



Book Review
In This Together:
Fifteen Stories of Truth and Reconciliation

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Abstract:

Numerous atrocities against Canada's Indigenous peoples have revealed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process. Truth is being told. But, how is reconciliation to be fostered? In her book entitled *In This Together: Fifteen Stories of Truth and Reconciliation*, Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail has gathered stories from a variety of individual Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives that tell the truth and offer means for reconciliation. Stories have been mechanisms for sharing wisdom since time immemorial – this book is no exception. Through the personal nature of these stories, we journey with each author through their unique adventures, circumstances, reflections, questions, and growth. In doing so, we are called to examine our own stories and embark on our own journey of truth and reconciliation—together.

Keywords: truth; reconciliation; story as gift; story as lesson

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Just Begin

Anthology editor, Danielle Metcalf-Chenail struggled to find her place in the movement toward reconciliation between Canada's Indigenous peoples and the settlers who entered into treaty relationships with them hundreds of years ago. Like Danielle, I too am a settler who has heard the horrific truths of Canada's colonial past and desire to be part of (re)creating a country that is built on nation-to-nation respect, honour, gratitude and love. Danielle noted how two small, wise words – *just begin* – inspired her to use her gift of writing to gather truth and reconciliation stories, which share life experiences and ensuing "aha moments" from a broad spectrum of Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors across Canada. The resulting anthology is a gift of story to Canadians who are trying to find their own beginnings in this complex journey of reconciliation. Through story, each author's "aha moments" can become our "aha moments" as we venture with them through each thrilling quest, truthful conversation, heart-wrenching tragedy, and resilient triumph. Customary of stories, each one has the potential to teach the right lesson to the reader at just the moment it is needed. Because each story is personal, some resonated deeply with me as the narrative of the author intersected with my own life experiences, while other stories, though intriguing, left me with more questions about reconciliation than answers. However, given the enduring nature of story, I expect that the lessons within them might speak truth at a different time or on a different level than what I am able to perceive now. Such is simply the power of story.

I have often heard that Elders rarely give direct instruction; rather, the wisest of them will recount a story in which a lesson is embedded and available for those who can hear it. Likewise, truth and reconciliation moments in the stories of this collection are largely encrypted within each author's experiences, encounters and relationships and if we are willing, we can engage in *piluwitahasuwawakon*¹ as we move together toward reconciliation.

The Transformative Power of Journeys and Being Away From "Home"

In "The Importance of Rivers," Carleigh Baker draws us into sensing the sights, smells, and sounds of Yukon's Peel River as she embarked on an ill-advised, month-long, 500 kilometre canoe trip across Canada's North. Motivated by her desire to deepen her connection with her deceased, alcoholic Métis grandmother, she responded to her own call to action by creating contemplative space throughout the journey to ponder their relationship. As good stories go, however, the teachings that revealed themselves along this journey were not those anticipated. As insufficient food supplies dwindled precariously, the crew was happened-upon by Alice and her family who

¹ Piluwitahasuwawakon is a Wolastoqey word that means *allowing our thinking to be changed so that our actions will follow a good path toward truth*.

offered help – not unlike the assistance their Aboriginal ancestors had been offering ill-prepared explorers for centuries. Over a much welcomed meal, Alice’s gentle prodding opened Carleigh to share her grandmother’s bondage to alcohol and the deep impact it had on her family. “It’s not your fault,” Alice stated repeatedly and as Carleigh reflected on her anger-infused family dynamics she grappled with her own feelings and responses to her grandmother’s alcoholic tantrums. Carleigh’s musings about her newfound insights into relationships and reciprocities that comprise *community* nudge us to consider how the journeys of our lives can be so serendipitously enriched by those who seemingly just happen upon us in a time of need.

