

see to see—

Truth and Reconciliation Week

David Geary

Capilano University has an annual Truth and Reconciliation Week. As a new citizen of Canada and as an instructor at the university, I try to attend every event.

MONDAY

I ask my theatre class what “Truth and Reconciliation” is: *Recognizing injustices / celebrating Aboriginal Culture / engaging in dialogue / learning and understanding / forgiveness?*

“How many of you know that the former prime minister, Stephen Harper, apologized to all residential school survivors in 2008?”

“Did he do that?”

“Yes. Who’s been to a pow wow?” No one. “Were you scared off by the ‘Don’t come down this road unless you’re on band business’ sign?”

“They have signs like that?”

Later, at Kéxwusm-áyakn Student Centre, the First Nations student lounge, everyone is invited to write on patches to form a “#Myreconciliationincludes” blanket out of their messages:

Mandatory Indigenous Studies at University / an open and humble heart, respect the land / hearing all the stories / save women from human trafficking / Ban the sales of “Indian” costumes to battle Cultural Appropriation.

Meanwhile on Facebook, my Māori and Pacific Island friends are angry that Disney has released designs for a grass-skirt-and-tribal-tattoos-on-brown-skin costume for the character of Maui in the new Polynesian Princess movie, *Moana*. *It’s black face! Halloween comes early!*

TUESDAY

I join the drum circle with Latash, a Squamish Elder. We struggle to keep the beat with him but our hearts are in the right place. The children from the crèche join us for “The Bear Song” and “The Cedar Song.” Latash once told me how his father had asked the nun at a residential school about his daughter going to university. The nun had laughed in his face: she taught trades to Indians, not things you need for higher education. Latash’s Dad then confronted the Indian Agent. The Agent shrugged. Bad move. His Dad lifted up a chair and threatened to hit the Agent with it. So the Agent got on the phone to

Ottawa. Latash's sister, and Latash, were transferred to a different school and went on to university.

Freedom Babies, a documentary by Doreen Manuel, is screened. It focuses on her niece, Kanahus, who never registered her four children with the Canadian government and instead brought them up off the grid. Kanahus was to be on the panel but has joined the Standing Rock Sioux in North Dakota. Pipelines are the new frontlines.

WEDNESDAY

Ernie George, Hereditary Chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, speaks about how the Mount Seymour Parkway went through their orchards, potato gardens, and graves. How the high tides from tugboats and container ships are taking their land, mudflats, clams, crabs, ducks. He was seven years old when put in residential school. After one year, his grandmother said he wasn't to go back. She knew. His grandfather argued with her. He had spent eight years at the school and so would Ernie. His grandmother insisted. She won. She knew.

THURSDAY

The Blanket Exercise. The organizer is disappointed that only six of us have turned up. I urge her to do it anyway. We lay out blankets to represent Canada, then enact European colonization. First Nations end up on handkerchiefs, disenfranchised, or dead. Settlers give blankets infected with

smallpox to the Natives—biological warfare.

The exercise ends; we introduce ourselves. Grace is from China. Julia is from Korea, is reminded of the Japanese invading and banning the Korean language, but at least they went home. Lay Lay is from Vietnam—she knows invasion stories.

Later, at Meet the Teachers night at our elementary school, I ask our son's new Grade 4 teacher what Indigenous content he teaches. He cheerfully announces that Indigenous content is covered in Grade 3, allowing him this year to concentrate on the explorers—Mackenzie, Fraser, etc.—though he does recall having enjoyed covering the "Hunter & Gatherer" culture of First Nations. I find this label of "hunters and gatherers" limiting, so I remind my son later that we were (and are) also explorers, scientists, inventors, navigators, politicians, economists, gardeners, farmers, traders, lovers, fighters, medicine men and women, storytellers, comedians, chefs, costume designers, weavers, jewellers, and generally multi-faceted complex and beautiful human beings. I'm then reminded of how Carleen Thomas, Ernie George's daughter, asked everyone to stop letting the media label them as *protesters*. "We are protectors. It is our sacred duty to protect our land, and our people."

FRIDAY

Another instructor frets to me that she observed the Minute of Silence to honour residential school survivors but halfway through worried how to bring her class

back out of it. I fret that the week is over and that we need to challenge ourselves to make truth and reconciliation part of every day of the year.

Late Breaking News: Disney pulls the controversial Maui costume after complaints. Meanwhile, the Grade 4 teacher reluctantly acknowledges Orange Shirt Day but worries that it detracts from the Terry Fox Run.

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University of X Graduate Student Parental Leave Policy

Mia Leinonen

*To facilitate return in a seamless manner /
To support open communication and good
will between students and advisors and
administrators*

.....

I agree you should not have to return after 4 weeks / Since we can't pay you for work you aren't doing / Hopefully logic / will make sense

I would like to hear from B--- first / I'll check with M--- tomorrow / I'm copying B--- and M--- / hoping B--- can advocate / I've written to L--- formally / She's really an ally / only seems bureaucratic

L--- was a great chair of the small committee / I was on / All the members / shared a passionate commitment / to making parental leave available

.....

