David Garneau and Clement Yeh, *Apology Dice*. 2013. (SHARIF MIRSHAK)

APOLOGY DICE: COLLABORATION IN PROGRESS

David Garneau and Clement Yeh

Snow and rain. Escaping the slushy, wet darkness, seven people gather in a circle around a generic grey blanket. In the centre are several oversized cedar dice incised with words. The first reads "I am," "you are," "we are," and "they are." The second reads "fairly," "deeply," "very," "so," "not," and "somewhat." The final die has five sides reading "sorry," and one with "tired of this" carved into it. The possibilities and combinations disassemble and reassemble as everyone reaches for the dice to smell and feel their heft, their smooth rounded sides. Clement Yeh begins to speak about their genesis at a residency in Kamloops, BC. These dice, he explains, are a proposition, a provisional answer to the question: given Canada's horrific legacy of Indian Residential Schools, is reconciliation at all possible? More importantly, what is reconciliation, and what forms might it take? He rolls. I am / not / sorry.

Discussion quickly ensues, fueled by questions from participants. Basic information on Aboriginal history and contemporary realities is missing; misconceptions abound. Haven't reparations been made? Does an apology even matter? Still, the participants roll. Speak. Listen. Learn. They are / deeply / tired of this.

— RHONDA L. MEIER, PARTICIPANT/RESPONDENT. DECEMBER 10, 2013. MONTREAL.

Collaborating

Clement Yeh is a maker of things. I make things too, but my objects are mostly paintings and texts, which are less thingy than his sculptures. While I mostly think in pictures and words, I sometimes have tangible ideas but lack the skills to realize them. The appeal of working together began with the selfish hope that a skilled craftsman could materialize my

imaginings, but it soon evolved into a collaborative relationship when I found myself thinking with Clement, having ideas about the physical work that I would not have otherwise had. In that mode, we knew our work would combine my love of words and Clement's love of wood, and that it would be performative—something outside both of our usual practices and comfort zones.

We came to this project shortly after having been part of a month-long residency in Kamloops called *Reconsidering Reconciliation*. Co-sponsored by the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre at Algoma University, the residency was held on the campus of Thompson Rivers University and hosted by Ashok Mathur during the summer of 2013. It gathered Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists who worked individually and collectively to consider what role art might play in reconciliation.

Prior to this gathering, I was not optimistic about the social engineering called Truth and Reconciliation. When first asked to work in this area more than five years ago by Jonathan Dewar, I rejected the idea. Even before seeing the testimony process firsthand, I felt that the principles of the formal TRC project continue the colonial enterprise. Individual payouts for personal testimony—rather than nation-to-nation settlements—are designed to by-pass Treaty relationships, to divide and conquer. While the aggressive assimilation spearheaded by Indian Residential Schools targeted children, it was designed to ruin whole communities, past, present, future. The money, and the public raking up of this pain, has caused a great deal of (mostly unreported) devastation to individuals, families, and communities. I remain convinced that the official Truth and Reconciliation is primarily a non-Indigenous project designed to reconcile settlers with their dark history in order that they might live in this territory more comfortably and exploit these lands more thoroughly.

"Re-conciliation" assumes that Indigenous peoples and settlers once had a conciliatory relationship; that all that is needed is Indigenous absolution for harmony to be restored. But there is no halcyon moment to recover, only the on-going colonial condition to become conscious of and resist. This cannot occur in the TRC bubble of structured empathy, where the pressure on survivors to forgive is enormous. The first line of the TRC's official mandate reads: "There is an emerging and compelling desire to put

the events of the past behind us so that we can work towards a stronger and healthier future" ("Establishment"). Whose compelling desire? The cruelty of this construction is that it places the onus on survivors of these internment institutions to forgive both their absent abusers and the abstract state. Following the familiar colonial script, these people are narrated as obstacles that must be overcome if we are all to move forward "towards a stronger and healthier future." The TRC's emotionalist structure negates resistance, reason, and discourse. The TRC is a pain generator, a testimony and a tear-stained tissue collector. The federal focus on Indian Residential Schools is an effort to personalize, cauterize, and distract notice away from larger issues. It aims to direct attention to the display of individual Indigenous suffering bodies, rather than the collective wholes that were betrayed. It attempts to pay off and/or "heal" these folks rather than negotiate with their nations. And it is designed to distract both Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks from larger ongoing issues of Canadian colonization and land (ab)use.

