

Final Reflective Paper
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The current state of contemporary indigenous practice is complex and unique, with a multifaceted artist base, complicated and often tumultuous subject matter, as well as important historical context. After participating in the 'Contemporary Indigenous Practices' course this fall, I will be writing this paper as a summary and reflection on my learning and the material provided in the course. This essay will explore my understanding of contemporary aboriginal practices, the requirements of responsible participants within this shared reality, as well as some key lessons I will be taking away from this course. After taking this class I now feel confident reflecting upon these topics and coming up with insight into my opinions of the modern artistic context for indigenous reality.

My understanding of first nation practice lies within the idea of cultural promotion and participation. Generally speaking the term 'indigenous art' refers to those of certain cultural or racial backgrounds and engagements. However, when speaking about shared realities it is important to acknowledge that non-indigenous participants have roles to play as well. Many works of art that fall into this category follow similar formal qualities, and mediums. This results in public identification of

aboriginal practice to often times leave out many art pieces because they do not fit into these stereotypical forms. I believe that this genre of art should be considered for the cultural and personal contexts surrounding it, as opposed to the formal aesthetics. My personal definition of this contemporary issue would be the idea of modern day artistic practice, but with relation to indigenous communities, artists, histories or traditions.

When looking to participate in the discourse surrounding these important pieces, it is critical to understand what a responsible participant would do to assure for upmost cultural and artistic integrity. When looking to engage in the contemporary indigenous context many artists tend to follow some personal ideals to keep with tradition, honesty and respect. First nations practice is the context in which indigenous artists create in relation to indigenous culture and history. Although the participants in these practices do not have distinct and set boundaries or guidelines, there are a few ways in which I believe that responsible participants tend to make their work. These include; the need to acknowledge the historical context of aboriginal culture, the promotion of indigenous resistance in society, and the encouragement of economic growth in their systems. For non-artists in this discussion I also believe that there are some ways in which responsibility and consideration is still important, such as the need to encourage art and the need to not appropriate it. It is through these lenses that I have noticed responsible participation in this dialogue.

The need to acknowledge the history of Canada in one's work is heavily prevalent within practices that contribute to contemporary indigenous discourse. Artists tend to pick a historical topic to practice on and create art surrounding. Many artists choose to acknowledge the history of colonial power relations in their works (Phillips, 2010, p.350). Artists also however, often acknowledge the history of the formal aspects of their work. This often times leads to artists finding ways to be creative within the bounds of traditional formalities (Martin, 2010, p.375). A great example of this lies in the artist Mungo Martin. Martin utilized the traditional practice of totem pole making, but put a unique spin on it by changing traditional imagery and putting unusual animals on the pole (Dawn, 2008, p.7). Martin actually placed a beaver at the bottom of the pole, as a nod of acknowledgement to the colonial power struggle between the Canadian government and the indigenous people of Canada. By using the Canadian governments' ignorance of aboriginal traditions, he was able to create a compelling piece that made them acknowledge their horrific history of oppression against his people. This artistic achievement by Martin assures that he has a legacy as a responsible participant in this conversation. Martin used the well known artistic practice of totem poles, with that same stylistic formalities, while infusing historical and

topical subject matter. Artists should always look to do this when attempting to put meaningful works into the open dialogues surrounding indigenous culture.

The secondary way in which I found indigenous artists to be contributing to this shared reality is through the encouragement of resistance through art, and the promotion of aboriginal identity in an ever-repressing society. As far a promotion of self or community as indigenous, I mean that artistic practices can as a form of resistance to the 'white washing' of their cultures and communities (Phillips, 2010, p.351). A great example of someone who creates art as protest is artist Norval Morrisseau.

Morrisseau used his fame and notoriety across Canada as a way to resist the media's narrative of aboriginal people (Robertson, 2016, p.83). Because of Morrisseau's wide spread discussion surrounding his own culture and roots, it wasn't long before he became one of the most famous first nations artists in Canada. Unfortunately Morrisseau had a less than favourable place in the media, and he was often used as a way to personify Indigenous stereotypes (Robertson, 2016, p.86). The media preferred to tell issues of Morrisseau's personal life rather than his art. In particular, news stations would put on stories of Morrisseau's struggles with drugs and alcohol, directly in contrast with information about his own cultural importance. This gave many media outlets the opportunity to use racist stereotypes to try and warp public perception of aboriginal people more than it already had been. Morrisseau attempted to resist

multiple racist narratives put on by the media by his refusal to participate in interviews, and refusing to let his art suffer. Morrisseau used his own individuality in his work, whilst drawing off of traditional practice, even with the pressure of assimilation coming down from various media (Robertson, 2016, p.100). James Purdie stated that Morrisseau creates his work in a way that “demonstrates both agency and decolonizing effort to reposition himself in popular culture” (Robertson, 2016, p.101). This shows how Morrisseau utilized the media and his art to resist racist calls for assimilation. By refusing to assimilate into non-indigenous Canada, Morrisseau acted as an inspirational figure amongst indigenous artists and appeared to many as the face of the artistic resistance in the 1970s. It is through careful analysis of an artists work and public persona that we can see the degree to which they act as responsible figures within a shared reality.

Economic prosperity in vulnerable communities is extremely important for the people and cultures involved. This is especially true for the modern aboriginal context because of the vulnerability, as well as the opportunities presented through traditional practices. Many artists see art as a way to bring this prosperity into their communities whilst maintaining traditions and historical acknowledgement. A great example of the way in which art can effect these communities would be the opening of the Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art in the 1950s (Martin, 2010, p.372). This opened

as a way to revitalize the art and traditions of the Kwakwaka-wakw and Haida people.

