EMILY CARR:

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SEARCH FOR A UNIVERSAL ESSENCE

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Mysterious. Sacred. Dignified. Brooding. “So Canadian.” The mystical Christian spirituality and the use of Indigenous imagery in the paintings of Canada's own Emily Carr is a recently growing issue for scholars[1] [2] and curators [3] alike. If her volumes of writing tell us anything, it is that Emily Carr's objective to “find God” in her painting was the greatest drive in her late artistic development and production. The struggle to reconcile her Christian Protestant faith to her ideals of Native spirituality by finding a universal “essence” of divinity in the depths of the West Coast forests is evident in her art and her journals, letters, and public addresses. In this paper, “universalism” is defined as 'the claim for the existence of an essence that transcends cultural context; and extending subjective experiences and/or ideas of this essence to all humanity.' Does Carr's work exhibit universalism? What current evidence is there of this viewpoint homogenizing and commercializing the spirituality of Indigenous cultures? Lastly, how is the rise of Emily Carr as a national hero, along with the Group of Seven, relevant to the assimilation of Indigenous culture today?

Victoria, British Columbia, 1871, born to English immigrants. Emily Carr couldn't have picked a more conservative colonial setting to arrive in. Early in youth, Carr wished she had been “born Indian.” [4] She received formal academy training in San Francisco and London. During a holiday to Alaska Carr met American artist Theodore J. Richardson, and committed to the task to painting “all the totem poles & villages I can before they are a thing of the past.” [5] At the time, despite the significant body of picturesque, descriptive scenes (Figure 1) and one successful exhibition, little else became of the effort. In France, Carr was exposed to modernism, fundamentally altering the way and reason she

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[1] Hirst, “The Spiritual and Artistic Journey of Emily Carr”

[2] Maria Crosby, “Construction of the Imaginary Indian” (1992): 267-287

[3] Globe and Mail. “Emily Carr’s legacy: What Sarah Milroy discovered co-curating her new show.” Last modified October 31 2014. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/emily-carrs-legacy-what-sarah-milroy-discovered-co-curating-a-new-show/article21406257/

[4] Tippet, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 29.

[5] Tippet, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 75.

was painting (Figure 2), effectively isolating her from conservative Victoria.

After this anti-climax, Carr took on a mixture of modest money-making ventures to support herself, including creating pottery using her studies of Native designs. She dug her own clay and appropriated rough versions of the faces and carvings she had once so meticulously described in her watercolours. When her sales became suddenly became so profitable she could not meet demand, as one *McLean's* magazine put it,[6] and other entrepreneurs started selling their own Native-pottery designs to tourists, Carr felt robbed—ironically. Indeed, in her autobiographical letter she wrote she "had taken up the pottery, adapting and utilizing my Indian designs...".[7] Around 1919, media experimentation and abandonment of convention led Carr to make great strides in her development. Details abandoned, forms in repetition, and rhythm took prominence. Emily Carr wasn't painting the forests in the modern style she had learned in France, but was moving towards her own individualistic expression.[8] However, it was only after being discovered by the Group of Seven in 1927 in particular Lawren Harris, did Carr find the self-expression and spiritual element in her painting that she is most celebrated for today.

The Group of Seven were surprised by the fifty-six year old BC native. Carr was equally deeply impressed with the Group, feeling she had been "beaten at my own game." [9] Most impressive to her was Lawren Harris's abstract, powerfully simple landscapes (Figure 3). More than just "great depth and dignity," Carr remarked in her journal, his paintings evoked the "rising into serene, uplifted planes, above the swirl into holy places." On Nov 14, 1927, she wrote, "Perhaps I shall find God here, the God I've longed and hunted for and failed to find." [10]

[6] Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography,* 136.

[7] *Ibid*, 143.

[8] *Ibid*, 131.

[9] Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr,* 5.

[10] Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr,* 6-7.