That said, after watching Peter Morin and Ayumi Goto's affectively wrenching *Hair* performance in Kamloops in August of 2013, I felt that one path through to that which is not-quite conciliation might be empathetic and inconclusive aesthetic exchanges across the Indigenous/non-Indigenous divide—particularly with newcomers, folks for whom Indian Residential Schools and Canadian colonialism is a recently adopted burden rather than something that directly entangled their ancestors. The possibilities of this sort of relationship are embodied in a gesture from *Hair*. Responding to Morin's grieving over the suffering endured by Indian Residential School children and their families, Goto cuts her beautiful, long black hair. Her reformation evokes both a shorn First Nation child and a traditional Japanese woman whose hair/culture is reshaped by Modernism.

The Morin/Goto partnership disrupts the Indigenous/Settler binary that assumes the Settler position to only be occupied by European bodies. This wordless dialogue, between a Tahltan man and a Canadian woman of Japanese descent, occurs in the margins of the colonial script. It has us wonder not only about how similar and dissimilar each is formed under their various empires, but also how they empathize, console, counsel, and collaborate with each other beneath empire.

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The Limits of Art and Empathy

There is a danger that, much like the Truth and Reconciliation road show, this sort of performance might be consumed as emotional spectacle and may not engender political results. And this is the weakness of all art for those who measure the world according to an instrumental calculus. Art moves us but does not necessarily move us to action. Gestures in the aesthetic realm may symbolically resist the dominant culture, but there is little empirical evidence to show that art leads to direct action or that viewing it makes us better people. And yet some of us do feel changed, and we continue to make and enjoy art *as if* it mattered, *as if* it made a difference. What art does—and what is difficult to measure—is that it changes our individual and collective imaginaries by particles, and the resulting new pictures of the world can influence behavior. Queer pride parades and Idle No More round dances do change how we see and treat each other and ourselves.

The public display of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working through their parallel constructions under colonialism, relating to each other in novel ways, in difference to dominant scripts, changes our

minds, pictures new ways of being with each other. The strong but weeping Tahltan man asks us to recognize his humanity, and we do, not just in this fictive moment but beyond. Dialogues about the lived experience of colonialism by a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who absurdly gather around three blocks of wood and a blanket are powerful if only because they exist apart from official control, where surprises may occur. To be sure, academic, racial, judicial, tribal, and religious patterns wind their way throughout the conversation. But in the polyphony and the overlay of differences, their structures, limits, and contingencies are laid bare. When, for example, members of an implicated faith group (in the absence of their leaders) talk about the good intentions of past members who designed and worked in Indian Residential Schools, and then are met with Indigenous survivors (in the absence of their leaders) who describe the bad results of those good intentions, it creates an intellectual and empathetic dissonance that cannot be dissolved by argument. Art can be a site of symbolic dissonance where hegemonies are revealed and challenged in fragments. In our case, creative conciliations are not answers but displays of possibility, ways of being other than the proscribed and unhealthy.

Clement identifies as Canadian with Chinese ancestry, his family arriving in 1979. Although he generally feels very much included within our national cultural mosaic, he never forgets that he is a visible minority. That knowledge prevents him from taking this land for granted. I am Métis, with more European than First Nations inheritance. Perhaps precisely because neither of us quite fit the Indigenous and Settler profiles, we wondered if we might be well suited to devise creative ways to stimulate conversation about issues of conciliation among all sorts of people living in these territories. I think of these small, rough, and unofficial gestures as creative conciliation. They are naïve, symbolic, incomplete, emotional, and hopeful person-to-person conciliations.

Apology Dice

In 2008, on behalf of Canada, Prime Minister Harper apologized to former students of Indian Residential Schools for the government policy of aggressive assimilation that separated children from their families, cultures, and

languages in an attempt to "kill the Indian in the child." The reactions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people were various. Many were pleased by the recognition of these facts but did not think the Apology and reparations went far enough. The non-Aboriginal Canadian reaction was similarly mixed—when not apathetic or confused. The meanings of the Apology are endless and this complexity may lead people to feel in suspense or indifferent. *Apology Dice* is a performative moment that endeavours to stir an emotional response, but also to help participants discover and express their feelings about these important issues in public. For ambivalent participants, rolling the dice may prompt more certainty: "I do feel only somewhat sorry." For those who feel well informed and have a strong opinion about apology and reconciliation, play may reinforce their beliefs or perhaps unsettle them a little—especially when they explain their thoughts to First Nations participants. *Apology Dice* is a conversation starter.

