepped to the land

Crucian blood warm to frost heaving stone  
shift buckled interior trees still under snow

restless multi-talented man fits guaranteed  
point of the pin the easiest end to find

ma eye dem

the steam drill on the left shall not soon forget

labourers journal unbridled demands

some say  
always a welcome visitor  
always an active contributor

beloved  
pioneer “negro-siwash” family

dem weary eyes form high, head low

the block holds.



## freemont

earned an excellent reputation as a bootmaker  
found time for prospecting  
found valuable deposits of mica  
found gold at Dunn Lake and along Dixon Creek  
opened a small store at Louis Creek  
opened up the Barrier Lake territory  
cut a good trail from Mount Olie  
pre-empted land at Louis Creek and started a ranch  
experimented with a wide range of crops  
appointed first post master  
recommended the valley to settlers  
bought land from Jess Lee Smith  
built a house and a cabin  
opened a shoe store  
discovered coal at Chu Chua  
organized the Kamloops Coal Company  
journeyed to the upper reaches of the North Thompson  
sold out to an American company  
began as a freelance journalist  
served as juror in trials  
elected alderman  
appointed City Assessor  
became Indian Agent  
encouraged modern methods of farming  
helped irrigation plans where possible  
taught the trade of cobbling  
continued in office until defeated in 1908  
continued his work in the area  
continued to write (*he was an excellent writer*)

*If Black life in Canada as a whole has been absent from the works of Canadian scholars, or inadequately served by them, Black women's lives have been doubly hidden*  
Dionne Brand (1991)

**for Mary**

Freemont turned to marry in 1877  
to Mary born in Victoria  
a mix through passage  
or northwest territories

Mrs. Smith must have mainly kept  
the small store at Louis Creek  
as that same year Mr. J. F. Smith  
cut a trail through to Adams Lake  
collected many mineral samples  
and carried prospects cross country

Mary carried, was it, eight children –  
two lost in infancy—two sons lost to sickness and war –  
four daughters for our present memory—

did they know this block

peer through leaded glass of neighbouring shops  
befriend crying girls northerly or easterly

Mary very talented trained performers  
planned occasions and concerts

through to their golden wedding anniversary

golden wreath of fifty years and music here still

## **mica gold coal**

up river crumbs high grade  
mica near Tete Jaune Cache  
carried back with a pack train of horses

covering 240 miles from the mine  
to split or delaminate thin  
as windows in stove doors or lanterns

one season away the goldfields  
at Dunn Lake and along Dixon Creek

privacy gold rush gold standards  
gold rings are pioneering mothers  
through golden anniversaries

found coal stakes at Chu Chua  
again, transport was difficult

claims near the mouth of the Clearwater

coal camp coal houses company stores

*total black* the overburden  
carbon emissions the slow release

## it is often said of a pioneer

born to the newly free  
colour enlivened

proceed

intent to settle  
transport was difficult

easier said than done

to set in train a political career in the city

dispensation of law upholding  
saw conditions form committees

civic situates  
steady operations simple rules

the difference of epaulets  
the imagery of world war

bootshop and residence burned

fires the rebuild  
the body public

Latin language

passing            *traders took my brother*

instrumental

amid nation in 1912, brother  
Indian Agent

Agent relations

modern methods of farming

taught cobbling to bare feet  
residential schools

no fair treatment from the city of Kamloops  
since Smith “was in most ways a good Agent”

if ever an agent wields the better world into right  
genocide or assimilation

in the true, our incomplete quincennial celebration

## **on block**

long block brick board art we are all neighbours  
next door of old Chinatown charm hereafter small  
city reach grows afar enroute rails move the river slow  
confluence at the low watermark leaves have fallen  
onward southerly copper and gold flurries as wild  
Canadian geese forage migrate homeless parks the meet  
September signs posted, there is an end to legislated poverty  
winter whisks narrow streets we traverse the holidays' sparkle



**sum in time**

for daughters' education  
wedding and the wander  
as more nerves impinge  
on dorsal root ganglion  
crude touch fibres carry  
kindliness pain surpasses  
the sure tract decussates  
lines lateral overlap still  
numbing steady sparks  
now settled spinal cord  
at eighty-four narrative  
sure of early settlements  
letters blur in slide angles  
paragraph ashamedly brief  
grief typewriter portended  
lexer flex parser of a human  
context-free grammar is still  
but, then—the heavy strain  
of doctor's and hospital bills  
rest, rest... *ere sleep comes*

*down to soothe the weary*

*ma eye dem*

*that have seen settled here*

## the ground beneath my feet

*from Anahuac to Anishinaabewaki/indigenous sovereignty means/immigrant rights  
libertad/decolonize immigration through indigenous/and migrant solidarity on Turtle Island*  
—text from a poster by Dylan Miner (March, 2012)

In November 2011, I spent time in Kamloops for a brief, but concentrated residency through Thompson Rivers University's Centre for Innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada. I was invited to write a poem to be delivered at a public celebration and art exhibition, part of a series of events to mark the centennial anniversary of the Freemont Smith Building. This (revitalized, character) building in the heart of the city was the visible legacy of one John Freemont Smith born in Frederiksted, St. Croix Island; the son of former slaves. On scholarship he travelled to Copenhagen for education, Liverpool to learn the cobbler's trade and, by his early twenties, to Russia, France and Peru. He eventually landed in Victoria, BC, in the early 1870s.<sup>1</sup> Here he met and married Mary Anastasia Miller. In the 1880s, Smith settled in the Kamloops area becoming a key figure in the development of the City of Kamloops and the broader region.

How John Freemont Smith was situated within the colonial project, on Secwepemc<sup>2</sup> territory, was foundational to his journey, narrative and legacy in Canada. As Smith established claims, towns, stores, charted routes and cut roads he contributed to "development" that led to further resource extraction and expanded settlement. For a portion of his career Smith worked as an Indian Agent to seven southern Secwepemc communities in the Kamloops agency. His tenure was demarcated as not representative of the Crown because of his racialization, origin and personal association with Secwepemc people. In 1913, he publically remarked, "Indians were here first and their rights must be considered first."<sup>3</sup> Smith advocated against the conditions of residential schools. Band leaders of the Shuswap Lakes region specify: "We have never received fair treatment from the City of Kamloops since the days of J. F. Smith who was in most ways a good Indian Agent."<sup>4</sup>

---

1 Smith, Trefor, *'A Very Respectable Man': John Freemont Smith and the Kamloops Agency, 1912-1923* (Montreal: McGill University, 1990) 31.

2 The Secwepemc People are a Nation of 17 bands occupying the south-central part of the Province of British Columbia, Canada. The ancestors of the Secwepemc people have lived in the interior of British Columbia for at least 10,000 years. See: [www.secwepemc.org](http://www.secwepemc.org)

3 Smith, Keith D., *Liberalism, Surveillance, and Resistance: Indigenous Communities in Western Canada, 1877-1927* (Edmonton, AU Press, 2009) 182.

4 Chief Francois Silpahan et al. Smith 9.

John Freemont Smith's incredible journey and influence are both admirable and implicated in the violent advances of nation-building. Renisa Mawani notes that "narratives of interraciality and heterogeneity [...] raise important questions about what we know and have yet to learn about British Columbia's colonial contact zone."<sup>5</sup> However, to avoid reinforcing official discourses of multiculturalism, the public celebration of such narratives must evoke anti-racist and anti-colonial criticality. "[P]eople of colour have often been invoked to provide the gloss of racial and cultural harmony for a nation rooted in oppression" and, as Robinder Kaur Sehdev further notes, "this gloss is thin."<sup>6</sup> Smith's endeavours are not reconciled easily with either the Canadian state or Indigenous people's rights or position. Reconciliation, Rinaldo Walcott reminds us, "requires a wholesale rethinking of the contemporary stakes of human life for the last 500-plus years."<sup>7</sup> Thus, we can recognize the narrative of John Freemont as one resilient strand of an intricate tapestry. His generally ambivalent presence in the colonial project of nation-building, nonetheless, provides some ground to establish dissent and build relations.

The Freemont Block project's awareness of the historical and immediate implications of racism and colonialism was evident in the work of curator Ashok Mathur, historian Trefor Smith and artists such as Chris Bose. As I engaged creative, research and archival materials, walked the city, wrote

poetry in the Art We Are Café and roomed in the Freemont building for four days, it was not just the ramifications of white settler nation that was my focus. In a fatigued turn away from the "distorted psyche of white supremacy"<sup>8</sup> as a definitive factor, my *work in progress* considered narratives of land and its components, Smith's conscious proximity to Chinatown, the minimally referenced, racially ambiguous Mary Smith—"wife of" and Freemont Smith's enduring labour. John Freemont Smith was also a writer.

This article begins with a quote from a poster released in March 2012 by Métis artist Dylan Miner. Miner's art is situated within a growing network of organizers and artists in the Americas working across state borders "cross-culturally" enacting a collective refusal to be defined by the conditions of capitalism and colonialism. In these efforts new relations are being imagined and forged through the hard practise of solidarity in the everyday. More than a growing desire for solidarity, the call for the decolonization of immigration marks a critical shift in discourse and a righteous assertion of indigenous epistemology, influence and vision necessary to migrant struggles. In Miner's artist statement he advances: "By using the language of anti-capitalist activism and Indigenous visuality, I make intentionally unrefined objects that, if nothing else, challenge the ambiguity of the elite visual artworld by operating within a tradition of political didacticism."<sup>9</sup>

As a hybrid poet, simultaneously displaced and fixed as only a ward of the state gets to be, beyond and black, partial to unrefined objects and steeped in anti-capitalist anti-colonial activism, I take to heart the possibilities of situating work within traditions of political didacticism. For the Freemont Block celebration in Kamloops I compiled a chapbook of

5 Mawani, R., "Cross Racial Encounters and Juridical Truths: (Dis) Aggregating Race in British Columbia's Contact Zone," *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*, Eds. A. Mathur, J. Dewar and M. DeGagné (Ottawa, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011) 166.

6 Sehdev, R. Kaur, "People of Colour in Treaty," *Cultivating Canada*, 268.

7 Walcott, R., "Into the Ranks of Man: Vicious Modernism and the Politics of Reconciliation," *Cultivating Canada* 343.

8 Toni Morrison in conversation with Angela Davis at the New York Public Library, March 10th, 2011.

9 Dylan Miner, artist's statement: [www.dylanminer.com](http://www.dylanminer.com)

seven poems. On the evening prior and the day of the event I designed, assembled, stamped, inscribed and sewed—with assistance from artists Ayumi Goto, Shima Iuchi and Jessie Bhandar—fifty copies of these to give away. It was an intense time of contemplation, writing, editing and performance.

In titling the chapbook I take up home/land, an aspect of an “hydrological lens,”<sup>10</sup> and the question: “*Tu viens du passage?*”<sup>11</sup> Work in progress entails a journey: Crossing Water.

---

10 “One way to move forward together, in peace and with respect, is to cooperatively focus on the health of the water that gives us all life” Rita Wong in *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity* 2011:85

11 Junie Désil evokes this question poetically. It is typically asked by an African, to a Black person of the Diaspora (mainly Caribbean).

# FATHER'S DAY: THE MISSING CONVERSATION

>> JEFF THOMAS

Father's Day was coming up, I was 12 years old, and I was worrying about whether to buy my father a card and what it should say. I was wishing that I had a father like those of my white friends whose lives seemed, at least to me, so much simpler. As an indigenous person, I faced a very different reality. I was too young, however, to understand why my life was so different, why my father was never around, and why, even when he was around, we never seemed to be able to have a real conversation.

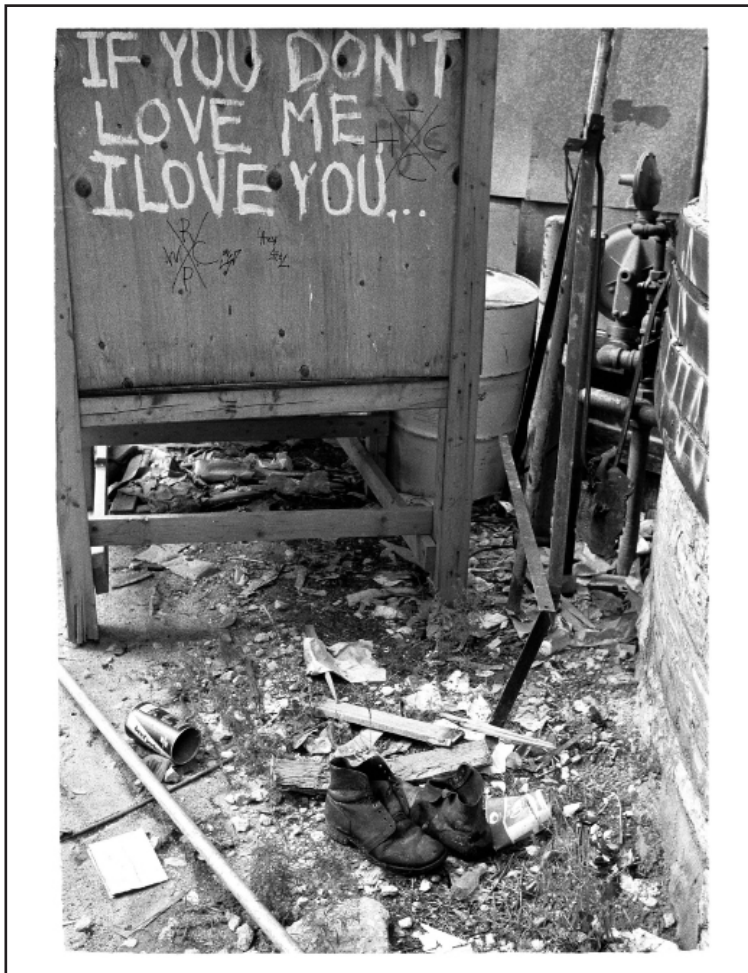
The conversations we never had would have centred on questions about being a city-born and raised Iroquois person and how to find a balance between the two worlds. The idea I had for a Father's Day card was of an image of a super Indian father figure on the cover. Inside would be a map of the world that my father would use to show me how we had arrived at this place and how to fight back against our complete assimilation. Perhaps my father had wanted to pose the same questions to his father, but never did, when he moved with his family from the Six Nations Reserve to the city. In all likelihood, these were the very questions he was, as an adult, running away from.

In the spring of 2012 I had a solo exhibition at the Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg, Manitoba, which I entitled *Father's Day*. My quest was to address the wall of silence by building a framework. Father's Day is my first project that makes a shift from a theoretical investigation of Indianness to putting it into action.

The shift was a result of a confluence of two events. The first was the curatorial work I did for the exhibition *Where Are The Children: Healing the Legacy of Residential Schools*. The exhibition examined the systemic effects of colonialism and racism in Canada and its impact on the stability of our communities. Putting this exhibition together helped me to understand the legacy of absent male role models in my own family.

The second event was a Father's Day card my son Bear gave me a few years ago and the heartfelt inscription he wrote on the card. It not only made me feel proud to be his father, it reminded me of the things I wish I could now say to my father and grandfathers.



