



# Understanding Aboriginal Arts in Canada Today

## A Knowledge and Literature Review

Prepared for the Research and Evaluation Section  
Canada Council for the Arts

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*The opinions expressed in this document are those of the consultants and the writers and speakers that are cited.*

*These opinions do not represent official policy of the Canada Council for the Arts.*

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Finally, we feel fortunate to be inspired by the thousands of Aboriginal artists - those who created art before contact, those who kept art alive during the past centuries and those who are with us today. Contemporary Aboriginal artists are reviving and reinventing art practices for the next seven generations.

Nia:wen Ko:wa, a heartfelt thank you to all of them.

France Trépanier & Chris Creighton-Kelly

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



Filming of a short film by Bruce Hauuli. Photographer: Guillaume Saladin.

*Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology. They are 'factors' to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood. (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 2001)*

## **Why a Literature Review?**

At first glance, the concept of an Aboriginal Literature Review may seem like a contradiction in terms! Aboriginal peoples traditionally passed most of their worldview - customs, medicines, protocols, cultural practices, ceremonies, creation stories, etc. - using oral methods. Much of this orality continues to the present day.

A literature review, as conventionally constructed, cannot deeply discover, let alone completely explain, the knowledge inherent in an oral culture. Marie Battiste (2002) describes this problem which she sees as an oxymoron:

*The first point is that in the European (or Eurocentric) knowledge system, the purpose of a literature review is to analyse critically a segment of a published topic. Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structure of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modelling, practice, and animation, rather than through the written word. In the context of Indigenous knowledge, therefore, a literature review is an oxymoron because Indigenous knowledge is typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples rather than a library.*

*The second point is that conducting a literature review on Indigenous knowledge implies that Eurocentric research can reveal an understanding of Indigenous knowledge. The problem with this approach is that Indigenous knowledge does not mirror classic Eurocentric orders of life. It is a knowledge system in its own right with its own internal consistency and ways of knowing, and there are limits to how far it can be comprehended from a Eurocentric point of view (p. 2).*

So, is creating a literature review about Aboriginal art a useful exercise? As authors of this document, after careful consideration, we say 'yes' - but with some reservations.

First, why do we say yes? Because:

1. the request for such a review came directly from Aboriginal artists, writers and critics in meeting after meeting
2. over the last four decades, a body of literature about Aboriginal art practice - some of it by non-Aboriginal people, but mostly created by Aboriginal commentators - continues to grow and develop its own discursive frameworks
3. it is critical that these voices are heard both in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal arts communities and in academia
4. there is an acute lack of critical discourse on Aboriginal art in the popular media
5. the mainstream art world, which generally ignores Aboriginal artists, will have a summary document to aid in expanding its knowledge about Aboriginal art

Secondly, why do we say 'with reservations'? Because:

1. we generally agree with Marie Battiste that there is a limit to understanding oral knowledge using written communication
2. the conventional style of literature reviews tends to limit the voices of those being quoted and co-opt their expertise on a topic to the author(ity) of the writer of the document
3. generally, literature reviews privilege academics as sources of truthful information and downplay elders, artists and popular commentators.

In this document, we have deliberately attempted to address these concerns. We have no pretension to being able to 'solve' the Eurocentric problem identified by Battiste. It is a contradiction with no immediate solution.

**We fully acknowledge that our document will have its limitations.**

We recognize the importance of working with an Indigenous research methodology. There is no one method that is applicable to all situations. Rather the various methodologies that have been developed follow certain principles. Battiste (1996) has strongly remarked:

*Indigenous researchers cannot rely on colonial languages and thought to define our reality. If we continue to define our reality in the terms and constructs drawn from Eurocentric diffusionism, we continue the pillage of our own selves.*

In Canada, in addition to the research of Marie Battiste, we have found the work of Kathy Absolon and Cam Willet to be useful. In Quebec, a critical voice has been Guy Sioui Durand. We have included words spoken by Joane Cardinal Schubert.

We have been influenced by Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples by Linda Tuhiwai Smith - a key work which both critiques the concept of 'research' and suggests new methodologies based on four directions - healing, decolonization, transformation and mobilization.

The common theme among all these methodologies is the concept of decolonization, the undoing of colonial assumptions and habits as they relate to the very concept of research. As Smith (1999) herself remarks:

*'Research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary (p. 1).*

Decolonization produces a critical understanding of the epistemologies, motivations and values that underlie Western research projects.

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*We have finally come to a point in our history as First Nations of sharing our art as a contemporary expression, derived from our cultural memory and our hidden history - a composite knowledge of icon, symbol and concept; of interpretation and visioning; of experimentation and experience; of movement and of new creation - ever aware that we take responsibility for our creations, to guard them and to use them well.*

Joane Cardinal-Schubert<sup>1</sup>

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We hope that by revising and reshaping the model of a conventional literature review, it can be made more useful for a variety of audiences. To this end, we have adopted the following strategies:

1. Rather than quickly summarizing a person's point into our text, we have chosen to include fuller, more descriptive quotes than is usual in a literature review. This allows the writer or speaker more space to cut down the brush, to blaze the trail, to elaborate their case, thereby de-centering our voice to a certain extent.
2. We prioritize Aboriginal people in our review, even as we include many citations from non-Aboriginal persons.
3. We quote elders, artists, curators, arts administrators and writers as well as academics and historians.
4. We give significant space to oral quotes. They are presented throughout the document in grey text, in a larger type face. These quotes, which have not necessarily been written down, come from speakers in conversations, at public events or during meetings.
5. We have attempted to write in a style which can be used both by scholars and by persons without academic training.

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<sup>1</sup> Words spoken at *Expressions - National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression*, 2002.  
<http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1288012608459/1288012608461#a6>

We have tried, stylistically, to bridge many ways of seeing, different ways of understanding the world and what is in it. As a consequence this document is subtitled *'A Knowledge and Literature Review.'*

**We state that this review comes from Aboriginal communities and goes back to those communities. Although we have assembled the content of this document, we intend that this content is 'owned' by Aboriginal artists and their communities.**

### ***Steps Taken***

The idea of a literature review on Aboriginal arts was first discussed during the consultations that took place during the Aboriginal Arts Research Initiative (AARI) supported by the Canada Council for the Arts in 2008. The Aboriginal arts community identified a literature review as a future research need.<sup>2</sup>

The project of conducting a knowledge and literature review began in 2009. This review has been financially supported by the Research and Evaluation Section and the Aboriginal Arts Office - Canada Council for the Arts - and by the Artex Information Centre.

We undertook the following steps in conducting this review:

- Development of terms of reference and conceptual framework
- Development of research questions
- Request for information on Aboriginal arts publication from numerous Aboriginal artists and scholars
- Compilation of information from these requests
- Research for the interviews with five senior artists
- Research at the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Archives of Canada
- Visits to libraries located in: Aboriginal cultural centres, art galleries, universities and municipalities in Canada
- Gathering, reading and analysing of research material

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<sup>2</sup> See the recommendations presented in the *Aboriginal Arts Research Initiative - Report on Consultations*, p. 22-23. [www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/rdonlyres/F4D7883E-C256-4E01-AD0D-7915173B116D/0/AARIFinalReport.pdf](http://www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/rdonlyres/F4D7883E-C256-4E01-AD0D-7915173B116D/0/AARIFinalReport.pdf)

- Conducting five in-person interviews with:
  - Margo Kane, Cree-Saulteaux performing artist and writer (Vancouver, BC)
  - Alanis Obomsawin, Abenaki filmmaker (Montreal, QC)
  - Alan Syliboy, Mi'kmaq visual artist and musician (Truro, NS)
  - Jean Sioui, Wendat poet and writer (Wendake, QC)
  - Sally Webster, Inuit elder (Ottawa, ON)
- Conducting e-mail, phone and in-person interviews with Aboriginal artists and scholars
- Research residency at Artexte Information Centre in Montreal.

### ***Two Comments on Terminology***

The first persons to inhabit the Americas are referred to by different names in different contexts. In the country now known as Canada, it is possible to overhear the following: Aboriginal, First Nations, First Peoples, Indian, Indigenous, Native and occasionally Native-Canadian or Aboriginal-Canadian.

Most of these ways of describing have their own advantages and shortcomings. We do not believe there is any one accurate description. We have no pretension to 'correct' the terms used by speakers and writers we have cited. Different persons use different words in different contexts communicating in their own voice.

We have chosen to use the word '*Aboriginal*' to describe persons who mainly live in Canada and who are First Nations, Inuit or Métis.

Of course, most of these persons identify themselves as members of their own ancestral peoples - e.g. Nisga'a, Anishinaabe, Mi'kmaq - when they feel it is appropriate.

Secondly, we have chosen to use the term 'arts' in the plural to emphasize the multiplicity of art practices. We note this in two ways:

1. Arts, as counter-posed to 'art', is generally taken to mean the arts in all Western art disciplines - music, theatre, dance, literature, visual and media arts. We also use it to encompass interdisciplinary arts.
2. Arts also refers to any art form that is practised by Aboriginal artists. In this sense, arts refers to any of the disciplines listed above but also includes story telling, basket weaving, pole carving, etc.

## ***Parlez-vous français?***

In our review, we have recognized that Aboriginal artists have been marginalized, sometimes ignored, by the Canadian art system. This is to be expected given the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. In Quebec, this history is both the same and different. As Guy Sioui Durand (2010) reflects:

*Despite all the epidemics, dispossessions and other misfortunes, we, the First Nations of Gépèg (Quebec), pursued our political autonomy through the Federation of the Seven Fires. The “big fire”, symbol of the constituent assembly, was held in Kahnawake. Starting with the Canadian Confederation in 1867, successive - and more and more repressive - versions of the ‘Savages’ law (still in force in 2009 under the name of the Indian Act) undermined the foundations of this alliance.*

*However, an “eighth fire”, one with an Aboriginal worldview and an Aboriginal imaginary, inseparable from geopolitical fires, remained untamed and survived, creating a contemporary resurgence against all repressions (p. 1).*

We want to highlight the particular situation of Aboriginal peoples who speak French within Canada. There are 11 nations that use the French language in some capacity.

The Waban-Aki and Huron-Wendat peoples use French as a first language. The Innus, the Malecite and the Attikamekw generally speak their ancestral languages first and then French as a second language. Many of the Algonquin, the Inuit, the Cree, the Micmac and the Mohawk peoples also speak French as a result of being geographically close to Francophone communities. Finally, there are the French speaking Métis.

Obviously these Nations are concentrated in Quebec, but collectively, Aboriginal artists who speak French are spread across Canada from British Columbia to Nunavut and all the way to Labrador. These artists are marginalized in three ways:

1. They are generally not included in the mainstream Canadian art scene, both historically and in the present day. This is slowly changing.
2. They are more or less invisible in discussions of Quebecois cultural issues or those issues that concern Francophones outside of Quebec.
3. They are under represented within the Aboriginal arts community in Canada, whose members overwhelmingly speak English, but not French.

In an attempt to counter these marginalization tendencies, we adopted five straightforward strategies:

1. We have deliberately sought to review works written and spoken in French.
2. We conducted two of our five major in person interviews in French, as well as several, shorter interviews.
3. We are including quotes from Francophones throughout this document.
4. We have created a separate bibliography in French.
5. This review will be published in both French and English.

### ***The Limits of this Document***

As anyone who has ever completed a literature review will attest, the more you know, the more there is to know! This is particularly true when a topic is not tightly focussed and when the topic itself is connected to other discourses which are not immediately recognizable as relevant. We found both of these conditions inherent in our goal - understanding Aboriginal arts in Canada today.

Early on, our research indicated that we develop a culturally-specific, historical context for analysing Aboriginal arts in Canada. It was clear that we needed to enlarge ways of seeing that went beyond the common method of evaluating artworks solely in an aesthetic way - based on colour, movement, form, editing, technique, lighting, style, etc. As a consequence, we generally have not included: catalogues, reviews in mainstream newspapers or coffee table books.

We have included sources that would contribute to the ongoing critical discourse that is being created by Aboriginal scholars, curators, critics and artists. These sources are generally non-fiction - descriptions of history; critical essays; government reports, both internal and external; scholarly journals; articles that analyse, not just describe; research papers; individual theses and dissertations.

We acknowledge that there are areas of research beyond the scope of this knowledge and literature review. These are some areas that this document does NOT include:

1. ***a survey of Aboriginal artists***  
We did not set out to document or discuss the work of individual Aboriginal artists. We have intended to honour them by using their words when they speak about art, culture, history and tradition.

2. ***a focus on the arts of specific Aboriginal peoples***  
Detailing the art works, in every artistic discipline, of every nation within Canada is an immense and complicated task. It would take years to complete properly. Some of this work has already been started.
3. ***research on Aboriginal arts from all of the Americas***  
We are aware that most Aboriginal persons do not recognize the borders between nation-states. As well, peoples, cultures and art practices do not end neatly just because of national boundaries. They blur across borders following traditional travel routes and settlement homes. We have on occasion cited references from outside Canada. However, this document is part of an ongoing process within the Canada Council for the Arts. It was funded by the Council whose mandate states that it deals with professional Canadian arts organizations and artists who are Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada.
4. ***an organization around artistic discipline or regions***  
Both of these methods are common in Canadian arts discourse - e.g. discussing specific issues in dance or speaking only of prairie artists. In this document we have taken a more generalized approach to all Aboriginal arts practices, conceptualizing them more as interdisciplinary and intercultural, more as processes that arise from tradition and culture. These processes and the art 'products' they yield generally do not sort neatly into established, Western art categories.
5. ***a search for one standard definition of Aboriginal art***  
We did not attempt to come up with one, singular definition of Aboriginal art. In fact, we doubt that would even be possible. Our task was to help the reader to 'understand' Aboriginal arts in Canada today. The knowledge and literature we reviewed suggested eight categories, each offering a useful perspective on that understanding.

**We are emphatically not insisting on our understanding of Aboriginal arts as being the only correct one. We intentionally acknowledge that this work is ongoing, incomplete and evolving every day.**

**We welcome comments, criticisms and further extensions of this review.<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> Please send comments to *Head, Research and Evaluation Section*, Canada Council for the Arts.

# INTRODUCTION



*The River - Home* by Margo Kane, Full Circle: First Nations Performance. Photographer: Nicholas Seiflow.

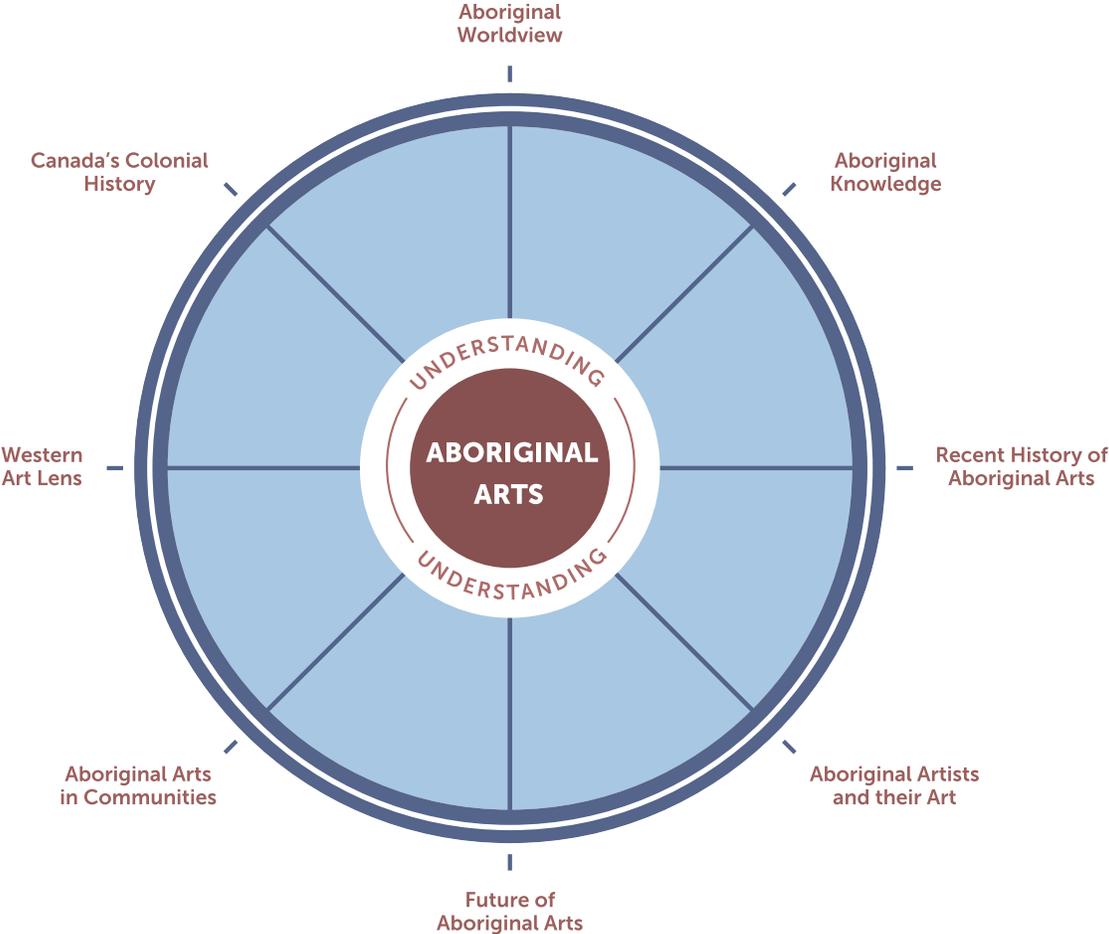
*It is necessary that, with great urgency, we all speak well, and listen well. We, you and I, must remember everything. We must especially remember those things that we never knew. Obviously that process cannot begin with longer lists of facts. It needs newer, and much more complex, kinds of metaphors. Perhaps we must trust confusion more, for a while, and be deeply suspicious of simple stories, simple acts.*  
(Jimmie Durham, 1993)

This review investigates an essential, but not a simple, question - how does one understand Aboriginal arts which are created in the territory known as Canada? Any response to this question that tries to produce a sole definition of Aboriginal art is both futile and counterproductive.

