

Aboriginal Art and Culture

From the perspective of Aboriginal cultural studies, the hegemony of the Canadian state perpetuates colonial practices and ideologies. The counterhegemony is Aboriginal cultural producers offering a contemporary perspective on Aboriginal identity. “A critical media cultural studies also intends to relate its theories to practice, to develop an oppositional politics aimed at producing a progressive turn in contemporary culture and society through contributing to development of a counterhegemony to the conservative hegemony of the past years” (Kellner 94). Contemporary identity is represented through signs of power including self-regulation, self-representation, and advocating for an Indigenous way of thinking and living in harmony with the Earth. The main attempt is not to criticize specific examples of domination, oppression and the ideologies that further such conditions. Rather, there is a need to present Aboriginal cultural production as a positive enterprise and as a site of resistance. Cummings’ dissertation focuses on Aboriginal arts and cultural politics in a similar fashion to Mackey's book. “In certain contexts, artists' discourses have a strong influence on meaning-making, and in others, the discourses of other stakeholders are more dominant” (Cummings 5). Aboriginal and other marginalized artists have to battle with keeping their autonomy and meaning alive in their work while deciding whether a national gallery or museum is an appropriate environment for their work.

Cummings argues that “Aboriginal artists experience pressure to frame their art within the rubric of contemporary arts valuation if they wish to gain this capital” (6). Lattas agrees: “Aboriginal culture is adapting to the art market in the same way that Aboriginal culture is supposed to have adapted to its physical environment” (316). Are all presentations of Aboriginal culture automatically adopted into the dominant mythology of Canadian myth making and identity creation? There must be alternative and resistant voices that cannot be labeled so quickly under this umbrella.

Mackey does not give the possibility of Aboriginal nationality or resistance mythology any merit. She contends that, even though there may be many constructions of national identity and mythology, it is a top-down construction and “they are all contributions to a shared and hegemonic project: creating and maintaining Canada as a nation; as an ‘integrated totality, defined according to progressive principles’” (Mackey 88). Many Aboriginal creators have turned to film and multimedia because they offer a hands on and exploratory self-expression as an alternative to Eurocentric values of artistic production. “The accepted Eurocentric values of artistic production, such as individual self-expression and the separation of art objects from everyday life, appear to be in conflict with the cultural values of many Aboriginal communities” (Cummings 6). Filmmaking allows the creator to show their audience only what they want them to see. Cummings quotes Jean Fisher: “In the absence of any alternative strategies, the native artist is forced into complicity with this [Western art world] framework” (6). Cummings, similar to Mackey, disregards alternative art production and other possible media that Aboriginal creators employ. Also disregarded is the possibility that Aboriginal creators are appropriating technologies first introduced as tools of domination and assimilation and turning them into tools of resistance and self-determination. The history and identity of Native peoples in Canada has been *written* by the colonizers using their technologies. The stereotypes and stigmas that are attached to these Euro-centered histories have persisted into contemporary Canadian society. Meadows developed a promising theory in 1995 that “implicit in new media technologies are empowering strategies which have enabled community broadcasters to appropriate media for their own culturally specific use”(n.p.).

Now, through the expansion of Aboriginal use of digital technologies, creators are able to express themselves and others' memories, share their histories and assert contemporary identities.

Doris Baltruschat explores this theory in "Television and Canada's Aboriginal communities: seeking opportunities through traditional storytelling and digital technologies", stating: "There is no doubt, however, that Aboriginal producers of film and television are experiencing a resurgence of their culture by combining traditional storytelling and digital technology". This is the aim of the documentary-series *Fish out of Water*, featured weekly on APTN. Hosted by nationally acclaimed comedians Don Kelly and Dawn Dumont, the two hosts travel to various Aboriginal communities across North America. There they experience traditional and contemporary Native practices, connecting with spirituality, storytelling and narratives, oral culture and identity. The show confronts tough issues about colonization, land and treaty rights, and loss of culture that different Native peoples have survived throughout their history but in a comedic manner, inviting all audiences to enjoy the programming by watching Don and Dawn complete tasks that are part of the community's daily life. The introduction to *Fish out of Water* includes the two hosts saying "I can't help hearing a call/a call from my elders/to rediscover the old ways/and to get back to the land". They are recognizing that a break has occurred in Native history (the elders have not been able to pass down their storytelling properly), and there is a need to understand the past in order to create a promising future. Although Don and Dawn are using contemporary digital technologies and production to achieve this goal, it nonetheless enables the show to pursue positive change for Aboriginal identity and cultural understanding. Ong argues: "Technology, properly interiorized does not degrade human life, but on the contrary enhances it as long as the individual recognizes that they are using a technology to express themselves" (82). Through watching shows like *Fish out of Water*, it is clear that Native creators have recognized the potential of television for cultural resurgence contributing to the preservation of tradition while also contributing to a contemporary Native identity.