Harris followed theosophy: a 19th century spiritual movement combining Eastern and Western occult beliefs. In the 1888 magnum opus of theosophy co-founder Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* explains how the mysteries of God and the Universe can be understood by a direct intuition.[11] (The link of the "intuitive" to "Truth" is an underlying tenant of modernism.) To depict the "inner sense of order … and universal rhythmic flow and balance," by means of an artist's intuitive reduction to symbolism, would lead to spiritual fulfillment. [12]

Carr was deeply interested with Harris' spirituality. She hadn't attended the local Reformed Episcopal Church since 1904.[13] Like Harris, she "endeavored to commune & come as close to God" and to "feel the power of his presence." Obsessed with traveling evangelists, fringe spiritualist groups in Victoria, and reading works by authors such as transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carr became torn between Harris' religion and her own. She even befriended an evangelist from the Indian Christian Mission Society called Raja Singh, who spoke of experiencing God in nature. Carr also had a strong, simplistic mysticism linked closely to her ideals of Native people. At the time of her childhood, there was an equal amount of Natives in Victoria as English,[14] but no evidence suggests she had interaction or interest in the local Native culture until her first sketch tip to Ucluelet in 1898. More significant of influence on her was Alexander Pope's seminal *Essay on Man,* published 1734, as evidenced by her handwritten copies of passages into a book she gave her sister. This essay was responsible for the "Noble Savage" concept, describing Native people as possessing inherent goodness and wisdom, and their oneness with nature allowed them an intimate connection with God. After their 1927 meeting, the resulting mentorship that ensued between Lawren Harris and Carr would continue to challenge her both formally and philosophically. The work from 1928 depicts Carr's wrestle to synthesize her Protestant theology and her notions of Native mysticism, as one spiritual unity.

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[11] Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine.*

[12] Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography,* 150.

[13] *Ibid,* 151.

[14] *Ibid,* 29.

Carr felt the spirituality of Harris' paintings would be contained, for her, in the wooden totems. “The oldest art of our West, the art of the Indians, is in spirit very modern, full of liveliness and vitality,” opined Carr in her first public address in 1930. “They went for and got so many of the very things that we modern artists are striving for today.”[15] She believed “Their sensitiveness to design was magnificent; the original and power of their art forceful, grand, and built on a solid foundation, being taken from the very core of life itself,” [16] and that “The foundation that the Indian built his art upon was his Totem.” [17]

More determined than ever to experience the West Coast culture, she was met with indifference and annoyance in arriving at the villages which had once shown her hospitality. Unable to find her ideal subjects, she ended up in the deserted village Kitwancool, populated only by leaning totems (Figure 4). In *Kitwancool,* 1928, the Group's expressive simplification and rhythmic lines are present. A towering but swaying white, pyramidal hill in the background evokes Harris' Rockies mountains and smooth blending. Freed from static documentation, Carr's totems are no longer decaying relics but an animated population, moving in rhythm with the land, like the ghosts of the missing inhabitants of the village.

In 1929, Carr painted *Indian Village,* (Figure 5), which was to become one of her most celebrated images ,[18] especially by Harris who bought the image. An abstract, rigid form of a whitewashed church stands symbolically centered under a canopic jungle of geometric vegetation. Unlike her totems, the starkly whitewashed church and grave markers do not undulate with the landscape or seem to decay into the forest shadows. Despite her deep religiosity and her dependence on them for lodging during sketching excursions, Carr blamed the Presbyterian missionaries for the epidemics and poverty of the local Native villages, as well as corrupting the “pure” Native mind. Is

[15] Carr, *Fresh Seeing,* 18.

[16] *Ibid,* 35.

[17] *Ibid,* 19.

[18] Hirst, *The Spiritual and Artistic Journey of Emily Carr,* 1.

Carr making a statement on the pure, immovable presence of (Christian) God, unshakable in the forces of nature? Is it an expression of her criticism of the Presbyterian missionaries in their vain attempts to tame First Nation people and the land, and the inorganic unnatural imposition of their religion? Whatever her statement, the picture demonstrates Carr's unique position, with her colonial vantage point and her sensitivities to Indigenous spirituality, reverence for the forest, the Church, and trying to conceive a unity with them. Despite her mystics and her "God in all" notion, Carr could not accept theosophy's absence of prayer, the Bible, Christ, and salvation, as she stated "there'd be nothing, *nothing*." [19] Her eventual rejection of theosophy ended up in the loss of Harris' friendship.