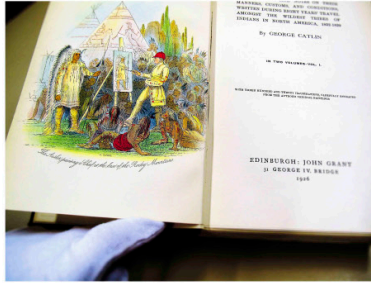


**Jeff Thomas, *IF YOU DONT LOVE ME I LOVE YOU*  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1990,  
2012 Collection of the artist, ink jet print, framed 25" x 21"**

I was walking by an alley near my apartment building on Hargrave Street in Winnipeg when I noticed something written in white paint. I walked closer to check it out and read "IF YOU DON'T LOVE ME I LOVE YOU." The alley was filled with graffiti: on one wall were pictographic-like figures; on the opposite wall was a metal loading-dock door spray-painted with "Lunch Box Rules."

Sitting on the platform was an empty bottle of

vodka. As I finished taking my photographs, I looked around and felt cut off from the rest of the world. I then noticed an old pair of work boots sitting under the sign, looking as if they were waiting for their owner to return. I felt a crush of childhood memories flooding back. No longer the detached observer, I thought about my father and my son, about abandonment, alcoholism, and the battle of being an Indian living in a city.



My Father Was A Factory Maintenance Painter . . .

**Jeff Thomas, *MY FATHER WAS A FACTORY MAINTENANCE PAINTER . . .*, 2012.**

**Collection of the artist, ink jet print, framed 25 ½ x 88 ½”**

**Left: Jeff Thomas, George Catlin’s *The North American Indians*. 1926.**

**Center: George Catlin, *The Author Painting a Chief at the Base of the Rocky Mountains*, 1841.  
Frontispiece to *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians***

**Right: Jeff Thomas, *My Father’s Hand (he was a maintenance painter in a car assembly factory)*, 1994.**

One of the earliest memories I have of my father is the time he took me to the public library. I was in grade school and having a difficult time learning to read, so my teacher suggested borrowing books from the public library. While my father was filling out the form for my library card, I sat at a table and paged through a book I had found. At one point, I turned a page and had my first encounter with a painted portrait of a Plains Indian man. He seemed so regal dressed in the typical clothing I had first

seen in movie westerns. When my father came over to the table I looked up at him and was surprised to see a facial similarity between the two men.

I was curious about what that similarity meant. My father worked in a local assembly plant. His job was a maintenance painter, part of which involved painting the white and yellow floor lines that ran throughout the plant. I spent four years working in that same plant.



*The transformation period is naturally discouraging, and the promise long held out to them of better things through civilization has proven worse than empty husks. Edward S. Curtis*

**Jeff Thomas, *INDIAN FAMILIES*, 2010.**

**Collection of the artist, ink jet print, framed 25 ½ x 88 ½**

**Left: Unknown photographer. Jim Abikoki and family, in front of the fence surrounding the Anglican Mission on the Blackfoot (Siksika) Reserve, c. 1900, Southern Alberta.**

**Courtesy of the Glenbow Museum NC-5-8. Longitude & latitude: N50 45.630 W112 54.504.**

**Center: Edward S. Curtis, Yellow Bone Woman Family—Arikara tribe, c. 1908, North Dakota. Courtesy of the Library of Congress LC-USZ62-101183. Longitude & latitude: N47 40.945 W102 19.286.**

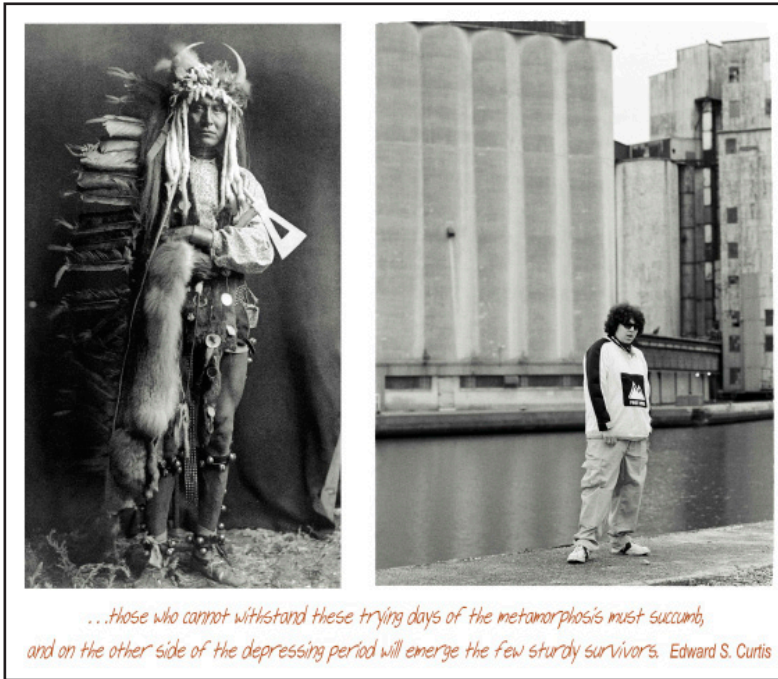
**Right: Jeff Thomas, Ron Good Eagle Family, Bismarck, North Dakota, 1996. United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck, North Dakota. Longitude & latitude: N46 45.922 W100 45.215.**

During my research for the *Where Are The Children: Healing The Legacy of Residential Schools* exhibition, I found a photograph of one the most notorious assimilationist and supporter of the residential school system, Hayter Reed, who worked for Indian Affairs in the late 19th century. In the photograph, Reed is posed in tribal clothing (probably acquired during his days in Saskatchewan as an Indian agent) at an 1896 costume ball on Parliament Hill.

My thoughts on absent fathers, systemic racism, and how a society could implement such a cruel school system aimed at the most vulnerable part of the indigenous world, its children, coalesced around the Reed portrait and what he had to say about his vision for indigenous people. In the 1890

*Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs*, Reed wrote of the need to separate Indian children from their parents:

*Before passing from the subject of these Industrial Schools wholly supported by the Government, I must not forget to notice the success attained in preventing Indian visitors hanging about the schools, and so unsettling the minds of the children, as well as too often insisting upon carrying them off for visits to their homes, from which they would only be recovered with much difficulty if at all. It was constantly represented to me by those in charge of the institutions that to prevent such visits and to refuse to let parents take away their children as the whim might seize them.*



*...those who cannot withstand these trying days of the metamorphosis must succumb, and on the other side of the depressing period will emerge the few sturdy survivors. Edward S. Curtis*

**Jeff Thomas, *SENSE OF SELF*, 2011**

**Collection of the artist, ink jet print, framed 45 3/8" x 36 1/2"**

**Left: Edward S. Curtis, *Iron Breast—Piegan*, c. 1900. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada C-019972. Longitude & latitude: N48 52.947 W113 01.247.**

**Right: Jeff Thomas, *Bear Thomas, Buffalo Creek, Buffalo, New York*, c 1997. Longitude & Latitude: N42 51.862 W78 51.710.**

In 1995 I returned to my hometown of Buffalo, New York, with my son Bear. My objective was to find evidence of the old Buffalo Creek Reservation. The original Iroquois reservation was sold to land developers in the late 1790s and was completely abandoned by the 1840s when the city of Buffalo began to emerge as a major commercial area. The abandoned industrial site where Bear is posed is beside the Buffalo Creek waterway and the southeast border of the reservation. When I was a young boy I discovered that my Iroquois ancestors had lived here, giving me a special bond to this place. I imagined my ancestors walking with me.

The absent father figure—the role model—was also an issue when I began teaching myself to use

a camera. I searched photography publications for images *by* indigenous people, but could not find any—past or present. I did, however, find many photographs *of* indigenous people, particularly the work of the most recognized practitioner of the “Indian” subject, Edward S. Curtis.

Although Curtis is often described, and dismissed, as producing overly romanticized stereotypes of the typical Indian figure—the feather and buckskin adorned Plains Indian warrior—I felt that this description was too simplistic. Curtis’s work captured something different for me in the way that the sitters exude a combination of intimacy and power. How, given that he worked at a time and in a society that was determined to kill off the Indian population, was he able to produce such works?





*The object of the work is to record by word and picture what the Indian is, not whence he came. Edward S. Curtis*

**Jeff Thomas, *WHAT TIME IS IT? IT'S INDIAN TIME*, 2008.**

**Collection of the artist, ink jet print, framed 25 ½" x 46 ½"**

**Left: Edward S. Curtis, *In a Piegan Lodge, Little Plume and son Yellow Kidney*, March 11, 1910, Courtesy of the Library of Congress/LC-USZ62-051432.**

**Longitude & Latitude: not available.**

**Right: Jeff Thomas, *The Red Indian*, Queen Street, Toronto, Ontario, 2003.**

**Longitude & Latitude: N43 38.880 W79 24.003.**

The Library of Congress has several versions of a photograph of Yellow Kidney and his family, one of which includes a clock on the ground between the two men. Curtis did not include the clock in the version in *The North American Indian* in order to remove any signs of modernity. But from my perspective, the inclusion of the clock is a poignant reminder of how quickly the Piegan world was changing. It prompts me to tell my own story about Indian Time:

I am sitting in the research room at Library and Archives Canada and look up to see Edward S. Curtis walking through the large glass doors. "Here," I think to myself, "is my opportunity to ask him all the questions I have been carrying for many years, like why he was so obsessed with the North American Indian project so that it consumed over thirty years of his life." I also imagined that, in our meeting, I would show him some of my work and talk to him

about the power of photographs in healing.

I introduce myself as a photographer who is also First Nations and explain how provocative I find his work and how the questions it raises have helped me develop my own practice. I ask him about *The Piegan Lodge* image I had found on the Library of Congress website—the one that included the clock—and what his take on Indian time was. What did he think was the cultural difference between a First Nations' view on time and his own view? Did he think that his sitters thought about the way his camera stopped time?

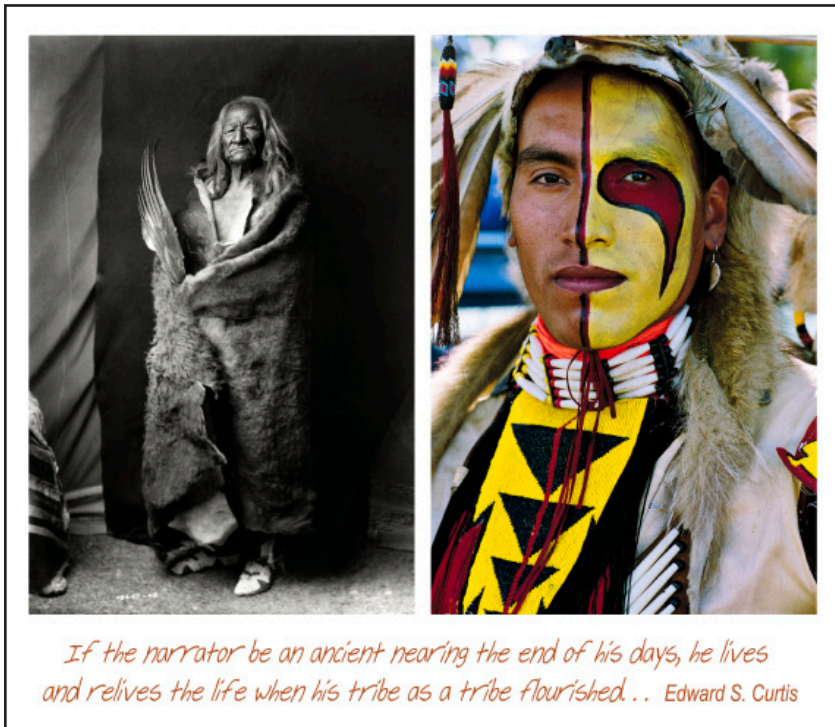
In my story, Curtis would then suggest that I ask the librarian to retrieve Volume 6 of *The North American Indian*<sup>1</sup>. He would show me how he used a version of the photograph where he retouched the

<sup>1</sup> Curtis, Edward S. *The North American Indian*, Volume 6 (Seattle: E.S. Curtis; Cambridge: The University Press, 1907–1930) 12–13.

clock out of the photograph in order to illustrate the Piegan warrior society. He would begin by pointing out that the text describes a giveaway ceremony that had taken place for the All Brave Dogs Society, where membership had specific requirements, such as giveaway ceremonies. Although Curtis does not state that the clock may have been the result of a giveaway, I think that it could very well have been acquired that way. So does the clock stand for the encroachment of white society or the continuation

of traditional ceremonies? Such questions are important to ask of these images.

Finally, I would show him how I responded to the clock version of *The Piegan Lodge* image with my photograph of an antique store in Toronto called The Red Indian. I look at him to see how he responds to the image. For me, the name on the storefront had photographic value in itself, but it was the large clock that made it far more appealing. I am hoping that he notices that.



**Jeff Thomas, *WA BUDI-SAPA (BLACK EAGLE) AND KEVIN HAYWAHE: TWO ASSINIBOINE MEN*, 2008.**

**Collection of the artist, ink jet print, framed 45" x 36 ½"**

**Left: Edward S. Curtis, *Chief Black Eagle (Wa budi-sapa, Assiniboine, c. 1908. Courtesy Library of Congress LC-USZ62-105371. Longitude & Latitude: Not recorded.***

**Right: Jeff Thomas, *Kevin Haywahe in Powwow Dance Attire, Assiniboine tribe, Carry-the-Kettle Reserve, Saskatchewan, 1991. Longitude & Latitude: Not recorded.***

Jeff Thomas: Can you tell me if there was one event that inspired you to begin *The North American Indian* project?

Edward S. Curtis: The author first saw the Piegan during the summer of 1898 at the season of their medicine-lodge ceremony. They were in camp on a depressed stretch of prairie, entirely concealing them from the sight of any one approaching. Suddenly one rode out in full view of their encampment and beheld a truly thrilling sight. The camp was a combined one of the Piegan and many visitors from the Piegan of the north [southern Alberta], the Bloods, and the Blackfeet, in all some two hundred and thirty lodges. If this poor remnant of a once so powerful tribe proved such an inspiring sight, what must it have been at the height of their existence!

JT: I photographed Kevin Haywahe while attending a powwow in Winnipeg. He is a well-known dancer from the Assiniboine First Nations, Carry-the-Kettle Reserve in Saskatchewan. Although you may not have seen yourself as a documentary photographer addressing the unjust issues imposed on indigenous people, I did sense a strong but subtle social undercurrent in your photographs. Can you describe your personal thoughts while working in the field?

ESC: The great change that now comes to the Sioux and to other tribes of the plains with the opening of their reservations to settlement and in the consequent increased contact with alien influences will, within the present generation, further demoralize and degenerate. This, however, is one of the stages through which from the beginning the Indians were destined to pass. Those who cannot withstand these trying days of the metamorphosis must succumb, and on the other side of the depressing period will

emerge the few sturdy survivors<sup>2</sup>.

JT: Tell me what you learned about Black Eagle?

ESC: [He was] born in 1834 on the Missouri below Williston, North Dakota. He was only thirteen years of age when he first went to war, and on this and on the next two occasions he gained no honors. On his fourth war excursion he was more successful, alone capturing six horses of the Yanktonai. While engaged in a fight with the Atsina near Fort Belknap, Montana, he killed a man and a boy. In a battle with the Yanktonai he killed one of the enemy, and in another repeated the former success. Black Eagle led war-parties three times. He had a vision in which it was revealed to him that he would capture horses, and the vision was fulfilled. He had the same experience before he killed the man and the boy. He claims no medicine. Black Eagle married at the age of eighteen<sup>3</sup>.