For example, using the familiar method which privileges aesthetic appreciation based on seeing only the formal qualities of an artwork, an audience member could miss the significance of both Aboriginal worldviews and cultures in which this art is profoundly rooted. Plus, Aboriginal artists create work that often has both Aboriginal and European influences!

A more fruitful methodology to understanding Aboriginal arts is ‘walking around the tree’, looking at it from different perspectives and histories. Each perspective yields rich, sometimes nuanced meanings. Putting them together gives a more complete, holistic understanding.

After more than two years’ research into ‘Aboriginal Arts’, both the oral and written evidence revealed many positions that could be considered as starting points to understanding. We have grouped these positions into eight perspectives, each of which casts its own light on the subject. Rather than just listing them, we are presenting these perspectives in a circular drawing, taking inspiration from the many circles that are part of Aboriginal traditions - the drum, the medicine wheel, the dream catcher, the talking circle - just to mention a few.



We will elaborate on each of these perspectives in the following sections.

## ***Describing Aboriginal Arts***

For now, as an introduction, there are some general observations that arise from our knowledge and literature review that describe - but not define - Aboriginal art making. These observations have been informed by the contributions of Jimmie Durham, Doreen Jensen, Tom Hill, Dolores Churchill, Gaétan Gingras, Candace Brunette, Richard W. Hill, Robert Houle, Marie Clements, Carla Taunton and Cathi Charles Wherry. We have included words spoken by Alan Syliboy.

For most Aboriginal people, 'art' does not stand alone without a cultural context. The distinctions among cultural practice, art and craft as separate categories are not articulated in the same way as mainstream arts. Doreen Jensen (1997) crisply summarizes:

*I do not distinguish between culture and environment, art and craft. Nor can I believe in categorizing work by living artists as either 'traditional' (valid anthropological artifact) or 'contemporary' (valid fine art object). Such distinctions are at best irrelevant; at worst, they are racist.*

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*I remember, when I was a kid... there is a whole different thought pattern when you speak Mi'kmaq. There is a lot of humour, a lot of laughter. That part has not been transferred to the next generation. If you didn't have the language, that thought pattern didn't survive. There was no word for art in Mi'kmaq because there was no need for it. It was all integrated.*  
Alan Syliboy<sup>4</sup>

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Some Aboriginal languages do not even have a word directly for 'art' as it is understood in Canada's mainstream art system. As Tom Hill (2002) describes:

*It is interesting to observe that in the traditional languages there is no word for 'art'. (Only a few Aboriginal art forms had no established function in daily life. To the North American Indian, everything made served a purpose; the idea of hanging a painting on a wall or mounting a sculpture on a pedestal just to admire it was completely foreign (p. 9).*

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with France Trépanier in Truro, NS on March 20 2010.

This does not mean that Aboriginal people do not 'make art.' Rather it is what they create - products that non-Aboriginal people might call art - that they themselves understand in a special category, but not necessarily as art. Here is an example from Dolores Churchill (2002):

*In the Haida language, there is no word for art, but an artist is called 'gifted' (p. 217).*

### **Aboriginal Art Practices are Unique in Canada**

When discussing Aboriginal arts, an obvious, yet somehow often overlooked, fact is revealed - Aboriginal people were (and still are) the original people of this land. Unlike most Canadian citizens, their cultures do not come from a far away 'home' country whether that country is France or England; India or Côte-d'Ivoire; Brazil or the Philippines.

Aboriginal art and culture come from this land we now call Canada. If people stop dancing Kathak in Canada, it will still thrive in India. If opera stops in Canada, countries in Europe and Asia will carry it on. But if Aboriginal people stop dancing powwow in the Americas, then there will be no powwow on the planet. It is an art form which is distinctive in the world, that exists only 'here'. As Gaétan Gingras explains:

*...you have to protect Native cultures because we are the only cultures that come from here. If an Italian man doesn't want to lose his culture or language, he can go back to Italy to discover it. And that goes for any immigrant group that wants to discover their roots. But with Native people, this is our land...once our culture is gone, that's it. We cannot go anywhere else to protect our culture or discover our past. We have to fight to stand here and say "Protect us!"...This is our culture. This is what comes from years of being here (in Apsey, 2009, p. 112).*

The implications of this simple fact are profound. They point to tough questions about who should be concerned about the survival of Aboriginal art practices. This is a critical issue for policy makers, governments and funding agencies in terms of their cultural priorities. Candace Brunette (2007) puts it this way:

*Currently the governments' national and provincial arts and culture funding structures force Aboriginal companies into categorical boxes, which are insufficient in meeting Aboriginal peoples' unique needs. Forcing Aboriginal performing art companies into Western mainstream systems is seriously problematic, and deserves complete reconsideration when dealing with Aboriginal people in today's contemporary context. Essentially, the current system was built to serve more established mainstream companies, and through time has responded to the needs of mainstream. However, it is important to recognize that historically, the relationship between government(s) and Aboriginal people in Canada has not been positive...The unchecked expectation that Aboriginal art practitioners fit into guidelines set by mainstream models is a*

*colonial encounter, which serves the interest of those in power, and systemically undermines Aboriginal people who are forced to work within it (p. 7).*

### **Aboriginal Arts Process**

Art, for Aboriginal people, is ongoing; it is a living, breathing process. It is not static or dead or only in the past. In this sense, nothing ‘dies.’ Nothing is ever discarded because it has a spirit. Richard W. Hill explains the relationship between this spirit and art:

*For many Native people, there is a living spirit in nature that permeates our lives. We know that spirit and communicate with it. One of the most important motives of our art is to show our understanding of that spirit and of our relationship to the world. It is nearly impossible to separate this spirituality from aesthetic principles, or from community aesthetic. Words such as art, culture, and religion are unnecessary: the values they represent are ever-present in the daily lives of traditional Native peoples (in Tom Hill, p. 253).*

On the other hand, some Aboriginal artists are more comfortable with Western notions of art, bringing them into their own work, inventing hybrid art forms that are nevertheless still Aboriginal in their creation. This approach has developed over the last fifty years. Thirty years ago, Robert Houle (1982) identified it in this way:

*Today, there is an emergence of a new art by a new generation of young artists. These come from two different aesthetic traditions: North American and Western European. The first is deeply rooted in tribal ritual and symbolism; while the latter is an irreversible influence committed to change and personal development. This new art is traditional and contemporary in source. Also, it is innovative and sophisticated in style and technique.*

This process of ‘coming from two different aesthetic traditions’ extends across artistic disciplines. Aboriginal theatre, for example, is performed revealing both Aboriginal and Western traditions. Marie Clements (2005) takes Houle’s observation further by suggesting that because Aboriginal story telling is an ancient art form, it can, in a sense, recontextualize Western theatre. She explains:

*Aboriginal theatre in effect strives to create a whole experience that can be connected through many disciplines be it theatre, movement, mask, dance, song, ritual, myth or multi-media. This in itself makes “Aboriginal theatre” a unique and highly diversified art form in Canada; one that still has its roots firmly in its cultural beginnings and practice, yet is informed by the very survival of Aboriginal peoples and their belief that art is in the living and is in direct relation to the land, and to the witness. In this light nothing is disconnected and this organic wholeness has extended to include the western form of theatre as “our story-telling” (p. 6).*

## **Aboriginal Art Making As a Survival Strategy**

Canadian history is marked by many attempts to assimilate, to segregate and even to eliminate Aboriginal peoples. And yet throughout this history, Aboriginal cultures have survived, sometimes battered about, sometimes nearly lost. But at other times, cultural practices have been transmitted orally, so that they are vibrant and fully formed.

Whether consciously or not, despite constant efforts “to take the Indian out of the Indian”<sup>5</sup>, artists and cultural carriers have kept the art flame alive. Aboriginal peoples have used art making as a strategy for survival. This continues to the present day. Carla Taunton (2007) states:

*It is important to recognize that in Aboriginal communities the story has long been a vehicle for resistance, employed as a strategy for cultural survival. This suggests that storytelling is a method of intervention (p. 56).*

From 1946 to 1948, a special joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons explored the possibility of changes to the Indian Act. Then, in 1948, Canada signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Among other factors, these actions caused the Canadian government to amend the Indian Act. In 1951 changes were made that removed the historical prohibitions on some traditional Aboriginal practices and ceremonies. For example, the potlatch was no longer banned.

This meant that Aboriginal peoples were now ‘free’ to practise their own cultural ways. After decades of surviving secretly, cultural carriers could now adopt a more open approach. However, as Cathi Charles Wherry (2006) explains, this has been a complex transition:

*...in order to avoid arrest and imprisonment, stealth and secrecy were required by Aboriginal people still practising their culture. In 2007 it is only 56 years since that particular legislation was repealed, and this erasure does not automatically remove its deeper effects on the communities and cultures it was imposed upon... This past might in fact offer energy that we can benefit from in the present. After all, it is a testament to our ancestors’ love and commitment to our arts and cultures that our practices have survived, and continue to evolve. Still today, these are the values that fuel the ingenuity of many artists and cultural workers across the country, who continue to create, organize and deliver their work to ever-evolving audiences (p. 3).*

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan Campbell Scott, Department of Indian Affairs (1913 - 1932), commenting on the implementation of the residential schools system in Canada. In Pierre Loisele, *Like Weeds in a Garden*, The Dominion. [http://www.dominionpaper.ca/original\\_peoples/2006/10/12/like\\_weeds.html](http://www.dominionpaper.ca/original_peoples/2006/10/12/like_weeds.html)

### ***Experiencing Aboriginal Arts***

Finally, we would like to make one more observation. Although we feel our approach to understanding Aboriginal arts is useful, we have acknowledged its limitations.

Obviously, even with a larger understanding, different persons in different locations will have different aesthetic impressions of a specific artwork in the moment that they experience it. This is part of the marvel and mystery that surrounds art. It can move each of us individually in profound, even disturbing ways and we still might not understand why.

Aboriginal arts are all around us - in theatres, galleries, dance studios, books and across media from film, television and video to the internet - with its various forms of social networking - to new media/technology experiments.

And you will also find them in friendship centres, at outdoor festivals, on reservations, in Aboriginal museums, at pow wows and in Aboriginal cultural centres. A critical way to enrich anyone's understanding of Aboriginal arts is to go out and experience them!

# ABORIGINAL WORLDVIEW



*Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* by Rebecca Belmore. Photographer: Sarah Ciurysek.

*My heart is beating like a small drum, and I hope that you mother earth can feel it. Someday I will speak to you in my language. I have watched my grandmother live very close to you, my mother the same. I have watched my grandmother show respect for all that you have given her... Although I went away and left a certain kind of closeness to you, I have gone in a kind of circle. I think I am coming back to understanding where I come from...*

(Rebecca Belmore, 2008)<sup>6</sup>

## ***What is Aboriginal Worldview?***

The first perspective that helps to understand Aboriginal arts in Canada is considering Aboriginal worldview. An Aboriginal worldview was traditionally passed from generation to generation orally. Those traditions continue to the present day. In addition, some writers are now developing this topic in print. More and more authors are joining this dialogue. Generally, they write in other fields, not directly concerning the arts.

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<sup>6</sup> Words spoken during the performance art piece '*Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan*' which took place on a mountain near Banff, Alberta.

In Canada, some of the key voices are found in education - Marie Battiste and Anne Poonwassie - or writing about epistemology - Willie Ermine. In the field of Aboriginal justice, there is Rupert Ross and in mental health, there is Cindy Blackstock. Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips contribute as art historians, Cyndy Baskin in the field of social work.

Elders are an important presence as they often give wise advice on questions of Aboriginal worldview and protocols. Many Aboriginal arts organizations have elders involved in their governance - on boards, as official advisors, in residence.

It is important to note the critical role of Aboriginal knowledge keepers. We have included words spoken by Tom Hill, Tomson Highway, Jeannette Armstrong, Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Jean Sioui. We have quoted artists who, while not writing extensively about worldview, speak of it in relation to their work. These contributors are Rebecca Belmore, Jane Ash Poitras, Gerald McMaster, Michelle Laflamme, Teresa Marshall, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Thomas King, Ryan Rice, Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod, Buffy Sainte Marie, Dolorès Contré-Migwans, Bonnie Devine and Deborah Doxtator.

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*There is a sense of urgency when First Nations people gather these days. Our communities are losing their cultural leaders: the Elders, the speakers, the faith-keepers. With them, a bit of knowledge seems to just slip away. This situation cries out for attention from every one of us, Native and non-Native alike.*

Tom Hill<sup>7</sup>

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Worldview “denotes a comprehensive set of opinions, seen as an organic unity and...serves as a framework for generating various dimensions of human perception and experience like knowledge, politics, economics, religion, culture, science and ethics.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Words spoken at *Expressions - National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression*, 2002.  
<http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1288012608459/1288012608461#a6>

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, consulted on January 17 2011.

While it is true that various First Peoples do not all have exactly the same worldviews, there are nevertheless common elements among them. As Marie Battiste (2000) explains:

*A review of available literature reveals that although Indigenous cultures and languages are as diverse as the North American landscape, they share a worldview informed by the common belief that their environment is shaped and created by living forces ...*

Aboriginal culture and art making are influenced by Aboriginal worldview. As Anne Poonwassie (2001), quoting Willie Ermine, puts it:

*World-views emerge from the totality of peoples' social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual perceptions and beliefs. Ermine (1995) defines Aboriginal and Western world-views as "diametric trajectories in the realm of knowledge" (p. 101). He describes Aboriginal world-views as founded on a search for meaning from a metaphysical, implicit, subjective journey for knowledge based on the premises of 'skills that promote personal and social transformation; a vision of social change that leads to harmony with rather than control over the environment; and the attribution of a spiritual dimension to the environment' (p. 102). He contrasts it with the Western world-view of the physical, explicit, scientific and objective journey for knowledge (p. 66).*

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*The difference between Indian people and white people is that one is patriarchal in structure.... In the Cree language, there's no gender. The world isn't divided into that kind of gendered hierarchy.*  
Tomson Highway<sup>9</sup>

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## **The Land**

An integral part of this worldview is an Aboriginal understanding of the land. Many writers and artists trace their creative influences back to the land. As Jane Ash Poitras states:

*Native people live by a mythology deeply rooted in the land, whereas western mythology is based on economics. The spiritual supernatural powers are an evolution from the land. It is the land that sustains Native peoples' needs,*

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Susannah Schmidt, 1998.  
<http://www.playwrights.ca/portfolios/tomsonint.html>

*whereas modern western man exploits the land without being linked to it spiritually (in Ace, 1997).*

The concept of land is not to be taken literally as meaning only the dirt, the earth under our feet. 'Land' is a metaphor for the natural world in so far as it manifests a larger, more spiritual cosmos. Gerald McMaster (2010) clarifies:

*The philosophical foundation for the majority of Aboriginal cultures is based on the land. This idea can be somewhat misleading in its reference, suggesting that 'land' refers to the ground we walk on. Here, the land is a much larger and more complex concept. The idea of land encompasses the land itself - what's beneath it, the sky above and beyond; in other words, the entire universe and what extends beyond it.*

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*The voices of the grandmothers and grandfathers  
compel us as Aboriginal artists to speak of the worth  
of our people and the beauty all around us and to  
banish the profaning of ourselves and to ease the pain.  
We carry the language of the voice of the land and the  
valiance of the people and we shall not be silenced.*

Jeannette Armstrong<sup>10</sup>

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The concept of land is intimately linked to ancestral languages, despite differences among these languages. Michelle Laflamme (2003) explains:

*For First Nations People, the mother tongue is often linked to the land, as Native language groups represent and codify cosmologies based upon traditional relationships with a specific territory. Across Canada, within traditional Native cosmologies, despite the specificities of language groups, the land is represented as an embodiment of the Great Spirit (p. 411).*

Put together as a schema, then, we could understand 'land' in a continuous relationship:

Land ~ Peoples ~ Languages ~ Cultural Practices ~ Art

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<sup>10</sup> Words spoken at *Expressions - National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression*, 2002.  
<http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1288012608459/1288012608461#a6>

In this way, a deeper understanding of the apparently simple concept of land comes back full circle to transformation, which in itself is an integral part of art making. Teresa Marshall suggests:

*Like the land, our drums are alive; whispering secrets, telling stories, stretching, contracting, resonating songs in rhythmic beats from our cores. Living is an art, not separate from life itself as in Western thought. When separating art from life, works become reduced to vacant decorations void of function, distilled of meaning or purpose. The object is dead. Spiritually and scientifically, all matter is alive. All that matters is alive. In Western terms, when something dies it no longer has life, function, purpose or meaning. It is often discarded, forgotten or vaguely remembered. For Indigenous peoples, all things are alive. Nothing dies. All things are in a continuous process of transformation (in Jensen, 1997).*

Of course, this does not mean that all Aboriginal art works are exclusively about the land. Aboriginal painters, for example, do not exclusively paint landscape! Not all Aboriginal theatre is about the earth. Rather using the schema above, an audience member can look for imbedded metaphors, historical clues or indirect references to the central influence of the larger idea of the land as McMaster (2010) suggests it "...the entire universe and what extends beyond it."

