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PO Box 5, Station B,  
Toronto, ON, Canada,  
M5T 2T2  
+1 416 539 9495  
[cmagazine.com](http://cmagazine.com)  
[info@cmagazine.com](mailto:info@cmagazine.com)

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Responding to  
Canada's Truth  
and Reconciliation  
Commission Report

*Untitled*

by Krista Belle Stewart

*marykennethagnes / oka*

by Scott Benesiinaabandan

*Indigenous Creative Sovereignty  
after Canada's Truth and  
Reconciliation*

by David Garneau

*Taking up the Truth and  
Reconciliation Commission*

*CALL TO ACTION*

by Cathy Busby

**canada  
searches for  
post-coloniality  
at the facticity  
and proxemics  
festival of  
celebratory  
mourning**



**Indigenous Creative Sovereignty after  
Canada's Truth and Reconciliation**  
by David Garneau

The final report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins: "For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada." The rest is footnotes – sober, thorough, harrowing, insightful and moving descriptions of the mechanisms and effects of the slow, relentless genocide machine. It is essential reading. However, it is written in the past tense, written as if Indigenous assimilation and dispossession – of which Indian Residential Schools were just one element – are confined to history. The Report's sense of future is constrained by conclusions that precede its research: that settlers want to re-form their fundamental relationships with Indigenous people; that truth-telling will result in reconciliation; that First Nations, Inuit and Métis people identify themselves as citizens of Canada.

Without a doubt, many Indigenous people believe that "sharing their truth" has been a good thing. But many more are suffering from having themselves, or their relations, rip open these wounds in public. "Canada's Truth and Reconciliation" has benefitted the state and non-Indigenous people more than it will ever improve the lives of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis. The purpose of state-designed Reconciliation is to settle settlers, to reconcile non-Indigenous Canadians with their heinous past and to distract from their heinous present, to have settlers feel at home on stolen lands. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation project considers individual Indigenous truths and some past shared truths but not how all function in a colonial enterprise that exceeds the Indian Residential Schools and includes the present. It assumes that reconciliation is the answer to the "Indian problem;" that First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples enjoyed a prior universal conciliation, and now just need *re*-conciliation. Canada is what happened to Indigenous people. Canada is the name of colonization in these territories. Reconciliation is colonialism rebranded.

While I do hope that the facts and stories condensed in the TRC Report will be foundational to recasting Indigenous-settler relations, the ideology that shapes it is counter-productive to sovereign Indigenous resurgence. The Report's concentration on Indian Residential Schools, on Indigenous pain and degradation and on reconciliation as the basis for change is incomplete and less productive (for Indigenous peoples) than is a focus on the larger mechanics of colonialism, its resistance and on the varieties of creative Indigenous resurgence.

As a Métis artist and curator, I am heartened by the Report's inclusion of art, but dismayed by its limited vision. Art is primarily imagined in this text as serving memorial, testimonial, and therapeutic functions: "Commemorations and memorials...are visible reminders of Canada's shame and church complicity. They bear witness to the suffering and loss that generations of Aboriginal peoples have endured and overcome"; "Sharing intercultural dialogue about history, responsibility, and transformation through the arts is potentially healing and transformative for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples".<sup>2</sup>

While there is a nod to the possibility of art as resistance, no examples are given and the concept is not developed beyond statements such as "These various projects indicate that the arts and artistic practices may serve to shape public memory in ways that are potentially transformative for individuals, communities, and national history".<sup>3</sup>

The report is cautious; its authors refer to the "potential" for healing and transformation but do not make stronger claims they cannot substantiate. Art does heal and transform, but it can also embarrass and traumatize. Monuments can function as containers of disturbing narratives rather than open dialogue. Exhibitions, plays, operas, films and other public art can make a spectacle of Indigenous pain and rarely provide after-care or remediation for the troubles they stir up. But most importantly, the TRC Report's aesthetic imaginary is restricted to personal therapy and Canadian nationalism. It does not include the healing possibilities of literal Indigenous sovereignty. Its dénouement wish finds First Nations, Inuit and Métis people reconciling themselves to their fate within Canada as its citizens brought to heel.

We should, of course, provide therapeutic art opportunities and produce monuments; however, these services and things must arise from and serve the needs of Indigenous peoples rather than the Canadian state. I am of two minds regarding how we should proceed. Indian Residential School survivors were offered payment for pain on a sliding scale. The scheme was to isolate individuals, compensate them according to capitalist measures rather than engage in conciliation and restitution for whole, wounded communities, including children of survivors. So, on one hand, I wonder if it is wise to engage Indigenous artists to be similarly contracted to speak for whole communities. Perhaps monuments of this sort should be collective cultural works rather than individual artistic expressions. On the other hand, individual artists often create brilliant things that no committee could anticipate, works that do speak with and through community. We, who identify as Indigenous artists (not simply as artists who are also Indigenous), if we are also cultural workers, need to exercise our creative sovereignty, not simply by striving for individual success within the dominant art world, or by working within the Reconciliation (colonial) ideology.