---

2 Curtis, Edward S. *The North American Indian*, Volume 3 (Seattle: E.S. Curtis; Cambridge: The University Press, 1907–1930) xii–xiii.

3 Curtis, Edward S. *The North American Indian*, Volume 3 (Seattle: E.S. Curtis; Cambridge: The University Press, 1907–1930) 182–183.



These imagined conversations have given me a sense of hope for the future, especially if we can begin having conversations that will draw us out from the ever-present cloud of despair and hopelessness in order to begin to heal from the tragic consequences of colonialism.

On opening night of my *Father's Day* exhibition, Bear was the DJ and attracted a hip and urban indigenous crowd; young people who may never have seen my work. I had produced a giveaway—my version of a post-colonial Father's Day card—to be

handed out to anyone who came to see the show. On the outside was a 1900 photographic portrait of a man and boy, dressed in tribal clothing, who had been performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. The older man was looking at the boy in an affectionate way, atypical for historical photographs of indigenous males. On the inside left-hand-side of the card was my photograph of the alley in Winnipeg with the scrawled words "IF YOU DONT LOVE ME I LOVE YOU." On the inside right-hand side, I inscribed the text: "Happy Father's Day. Wish You Were Here."

# RISKY BUSINESS

>> MEEKA MORGAN, KARINE NG, JAYCE SALLOUM



**HERITAGE, HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY, VANCOUVER, 7/15/04  
PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

Jayne Salloum: When thinking about what may be useful to contribute to this journal/discussion, I arrived at what may be an opportunity to invite you two to collaborate. Collaboration for me is key when it comes to working across cultures, across radically different experiences, and trying to progress in these “work(s) in progress.” Our identity is wrapped up in our state of being, continually in flux yet anchored in histories and others. Working intensely with Meeka in developing and delivering the Native Youth Art Workshops (NYAW) there were many points of articulation, moments when encounters clarified specificities of reconciliation that went beyond theory and highlighted what was at stake. Putting ourselves out there, our vulnerabilities added to the strengths in the room. Karine’s perspective is from a whole other ballpark but still within the same field of Canada (and B.C.). Her more recent immigration here (mine is second or third generation), her experiences with race and racism and her working in the school board system with aboriginal, non-aboriginal, and immigrant students adds a valuable position to talking about reconciliation and what that means. The three of us together may have something to say about forming allies/partnerships and relations across race and cultural boundaries. This was initially intended to be a conversation, but with Karine and I travelling during this whole process and Meeka being several thousand kilometres away, it has become a series of emailed texts, utterances, and



**WARMTH CARRYING FAR, WANOCK FAMILY POTLATCH, ALERT BAY,  
10/22/04. PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**



**POST-FACT, LAYERS/SITES, KAMLOOPS RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL, 9/28/09**

**PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

responses—a work in progress through these months and thoughts. Acting as more of an initiator than interviewer, I hope that we can enter dangerous territory and push the limits of what has been the status quo, of what has been accepted in the quotidian discourse of reconciliation and how it gets played out in our daily consciousness.

It wasn't until 2000 that I started thinking and working directly/praxis(ically)—if you allow made-up words—with issues of general disenfranchisement (in Canada), urban survival of the economic and politically marginalized, and First Nations/Métis artists and residents in my neighbourhood in Vancouver, this through the desmedia collective workshops which facilitated expressions/representations in video and painting/drawing. Afterwards I went on to develop and produce several videotapes, painting, and workshop projects (including the NYAW workshops) where I worked with

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists/ students/participants, co-conspirators/ facilitators, collaborators, and subjects. I want to start with this brief introduction because, if it took me forty-two years of my life to getting around to this and others take longer or shorter or not at all, with this in mind, perhaps it is important to look at the many obstacles that might be preventing more of us from coming together

and the opportunities/ encounters that can be recognized or created to bridge our cultures, histories, and peoples. “Cultures”/“peoples”/“communities”/“neighbourhoods”—all of these terms are problematic of course, but I think we can still use them to get our points across. Can we also use the word “aboriginal” instead of writing “Aboriginal/ First Nations/Métis/Inuit”? After all we only have a couple of thousand words to do this. Further, can you please discuss what in your lives got you to thinking about and working on cross-cultural issues, between aboriginal and European (and other) cultures/peoples?

Meeka Morgan: As an aboriginal woman of Secwepemc/Nuu-Chah-Nulth descent, child of two residential school survivors and grandchild of survivors from generations before, it was during the journey of my thesis *Making Connections with Secwepemc Family through Storytelling: A Journey in Transformative*



*Rebuilding* that I took on the task of exploring/researching my own people/community/family members, having a focus on voices, emotions, and the life experiences that shaped the meanings that the people gave to themselves and their experiences. The teachings I was working with were to bring mutual understanding on many levels between people and their stories, to bring consciousness to the multi-generations connected to people about their stories, and to also reach out to wider audiences which may not share a direct history or culture but would benefit from mutual understanding and connectedness that the stories might bring. Yet what I did not understand until the conclusion of the research was that I was really dealing with many levels of reconciliation, internally and externally. I wanted to study a subject that was close to my own personal identity. I wanted to understand these people of my family and community (through asking questions and listening, then through placing the responses into poetic narrative based on the verbatim, imagery, and voice of the teller). I wanted to bring these stories to others as a way to transform and rebuild our relationships to one another. Or was the impetus really my own inner need to create a bond to my family



**SKETCH, NATIVE YOUTH ART WORKSHOP (NYAW) COLLABORATIVE PAINTING, 96" X 60", 6/07-9/09 PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

and community in one of the more comfortable ways I knew how to (in academia), in a way that they would also feel compelled to support me (in education)? It was also about reconciling my own relationship with education and academia through creative ways that were related to my own cultural traditions of storytelling and mindful listening. I distinguish education from academia, because it seems when one enters higher education, the relationship to one's community is affected—it is encouraged, yet has the effect of a betrayal. Whatsoever the case, the effect was one of transformative rebuilding of my relationship to my community and family, which when shared (through performance, circle reading, recitation, and discussion) reverberated through the audiences, manifesting in a multitude of creative mediums such as poetry, reflective narrative storytelling, music, and visual art. The effects of this research brought a connection to working with



**DISPLAY/REFLECTIONS, CANADIAN TIRE, VANCOUVER, 11/11/07  
PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

aboriginal youth in artistic workshops where our theme was to explore their ideas on identity and their relationships to themselves, their community, their people/nations, their world, and invite them to create through visual art, writing, and music their own interpretations. I was brought back to my experience of interviewing my parents' generation, some of who are now becoming our elders. I could sense the familiar instinct of knowing that I needed to tread very gently on this path. It was contemporary sacred space. Like those elders, these youth were sharing their lives, their stories, their dreams, their visions. I had begun building a relationship with these people and now had to honour that through sticking it out 'til the end. It was as if we had agreed on a silent protocol that said: "I will participate, in my own way, without coercion, and in exchange you will respect my decisions of what and how I want

to express. As long as it is also respectful of you and others then we can work together in the spirit of collaboration."

Just as our parents and grandparents were survivors of the residential school, were we too not survivors? Survivors of cultural genocide and assimilation, holding memories of our ancestors, trying to make sense of our past, exploring what has made us into who we are, how we feel, and what we are to do next? Survivors of being raised by people who experienced role dispossession and having to adapt to the realities that this would bring? By presenting our experiences in the form of visual art and music, writing, performance, we make connections between personal experiences and the cultural and structural realities that have framed our lives and the lives of our ancestors, and in turn perform acts of personal activism and reconciliation. On canvas and in the recording booth, in stories, poetry, narrative, and in dramaturgy, and even in academic study, we can confront things that are not embodied in one human being or issue that may seem too powerful to address. So we come to take action with voice, imagination, and the hand, move thought into a manifestation of physical action, bringing it a little farther than our minds may have allowed, and giving it to other people in the unique ways we can offer. Spread hope.



We are honouring our ancestors while reinventing our culture through self-expression and reflection in very unique ways.

I have felt honoured to be a part of this awakening, as it awakened me also to a more non-judgmental state of being, bringing deep issues up through stories and art. We have transformed and rebuilt our bonds to one another through all of these experiences.

It is reminiscent of the storyteller Mabel, in Greg Sarris' *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*:

*Remember that when you hear and tell my stories there is more to me and you than is the story. You don't know everything about me and I don't know everything about you. Our knowing is limited. Let our words show us as much so we can learn together about one another. Let us tell stories that help us in this. Let us keep learning.*

Karine Ng: My involvement with the NYAW (Native Youth Art Workshops) workshops has been marginal, having only attended the inaugural session and one other midway through the two-and-a-half year span when they were taking place regularly. Admittedly, I am also a latecomer in regards to the subject of Aboriginal issues. Never before did I find myself in any context where I, as a teacher in the Vancouver public school system, had to interface with so-called "Aboriginal students" as a separate category.



**PUZZLE/EMO//BOMB, NYAW COLLABORATIVE PAINTING, 121" X 60", 6/07-6/08. PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

Remembering my own high school days, we were of course duly informed in history class of European settlers and their colonial projects, including the decimation of the Indigenous people of modern Canada and residential schools, et cetera. But all that was "history." So what of contemporary Aboriginals? Besides the warnings from my mother about the dangers of "drunk Indians" around Chinatown after dark, there really were not any Aboriginal persons in my life, be it at school, at work, or as neighbours or friends. It was all a textbook discussion—land claims, Robert Davidson, Bill Reid, ovoids, affirmative action. It happened on an intellectual, academic plane, in theory.

To speak about reconciliation I think it necessary to identify and acknowledge the conflict that necessitates it in the first place. Turning away from theory, I would have to situate the conflict in my personal



**BLUE/BOTTLE/EXIT (DETAIL), NYAW COLLABORATIVE PAINTING,  
95" x 60", 6/07-11/08. PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

history, which came in the form of verbal violence during a time when I held a two-year contract position with the Vancouver School District, working in particular with students identified as Aboriginal. This particular job also coincided with the commencement of my Master's studies, a two-year period where the theoretical discussions that took place in one classroom were affirmed, challenged, and/or tested in another. Since I never encountered such behaviour at the workshops I attended, I wondered if perhaps the context of school (with all its historical, political, social, and cultural implications) precipitated it. If so, then what can be learned from the workshops to serve as an alternative model for a didactic relationship that is not mired in dysfunctional patterns of violence, resulting in more pain, blame, and misunderstanding?

So much is lost when such misunderstandings occur. The naive goodwill

to help and to educate requires itself to be educated, with support from the community/institution/individuals involved. When my role obliged me to traverse from theory (reconciliation as issues) to practice (reconciliation as interacting in the quotidian), I found a large, difficult gap to fill. How could I make sense of the abuse directed at me, when I had nothing but goodwill to offer?

Recognizing and trying to mitigate what I, as

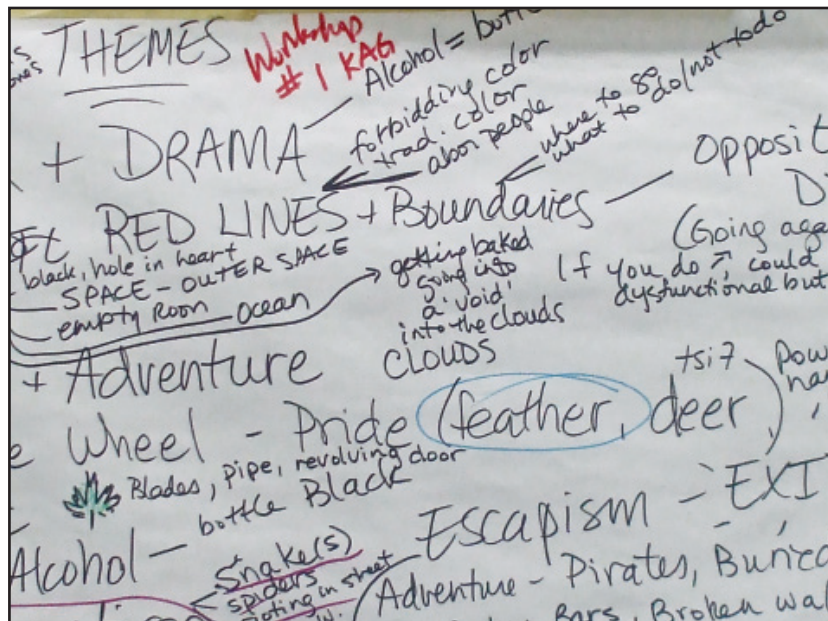
a teacher in the formal education system, represented in the eyes of my students was hardly enough. I often desired to tell them my personal (hi)story as determined by the decisions made by my ancestors, parents, and myself to recount the effects of colonization had on me, my family, and community. How I came to be a immigrant-settler educated and trained to be their teacher today is a product of history that concerns both me and them. To echo Meeka's idea of storytelling and sharing of experiences, this endeavour can be individually and culturally healing if effort is made to encourage such exchanges between generations and cultures.

I came to Canada from Hong Kong at the age of twelve, making "home" a place(s) inextricably linked to the legacy of British colonialism. This legacy is not unique in the sense that the pain inflicted upon peoples the world over by

colonization of different stripes is commonly shared. The stories of contact are never simple, like the ones told to me about the British or the Japanese occupation of China, just like the ones that were untold to me about the Chinese exploitation in many parts of Southeast Asia. My hope is for these points of contact (wounds) to be

revealed, discussed, and shared as much in academia as in the daily practice of being and living in today's diverse society. Only exposed and drained can these wounds be given a chance to heal and to enrich our cultural identities like scars that tell of suffering and new learnings. After all, what doesn't kill us does make us stronger.

JS: Your responses both underline the importance of recognizing that any form of reconciliation takes place, as Meeka puts it, on “many levels of reconciliation, internally and externally,” interwoven, and intrinsic to identifying one's own histories as much as coming to grips with recognizing, acknowledging, and accepting other(s) histories. As well, we are simultaneously dealing with the “institution.” The state, academia, the school board, the art world, all of these are still very much part of and integral to the colonial system and oppressive structures set up in the nineteenth century (and earlier).



**ORIENTATION SHEET/PAINTING IDEAS, (NYAW), 7/6/09.**

**PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

Yet, despite the problems and difficulties, even there you have illustrated a usefulness for some of the tools and languages within those systems/structures. So, are there additive processes (changes that don't fundamentally alter the structure) that can rehabilitate these institutions? I think some changes can make a difference, but with institutional foundations in racism, colonialism, and domination it seems that some wholesale housecleaning is also in order. The basis of these institutions is flawed from the get-go, and their foundations need to be re-examined and rebuilt.