On the other hand, there can be dangers in using the 'land lens' exclusively to define Aboriginal peoples and their art practices. Charlotte Townsend-Gault (1998) quotes Marcia Crosby's (1996, p. 23) warning:

*...Marcia Crosby is not alone in pointing out that "land" does not address the lives of urban Indians. She warns that where land and resource disputes between First Nations and Canadian governments are the only situations in which Aboriginal people are perceived as having "authority," and where "the signposts of clearly defined 'difference' are still determined by the conventions of authenticity, origins and tradition," "land" then becomes the measuring stick for Indianness to the exclusion of so much else that it is, finally, impoverishing.*

### **Connectedness**

This sense of 'universe' - of the land containing all things - illuminates the Aboriginal belief in connectedness. Rupert Ross (1996) describes it like this:

*Aboriginal peoples understand what scientists have only recently come to envision, that everything in our world is composed of energy or spirit in a continuous state of transformation or flux and therefore all time, space and events are interconnected (p. 63).*

Connectedness is not just about external perception, about objects, ideas, forces that occur in the physical world. It is also about our internal thoughts and emotions, what we normally imagine as our private world. Existence itself is not something just 'out there' but 'in here' as well. Here is how Willie Ermine (1995) puts it:

*Aboriginal people found a wholeness that permeated inwardness and that also extended into the outer space. Their fundamental insight was that all existence was connected and that the whole enmeshed the being in its inclusiveness. In the Aboriginal mind, therefore, an immanence is present that gives meaning to existence and forms the starting point for Aboriginal epistemology (p. 103).*

For the Western mind, accustomed to thinking in dualities, understanding this sense of 'connectedness = wholeness' is often a leap of faith. It could be seen, in a way, as a question of theology. Connectedness allows Aboriginal people to live comfortably with mystery, memory and magic, all elements often found in art making. Cyndi Baskin (2006) elaborates:

*Eber Hampton (1995) published an article several years ago in the Canadian Journal of Native Education titled "Memory comes before knowledge". For me, this magical, mysterious and completely sensible phrase captures the connections inherent in Aboriginal world views. It helps me to understand so many pieces of the circle that contribute to Aboriginal ways of knowing and seeing the world. It is inclusive of spirit, blood memory, respect, interconnectedness, storytelling, feelings, experiences and guidance. It also reminds me that I do not need to know or understand – in the sense of absolute certainty – everything. It reinforces the sense that it is perfectly acceptable and appropriate to believe that there is much that I am aware of, but that I cannot explain.*

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*I trust my dreams. I dream a lot, and my dreams give me ideas or else help clarify and shape things. I also trust the worldview that I have been given. I am grateful to my mother and my mothers people for that worldview, nêhiyawin, the Cree worldview.*

Cheryl L'Hirondelle<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview on the Indigenous Arts Network.  
[http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/cheryl\\_lhirondelle/interview/](http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/cheryl_lhirondelle/interview/)

Another way that sums up connectedness is the translated-into-English phrase ‘all my relations’, a meaning that is found in many Aboriginal languages. This expression is frequently spoken at public events where it can be used as a blessing. Thomas King (1990) elaborates its meaning:

*“All my relations” is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship that we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship extending to the animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, “all my relations” is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner... (p. ix).*

Ryan Rice (2008) suggests that this sense of being connected is made stronger by the fact, that despite many historical impediments, Aboriginal peoples have survived to the present day:

*For the ‘real people’ or ‘original people’, common translations for Indigenous people in many Indigenous languages of Turtle Island (North America), the ideology of ‘all my relations’ and ‘we are all related’ acts as an anthem that identifies our relationship with the natural world - our home, native land - and with each other. It is a concept reinforced by survivance (we are still here), and by sustainability, which carries forth notions of respect, unity and harmony for all.*

## **Creation Stories**

Aboriginal creation stories both derive from and sustain Aboriginal worldview. How the earth began, who or what is nature, how we got here, why are we here - all this and more make up a creation story. Aboriginal creation stories differ radically from Western versions of creation. Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips (1998) explain:

*Aboriginal oral traditions and Western scholarship account differently for the origin of the world and the human presence in it. Stories of creation are as various as the people of North America, although those of neighbouring peoples often share common features. They are ‘histories’ in the sense that they are chronological, eventful narratives that explain the origins of present realities, but they are posited on a different notion of authority, that of inherited, transmitted truth that has force of moral explanation, rather than of scientifically verifiable fact that has no moral force (p. 4).*

Thomas King (2003) compares Genesis and an Aboriginal creation story:

*A theologian might argue that these two creation stories are essentially the same. Each tells about the creation of the world and the appearance of human beings. But a storyteller would tell you that these two stories are quite different, for...the*

*elements in Genesis create a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies...that celebrate law, order, and good government, while in our Native story, the universe is governed by a series of co-operations...that celebrate equality and balance (p. 23-24).*

### **Oral and Visual Pictures**

For persons accustomed to reading and writing every day, the idea of an oral tradition can easily - and mistakenly - be understood as an inferior means of communication. In fact, orality has developed its particular methods, not just of communicating, but orally archiving its own knowledge. As Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod (2008) state:

*Oral traditions are distinct ways of knowing and the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation. Oral traditions form the foundation of Aboriginal societies, connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory. To understand oral tradition as a form of knowledge shaping the work of Aboriginal artists and authors, for example, one listens to the oral narratives in order to know how their voices might be heard within the communities they come from as well as the communities in which they are received.*

Obviously, oral traditions are kept alive using the spoken word. It is critical to see that spoken word in the context of Aboriginal languages, whether spoken today or not, as they relate to cultural practices. Buffy Sainte Marie<sup>12</sup> explains:

*Language and culture cannot be separated. Language is vital to understanding our unique cultural perspectives. Language is a tool that is used to explore and experience our cultures and the perspectives that are embedded in our cultures.*

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*We still have elders. It's important to go see them, talk to them, feel the spirit of the elders, of the ancestors . . . It's important to know about our culture before doing anything. That doesn't mean that what we create will be a traditional object. What it will be is an object that breathes life...*

*Jean Sioui<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Citation from <http://thinkexist.com/quotation/language-and-culture-cannot-be-separated-language/1480989.html>

<sup>13</sup> Interview with France Trépanier in Wendake, QC on March 17 2010.

Aboriginal elders explain that oral tradition was key to keeping cultural practices alive during the worst of conditions. If knowledge had been written down, it could have been easier to destroy! Dolorès Contré-Migwans (2008) explains this power of orality in terms of spoken word and gesture:

*In Aboriginal culture, what is oral continues to...live on, to a certain extent, because by definition orality requires an exchange with the world, an interrelation and interaction. The power of oral tradition is being able to breathe new life into the original act by investing the narrative with an individual's feelings and experience. What was seemingly dead or limited is revived through our life-force and comes alive through revisited words and actions (p. 91).*

In addition to oral tradition, Aboriginal peoples have communicated (and still do) through complex combinations of picture writings, sometimes in the form of pictographs. Occasionally, ancient picture writings emerge within mainstream Canadian society. As Bonnie Devine (2007) reminds us:

*Among the great artists of Canada, the Algonkian (Anishnabe) makers of Muzzinobikoan (drawings) must surely have a place. Their ancient and beautiful iconography dawned upon the national consciousness in the early 1950s when the petroglyphs at Peterborough Ontario were discovered and news of a magnificent pictorial record was reported in newspapers across the country (p.13).*

Picture writings are found on everyday items. These 'writings' do not communicate in the same way that we commonly understand as reading or translating a language. Deborah Doxtator (1996) elaborates:

*Like picture writing on utilitarian objects, basketry, pottery, clothing, or in wampum belts or pictographs, these objects as metaphors are not transcriptions of word for word linear sentences but of concepts and processes. Each symbol does not correspond to an English phoneme which when connected to others form a word and sentence which explicate a meaning. Like the words in our languages they emphasize movement, action, and mean not one thing but several. A metaphor presents knowledge as an 'instant fusion', not as a narrated argument of one opinion. It involves the iconic flash of understanding of an idea using both one's conscious or 'rational' and unconscious or intuitive mind simultaneously (p. 6).*

# CANADA'S COLONIAL HISTORY



*I once heard an elder say that the great crime in this land was not that the natives had their language and culture beaten out of them in boarding schools - the great crime was that the people who came here did not adopt the culture of the land.*  
(Mike MacDonald)<sup>14</sup>

*Autoportrait by Zacharie Vincent 'Tehariolin'.*

The second perspective that sheds meaning on Aboriginal arts today is remembering Canada's colonial history in relation to its original inhabitants. A key figure who wrote about this in Canada was Olive Patricia Dickason. She worked extensively to create a record of Aboriginal peoples, both before and after contact.

Of course, this is a large field that has been written about over the decades. Another example in Canada, is archaeologist Bruce G. Trigger and in Quebec, historian Denys Delâge. In the U.S., James Axtell has written a number of books on Aboriginal history

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<sup>14</sup> In Charlotte Townsend-Gault, 1998.

and Jacqueline Shea Murphy has described the history of Aboriginal dance as a form of resistance to colonialism. Other commentators include Mike McDonald, Doreen Jensen, Jean Goodwill and Norman Sluman, Alfred Young Man, Tom Hill, Tom Flanagan, Lee-Ann Martin, Samian and Taiaiake Alfred. We have included words spoken by Doreen Jensen and Candice Hopkins.

Although they may not have lived through the most horrendous injustices, a large number of artists make reference to the importance of this history as an influence on language and culture. Often, this historical knowledge has a direct connection to identity and art practice. As Doreen Jensen<sup>15</sup> states:

*Canada is an image that hasn't emerged yet. Because this country hasn't recognized its First Nations, its whole foundation is shaking. If Canada is to emerge as a nation with a cultural identity and purpose, we have to accept First Nations art.*

Even a cursory look at colonial history reveals repeated attempts to repress Aboriginal arts and cultural practices. It is critical to see Aboriginal arts in the light of this history, a history that is both painful yet essential for non-Aboriginals to explore and comprehend. As Jean Goodwill and Norman Sluman (1984) indicate:

*The average Canadian can have no idea of the merciless and prolonged pressures brought to bear upon Indian people to allow themselves to be legislated out of existence.*

### **Contact with Europeans**

Aboriginal culture, more accurately cultures, were part of everyday life for Aboriginal peoples long before the arrival of Europeans. Some scholars date this period to 12,000 years ago.<sup>16</sup> Obviously we do not have photos, recordings or written documents from those times but the archaeological evidence indicates some activities that today we would call 'art practices'.

The details of pre-contact Aboriginal life are not completely filled out. Olive Patricia Dickason (2002) gives an impression:

*At the time of the first known European contact with North America, that of the Norse in about A.D. 1000, by far the majority of Canada's original peoples were hunters and gatherers, as could be expected from the country's northern location. This way of life, based on regular patterns that had evolved over thousands of years, grew out of an intimate knowledge of resources and the best*

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15 In the film *Hands of History* by Loretta Todd Studio D, National Film Board of Canada, 1994.

16 Canadian Encyclopedia.

*way of exploiting them. Anthropologist Robin Ridington has made the point that their technology consisted of knowledge rather than tools.*

*All of these peoples, whether mobile or sedentary, lived within cultural frameworks that met social and individual needs by emphasizing the group as well as the self...The social organization of Amerindians, like their languages, displayed a wider variety than was the case in Europe (p. 6).*

However there is a tendency to dismiss this history as 'prehistoric' as if 'real' Aboriginal cultural activity only begins with European contact. As Berlo and Phillips (1998) warn:

*Western scholars characteristically divide their historical narratives into two large epochs predating and following European contact. This fundamentally Eurocentric periodization is largely determined by the new kinds of record-keeping made available; post-contact history can make use of written texts, depictions, photographs and films, while pre-contact history usually relies on archeological evidence and the Aboriginal oral traditions themselves. It is clear from these latter sources, however, that during the thousands of years that preceded the arrival of Europeans the cultures of indigenous peoples changed and adapted to new features of the environment...The advent of the Europeans was the most violent and traumatic of the cross-cultural encounters and the most challenging to existing Aboriginal concepts and styles of art. The notion of 'prehistoric' is misleading, because it implies a clear dividing line between eras of 'history' and 'before history' and appears to deny the momentous changes and developments that occurred prior to 1492 (p. 4).*

On the other hand, Dickason (2002) suggests that just making this important distinction - pre-historic vs. pre-contact - may not be fruitful enough. Recognizing and then 'translating' oral traditions into contemporary, Western academia has its own limitations. Whether ignoring by intention or ignoring by lack of methodology, Aboriginal peoples are still shuffled out of history. She explains it this way:

*History, for its part, has been written as a document-bound discipline. If something was not written, preferably in an official document, it was not historical. Thus were pre-literate societies excluded from history and labelled prehistoric, or perhaps proto-historic. The best they could hope for was to become historic by extension, when they came into contact with literate societies. In other words, Canada's history began with the arrival of Europeans...Because they were oral, rather than literate, peoples (even those who did possess a form of writing had not developed it into a widely shared form of communication), reconstructing their pre-contact history in the Western sense of the term is a daunting task. Canadian historians have, in the past, found it much easier to ignore the earlier period; hence the blinkered view of Canada as a 'young' country (p. 11).*

This 'ignoring' of earlier Aboriginal histories simply because of their oral tradition is part of the colonial worldview that equates 'oral' with 'pre-literate' and therefore lesser. The assumption, that still continues to this day, is that pre-literate societies are still in development to become literate ones. Alfred Young Man (1991) explains:

*No credence was given to the notion that in the preceding centuries North American Indians were viable social, political, and economic social organisms in their own right with artistic and cultural paradigms to match. After all, it was presumed, what kind of history or social systems could these pre-literate societies build without written languages?*

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*I would like to remind you of the Art that the Europeans found when they arrived in our country. They found Art everywhere. In hundreds of flourishing, vital cultures, Art was fully integrated with daily life. They saw dwellings painted with abstract Art that was to inspire generations of European painters. Ceremonial robes were intricately woven Art that heralded the weavers' identity and privilege in the community. Utilitarian objects, including food vessels, storage containers, and clothing, were powerfully formed and decorated with the finest, most significant Art. Each nation had its theatre, music, and choreography. The first Europeans found hundreds of languages in use - not dialects but languages. And in every language, our Artists created philosophical argument and sacred ceremony, political discourse, fiction, and poetry.*

Doreen Jensen<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Words spoken at the opening of *INDIGENA: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years*. Museum of Civilization in Hull, QC, 1992.

From the beginning of European contact, dehumanizing treatment of Aboriginal peoples was the norm. History is filled with examples of Aboriginal cultural practices that were suppressed. This attitude was seen as common sense. Jacqueline Shea Murphy (2007) explains how Aboriginal dance transgressed this 'common sense' understanding:

*Dance was at the core of this invented, irreconcilably different, Indian identity...Indigenous dance practices embodied ideologies counter to those the governments were corporeally enforcing. Dance practices and gatherings threatened assimilation policies based on classroom education and literacy, as they affirmed the importance of history told not in writing or even in words, but rather bodily. Praying through bodily movement and ritual practice rather than through sitting, reading, and believing threatened colonizers' notions of how spirituality is manifested. Ceremonies that included elaborate feasts and gift-giving threatened ideologies of private property and individual ownership, definitions of what constitutes work and what productive activity might include, and the value of productivity itself. They were seen as wasteful of practitioners' physical energy and time, and thus as excessive expenditures of bodily labour...In short, the federal governments of North America sensed and feared the importance of Indian dance as a social, political and ideological agent, and the threats it posed (p. 31).*

As Tom Hill (2002) states, much of this history still needs to be fleshed out:

*The history of these (Aboriginal) arts, from prehistoric times to the present, is yet to be written...*

### **Neo-colonialism**

In conversations about Aboriginal issues, a certain assumption is frequently overheard. 'The issues that arose from colonialism are in the past - no one thinks like that anymore.' Yet Tom Flanagan (2000) states:

*European civilization was several thousand years more advanced than the aboriginal cultures of North America, both in technology and in social organizations. Owing to this tremendous gap in civilization, the European colonization of North America was inevitable and, if we accept the philosophical analysis of John Locke and Emer de Vattel, justifiable (p. 7).*

This is not a quote from the distant past; it was written in 2000. To be sure, not all Canadians would agree with his point. Still, even if Flanagan's ideas are the ideas of a minority, it is still a strong, prevalent attitude in the Canadian body politic. Flanagan and his colleagues from 'the Calgary School'<sup>18</sup> have helped to formulate policies for the Reform Party and the Conservative Party.