Don and Dawn also manage to break down stereotypes, including deep-rooted ones of the

primeval or savage Native, one who is stuck in the past, and the exoticization of Native life. “They [Natives] have been traditionally underrepresented in mainstream media, or misrepresented due to stereotyping of Aboriginal life” (Baltruschat n.p.). Don and Dawn call themselves “urban Native, office bound Ojibway, Cree” in the introduction to every episode of *Fish out of Water*. Neither Don nor Dawn grew up in traditional Native family settings, similar to many Native peoples' experiences today, but both hosts are part of band tribes. Don Kelly is part of Ojibways of Onigaming, a Treaty #3 First Nation in northwestern Ontario, and Dawn Dumont is Cree and Metis from Alberta³. The show asks simple questions: What does it mean to be a Native in North America? Where do Natives come from? Who are Native people today? Baltruschat explains that “Aboriginal programs offer a distinctly different insight into cultural, economic, and political affairs of First Nation peoples. The stories told in the programs have not been told in this format before. They document a people struggling for cultural survival in a global economy” (n.p.). Don and Dawn take on the task of exploring cultural survival and resurgence and create a safe space through comedy to visit the past and present conditions of Native existence.

Lattas describes another artistic connection between Aboriginals and the land, the desert, and how this transpires into their art. “The desert and its portrayal in Aboriginal paintings is made to speak an emotional truth back to an urban cosmopolitan self-searching for personal revelation” (Lattas 314). In the Canadian context, the desert stands in for the vast wilderness of Canada, the prairies, the North, and the forests that are equated with a pristine and timeless place, including the historic Aboriginal peoples. Artists who portray these scenes include Emily Carr, Kornelius Krieghoff, William Berczy and Joseph Brant, artists praised in Canadian art galleries across the country. Lattas provides a straightforward analysis of the cultural and national implications for the white settler hegemony of such works but fails to identify any space for resistance or oppositional readings. Nor does he include any Aboriginal peoples' perspectives, or the impact the white redemption cultural theory has on their

1 www.foow.ca

culture. Lattas takes a top-down approach, attempting to make sense of the role that Aboriginal-based art plays for the white-settler seeking an identity.

In Canada, Kent Monkman has reclaimed landscape painting. “With a comprehensive and sound knowledge of art history, he [Monkman] appropriates the aesthetic of ‘New World’ landscape painting, re-creating the picturesque and sublime landscapes of North American colonialism by playfully inserting dramatic scenes of sex and violence between Europeans and First Nations peoples. Monkman has developed a body of work that subverts and diverts the established canon” (Madill 28). Kent Monkman is an artist of Cree ancestry who works in a variety of media including painting, film/video, performance and installation. Monkman is employing contemporary technologies and mediums of communication that are non-traditional to Aboriginal peoples. Subverting the medium, he produces an Indigenous Knowledge System, challenging the reductionist understandings of Aboriginal identity while his work is considered contemporary art. He is an expert at playing with the notion of identity, double identity, role reversal and “otherness” inspiring for Aboriginal artists and communities. Although he deconstructs 19th century perceptions, this act in itself contributes to a contemporary Aboriginal identity making practice that is constantly under construction.