Apology Dice consists of participants, three large dice, and a blanket.

Each die is cast one at a time, and in order, to form a sentence. The letters of the first die begin with a capital letter. The second die has no punctuation. The word or words of the third die end in a period. "I am / so / sorry." "We are / not / sorry." "They are / very tired / of this."

The participant reads the sentence aloud and responds. Is this how they feel? Is this the opposite of how they feel?

The Indian Residential Schools are a living tragedy for Aboriginal people. This work is not intended to make light of this dark legacy but to be a disarming vehicle to prompt discussion. Apology Dice are only to be rolled in an environment of contemplation and conversation. Participants must be willing to share and discuss their thoughts and feelings.

I recently activated the dice with a dozen Shingwauk Residential School survivors at the Art Gallery of Algoma (June 8, 2014). These folks have organized themselves and supported each other for decades. They found surprising nuance in the rolled sentences. "We are so sorry," had them wonder which "they" and "sorry" for what? Sorry about the schools? That they did not work as planned? Sorry to have initiated the TRC process? The sentences became Rorschach tests, allowing participants to raise what issues they pleased. They told and taught rather than confessed. Nearly half the group had been in the Parliament Buildings for the apology. Some were moved; others not. One elder said that she purposely stayed away from the ceremony. She did not want to be mollified by the ritual.

I also activated the dice with a mixed group later in the week. Nearly everyone gave it a try. They seemed excited by the opportunity to share their thoughts. Indigenous folks, perhaps since everyone was taking a turn, appeared eager to explain their experience—not at Indian Residential School, but as being Native in a non-Native world. Talk was very much to and with each other, rather than abstractly historical and political.

Apology Dice was an attempt to encourage conversation in a playful setting rather than a didactic one with intentional outcomes. I was concerned that some might find the work not disarming but disrespectful, making a game of tragedy. I was very pleased that the Shingwauk elders appreciated the accessibility of the work and that it was about whatever those participants needed it to be about. One of the elders, upon picking up a die, said: "It feels so light. I suppose, though, that the more they are used the heavier they will get."

—DAVID GARNEAU

Why I wanted to make the Apology Dice

Canadians spend so much time patting themselves on the back for their supposed openness to ethnicity, acceptance of gay marriage, history of peacekeeping, socialized medicine, and so many other things, one must wonder why we don't all have sore wrists. Some of these claims are certainly true, and I am proud of them. But there lies an inherent danger: self-congratulation can obscure areas that demand immediate improvement, such as major retractions in our commitment to fighting climate change, and our continuing history of subjugating First Nations people.

For many years I have wanted to make something that expresses my desire to be an ally with Indigenous peoples, but I didn't know how. The problems are so complex. One only has to read the nasty comments under any Aboriginal-themed news article to realize that a huge part of "polite, liberal, open-minded" Canada has written these people off: "What's done is done. Why can't they just get over their problems and conform to the rest of us?" One out of many responses comes to mind: We, settlers,

David Garneau playing *Apology Dice* at Algoma Art Gallery. 2014. (JONATHAN DEWAR)

have attempted to obliterate their cultural identity by decimating most of their lands and traditional ways of life. We kidnapped several generations of their children, and subjected them to sexual and physical abuses, cultural shame, and harsh nutritional experiments. We have relocated their society far from the rest of us, sometimes in very inhospitable conditions, and set up barriers to equal education, employment, political/legal representation, and healthcare. History shows that demolished civilizations don't adapt and rebound overnight. Besides, what is so damn great about our society that they should conform to us? They were here first; maybe we should be the ones conforming to them.

Collaborating with David Garneau has given me a special opportunity to add my skills and empathy to this conversation, hopefully without being another intruder. Thanks to Sophie McCall, Gabrielle Hill, and Ashok Mathur for helping to make this happen. *Apology Dice* is meant to stimulate conversation between people of different backgrounds. While I don't believe complete reconciliation and restitution across this entire nation can ever be achieved, my goal is to use this project to educate myself and others about how we can all move forward to a place of understanding, compassion, and respect.

—CLEMENT YEH