In “Two-Step,” Katherin Edwards also tells of a journey and a conversation that furthers our sense of how the two work in synergy to bring forth transformation. She recounts her harrowing day trip to see the cave paintings on Savona Mountain, and punctuates it with her conversations with Carol Camille, co-owner of the Painted Pony Café. Carol is an “advocate of sharing” (p. 89) and the medium with which she shares is traditional Aboriginal foods and family recipes. As we reach the caves with Katherin, we hear her admiration for the First Nations peoples who made this place their home and by pictographs communicated their message of belonging. How is it that the caves and petroglyphs contained therein *belong* to the Mount Savona Provincial Park and how can we fathom that such evidence of previous life could possibly belong to *us*? Moreover, is it possible for us to exist together in a land that is not *owned* at all but rather *shared*? Sharing is ingrained in First Nations cultural values as exemplified by Carol who claimed that at the café “we share everything and we give our best” (p. 94). A poignant silence ensued when Katherin was made aware of the difference between Aboriginal and Caucasian clientele; Caucasian customers tend to insist upon having their meal prepared *their* way while Aboriginal customers express gratitude for the spirit in which the meals are prepared. The moment where Carol’s and Katherin’s tears spilled together as they silently acknowledged the hurt inflicted by generations of white people demanding their own way speaks to us about how reconciliation can begin, one relationship at a time, through the power of sharing.

In “This Many-Storyed Land,” Kamala Todd’s *journey* is one that considers *place* and our relationship with it and, like the other stories in this category, talks about the importance of fostering relationships with people *of* place in order understand its history. She asks the question about how well we know the land on which we live if we are not *of* that land. If we are not indigenous to the place we call *home*, can we really understand its depths and the impacts behaviours such as building cities might have on those who are indigenous to place? Kamala’s understanding of Vancouver (Coast Salish territory) came through fostering relationship-based knowledge of people *from* this territory. Through her deepening understanding of Vancouver’s history, and her frustration with a dominant narrative that hides the city’s “Indigenous roots,” we are compelled to examine the true histories of the places we call home. Do I know the landscape of the Indigenous land on which I raise my children? Do you? But Kamala does not leave us here, she poses numerous questions that we, too, can ask that help us “read” the land and not only challenge the dominant colonial narrative of our urban spaces but make visible the societies upon which our modern societies are built.

Non-Aboriginal Peoples' Awakenings to Colonial Truths

Each of the following stories contain elements of discovery as non-Aboriginal people come to realize that Canada's history according to the school curriculum is not the history that was experienced by Canada's Aboriginal peoples. The "aha moments" in these stories speak about feelings of guilt, a desire to fix things and a sense of helplessness or hopelessness in the overwhelming complex tragedy of the circumstances. Yet, they also contain the common theme of optimism and hope.

"Dropped, Not Thrown" depicts a story of a young woman who fell in love with a Tla-o-qui-aht canoe maker and his place, Clayoquot sound. Through witnessing conflict erupting between First Nations and non-Native townspeople to enduring the seemingly endless numbers of tragic deaths in the community, Joanna Streetly's perspective of First Nations' realities came into clear focus. Her head knowledge of history became actualized while the devastation brought forth by colonialism was lived before her. In examining the complexities of cross-cultural relationships Joanna notes how tenuous the threads holding them together can be. She reveals an intense moment where her life might have been spared simply because she knew the name of one of the boys who threatened to throw boulders off the bluff and onto her kayak. Reflecting on this incident, she exhorts us to know one another's *names* since it makes it difficult to diminish people whose names we know. Furthermore, the power in names is manifest "as we say each other's names, so we sing them alive . . . awakening our own selves along the way" (p. 34).

In "Jawbreakers"—referencing arrowheads found in the family's backyard stream which are reminiscent of the candy with a similar black, shiny appearance—Donna Kane reflects on her memories of the land pioneered by her family. To her younger self, it was *home* and the vague notion of Aboriginal presence was that of a transient existence where arrowheads and fossils spoke of life that existed for a time but not today. Donna describes an intimate knowledge and relationship with her home place, yet the realization of being a descendent of colonialists did not occur until much later in Donna's life and in response to a seemingly innocuous question "the same as who?" (p. 49). Recollecting her awakening to the realities of her own colonialist privilege, history, traditions and beliefs, Donna invites us to challenge our own assumptions about our idyllic notions of "sameness", ask the question "the same as who?" and to be honest with ourselves to see if colonial thinking lurks in the response. With refreshing honesty, Donna observes that it is with increasing awareness of how our beliefs, actions, and responsibilities impact others that reconciliation can be attained.