Karine speaks to the ongoing apartheid state (in/of Canada) of my youth as well—we are a generation apart, and I don't think it has changed much. You can go your whole life in Canada as a non-aboriginal person and have next to no contact or direct relations with aboriginal life, aboriginal people, and geographies—or at least it could seem that way





**BLUE/BOTTLE/EXIT, NYAW COLLABORATIVE PAINTING, 95" X 60", 6/07-11/08 PHOTO: JAYCE SALLOUM**

—as so much is invisible to us in our parallel universes. What we do of course does affect each other whether we are acknowledging the other(s) or not. Aboriginal people are always with us, as we are with them, but that doesn't mean there is anything that we are embracing together or identifying what is between us. We (speaking broadly and across historical periods) have imposed ourselves, uninvited, have lived our lives at the cost of theirs and others in far-flung places. The recognition that Meeka writes about takes work (a working consciousness) and it takes a stepping back to observe ourselves in relation. It was often through discussions with Meeka after and before workshops that we were able to identify moments and possibilities for recognition, exchange, and the emergence of participants (and us) participating in a space of empathy, respect, and working together. This is a form of honouring as well, recognizing

each other, coming face to face and not turning away.

Could you please talk about specific instances/circumstances where some form of bridging or reconciliation took place, what led up to that moment, and try to articulate what specifically happened that could be used in future projects/workshops/classes? Also, it may be useful if you could mention what processes work for you in this regard and perhaps how they function theoretically.

MM: Karine's experience brought up many of my own experiences of being in high school in the 1990s as well as later, as an adult, doing various workshops in the schools in this district (Gold Trail, School District #74, here in the southern interior of BC) These workshops were focused on issues such as "Understanding Aboriginal History through Story, Music, and Visual Art," or "Transforming Our Understanding of Aboriginal History through Contemporary Story, Music, and Art" —all from my own aboriginal perspective, many based on the teachings of my research and work from my thesis.

When Karine wrote about what she learned of aboriginal history and issues, much of it being textbook or based on stereotypes ("drunk Indians after dark," et cetera), I was immediately brought back to my own high

school days, where learning about aboriginal history was very textbook and general. In fact, I remember learning about the Interior Salish but not understanding that that category actually included Secwepemc (you'd think they might have mentioned that in the class since we were in Secwepemc territory, but it wasn't), and I felt intensely what I learned was called "psychic disequilibrium" by poet Adrienne Rich in "Invisibility in Academe":

*...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing."*

It is a very lonely place to be. This, I believe is the gap that Karine is describing, and I have described it myself as a void, a large gap, a black space, a crevice. And this void created a distance between myself and everything around me, my family, my friends, my teachers, my understanding of my world. I recall the moment that I realized we were all living behind a smokescreen, and I even tried to convince myself that, of course, everyone really did know what had happened, and that it must have been dealt with long ago, and since aboriginal people didn't complain too much about it, no one seemed to talk about it, it must not have been that traumatic. I mean, both of my parents went to residential school for ten-plus years each, yet I couldn't recall them ever talking to me about it. They acted as if it had never happened, or that they wanted to pretend that it didn't happen, because nobody cared anyway. Finally in 1991, when I was in Grade Ten, a teacher brought up an article in the paper that was written about a group of aboriginal peoples trying to take the Government of Canada to court for residential school abuse. When I

identified myself as having two parents that went through this, this was the first moment of clarity I had ever felt regarding my history in relation to everyone else's, because for that moment, I was not invisible, they saw me, they looked at me.

When I finished my MA thesis, *Making Connections with Secwepemc Family through Storytelling: A Journey in Transformative Rebuilding*, we would read the pieces and discuss what kinds of reactions, emotions, feelings, imagery, and memories it brought up for them. We explored contemporary aboriginal music, writing, art. Many students felt incredibly upset, angry at first, towards me for bringing this to them. They had to process, in stages it seemed, this new part of their own history. Some of them had to lash out as well, express their own frustrations with feeling blame and shame. Many of them experienced harsh feelings of denial, not believing that these kinds of things took place, through our own Canadian government, and if it had, why is it that they were only finding out now? I could feel them wanting to ask me who the hell I thought I was. I myself asked that same question when I was asking for stories from my own people and family. They felt betrayed. I allowed them to express this, and there were tears. But once they felt we were allowed to mutually share our stories as well as our reactions to it, we were somehow able to come together, sit through our pain, the unease of unspoken moments, in a place where we could confront our fears and grow within each other. Finally, they started to feel this aboriginal history as a part of their own, as a part of what it means to be Canadian. In the black void there was some light. There they were, sitting up straight, opening their eyes, willing to open their hearts, and there I was as well. Our relationships became more

than what they seemed.

I don't think I can fully explain how important it is for us all to find this place, this place where we can find the beginnings of understanding. When we feel we are able to tell our stories, the chain to our trauma gives way, and whoever shares in that experience may be able to feel it also. If we can open up about our reality, we can have the strength to transform it, to rebuild it.

Education for aboriginal peoples has a more complex history of representing the history of colonization, of government, church, and institutions that are embedded with the values and beliefs of the people who created them, yet it is encouraged in aboriginal communities as a way of bettering ourselves, getting ahead, but somehow also feels like a betrayal. Many must leave their communities, and often afterward are seen as outsiders when they return with hopes of sharing their new knowledge. It has the same feeling or vibration as having to leave a child at residential school—that aboriginal knowledge and ways of life are only ways to be behind. It has the same feeling of being in that high school, looking in the mirror and seeing nothing. What I tried to do in my own work, my own process of reconciliation, was to find ways that academic knowledge and aboriginal knowledge could come together, not perceived as a way to get ahead or be apart, but to be within. I simply could not carry out the research experience in ways that kept me separate and apart from my family and community. I wanted them to also feel a part of my research—for the research to be received in a way that the information would create mutual understanding, not only between members of my community and the academy, but also to audiences outside as well. I felt that by bringing these together that I could

develop my perceptions of education in ways that felt empowered rather than assimilated. It also forced me to have a relationship with my parents' generation, including my own family, creating more space for us to walk together. It led to encouraging people to build relationships with those that shared history as a process of transformative rebuilding. The heart of the research was lying in the relationship I had with my people, their relationships with me, and our relationship to everyone else.

KN: In a sense, this very act of exchanging between us now is an occurrence of reconciliation for me. What distinguishes what we are doing now from a conversation—the opportunities of which have been plenty—is, I think, the express will to investigate and to share our feelings and experiences specifically related to the subject at hand. Although this observation may appear obvious, it is not often that I find myself in such company who are willing to open up their Pandora's box. Speaking about pain is difficult enough; to expect constructive outcomes from such talk may just be too much (too painful?) to ask for. But it seems pain is inevitable if one were to come to some revelation of what this pain can mean, and how one can be healed. It is my conviction that after violations have occurred (against all human and non-human beings), reconciliation is necessary, and that regardless of how small or how much in the distant past a violation has taken place, it hurts. Like an untreated wound, violation without redress does not disappear, it only festers and brings more pain.

As I write presently I still feel a certain unease, as if my words are inadequate or needing to be reworked or embellished before they can be acceptable to others, others who have felt even more pain than I have, experienced worse trauma, others who would



no doubt discredit me for what I have to say. Others. This reminds me of W.E. Dubois' notion of "double consciousness." I perceive myself through the lens of the dominant other, while also trying to reconcile that perception with a self-consciousness developed through my own lived experiences and cultural heritage. Perhaps my feeling of voicelessness is similar to Meeka's of invisibility, of not seeing herself in the history textbooks. For example, surely we read about the CPR project and the Chinese labour that contributed to it. But how I and other students of Chinese heritage might have felt upon learning about the Head Tax that Canada imposed on Chinese immigrants was never discussed. How is youth to make sense of that history and how it relates to their identities and experiences today if space is not made/ designed for that kind of discussion? The fear of not finding or being able to assert my voice often paralyzes me to the extent where the intention to consciously open up myself is subverted, only to be replaced by a dismal, fatalist outlook. What can possibly emerge from sharing our sob stories with each other, other than bottomless self-pity or some false sense of strength, like the wounded arrogance of failed heroes?

The emotional obstacles are immense and appear insurmountable at times. The process of fighting off the fear and maintaining optimism is constant—I would like to think it as a stage overcome, but alas it is not. Rather, it is a psychological undercurrent that I have to learn to navigate despite its strong riptides at various points along my emotional coastline. Working with youth has taught me the important lesson that what appears to be hopeless today can change dramatically tomorrow, and that the inverse can also be true. Each and every student with whom I have been able to connect at a

personal level has first challenged my limits, honed my skills, and strengthened my faith. Like sailors of the sea I can only trust that my intuition is fine and my vessel sound. There is also wisdom in knowing when to exit a storm; we are not all psychically synchronized, so when we pressure an unwilling subject, myself or others, to open up, the well-intentioned endeavour can backfire. Returning to the first instance of verbal assault I encountered, it took many assaults after that for me to finally realize that the violence did not originate from the student destined for me personally. The realization came to me a few years ago when I was attending a conference about First Nation education in the context of urban Vancouver, specifically a talk that was delivered by Calvin Helin, who explained the nature of violence being multidirectional. Like abusive behaviour patterns that get passed on from one generation to the next, the violence of colonial rule spreads outwards, horizontally and vertically, through space and time.

It is risky business that I sometimes do. The process of drawing a student out often requires that I reveal myself first, while that vulnerability is neither endorsed nor protected by conventional curriculum or practice (the institution that Jayce mentioned). If we were serious about helping youth heal from the legacy of colonial violence, we must first decolonize our own national narratives and debunk myths that contribute to our suffering and that of our forebears. In terms of effecting change at a systemic level, it is necessary to initiate reconciliatory discussion and action throughout the school system, from top to bottom, inwards and out. How can adults be expected to lead the process if they themselves are still hurting? How can board trustees be trusted to make the appropriate decisions if

they know not what pain is suffered? How can anyone expect residential school survivors to entrust their children to the educational system if they remained voiceless and invisible in administrative decisions? How can children of immigrant families grow up to truly believe that they were brought to a civilized country if no one ever cared to explained to them they had been in fact living in unceded territories?

MM: It is certainly risky business, but necessary, and the territory of all this is dangerous, yet emancipating. After doing the interviews for my thesis I knew I couldn't understand everything about the interviewees, especially my father, so it was most important that I continue to ask questions and to talk to them regardless, while at the same time recognizing the limitations of the process. In accepting their differences I learnt to feel out the times that I needed to let silence be in order to grow with them, to bring me closer to their level of understanding. But would I ever reach that level? It will be a continuous process of teaching and learning. And like the people I interviewed, there are things I am just not prepared to talk about. Yet I feel that by starting the process, painful as it may be, I become closer to opening up about my reality so that I have the strength to transform it, to rebuild it.

JS: There is a lot of fear in approaching any type of reconciliation or coming together of separated peoples and pasts. The present is difficult enough. But if things, any and all things, are to get better then we have to come together, work together, and recognize each other. I think the risks are far greater if we do nothing or continue along the path of the status quo. In the NYAW workshops we faced each other. Sometimes it took many meetings, sometimes it happened more easily, but we eventually broke through so many barriers to be able to

see beyond our projections and transferences, beyond stereotypes and assumptions. The difficulties were many, but the patience was great. It took us a while to realize that if our hearts were in the right place and we were open to the opportunity then we didn't need many rules. The growth happened organically or holistically, and openness was the key. We were ready for things to happen (and for all sorts of people dropping by) within the environment that we had created, in the place of contention we had occupied, and in the space of calmness and acceptance we had offered to all who came through the doors, native and non-native. The process was not always smooth, but the possibility of change, re-visioning, working through our senses, seeing the outcomes and the works transforming before our eyes told us we were on the right path. Reflecting back on those workshops I think it was more than acceptance or tolerance that propelled the participants and us along. There was a trust developed and the understanding that in our mutual recognition we could come together and place ourselves in the works and use them to map our course during those times, past times, and for future possibilities.

There is so much work to do together and it feels like we have barely started. And it's not just work, I mean it's about living, living in a way that is different than how separate incubator existences function. Collaboration still holds a key as does establishing and increasing the commons, shared physical spaces/places that can help to regenerate communities and people. Reconciliation and progress beyond that to holistic, sustainable, stimulating, healthy life will only come from working communally with all segments of the population. Fear has to be extinguished with love.

KN: Agreed. I would add to "love" a large dose of

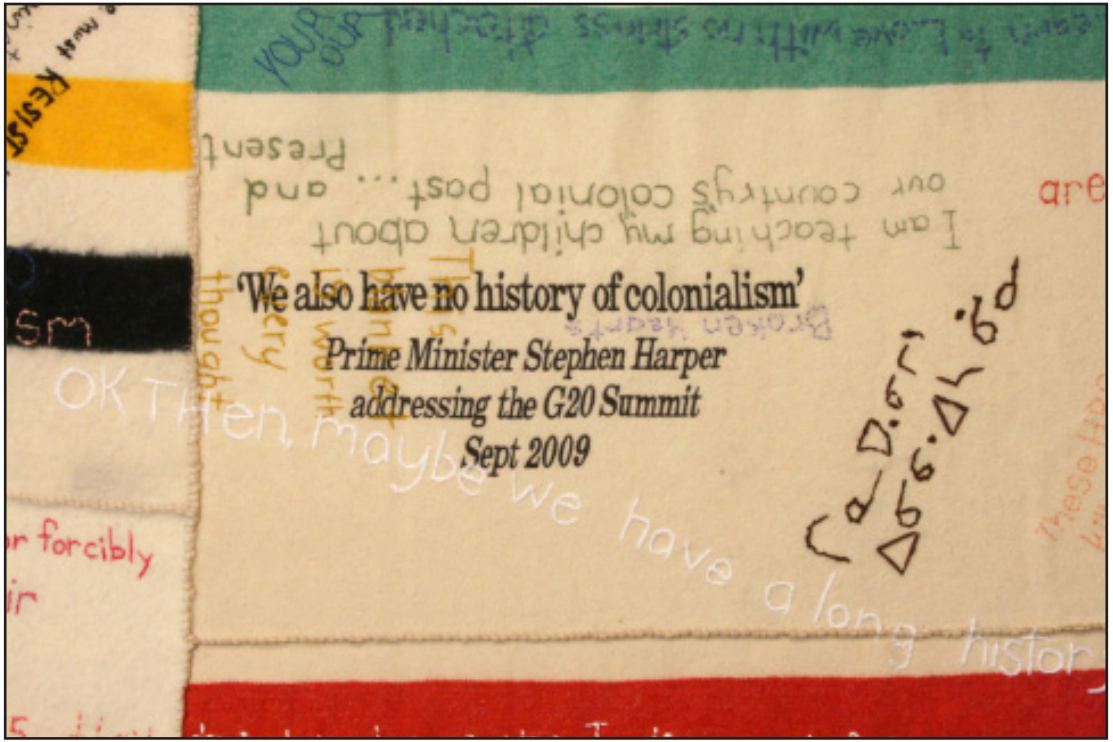
“play” as well. If to work on reconciliation is to live with communal consciousness, to love is to play like carefree and fearless children in a shared community playground, while following a code of conduct/ethics. Indeed, we need to play whole-heartedly but also fairly, bravely, and respectfully, allowing each other the space to display, discuss, and appreciate the many different creativities and imaginations. To me, this description is about as close to the practice of (good) art as can be.