I wish I had better news / after consulting with B---, J---, and L--- / Policy is going to hold firm / out of equity / I wish I had better news for you

Your estimated due date is two weeks prior to the January 10 leave start date indicated on the request form / We will need to adjust the dates of your official leave

For consistency / this is how / Parental leaves are handled

Approved December 27, 2015 to February 7, 2016

Confirm receipt

.....

We care about you, we want the best for you / We just have to be mindful / of equity

Mapping individual pregnancies onto the academic schedule / raises the thorny issue / of equity

Whenever a student gives birth / Summer, Fall, Spring, or Winter / We can't guarantee the length / of time at home with baby

Personal choices that determine one's delivery date / determine that

Do we just say Spring mothers are luckier? / Summer mothers are much luckier? / Every student-mother / Regardless the accident of due dates / We simply do not have the money

oooo

You need to distinguish between / you and
your department

Your primary role is as a student / your
other role is as a teacher

They did not design the policy /
to address teaching / It does help
departments support students

oooo

I prefer to continue this conversation /
in person

oooo

*// Please // I urge you // Thank you for your
efforts // I go into labor any day now //
Thank you // Yes, please do // Thank you for
your thoughtful response // I'm going to focus
on birthing this baby now*

oooo

I hope by now / a healthy, happy baby

It may be awkward to meet in person / so
soon after but / I would rather be talking
with you face to face / so you might see
the friendship and empathy

If you think about equity / and still feel
your case deserves / special support

I would feel happy for you / but also feel
very, very bad / for others

Neither J--- nor H--- was articulating /
department policy, nor making a / binding
promise

You're not being cheated of time with your
newborn / Even so / I would like to make
you happy

You must agree / you will not pursue /
time-consuming complaints

Congratulations on the birth of your baby

I hope you're not physically miserable / I
look forward to seeing you / and perhaps
meeting your baby

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Review of *Mercenary English* Second Edition (Mercenary Press 2016)

Natalie Knight

I insist on revolution and its poetics as I
read the new edition of Mercedes Eng's
Mercenary English, expanded with an
afterword by the poet and a conversation
between her and Fred Moten (to whom
the book's credits give special thanks "for
fellowship"). As this issue of TCR goes to
print, Eng is readying to self-publish and
launch the second edition of her book,
and I sit on my bed, laptop in lap, with
a press-ready PDF of the text. I want to
say to Mercedes, "Fuck yeah you did it"—
you self-published this incredible work,
a countering and resistant act in this era

of widespread reliance on publishers, whether big or small, to facilitate poetic conversations. And you are making it free because that's the way it should be. This is the fourth time I've read *Mercenary English* cover to cover since getting to know it when it was first released by CUE Books in 2013. And now, three years and a few social movements later, I still think *Mercenary English* defines our history and activates our revolutionary potentials as much as it did when it first came out.

I situate *Mercenary English* in a diverse line of revolutionary poetics—including those of writers like M. NourbeSe Philip, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Kamau Brathwaite, Cecilia Vicuña, Heriberto Yépez, and Laura Elrick, to name just a few. Eng's revolutionary poetics emerge in part through reflections on her relationship with Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood on unceded Coast Salish Territories, a neighbourhood that populates the text throughout. Her readings of her social position pull no punches; as she writes in her afterword, titled "there goes the neighbourhood!":

When I moved to the Downtown Eastside in 1996, I was an addict and street sex worker, and the space that [a] picketed restauran[t] occupies was a second-hand shop, then a pharmacy where I filled my methadone prescription when I went into recovery, and the space above it, now occupied by expensive private residences, was low-income

housing. I've changed too: in socioeconomic class and attendant privilege, I now typify the new residents that have displaced the kind of resident I used to be. My life is far removed from that of the women I worked with. For one, I am among the living. (118)

The content of this prose reflection does a different kind of emotional and political work in poetic lines like the following, from the long poem "February 2010": "my women hold me down / with their bones in the ground / with their bodies bound / with their voices hushed of sound / my women hold me down" (63). Passages like these, whether discursive or musical, also reveal just whose side Eng stands on, and that taking sides is absolutely necessary. *Mercenary English* calls out all those who sit on the sidelines while human suffering, borne of structural causes, continues apace. Eng charges, "every / single / one / of / you / who looked away / while women were murdered / left right and centre / in this dream city / this gold mountain city / with its cold coal heart / i call you out" (n.p.).

Building from the clear taking of sides in the social war that defines the lives of many residents of the Lower Mainland, one of the most inspiring characteristics of *Mercenary English* is its enactment of revolutionary solidarity. I mean that Eng knows the difference between "allyship" and solidarity, and knows how to write a poetics that pushes us to enact the latter. Allyship, as well-intentioned as it may

seem, doesn't require action from a position of understanding that our liberation is bound up with the liberation of all others; that we must fight against the forces of oppression that all of us experience; that it is not enough to say "I recognize your oppression and I stand beside you." Instead, revolutionary solidarity requires dismantling the oppressive forces of the seemingly pacific nation of Canada, a nation built and continually rebuilding itself on top of Indigenous dispossession, even through its 21st-century politics of reconciliation. In Eng's poetics this tension resounds emphatically: "what caused the tears? / who caused whose tears? / what about the tears? / those deep structural tears in the warm blanket of our multicultural nation" (10). Yet, it would be misleading for readers of this review to assume that *Mercenary English* is a book of tears. The text overflows with rhythm and music, humour and puns and inalienable connection. As Eng writes in response to one of Moten's questions about what he calls "the documentation of genocide": "Even though what I write about is dark, there's often humour, which I can see as a kind of a beauty in being able to document genocide honestly and also creatively through a kind of textual transgression [...]. This is how my humour works in writing and in life" (129).