Strangled by Growth, 1931, (Figure 6) was around the end of Carr's totem painting period. In this dynamic, tangled scene once again a totem's animated being is evoked, this time choked and nearly covered by the devouring boughs of undergrowth. Themes of death and life, strength and weakness suggest the theme that has been repeated in many other of Carr's works: a concept in mystical painting that has been described by Ann Davis in the *Logic of Ecstasy* as a "unity … created through opposites." [20] Decay and returning to nature wasn't a new theme to Carr, beginning with the totems in her earliest sketch trips. But the treatment is wholly different: instead of being the recorder, hastily working to preserve a visual record of the vanishing artifacts, she is celebrating the cyclic process of life and death and the tangled, dependent interaction of nature and humans. In 1930, Carr wrote that she wanted to feel "The reality of growth and life and / light, and the sweetness of Mother / Nature, the nearness of God, / the unity of the universe, / peace, content." [21]

By 1931, Emily left Native motifs temporarily to focus exclusively on the landscape, following the urging of Harris. Unprecedented for a modern artist to admit, Emily agreed she had been "copying the Indian idiom instead of expressing my own findings." [22] According to Maria Tippet, Emily Carr

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[19] Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 136.

[20] Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting,* 12.

[21] Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 172.

[22] Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 254.

preoccupation with the Indigenous stopped her from overcoming her European fear for the Forest.[23] For the next 4 years, Carr meditated on the grandeur and presence of the Divine in expanses of sky and reduced forms for trees, producing brooding, expressive images such as *VII – Forest, British Columbia*, c. 1931 (Figure 7). In this solemn piece, a deep, curving tunnel is formed by the powerful tree trunk in this painting, reverberating in harmony. The sky is utterly blocked by the thickness of the leaves, but light still creeps in. The impression of a cathedral is impossible to ignore. Even without such overt symbolism as a church and crosses, Carr manages to imprint suggestions of Christianity to the wilderness, with the towering, dignified, arching forms.

One of her most profound paintings come from this period. *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky*, 1935 (Figure 8) becomes a profound metaphor of Christian theology and a capturing of spiritual ecstasy. Margaret Hirch suggests the lone timber is a metaphor for Christ, who was scorned, yet beloved by the Father, and ascended to heaven following the crucifixion. Two the central tree's left, stands a faint suggestion of the two other crosses (trees) of Calvary. [24] Considering Emily Carr was rooted in her faith at this point, metaphors of trees, sky, and the logging activity—the destructive doing of Man—are a plausible interpretation. The link between Christ, salvation, natural resources which man is dependent on, blending Christianity, theosophy, and "Native" spirituality culminates in this work. Carr became convinced that not only was God in nature, but as an artist, she could commune with him, and a divine universe.

Carr was looking for an essence, not just formally by means of abstraction, but of the object's inner meaning, its spiritual essence. In her public address on 4 March 1930, Carr explained abstraction as a means to this essence, "where form is so simplified and abstracted that the material side, or object, is forgotten – only the spiritual remains." [25] But abstraction alone was not sufficient; for Carr, the art of the West Coast tribes were perfect embodiments of this essence. To her, Indigenous people are

[23] Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 167.

[24] Hirst, *The Spiritual and Artistic Journey of Emily Carr*, 56.
[25] Carr, *Fresh Seeing*, 11.

closer to nature and communion with God, that is they are closer to the essence. Carr appropriates their carvings and imbeds them with her own hybrid mysticism, framing it in a Protestant Christian framework. In her 1935 speech to Normal School students and staff, Carr stated,

> "..this most elusive of all elements in a picture, this "something plus," is born of the artist's attempt to express the force underlying all things. It has to do with life itself …Whatever subject to be translated...the artist at the moment of painting it must *feel* its very nature, which, by the magic of his art, he transfers into his work ...affecting all who see ti with the same sensations he experienced when executing it. It is by expressing the *felt nature* of the thing, then that the artists becomes the mouthpiece of the universe of which he is a part and reveals it unto man through the "something plus" in the picture, the nature as well as the appearance of the life and forms about him." [26]

Carr continues to list various cultures, including "the African negroes" and the "Indians of America" as having embodied this nature in their art, transforming their work into the "universal language of man."[27]. In the modernist view, the artist's sensations around the subject alone are not only adequate to represent it, but to reveal its inner "nature" as well. This idea that modern can be the "mouthpiece of the universe," illustrates how representation of cultures can take an earnest, sympathetic and inspiring form. In the case of Emily Carr, universalism is the mythology that prompted the seemingly humanitarian, philanthropic act of salvaging a culture thought to be vanishing and in need of ethnographic preservation.