Yet Monkman is in a position of constant struggle with the Canadian nationalist project. “The mythical union of European culture with the primordial otherness of Aboriginal culture becomes a national obsession to bring into the centre of the nation that which has been peripheralised” (Lattas 317). Lattas explains how galleries and curators have taken Aboriginal art and turned it into contemporary or modern art, giving minimalist information with each piece and not providing any culturally relevant Aboriginal-based information, history or context for the works. Monkman has exhibited his work in national galleries and museums across the globe. Does this discredit the subversive and resistance based meanings of his work? Mackey argues that presentation of Aboriginal cultural self-representation in art galleries, museums and the like “can be appropriated and transformed by their location within dominant nationalist imaginings” (85). An Aboriginal creator offering an

alternative way of understanding their identity and experience can inspire other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to investigate and explore what this means. Appropriation and misconception can happen at any time, but the fact that these artists are asserting themselves, exploring identities beyond the labels of hybridity and post-colonialism, is powerful in and of itself. Mackey relies on post-colonial theory extensively and disregards the hard work and spaces of positive identity-making and transformation that Aboriginal artists have undertaken. Mackey does admit “if one is to reach an understanding of how identities work in Canada today, one must explore what role Aboriginal self-representation plays, not for the artists, but rather for the consumers and audiences of the exhibition, and in the Canadian nationalist imagination more generally” (84). Mackey argues that once a piece of art is labeled under the nationalist mythology construction, such as Monkman's art may be labeled, it holds no power. Here, we can disagree because exposure to Monkman's work, whether in a national gallery or independently, can still force us to re-think and re-imagine some of our underlying assumptions, stereotypes and visions of reality about the imaginary Indian, painted by the noble white man. Whereas not all audience members will take this position, hopefully some of them do, and this can lead to a new perspective of understanding and encourage questions of power relations.

Furthermore, not all Aboriginal creators are showing and selling their work to galleries. Wapikoni encourages the use of film and creativity to foster a sense of community, work through personal issues and also disseminate ideas. Meadows explains, “Indigenous media, too, in their various forms, represent community cultural resources which have the potential not only to contribute to community management, but also to operate counter-hegemonically” (n.p.). Aboriginal creators have employed media to challenge current social, political and cultural situations. “The emergence of Aboriginal media in the 1960s illustrates that Canada's First Nations people recognized an opportunity early on to create their own media for local community interaction and economic growth” (Baltruschact n.p.). For example, through Wapikoni, Craig Commanda created the short film *Weight* (2013), exploring personal storytelling while exposing the issue of depression that is rampant among

Aboriginal communities in isolation. Commanda employs film to share a personal story and address issues that affect many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples: mental health and depression.

Commanda employs traditional storytelling techniques, himself as the narrator, sharing his experiences, and relating himself to different animals. The set for the film is exclusively nature. Commanda may not be comfortable sharing his story anywhere else or with anyone specific. Film allows him the freedom and protection needed for self-expression. Wapikoni is low-budget, and Commanda uses plasticine characters, but it is not the medium which is powerful, it is how Commanda chooses to manipulate the medium. One could be listening to him tell the same story in a room, face to face, and it would probably have a similar effect. But his poetic-like prose and artistic rendering enhance the storytelling, while the medium of film enables wider dissemination of his personal story that so many people can relate to.

Another example is the work of Shelley Niro. She employs interdisciplinary art practices intending to develop a contemporary aesthetic. “Her 1991 photographic series, *Mohawks and Beehives*, secured her place as one of Canada's most prominent contemporary artists” (Indyke 42). Note the author of the article chose to present Niro as a contemporary artist first, omitting her heritage. The second sentence continues, “In it, Niro, a Mohawk and member of Iroquois League comprising the Mohawk and four other tribes, depicts her laughing mother sitting under a hair dryer in the triptych: ‘The Iroquois is a highly developed matriarchal society’” (Indyke 42). Indyke includes Niro in the realm of Canadian contemporary art, not depending on her Aboriginal status to define her first. Her art should be considered contemporary and she should be considered an artist regardless of her heritage. Indyke also endorses the fact that Niro's art is subjective and personal, not a comment or representation of all Aboriginal peoples’ experiences. “Subsequent photos, in which she and her family members theatrically dress and pose, also show the artist's perspective on Native women, cultural stereotypes, and the interplay between personal and political concerns” (Indyke 42). Niro turns inwards, on herself, family and community to make sense of the world around her. “Indigenous epistemologies are

grounded in an awareness and deep appreciation of the cosmos and how the self/selves, spiritual, known and unknown worlds are interconnected. The appreciation of the outer self and space is connected to an understanding of the inner sense of self” (Sefa Dei 115). Niro is in alignment with the creation of an Indigenous Knowledge System privileging the perceptiveness of the speaker (herself), simultaneously exposing underrepresented contemporary Aboriginal family life and embracing multimedia arts.

