

# Trickster art: The digital storytelling of Chris Bose



In Nlaka'pamux (pronounced ng-khla-kap-mh) country in south-central British Columbia, you can hear coyotes howling in the canyon at night, and glimpse them disappearing into the woods. For the Nlaka'pamux people, coyote is a trickster, using his creativity to transform the world, while rebelling against and disrupting established order.

As a scavenger, coyote is the ultimate survivor, constantly adapting to changing times.

Chris Bose, a photographer, filmmaker, digital storyteller, poet and musician, has a lot in common with coyote.

Living in Kamloops, B.C., Chris is also a creator, rebel, disruptor of the established order and, most of all, a survivor. Chris is from the Nlaka'pamux nation, which means "People of the Canyon," referring to the B.C. region where the Fraser and Thompson Rivers join.

Through his artwork, Chris wrestles with demons in the form of the traumatic effects of residential school on his parents, aunts and

uncles, and how that trauma has rebounded on his generation.

He also criticizes Canada's policies of forced assimilation, and reflects on issues ranging from **Duncan Campbell Scott's** proposal to "kill the Indian in the child," to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's **official apology** for the residential school system.

Until recently, Chris followed in the footsteps of Aboriginal artists like Jane Ash Poitras and Carl Beam, masters of mixed-media collage. He made art by scavenging: collecting objects, photographs, fabric, etc., and transforming them with paint and glue.

In present tense, Chris' most provocative storytelling medium is digital -- he is a self-taught expert in image manipulation technologies. Using Photoshop, First Cut and other applications, he recreates the effects of the mixed-media collage on a computer screen.

"I've collected thousands of images, many of them from archives,

of residential schools -- photos of Indian children in uniform, photos of Indians being measured with rulers. Over the last fifteen years, I've worked in the buildings where residential schools used to be. I've explored these places and found secret passages, heard ghosts. I'm fascinated and traumatized by them. Residential school is our hidden holocaust. The residential school is always going to be in my art and in what I do until I figure out a way to destroy it."

"Because my parents grew up in residential school, they never learned how to be parents. So I never learned either. I grew up in Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver. My mother moved us a lot so child welfare wouldn't take me away. It was during the sixties scoop."

During the "sixties scoop" Aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in non-Native adoptive homes. Most adoptions took place in the sixties. Children were often literally scooped from their homes by the

## Jennifer Dales

This article originally appeared in [rabble.ca](http://rabble.ca) - <http://rabble.ca> on July 6th, 2009. Jennifer Dales is a writer living in Ottawa. She has reviewed art, poetry and non-fiction for the Canadian Medical Association Journal, Arc: Canada's National Poetry Magazine and The Danforth Review. has appeared in several journals, including Prairie Fire. She teaches in the professional writing program at Algonquin College. Her interest in First Nations art, literature and politics spans more than 20 years.

child welfare representatives without the consent of their families.

“I think about the idea of home a lot. It’s a funny place, I guess. A place I can never go back to. Home is not really tied to one place for me, because we moved so much. I guess home for me is a comforting memory of the past -- being on the rez at Granny and Grampa’s.”

Though Chris spent his childhood on the move, he returned home to visit his grandparents in the summer. While trapping with his grandfather, Chris heard Nlaka’pamux stories, including stories about coyote. Chris carries on this tradition, telling his grandfather’s stories at cultural events, and teaching digital storytelling, painting, stencil graffiti and filmmaking to Aboriginal youth in B.C.

In January 2009, Chris launched **the Urban Coyote TeeVee blog** as part of a project that involves developing a new piece of digital art or film every day for a year.