Contemporary Haida artist Bill Reid is evidence for the persistence of this mythology and its adverse effects. Collaborating with academics and anthropologists in the 1950's, Reid collected artifacts of West Coast tribes, including totems, "repatriated" objects from collectors to give them to museums, and worked on a reconstruction of a village. He has been credited as both the "reviver" and

[26] *Ibid,* 34.

[27] *Ibid,* 34-35.

"saviour" of Haida art and culture.[28] To Maria Crosby, Reid is still "informed by the colonial system, and has internalized colonial Euro-Canadian frames of authority." According to her, Reid's critical success by 1980 was linked to the conception of Reid being "reviver, resurrector and rescuer of Indian art." [29] In many ways, the actions Reid has taken in order to save his own people's culture is no different than those of Emily Carr—Reid is but one example of the trend. Like collecting, representations contained in art pieces can be sold and collected by dealers, museums and galleries. This does not "preserve" the pieces, then, as they were in their previous state, property of the cultures whom created them, but commoditizes them in a new nationalistic and corporate context. To Crosby, the preservation of images does not simply mean increased cultural awareness/accessibility to mainstream Canadians; rather it allows the dominant culture to assert its obligation and right to protect, advocate, and purchase Native culture.

Appropriation is defined as: speaking for, defining, describing, representing, using stories, images, and experiences of someone else.[30] Theodore Levitte, the economist credited with coining the term "globalization of markets" in 1983, argued that tastes were universal and markets should work to create universal to accommodate this commonality. [31] Martha Rosler, an artist and writer who focuses on cultural and social issues, has stated that a progressive stance is to abandon national identities in favour of the "valorization of peripheral cultures" and of a "new, global postmodern village culture." [32] To these arguments, in *Notes on Appropriation,* author Loretta Todd responds that in the development of a universal image, the market will simply create "choice" cultures and "exotic" cultures, which are then fetishized and become objects of consumption. If truly a "universal man" exists, Todd questions,

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[28] Crosby, *Construction of the Imaginary Indian*, 280.

[29] *Ibid*, 283.

[30] Todd, *Notes on Appropriation* , 24.

[31] Levitt, *The globalization of markets,* 20.

[32] Todd, *Notes on Appropriation* , 30.

why must a Native man be the tool to create this image? [33] In other words, universalism does not unite; it simply strengthens the already entrenched division between the Central/peripheral and mainstream/exotic. For Crosby and Todd, so-called Western "inclusivity" means a continuation of Indigenous culture valorized, appropriated, or studied as a science. Universalism not merely excludes, but fosters the creation of distorted representations of the excluded culture, perpetuating stereotypes.

Homogenizing spirituality certainly has its uses. In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria explains an environmentalist group use of the 1855 Speech given by the supposed Chief Seattle, as having "erased contemporary social realities," history, and bound all humanity in blood connection. [34] Besides well-meaning intentions, financial gain and political victory seem to motivate universalism ideologies as well. What will evolve from universalism? As author of *Hyperreality and Global Culture* author Nick Perry puts it, "If you routinely have your head in one location and your feet in another, then the oracular effectively becomes the secular . . . in no way exotic." [35] Eventually, as Perry predicts, references stripped of their cultural context will lose even their artificial meaning and Otherness, melting into the bland mainstream grey of postmodern culture.

"More than half a century after her death, Carr has become a Canadian icon," states The Canadian Encyclopedia.[36] The Emily Carr House, located in Victoria, BC is both a provincial and federal heritage site, from which it receives its funding. The Royal BC Museum features a permanent display of Emily Carr's work. It is clear Canadians are eager to nationalize Emily Carr. But to what extent?

Historically, nationalism in the context of the arts has proven a problematic and volatile issue. From Margaret Preston's flora and indigenous motifs of Australia, Gordon Walter's Koru paintings of

[33] *Ibid*, 26-30.

[34] Deloria, *Playing Indian,* 166-167.

[35] Perry, *Hyperreality and global culture*, 1-2.

[36] The Canadian Encyclopedia, "Emily Carr."