In an interview Niro explains, “using these basic images [of my family] was a self-actualization process, where, if you start relating to the people you are looking at, and the more images you see of somebody that looks like you, the more you can accept of yourself, whereas if you see images of people that you have no connection with and can't relate to, then you're doubting your own presence” (Abbott 360). This statement by Niro is applicable to the Wapikoni Mobile program too. The Native youth have very few positive Native role models that they can relate and look up to. Through film they make their own visions of self, community, family and the world. “The Wapikoni mobile gives First Nations youth the opportunity to express themselves through video and music, to expand their horizons beyond their usual surroundings and allow them to shine in their own communities and throughout the world. While encouraging the emergence of talents, the project facilitates both exchange and communication between these young people and helps reduce their isolation” (*Gazette*:2013 n.p.). Filmmaking becomes a project that the whole community can engage with, even just as audience members.

Similarly, imagineNATIVE short films, created by First Nation, Inuit and Metis individuals, have had worldwide exposure. Individuals submit films and artwork for presentation at imagineNATIVE’s annual festival in October. In 2013 the short films were also shown on Air Canada’s in-flight entertainment for two months, enabling a diverse audience to be exposed to

contemporary Aboriginal filmmaking and culture they may otherwise never come across.⁴ The films were alternative, powerful and emotional in keeping with imagineNATIVE's mission statement "...committed to dispelling stereotypical notions of Indigenous peoples through diverse media presentations from within our communities, thereby contributing to a greater understanding by audiences of Indigenous artistic expression".⁵ The content of the eight films chosen ranged from a re-enactment of being sent to residential school filled with personal stories from survivors, to the success of the Smoke Valley local drum group traveling to events across North America.

Niro explains why her work and subsequently programs like Wapikoni and imagineNATIVE are needed; "Films like *Black Robe* and *Last of the Mohicans* portray Indians in a certain way, showing them as being nasty people. I wanted to emphasize Iroquois art and design. I want to emphasize the fact that a culture does not survive by being nasty. It survives out of the will to be creative, and by being creative it boosts the level of thought" (Abbott 360). Hollywood and the mass media representation of Natives is unkind and often unrealistic, "the cinematic gaze on indigenous lives is clearly that of a non-native, at worst imbued with superiority and at best with ethnographic or ideological intentions" (Santoro 267). The participants of Wapikoni create their own self-actualization process by making their own films and watching films made by their peers. It initiates dialogue within the community on identity, belonging, and self-expression, issues that may have no other means of being shared and explored. Sedillot interviewed ten Native individuals from Atikamekw Manawan reserve in northern Quebec on their experiences and thoughts while working with Wapikoni and Indigenous filmmaking. "According to those with whom I spoke, the participants' films will allow Canadians to see a more realistic and positive image of Native people, thereby contesting the stigma and the stereotypes to which Natives are subjected, as well as controlling the symbolic violence that operates upon them through the traditional/dominant media (Sedillot n.p.). Niro agrees: "Regardless of how Indians are

2 <http://rpm.fm/news/imagenative-takes-flight-with-air-canada/>

3 <http://www.imagenative.org/home/Mission>

viewed, as being very isolated and alienated, we still watch TV, we read the paper, we listen to music” (355). The community members of Atikamekw Manawan are given a voice and the chance to present themselves as contemporary individuals, most importantly on their own terms. The founder of Wapikoni, Manon Barbeau states, "The most important thing we do is listen to the kids and try to empower them ... Plenty of these kids won't go on to become filmmakers, but when you give them a camera, you give them a voice. Give them a voice and they'll feel like they're worth something” (Curtis n.p.). Sedillot explains, “Several of my interviewees suggested to me that the films should focus upon the achievements, talents and passions of the individuals in the community in addition to transmitting knowledge and practices” (n.p.). Wapikoni has found highly praised recognition, including the Prize for Best Canadian Initiative and 2011 Rights and Freedoms Prize. Noteworthy is the inclusion of Wapikoni Mobile's successful practices in a section of the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime Code and a Public Safety evaluation stating, “Wapikoni Mobile helped participants' life trajectory for the better”.⁶ The Wapikoni program provides a framework for approaching isolated and afflicted individuals and communities, especially those who have experienced trauma, in a non-intrusive way, on the communities’ own terms. Clearly the program is having positive repercussions if the Prevention of Crime Code is recognizing Wapikoni’s powerful abilities to improve its participants’ life outlook.