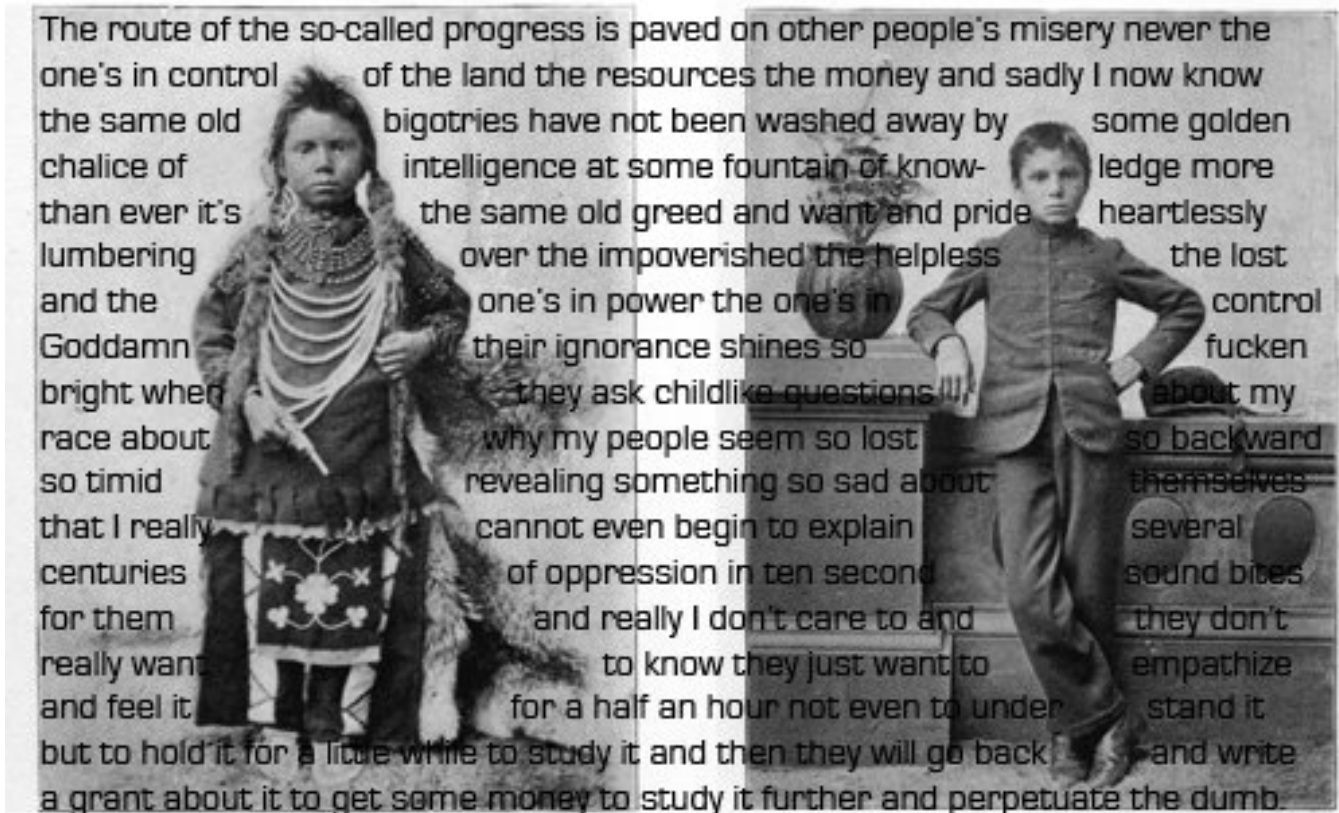
As the blog’s title suggests, Urban Coyote TeeVee delivers a contemporary urban Aboriginal viewpoint to its audience, fusing Nlaka’pamux culture with historical and urban imagery, using a digital online medium.

These digital art and film postings give his audience insight into Chris’ dynamic and adaptable artistry, reflecting his experimentation with film and imagery as well as his thoughts and feelings on the day he created each image or film clip.