MM: As we continue to work in progress, the possibilities are endless. They will vary from individual to situation to environment, finding ways to build understanding to open our hearts to solutions that benefit the highest good of all

concerned. In order to truly reconcile, we must learn to trust again, face the fear of addressing painful issues through finding ways and starting points to work together. The creation of new collaborative stories through music and art is one way. Yet it is also important to develop our intergenerational bonds again as well as reclaiming our roles—as sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles. I believe that the act of expressing our stories and our relationships to those stories through art and music is one of the more non-painful ways, or should I say gentle ways of doing this. The act itself is more of an embrace than an attack. We must deliver hope in the myriad of ways that we can each uniquely offer.

(OFFICIAL DENIAL)  
TRADE VALUE IN PROGRESS:  
UNSETTLING NARRATIVES

>> JAIMIE ISAAC AND LEAH DECTER



As Indigenous and settler, curator and artist, researchers with related but distinct interests, and collaborators we in some ways experience, understand, and articulate aspects of this project differently, while in others our conceptions of it converge. We chose to construct this piece of writing in the form of separate Artist and Curatorial Statements as a way of making visible our unique frames of reference and the overlap in our relationships to the project. The texts interspersed throughout both of our statements are drawn from the responses contributed by those who have engaged with the project. As its backbone they are a through-line reflecting the activation and interaction that the project enacts. We want to take this opportunity to thank those that shared their thoughts and experiences. We felt it was important to reflect and honour the voices of those involved in the project by activating their statements within the context of our narratives. Here these statements are brought to life, mirroring and countering the inter-narratives of artist, curator, participants, and reader. We invite you to visit the project website to read more responses, as they are all relevant and important to this work in progress.

## ARTIST STATEMENT: LEAH DECTER

As an artist and researcher my primary paths of inquiry are concerned with interrelated issues of place, identity, and (dis)location. Elements of my maternal grandfather's life story, in particular the conditions of loss and extended displacement that eventually led him to emigrate to Canada, serve as points of reference for a considerable portion of this work. My grandfather's story is emblematic of those commandeered to construct a conception of Canadian identity in relation to narratives of refuge and advancement that occludes correlations with our history of settler colonialism. Such characterizations invalidate the impact that policies and practices of immigrant settlement have had on the economic, political, and cultural lives of Indigenous people and communities. In truth, when our ancestors found their home in this territory, and relief from *their* dislocation, they became part of a colonial system that precipitated processes of displacement and oppression with legacies that stretch to the present. Obscuring the full picture of this history, and by extension the reality of current conditions, these narratives, along with other dominant conceptions of Canadian identity, have calcified into reductive mythologies. Framing understandings of the Canadian nation-state and its population in this way works to eclipse Indigenous narratives and voices, devalue Indigenous knowledge, and perpetuate dichotomous colonial systems in which inequities are entrenched.

*"If we can't honestly examine our mutual histories, oppressed becoming oppressors, then imperialism continues and remains obscured"*

*"Canada is a beacon of peace around the world: Lies my teacher told me"*

*"Everybody has the right to know and have a history"*

Extending the inquiry that began with my

grandfather's story, my ongoing body of work *trade value*, of which (*official denial*) *trade value in progress* is part, seeks to disrupt these dominant mythologies and to examine both contemporary legacies of settler colonialism and current initiatives of reconciliation and decolonization. The works in *trade value* build on my practice of enacting interventions onto Canadian land and *landscape*, and tampering with iconic elements of Canadian visual culture, in this case enlisting the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Point Blanket. Incorporated in this work in material and digital form, the HBC Point Blanket invokes the notion of trade as an economic, political, and social interchange. As the economic engine of the imperialist project, European trade practices set a pattern of European dominance by privileging Western models of capitalism and ownership in disregard of Indigenous practices and belief systems.<sup>1</sup>

*"The past is not something we can choose to forget or accept on our convenience.*

*It is always with us. In the ground we stand on and in the blood in our veins.*

*Denial is no shield from it."*

With its near monopoly on the fur trade and considerable land holdings, the Hudson's Bay Company formed the primary economic pillar of the colonial project in the territory now known as Canada. The Hudson's Bay Company's point blanket is a highly charged symbol of Canada's inception through its role as a colonial currency in the fur trade, and its implication in the spread of smallpox and other diseases into Aboriginal communities. The point blanket, particularly the multi-stripe version, has come to be a national icon and an expensive luxury item. Enduring as hallmarks in the HBC's retail product line, the multi-stripe blanket and its numerous variations (bikinis,

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London: Zed Books Limited, 1999).





upholstery, kitchenware, chocolate boxes, dog beds, etc.) are increasingly prevalent in home décor, as fashion and as Canadiana. With this position in mainstream consumer culture the difficult history of the blankets has largely been expunged. The *trade value* works redeploy the blanket and its contentious social history through transfiguration, recontextualization, and relational activation to foreground historical inter/counter-narratives, contemporary conditions, and future possibilities. As this body of work progresses I am increasingly interested in developing concepts and practices of trade that challenge Western capitalist assumptions and that could activate as tactics of collaborative pedagogy towards equitable inter/change.

*“What a thing to do to a Hudson Bay blanket”*  
*“My grandfather shared his blanket with NWMP (Northwest Mounted Police)—who became known as Chief Walking Blanket”*

*“We need to change the way we treat each other and the way we treat the land”*

As a non-Indigenous Canadian I engage in research and production concerning these issues through a critical and ongoing analysis of my position as part of the white settler society within contemporary colonial realities. This work is framed within a context of endeavours that seek to develop just paradigms for Indigenous-settler relations, and is embedded in practices of self-reflexive decolonization, critical non-Indigenous engagement, and Indigenous-settler collaboration. There is increasing recognition of the imperative for a range of non-Indigenous responses and actions with regard to colonial residues. If, as Rice and Snyder state, “Reconciliation is about healing relationships, building trust and working out differences,”<sup>2</sup> then settler engagement is

2 Brant Castellano, Marlene et al., Eds. *From Truth to*

clearly necessary. At the same time, such agency is regarded with justifiable skepticism. As Steph Gude suggests, there has been a “very real tendency to appropriate the voices of those with whom we are supposed to be acting in solidarity.”<sup>3</sup> The potential for the non-Indigenous ally to re-inscribe colonial constructs while attempting to interrupt or critique them suggests the need for an approach that is informed, self-reflexive, and activated—one that involves cultivating comprehensive understandings of colonial history and its contemporary legacies, acknowledging and understanding one’s accountability within these conditions, and taking steps to interrupt embedded colonial paradigms, perceptions, and assumptions.

*“Is an apology that is refuted worse than no apology at all?”*

*“We as white Canadians need to know the truth of why we have and continue to discriminate against those who lived here first and still live here”*

*“How do we move forward? What can I do to contribute?”*

It seems essential in such undertakings to recognize the necessity of taking risks—the generative potential inherent in the instability of relinquishing power, control and authority, the unease of challenging the ingrained colonial beliefs of our settler communities, and the uncertainty of engaging in new ways across cultural divides. Just as risk resides in personal, political, and social change, discomfort can be seen as a notable component of its methodology. In *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Paulette Regan advocates for a “pedagogy of

discomfort” and the practice of “stepping outside of one’s comfort zones”<sup>4</sup> as instrumental to transformative change in the decolonizing work of settlers. Andre Lepecki describes the “zones of discomfort” that artist William Pope.L “creates with and for his audience” in his performances as “allow(ing) for... transformation into generative zones of dialogue and relationality.”<sup>5</sup> In both cases the careful channelling of discomfort is understood to intensify critical engagement with contentious issues without the type of destructive confrontation that reaffirms barriers. The creative practices of cultural production, in particular rigorous dialogic and relational approaches, hold the capacity to translate such carefully channelled discomfort into problematizing, restorative, and intensively investigative spaces of resistance.

*“There has to be justice and healing for the true Canadian people, the Aboriginal people”*

*“My ancestors arrived here in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and I know that the Canada they came to was and is an artifact of colonialism”*

*“Consequences of inconsequential words. Language forces us to consider who we are in relation to others.”*

Holding a tension between familiarity and discomfort, (*official denial*) *trade value in progress* was conceived in the spirit of creating such spaces as decolonizing zones in the face of enmity to decolonizing agendas. In September of 2009, at the G20 Summit, just over a year after the official *Statement of Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools* was issued by the Canadian government, Prime Minister Harper

---

*Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008/2011). See: “Reconciliation in the Context of a Settler Colonial Society” by Brian Rice and Anna Snyder: 47.

3 Gude, Steph. Interview, “Listen, Take Direction and Stick Around,” *Briarpatch*, June/July 2008: 27.

---

4 Regan, Paulette. *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010) 52.

5 Lepecki, Andre. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 90.

stated of Canada that, “We also have no history of colonialism.”<sup>6</sup> Although it received some substantive analysis from alternative media, this statement was quickly dismissed in mainstream media as a public gaff. I initiated *(official denial) trade value in progress* late in 2009 in response both to this statement and its public reception. Scott Morgensen points out, “The confidence of Harper’s statement would be implausible if his audience—broader than we may care to think — truly believed that Canada practices colonialism.”<sup>7</sup> The reception of Harper’s statement underscores the persistent mythology of Canada as a “benevolent peacemaker”<sup>8</sup> and the proclivity for settlers to “present as other than colonists.”<sup>9</sup> Given the implications of this unofficial official remark, its relatively low profile and the general acceptance of the veracity of its claim, my impulse was to render it more visible and to activate a process of bearing witness to it.

*“Its not just Harper—he’s just representing the masses—what’s worse?”*

*“If there is no history of colonialism why does my family suffer every day from it:”*

*“Amazing how history can be rewritten to reflect a completely different reality”*

*“Words, the new Smallpox.”*

Rather than devising a material representation of my interpretation of Harper’s remark, I was interested in contextualizing it in such a way that a viewer/participant could be engaged in rendering *their* understanding of, and response to, the statement in relation to each other, and directly in the generation of a material object.

As such, *(official denial) trade value in progress* is rooted in collaboration and interaction. The collaboration between Jaimie Isaac and me has brought a particular depth to the project and has been significant in the way it has unfolded. Jaimie’s involvement began when, after being introduced to my work during a visit to my studio, she expressed interest in curating *(official denial) trade value in progress* into the exhibition component of the inaugural Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) event. Having played a key role in launching the project in this way, Jaimie’s engagement has expanded; and since the post-TRC events began in 2011, we have collaborated to activate the project.

The project invites people to respond to Harper’s G20 statement using two primary interfaces: a set of books and a 12’x15’ textile object made from reconfigured HBC Point Blankets. The statement is machine-sewn in formal font at the centre of the textile, and an ever-increasing corpus of responses is hand-stitched throughout the textile’s surface. The project unfolds through a series of engaged encounters hosted by individuals and organizations solicited through an open call. Responses to the statement are written in the books at public presentations of the piece, and are then hand-sewn onto the blanket in Sewing Actions. At the Sewing Actions participants select a response already written in the books to sew onto the blanket, and can also write a response in the book for future Sewing Actions participants to choose from. In this way the blanket, the books, and the events act collectively as a platform for dialogue, exchange, and reflection.

6 Ljunggren, David. “Every G20 Nation Wants to be Canadian, Insists PM. *Reuters* 25 Sep 2009.

7 Morgensen, Scott Lauria. “The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right here, Right Now.” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1.1 (2011): 66.

8 Regan 11.

9 Morgensen 66.

*“Mr Harper. You were charged with the duty of apologizing on behalf of all Canadians. You fell short, disgraceful.”*

*“ We should still say Meegwetch to the Prime Minister for half acknowledgement of the violations that have been committed to Canada’s First Nations People”*



*“Mr Harper, exactly who are you speaking for?”*

These nodes of interchange are charged with haptic and interpersonal proximity. Looking through the books clears a private portal for reflection. The character of each written response is signaled not only in the words but also through the hand of the writer — the form of the letters, the pressure of the pen on paper, the placement of the text on the page. The very notion of “blanket” suggests a closeness that can both comfort and obscure. In viewing the textile piece one is aware of the idiosyncratic materiality of the second-hand blankets that construct it. Patterns and degrees of wear, imperfections, and even the lingering odors evoke familiar utility and the nearness of unknown inter-narratives. The act of sewing recasts the viewer as participant, bringing them into closer proximity with the blankets, each other, the statement, and the responses. People write their own response in the books; however, in

choosing to sew a response onto the blanket one is making someone *else’s* contribution visible. In this remote collaboration the act of responsibility is engendered. The extended temporal and corporeal engagement of physically translating one person’s text into the hand of another through sewing works to problematize appropriative empathy<sup>10</sup> and enrich the act of listening to move it beyond a colonial practice of consuming narratives in “passive empathy.”<sup>11</sup> Sewing is a material act both inherently relatable and demonstrably political. As speech act it re/iterates the sampler which, having begun as a means of indoctrination, was retooled as a means of resistance. Situated in the everyday and

<sup>10</sup> Razack, Sherene. “Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses.” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 29.4 (2007): 375–394.

<sup>11</sup> Regan 48.



bearing compelling connections to labour, industry, construction, restoration, and emancipation, sewing operates “as a means of linking the social, the political and the personal.”<sup>12</sup>

*“I guess the Prime minister is teaching me humility. I have never been so ashamed of Canada before.”*

*“This event has been an amazing and personal moment for an Aboriginal women”*

*“We have blood on our hands like every other country”*

The individuals who engage with the project are responsible for the dialogue it manifests. Through their written and sewn responses, materialized in the textile and the books, a light is shone on Harper’s G20 statement and a process of witnessing is both activated and made conspicuous. These intersections of object and encounter create a space for unfolding narrative—narrative as personal account and in terms of “communicative, performative action... something of interest” which “lies between people and... can relate and bind them together.”<sup>13</sup> That which “relates and binds” can range from the solace of intimate kinship to the difficult terrain within divergent experiences of shared histories and presents. “Interest” and the “communicative act of narrative” speak to what happens between people and, importantly, what does not. Spiritual leader, teacher, and activist Stan McKay points out that, “We all have stories to tell and in order to grow in... understanding we have to listen to the stories of others.”<sup>14</sup> The inter-narratives in the pages of the

book and on the blanket itself, whether in the form of testimony or opinion, represent the opportunity to tell and to listen — to enact a vital utterance and, moreover, for that utterance to be witnessed.

*“Colonialism took my language from me. It is real!”*

*“I remember the ones that ran away and just... vanished. They drowned, died from exposure trying to get home. How could you deny what happened?”*

*“Not only is there a history of colonialism there is a living experience of colonialism”*

The TRC is rooted in such practices of telling and listening. As the first major presentation of (*official denial*) *trade value in progress*, the TRC National Event in Winnipeg in June of 2010 was its de facto launch. During its presentation over one hundred responses were written in the books representing a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. Although it is a diverse collection, this foundation of responses foregrounds the counter-narratives of survivors, and those who experience intergenerational effects, in unwavering resistance to Harper’s statement. The direction of the dialogue in the project is prompted by Harper’s statement as contextualized in the object; however, it is also significantly informed by the responses already contributed. As such, the initial TRC responses have had considerable impact on the project and how people have engaged from its onset. Its inclusion in the TRC event has arguably situated the project within reconciliation discourses in relation to Residential School histories and legacies; nevertheless, Harper’s G20 statement can be seen to encompass the disavowal of a more comprehensive set of colonial truths. Unfolding in reaction to Harper’s statement, to each other’s responses, and to the experience of participating in the events, the project’s dialogue underscores the reach of his statement through personal reflections

12 Schueing, Ruth, and Ingrid Bachmann. *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles* (Toronto: YYZ, 1998).

13 Homi, Bhabha. *Space Agency: Ethics and the Enunciation of Equality* (Eugene: Koehn Colloquium, University of Oregon, 2001).

