

A Responsibility to Understand: Language, Art, and Patterns of Interpretation and Representation in Colonial Contexts

Faun Rice

University of Alberta

faun@ualberta.ca

This paper examines linguistic and artistic intercultural communication between Indigenous and colonial communities, individuals, and institutions. It will focus on the interpretive difficulties colonial audiences encountered in certain key events: an Aboriginal Title trial in Canada, two curated displays of Indigenous art works and artefacts in the United States, and the work of Haida artist and activist Bill Reid. In each of these cases, Indigenous communicators saw their messages severely decontextualized and reinterpreted using a colonial framework. Additionally, the pressure to be ‘authentically’ Indigenous while in a ‘modern’ setting caught many interlocutors in a double bind. Colonial audience members either interpreted communications on their own terms or framed them as belonging to a static, past tense, premodern society. I will argue that in an intercultural setting, an Indigenous communicator may find it difficult to position themselves as part of a living and dynamic Indigeneity without facing charges of inauthenticity. Settler colonial interlocutors may need to interrogate both assumptions and institutions to engage in dialogue responsibly. This has important ramifications for Indigenous sovereignty claims and the role of colonial interpreters in them.

Keywords: modernity, oral tradition, indigenous, art, law, sovereignty

1. Introduction

In any community, the meanings assigned to geographical features and acts of speech will be influenced by the subjective determinations of the people who assign them, and these determinations, needless to say, will exhibit variation. But the character of the meanings – their steadier themes, their recurrent tonalities, and, above all, their conventionalized modes of expression – will bear the stamp of a common cast of mind. Constructions of reality that reflect conceptions of reality itself, the meanings of landscapes and acts of speech are personalized manifestations of a shared perspective on the human condition. (Basso 1988: 100)

Intercultural communication is famously difficult; underneath the problem of a language barrier are numerous other pitfalls. Cultural content and inaccessible references are hurdles made far taller by, as Keith Basso says above so well, ‘their conventionalized modes of expression,’ or the unique ways in which they are encoded. While content and code incongruities may provoke communicative problems in any context, there is a unique form that the intercultural disconnect takes in certain colonial settings. With a focus on artistic and linguistic intercultural communication between Indigenous and colonial communities, individuals, and institutions, this paper will explore the challenges that Indigenous interlocutors and their messages may face. It

will draw themes from cases of Indigenous land claims and art works, focusing on comparative examples from North America and Australia. Across all instances, the central interpretive conflict involves a colonial audiences' inability to reconcile Indigeneity with so-called "modern" settings.

The discursive patterns of concern in this paper are identified by other authors but made especially salient by repetition across radically different contexts (Battiste 2000; Briggs 1996; King 2011; Myers 1991; Remillard 2011). In the first sections of this paper, I will discuss shared patterns of interaction wherein an Indigenous communicator sees their message stripped of its context, code, and connotations and then decoded using a colonial framework. This is particularly likely when the colonial audience sees the method of communication as a universal category. An Indigenous communicator is also faced with the challenge of proving that they are 'authentic,' despite (or because of) their presence in a 'modern' setting. In both challenges, interpretation and authenticity, is the implication that colonial audiences are only open to Indigenous communication if they can approach it on their own territory. In other words, audiences either approach the communication on their own terms, or they contextualize it as belonging to a dead or dying, static, past tense society. There is little room left for lived, postcolonial Indigenous culture. This paper will conclude with an exploration of ways in which we might pay more attention to colonial discourses and de-code intercultural communication more accurately and responsibly.

1.1 Context and Terminology

The notion of "modernity" is a copiously defined term, referring variously to a historical era, a scientific paradigm, a tool for colonization, an epistemology, and a myth (Bhaba 1999; Foucault 1994; Latour 1993; McLean 2013; Youngblood Henderson in Battiste 2000). In this paper the meaning of "modernity" or "modern" borrows from many of these definitions and refers not to an era, but to an ideology based in the notion that 'civilized' humanity is fundamentally separate from nature. In practice, this ideology has historically lined up with industrial development, colonialism, and cultural evolutionism to pigeonhole Indigenous peoples as belonging to a primitive 'state of nature' that creates a moral imperative for colonial expansion: the infamous white man's burden (Youngblood Henderson in Battiste 2000). In now-colonized regions such as North America and Australia, the ideology of modernity persists and continues to raise barriers for Indigenous agents. Numerous critiques of modernity have populated 20th century scholarship (Foucault 1994; Latour 1993). Currently, many scholars are now pursuing the idea of multiple modernities and re-evaluating the power of this fundamentally Eurocentric term (Bhaba 1999; McLean 2013; Russo 2013). While this discussion will not be addressed directly in this paper, diversifying the histories we use to evaluate the present is an important step towards decolonization and may be a natural consequence of interrogating the epistemology outlined above. In this paper, 'modern' may also be used to refer to modern art, but the distinction will be made clear.

