



Supporting Indigenous art in the spirit of cultural self-determination and opposing appropriation

“Our stories have been stolen and silenced for years, while our bodies and land have been abused and broken. One allows the other.” (Jesse Wentze)

At a time when Canada is re-examining the place and scope of Indigenous peoples’ inherent treaty and constitutional rights, the Canada Council for the Arts considers it relevant and timely to take positions on cultural appropriation and the rights of Indigenous peoples to the protection of their cultures. In doing so, the Canada Council is consistent with the approach of reconciliation and decolonization that is at the heart of its strategic plan (2016-2021) **Shaping a New Future**.

The Canada Council must take into account the historical challenge that Canada is now facing, after the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report in June 2015 explicitly demonstrated the attempted cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples of this land. As Canada Council CEO Simon Brault reminds us, “As a public arts funder, we are aware — in a way we were not sixty years ago — of the deliberate attempts throughout Canada’s history to eradicate the cultures and languages of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. We have an obligation and a responsibility to transform ourselves to better support Indigenous artists and communities on their own terms.”¹

As Canada’s public arts funder, The Canada Council bases its activities, philosophy and raison d’être on core values and explicit strategic commitments. Thus, it wholeheartedly supports freedom of artistic expression by protecting it from external dominance; furthermore *the Canada Council is formally committed* to respect the histories, traditions, languages and contemporary practices of Indigenous peoples.² As Anishinaabe artist Aylan Couchie has so powerfully articulated, “the appropriation of Indigenous stories, ways of being, and artworks is simply an extension of colonialism and settlers’ assertion of rights over the property of Indigenous people. The history of colonizing Indigenous identity through images, film and narratives has played its part in placing Indigenous perspectives at a subordinate level. It’s this hegemonic system, filled with stereotypes and suppression that continues to thrive within institutions. It erects barriers for Indigenous voices.”³

We are all agents of either stasis or change. For every act of political, social or cultural agency that challenges the status quo, there will always be opposing forces fuelled by colonial entrenchment/privilege, oppositional paranoia or, simply, inertia. The Canada Council is committed to reaffirming and revitalizing its relationship with First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada. The Canada Council believes that an approach that respects First Nations, Inuit and Métis artistic expression, cultural protocols, Indigenous rights and Indigenous worldviews is a fundamental part of the processes of conciliation and reconciliation in this country.

¹ Speech delivered at Creative Cities Summit 2015 in Kelowna, B.C.

² ([Source: corporate social responsibility, statement of principles](#))

³ <http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/may-2017/returning-voices-us/>⁴

http://www.kobobooks.com/ebook/Red-Skin-White-Masks/book-pOVYOVAnMU6Rr1kkTdEgww/page1.html?utm_campaign=TextQuotesIOS&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=App_Acq Intro 32



We understand this to mean that the customary and contemporary cultural and artistic practices of Indigenous peoples must remain in the control of Indigenous peoples and communities. In this context, the Canada Council affirms and supports the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, specifically Articles 11(1) and 31:

Article 11

1. *Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.*

Article 31

1. *Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.*
2. *In conjunction with indigenous peoples, States shall take effective measures to recognize and protect the exercise of these rights.*

By affirming the UNDRIP Declaration, the Canada Council commits to a nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples that is rights-based and comprehensive. By supporting and embedding the UNDRIP within our value system, we make clear a path forward to self-determination and cultural sovereignty for Indigenous peoples without compromising our support for artistic and creative expression.

The Canada Council has, and will always maintain its support of free expression and artistic independence for cultural creators and producers. But these freedoms are only actualized when they come with responsibility, reciprocity and respect. In this case, respect for the authority of Indigenous voices in the telling of *their* stories and an understanding of the role cultural appropriation has played in the oppression and violence against Indigenous peoples.

We must always be cognizant of the power dynamics that give rise to cultural appropriation and the politics of race and colonial privilege in Canada and that continue to exist. Indigenous peoples have been marginalized, stereotyped and maligned for centuries. Real reconciliation and decolonization must include acknowledgement and redress of this historic and current reality. As Dene scholar Glen Coulthard points out, *“authentic decolonization must directly confront more than mere economic relations; it has to account for the multifarious ways in which capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the totalizing character of state power interact with one another to form the constellation of power relations that sustain colonial patterns of behavior, structures, and relationships.”*⁴

⁴ http://www.kobobooks.com/ebook/Red-Skin-White-Masks/book-pOVYOvAnMU6Rr1kkTdEgww/page1.html?utm_campaign=TextQuotesIOS&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=App_Acq Intro 32



The Canada Council for the Arts will continue to encourage and support the creative freedom of all artists, but we insist that it is done respectfully and truly honours the fundamental and inalienable right of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples to cultural sovereignty. The Canada Council also considers it normal to ask the artists and organizations applying for grants for projects that address, deal with, incorporate, comment on, interpret or depict unique aspects of the First Nations, Inuit or Métis culture, to show that they have respect and true regard for Indigenous art and culture in their endeavours. Without dictating a specific or mandatory way to go about it, it can be expected that authentic and respectful efforts have been made to engage with artists or other members of the Indigenous communities whose culture or protocols are addressed by the project for which the Canada Council's support is sought.