14 Brant Castellano et al. See: “Expanding the Dialogue on Truth and Reconciliation—In a Good Way” by Stan McKay: 105.

of anger, shame, pain, loss, fear, resistance, ignorance, impatience, humility, respect, humour, and denial.

*“Is it possible he didn’t mean to say that?”*

*“Canada does not have a history of de-colonization”*

*“CAN’T EVEN WRITE! TOO ANGRY!”*

*“Denial: Helping politicians sleep at night”*

Although (official denial) trade value in progress has clearly been impacted by its presentation at the TRC event, it remains an independent activist art project; and, as such, rather than operating through the widespread visibility of official state-sponsored proceedings, it functions in the rhizomic territory of the unofficial. The books containing handwritten responses and the blanket’s hand-sewn texts foreground the counter-narrative of the unofficial, and, together with the cross-generative act of sewing, they bring into intimacy the disparate experiences of those who contribute and engage.

The project’s exchanges both embody and trouble notions of response, responsibility, solidarity, shared experience, and reconciliation. Reflective of the role that spatial divides and intimacies have played historically and contemporarily in constructing the colonial conditions in which we now find ourselves, the project’s proximities reflect the necessity of understanding relative adjacency in relation to decolonization and reconciliation, and barriers to those processes. Operating within the complexities of colonial legacies, the project in some ways cannot help but perform the difficult realities of our present conditions at the same time as it works to embody the potential of transformative inter/change. As a whole the project’s responses call for the recognition that in this country we all, in different ways, live in the substantial shadow of colonial experience. Indigenous–settler collaborations such as the one between Jaimie and myself, and those spanning across geography, time,

and culture that are produced through the project’s engagement, are crucial to reforming the damaged relationships that mark our contemporary times.

*“Although my family immigrated relatively recently, my white Canadian life is still built on a foundation of Aboriginal pain, suffering, trauma, poverty and betrayal”*

*“Its time for a change and change has to come from all of us speaking out”*

*“Don’t think you can be an innocent bystander.”*

Material components are crucial to this project’s meaning and process; however, it is the relational and collaborative frameworks that form its core. As Deleuze suggests, it is the “fundamental encounter”<sup>15</sup> that provokes us to think. The objects provide tactile, visible, affective materiality to people’s stories and ideas; however, change is manifested as the residue of the encounters moves out into the world in and through the embodied experience and knowledge of those who engage with the project. What began as an impulse to engage Canadians in critical reflection on personal and political accountability—a way of holding a mirror to denial and desire in relation to the very real history and presence of settler colonialism in Canada—has evolved as an unfolding process of critical engagement. As its name suggests, this project is inherently “in progress” with its currency expanding each time an engagement is activated, a perspective is made visible, or a platform is opened for the “act of bearing witness as an ethical undertaking.”<sup>16</sup>

Leah Decter, July 2012

---

15 Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition* (Great Britain: Athlone Press, 1994) 139–140.

16 Regan 18.



## **CURATOR'S STATEMENT: JAIMIE ISAAC**

There are many benefits of working with a *longue durée* project such as (*official denial*) *trade value in progress*; the significance of time and involvement underpin the strength of evolution and reflection from which to draw. I consider my involvement *longue durée* because it went beyond a one-time exhibition. For two years and counting, Leah Decter and I have been collaborating with each other on this project, with my role shifting from curatorial to collaborating artist as the project evolves. Our collaboration has significant beginnings... In June 2010, I coordinated the visual arts component at the inaugural Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) event in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The TRC's mandate and agreement was established to contribute to truth, healing, and reconciliation. The national events held across Canada commemorate survivors of the Indian Residential School legacy, educate the public about this legacy, and provide opportunities for people affected and impacted to share their experiences. Within the scope of work at the TRC event in Winnipeg, 2010, I researched visual artwork and curatorial pursuits that pertained to the Indian Residential School history in Canada with a focus to educate, commemorate, and disseminate to a broad audience. The breadth of work by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists within this domain are abundant. Some of the projects were inherited upon my hire, and others I was able to select and propose to a committee authority that ultimately made the final decisions on what would be accepted for exhibition. It was challenging at times, as there were many artists' works I felt were significant and relevant but weren't selected for reasons I was not privy to. There were overall six visual arts components I worked on for this event, and depending on the exhibition's content, there were assigned therapists, comment books, opportunities for community interaction and engagement with the art works, and private areas to contemplate and

read. The visual arts component of the event was largely pedagogical in nature, appealing to diverse audiences and various demographics; survivors, intergenerational survivors, non-Indigenous people, settlers, children, adults, youth, and the elderly. The educational method was vital in the process towards healing and reconciling, with the ideology that people must first understand, confront, and unpack the trauma, the impacts, the causality, and the truth of this history. For many people, this was the first time they faced their country's true history of colonial violence.

*"This wasn't something I learned in either Canadian or Mennonite history class in high school. Clearly there are stories we don't tell. So not so much a long history of amentia as a history of cultivated, partial ignorance"*  
*"Violent words to deny violent reality"*

The Indian Residential School legacy in Canada was a historically, mutually beneficial relationship between the government and churches to forge a racist policy of assimilation and ethnocide. The schools were in operation for over 150 years. The general public wasn't aware of Canada's history or the degree of severity the school system had on Indigenous People's social, economic, spiritual, and political existence. It is quite evident in today's headlines and First Nations' realities that the intergenerational impacts stem from this colonial system that continues to affect generations of Indigenous Peoples. "We only have to look around the streets of any major city in Canada and see the effects of this ethnocide."<sup>17</sup> The residential school legacy was constructed by the Canadian government to

*command a system which provides for its Indian wards a practical course of industrial training, fitting for useful citizenship the*

17 Thomas, Jeff. *Where Are The Children? Healing The Legacy of The Residential Schools* (Ottawa: Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2003) 19.

*youth of a people who one generation past were practically unrestrained savages.”<sup>18</sup>*

The objectives of religious-based residential schools were to administer cultural genocide by removing children from their parents care, influence, and cultural traditions to assimilate them into the dominant European culture and teach them that their way of life was shameful and wrong—inward feelings still felt in many Indigenous peoples public consciousness today. In 1847, Egerton Ryerson’s report on Indian Affairs recommended “the education of Indians consist not merely of training the mind but of a weaning from the habits and feeling of their ancestors and the acquirements of the language, arts, and customs of civilized life.”<sup>19</sup> Emotional, physical, and sexual abuses were inflicted on the students of these residential schools in addition to attempted ethnocide, which are publically shared by survivors today. Until recently, this history was not taught in schools; but after Indigenous leaders’ lobbying efforts, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, and the TRC the residential school history is now acknowledged as a colonial legislated policy in Canada and is now taught in school curricula. Still, this is Canadian truth that needs to be understood, validated, and endorsed as history by multi-level systems of knowledge such as education, socio-political streams, law, philosophy, media, and most perhaps effectively through the arts that can be entrenched in the spirit and psyche within people from all cultures.

*“I am teaching my children about our country’s colonial past... and present. Together with my aboriginal brothers and sisters I will spread the truth and work for justice”*

18 Forget, A. E. Indian Commissioner, Education, 1897: Thomas 17.

19 Ray, Arthur, *I Have Lived Here Since the World Began, An Illustrated History of Canada’s Native People*, (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1996) 237.

Among the exhibitions I organized for the TRC, I presented Leah Decter’s work (*official denial*) *trade value in progress*, which was debuted and activated for the national event. It was incontestable to include the work of Indigenous artists, survivors, and intergenerational survivors. I also felt it was important to include non-Indigenous artists and their perspectives on this matter, as this legacy pertains to and has affected all Canadians on multiple levels. Collecting responses at the first Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission event was extremely powerful because the event was centred around healing and reconciling with Canada’s history of colonialism; Harper’s contradictory statement on the blanket was shared for public scrutiny to a diverse and affected audience. There were survivors, intergenerational survivors, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples bearing witness and critically engaging. After people would learn about the history of Residential Schools, and then learn about Stephen Harper’s contradictory statements with his apology and his denial, people’s responses were disparate.

*“It is not surprising a politician has a forked tongue!!”*

*“You dishonor me, my family and my country”*

*“Now I’m confused, what is our history”*

Other responses mnemonically allude to further oppressive colonial realities. The residential school legacy was only one part of the larger colonial machine that affected Indigenous peoples’ ability to have equal standing and respect in society. Colonialism affected First Nations peoples on many levels of violating basic human rights. These colonial government policies gave authority for land and resource theft, the spread of smallpox through trade agreements (HBC blankets), the pass system that restricted people to leave their reserves unless permitted, disenfranchisement, jury discrimination, the Sixties Scoop which stole children away from



their traditional homes to be placed in foster care, the sterilization of women, and the scorched earth plans that cut off traditional foods forcing reliance on unhealthy processed commodity foods which is instrumental in the prevalent diabetes problem across North America.<sup>20</sup>

*“Robbed of my language and culture!!”*

*“No, just a history of kidnapping children”*

*“My family is so screwed up because of a long history of alcoholism!”*

*“The ongoing abuse of Aboriginal Women is a legacy of colonialism in Canada”*

Presenting Leah Decter’s work firstly at the Truth and Reconciliation event and then consequently working together over a period of

time allowed me to confront, reconcile, and examine my own vulnerabilities in my family history by considering Canada’s colonial causality as it had affected my immediate relations. The matriarchal side of my family is Ojibwe from Sagkeeng First Nation and the patriarchal side of my family is settlers from Britain.

*“Its not easy sitting on both sides of the fence...”*

This cultural and political dichotomy shapes my artistic sensibilities and vision of decolonization. My matriarchal family and community are survivors of this legacy, but many did not survive and many still suffer today. My community’s history is documented in a book called *Broken Circle: The Dark Legacy of Indian Residential Schools: A Memoir*, written by a relative, Theodore Fontaine. For a long time my family didn’t talk about this history they had

20 LaDuke, Winona. *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005) 194.

experienced and ultimately survived. It was denial and a need to protect the younger generations of the atrocities they endured; however, this left gaps in understanding why many of our Peoples suffer severe systemic social, economic, interpersonal, and educational plight in Canada. Drawing from my experience, education, and mixed cultural background I feel I have a role in bridging and connecting settler-Indigenous relations through my curatorial and artistic pursuits by contributing to a non-divisionary dialogue that de-essentializes insularism, de-naturalizes dominant knowledge, to generate a decolonizing rubric and national social activism. Essentialist knowledge has been inadequate in understanding all the complexities of the world's social, spiritual, and political domains. In terms of Leah Decter's work, (*official denial*) *trade value in progress*, our collaboration evokes an activist-based approach and participatory action that prompts an inclusive dialogue. Shannon Speed from the University of Texas endorses

*that the critical engagement brought about by activist research is both necessary and productive. Such research can contribute to transforming the discipline by addressing the politics of knowledge production and works to decolonize our research process... activist research allows us to merge cultural critique with political action to produce knowledge that is empirically grounded, theoretically valuable, and ethically valuable.*<sup>21</sup>

*"History is written by the victors. This blanket is rewriting history"*

Throughout this project, my role of Indigenous-curator-as-activist partaking in a project that involves participatory action methods, instead of "bestowing" people to activate their

21 Speed, Shannon. "At the Crossroads of Human Rights and Anthropology: Towards a Critically Engaged Activist Research." *American Anthropologist* 108.1 (2006, March).

voices, the process instead utilizes a relational dialogic approach that brings people together to activate agency. Artistic methods that approach a decolonizing process root its rationale to de-centre and acknowledge the responsibility of knowledge and their affect on community. The role of Canadian institutions and galleries have been vital in contributing to a critical dialogue towards decolonization and truth by exhibiting avant-garde artists that have contributed groundbreaking bodies of work that began to decentre dominant ways of knowing by challenging and exposing colonialism and de-mythologizing racist ideologies in Canada. Within the wake of postmodernism, the art community emerged to free themselves from colonial thought, embraced and shared their cultures in a realm of the white cube. As Dana Claxton has written, "the art community has helped lead the decolonization process in the exhibition space..." which "is the site where the most radical and polemic critiques of Canadian society have taken place."<sup>22</sup> Settler and Indigenous participation in decolonization-driven projects such as Leah Decter's and my collaboration demonstrate that the Indigenous and the settler mainstream need to work together to adjust their world views to acknowledge the colonial affect and recognize equal standing. Claxton maintains that, "as Aboriginal people decolonize, so too does the non-Aboriginal community. Both groups need to become free of the dominant forces that have cast Aboriginal cultures as inferior."<sup>23</sup>

*"Decolonize [sic] yourself"*

*"Denial is the easy way out. Canada need to own up to its history the effects of colonialism"*

The work (*official denial*) *trade value in progress*

22 Claxton, Dana. *RE:WIND: Transference Tradition Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and digital culture* (Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2005) 17.

23 Claxton 17.

destabilizes the settler–Indigenous division to draw connections among diverse groups of people by instigating dialogue on how the history of colonial power has affected Canada as we know it now. In the last two years, Leah Decter and I have brought the work to places across Canada, and the US, everywhere from public galleries, artist-run centres, private schools, and universities to inner-city centres and private homes. The blanket has collected more than 200 responses and over 120 sewn responses onto the blanket, and we continue to make connections. It is important to recognize and celebrate Indigenous art/culture in all its complexities within the art world by working on projects that advance and privilege not only Indigenous voices but also Indigenous allies whose work is important in the process of decolonization. I follow the advice of Skawenati Fragnito in her article, “Five suggestions for better living”; #4 encouraged that “native curators should include non-Native artists in their practices,”<sup>24</sup> in recalling her curatorial work in the exhibitions *Blanket Statements* and *Cyber Pow Wow 2K*. By advancing the work of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars on topics of decolonization and reconciliation, the risk of essentialism and insularism can be eluded. The work (*official denial*) *trade value in progress* offers/privileges uncensored, cross-cultural, intergenerational dialogue and critical exchange among diverse individuals on the issues of colonialism, reconciliation, denial, and truth. As it evolves, the blanket has become a public record revealing a myriad of perspectives, bridging unlikely communities through an intermediated dialogue and through an activist initiative. The process has brought into connection people across the nation, each with different backgrounds and education, and the statement books and blanket

reflect their responses and reveal their sentiments. The diffusion of the project to a broad audience has encircled a line of opportunity for public interface that summons varying and often conflicting responses, some of which are provocative, instigating, emotive responses.

*“It is because of colonialism that you have the right to speak”*

*“Get over it”*

On a personal level, some responses evoke a feeling of vulnerability with my participation in this project because of my family and cultural background; I feel that although these sentiments reflect a truth of inherent and latent colonial mindsets, this painful discourse and acknowledgement is a part of the decolonization process. To address these sentiments, a call to redress the balance becomes a participant’s role to help render equality through counter-utterance. Telling this history is not meant to negate or compare any other cultural group’s experiences of oppression across the globe and through history.