In "Drawing Lines," Erika Luckert reveals the privilege-based ignorance of many non-Indigenous people living in Canada, totally unaware of the history of the land they inhabit. Erika tells us how she sought out the history and geography of Treaty 6 territory and notes that, with a few elegant words, more than 190,000 square kilometres of land in Northern Alberta and Saskatchewan were ceded. Motivated by her desire to use maps to reveal historical truth, she examined treaty language to create a map of the ceded land. In doing so, she discovered the intent to appropriate the lands where "the soil is all of first class quality . . . the land will not be difficult to break" (p. 39).

Despite the poetic nature of the treaty language, the intent was clear, lines were drawn and maps were made, thus solidifying the colonial boundaries. Erika then shifts her view of maps as tools of appropriation to a view of maps as story. Like stories, maps portray details that the creator wishes to convey while omitting those intended to be concealed. Maps as stories is not a new concept: Indigenous peoples made maps long before European settlers arrived. Theirs, through carvings on sticks, told stories of journeys taken and topographies of land and water discovered along the way. By undertaking the creation of her own historical map of Edmonton—before the city was established—Erika recognized the limits of maps and implores us not to be content with maps alone. Rather, we need to question them, challenge and reimagine them so that they lose their power as tools of colonialism and in turn become means of revealing and reclaiming what has been hidden.

In “Lost Fires Still Burn,” Carissa Halton gives a different perspective of Treaty 6 territory. She opens the story by sharing an incident of blatant racism experienced by Darren, a 13-year old boy in foster care. Then, in a brief history lesson, Carissa winds her way from the duplicity of the treaty negotiation to the Sixties Scoop to today’s disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in foster care. Carissa then shares her conversation with Patti Brady, a social worker and survivor herself of the welfare system, and we become drawn into the life story of a young girl who had been placed in a loving foster family yet never felt at home in the absence of *her* family. Despite her personal experience in the foster system as a child and now as a professional, Patti has taken the optimistic outlook that the system must and can change. She described to Carissa a lovely analogy of Aboriginal families as sundancers who sacrifice for their children and their communities, and where “every sundancer has an *oskapewo*; a sacred helper” (p. 167). It is in this capacity that practitioners in the social system should operate. Under Patti’s leadership the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society has piloted *Kahkiyaw*—all in this together. This program has noted tremendous strides in moving toward the changes in the system that Patti envisions. The story concludes with an update on Darren—now sundancing as a father of two. This young family is writing their own story with the help of a “community of *oskapewis*” (p. 170).

“To Kill an Indian” presents a view of a traditional Inuit community through the eyes of Jewish lawyer, Steven Cooper (with Twyla Campbell), who was raised for a time in Nunavut and then returned later to practice law. His “aha moment” occurred when a friend shared his experience at residential school and Steven was shocked to realize that he had no knowledge of such horrific practices. Later, when Steven returned as a lawyer to the Northwest Territories, his files consisted of First Nations’ graduates of the residential school system and whose crimes pertained to addictions and violence. To Steven, these crimes were clearly linked to the generational horrors inflicted by residential school system, yet he could not understand why no one talked about them. As he learned about the purpose of the residential school system—to kill the Indian in the child—he noticed outcomes that made disclosing their experiences nearly impossible. Indeed, the Indian in the child was killed and, along with it, a sense of self-worth perished. Children in the residential school system, isolated from their families, were taught to comply without questioning authority. Such indoctrination of the infallibility of the authorities robbed them of their ability to speak out against

the system that crippled them. Steven notes that part of the intention to kill the Indian in the child was based on misunderstanding of the colonizers. They failed to see Aboriginal populations as vibrant, healthy, family- and community-based societies and believed that the church would replace the perceived "void" with something better. However, rather than filling a void, one was created. In the absence of community and cultural grounding, survivors of residential schools strived to fill this new void without proper supports and the end results are the behaviours that form the basis of much negative stereotyping even today. Yet, Steven expresses hope. He has seen firsthand the resilience of Aboriginal peoples and what communities that have "reclaimed its soul" (p. 82) can look like. His concern, ultimately, is not about the Aboriginal peoples themselves but about the reactions of the colonizers who continue to devalue Aboriginal cultures, languages, and histories, those who only hear stories of residential schools superficially and peripherally. His call is for our country to understand and embrace the impacts of the residential school system on Canada's Aboriginal peoples and to participate in the natural flow of reconciliation that will ensue.