Mercenary English is also a call to justice for so many whose living days know violent injustice. These bodies, women gone missing and murdered, unhoused

neighbourhood residents who make a tough residence on the streets, sex workers making a living on street corners, bodies who cope with violence through addictions, and all of their defiant resistance to the forces that hold them down (in one sense of that phrase) are the residents of *Mercenary English*. Eng issues a "fuck you" to city officials, bureaucrats, and poverty pimps for their irresponsibility toward community members most at risk—those who are also, often, most resistant and enlivened. As Eng clarifies in her conversation with Moten, "There is already life in the DTES, just not lives that are valued" (126).

So, dear readers, I want to leave you with the primary feeling that I still have while reading *Mercenary English*, and that is a big, wide, uncontainable "fuck you." This rebellious affect is, in my reading, the guiding impulse of Eng's poetics: "Like colonizers and capitalists," she writes, "I wanna use language as a weapon and swearing and vernacular are some of the ways I weaponize English" (128). To be sure, this weaponized English is a vulnerable and tender form of revolutionary poetics, with "hair like waves of amber grain" (22) and with its speaker "cradled by a maternal ecology" (130). The poetics of *Mercenary English* erupt with insurrection—"I love it that my work says: Here we go, motherfucker!" (128)—redoubling this call with the courage to affirm: "my voice / it's mine to find / when it comes / my call will make you deaf" (50).

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All my relations (on visiting Standing Rock)

angela simple

Thursday, October 27. I watch from my flannel sheets stretched over my queen-sized bed as 117 of my relations, protectors of the water and the land, are arrested. The militarized police force pulls my brothers out of our church—a sweat lodge—where they are “acting out” in peaceful prayer. Horses are shot out under teenager riders. Children are numbered along with Elders, aunties, nephews, and nieces. They are put into dog cages, thrown to the ground, some of their bones broken.

I think back to when I first saw the violence begin. The long weekend in September. I had just completed my contract at a summer job and was returning to school. I watched online as a private security company (now with court cases against them for having operated with inadequate training) sent their dogs to attack our people.

It was that night that I said to a friend: “I’m going. I’m going to the Dakotas. I didn’t even know at the time where Standing Rock was. All I knew was that my family was being attacked. Attacked in the same way we’ve been for so many generations on the same land Custer massacred our ancestors.

I live in Nogojiwanong,¹ where I was

¹ Nogojiwanong means “the place at the end of the rapids” in Anishinaabemowin. It is the Anishinaabe word for Peterborough, Ontario.

able to organize a fundraiser in less than twenty-four hours. On the shortest of notice people came together to play music, bring supplies, donate cash. \$735 Canadian dollars were raised in one night because everyone had seen the Facebook videos of the dogs sent to attack the people protecting our futures (all of our futures). A recent double-mastectomy survivor donated first aid supplies, a friend’s mom donated her fur coat. And then my co-pilot offered to join me: she doesn’t drive, but she’d get us there just as much as my maneuvering the gas and brake pedals would. It had taken me less than a minute to decide I would go to Standing Rock, but it took an army to help pull off over 5000 km of driving, crossing colonial borders, and facing the unknown of blockades, attack dogs, rifles.

In our rented car we crossed that border and drove all the way into the camps of the Oceti Sakowin at Standing Rock, North Dakota. We set up our tents and delivered money (USD \$2000 in cash) and supplies. We prayed with our sister, the Missouri River, our relation, the *wu’u*,² and we visited. We laughed and sang and talked and prayed with brothers, sisters, aunties, uncles, grandmothers—relations from all parts of the world who’d come to be there. We were there on the land, learning again how to be together, and I saw some of those people I’d met in the videos.

I’ll leave you here with a poem I wrote as I watched yet another attack on the sovereignty of our people:

² *wu’u* means water in Ktunaxa

this is what they felt
our great grandparents as those
indian agents

stormed their houses and took
our grandparents\\their children
this is what they felt

our ancestors on
the same land we stand on now
at custer's violence

this is what they felt
watching the caribou drown
the waters dammed

the buffalo gone
hunger in our hearts for our
relations\\all them

this is what i feel
grenades and rubber bullets
pepper spray and dogs

dogs are medicine
weapons once came from the land
turned them against us

this is what they felt
this is what i hope you feel
for we need you now

A series of haiku to tell you just how locked
into it we are. We will die for this, and none
of us will be surprised when the first body
falls. Will you?