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<sup>18</sup> The Calgary School refers to a group of like-minded academics from the University of Calgary's political science and history departments.

Lee-Ann Martin (1995) points to how this type of contemporary, neo-colonial attitude is still woven into Canada's cultural institutions:

*Over the past twenty years, aboriginal artists have developed a history of activism shaped by strategies of self-determination as identified and initiated by the artists themselves on a collective basis. Many of the early alliances must be considered directly in relation to the paternalistic domination of individual artistic production by the federal government, through programs of the Department of Indian Affairs. It is not my concern to focus on early government efforts to define, control and promote Indian art. I do suggest, however, that the unique historical relationship between the government of Canada and the original inhabitants has affected aboriginal activism and contributes to the racist attitudes and exclusionary practices that pervade all levels of cultural institutions to this day.*

Martin's commentary does not suggest that we still live in the colonial period of 200 or 300 years ago. Obviously, attitudes continue to change due to Aboriginal peoples' insistence on their rightful place in Canadian society. Martin is suggesting that these changes are happening in the present day continuation of that past and therefore are still contextualized by Canada's colonial history.

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*I think that there is still much work to be done in writing the various facets of the history of contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada. There is not yet a written history of SCANA, a concise history of the short life of the Indian Group of Seven and how they made space for Aboriginal art that had yet to find a place in mainstream art institutions, the role of the Indians of Canada pavilion at Expo '67 and how this would go on to shape the face of Native contemporary art for generations to come.*

Candice Hopkins<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> E-mail to France Trépanier on September 12 2010.

There are fundamental questions about Canadian history that many citizens are not aware of or if they are, they simply ignore them. Samian<sup>20</sup> speaks of this lack of remembering:

*In Quebec, we have a national slogan: Je me souviens. But really, what do we remember in Quebec? In Quebec we forget some of the biggest parts of our own history. How was Quebec and Canada founded? What ever happened to the people who originally lived here?...So much about our history has been hidden or erased, and so young people never learn about the first peoples. These are all questions that—incredibly—aren't well answered in our schoolbooks. The government is also directly responsible for the lack of knowledge about our history, because Indigenous culture and history is not a priority, and not taught seriously within the public school curriculum.*

Moreover, history sometimes appears static; yet it is always moving. So things stay the same and they change, both at the same time. Or they shift and adapt to current times, yet maintain the same values - the essence of neo-colonialism. Taiiake Alfred (1999) elaborates:

*Without a good understanding of history, it is difficult to grasp how intense the European effort to destroy indigenous nations has been, how strongly Native people have resisted, and how much we have recently recovered. Not to recognize that the ongoing crisis of our communities is fuelled by continuing efforts to prevent us from using the power of our traditional teachings is to be blind to the state's persistent intent to maintain the colonial oppression of the first nations of this land (p. 1).*

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20 Interview with Stefan Christoff, *Giving Algonquins a Good Rap*, The Dominion. <http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/3240>

# ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE



Inuvialuit Drummers and Dancers, Inuvik. Photographer: Chris Randle.

*My hope is that the work that so many of our people are engaged in now, to restore some of these practices, to incorporate our knowledge and to recover the knowledge and philosophy and the ethics in a contemporary life way that makes sense and restores the stewardship, restores the community, restores the bonding that we have with our land that has been severed for many years.*

(Jeannette Armstrong)<sup>21</sup>

The third perspective to understanding Aboriginal arts is recognizing the significance of Aboriginal knowledge. In Canada, Aboriginal knowledge has been kept alive through the difficult conditions of a near cultural genocide. Today it is used as an essential and comprehensive response to the negative consequences of colonialism.

Aboriginal knowledge is a vast field which touches on all aspects of being human - from creation stories to medicine to our relationship with nature to sexuality to creativity to

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<sup>21</sup> Words spoken in the video, *A Vision Manifesting - Native Perspectives on Sustainability*, 2010.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ae2AkJEU0x0>

food. This knowledge, going back millennia, informs principles of health, healing, justice, education, ecology, social work and many others.

Some important authors are Taiaiake Alfred on Indigenous governance, Gregory Cajete in science, Marlene Brant Castellano in education and Greg Young-Ing on the protection of Traditional Knowledge (TK). Other contributors are Jeannette Armstrong, Greg Staats, Nicole Obomsawin, Cathi Charles Wherry, Zacharius Kunuk, Yves Sioui Durand, Gerald McMaster, Anne Poonwassie and Rebecca Tsosie. We have included words spoken by Duke Redbird and Irene Betsy.

Within the art world, Aboriginal knowledge is discussed in the context of the utilization and protection of Traditional Knowledge present in certain art works. The issues that are raised pertain to cultural appropriation, who can use what image or sound, permissions or protocols that must be followed and TK as a sort of 'Aboriginal copyright'.

### ***What is in a Name?***

Knowledge has been passed orally from generation to generation, all over the world, throughout the millennia of humankind. It is only relatively recently that other methods have been used (writing, printing, photography, screen culture, etc.).

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*In the Native community, there is a tradition of finding people who've had experience with life — with “many winters,” as we call it. We assume they have wisdom because wisdom comes from the experience of engaging your life, your environment and your world for a very long time.*

Duke Redbird<sup>22</sup>

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In Aboriginal societies this knowledge has been mostly passed from elders to the next generation and ultimately to the youth. Marlene Brant Castellano (2000) describes:

*The knowledge valued in aboriginal societies derives from multiple sources, including traditional teachings, empirical observations, and revelation. These*

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Sketch Magazine, Spring 2009.

[http://www.ocadu.ca/Assets/pdf\\_media/ocad/about/news\\_events/Sketch\\_Spring09.pdf](http://www.ocadu.ca/Assets/pdf_media/ocad/about/news_events/Sketch_Spring09.pdf)

*categories overlap and interact with one another, but they are useful for examining the contours of aboriginal knowledge.*

*Traditional knowledge has been handed down more or less intact from previous generations. With variations from nation to nation, it tells of the creation of the world and the origin of clans in encounters between ancestors and spirits in the form of animals; it records genealogies and ancestral rights to territory; and it memorizes battles, boundaries, and treaties and instils attitudes of wariness or trust towards neighbouring nations. Through heroic and cautionary tales, it reinforces values and beliefs; these in turn provide the substructure for civil society. In some of its forms, it passes on technologies refined over generations. In most aboriginal societies the wisdom of elder generations is highly regarded and elders are assigned major responsibility for teaching the young (p. 23)*

Knowledge is named differently in different contexts. For example, Aboriginal scholars and others have attempted to clarify the contrast between Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge. Greg Young-Ing (2006) proposes a useful distinction:

*Traditional Knowledge (TK)... the term encompasses a broad range of Indigenous knowledge including ancient stories, songs and dances; traditional architecture and agricultural; biodiversity-related and medicinal, herbal and plant knowledge; ancient motifs, crests and other artistic designs; various artistic mediums, styles, forms and techniques; spiritual and religious institutions and their symbols; and various other forms of Indigenous knowledge.*

*Three important points on TK:*

1) *Not all Traditional Knowledge is originated from Indigenous Peoples. Other forms of knowledge such as Ancient Chinese Medicine, Caribbean Steel Drum making and music, ancient Belgium weaving and lace-making techniques, and ancient Swiss yodelling have been considered to be forms of Traditional Knowledge. It is the case, however, that well over ninety-five percent of Traditional Knowledge is derived from Indigenous Peoples.*

2) *The term 'Traditional Knowledge' differs from the term 'Indigenous Knowledge' in that it does not include contemporary Indigenous knowledge and knowledge developed from a combination of traditional and contemporary knowledge. The two terms are, however, sometimes used interchangeably. Certain voices in the discourse prefer the term 'Indigenous Knowledge' because 'Traditional Knowledge' can be interpreted as implying that 'Indigenous Knowledge' is static, does not evolve and adapt (i.e., Henderson, 2002). However, 'Traditional Knowledge' is the term used in most national discourses and virtually all the international forums.*

3) *Although Traditional Knowledge can have fundamental characteristics that differ from European-based intellectual property, Traditional Knowledge IS Intellectual Property, and is treated as such within the Intellectual Property Rights System (p. 34).*

For this review, we have chosen to use the term 'Aboriginal Knowledge', because we wanted to circumscribe the notion of knowledge historically derived from the specific territory we now call Canada, not the world, as the term 'Indigenous' generally implies. And also, as Young-Ing clarifies, we are not reviewing 'Traditional Knowledge' from any cultures other than Aboriginal ones.

### ***Aboriginal Knowledge Today***

As Young-Ing hints at, knowledge from the past is often seen as static, not adaptable and of little use in a Western, technology-laden society. However as both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people question certain aspects of contemporary Western society, understanding Aboriginal knowledge is an illuminating alternative. Greg Staats states:

*In today's world of advanced technology, change is left to science and progress measured by technology. Yet we cannot expect to benefit by this process alone, and it is up to us to change and advance through our lives. As the Native traditional teachings of the Four Directions, Medicine Wheel tell us, there is in all of this a great potential. We are all given a gift to share with others and it is up to us to discover and nurture that gift throughout our lives (in Young Man, 1991).*

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*Traditional knowledge is local knowledge, collective knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, an informal knowledge based on our relationship with the land, with the environment, with one another. A dynamic, evolving, changing and sustained relationship of conservation practices and innovations.*

Irene Betsy<sup>23</sup>

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For Aboriginal peoples, their heritage is not just a means of cultural survival, but as well, it propels them forward into a different future. Nicole Obomsawin (2002) suggests:

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23 Words transcribed by Dolorès Contré-Migwans, 2008.

*Aboriginal heritage is based on spiritual heritage passed on by oral tradition. It's what defines us and has allowed us to survive as a culture. Observing, listening, remembering and transmitting are the foundations of Aboriginal education . . . The Aboriginal cultural identification movement has generated excitement and many nations have instituted organizations devoted to safeguarding and promoting language and culture, while artists and creators are increasingly present on every stage (p. 67-68).*

An important part of Aboriginal Knowledge is passing on and maintaining cultural protocols. On one level, they can be seen as codified communications that facilitate respect and clarity. More than that, protocols act to formalize, in a sense to 'institutionalize' cultural activity. Cathy Charles Wherry (2006) elaborates:

*Aboriginal people have always maintained 'cultural industries' and 'cultural institutions', ensuring they would survive in some form...Although these institutions often exist without permanent physical facilities, they are based on organized, long-established protocols, relationships and shared understandings that are essential to the foundations of the cultures they are part of. They are directed by culture carriers, artists, teachers and other community leaders, and the young energetic ones they can trust (also known as 'volunteers' and less often as paid 'staff'). Many of these infrastructures and processes exist outside of the usual frame of reference maintained by the bodies that define and deliver resources and support to arts and culture presentation venues (p. 3).*

### **Aboriginal Identity**

Aboriginal knowledge helps to codify and support various ways of looking at Aboriginal identity. Identity is linked to history, but it is also expressed through language. Zacharias Kunuk explains why he makes his films in Inuktitut:

*That's why I choose to film them in Inuktitut. When in front of the camera, they speak. Our history is oral: nothing was ever written down for four thousand years, and we have been expressing ourselves in English for a mere sixty years. Our productions in Inuktitut let us finally depict ourselves as we are. We've had enough of Hollywood actors playing the roles of Inuit on our land—they don't reflect who or what we are. Our films are an affirmation of our identity. We get our entire community involved, both young and old (in Godrèche, 2008).*

Of course, identity is expressed linguistically and culturally by all peoples. But some have had the privilege and opportunity for full expression more than others. Identity also goes deeper to Aboriginal worldview and values. Identity is fundamentally linked to questions of ethics. Yves Sioui Durand explains:

*To be or not to be? That's the question before all Aboriginal peoples of the Earth. Will we escape hyper-consumerism? Our challenge is the survival of our identity:*

*opening up new areas of expression to defy the commercialization of our cultures...(in Lacombe, 2010).*

On the other hand, when a current Aboriginal identity is constructed in a deliberate way, it influences artistic practices in new ways. It is not only a matter of expressing knowledge through historic cultural forms but rather, re-imagining that knowledge in a contemporary life, specifically an Aboriginal life that has not been formed on the reservation. Gerald McMaster (2005) suggests a new term, 'post-reservation':

*Since World War II, the resurgence in both Canada and the United States of a self-conscious aboriginality or indigenoussness has had enormous impact on contemporary art practice. In particular, the artistic practice - the work - of the artist has played a significant role in articulating a modern identity...The indigenous contemporary artist is now viewed as a complex individual who has matured within highly charged social, historical, and political frameworks, inside and outside of tribal structures...These emerging artists, with their critique of modernity, are a phenomenon of a period that runs parallel with the so-called postmodern, but their attitudes and artistic practices, I would argue, should be characterized instead as a condition of the post-reservation.*

### **Self-Governance and Cultural Sovereignty**

For the last few decades, Canada has witnessed an increasing concern among Aboriginal peoples - the inherent right to self-government. This 'right' pre-dates contact with Europeans. Aboriginal knowledge has kept it alive for centuries and it has become a kind of sine qua non in current negotiations. Anne Poonwassie (2001) states:

*Despite overwhelming social, political, economic, and cultural domination and continual interference from Canadian governments and institutions, Aboriginal peoples have managed to maintain core aspects of their cultures and begin the process of reclaiming autonomy and self-government.*

What appears to many non-Aboriginal Canadians as protests, barricades and special 'race-based' treatment is evident to Aboriginal peoples as just common sense. Since they were here long before the first white colonists; since they have always governed themselves; since Canada has signed the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other documents, notably the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2010), then it follows that Aboriginal people have the right to self-government. The question, in negotiation with non-Aboriginal governments is - what does that actually mean? Taiaiake Alfred (2002) responds:

*Indigenous people have successfully engaged Western society in the first stages of governance. The movement... is founded on an ideology of indigenous nationalism and a rejection of the models of government rooted in European cultural values. Many communities have almost disentangled themselves from paternalistic state controls in administering institutions within jurisdictions that are*

*important to them. Many more are currently engaged in substantial negotiations over land and governance, hoped and believed to lead to significantly greater control over their own lives and futures. There is great wisdom coded in the languages and cultures of all indigenous peoples...this is knowledge that can provide answers to compelling questions, if respected and rescued from its status as cultural artifact. There is also a great potential for resolving many of our seemingly intractable problems by bringing traditional ideas and values back to life (p. 460).*

Alfred not only recognizes the rejection of European values in governing Aboriginal peoples, but he hints at some elements that would illustrate Aboriginal self-governance if it were to work well. One of these elements is the complex idea of cultural sovereignty. Rebecca Tsosie (2002) explains why it is critical:

*The concept of cultural sovereignty seeks to revitalize and affirm the values and norms embedded within Native belief systems...through the exercise of sovereignty, Native nations can exert control over the intangible aspects of culture as well as the tangible aspects of culture, such as land and natural resources. Both are necessary for the continued survival of Indian nations. (p. 306).*

Further, Gerald McMaster elaborates cultural sovereignty by linking it to the importance of language, cultural expression and the construction of identity and community. Aboriginal knowledge is sometimes expressed using art. In this way, artists can contribute to keeping alive inherent forms of self-government. As McMaster (2005) says:

*During the reservation period, from the late eighteenth to the mid twentieth century, certain cultural expressions flourished while others suffered a gradual decline because of disuse or outright prohibition. In the late nineteenth century, ceremonies such as the Sun Dance and the potlatch were effectively outlawed. The post-reservation period, however, brought a remarkable shift in aboriginal people's resistance to and liberation from a system of government control. As a consequence, aboriginal people across Canada fought to regain long-denied rights and freedoms.*

*Aboriginal people help constitute themselves in the present by the pen and through use of language. Land claims, self-determination, and self-government are strongly articulated. Reclaiming, as an act, sets up new relations with those who illegally expropriated land from aboriginal people. But it also determines certain parameters for tribes regarding inclusion of their own members: the return of traditional forms of kinship identification; the repatriation of sacred and sensitive objects from museums and restoration of ceremonial use; the reintroduction of aboriginal language; and the social affirmation of being with those who share similar attitudes, beliefs and values.*

# WESTERN ART LENS



*The Rez Sisters* by Tomson Highway, Centre for Indigenous Theatre. Photographer: Andrew Moro.