**Endnotes**

- 1 "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada." p. 332. <http://web-trc.ca/>
- 2 *Ibid.*, 330.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 332.

(Page 26-27)  
Cathy Busby is a Canadian artist based in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

(Page 25)  
David Garneau is a writer, editor and curator who teaches in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan.

(Page 24)  
Scott Benesinaabandan is an Anishinabe intermedia artist who works primarily in photography, printmaking and video.

(Page 23)  
Krista Belle Stewart is an artist who lives and works in Vancouver and Brooklyn and is a member of the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation.

## TAKING UP THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION CALL TO ACTION

**“...MANY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE NOW LIVING IN CANADA’S LARGEST CITIES CONTINUE TO GRAPPLE WITH THE MOST SEVERE CONSEQUENCES OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA CAUSED BY RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS – BUT WE ARE COMMITTED TO SUPPORTING AND DELIVERING REAL CHANGE, WORKING TOGETHER WITH ABORIGINAL LEADERS...” – MAYOR [VANCOUVER] GREGOR ROBERTSON, CHAIR, BIG CITY MAYORS CAUCUS FEDERATION OF CANADIAN MUNICIPALITIES, JUNE 1, 2015.**

[http://www.fcm.ca/Documents/letters/Statement\\_of\\_Reconciliation\\_from\\_Canada's\\_Big\\_City\\_Mayors\\_BIL.pdf](http://www.fcm.ca/Documents/letters/Statement_of_Reconciliation_from_Canada's_Big_City_Mayors_BIL.pdf)

**“...WE NEED THE POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT OF NOT ONLY THE GOVERNMENTS BUT THE SUPPORT AND GOODWILL OF THE PUBLIC, OF ALL CANADIANS, TO CREATE AND IMPLEMENT SUBSTANTIAL AND MEANINGFUL CHANGES IN CO-OPERATION, IN PARTNERSHIP, WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES THEMSELVES. WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.” – ROMEO SAGANASH, CREE, RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SURVIVOR, MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, MACLEANS MAGAZINE, JUNE 1, 2015**

<http://www.macleans.ca/politics/for-the-record-romeo-saganash-on-residential-schools/>

### **“...EQUITABLE FUNDING OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES...”**

**“...SOCIAL WORK RECOGNIZES THE VERY SPECIFIC ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY IT HAS IN SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRC RECOMMENDATIONS WITH EMPHASIS ON THOSE SPECIFIC TO CHILD WELFARE...CASW (CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS) CALLS ON THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT OF CANADA TO IMMEDIATELY...END ITS ACTIVE RESISTANCE AGAINST THE EQUITABLE FUNDING OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN.” – MOREL CAISSIE, MSW, RSW, CASW PRESIDENT**

<http://www.casw-acts.ca/en/casw-statement-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-canada>

### **“...POWER OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AT THE ELECTION POLLING BOOTHS...”**

**...IT IS ALSO INCUMBENT UPON ABORIGINAL LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS...TO ENSURE THAT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS REMAIN FRONT AND CENTRE IN THE COMING FEDERAL ELECTION. WE HAVE ALWAYS UNDERESTIMATED AND UNDERUTILIZED THE POWER OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AT THE ELECTION POLLING BOOTHS. MAYBE NOT THIS TIME! – BEVERLY SABOURIN, PIC MOBERT FIRST NATION / RECENTLY RETIRED VICE-PROVOST OF ABORIGINAL INITIATIVES, LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY. PETER GLOBENSKY, RECENTLY RETIRED CEO OF THE CANADIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS OF THE ENVIRONMENT, ANISHINABEK NEWS, JUNE 23, 2015.**

<http://anishinabeknews.ca/2015/06/23/the-truth-about-reconciliation/>

**“IT’S THE KIND OF DOCUMENT THAT NEEDS TO BE TAKEN VERY SERIOUSLY AND ONE WHICH, IN THE WORDS OF OUR NATIONAL INDIGENOUS ANGLICAN BISHOP AND OUR PRIMATE AND LEADERS ACROSS THE CHURCH, IS GOING TO BECOME A SERIOUS MAP FOR OUR WORK AND FOR OUR COMMITMENTS.” – HENRIETTE THOMPSON, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC WITNESS FOR SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE, ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA, ANGLICAN JOURNAL, AUG 19, 2015.**

