

# Shaking It Off: Papal Apologies and Narratives of Exceptionalism in Canada

by Patty Krawec

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**MY FATHER** did not attend residential school. His brothers did, and in the archives of Algoma University there are photographs of children from Pelican Lake Residential School - just outside Sioux Lookout - that include pictures of my uncles. Our family can thank a band manager for my father's near miss; they had taken an eraser to the Lac Seul band list and erased my father's name when my grandmother left her husband. This was one of the few powers of band managers in the 1940s. So my father went to school in town where the community, caring little if he lacked Indian status, treated him with racist violence. And, eventually the horrors of residential schools came for him, too, through family that did attend. Because hurt people, hurt people.

With my own family's story close, I have been listening to stories of others. Connie Walker's [Stolen: Surviving St. Michael's](#) and [Kuper Island](#) hosted by Duncan McCue. Both are about specific people in specific schools, searching for answers to a father's rage, a child's death. They run into the brick walls of church and government bureaucracies that refuse to release records even as they manage to release predators. They describe schools endemic with abusers, Walker noting that at St. Michael's there were years when every priest and nun would eventually be named in nearly 500 lawsuits referencing abuse.

It is in this context that I saw the spectacle and heard the entirely inadequate Papal apology this week. An apology that [Justin Trudeau says](#) fulfilled Call to Action #58, while former Senator and Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Chair, Murray Sinclair [suggests](#) did not. These opposing views of the apology reveal the problem at the center of Canada; our ongoing dispute over the truth. There are two narratives that flow from the

apology and back through time: Canada the multicultural and reconciliatory dream vs. the racist, colonial power. While the former has dominated our relationship for most of our shared history, the latter is harder and harder to ignore.

## Canadian Mythology

Multiculturalism is a pillar of Canadian exceptionalism; that notion that Canadians are kind, welcoming, enlightened. Certainly, fundamentally better than their American counterparts. Racism is an aberration, at odds with the inherent politeness of the Canadian identity. Take the so-called Freedom Convoy, which is positioned them as a fringe minority of Northern Trump loving MAGAs, as if the murder of Colten Boushie and subsequent exoneration of Gerald Stanley, like so much other violence, wasn't part of a long-standing belief about who belongs on Canadian land and who does not. Perhaps the Convoy simply showed Canadians a mirror of an image they've fought for so long to hide. But if you listen carefully to that Canadian myth; it speaks of an invisible whiteness that celebrates differences in order to entrench itself as the center around which others revolve.

**There is a parallel myth in operation here: Christian exceptionalism. There is a belief that Christianity is intrinsically better than other religions.**

It absolves the church of the wrongdoings of its members, which we see in the Pope's apology this week, holding up the infallible nature of the church and scapegoating some isolated church officials who made "mistakes". Rather than acknowledging the church's role in colonization, Francis talks about the evil of individuals; which try as they might,

the charity of other Catholics could not balance. But we all know that residential schools and the infrastructure of genocide was only possible with church money and institutional authority. There was an opportunity to acknowledge the responsibility for colonization that we needed, but it would not come. Because, like Canada, the church understands itself as not only fundamentally good but the conduit of goodness in this world. The wrongs committed on its watch are seen as aberrations rather than inevitable outcomes of a structurally harmful system or a faith that demands acceptance; short of that you perish in fire.

It makes sense that Trudeau, that champion of multiculturalism who tweets out welcome to refugees while maintaining the Safe Third country Agreement that prevents them from actually coming here, would see this as a reasonable apology. It is much like the apologies he and other Canadian politicians have offered: this is not who we are, we will do better. These apologies affirm the primacy of the church and the state as owners of, and authorities over, the land and people. Apologies serve as salvation in one sense anyway: they help rescue the narratives of exceptionalism. And rather than accepting Indigenous people as sovereign actors in our own right, draw us into their respective folds. This is not our land; we are simply in the way.

## Community-Led Healing

About ten years ago I returned home to Lac Seul with my father for the community's annual Powwow. We stopped at the grounds of the former residential school which is now

the Pelican Falls First Nations High School and Center. The high school, which opened in 1978 and serves Lac Seul as well as twenty-three northern communities, is run by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council. But until 1969 it was operated by the Anglican church. (My mother was a teacher, not there though; in nearby Umfreville, in a one room schoolhouse for the mostly Indigenous children of lumber mill workers). When we visited the grounds and the residential school memorial which now stands there, I picked up goose feathers that were scattered around and thought about my early years living in the area while the residential school was still in operation.

**We continued on to the reserve and the Powwow. I met and danced with cousins; I admired twins in their matching moss bags and tikinagans; I ate walleye and other country food at the feast; I listened to the language all around me.**

I thought about a church and a government who can't admit it, but still intend to erase Indigenous people by making us all Canadians, making us all Christians, and how despite everything they tried, they failed. It was through these memories that I heard the words that came after the apology - the other narrative that I had been waiting for - the words of Sipihko, a Cree woman who spoke her language to the pope and sang a song that many mistook for the national anthem and told reporters "... then I turned my back on him and said 'hiy hiy' and I shook it off.

### CITATION

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