*Barre Toelken...at the University of Oregon, tells a story about a northern California Indian basket-maker, Mrs. Matt, who was hired to teach basket making at his university. After three weeks, her students complained that all they had done was to sing songs. When, they asked, were they going to learn to make baskets? Mrs. Matt, somewhat startled, replied that they were learning to make baskets, that the process starts with songs that are sung so as not to insult the plants when the materials for the baskets are picked. So they learned the songs and went to pick the grasses and plants to make their baskets. Upon their return to the classroom, the students were dismayed when Mrs. Matt began to teach them new songs, those that must be sung as you soften the materials in your mouth before you start to weave. The students protested again, but Mrs. Matt patiently explained, "You're missing the point. A basket is a song made visible." (Richard W. Hill Sr.)<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> In Tom Hill, p.133, 1994.

The fourth perspective that assists in understanding Aboriginal arts is looking through the Western art lens. The Western arts lens is not a straightforward instrument that one can look through and clarify things in a simplistic way. It is better seen as a deconstructive methodology that can identify the many ways in which Western art history both glorifies European artists and their art forms and, at the same time, denigrates or ignores those art practices from other peoples in the world.

We are aware that some Aboriginal artists prefer the term 'European' to 'Western'. For example, Ian Reid states that he is "uncomfortable with the phrase 'Western art' when used in the context of a discourse on Aboriginal arts."<sup>25</sup> We acknowledge and respect this discomfort.

And furthermore, we recognize that both terms have their limitations. Rinaldo Walcott (2011) tries to bridge these inadequacies by using the term, 'Euro-Western' which he describes in this way:

*I am using the term "Euro-Western" to signal the ethno-centred organization of what we have come to call the West. It is a term meant not only to signal Europe but also those satellite settler colonies like the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand who understand themselves to be Euro-Western in founding and organization (p. 349).*

We understand his description as overlapping with the more common term 'Western'. We have chosen to use this term, 'Western' because we feel it also describes a series of attitudes - that constitute a worldview - that while they are European in origin, are also prevalent in North America, as well as in other places throughout the world.

Colonial history has constructed a way of seeing and understanding that privileges the assumptions, beliefs, philosophies, attitudes and logic of the Western world. It is a complex, potent mix of history, anthropology and politics. It has ramifications for art history and art discourse.

A seminal text is Edward Saïd's, *Orientalism* (1978). While not writing about Aboriginal peoples per se, he suggested that 'Orientalist' scholarship continues to be inextricably tied to the societies that produced it and therefore illegitimate in its ethnocentric assumptions. Scholars, many of them of colour, have elaborated and detailed his ideas, expanding them into the field of postcolonial studies.

Aboriginal writers, in general, are suspicious of the term 'postcolonial' preferring to see the condition of Aboriginal peoples in the current reality as 'neo-colonial'. Still, they do acknowledge the basic critique implied by contesting the Western lens.

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<sup>25</sup> E-mail to France Trépanier on May 9, 2011.

Some commentators are Richard W. Hill Sr., Rinaldo Walcott, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, Anne Whitelaw, Sylvie Paré, Richard West Jr., Barry Ace, Rasheed Araeen, Homi Bhabha, Nancy Marie Mithlo, Helen Hoy, Lee-Ann Martin, Margaret Dubin, Michelle Laflamme, Nestor Garcia Canclini, Joyce M. Szabo and Loretta Todd. We have included words spoken by Norman Vorano.

## **Anthropology**

After more than five hundred years of colonialism, the cultures that dominate the world are mostly Western in their history. This is slowly changing as voices from around the planet begin to assert themselves beyond their regional cultural roots. A couple of obvious examples are Afro-Cuban music and Bollywood.

Indigenous peoples everywhere are part of this movement, making their specific cultures heard beyond the local. But to do so, they have to overcome the overwhelming authority of the Western lens - a way of ordering and understanding the world, that is at once pervasive and, at the same time, almost invisible. This lens is seen as a 'common sense' way of codifying the world and the peoples who live in it. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999) traces the roots of this attitude as it relates to Aboriginal peoples:

*Authors cannot help but invest in their work their own preconceptions and attitudes. This is undeniably true in the literary depictions of the inhabitants of the 'New World' sent back to Europe by early explorers. They took back stories of wild savages that fit neatly into the preconceived notions the Europeans had of what a savage would be...The term savage or 'sauvage' was most often used to describe the native populations (that) the English and French settlers initially met. Infidel, heathen, and barbarian were also used...(p. 2).*

These anthropological preconceptions play out even to our present day, despite protestations that they exist only in the past. Kilpatrick continues:

*The history and cultures of Native Americans have been miscommunicated in films, and the distortions have been accepted as truth, with sometimes disastrous results (p. 36).*

On the other hand, some anthropologists and museum curators have identified the historical flaws in their understanding of Aboriginal peoples. There is literature which attempts to reform the nature of anthropology - collecting, curating and displaying Aboriginal objects/performances. Anne Whitelaw (2006) identifies some of the assumptions associated with these historical flaws:

*Since at least the mid-1980s, there has been a wealth of literature on the presentation of Aboriginal objects in the museum. Much of this literature has come from cultural anthropologists who have correctly argued that the presentation of Aboriginal objects in most institutions has relied on antiquated conceptions of the authenticity of pre-contact indigenous cultures, and the*

*impossibility or undesirability of any link between this idealized, "authentic" past and the present. Representative of this literature is James Clifford's (1987) discussion of the "salvage paradigm" as a means of capturing the belief at the turn of the twentieth century that the vestiges of pre-contact "primitive" societies needed to be preserved as artifacts of the most authentic period of non-Western cultures existence.*

*Anthropologists in particular were concerned with collecting as many and as varied specimens from such cultures before the inevitable assimilation with European culture became too evident. While there was little desire to ensure the survival of the human members of such cultures, great care was taken to safeguard the more elaborate and significant objects these members produced.*

The legacy of anthropological collecting is still with us today. The results are frequently tragic, sometimes horrific. Sylvie Paré (2006) recounts a particularly disquieting experience:

*In 1999, the Royal Ontario Museum announced, after years of negotiations, that it would be returning the bones of our distant ancestors that had been taken from a cemetery on Georgian Bay to us, so we could commit them to the earth. We were invited to participate in the repatriation of the objects and in the ceremony.*

*It was one of the strongest experiences of my life. It was incredibly moving to see the museum truck arrive with catalogued crates. We were far away from folklore! When I thought of the objects being repatriated, I imagined entire skeletons in those boxes. But no! There were tibias with tibias, skulls with skulls. The museum's entire classification system was reflected there—the aberration!*

Sometimes the Western art lens is so total, that it can define both sides of a debate. It has obviously influenced anthropology, as well as many other disciplines. So even when an alternative to the anthropological paradigm contests cultural meaning - in the following case, an art history approach with an emphasis on aesthetics - the discussion still ignores any Aboriginal understanding. It is as if an Aboriginal person, who knows a thing or two about their own history and culture, must wait to speak until two other persons who know less are finished their loud debating. Richard West Jr. describes his bemused feeling:

*To be sure, the representational focus almost always has begun - and, unfortunately, often has ended - with native material culture, to the sometime exclusion of the complex native thinking that produced the objects in the first instance. This statement has been particularly true where a conventional European art history analysis has been employed that emphasized aesthetics rather than cultural context. On the other hand, disciplines such as anthropology, while approaching native material from the standpoint of its context, sometimes have minimized its aesthetic qualities, which are often considerable. The debate*

*about whether native cultural material is 'art' or 'artifact' has its origins in these very different approaches to cultural interpretation and representation.*

*As a Southern Cheyenne, I am bemused by the sometimes thunderous academic salvos that go back and forth between the art historians and anthropologists in this argument. Ironically, it is not the making of native peoples themselves, who had little to do with defining the terms of this debate. To the contrary, the whole discussion derives from intellectual constructs and systems of academic analysis that came from Western Europe.*

*From a native perspective, objects of material culture are viewed rather differently. In the Cheyenne language, for example, no word for 'art' as the term is understood in Western culture, even exists. Furthermore, for most native peoples, the process of creating objects has always been as important as - and perhaps more important than - the end product, the art object itself (in Tom Hill, 1994).*

### **Legacy of Primitivism**

Anthropology, with its various notions of primitivism which were developed from as far back as the Enlightenment, laid the theoretical groundwork. Aboriginal people were framed as uncivilized, as somehow lesser. Edward Curtis imagined them as a "vanishing race" that needed to be documented before they and their 'primitive' artistic objects were extinct.

In the mid-nineteenth century, this notion of primitive art, outside the purview of Western art history, was relegated to anthropological study and to exhibition only in the museum, not the art gallery. Only when Western artists like Paul Gauguin began to paint mimicking a primitive style, did the work take on the patina of 'beaux arts', fit for the art gallery. Primitivism, the art movement, was born. Barry Ace (1997) suggests that this legacy continues into the twenty-first century:

*Perhaps the most disturbing, yet challenging, barrier facing Indian artists today is posed by the western art terms 'primitive' and 'ethnic'. Ironically, these terms have been used historically by the dominant western cultures to distinguish 'high' art from the art it has often appropriated from other cultures... These terms have conveniently situated Indian artists into a stereotype that treats their art as something static and/or peripheral, or even worse, dismisses their art as 'unauthentic' for any noticeable signs of modernity.*

This notion that Aboriginal arts take place in the past - and that they are static - reinforces old colonial stereotypes. In this way of seeing, Aboriginal arts are historical and cannot be contemporary. Rasheed Araeen (1991) explains:

*...the ideas of modern anthropology have made no impact on art historical scholarship, on art criticism, or on western consciousness in general about the*

*people who have been explicitly primitivized in the past. The ideas of nineteenth-century Europe are still with us today and they are being used to define and fix the positions of non-European peoples in such a way that they are deprived of their active and critical functions in contemporary cultural practices (p. 166).*

This idea that the work of Aboriginal artists (and other non-Western artists) is somehow “fixed” is central to the persistence of primitivism. Homi Bhabha (2007) expands upon this concept and how it works:

*An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of “fixity” in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always “in place,” already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated (p. 121-122).*

With this legacy of primitivism, the Western art lens creates a dilemma for Aboriginal artists - completely lose your ‘Indian identity’ and you might be invited to join or name yourself as part of an Aboriginal community and you usually have to forfeit the game. Nancy Marie Mithlo (1998) describes it this way:

*A subjective, contextual approach to Indian arts runs counter to basic premises of the fine arts world... Artists who choose to identify with a certain community (Indian artist, Chicano artist, African-American artist) simultaneously forfeit their perceived ‘freedom’ by embracing a cultural identity. The word Indian placed before the word artist triggers a response laden with stereotypes. Notions concerning the ‘cultural baggage’ of Native artists (as opposed to the perceived individual freedom of their non-Native peers) invalidate Indian contemporary art from consideration as fine art. This marginalization results in real consequences for Native artists, especially those who wish to be included in a fine art realm offering higher prestige or economic payback (p. 136).*

As a consequence, even when given an opportunity to make art, the perceived ‘cultural baggage’ of Aboriginal artists still limits the totality of their artistic concerns, while the ‘cultural baggage’ of their mainstream colleagues is not mentioned! Helen Hoy (2001) quotes Marilyn Dumont as she speaks of these assumptions:

*...Marilyn Dumont describes the pressure on contemporary Native writers: ‘If you are old, you are supposed to write legends, that is, stories that were passed down to you from your elders. If you are young, you are expected to relate stories about foster homes, street life and loss of culture and if you are in the middle, you are supposed to write about alcoholism or residential school. And somehow throughout this, you are to infuse everything you write with symbols of the native*

*world view, that is: the circle, mother earth, the number four or the trickster figure.' What if you are an urban Indian, like herself, she asks (p. 5-6).*

This burden of representation often boxes in Aboriginal artists as they feel obligated to express themselves only about their race, traditions or ethnicity, no matter how stereotypical. On the other hand, if they aspire to speak of other, broader concerns, sometimes their Aboriginal identities can be white washed away with universalist assumptions of 'we are all just human, after all.'

### ***Authenticity and Appropriation***

Another consequence of the Western art lens is the notion of authenticity. Works that were not influenced by Europeans, while not exactly considered 'art' were still sought after because they were authentic. As Lee-Ann Martin (2002) states:

*'Authentic' objects were defined as works that were created early in a particular historic tradition, and thus free from European influences. The concern with the 'authentic' object revealed prevalent European preoccupation with cultural purity and historical traditions that continued intact (despite colonial intrusions into all aspects of life for the original North American).*

This artistic 'purity' continued throughout the last two centuries despite attempts to wipe out Aboriginal cultural practices. Paradoxically, authenticity - nominally a laudable concept - did not create a level playing field. Authentic, maybe; equal in stature, certainly not. Margaret Dubin (1999) declares:

*In fact, until recently, Aboriginal peoples were not viewed as equal participants in a shared modernity. It is not surprising that many Aboriginal artists today reject cultural authenticity as a measurement of quality.*

The Western art lens diminished Aboriginal arts and the cultural practices that nurtured them. It also stunted the development of any theory or art discourse surrounding the production of these art forms. If it is not really art, no need to talk or write about it. Martin (2002) continues her commentary:

*Both the discipline of anthropology and ethnographical museums embraced the study, classification, and representation of Aboriginal material culture as artefacts. At the same time, art criticism, history, and theory developed with little recognition of Aboriginal art, save for a few objects from the archaeological records that were classified as Primitive art...this colonial legacy continues to inform the scholarship and presentation of Aboriginal art histories and contemporary art practices, and it is only in recent years that Aboriginal curators and art historians have begun to expand the discourse beyond such colonialist parameters.*

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*As a field, Inuit art has been and continues to be overwhelmingly dominated by non-Inuit specialists talking and writing about Inuit people. This is not entirely the case with other First Nations art, where an increasing number of First Nations people are now writing art history and critical discourse. While we have made great strides in coming to understand the complexities and politics of cross-cultural representation, people working in the field of Inuit art, myself included, should work more actively to draw Inuit into the cultural sector as art historians, critics and curators.*

*Norman Vorano<sup>26</sup>*

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Currently, even authenticity does not carry the weight it once did. In a consumption oriented society, ever desirous of the next hot trend, Aboriginal 'authenticity' seems old-fashioned, even passé. New, yet distorted, images of Aboriginal peoples emerge. Michelle Laflamme (2003) offers an example:

*...the fact that Hollywood dominates the film industry and controls much of North American distribution system means that Canadians also consume American distortions of First Nations people...The emergence of a newly constructed 'urban savage' is in one way a reconfiguration of the 'noble savage' that has been central to the Eurocentric rendering of history (p. 404).*

This ability to mess about in, adjust and invent new images and semiotics for a culture that is not your own is a privilege conferred by the Western art lens. If you believe that your cultural heritage is superior to others, then obviously you can take whatever you need from the world's smorgasbord. In some quarters, this practice is regarded as innovative. Nestor Garcia Canclini (1998) puts it this way:

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Janet Berlo, p. 20, 2006.

*While the European artist is allowed to investigate other cultures and enrich their own work and perspective, it is expected that the artist from another culture only works in the background and with the artistic traditions connected to his or her place of origin...If (this)...artist does not conform to this separation, he is considered inauthentic, westernized, and an imitator copyist of 'what we do'. The universal is ours, the local is yours (p. 187).*

In addition, it has been proposed that allowing Aboriginal artists an appropriate place in art history would undermine this privilege of enjoying the cultural smorgasbord. Joyce M. Szabo (2006) states bluntly:

*Another reason for the absence of Native American art from the canon resides in a comparatively late recognition that at least some non-Native avant-garde artists were inspired by Native American art..*

This art historical line from colonial contact to primitivism to notions of authenticity and cultural purity to invisibility in art history leads directly to recent debates about appropriation. Loretta Todd (1990) re-names cultural 'borrowing' in this way:

*The valorization of peripheral cultures is frequently undertaken through acts of cultural appropriation. In an extension of the concept of property and colonial conquest, the artists do not value or respect cultural difference, but instead seek to own difference, and with this ownership to increase their own worth. They become image barons, story conquistadors, and merchants of the exotic.*

# RECENT HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL ARTS

*The turning of minds in the Canadian cultural mainstream institutions has really just begun. The task of re-educating art administrators of a past generation and, disappointingly, many of the current generation, as well, is as difficult as 'reasoning' winter into not bothering to show up this year. It has taken great efforts for Aboriginal artists to crack the walls of such institutions.*  
(Jim Logan)<sup>27</sup>



*Shield for a Yuppie Warrior* by Ron Noganosh.  
Photographer: Allan J. Ryan.