<http://www.anglicanjournal.com/articles/indigenous-anglicans-rank-trc-calls-to-action>

**“...MANY BELIEVED UNOCCUPIED LAND COULD BE SEIZED...”**

**“...ONE OF THE CALLS TO ACTION ASKS RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS TO REPUDIATE ‘CONCEPTS USED TO JUSTIFY EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY OVER INDIGENOUS LANDS AND PEOPLES, SUCH AS THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY AND TERRA NULLUS.’ ...MANY BELIEVED UNOCCUPIED LAND COULD BE SEIZED BY COLONIAL POWERS. ...WHEN WE LOOK TO THE BIG PICTURE, UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF CULTURAL SUPERIORITY DID SHAPE OUR RELATIONS WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.” – BISHOP BOLEN, THE BC CATHOLIC, SEPT 16, 2015 (REVISED SEPT 17, 2015)**

<http://www.bccatholic.ca/component/content/article/1-latest-news/5521-cccb-examines-response-to-truth-and-reconciliation-commission>

**“THERE ARE ABOUT 1,200 LIVES THAT NEED SOME CLOSURE. THEY NEED JUSTICE. THEIR LIVES WERE TAKEN VIOLENTLY AND THE HARPER GOVERNMENT ISN'T TAKING IT SERIOUSLY ENOUGH. IT'S LIKE THEIR LIVES DIDN'T MATTER.” – CARLEEN THOMAS, FORMER TSLEIL-WAUTUTH NATION COUNCIL MEMBER, NORTH SHORE NEWS, SEPT 18, 2015**

<http://www.nsnews.com/news/three-of-four-parties-promise-inquiry-for-missing-and-murdered-aboriginal-women-1.2062598>

**“...WHILE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE COMPRISE JUST FOUR PER CENT OF THE CANADIAN POPULATION, THEY MAKE UP 23 PER CENT OF THE FEDERAL INMATE POPULATION AND ACCOUNT FOR ONE IN THREE FEDERALLY SENTENCED WOMEN. – (RCMP, NATIVE WOMEN ASSOCIATION OF CANADA, CORRECTION SERVICES OF CANADA)...THE NCCABC IS CALLING UPON THE RCMP, FEDERATION OF LAW SOCIETY OF CANADA, LAW SCHOOLS, ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT AND OTHER PARTIES LISTED IN THE CALLS TO ACTION, TO ACT NOW...”  
– TERRY LA LIBERTE, QC, PRESIDENT, NATIVE COURTWORKER AND COUNSELLING ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (NCCABC), JUNE 4, 2015**

<http://nccabc.ca/nccabc-response-to-the-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada-calls-to-action/>

**“...AMAZING ENTREPRENEURS...IN THE DAYS OF THE FUR TRADE...”**

**“WE USED TO BE AMAZING ENTREPRENEURS BACK IN THE DAYS OF THE FUR TRADE, SO WE'RE EMBRACING THAT ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT...THE IDEA OF TRADES AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT ARE TOP OF MIND ESPECIALLY WITH THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION REPORT THAT JUST CAME OUT...AS ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WE RECOGNIZE THE VALUE IS OUR LAND...THAT'S WHERE WE GET OUR SUSTENANCE FROM, AND THAT NEEDS TO BE ON THE TABLE IN NEGOTIATIONS WHEN WE TALK TO INDUSTRY AND GOVERNMENT. RESPECTING THE TREATIES, RESPECTING OUR RIGHTFUL PLACE IN CANADA AS A FIRST PEOPLE...”  
– J.P. GLADU, HEAD, CANADIAN COUNCIL FOR ABORIGINAL BUSINESS, JUNE 26, 2015.**

<http://aptn.ca/news/2015/06/26/boosting-first-nation-economies-part-reconciliation/>

**“...ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP OF EQUALS...”**

**“RECONCILIATION IS NOT AN ABORIGINAL PROBLEM – IT IS A CANADIAN PROBLEM. IT INVOLVES ALL OF US...OUR RECOMMENDATIONS SHOULD NOT BE SEEN AS AN ITEMIZATION OF A NATIONAL PENANCE BUT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EMBRACE A SECOND CHANCE AT ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP OF EQUALS...”  
– JUSTICE MURRAY SINCLAIR, CHAIR, TRC, JUNE 2, 2015**

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/truth-and-reconciliation-report-brings-calls-for-action-not-words-1.3096863>