*“Colonialism shaped the world and Canada is not different”*

*“Was Apartheid [sic] not inspired by the Canadian segregation system??”*

*“The holocaust happened. Colonialism in Canada happened”*

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa presented artist Williamson, who created artwork “intended for and reached mainly bystander audiences”: those who did not know ‘the truth’ first-hand and could afford to question its relevance. These pieces were exhibited in galleries in white neighborhoods and metropolitan centers, reaching, by and large, an elite white audience within South Africa and abroad... “[and questioned] responsibility for the past and future.”<sup>25</sup> Exhuming

24 Fragnito, Skawennati Tricia. *Five Suggestion for Better Living: On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*. Eds. Lynda Jessup with Shannon Bagg (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002) 234.

25 Marlin-Curiel, Stephanie. *Re-Collecting the Collective: Mediatized Memory and the South African Truth and*



these legacies allows people to acknowledge their country's history, identity, and land and recognize their place within that domain. In Canada, it is also significant for newcomers to fully understand the colonial history and the impacts on the First Peoples of the country they now call home. As one newcomer states,

*from my perspective as an immigrant coming from the imperial centre, there was no disputing that Indigenous Peoples all over Canada had been subjected to the outright theft of their lands and resources. I found this shameful, and my sense of indignation motivated me to learn as much as I could about Canada's colonial history.*<sup>26</sup>

Learning these truths not only cultivates empathy and compassion, but also dispels preconceived prejudices and constructed myths instilled by dominant culture.

The blanket is a reflexive aesthetic that invites viewers to reflect and consider past and current colonialism, becoming a space for agency and reflection. The blanket acts as a space and site for inquiry and social critique, and it is interdependent of the artist, curator, host, and participants to progress. Decker's prior work involves performative aspects and encountering the *official denial* project feels like a performative art experience; with the process of participation and engagement, the line between artist and object, viewer and object, is disrupted and enables participants to learn and understand the blanket's subject matter on a very

personal and tactile level. In considering the notion of reconciliation and healing through the arts, not only is art therapy an established practice, but art has also been known to transcend the limitations of language, articulation, and utterance by allowing the creator to express or confront feelings and emotions through different forms of art. Artists like Robert Houle with his work *Sandy Bay* and R.G. Miller with his work *Mush Hole Remembered* have expressed the vital role of their art practice in their process towards healing from their Indian Residential School trauma. Bearing witness to these bodies of work, one feels the anguish expressed by the artists, as if to behold the hellishness as it is manifested and released on their canvasses. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation completed a study of the benefits of creative arts in Aboriginal healing programs throughout Canada. The studies present compelling evidence that creative arts, culture, and healing are linked. One man presented in the study referred to sewing as a creative practice that has meditative and calming qualities:

*When people are doing things with their body, there's a connection between body, mind and spirit. They're being creative and active. Being fully engaged in a creative thing like sewing, the mind is engaged, the heart or creativity is engaged on a more spiritual level and they are physically engaged, working with the hands. It allows people to feel more secure, more safe. They're in an almost trance-like state and they go deeper into the issue they are talking about than if they were sitting face to face with a counselor.*<sup>27</sup>

As we experience sewing actions with varying groups, the issues we present of colonial history and political impunity are contemplated and

---

Reconciliation Commission, *The Image and The Witness; Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) 79.

26 Chambers, Natalie A. "Reconciliation: A Dangerous Opportunity to Unsettle Ourselves." *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*. Eds. G. Younging, J. Dewar, and M. DeGagné (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009) 290.

27 Archibald, Linda, and Jonathan Dewar. "Creative Arts, Culture, and Healing: Building an Evidence Base." *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 8.3 (2010): 12.



discussed in a non-confrontational manner. While participants sew, they reflect on Harper's statement and the response they've selected to portray on an area they've chosen on the blanket. As people sew together in concentration and work with their hands to manifest someone else's statement, a dialogue is drawn out and considered by connecting the body and mind. It is a sensory experience, the blanket is itchy, soft, and warm and its familiar aesthetic triggers memories each distinct with a particular encounter with the textile.

*"When you see these blankets for sale in stores still, its [sic] insulting, almost mockery"*

*"The stripes on this blanket represent so much..."*

*"That was my most prized possession"*

*"Is this blanket infested too?"*

The HBC blankets are just as emblematic of Canadian symbolism as the beaver; it is as ingrained and woven into Canadian consciousness. Although the blankets are promoted and sold as luxurious commodities, it remains an artifact and signifier of colonial hegemony. The (*official denial*) blanket is composed of the well-known white blankets with stripes of green, red, and yellow sometimes referred to as "chief's blankets."<sup>28</sup> The powerful materiality of Decter's work brings to the fore popular Canadian iconography embodying a dark history of colonial violence and capitalism, which has been the stimulus for other prominent Canadian artists to draw upon. Vancouver-based artist Rebecca Belmore created an uncanny video installation, *The Blanket* (2011), where she presents a red four-point blanket as a metaphor to call attention to its horrible history of disease and betrayal signalling the systemic racism and ill-treatment of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>29</sup> The late

Métis artist Bob Boyer also critiqued Canada's colonial history in his body of work, entitled *Blanket Statements* (c.1987), which refers to the fur trade strategy of spreading disease with the blankets.<sup>30</sup> Ojibwe artist Keesic Douglas presented a body of work at Urban Shaman Gallery (2011), entitled *Trade Me*, using photography and video. He connects the links between colonialism and capitalism, with photographs likened to advertisements, presenting images of multicultural models donning the HBC blankets and a video that was projected onto a HBC blanket documenting a personal canoe journey to trade an HBC blanket for his grandfather's pelts. Anishishabe artist, curator, and educator Robert Houle's body of work *Palisade* (1999) recalled the history of colonial warfare tactics of spreading smallpox with the HBC blankets. Houle vividly documents encounters between Indigenous Peoples and colonial settlers with eight large canvasses and digital graphic collages. Houle's digital graphic collages were presented on a series of billboards across Saskatchewan cities through a collaboration of galleries in 1999.<sup>31</sup> Exhibiting in this manner elicited a distinct connection to the capitalist interests of the Hudson's Bay Company and colonial settlement in Canada.

As a practice, exhibition has been related to enlightenment, the production of knowledge through art and display. Within the context of this project, it is difficult to measure impact or indicate whether people have benefited from education, healing, or reconciliation. In connecting a historical colonial object with current political and capitalist oppression, (*official denial*) is not an act of colonization but an act towards decolonization.

---

(Plug In Editions, 2011) 95.

28 HBC Heritage website <<https://www2.hbc.com/hbheritage/history/blanket/history/>> 4 July 2012.

29 Martin, LeeAnne. *Remembering Our Future: Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*. Ed. Sherry Farrell Racette

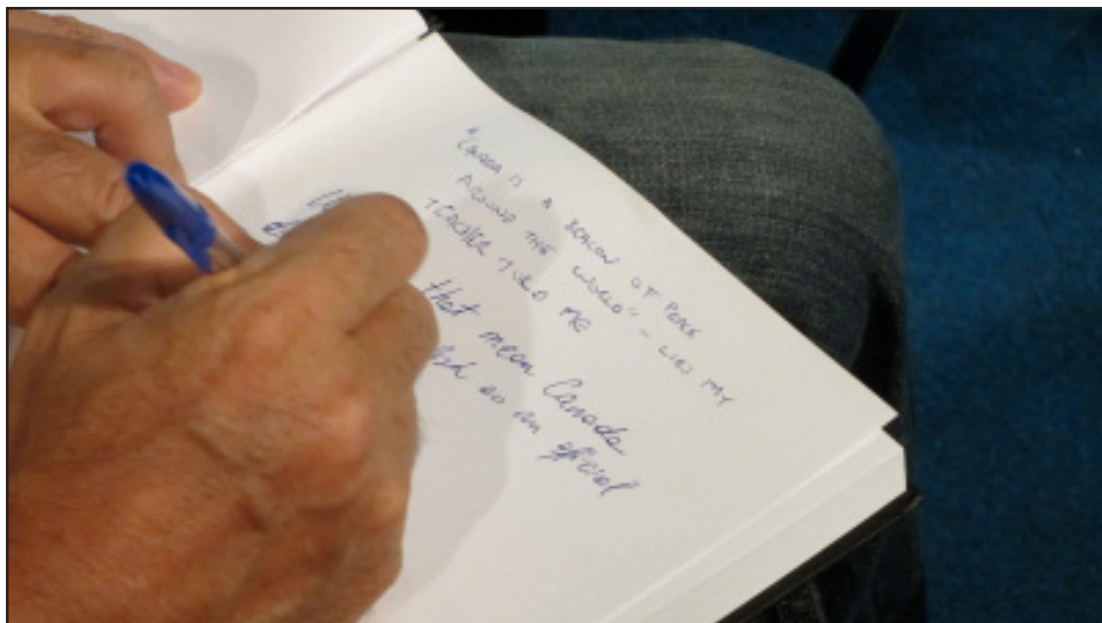
30 The National Gallery of Canada website <<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=34058>> 1 July 2012.

31 Tribe Inc. website <<http://www.tribeinc.org/exhibitions/robert-houle-palisade/>> 1 July 2012.

To truly embrace truth, healing, and reconciliation it is necessary to first understand denial, pain, and conflict. Half the process is realization and acknowledgement. With the goal of reconciliation and decolonization through artistic engagement it is important to centre the reasons why; otherwise,

in the words of Paul Stroller, “why engage in the pursuit of knowledge, I wonder, if not to enrich the quality of life. For me, a fully sensuous scholarship is one path toward that felicitous end.”<sup>32</sup>

Jaimie Isaac, July 2012



---

32 Stroller, Paul. *Sensuous Scholarship*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) xvi.



## CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

**ADRIAN STIMSON** is a member of the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation in southern Alberta. He is an interdisciplinary artist, curator and educator with a BFA with distinction from the Alberta College of Art & Design and a MFA from the University of Saskatchewan.

As an interdisciplinary artist, Adrian's work includes paintings, installations, collodion wet-plate photography, sculpture and performance. Recent exhibits and performances include "*Suffer little children...*," ARNICA, Kamloops; *Buffalo Boy's Coal Jubilee*, *House of the Wayward Spirits*, ANDPVA, Toronto; *White Shame Re-Worked*, Grunt Gallery, Vancouver; *Holding Our Breath* (Canadian Forces Artist Program-Afghanistan tour), Neutral Ground, Regina; *Beyond Redemption*, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon; *Photo Quai*, *Musée du quai branly* and *Unmasking*, Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, France; "*The Life and Times of Buffalo Boy*", The Works, Edmonton; *Pink Panther*, Open Space, Ft. Simpson; *Kentucky Fried Chicken Dance*, Two Story Café, Prince Albert; *Brave Seduction*, Gallery 101, Ottawa and "*Buffalo Boy's You can roller skate in a Buffalo herd*", Harbourfront, Toronto. He is a regular participant at Burning Man and was featured in the 2007 summer issue of *Canadian Art: Buffalo Boy at Burning Man* and Spring issue of *FUSE magazine: Buffalo Boy Then and Now 2009*.

Adrian was awarded the Blackfoot Visual Arts Award in 2009, the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal in 2003 and the Alberta Centennial Medal in 2005 for his human rights and diversity activism in various communities. He currently lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

**ALEX JANVIER** has been painting for over 40 years and has created a unique style, his own "visual language," informed by the rich cultural and spiritual traditions and heritage of the Dene in northern Alberta. Alex was born on Le Goff Reserve, Cold Lake First Nations, northern Alberta, in 1935. At the age of eight, he was sent to the Blue Quills Residential Indian School near St. Paul, Alberta, where the principal recognized his innate artistic

talent and encouraged him in his art. Alex received formal art training from the Alberta Institute of Technology and Art in Calgary (now the Alberta College of Art and Design) and graduated with honours in 1960. In 1966, the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs commissioned him to produce 80 paintings. He helped bring together a group of artists for the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67, among them Norval Morrisseau and Bill Reid. In recent years his work has been characterized by flowing, curvilinear lines and more abstraction, examples of which may be seen online as part of his residency at the Centre for innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada at <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hL13ohXGa\\_M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hL13ohXGa_M)>. His unique language has made its mark, cementing his legacy as one of the country's foremost painters. Alex lives in Cold Lake, Alberta. <[www.alexjanvier.com/](http://www.alexjanvier.com/)>

**AYUMI GOTO** is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC. Between 2010-2012, she served as the art facilitator at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre in Vancouver. Ayumi has travelled extensively to South Africa, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Australia, and within Canada, to present at conferences and meet with people to better appreciate the effects and limitations of reconciliation initiatives on every day lives. She is particularly interested in examining the practices of politicized and community-based artists who challenge prescriptive institutionalized strategies on reconciliation.

**BO YEUNG** was born in Kaiping, China, in 1988. Kaiping is a rice-farming village of a thousand people. At the age of 6, she along with her Aunt and cousin immigrated to Canada in 1995. For the first three years, they lived in a basement suite on 33rd Ave. and Fraser St., Vancouver. Later they moved to Kamloops and opened a family Chinese restaurant, which became the main source of income. Everyone worked 6 days a week, eleven a.m. to midnight. They have lived in Kamloops for the past thirteen years. It was at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in the curved hallways of the visual arts wing that Bo began

to delve into her artistic endeavours and collaborate with Megan Gamble. Through her education, Bo began a self-critical analysis of her role as a Chinese-Canadian artist. She is trying to understand what these three words mean to her, together and separate. After graduating from TRU, Megan and Bo flew up to Dawson City, Yukon, to experience a winter. Here they shifted from an institutional way of learning to a community based one.

**CECILY NICHOLSON** is a poet and organizer who lives along the Fraser River, unceded Coast Salish Territory. She has worked for many years in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood of Vancouver and is a member of the Press Release Poetry Collective and the No One is Illegal Vancouver collective. Recent collaborations include the Centre for Innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada at Thompson Rivers University, the Audain Gallery of Simon Fraser University and the Purple Thistle Centre and Summer Institute. She has edited and written chapbooks: *Surveillance* (Press Release, 2010), *r/ally* (No One is Illegal, 2011), *Kettle* (with Stephen Collis, 2011), *Crossing Water* (2011) and *M'AIDEZ* (Press Release, 2012). Cecily is currently working on a curatorial project in the Crista Dahl Media Library and Archive involving video related to 1970s conditions of Civil and Indigenous rights, resistance and solidarity and has a forthcoming book with Donato Mancini and Alex Muir *Anamnesia: Unforgetting* (2012). *Triage* (Talon, 2011) is her first book of poetry.

**CHRIS BOSE** is a writer, multi-disciplinary artist, musician and filmmaker who creates art and music on a daily basis. He is a curator of First Nations exhibitions and a workshop facilitator of community arts events, digital storytelling and art workshops with people of all ages and backgrounds. Chris has read and performed at universities, theatres and coffeehouses at all points from Victoria to Montreal. He is a war-party baby of the N'laka'pamux and Secwepemc nations in BC, and currently spends his time in Kamloops, BC.