Carol Shaben is a third-generation Arab Canadian who grew up in the northern Canadian prairie and believed she shared a bond with Echo—an Aboriginal girl—based on their similarities of skin colour and shared otherness. In her essay entitled "Echo," Carol tells a familiar story of growing up alongside her Aboriginal friend with whom she shared a school-confined relationship. She discloses that she assumed an insider's view into Aboriginal realities and was determined to educate those who lacked such a perspective. Later, it was through her zealous desire to tell the story of Rose—a survivor of the foster care system—that she was forced to face her own biases and misguided beliefs. In reflecting on her encounters with Echo and Rose, Carol repeatedly comments "I never thought to ask" and as a result of her unasked questions and assumed answers, relationships with both women fizzled. Carol parallels her relationships with Echo and Rose to Canada's relationship with First Nations people. Like Carol, we can ask ourselves what skewed perspectives we assumed and what questions we never thought to ask.

In "Mother Tongues," Katherine Palmer Gordon speaks directly to issues surrounding language and its connection to culture and nationhood. Providing compelling evidence for the importance of knowing one's mother tongue, including mitigating suicide rates, increasing academic success, and improving overall wellness, Katherine discusses the realities of language loss for many Indigenous peoples in Canada. With passion, she implores us to care about the original languages of this country. She claims that unless endangered languages and the rights of First Nations people to learn and speak them fluently are revived, reconciliation between nations will not be achieved. She calls us to imagine a Canada where all First Nations people speak their original language as fluently as English and French and live in a sense of holistic wellbeing. Moreover, she envisions that Canadian children will learn the names of the original languages and we can all engage in meaningful dialogue with respect in our own tongue. And this is something we all have reason to care about.

In a compelling poetic writing style Lorri Neilsen Glenn, in "Marking the Page", describes the smell and feel of mukluks and juxtaposes their warmth and comfort with the strict and formal school which she attended in The Pas, Manitoba. Using an effective interposing of Latin words throughout

her narrative, Lorri provides snapshots of the lives of Aboriginal people with whom she has crossed paths. Each endearing and heart wrenching story highlights the notion that “where two or more are gathered . . . we must make one an Other” (p. 151). Latin and Greek-permeated science has made us experts in categorization. Yet, such categorizations are made based on race, despite Lorri’s claim that genetic diversity has little to do with race, and identities are defined by the component that is the most marginalized. Though we are prone to categorization, personal encounters with others and sharing our stories serve as a reminder that “we are responsible to each other” (p. 156). Indeed, sharing of ourselves changes our categorization of “other” to “all my relations”.

Lived Colonial Experiences

The following four essays are written from the perspective of Aboriginal writers who generously share their lived experiences and perspectives about Canada’s colonial past and present.

Zacharias Kunuk is an Inuit film producer/director who describes feelings of exclusion in mainstream media; invisibility is one of many outcomes of colonialism. In “The Perfect Tool,” we learn about the frustrations resulting from the Inuit people repeatedly being ignored, dismissed, and stereotyped. Zacharias tells of the olden days where Elders’ deep knowledge of the natural world was respected; children watched and learned. Through use of the camera—the perfect tool—Zacharias strove to capture Inuit cultural practices authentically and, in doing so, incorporated cultural teachings in the making of his films. Costumes were made for the set in the same way clothing was made historically, so women were commissioned to create parkas, for instance, that reflected the fit and design of the time period. Zacharias describes the making of the film *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, the numerous obstacles that had to be overcome in the process, and his surprise at the film’s success. The success of *Atanarjuat* and description of upcoming film ideas makes us believe the Inuit of Canada’s North will be given widespread voice and representation through the use of this perfect tool. No longer will Inuit culture be excluded, misrepresented or invisible in mainstream media. Rather, the films will be about real life, depict Inuit ways, and tell their stories. Perhaps the camera is a perfect tool for telling the truth and beginning of reconciliation.