The blog reflects its creator’s sense of humour, anger and versatility,

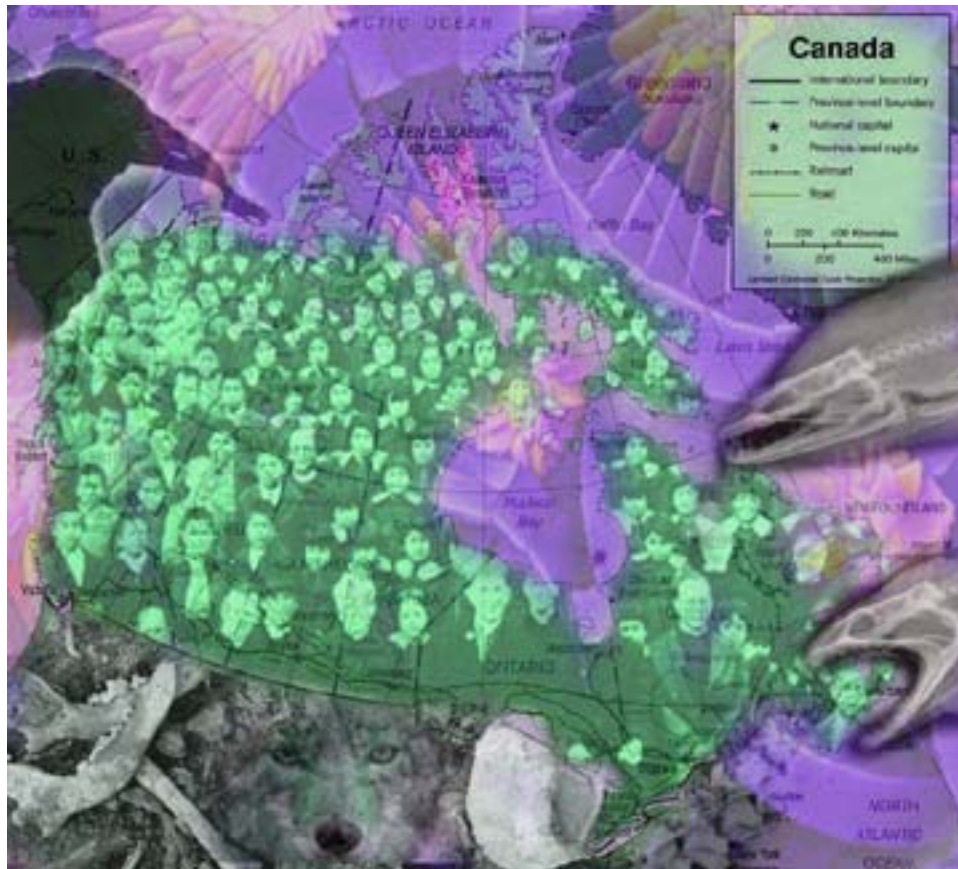
ranging from a humorous critique of B.C. premier, **Gordon Campbell**, to reflections on the impact of violence in society, to poetry combined with archival images.

One of the most compelling of Chris’ blog images is a postcard-sized digital piece combining two black and white archival photos of an Aboriginal child named **Thomas Moore**. The digital image juxtaposes Thomas before and after his entrance into the Regina Indian Industrial School in the late 1800s. In the “before” picture, he has long hair and is dressed in traditional Plains clothing, and in the “after” picture, he is wearing a high-collared military-style suit. These before-and-after photos were no doubt staged to demonstrate the “civilizing” effect of residential schools on their subjects.



Thomas Moore before and after his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan in 1874.

Library and Archives Canada / NL-022474



Over the two images of Thomas, Chris layers his own words: "... the ones in power...ask childlike questions about my race about why my people seem so lost so timid revealing something so sad about themselves ...they just want to empathize and feel it for half an hour not even to understand it but to hold it for a little while to study it and they will go back and write a grant about it to get some money to study it further and perpetuate the dumb."

The blog has resulted in another powerful digital creation: **Jesus Coyote**, a heretical, humorous character, whom Chris uses to "Aboriginalize" Christianity, while at the same time defusing the power of the church and school system.

"Jesus Coyote is a trickster -- the ultimate trickster. He is holy, but he's also a rascal. Who's to say Jesus wasn't a bit of a trickster? He turned water into wine. He walked on water! Jesus Coyote's always got something up his sleeve. He is an ordinary guy with a little too much power. But he is not going to moralize."

Much of the subject matter in Chris' blog is also present in his films, which can be viewed at **the Urban Coyote Television website**, including three short films that Chris created last year as part of a collaborative project at the Smithsonian Institute and the **National Museum of the American Indian** in Washington, D.C.

Chris has been invited to send films to the **Imaginative Film and Media Arts Festival** in Toronto. One of these films, called **'at the heart of it all,'** focuses on the Canadian government's apology to First Nations.

Chris has a book of poetry forthcoming in the fall of 2009, published by **Kege-donce Press** and he has just finished recording a spoken word CD called 31 Confessions. His digital art will be featured in an exhibition this winter at the **Arnica Courthouse Gallery in Kamloops.** ✨

*Chris Bose will be presenting at the BCTELA Fall Conference on Friday, October 21st in Richmond.  
To register, go to [bctela.ca](http://bctela.ca)*