The fifth perspective that sheds light on understanding Aboriginal arts is reviewing the last sixty years of the arts in Canada. We are aware that there is a danger in simply pulling out sixty years from complex, rich Aboriginal histories that go back thousands of years. Nevertheless, we feel that it is critical to highlight this recent period, in which there has been a resurgence of Aboriginal artistic production.

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<sup>27</sup> In Lee-Ann Martin, 2004.

There is some historical literature on Aboriginal crafts, dance and music, but most of it comes from the anthropological perspective of the two centuries before 1951. This creates false equations between Aboriginal cultures with those of European origin, in which Aboriginal arts are reduced. As Bernard Assiniwi (1989) reminds us:

*For over more than four hundred years, Aboriginal literature was the responsibility of storytellers, keepers of the oral tradition of first nations in our country. During all of this time, the interpretation of symbols, metaphors and parables was made by anthropologists, ethnographers and, very often, by historians...the latter never failed to make comparisons with Western European civilizations, and in so doing, totally distort the degree of social, economic, political and cultural evolution of the original peoples of our continent (p. 46).*

In the last few years, there has been a development - within visual arts discourse and, to a lesser degree, in the performing arts - that has begun to describe some of this pre-1950 history. Still, it appears that no one has attempted to produce a comprehensive, multidisciplinary document about Aboriginal arts during this period.

It is illustrative to place the recent - the last sixty years since 1951 - art history of the Canadian mainstream beside the renewal and (re)development of Aboriginal art forms. There has been a considerable amount of documentation about this nation building period in Canada and Quebec, yet little describing the significant growth of Aboriginal art activity.

Writers and artists have attempted to fill this gap with specific histories - in one arts discipline, or one First Nation, or one time period, or even one group of artists. Some commentators are Jim Logan, Bernard Assiniwi, Viviane Gray, France Trépanier, Greg A. Hill, Marie Clements, Valerie Alia, Lee-Ann Matin, Lance Belanger, Lucille Bell and Vince Collison, Daniel David Moses, Yvette Nolan, Jacqueline Shea Murphy and Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew. We have included words spoken by Jimmie Durham, Steven Loft and Sylvie Paré.

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*It would be impossible, and I think immoral, to attempt to discuss American Indian art sensibly without making the political realities central.*

Jimmie Durham<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In Lucy Lippard, p. 204, 1990.

## ***The Last Sixty Years***

This timeframe has seen an incredible blossoming of the mainstream arts. The first half (1951 to 1981) was a cultural “nation building” period. Starting with the Massey-Lésveque Royal Commission in 1951 - two results were the creation of the Canada Council and the National Library - Canada went through a cultural metamorphosis.

The fruits of this forward thinking investment have been harvested in the second half (1981 to 2011) as Canadian artists have travelled across this country and internationally. However, this second half has also seen the diminution of arts funding with a corresponding lack of new arts infrastructure.

In this same time period, Aboriginal arts have flourished. Of course, they were always there. But after a suppression, nearly an elimination, over centuries of colonial history, it took awhile for the arts to take flight again. Viviane Gray (1993) states:

*Canadian Indian art has taken on many new dimensions since its recognition by the non-Indian art world in the 1940's...It was not, however, until the 1980s that younger artists made a strong impact on Canadian art with their works of art, their words and their actions.*

Incongruously, as the Canadian arts system was revving up to grow in 1951, this year also marked amendments to the Indian Act which finally lifted the ban on Aboriginal cultural practices such as traditional dancing, the potlatch and the celebratory raising of totem poles. However, even as the nation building period caught fire culturally, the work of Aboriginal artists continued to be disregarded. As France Trépanier (2008) describes:

*...the majority of Canadian arts institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada and the National Arts Centre did not collect or present contemporary Aboriginal art. Furthermore, Aboriginal artists were not even considered as professional artists. In 1951, the Indian Act was again amended to allow certain cultural expressions. Although this was an official change in policy, Aboriginal arts and artists were still ignored by the art system. For example, in that same year, the Massey-Lésveque Commission recommended the creation of the Canada Council, which was to be exclusively concerned with European based art forms such as ballet, classical music, theatre and literature.*

*The following decades became a “nation building” period for mainstream arts institutions in Canada. However, Aboriginal artists and their organizations did not receive appropriate funding from the Canadian art system. The excellence of their art forms was not recognized nor was sufficient support provided to build appropriate infrastructure. It is only within the past fifteen years that this situation has begun to change. p. 8-9).*

The report of the Massey-Lévesque Commission (1951) did include a section called “Indian Arts and Crafts” which led to this misunderstanding:

*This unsatisfactory state of affairs has led some to believe that, since the death of true Indian arts is inevitable, Indians should not be encouraged to prolong the existence of arts which at best must be artificial and at worst are degenerate... The impact of the white man with his more advanced civilization and his infinitely superior techniques resulted in the gradual destruction of the Indian way of life. The Indian arts thus survive only as ghosts or shadows of a dead society. They can never, it is said, regain real form or substance. Indians with creative talent should therefore develop it as other Canadians do, and should receive every encouragement for this purpose; but Indian art as such cannot be revived. (p. 239).*

Despite this rather discouraging outlook, Aboriginal artists did continue their work - using traditional images, dances and songs - by reviving, and in many cases re-imagining them in a contemporary context. There were even suitable moments to make this work public, although they were fleeting. Greg A. Hill (2006) describes one of these moments which occurred in 1967:

*As...the country became caught up in the buoyant nationalism of centennial celebrations, the government was confronted with the reality of a history of colonization that left Aboriginal peoples in an impoverished state. Across the country, Aboriginal artists emerged with a modern visual language. Expo 67 became a venue for this newly found voice, and the ‘Indians of Canada Pavilion’ spoke volumes to both Canadian and international audiences.*

*As much as the Indians of Canada Pavilion struggled to be an example of ‘Indian Sovereignty’, federal bureaucrats were determined to temper the Indigenous voice to present their sanctioned and controlled version of Canadian history. Even with the interference, the tone and facts presented sent a strong message to an international audience. It is perhaps telling that none of the mural works were preserved after Expo (p. 20).*

These encounters, such as the Indians of Canada Pavilion, served to illustrate the question of ‘ownership’ of Aboriginal images and stories. Who would create them? Who would present them? Where, how and to whom would they be presented? These questions continue urgently to the present day. Marie Clements (2005) describes another historical example:

*Almost forty years after the production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* at the Vancouver Playhouse and its subsequent national tour and international productions, the production still stands in the minds of Canadian theatre professionals as the watershed moment when Aboriginal theatre began to exist: not because it was written or directed or produced or sometimes even performed by Aboriginal performers, but because there were Aboriginal people on stage*

*portraying the Aboriginal experience in Canada. This watershed moment is not considered a watershed moment across the board. Aboriginal theatre professionals believe the moment Aboriginal theatre truly came alive was with the production of *The Rez Sisters* in 1982...by Tomson Highway (p. 7).*

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*Too often the work of Indigenous people is presented in a reductionist format in order to best engage a wide audience, predominantly of non-Aboriginal people. In this model, issues and larger concepts of identification are not addressed for fear of alienating this audience.*

*Contextualization, in this sense is relegated to... promoting understanding and awareness, and not to issues of aesthetic analysis or cultural sovereignty. A wider discourse that includes critical, epistemological and pedagogical concerns must be engaged in if there is to be an integration, not assimilation, of Indigenous art into the larger milieu.*

Steven Loft<sup>29</sup>

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In publishing, Aboriginal writers have seen important changes regarding the question of 'ownership' over the last thirty years. Not only have debates about cultural appropriation given a primary voice to Aboriginal authors, but also in terms of who publishes whom. Valerie Alia (2010) states:

*Before the 1980s, "most books accredited to Aboriginal authors were of the 'as told to' variety" (Twigg 2005:7)...Canada's 'first Aboriginal-owned and operated publishing company' Theytus Books, arrived in 1980. It was started by Randy Fred (Salish) and nurtured by the En'owkin Centre at Pencticton, BC, with the involvement and support of author, Jeannette Armstrong (Twigg 2005:10) (p. 80).*

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<sup>29</sup> Words spoken in the video: *Towards Forever: An Indigenous Art Historical Worldview*, Lecture at Ryerson University, October 2010.  
<https://ryecast.ryerson.ca/27/watch/832.aspx>

Despite many challenges to the Canadian art system, especially in the last thirty years, it frequently seems impervious to change. Lee-Ann Martin (2005) describes the situation:

*In the 1980s, First Nations artists matured individually, and collective strategic action was taken to integrate them into the country's museums. Towards the end of the 1980s, artists developed an aesthetic of decolonization backed by a strategic arsenal of self-determination, criticism of colonialism and a policy of identity. They challenged Eurocentric art and museum curators and directors. By denying Aboriginal artists the power to address cultural identity and colonial history, a large number of those custodians of Canadian art standards working with major institutions effected cultural and historical amnesia whose effects continue to this day (p. 8).*

### **Current Conundrums**

The last sixty years, especially the last thirty, have produced an ever growing body of work from many Aboriginal artists across disciplines. During this recent history, these artists have used their work to discuss, to examine and to re-interpret the effects of colonial history. This does not mean that every artwork is about a specific historical event that happened to Aboriginal peoples.

However, when creating images, sounds, words, movements that generate pictures of Aboriginal reality, it would be difficult for artists to avoid this history and its current ramifications in everyday life. Sometimes the reference is muted, indirect; other times more obvious, more critical. As Lance Belanger discusses:

*I have a strong belief in a new Indian aesthetic. This aesthetic that narrates the past and more importantly the present socio-political sensibilities of Canada's Aboriginal people. While I am aware that mass media and government restraint can limit what we have to say about ourselves as First People of Canada, I realize that our art can convey that which we are and what we have to say about ourselves and events around us. Through the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists, the unique positions of Canada's aboriginal peoples can be realized in a forceful and effective way (in Gray, 1993).*

It is important to note that Aboriginal artists are not only complaining or protesting about colonial history, although they might do just that. They are engaging in deliberate strategies that are also about remembering, respecting and regenerating. As France Trépanier (2008) puts it:

*In Canada, the process of colonization has had a profound and lasting impact on Aboriginal peoples, their land, their languages, their cultures and their art practices. Today, many artists consider contemporary art practices to be a process of decolonization, re-appropriation, reclaiming and healing (p. 8).*

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*We have a problem of historical proximity in Quebec:  
the past is too recent, barely 500 years of history.  
Tensions remain relatively strong . . . in the  
contemporary art community, interest lies in the new  
history of art, what's happening on the international  
scene. However, when speaking of our own history  
here, there's a kind of bias that endures in our current  
vision: the veils of history continue to perpetuate that  
colonial history.*  
Sylvie Paré<sup>30</sup>

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This complex process of decolonizing, which will not happen easily, can nevertheless point to fresh directions. Lucille Bell and Vince Collison (2006) relate one event:

*Most importantly, after each repatriation ceremony, we feel that the air has been cleared, our ancestors are at peace and we can focus more clearly on the great things that the Creator has in store for us. Our job is not done yet...With most of our ancestors home, we can now concentrate on building meaningful museum relationships and repatriate Haida treasures. On our museums visits, we have seen some amazing works made by renowned artists...There are thousands of Haida treasures in museums, many of the oldest are in overseas museums where no Haida has ever seen them. Only one to three percent of these objects are actually on display.*

As Aboriginal literature has developed in the recent past, it has certainly borne witness to the legacies of colonialism - the pain, the anger, the injustice, the poverty and sometimes the hopelessness. Some observers have suggested that there is another emerging side to these stories. Daniel David Moses (1998) explains:

*Native Literature is almost past its youthful idealistic and angry stage. Adolescents tend to be so hopeful: all they can experience is disappointment in this world. Partly this means Native literature is no longer shouting loudly, 'Look at me', but is now also taking time to consider just what it can do to heal its community. Native literature is doing this quietly and more artfully than ever before...(p. IX).*

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Monika Kin Gagnon, 2006.

As Aboriginal theatre grew in numbers and in stature, people took notice. Artists found themselves both wary of and wanting this kind of attention. Yvette Nolan (2008) says:

*As Native theatre gained recognition in Canada, it naturally became an area of study and analysis. Academics began to write about what made Native theatre Native. Some suggested that it had a circularity rarely found in the Western theatrical tradition. Others asserted that Native theatre always had a Trickster character, or at least a spirituality that was more evident than in the plays of the world theatre canon.*

*Native artists themselves struggled with these expectations, fighting for the very right to practice, and to incorporate elements of Western theatre while maintaining connections to a number of disciplines including dance, song, mask, ritual, myth, movement and storytelling. Native theatre in Canada is a theatre that exists in spite of the dominant culture, and so the stories have naturally been stories of survival...(p. 6-7).*

Aboriginal dance has responded to contemporary pressures about defining and redefining 'Aboriginal' by offering a means to negotiations - negotiating with history, identity and resources. As Jacqueline Shea Murphy (2007) describes:

*Negotiations are intrinsic to dance, with its required attention to shifts in weight, rhythm, relation to other bodies, and available space, and to the shifting circumstances and experiences, theorized, and recorded in embodied form. In thousands of different forms, locations, and ways, Indigenous dancing has tapped these capacities: Native peoples used, and continue to use, dance as a powerful tool in continuously shifting negotiations of agency, self-determination, and resilience (p. 29).*

Sometimes, Aboriginal artists working today seek a new medium to express their ideas, both traditional and otherwise. In recent years, they have gravitated to the new media arts which may or may not contain elements of their previous arts practice.

It is critical to note that there are many ways to understand new media practices. Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew (2005) elaborates:

*Aboriginal new media did not emerge as a singular and isolated practice. The history of Aboriginal art presents many instances of disconnection and renegotiation...The overall production of Aboriginal artists demonstrates a vision that has not been constrained by divisions of pre-existing and predetermining individual arts disciplines, but one that honours story and strives to make the best match with production methodology – whatever that may require. New media was taken up for expression, when appropriate, by artists working in various other disciplines, but primarily the already interdisciplinary media arts.*

# ABORIGINAL ARTS IN COMMUNITIES



*Global Savages* by Debajehmujig Theatre. Photographer: Ron Berti.

*...what makes an individual 'indigenous' is his or her situation within a community. In fact, it is impossible to understand an indigenous reality by focusing on individuals or discrete aspects of culture outside of a community context. However knowledgeable and rooted one may be, one cannot be truly indigenous without the support, inspiration, reprobation, and stress of a community as facts of life (Taiaiake Alfred, 1999, p xvi).*

The sixth perspective in understanding Aboriginal arts is reflecting on Aboriginal artists in communities. As Taiaiake suggests an Aboriginal person is shaped by their situation

within their community(s). This is true of many persons, but is particularly so when it comes to Aboriginal artists.

Many artists have important connections with their communities and sometimes this connection is evident both in their work and its impact within the community. Even art forms that are non-Aboriginal in their roots can become part of an Aboriginal community. Joanna Bedard elaborates:

*Music and dance play a large part in both traditional and contemporary First Nations communities...music is not always so-called traditional in nature, music of other cultures has been adapted and manipulated to suit the needs and express the life experience of the First Nations. From classic to blues from powwow to ballet from flute to fiddles, First Nations artists have excelled in their performances of both traditional and non-traditional art (Woodland, 1990, p. 5).*

For some Aboriginal artists, implicating their community is an essential part of their work. Even the most professional of these artists will insist that they are not just making art, but involving their community in that process. In this way, art that is made in collaboration with a community can be part of a healing process that actually strengthens that community. This aspect of Aboriginal art making is often misunderstood and ignored by funding agencies and other mainstream organizations.

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*Its about for me the incredible resources we have in our communities. I feel as a producer and director it's my job to bring the best technology I can, to these resources, because...you can't put a value on the knowledge, the humour, the experience that exists in our communities...*  
Gregory Coyes<sup>31</sup>

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Artists and writers are speaking about the importance of this relationship between Aboriginal artists and communities, emphasizing respect. Some of these are Taiaiake Alfred, Joanna Bedard, Richard W. Hill Sr., André Dudemaine, Greg A. Hill, Bruce Bernstein, Joanne Arnott, Gerald McMaster, Valda Blundell and Cathi Charles Wherry. We have included words spoken by Gregory Coyes, Sally Webster and Margo Kane.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview on the Indigenous Arts Network  
[http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/gregory\\_coyes/interview/](http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/gregory_coyes/interview/)

## **Community and Responsibility**

Some Aboriginal artists, even those living in an urban environment, have both a connection and a strong sense of responsibility to their community. These artists will create their work in collaboration with members of their community, even if those people are not 'professional' artists in the Western sense of that term. When that respect is given, honour is given back. Richard W. Hill Sr. talks about this relationship:

*Native societies tend to think of artists differently. The ability to make things by hand is considered a gift given by the Creator, to be used for the welfare of the community... Such gifts are tied to tradition. By making things of beauty and belief, native artists keep their people's values, ethics and ways of thinking alive. Art teaches about ancient world views, as well as modern realities. It bridges differences. And the artist is the bridge-builder (in Tom Hill, 1994, p. 234).*

This relationship is deepened when artists actually listen to community members. The artist seeks not just information for the content of their work, but a more profound understanding of how their work connects to history and knowledge.