In “White Aboriginal Woman,” Rhonda Kronyk tackles the disputed subject of *identity* and how it is conceptualized in the Canadian Indian Act. Until the early 1990s, the Indian Act essentially mandated that a woman’s identity, and thus her status, was defined by the man with whom she was connected. As women of mixed ancestry yet raised White, Rhonda and her grannie received Aboriginal status under Bill C-31. Rhonda’s questions about identity in relation to self-identity and government designations cause us to ponder along with her “what makes a person Indian/Aboriginal/Indigenous/Métis/Inuit in Canada?” (p. 128) and how is the story of identity linked to Canada’s history of colonialism? And further, how do today’s colonial realities tie to our notions of identity? Rhonda’s research into Canada’s history led her to claim that Canada today is still entrenched in colonial and genocidal practices as evidenced by the poor living conditions, lack of adequate investigation of murdered and missing Aboriginal women, and epidemics of abuse and homelessness experienced by so many Aboriginal peoples today. Yet, despite Rhonda’s bleak

account of these realities, she remains hopeful for our future. As one whose ancestry “reflects the plurality of this country” (p. 124) she sees ways for reconciliation to replace recrimination as Aboriginal people stand up to colonial practices and beckon all Canadians to move forward with them in a new direction, together.

If I were to think of a typical story of colonial public school experiences of Canada’s Aboriginal people, Emma Larocque’s “Colonialism Lived” would embody that story. Emma vividly describes her early school years where the only reference to Canada’s Aboriginal people in the curriculum was of the cowboys-and-Indians variety and of being strapped if she spoke Cree/Michif or was two minutes late despite having to walk three kilometers from her home to school. Without consulting her parents, Emma was subsequently moved to two different schools where teachers were insensitive, unkind, overtly racist, and physically violent. She describes her hurt and humiliation but more poignantly, her reluctance to tell anyone about these experiences. Though many in her situation simply did not survive continued exposure to racial hatred, Emma decided early that her survival would be tied to education and research about relations between Aboriginal and White people. In this vein, she offers several hard-hitting statements about racism in Canada about which we as a nation need to become educated. She calls for a commission on public schools and examination of ways that our society, institutions, media, laws, and policies have perpetuated racism in this country. Moreover, she points to the discrepancy between how Canadians respond to the injustices against Aboriginal people and the response to humanitarian crises in other countries. Before Canada can be considered a just country, much work is needed in understanding and righting wrongs that have been done through colonialism.

Antoine Mountain is a well-known Dene artist whose paintings depict with exquisite detail his love of his northern landscape, Dene culture, and spirituality. In his essay, Antoine captures through words the beauty of the natural world in contrast to the agonizing realities of residential school life such as “literally scrubbing the Indian right out of us” (p. 172). He describes dying emotionally, being starved for affection, and feeling smothered in residential schools. Yet, there were several “aha moments” that awakened realizations within him: that he should not allow himself to be blindly led, that he was indeed a residential school survivor, and that he needed to learn the true history of his people. His soul knew that life offered so much more than what he had been dealt and he sought to find meaningfulness by returning to cultural practices such as living on the land in a teepee and trying to regain what had been lost during the years he was imprisoned in the residential school. Antoine’s narrative takes an abrupt turn to a conversation in a hospital room, where he was being assured by a White woman that everything would be ok and he was told that he had a serious drinking problem. Though he doesn’t describe this encounter as an “aha moment”, it was pivotal as it launched him onto a path of sobriety and to living with the truth that would set him free. Once again, the artist appears and Antoine’s description of his culture and the natural world become as tangible in word as they might be in a painting where his “aha moments” converge into a lasting Aho—thank you.

Concluding Thoughts

This compilation of stories shares commonalities about hurtful and healing relationships and describe some sort of transformation of perspective, attitude, or belief. In the opening remarks, editor Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail mentions that some stories entreat us to “examine our prejudices and stereotypes around Indigenous peoples in Canada” (p. 6), but the concluding remarks by the Honourable Murray Sinclair provokes a further challenge to understand how we *are* with each other today and how we want to be like together in the future. This call is to all of us in relation to one another as Treaty people. In response to a question by interviewer Sheilagh Rogers, Senator Sinclair addresses the question of what he hopes we will be like in twenty-five to thirty-five years with an inclusive and optimistic response that speaks to every single Canadian, personally and collectively:

That you lived the life that was given to you, to live in the best way you could. And that you lived in accordance with the teachings of life as you understood them. And that you lived according to the teachings of the Creator that you learned, as you understood them. Because those teachings of faith that we have been given, whether they’re Christian teachings or Muslim teachings or Indigenous teachings, they are all about how we must live together, treat each other, and be responsible for the future and to the Creator. (p. 207-208)

The ability to live in peace and justice with one another is one we must all strive for if we are truly to be *In This Together*.