

Weak Credentials: Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge in Contemporary Colonial Art

Most of the histories of the nations, which include a greater or smaller aboriginal population have been written by the descendants of the conquerors. Their emphasis has been on the white majority (or the white population, even where it is the minority)... the harshness and repression by which it [the conquest] was accomplished have been lost from the popular accounts. The outrages were too many and too great to be admitted.ⁱ

Artist-run communities in Canada and Québec are significant repositories of cultural leadership. They are supported by diverse and engaged pedagogies that confirm significant aspects professional status on producers, analysts and administrators. This rich body of knowledge has within it however, an uncharacteristic weakness and failure of rigour that betrays its origins in, and continued alignment with Canada's colonial foundation. The contradiction that lies at the heart of this failure and weakness is that while the theory and practice of cultural articulation in artist-run communities pays homage to freedom, diversity and resistance to oppression, their resources and methodologies are to a large extent ignorant of Aboriginal history and cultural practice, and thereby collude in oppression and exclusion of Aboriginal creative and analytic expression.

Aboriginal artist, curator and analyst Steve Loft searches for signs of an awakening to this contradiction.

The question really is: where and when is this going to happen? It certainly is not happening at our universities, and this strikes to the core of the issue. If this is where we are supposedly training and educating the professionals, why does curriculum not reflect (or even include, in most cases) Aboriginal expression as an historical and contemporary art aesthetic? How do we expecty significant change to occur at any level when our basic institutionalized education system refuses to acknowledge that any change is necessary, desirable or warranted? If you wanted a place to start, I'd argue that this is a good one. The way we teach fine art and art history has to change if there is to be true commitment (as opposed to lip service) to real and substantive recognition of Aboriginal art at all levels of arts discourse in Canada.ⁱⁱ

For older generations of non-Aboriginal cultural workers an opportunity to build a practice that clearly acknowledges colonial history and contemporary collusion may have slipped away except for those who committed to individual and largely isolated examinations of colonialism. Hope for development of cultural practice that remediates liberal contradictions of Canadian history lies with emerging communities of youth. Aboriginal writer Mike Paterson presents an outline of their characteristics that give rise to this hope.

Unlike rigid political ideologies that have ruled America for decades, the ideas of the postpolitical young remain fluid... they tend to be libertarian, materialistic, tolerant, rational, technologically adept, disconnected from conventional political organizations... and from narrow labels like liberal or conservative. They are not politically correct, rejecting dogma in favor of sorting through issues individually, preferring discussion to platforms... This is a culture founded on those of individuality, not leadership. Information flows laterally -- from many to many -- a structure that works against the creation of leaders.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another important aspect of youth culture is that they feel betrayed by the failure of pedagogy to present an honest and complete record of colonial history and its implications for contemporary practice. In a study completed in 2001 by the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS), first year college and university students expressed this sense of betrayal when the survey instrument itself made evident that the students had received little or no education on Canada's relationship with Aboriginal peoples, their diverse cultures, or on the contemporary contributions they were making.

"Students were asked to evaluate both their opportunities to learn about Aboriginal Peoples' histories and cultures in elementary and secondary school, and whether their learning had prepared them to address current issues between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. With incomplete and neutral answers excluded from the data, 80% of young persons are dissatisfied or strongly dissatisfied with existing Aboriginal Studies curriculum.

I was barely taught ANYTHING regarding Aboriginal Peoples in school... I am absolutely clueless with regard to these issues. I am uneducated on these matters and as such feel ill equipped to even have an opinion much less come to an understanding. [Ontario respondent/Canadian]"^{iv}

The CAAS report utilizes an analysis that is framed around concepts of a 'pedagogy of oppression' that describe the colonial purpose in marginalizing or negating information about Aboriginal culture in Canadian schools.

To achieve the social goals of those who constructed it, Canadian school curricula have historically denied the complexities, accomplishments, dynamism, and even the mere existence, of Aboriginal Peoples' many diverse cultures. The curriculum has promoted theories of settlement (such as Columbus' "discovery" and the Bering Strait migration) that strengthen the validity of colonialism. Accurate portrayal, from Aboriginal perspectives, of this history would undermine the supremacy of European culture on this land.^v

The CAAS report tests the theories developed by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*^{vi} and determines that the approach to Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian education system rests on depriving non-Aboriginal students of the critical tools necessary to make an accurate and informed assessment of a history and society that includes Aboriginal peoples.

It is important to remember that the objects of this pedagogy of oppression (within the Canadian school system) are the young of both the marginalized and the dominant classes. In particular, the young of the dominant class must be conditioned to believe the Master-Narrative regarding Euro-Canadian cultural superiority and Indigenous cultural inferiority. This is "tough work" for the power elite, because of the contradiction between this hegemonic pedagogical goal and the fact that Canada is a social democracy that simultaneously advocates protection and recognition of human rights and freedom of opinion. Canadian youth are constantly exposed to cross-cultural leakages of information, illuminating the fallacy of this superiority-inferiority construct.^{vii}

The greatest challenge facing arts professionals in Canada and Québec is becoming aware of the colonial enterprise that shaped their education and that insidiously refused to deliver on its promise of liberal democracy and human rights. Artist-run

practice is a significant leader in cultural development. Its standards of professional practice should include a full range of analytic tools that reveal and recognize colonial manipulation of cultural perspectives and that can forge insightful and enduring relationships with Aboriginal history and contemporary cultures.

ⁱ Patterson, E. Palmer II. *The Canadian Indian: A history Since 1500*. Toronto: Collier-MacMillan, 1972, p5. Quoted in *Learning About Walking in Beauty: Placing Aboriginal Perspectives in Canadian Classrooms*, 2001. part II East: The Long Era of Survival & Resistance – Colonization, p53. Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS). Online: http://www.crr.ca/en/Publications/ResearchReports/LearningAboutWalking/20021118_LearningAboutWalking_EAST_Colonization.pdf

ⁱⁱ Loft, Steve. *Aboriginal Art and Public Galleries: Towards an Integrative Structure*, 2002. Published in the anthology 'Expressions' as part of the Canadian Heritage National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression. Online: http://www.expressions.gc.ca/loftpaper_e.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Paterson, Mike. *Confessions of a Webmaster: on Morphing to the Transhuman Era*, 2000. Online: <http://www.carleton.ca/~mpatters/soc.html>
Quoting Katz, Jon. 1998. "The Netizen: Birth of a Digital Nation" in Holeton, Richard. 1998. *Composing Cyberspace: Identity, Community and Knowledge in the Electronic Age*. Also at <http://www.hotwired.com>

^{iv} *Learning About Walking in Beauty: Placing Aboriginal Perspectives in Canadian Classrooms*, Report Highlights, 2001. Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS). Online: http://www.crr.ca/en/Publications/ResearchReports/LearningAboutWalking/ePub_LAW20021115_report_highlights.htm

^v *ibid.* part II East: The Long Era of Survival & Resistance – Colonization, p38. Online: http://www.crr.ca/en/Publications/ResearchReports/LearningAboutWalking/20021118_LearningAboutWalking_EAST_Colonization.pdf

^{vi} Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder, 1971.

^{vii} *Learning About Walking in Beauty: Placing Aboriginal Perspectives in Canadian Classrooms*, Report Highlights, 2001. part II East: The Long Era of Survival & Resistance – Colonization, p44. Online: http://www.crr.ca/en/Publications/ResearchReports/LearningAboutWalking/20021118_LearningAboutWalking_EAST_Colonization.pdf