<<http://findingshelter.blogspot.ca>>

According to many dictionaries *the swallow* (aka *l'hirondelle*) is a "migratory swift-flying songbird." This describes **CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE** accurately, though for this award-winning singer/songwriter, interdisciplinary and community-engaged artist the definition should end with "and so much more." She is also a curator, an educator, an advisor and a consultant for various governmental, educational and arts centres, festivals and institutions nationwide. Cheryl resides in Toronto and is Metis/Cree from Kikino Metis Settlement and Pahnahstayo First Nation in Alberta.

<http://www.cheryllhirondelle.com>

**DAVID GARNEAU** is Associate Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Regina. He was born and raised in Edmonton, received most of his post-secondary education (BFA in Painting and Drawing, MA in English Literature) at the University of Calgary and taught at the Alberta College of Art and Design for five years before moving to Regina in 1999.

David's practice includes painting, drawing, curating and critical writing. His solo exhibition, *Cowboys and Indians (and Métis?)*, toured Canada (2003-7), and *Road Kill* toured Saskatchewan (2009-11). His work often engages issues of nature, history, masculinity and Aboriginal identity. His paintings are collected by Canadian Museum of Civilization; Parliament of Canada; Indian and Inuit Art Centre; Glenbow Museum; Mackenzie Art Gallery; Mendel Art Gallery; Saskatchewan Arts Board; Alberta Foundation for the Arts; NONAM, Zurich; and in many other public and private collections.

He has curated several large group exhibitions: *The End of the World (as we know it)*; *Picture Windows: New Abstraction*; *Transcendent Squares*; *Contested Histories*; *Making it Like a Man!*, *Graphic Visions*, *TEXTiles*; two-person exhibitions *Sophisticated Folk* and *Reveal/Conceal*; and solo shows *Diana Thorneycroft* and *Tim Moore*. David has written numerous catalogue essays and reviews and was a co-founder and co-editor of *Artichoke* and *Cameo* magazines. He has recently given talks in Melbourne,

Adelaide, New York, San Diego and Sacramento and keynote lectures in Sydney, Toronto and Edmonton. David is currently working on curatorial and writing projects featuring contemporary Aboriginal art exchanges between Canada and Australia.

**ELWOOD JIMMY** is originally from the Thunderchild First Nation in Saskatchewan. Over the last decade he has worked as an arts administrator, curator, writer, community animator, and artist, playing a leadership role in several projects and organizations across Canada. He is currently based in Toronto and actively working on a number of projects currently influenced by collaboration, beading, low-riders, gardening, horses, grief and love.

**HEATHER IGLOLIORTE** is an Inuk artist, writer, and curator from Labrador. After graduating from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting and a minor in art history, she moved to Ottawa to pursue her Master's in Canadian Art History, specializing in Inuit art. While in the master's program, Heather completed a year-long internship as a curatorial assistant at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, became involved with the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC), and was hired by the Carleton University Art Gallery to be the Curator of Inuit Art for the 2005–2006 academic year. Her artwork has been shown and sold all over the east coast and can be found in several public and private collections.

Heather is completing a doctorate in Inuit and other global Indigenous art histories at Carleton University with the Institute for Comparative Studies in Language, Arts, and Culture. Her dissertation research centres on the historic and contemporary visual arts of the Labradorimuit.

She is has also curated several exhibitions, including the nationally touring exhibit "We Were So Far Away...": The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools", which features the stories of eight Inuit former students of residential schools.

As of July 2012, she is the new Assistant Professor of Aboriginal Art History at Concordia University.

**JAYCE SALLOUM's** practise exists within and between the personal, quotidian, local, and the trans-national. While he has lived in many locales, Jayce currently resides in Vancouver, Canada. His work engages in an intimate subjectivity and discursive challenge while critically asserting itself in the perception of social manifestations and political realities. He has worked in installation, photography, drawing, performance, text, and video since 1978, as well as curating exhibitions, conducting workshops, and coordinating a vast array of cultural projects. Salloum has exhibited pervasively at the widest range of local and international venues possible, from the smallest unnamed storefronts & community centres in his Downtown Eastside Vancouver neighbourhood to institutions such as the Musée du Louvre, Paris; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Canada; Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; Centre Pompidou, Paris; CaixaForum, Barcelona; 8th Havana Biennial; 7th Sharjah Biennial; 15th Biennale Of Sydney; Museum Villa Stuck, Munich; Royal Ontario Museum; Robert Flaherty Film Seminars; Biennial of Moving Images, Geneva; and the Rotterdam International Film Festival. His texts/works have been featured in many publications such as *The Archive* (Whitechapel, London/The MIT Press, 2006), *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice* (Wallflower Press, London, 2007), *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists* (Coach House Press, Toronto, 2008), *Third Text, Semiotext(e), Framework, Felix, Fuse, Public, Prefix Photo*, and *Pubic Culture. Jayce Salloum: history of the present*, a survey exhibition of 25 years of Jayce's practice is touring Canada until 2012, and the accompanying monograph was published in Fall 2009. He is represented by MKG127, Toronto.

**JAIMIE ISAAC** is from Winnipeg, Manitoba, and is of mixed heritage (Ojibwa/European) and member of Sagkeeng First Nation. She holds a degree in Art History and an Arts and Cultural Management Certificate from the University of Winnipeg. Jaimie is currently completing a Masters of Arts at UBC Okanagan with a focus on Indigenous curatorial



practices. She is a freelance writer, curator, artist, and art administrator. Projects include Leah Decter's (*official denial*) *trade value in progress* touring nationally (currently), *The Ephemerals: Trending* collaboration at the University of Winnipeg (2011), and a recent essay contribution in the exhibition catalogs for *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* and *unSacred*. She recently presented at conferences on Indigenous contemporary practices at Princeton University in New Jersey and the University of British Columbia in Kelowna. Jaimie has been involved with boards, collectives, and juries across Canada. She is an advocate for emerging Aboriginal curators with the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective/CCA board of directors and also volunteers on the Manitoba Aboriginal Music board of directors.

**JEFF THOMAS** is a self-taught photo-based artist and curator whose career in the visual arts began in 1979 following a life-changing car accident. Jeff turned to an already existing interest in photography in order to begin a new life focused on confronting photo-based stereotypes of Aboriginal people. His research into photographic history pointed out two significant absences: images of Aboriginal people living in cities and images produced by Aboriginal people. He was frustrated by these absences and the silences they engendered and began to challenge these silences by creating new conversations through his photo-based work.

Jeff's work would eventually lead him to self-identify as an urban-Iroquois—someone who was born in Buffalo, New York and an enrolled member of the Six Nations reserve in Ontario. Finding a balance between the Iroquois identity his elders at Six Nations instilled in him and surviving as an Indian in the city lead Jeff to weave a new story from the fragmented cultural elements left in the wake of North American colonialism.

The work of American photographer Edward S. Curtis, particularly his seminal work *The North American Indian*, has been a focal point for Jeff's projects. Jeff's idea is not to recreate a modern version of Curtis's study of tribal culture, but to consider what Curtis did not photograph as a

stepping stone to creating a new body of work. Jeff's work engages the people Curtis photographed, yet breaks through the seeming stasis of those photographs by constructing a post-colonial conversation on Indianness. This new series—*The Conversation*—is the result of Jeff's 33-year journey.

**JONATHAN DEWAR** is currently the Director of the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre and Special Advisor to the President for the Residential Schools Legacy at Algoma University. From 2007-2012 he served as Director of Research at the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and is a past director of the Métis Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization. He was the founding executive director of the Qaggiq Theatre Company in Iqaluit, Nunavut—a youth, culture, and social-issues-focused arts organization—and served in that capacity for four years. During that time he also worked with the Office of the Languages Commissioner of Nunavut and the Intergovernmental Affairs and Inuit Relations unit within Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Nunavut Region. Jonathan has several years of First Nations-, Inuit-, and Métis-specific policy and research experience in a variety of areas in both government and non-government organizations. He has a BA Honours in English and a MA in Literature and Creative Writing, with specialization in Aboriginal literature and drama. Jonathan self-identifies as a person of mixed heritage, descended from Huron-Wendat, Scottish, and French Canadian grandparents and is completing a doctorate in Canadian Studies, specializing in Aboriginal art and reconciliation.

**KARINE NG** has been teaching and learning across diverse subject areas and in various social and cultural settings in Vancouver, Canada, and elsewhere. Her work is anchored in education with a focus on language and critical literacy. Her keen interest in multiculturalism, diversity, and democracy flourished during a graduate program that addressed cultural and socio-political issues in education. Karine has been working in the Vancouver school district since 2003, with experience in

multiple elementary and secondary schools within the district. She hopes to continue critical inquiry work through literary and artistic means in addition to her teaching practice.

Based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, **LEAH DECTER** is a researcher and inter-media artist whose work integrates video and other digital media, textiles, performance, and dialogic/engaged practices. Across this range of media she employs integrative research methodologies and diverse approaches to collaboration and engagement. Leah's ongoing body of work *trade value*, which she began in 2008, engages in dialogue about colonial histories and legacies and initiatives of reconciliation through a critical settler lens. She has exhibited widely in Canada—including the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Grunt Gallery, Aceart, Trinity Square Video, Platform Center for Digital and Photographic Arts, and the Dunlop Art Gallery—and internationally in the US, UK, Australia, and Europe. Video screenings of her work include the Images Festival in Toronto, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and Malta Contemporary Art in Marsa Malta. Her work is held in the collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery as well as private collections in Canada, US, and UK. She holds an MFA in New Media from Berlin-based Transart Institute.

**MEEKA NOELLE MORGAN** is Secwepemc & Nuu-chah-nulth and is a member of the Bonaparte Indian Band in the southern interior of BC. She is a creative writer, performance artist, and instructor/facilitator and has experience in theatre and music. One of her most significant projects has been the completion of her Master of Arts thesis: "Making Connections with Secwepemc Family through Storytelling: A Journey in Transformative Rebuilding," where through narrative, creative writing, and song she tells the story of conducting research on her home community and how it transformed and rebuilt her relationship to her community members and family. Through Meeka Noelle Consulting she conducts many workshops and presentations on the teachings of her work, which is focused on bringing people and stories together in the spirit of

creation and collaboration. Meeka is also co-founder of The Melawmen Collective, an arts and music organization whose focus is to create connections between Aboriginal People and others through contemporary and traditional stories, history, and culture, by way of various forms of art and music. She currently tours with The Melawmen Collective as a musical act, with collaborators Rob Hall and George Ignace (Geo aka The Voice), most recently at the ArtsWells Festival. As well, Meeka performs with the Ghengis Gandhi's, husband Rob Hall's BC reggae band. In the past she has collaborated with artist Jayce Salloum on the successful *Native Youth Art Workshops*, which was exhibited at the Kamloops Art Gallery 2009–2010.

**NIGIT'STIL NORBERT** is a photo-based artist originally from Yellowknife, NT, now living out of Toronto, ON. She has exhibited in Canada and the US, and in June 2012 completed her BFA in Photography at the Ontario College of Art & Design University in Toronto, ON. Nigit'stil is interested in making new traditions, where the old meets the new and contemporary. Her most recent explorations have involved stop-motion photography, unique beaded photographs, and installation-based works. Nigit'stil's art practice focuses on the historical and contemporary representation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Along with her extensive research regimen her art explores ideas of representation and misrepresentation, the role of the museum in the Aboriginal art scene, and stereotypes. By employing such practices she leads her viewer to fresh and new insights into the world of the young contemporary Aboriginal art scene that is exploding across our great country. Within her art she likes to speak simply but with honesty and without fear.

**PETER MORIN** is a Tahltan First Nation artist, curator, and writer currently based in Victoria, BC. He studied art at the Emily Carr Institute and recently completed his MFA at UBC Okanagan in 2011. In both his artistic practice as well as his curatorial work, Peter explores issues of decolonization and indigenous identity and language.

He has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions and live events including *Team Diversity Bannock and the World's Largest Bannock attempt*, *7 Suits for 7 Days of Colonialism*, and *A return to the place where God outstretched his hand* (2007); performative works at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; *12 Making Objects AKA First Nations DADA* (12 Indigenous Interventions) (2009) at Open Space, Victoria; *Peter Morin's Museum* (2011) at Satellite Gallery, Vancouver; and *Circle* (2011) Urban Shaman, Winnipeg. Peter has curated exhibitions at the Museum of Anthropology, Western Front, The Burnaby Art Gallery, and Grunt Gallery among others and, in 2011, curated *Revisiting the Silence*, an exhibition of photographs by Adelaide de Menil at the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art and *Peter Morin's Museum* at Satellite Gallery, both in Vancouver.

**STEVEN LOFT** is a Mohawk of the Six Nations with Jewish heritage. He is a curator, scholar, writer and media artist. In 2010, he was named Trudeau National Visiting Fellow at Ryerson University in Toronto and Scholar in Residence at the new Ryerson Image Centre, where he is continuing his research into Indigenous art and aesthetics. Formerly, he was Curator-In-Residence for Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada. Previous to that he was the Director/Curator of the Urban Shaman Gallery (Winnipeg), Aboriginal Curator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Artistic Director of the Native Indian/Inuit Photographers' Association. He has curated group and solo exhibitions across Canada and internationally and has written extensively on Indigenous art and aesthetics for various magazines, catalogues and arts publications and lectured widely in Canada and internationally. Steven co-edited *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Aboriginal Media and New Media Art*, published by the Banff Centre Press in 2005, and is the editor of the upcoming volume *Coded Territories: Indigenous Pathways in New Media*. This book of essays by artists, curators and scholars frames the landscape of contemporary Aboriginal new media art, the influence of Western criticism and standards, the development of a distinct Indigenous art history and the liberating

advent of inexpensive technologies, including video and online media.

**TANIA WILLARD**, Secwepemc Nation, works within the shifting ideas about contemporary and traditional, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections of Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard has worked as an artist-in-residence with Gallery Gachet in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, the Banff Centre's visual arts residency, fiction and Trading Post and as a curator-in-residence with grunt gallery. Collections of Willard's work can be found at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and at Kamloops Art Gallery. Her recent work with Stanley Park's environmental art project focuses on Aboriginal presence and absence in Stanley Park through the philosophy of the Cedar Tree as the tree of life. Willard's recent curatorial work includes *Beat Nation: Art Hop Hop* and *Aboriginal Culture*, featuring 27 contemporary Aboriginal artists.

**VANESSA DION FLETCHER** is an emerging artist working in Toronto, ON. She graduated from York University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Certificate in Indigenous Studies. Dion Fletcher is a multidisciplinary artist who focuses on printmaking and performance. In her most recent works she explores themes of communication, identity and the body. Her explorations into concepts of language and identity have led to the notion of the "failure to communicate." Of Potawatomi and Lenape ancestry, and being a unilingual English speaker with no direct access to her Aboriginal linguistic roots, Dion Fletcher has been inspired to explore notions of fluency and communication without words. Dion Fletcher's work has been exhibited at The Art Gallery of Peterborough, ON: *Jiigbiing—At The Edge Where The Water and Land Meet* and at Art Mûr in Montreal, PQ: *A Stake in the Ground: Contemporary Native Art Manifestation*. In addition to her own art practice Dion Fletcher works with the T.D.S.B Aboriginal Artist Collective on community arts projects and has co-curated the exhibition, *Emnowaangosjig || Coming Out: The Shifting and Multiple Self*.