Referring to Shelley Niro and her work, Santoro provides great examples and analysis. Yet she explicitly aligns herself with a post-colonial approach, even though her article is moving towards a celebration of contemporary film practices. Santoro sees “this new generation of storytellers creates films that are in clear negotiation with a North American cultural and cinematic milieu, even as they demonstrate a political and aesthetic awareness that falls squarely within the discourse of decolonization that Knopf and other have identified as a key component in the development of an ‘emancipated’ indigenous cinema” (269). Santoro feels the need to classify her work and the

4 <http://www.wapikoni.ca/about/who-are-we/public-recognition>

filmmakers' work from a hegemonic analytical perspective. The Native creators she focuses on are victims, and film enables them to save and free themselves from the thresholds of history. She admits to being non-Native and dismisses her 'right' to engage with Native creative work on a ground level by forcing herself to identify with a post-colonial approach. "Although my analysis seeks primarily to highlight the importance and intent of these directors' work, rather than subject my films to a systematic critical reading, the profiles that follow participate in the post-colonial approach to filmmaking" (Santoro 269). This is a contradictory statement. Santoro attempts to state that she is not participating in a systematic critical reading but then aligns herself with a post-colonial approach to filmmaking. Santoro does not engage with the prospect of an Indigenous Knowledge System at play. Nor does she realize that the act of using film and television for an Aboriginal cultural rejuvenation signals an appropriation of power that does not have to be critically engaged with continually from a post-colonial perspective.

Santoro also determines 'success' for Niro based on mainstream recognition: "Although Niro's two early ventures into fiction did not raise her to the level of mainstream recognition in the same way as Eyre and Kunuk's films did for them, no doubt because hers were not full-length feature films and thus did not have theatrical distribution ... " (270). Santoro ignores the importance of the films for Niro, her family members who participated in the films, and the communities who saw the films. Niro admits that the films aid her journey of self-actualization, asserting an identity. Similarly, Santoro mentions Wapikoni Mobile program but argues that "space obliges me to limit my considerations here to indigenous directors who have produced longer fiction films in the past decade" (269). Corinn Columpar, author of *Unsettling Sights: the fourth world on film*, also omits Indigenous short films and focuses her book on Indigenous feature length filmmaking. Attention to short films and the power of training youth and community members to make their own films is overshadowed by the 'mainstream' Native films that have been adopted by large non-native audiences and mass media. Santoro and others should be asking: 'How does the adoption of Native feature-length films affect Native communities,

identities and cultural exchange?' Do they provide positive role models and self-identifiers for community members, or does the mainstream attachment deteriorate their significance for a native-based audience?

The last point Sedillot makes for the Wapikoni program concerns healing. She argues that whether the filmmakers of Wapikoni have the intention of healing themselves or others through the filmmaking process, it often occurs. This is a process considered important by many communities and part of identity formation in a positive sense. This process can be labeled as part of the decolonization process, categorizing healing as a collective 'step' that the colonized peoples need to take in order to move onto whatever decolonization step comes next. Healing or self-actualizing can also, more positively and independently, contribute to an Indigenous Knowledge System. The filmmakers and community audiences are participating in the creation and transmission of what they see as important knowledge. Sedillot's concluding analysis of Wapikoni reiterates her main points that the Wapikoni program enables the Native community to "re-imagine the space of indigeneity" and "find their autonomy." It is important to stress the significant role that programs like Wapikoni and imagineNATIVE, filmmaking as a whole, and the employment of digital technologies by Indigenous creators play in the development and assertion of IKS. The "objective [of IKS] is nonetheless to challenge imperial ideologies and colonial relations of knowledge production which continually characterize and shape academic practices" (Sefa Dei 113). Sedillot provides an anthropological and structured methodological analysis of Wapikoni, immersing herself in the program and conducting interviews, taking seriously the impact of the content of the films and the filmmaking process itself. Therefore Sedillot's work is an important example of academic production in combination with an IKS approach. Sedillot combines western methods of research (interviews, anthropologic work) and at the same time privileges the voices of the Native creators. Sedillot makes no mention of her identity in the article (non-Native upon further investigation), yet the grassroots level of research and investigation coupled with her position in academia as a professor is worth mentioning as a step towards IKS

production. This type of work is what Sefa Dei and Muecke are advocating and encouraging.