The role of elders is essential to this way of working. André Dudemaine (2008) states:

*Listening is one of the first tasks of the artist committed to his or her community. One must lend an ear in order to create the words that recount seminal narratives enriched by the new chapters generated by current events. Because the unchanging remains in every manifestation of the present, the work of the Indigenous documentary filmmaker will be to perceive, underneath the surface of things, the undercurrents that convey identity (p. 43).*

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*I asked my mother one day, "Can you make me an amautiit?" She said no. I said, "Why? Why did you say no? I want one. Can you make one for me?" She said no. I wanted one so bad I made it myself. I would see a lady wearing one and I would study it behind her back...I think that my mother said no so I could do it myself. So now I tell the young people, "If you want it bad enough, you can do it yourself."*  
Sally Webster<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with France Trépanier in Ottawa, ON on March 15 2010.

The role of the Aboriginal artist in community is often seen as sacred. Greg A. Hill (2006) explains that this basic concept is sometimes forgotten in the mainstream arts system:

*Throughout history, many societies have produced individuals who can be described as inhabiting the role of the artist or the shaman. The role of the artist has become increasingly secular in Western cultures since the Renaissance era and the development of an art market that was independent of commissions by the Church. Time has obscured the notion of the artist as visionary - imagining for others that which could only be imagined. The role of the artist in pre-literate societies was to make manifest a collective imagination that would substantiate, verify and communicate the oral traditions. Artists were valued for their ability to interpret, in a visual manner, the spiritual experiences of the community (p. 28).*

### **Contesting Community**

On the other hand, perhaps there is no easy definition or understanding of community. Is it a reserve? Is it where you were born or where you live? Is it rural or urban? Can an artist find community on the internet?

There are complex cross currents within this notion of community. On the one hand, it is a challenge to put into question non-Aboriginal stereotypes of what an Aboriginal community is and, at the same time, to re-engage Aboriginal traditions in a contemporary context. As Bruce Bernstein (1998) describes:

*Contemporary indigenous artists continue to challenge non-Native definitions and assumptions of what is traditional, spiritual, environmental - indeed, what is Native. The artists...influenced by urban and rural environments and Native and non-Native cultures, explore concepts of community and cultural identity through innovative work that reflects their distinct personal and artistic backgrounds, as well as their individual ideas about community, however it might be defined - reservation, reserve, rural, urban and the hundreds of possibilities in between.*

By posing the idea of community as a *problematique*, it is possible to see it in a less idealized way. Community can be a space for the resolution of problems but also simply a place for describing them. Joanne Arnott talks about it:

*My community is very much one of individuals, of insecure identities. Whether we've arrived in the borderlands between nations through intermarriage, miscegenation, and migration, or as a consequence of government removal of indigenous children from indigenous homes and communities, or by other means, there is a commonality of insecurity and isolation that marks membership in this community. My writing rises out of this community (in Moses 2005, p. 474).*

Arnott does not attempt to romanticize her definition of community. As a consequence, her understanding is real, even bleak. It is, in a way, more honest as it does not shy away from the problems. At the same time, it tends to reinforce stereotypes about Aboriginal communities as only being places of despair and tragedy - the kind of imagery that is superficially covered on the nightly news.

Taiaiake Alfred (1998) reveals one underlying cause:

*Native American community life today is framed by two value systems that are fundamentally opposed. One, still rooted in traditional teachings, structures social and cultural relationships; the other, imposed by the colonial state, structures politics. This disunity is the fundamental cause of factionalism in Native communities, and it contributes significantly to the alienation that plagues them. (p. 1).*

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*We are not free to follow our natural tribal inclinations. We have been so colonized for so long that I don't think that anybody remembers what those are except for some elders. Therefore, the arts and the artists and the storytellers and the visionaries are seen in terms of a Western notion. They are seen as being frivolous. Because our people are poor and they are suffering, their needs and those things that are going to give them life and feed them are, of course, a priority...The political concerns are about economic development.*

Margo Kane<sup>33</sup>

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Community continues to be important to Aboriginal artists. It is constructed, especially for urban Aboriginals, in different ways. Many city-based artists return to the reserve or to the land on a regular basis as a form of renewal. Gerald McMaster (1998) sketches a new notion of community:

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with France Trépanier in Vancouver, BC on March 7 2010

*As many of the artists affirm, a contemporary community is no longer a fixed, unified, or stable place; it exists in some kind of flux. Communities were often a means of maintaining some sense of order and coherence. They established sameness, thereby making difference difficult. Similarly, identity is seen as multiple and mobile against the stable and homogeneous concepts of the past. ...contemporary artists value the importance of belonging or connecting to an Aboriginal community. This raised such questions as: What is the artist's role in, and how does the artist contribute to, a community's cultural identity? In turn, how is the community giving artists an identity? And what is the relation between an artist's community of choice and the mainstream art community?*

### **Community as Renewal**

Communities, whatever currents run within them, do still act as a kind of 'home'. This is especially true in urban settings where Aboriginal people have roots in various nations and where there is no cohesive Aboriginal society based on a direct relationship to the land. Still artists create objects for use in a domestic context as a form of renewal.

Richard W. Hill Sr. elaborates:

*There is a belief among many native communities that objects need people in order to be useful. They are meant for use, not necessarily to last forever. We feel a sense of loss, of disconnection, knowing that there are more such objects in museums than in native homes and institutions. But there is an artistic resurgence taking place in native communities, where people are committing themselves to making objects to replace those that have disappeared. These new objects rekindle pride and ancient beliefs...our ancestors took the time and effort to produce these beautiful objects for us, and we are moved by their faith that we would understand and appreciate them. These works are evidence of the desire of Indians to remain Indians throughout all times. We are still here (in Tom Hill, 1994, p. 237).*

One of the most powerful Aboriginal cultural events is the pow wow. To a non-Aboriginal person, they appear as colourful, traditional performances not unlike a festival. They are this and more than this. In a sense, they are temporary communities. Valda Blundell (1993) reflects upon other meanings that Aboriginal peoples give to these gatherings:

*Canadian powwows are events where Native people exercise a degree of control that is often more difficult to achieve in other areas of their lives...Indeed, powwows have become sites where aboriginal peoples (re)construct expressive cultural forms that reflect, and allow them to reflect upon, the nature of their aboriginal identities within the changing conditions of the contemporary world.*

*As this renewed Native consciousness has swept across North America, powwows have become one arena where aboriginal peoples engage in a process of cultural recovery and reformation... Powwow performers have also*

*used their artistry to challenge stereotypic ideas about Natives that continue to circulate widely in North America, including those allochronic inscriptions that locate aboriginal peoples in an eternalized past-in-the-present...*

In any case, communities can be visionary. Not in the sense of an frozen-in-time, idealized Aboriginal society where everyone lives in perfect harmony. Rather it is possible to imagine many arts practices in a healthy community as a dynamic force that has the potential for healing. Cathi Charles Wherry (2006) offers:

*If a community's cultural vision is clearly defined, authenticity, protocols and artistic excellence will be protected. In turn, these foundational values will inform planning and provide balance for potentially conflicting priorities such as cultural tourism or business strategies that focus only on economics and structural form. Support for the development of community arts visions and strategies could assist with clearing a path to rich programming that is based in the priorities of informed community experts and practitioners. (p. 6).*

# ABORIGINAL ARTISTS AND THEIR ART



*Oaraya* by Art Cirq. Photographer: Guillaume Saladin.

*The mind is called 'mom tune ay chi kun'. 'Mom tune ay chi kun' is the sacred place inside each one of us where no one else can go. It is in this place that each one of us can dream, fantasize, create and, yes, even talk to the grandfathers and grandmothers. The thoughts and images that come from this place are called 'mom tune ay chi kuna', which means wisdoms, and they can be given to others in stories, songs, dances and art. Stories are called 'achimoon', songs are 'nugamoon', dances are 'neemeetoon' and art is 'tatsinaikewin'. They sound almost the same, don't they? That is because all these words, describe gifts that come from the sacred place inside (Maria Campbell, 1985).*

The seventh way of understanding Aboriginal arts is paying attention to what Aboriginal artists reveal about their work. Much of this information on Aboriginal artists can be gleaned from catalogues, magazine articles or reviews of work. These are often “puff pieces” or, in the case of reviews, sometimes poorly researched and written by non-Aboriginal critics with little experience writing about Aboriginal work.

A smaller, more discursive literature, by mostly Aboriginal writers and critics, is found in essays and scholarly articles about artists and their work. Sometimes this is about an individual artist and their work; other times about a specific movement, for examples: the Woodland School or Native Theatre since the 1980’s.

Simply stated, we wanted to give voice to artists speaking about specific aspects of their work. Some of these artists are Maria Campbell, Truman Lowe, Sandra Laronde, Minnie Aodla Freeman, Jerry Longboat, Candice Hopkins, Geraldine Manossa, Drew Hayden Taylor, Tomson Highway, Kristina Fagan, Yvette Nolan, Linda M. Morra, Marianne Nicolson, Marie Clements and Eleanor Heartney. We have included words spoken by Santee Smith and Yves Sioui Durand.

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*I believe that we live as human beings, on this Earth  
journey as creative beings in a creative universe. I  
just see everything that we do, and arts especially,  
we are able to harness that creativity, explore it and  
that is the job of artists, to really find that freedom  
of creativity and work it.*  
Santee Smith<sup>34</sup>

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In general, the mainstream arts are explained and critiqued, removed from their cultural history and context. The focus is on the work itself, as if it could be properly deciphered only by looking at it a little closer. This way of making sense of the arts has been common in the Western tradition. It is our contention that it would be inadequate, if not impossible, to understand Aboriginal arts exclusively in this way. That is why, while organizing our review, we proposed the ‘walking around the tree’ method, looking from eight different perspectives. Still, we feel it is important to include the artist’s point of view as one of these perspectives.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview on Indigenous Arts Network  
[http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/santee\\_smith/interview/](http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/santee_smith/interview/)

## **An Artist's Intention**

It is sometimes difficult to find a way into a work of art - whether it is dance, new media, music or visual art. A good place to start is to listen to an artist's intentions. Truman Lowe (1991) speaks of his hope:

*I am interested in finding that point in time when 'history' stops and 'myth' begins. It is the time when a family's history leaves the page or the tribal record and becomes legendary. That realm approaches art. Then you begin to assemble images from somewhere in the deep recesses of your memory or that of an ancestor's mind.*

Occasionally it is difficult to find elegance or beauty given the history of Aboriginal peoples. Sandra Laronde declares:

*I think it is far more revolutionary to show beauty. I mean, what is beauty? You know what I think beauty is? I think beauty is health made visible. So many people create work around their pain and their issues. I am not discrediting their expression, but we are so much more than our issues! It is time to start showing our health—the vitality of our communities, arts, cultures. Let's make those things visible. That's something that is so important...to create art that comes from that place of beauty rather than a wounded place or a place full of angry issues (in Apsey, 2009, p. 90).*

Sounds, images and words are artists' building blocks. They translate their intentions, impulses and intuitions into them for their audience. Frequently in this process of translation, a new element is invented. Minnie Aodla Freeman remarks on this process:

*We Inuit have adapted and adopted many different words to accommodate our understanding of our changing world. Very often we make up a word that may not exist in our language in order to express something from another culture. The word 'art', for example, did not exist in Inuktitut. That is not to say that Inuit art did not exist... (in Leroux, 1994, p. 15).*

For a dancer, the impulse is in the body. One has to work and work to get the movement right and then finally work to interpret it. For Aboriginal dancers, there is another dimension, one of honour and respect. Jerry Longboat explains:

*I think when you do that kind of serious work and research and commit to experiencing those ceremonies, you are more able to find new pathways to evoke ritual context that will enhance the artistic expression of dance. For example, when I worked with a Kwakwaka'wakw master on learning and performing his family's Raven dance with his family clan mask, he took me into his family's tradition... Once I had reached a level of proficiency with the movement and the drum song, he said 'Now, you must make it your own. You have to infuse your character into the Raven. Then you will add to the legacy of the Raven.'*

*When I committed to performing that dance—to honestly infusing my character with the context of dancing that mask and honouring it—I had to become the Raven. And I did...I experienced dancing in the big house, the soft dirt under my feet, smoke in my lungs, and all my relatives around me (both human and animal). I definitely had a sacred experience—even though I was dancing on camera. When you are able to completely understand something and respect it, you are able to then innovate with it (in Murphy, 2007).*

## **Storytelling**

For Aboriginal artists, regardless of their medium, almost always there is a story underlying their work. Stories go back to the beginning; they are an essential part of oral tradition. Their meanings lie deep. Candice Hopkins (2005) observes:

*In Native culture, stories are not simply stories. They are told and retold so that they resonate in the present, not as myths and legends, but as a vital part of history. They teach critical lessons and cultural values, like bravery and the necessity of communication.*

Stories, in Aboriginal worldview, come from somewhere. They are not just made up on the spot. In using them, artists are encouraged to search the cultural origins, before elaborating new artistic meanings. Geraldine Manossa (2002) explains:

*Native performance theatre comes from a specific source and entails a particular language, which unfolds movements true to the story. These specifics reflect Native performance as distinct from Western theatre based on where the creative process arises. That is why Native performers, writers, and directors need to do the necessary ancestral research, so they can continually be inspired from these unambiguous and powerful sources (p. 30).*

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*The only hope for the future is to believe in the strength of our cultures and, at its core, the function of art to convey the ethical values of our traditions through the power of the imaginary, free from the taboos and superstitions that condemn us to fear ourselves, to fear our innermost being.*

Yves Sioui Durand <sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Johanne Chagnon, p.2, 2001.

As well as listening to the stories themselves, it is critical to recognize the cultural protocols of how they are passed from one person to the next. Maria Campbell relates her experience:

*Stories are precious to Aboriginal people, but to the Métis they are the greatest inheritance of all. Land you can't give away because it doesn't belong to you. And it is not 'it' anyway, 'she' is the Mother... No one ever told me a story that was not his/her own, and if they did, it was only if the story had been given to them or if the story was purchased by way of trade. Even then, the storyteller would begin the story by telling how he/she came by it, and the name of the original creator would be given. The storyteller who had been given the story could not pass it on to anyone else without permission or prior consent (in Moses, 2005, p. 122).*

Aboriginal storytelling is rarely a simple act of reading from a book. The storyteller generally has told the story many times. In recounting it, it becomes something else. Drew Hayden Taylor (1999) suggests:

*Much like an actor or writer, a storyteller uses his body, voice and imagination to take the audience on a journey. If that is not the essence of theatre, Native Theatre, I do not know what is (p. 203).*

### **Trickster**

A variation of the trickster role is found in many cultures around the world. S/he has emerged again in the contemporary work of Aboriginal artists. Tomson Highway (1988) attempts to explain why this is so, speaking of the important role of the trickster:

*In the same sense that Jesus Christ stands at the very, very centre of Christian mythology, we have a character in our mythological universe, in our dreamlife as a people, who stands at the very centre of that universe, and that character is the Trickster. That little guy, man or woman - it doesn't matter because the Cree language doesn't have any gender - who essentially straddles the consciousness of Man and God, translates reality from the Supreme Being, the Great Spirit, to the people and back and forth. Without the spiritual health of that figure I think Indian people are completely screwed.*

*I think it's up to us, particularly the artists, people working with spiritual lives - which is essentially what artists do - they're kind of priests of a sort, they serve that kind of purpose in the culture - without the revival and the bringing back of that essential character, the Trickster - Weesageechak (in Cree), Nanabush (in Odjibway) - I think we've had it. We're up shit creek.*

A further reason for trickster's renewed popularity in Aboriginal arts is suggested by Kristina Fagan (2010):

*For instance, the concept of the trickster seems to have been particularly appealing and useful to urban Native artists. The urban Native community is tribally mixed, and living with a wide array of cultures and possible lifestyles. In this situation, the 'trickster', being pan-tribal and endlessly adaptable but still identifiably Native, may offer a useful symbol of city life (in Reder, p. 13).*

There is a risk, however, in seeing the trickster figure as somehow 'essentially' Aboriginal, as reduced to some kind of simplistic cliché. Yvette Nolan (2008) warns:

*The trickster, who goes by many names - Nanabush, Weesageechak, Raven, Coyote - caught the imagination of artists and academics alike. As Native artists started to find new ways to tell old stories, they found a willing facilitator in the Trickster...Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, the Trickster teaches us about the nature and meaning of existence on planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and God, the Great Spirit...There is a danger, however, in seeing the Trickster everywhere in Native works. Drew Hayden Taylor tells a story about being astonished to read an academic essay that identified the Trickster throughout his body of work. While there is the element of the Trickster in some of Drew's work, just because it is a work by a Native writer does not mean there must be a Trickster (p. 8).*