Fortunately this became extremely successful and ended up with heightened demand from commercial and local markets. Because of the introduction of encouragement from artists and traditionalists, the community and its members began to flourish. By using responsible participants from the indigenous and non-indigenous worlds, this school was able to promote and encourage economic liberation for a community. As aforementioned it is also important for non-indigenous people, wishing to engage in this shared reality to be encouraging of these trends. Non-indigenous people who purchase aboriginal art and support artists, without appropriating anything would be a good example of this. It is not an uncommon opinion to have that traditional arts can provide economic bases for aboriginal people, as this same opinion was shared by George Raley, residential school principal from 1914 to 1934 (Phillips, 2010, p.351).

Raley would be a good example of a non-indigenous individual who participated in this shared reality by putting on displays of aboriginal art for the community and cultural benefit. Of course Raley would not be without his criticism as a residential school principal. Although this action was beneficial to indigenous communities, his other actions may not have been. Another example of how art can effect community economics comes from the Inuit people of Canada (Berlo, 1989, p.297). Inuit communities have promoted their artists, primarily female and in turn experienced

great economic gain. Evidently this claim holds weight in the discussion of economic prosperity, and that is perhaps why so many artists promote the arts their communities.

Although many non-artists individual may read the aforementioned guidelines on how to participate in indigenous art and agree, I believe it takes more than agreeing to advance a cultural effect like this. For example, you would be hard pressed to find someone who outright says that they do not believe aboriginal people should be economically fruitful, and perhaps this is why the point stands strongly with non-indigenous and indigenous people alike. It is however important to note that is is very different thing to wish for success and to actually encourage success. One can say that they like seeing success, but never buy from an aboriginal artist. This would be a logical fallacy of course but it is one that is worth pointing out to eager participants in this discussion. A good example of this support comes from the indigenous and non-indigenous support for new galleries of aboriginal art in recent years (Whitelaw, 2006, p.202). This support allowed individuals to have their art viewed as more than token or artifact, and therefore advances them selves and their communities. Individuals must not only voice support for first nation art and culture but actively engage in its encouragement as well.

Cultural and artistic appropriation is extremely dangerous and should be discouraged constantly among non-indigenous people. Although artists can also be guilty of this, it is much more prevalent in non-artists, and that is why I categorized it as a responsibility of non-artist participants. This is where I do find myself personally to be a little lost. Although it is good to support these artists and traditions, I also understand that there is a point where non-indigenous peoples need to stand aside and let these cultures speak. A passage that spoke strongly to me in relation to this idea goes as follows; "The narratives of decline...that result when Aboriginal ritual arts are decontextualized, privilege Western rather than Aboriginal value systems" from page 354 of *Aboriginal Modernities: First Nations Art* by Ruth B. Phillips. This summarizes how taking rituals from a culture is extremely dangerous to it, even if it is in the name of appreciation. Drawing the line between appropriate and appropriation is extremely difficult for many non-indigenous people who wish to be socially and culturally conscious. It is perhaps a role of the artistic community and its participants to start coming in and defining these lines more clearly.

There are many ways in which I feel as though this course advanced my knowledge and therefore I believe that there are some key points that I have taken as lessons. Personally I believe that this course has given me a more critical view of the world, as I was unaware of the true extent of many of the atrocities and historical events that

happened against aboriginal people. I also was unaware of how society still attempts to control indigenous peoples through the successes and failures of different aspects of aboriginal art. The artist that inspired the most to make change in my life and art was Mungo Martin. Mungo Martin utilized tongue-in-cheek art to form a sort of resistance against the Canadian government and their colonial power dynamics (Dawn, 2008, p.9). This show of subtle and sneaky political resistance and visibility was incredibly inspiring for me to look at my own work and see how I can use my art to contest power dynamics, and inequalities in the world. This course also taught me the correct ways to encourage indigenous art and engage in this conversation without being appropriative or insensitive as a non-indigenous person. I enjoyed the opportunity to learn these critical and ever-topical skills. Overall I believe the lessons I gleaned the most from this course surround the conversation of my relation to aboriginal people, and my relation to cultural art.

This fall, my participation within the 'Contemporary Indigenous Practice' course allowed me to get a close look at the historical and contemporary aspects of aboriginal culture and art. In relation to my artistic practice and individual life, I was able to gather a few key lesson from the course for my personal development. The biggest lessons I learned from this course was the desire to look at the world in more critical ways, and to consider the historical contexts of everything. Also as an artists this class excited me as

I now look at ways in which I can subtly use my work as protest and resist. Overall just the ability to start participating in these conversations was the most important thing this course gave to me. This course also allowed me to gather some insight on the conversation surrounding indigenous art, and see how participants in these conversations utilize their artistic practice to become better at furthering this discourse. Artistic individuals tend to follow a few guidelines for productive and integrity driven discourse. These are as follows; acknowledgement and basis off of historical contexts, the pressure of political and social resistance, and the promotion of economic growth within these communities. As far as non-artistic individuals go, I believe there are two main ways in which they can participate in this discussion; encouragement of the artists, and avoidance of appropriation. My personal learning has advanced so far because of this course and I look forward to the ways it will continue to affect my worldview.

The conversations surrounding modern aboriginal art are far from over, and are more topical now than ever. In fact, I would dare to day that the indigenous art community has just begun to touch on the current state of aboriginal contexts, and the ways it can be improved. All of the incredibly informed work coming out of these communities are beacons of hope for those in support. I look forward to not only continuing my discussions surrounding these issues but to seeing how the indigenous art world will continue to evolve in the coming years.

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