New Zealand, and a countless number of romantic painters depicting the Native Americans of America's Wild West–-artists seem to turn to the country's Indigenous when searching for a national visual language, and appropriate without understanding. Though Emily Carr did build friendships with Natives whom she sketched and visited, thorough understanding of Native culture was hindered by a language barrier, and Carr's clinging to Pope idealisms and a Christian (albeit mystical) viewpoint. In her expressionistic work, Carr depicts totems buried deep in the forests, when she would have known, especially from her documentation days, that Haida, Kwakiutl and Tsimshian were coastal tribes. Despite that her motivation for art making seemed mostly personal and financially unprofitable, Carr was definitely interested in searching for a Canadian art: “Canada wants something strong, big, dignified, and spiritual that shall make her artists better for doing it and her people better for seeing it.” [37] She was enthusiastic with identifying with the Group of Seven on this pursuit as well. Is the later phase of Carr's images, that contain no representation of Indigenous art, a safe bet?

Firstly, Carr is known and promoted by work from both the “totem” period and the “tree” period. Secondly, that Carr had to first use Native art to rise to her aesthetic and philosophic peak, only to discard it when no longer necessary, is the typical tradition of primitivists of the modern movement. Thirdly, with the excitement of The Group of Seven, the word indigenous took on a new sense, ie. nationalism. In means that an artist was born and developed their own voice apart from Europe and America.

Not unlike Harris' belief that knowledge would come from intuitive contact with the land, F.B. Housser felt nationalistic art would arise out of “a direct contact with Nature itself,” [38]-- as if a new “indigenous” Canadian art could spring from the raw sublimity of the land, and all its pure genius could be claimed as Canada's. If critics and historians had a strong political motivation to claim a national ownership over Emily Carr and her contemporaries, ignoring what they owed to design, Art Nouveau,

[37] Carr, *Fresh Seeing*, 18.

[38] Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 144.

European Expressionism, and American movements [39] would be the way to do it. It has been argued by Johanne Lamoureux that in an effort to "indigenize" the Canadian perception of Emily Carr, scholars and curators over-emphasized Carr's meeting with the Seven and overlooked the impact of her introduction to modernism in France under Gibb, which pivoted her art making formally and conceptually, and was likely responsible for her path merging with the Group's.[40] In the argument of Marcia Crosby, the idea of Indigenous art arising from the land and not the people "lends itself to the smooth transference of our land and heritage to public institutions, corporations, private enterprise and individuals." [41] Even nationalizing the highly imaginative and abstract late landscape works of Carr stamps ownership on the land and cultures she represented.

By raising Carr as a national icon Canada joins the long history of colonised nations in turning to representations of "pure" Indigenous land and people by non-Indigenous artists, to find within a national identity to call their own. A miniature, national universalism occurs when that government, through funding and commemorating, calls one or a select few "a Canadian icon," because it states this artist has captured the "essence" of the country. Native heritage becomes "our" heritage. Theosophy may claim mankind is 'essentially of one and the same essence', but when it comes to young countries, one view cannot represent all. Rather, it homogenizes the cultural diversity existing. An "essence" cannot be proven, but diversity and difference can be. In the case of Carr, the homogenizing is done by Carr herself, the spiritual--perhaps the most potent component of a cultural identity—and by Canada, the culture and life of the West Coast in its entirety.

Emily Carr was a prolific artist whose unrelenting pursuit for modernity, expression and spiritual meaning broke academic, cultural and gender conventions of her town and of her time.

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[39] *Ibid*, 143.

[40] National Gallery of Canada, *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, 43.

[41] Crosby, *Construction of the Imaginary Indian*, 282.

Despite eluding stable critical and commercial success until late in life, meanwhile battling isolation and physical and mental illness, Carr managed to develop her own personal visual language and perception of the West Coast. Just as it has been argued that primitive wasn't about the so much about indigenous cultures as it was about criticizing European society, so Emily Carr's goal was, not about finding the universal essence of the forests and the totems, as it was her own struggle to find a place in her family, in society, in the contemporary art world, and her relationship with God that pushed her to paint. If Emily Carr's homogenization was in an earnest search of personal identity, Canada's preservation and iconizing of Indigenous art was in a similar search. However, a government is not synonymous to an individual artist. The actions of the Canadian government to iconize Carr's messages places a political and cultural authority on her words and art that is inappropriate for a single artist, with their personal religious, economical and psychological factors, to be given. It denies the fallibility and limitation of an impressionable, individual artist and uses her as a way to simplify and claim Indigenous spirituality. Emily Carr's writings do not indicate she ever found the "unity in the universe" she was looking for, but her paintings testify to having discovered a profoundly personal one. If in each artist, and likewise each culture, we look for not for a common, universal essence but for a unique, individual identity, we will find the most meaningful experience of all.

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