Elaborating Nolan's point Linda M. Morra (2010) proposes a (re)location for trickster in the current context of Aboriginal art making:

*Since the late 1980s, tricksters have been seen as emblematic of a postmodern consciousness rather than as part of specific Indigenous cultures, histories, storytelling: and since tricksters have often been used in the service of a predominantly white and colonial culture that characterized this figure as exotic, tricksters need to be relocated within specific Indigenous socio-historical contexts, and understood properly within these contexts (in Reder, p. xii).*

### ***Straddling Two Worlds***

Many, though certainly not all, Aboriginal artists face the quandary of hybridity - working within two ancestries, two traditions or two aesthetics. This can be expressed on the individual level, but also in a larger way. Marianne Nicolson talks about her personal changes over time:

*My identity has shifted. At times I have felt more attracted to non-Native culture and ways. Over the last five years I have been much more part of my mother's side - she is Kingcome Inlet. It is a struggle that I play out in my art work. I find being bicultural is a common issue, not just for me, but for us as a community. My art is my attempt to deal with it (in McMaster, 1999).*

For other Aboriginal artists, it has more to do with their complex relationship with Western art forms. It has been said that the genre of 'Native Theatre' is, by its nature, hybrid - borrowing from both Aboriginal and mainstream ideas of theatre. Marie Clements (2005) comments:

*This ever-churning personal, historical and political kaleidoscope is often what colours the Aboriginal perspective outwards and onto the stage, and places Aboriginal artists in Canada in the unique position of knowing more about the dominant culture, than that culture knows about them. This generational assimilation has afforded survival with acute societal costs but has also bred generations of Aboriginal artists who have survived and ultimately transcended a world that has demanded an unwavering presence in their living rooms, their school books, in the minds of justice, in the houses of belief, on their tongues, and in their genes, and yet still failed to quiet their authentic voice (p. 6-7).*

Describing these shifts in identification as bicultural is sometimes inadequate to understanding the situation of Aboriginal artists. Not only do some claim multiple identities, but even these identities are in constant flux. Eleanor Heartney (2007) suggests:

*The artists...express a fluid sense of identity, which affirms that there is no such thing as ethnic purity. Instead, as 'post-Indians', they embrace a reality in which identity is constantly being reshaped by surrounding circumstances. Freedom from the quest for purity allows them to address a diverse set of issues in a wide range of media...These artists also represent an inescapable reality of contemporary life, namely the hybrid nature of all identity. Many of them claim double, even triple, identities, and their artwork tends more toward postmodern strategies like appropriation, deconstruction, and irony than towards assertions of ethnicity or invocations of tribal custom.*

# FUTURE OF ABORIGINAL ARTS



Shooting of *Journal d'un Sevrage*, Wapikoni mobile. Photographer: Iphigénie Marcoux-Fortier.

*Indigenous people in Quebec...are still calling for justice, and hip-hop is a vehicle to call for this change. As an artist, I love hip-hop because it allows for free expression: You can talk about whatever issues are important to you. Hip-hop is a space for me to express myself on many subjects, to denounce injustices. It's also a space to propose positive solutions for social ills, and to reflect on the world around me. Through hip-hop we are opening people's eyes to our culture and also to our long, long history on this land. I want to speak to youth in Quebec who don't always learn about real Indigenous history in the school system. Quebecois and Indigenous peoples' history in Quebec are interlinked. This relationship between our cultures has shaped what we know to be Quebec today, and who we are. (Samian)<sup>36</sup>*

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Stefan Christoff, *Giving Algonquins a Good Rap*, The Dominion.  
<http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/3240>

The eighth way in which to understand Aboriginal arts is looking at the future. This is always a tricky proposition. It is misleading to suggest that there exists a commonly defined field called, 'Future of Aboriginal Art'. The future is generally unpredictable.

Our review did suggest certain trends that have been emerging within the Aboriginal arts milieu. We have no pretension to claim that these tendencies form some kind of a movement. Taken together, they do not necessarily add up to something comprehensive or unified. They do, however, offer clues as to how Aboriginal arts are evolving.

Some artists who have commented on this evolution are Samian, Skeena Reece, Archer Pechawis, Tania Willard, Steven Loft, Margo Kane, Verna J. Kirkness, Susan Crean, Sylvie Paré, Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Peter Morin and Réginald Vollant. We have included words spoken by Marrie Mumford and Alanis Obomsawin.

## ***Tendencies***

Obviously, no one really knows what the future will bring. But we can start by looking at some current tendencies in Aboriginal communities:

### **1. *birth rate of Aboriginal peoples = more Aboriginal youth***

The birth rate among Aboriginals in Canada is the highest in the country, projected to be twice as much as the average birth rate by 2017.<sup>37</sup> This is producing a population which is the youngest in Canada with roughly half being under 25 years old. This means more young Aboriginal artists, more demand for support. Skeena Reece<sup>38</sup> states:

*We are now seeing on a grand scale, also due to the growing number of young Indigenous people coming of age, a massive documentation process and participation in mainstream culture. They are talking about their standards of living, their communities, their hopes and fears, and we need to listen. We need to open our eyes and really see what they are presenting and not just as a last resort to avoid any great catastrophes: we need to use it as a first resort for guidance in our roles as adults and guardians...Native youth, Native people, Indigenous people, hip hop people are presenting ideas, making connections, drawing conclusions and asking important questions.*

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<sup>37</sup> The Aboriginal population is expected to grow at an average annual rate of 1.8%, more than twice the rate of 0.7% for the general population.

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/050628/dq050628d-eng.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Curatorial statement, *Purple Turtle Speaks and Breaks*, Beat Nation.

<http://www.beatnation.org/curatorial-statements.html>

## **2. exchange among Indigenous peoples**

Indigenous peoples, from around the world, including those from this land, are meeting; exchanging knowledge and strategies; networking; publishing and using their combined presence to pressure governments - local, national and international. This means that Aboriginal artists from Canada can more easily participate in cultural exchanges. As never before, they encounter new artworks in a global context, as they share their own work and ideas. These exchanges will not always be comfortable, not always in the 'celebration' paradigm. As Archer Pechawis (2000) suggests:

*I want to de-colonize my soul...I've had native people tell me that the following things are 'traditional': heterosexism, patriarchy, the 'horns and pitchfork' devil, dark is evil/light is good, you name it. I know I have an idealized notion of pre-contact Indianness, but give me a break!*

*If we (Indians) are going to untangle ourselves from the mess we are in then some hard-assed questions have got to be asked. I am addressing these questions to the Aboriginal community for an internal debate. I'm not interested in non-Native peoples' thoughts on this matter. It's an Indian thing. And hopefully that will give us some room to breathe on this, cuz it doesn't have to be hashed out in a public sphere...I think the issue of what is 'traditional' is going to be a long, long debate (p. 137).*

## **3. cultural hybridity**

Aboriginal people, especially those living in large cities, are interconnecting with folks from other racial groups. This means more artists with mixed roots (Aboriginal plus 'something else'), creating hybrid art forms. Of course, other Aboriginal artists, without mixed roots, are also working in hybrid ways. The current generation of Aboriginal artists has an ability to bend art forms - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to serve their own artistic practice. Speaking of hip hop, Tania Williard<sup>39</sup> elaborates:

*The search for culture through art and expression is one of the influences for the assimilation of hip hop forms into indigenous aesthetics...Indigenous artists trace roots back to not only their indigenous culture but also to the influence of hip hop, on the other side of the imaginary line we call a border.*

*Medicine beats and ancestral rhymes fuel indigenous hip hop, art and expression. Culture and identity are in a constant state of flux; new forms created today are becoming the culture of our grandchildren – hybridized, infused and mixed with older 'traditions'. We continue to shift, grow and change. Whether the influences are hip hop or country music, the roots of the expression go back to cultural story, indigenous language, land and rights, and the spirit of our ancestors.*

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<sup>39</sup> Curatorial statement, *Medicine Beats and Ancestral Rhymes*, Beat Nation.  
<http://www.beatnation.org/curatorial-statements.html>

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*I think what's been successful is that Aboriginal theatre has emerged and created a movement across this country despite deplorable levels of funding from the Canadian government and institutions. We as Native people are extremely successful at working with next to nothing.*

Marrie Mumford<sup>40</sup>

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#### **4. new and emerging technologies**

Although there continues to be problems of access to new technologies for some Aboriginal communities, these technologies still have an impact on them, including those living in remote areas. This impact is felt by artists as well. They can make their work using new and emerging technologies. In addition, they can distribute it; market it; and talk about it (e.g. at a gathering) without leaving home. As Steven Loft<sup>41</sup> describes:

*Art, as a component of the Internet is still in its infancy. True, there are many sites featuring art and artists, but we are still conceptualizing cyberspace as a site for creative production and dissemination. The future of this technology lies in the development of "conceptual networks", places for artists to experiment, interact and to disseminate. This could be said to be even truer for Aboriginal artists given their diverse geographical divisions and their history of interaction with the mainstream art community.*

#### **5. healing from the impact of colonization**

Aboriginal peoples are still reeling from Canada's colonial history. However, they are using many, varied strategies to heal the impact of this history - e.g. traditional medicine principles; truth and reconciliation; restorative justice. Aboriginal artists are contributing to this healing through the production of their work - novels, videos, plays, etc. Margo Kane (1998) explains:

*To this day, Native people continue to find their way home. Many were adopted or fostered out-of-province, some to the United States, some even to Europe. Many come home with tragic stories of abuse and memories too painful to push*

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Marie Clements, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Words spoken at *Expressions - National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression*, 2002.  
<http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1288012608459/1288012608461#a6>

*aside. They and their families have begun the slow process of healing, rebuilding themselves and their communities.*

## **6. education and training**

More and more Aboriginal youth are finishing high school and then going on to community colleges and universities. Many Aboriginal artists now receive art training, whether in Western-based art schools, artists' residencies, Aboriginal mentorships or within the limited Aboriginal training programs that exist in the arts. This is happening at the same time that the concept of 'education' is being revamped and more attuned to Aboriginal traditions, values and ways of living. Verna J. Kirkness (1999) suggests:

*The prospective of Aboriginal education in Canada, as I see it, begins with process rather than content. We must engage not only parents, which is paramount, but we must engage the whole community to take ownership of what is to be in Aboriginal education in the 21st century. Together with teachers, the school authority, they must decide what they want for their children both now and in the future. They must adhere to the philosophy and principles they set in place. Only then can we/they...begin to see Aboriginal education as a holistic and cultural phenomenon.*

## **Future Realities**

All of these tendencies will put pressure on the Canadian arts system, as it is currently constructed, to adapt. New challenges will arise from this pressure. Some of them are:

### **1. infrastructure**

One of the weakest components of this system is the lack of appropriate infrastructure to support Aboriginal arts - arts organizations, training institutions, arts service organizations, Aboriginal venues, presenters.

Writing about theatre, Susan Crean (2008) remarks:

*Native theatre has now reached a stage where it is making demands and taking liberties. It has established its own multidisciplinary tradition and collective aesthetic, and has the authority as well as thechutzpah to tug on Shakespeare's cape. The underside of this achievement is the extreme fragility of the edifice holding it together. Extreme overwork and low pay are common enough in the arts, but in aboriginal theatre the entire community runs on burnout. Most affecting, though, is the failure of mainstream Canadian theatre to support aboriginal work by picking up and producing native plays.*

### **2. new arts awareness = new audiences**

As the production of Aboriginal arts increases, there will be a corresponding desire to understand and appreciate Aboriginal artists and their art practices. This desire will likely come from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. Canadian arts institutions and organizations will have to learn to adapt and to co-operate in fresh ways

if they hope to be relevant to these new audiences. This will not happen quickly as it involves taking risks, something mainstream arts organizations do not often consider as part of their mandate. Sylvie Paré (2006) says:

*. . . one finds so little interest for the history of our own artists in state-run museums. Prejudices run deep and prevent people in the field from finding new ways to work together. Undoubtedly, museology needs to be developed from the ground up in Quebec art museums to shape innovative methods and approaches with First Nations.*

### **3. critical discourse**

Aboriginal scholars and critics endeavour to place art and culture in the appropriate frameworks. Aboriginal art works simply cannot be properly evaluated by looking at them through the Western art lens. But what does an Aboriginal art lens look like for the future? How will current Aboriginal arts discourse continue to develop? Skawennati Tricia Fragnito<sup>42</sup> says:

*What I am really interested in talking about, or in seeing and showing to other people, is native people in the future. I would like to see us there, so that we can envision ourselves there in this far future, as not just survivors anymore, but as fully participating, empowered members of society, of a contemporary, thoroughly modern, futuristic society.*

### **4. Indigenization**

Currently, Aboriginal arts organizations are researching and starting to use Indigenous governance models as alternatives to the mainstream. As Aboriginal people, artists in particular, re-claim, re-appropriate and re-imagine their own ways of being in the world, the future will be more 'Indigenized.' Aboriginal artists are rediscovering traditional ways of working at the same time that they push boundaries into the future.

In this regard, the three way connection between elders, youth and artists is critically important. Artists can act as inter-generational bridges, as transmitters of cultural traditions. They will make art - the conception, the process, the product and the understanding - in communities, creating both with ancestral influences and, at the same time, in renewed, refreshed ways. Finding Aboriginal voice will be a critical part of this Indigenization process. Speaking of the 'land', Peter Morin<sup>43</sup> encourages:

*Your voice is also a land-filled voice. A land-filled voice is steeped in history - in ideas - in practice of these ideas. Remember your land-filled voice. Use it to speak.*

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<sup>42</sup> Interview on Indigenous Arts Network.

[http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/skawennati\\_tricia\\_fragnito/](http://indigenousartsnetwork.ca/artists/skawennati_tricia_fragnito/)

<sup>43</sup> *This Is a Speaking Voice*, A Small Gathering for the Healing of Our Aboriginal Languages.

<http://front.bc.ca/gatheringlanguage>

## ***Closing Reflections***

Creating this knowledge and literature review, while occasionally tedious, has been an incredible labour of love for both of us. We have learned considerably. We offer this document as our modest contribution to an ongoing dialogue - the history, tenacity and contemporary meanings of Aboriginal art forms - which has been moving out of the shadow of colonialism in the past few decades.

It is a dialogue among Aboriginal artists themselves and their communities. It is a dialogue with the Canadian arts mainstream. And it is a dialogue, recently begun, with artists of colour and their organizations.

We wish that, through a better understanding of Aboriginal arts today, more non-Aboriginal Canadians will honour Aboriginal artists. We hope for the day when their respected place in the arts imagination of this country is finally and fully recognized.

One of the ways of honouring Aboriginal artists is by visiting their working contexts. There is much to be experienced, much to be grateful for in the presence of these artists. As Réginald Vollant invites non-Aboriginal peoples to the talking table:

*Come see where we live, come see our people, come share stuff with us. I think if there's something to be done, structures to be built or discussions to be led with Aboriginals, then it has to be done in that context (in Trépanier 2002).*

This is a specific moment in history.

Aboriginal peoples are repatriating their art works and artifacts from museums around the world and bringing them back home. And when these objects get there, new life is being breathed into them.

Indigenous peoples from across the planet are meeting each other with increasing frequency, sometimes for the first time. And when they meet, new understandings, new alliances, new commitments about art and cultural practices are being made.

Aboriginal artists, scholars and critics are writing - often re-writing - art history to tell it from an Indigenous perspective. And as they do this, whole new ways of seeing, remembering, analysing, cataloguing, reviewing and critiquing their own art forms are being developed.

If we - and there are many Canadian we's - are taking all of this seriously; if we are genuinely and respectfully listening; if we are fearlessly examining the harsh realities of our collective history, the results will be transformative.

We will begin to imagine new meanings for this idea we now call Canada.

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*Honour the artist. The artist is the voice of the country. For a long time, it seemed to us there was war. Everything was frightening. Many of our people were sleeping; the land, the water, the air and animals were troubled. The artist kept on working. The prophecies are now coming through. Our young are the seventh generation making a difference as they prepare the ground for the next seven generations to come. The artist is inspired and stronger than ever. The children have a place in the world again.*

Alanis Obomsawin<sup>44</sup>

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France Trépanier & Chris Creighton-Kelly

December 2011

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<sup>44</sup> Words spoken at the conference *Cultures, Diversity and Everyday Life*, Montréal, 2002.

*We have employed a method for listing a bibliography that is comprised of works in two languages.*

*First, we have listed all texts published in English, followed by those published in French. If a work was published in a bilingual format, or translated, we have placed it in both the English and French bibliography.*

*We have done this for a specific reason. We have grouped publications in French as a singular, stand-alone list in order to create a preliminary overview of works on this topic for people who read in French. These are works that have been published in French, whether or not they were originally written in French.*

*Second, whether you are reading in English or French, some of the quotations will have been translated from one language into the other. All quotations have been referenced in either one bibliography or the other and occasionally, in both.*

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