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

["Indigenous Creative Sovereignty after Canada's Truth and Reconciliation," *C Magazine* no. 128 (2016): 25.]

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 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 benefited 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" (332); "Sharing intercultural dialogue about history, responsibility, and transformation through the arts is potentially healing and transformative for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples" (330). While there is a nod to

the possibility of art as resistance, no examples are given, and the concept is not developed beyond a statement 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” (332).

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. 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 denouement 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.