Ethnographic scholarship and anthropology have numerous links, historical and contemporary, with modernity and colonization. Therefore, an important note has to do with the role of the anthropologist as author and interpreter. One of the main interests I have in this paper (as an anthropologist of settler-colonial background) is to try to identify places where pitfalls exist, examine them, and pursue ongoing personal decolonization. I do not intend this paper to be taken as either determinism or prescriptivism, simply to contend that the discourses identified create real barriers and that an understanding of them is important for mindful intercultural

communication in nations like Canada, which are still living with structures built by past and present colonial practices. Most importantly, this paper is focused on a critique of “modernity” in action and is not intended to speak for Indigenous agents.

Correspondingly, recent scholarship coming from Native Studies in Canada emphasizes the problematic ways in which Indigeneity has been defined: strictly as ‘the colonized,’ for instance, which sets up a false binary and erases all parts of identity not connected with subjugation (Battiste 2000). Attempts to define ‘what it means to be Indigenous’ are exactly what cause the problems this paper discusses, and have been satirized aptly by many, including author Thomas King in the appropriately titled lecture “You’re Not the Indian I Had in Mind” (2011). King explores the challenges inherent in trying to be an ‘authentic Indian’ without dressing up to perform an imaginary, unifying race (2011: 42).

In this paper, the reader should be aware of the complexity inherent in using the word Indigenous in opposition to colonial (or ‘modern’ or ‘Western’) as a kind of catch-all for everyone who is left over, especially since some individuals self-identify as neither or both or change throughout their lifetimes, including one of the artists that will be discussed in this paper. The use of these terms is not intended to set up an absolute binary, more to signal a power imbalance that is both historical and intergenerational. ‘Modern,’ ‘colonial,’ ‘Western:’ all of these are meant to ask for self-awareness, not to be accusatory. Indeed, just as modernity does not refer to a definable era but to an epistemology that refers to it, ‘Indigenous’ and ‘colonial’ are tools to think with that can only be reified in far more complex ways than such a simple binary suggests.

2. Sovereignty and Interpretation

In courts of law, art galleries, museums, newspapers, and elsewhere, Indigenous sovereignty is examined and interpreted by a colonial audience, often one which has some degree of power or jurisdiction over the success of sovereignty projects. Sovereignty implies a greater or lesser degree of self-determination and connection to land: while it may be used as a legal category by nation-states, it may also be used to imply a different and more fundamental autonomy that precedes contemporary political boundaries. To begin drawing out the discursive themes in colonial interpretive efforts, I will use two different instances of Indigenous land claims, both of which employ codes that are unfamiliar to their audiences. ‘Audience’ should not imply passivity: in both examples to follow, audience members (judges and art critics) not only view and attempt to interpret Indigenous land claims, but their interpretations also have power in the courtroom, the art world, and the public eye. Art and language, in these cases, may prove enigmatic in part because they are frequently assumed to have universal definitions (to mean the same thing, or to be used in approximately the same way across cultural boundaries). Language and art are often considered to be fundamental characteristic of humanity, obscuring the places where mutual intelligibility unexpectedly dissolve (Hymes 1996: 26; Gell 1992: 41); however, a single language such as English can contain innumerable speech communities, and can often adopt semantic, phonological, and syntactic patterns distinctive to a speaker’s region and culture (Hymes 1996: 66). The assumption of universality in the following examples allows audience members to misunderstand the meaning of each communicator’s claim, either by first decontextualizing it and then approaching it on colonial terms, or by mischaracterizing its context as Indigenous, but an immortalized version of ‘Indigenous’ that fits the modern imagination.

Our first example is Canadian. In the 1997 Aboriginal Title trial *Delgamuukw v. B.C.*, Indigenous Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en claimants used oral histories and traditions to lay claim to land, including the use of chiefly names to assert property rights (Palmer 2000: 1042). The importance of naming, kinship, and property was implicit in the code (language norms) used by Indigenous speakers, but was misinterpreted by the arbitrating judge. Our second example is from Australia, where Indigenous actors similarly draw on kinship and associated rights to assert a land claim. Pintupi Aboriginal artists, coming from traditional territories in Australia brought an exhibition of acrylics to New York City in 1988 and explained to their audience that it was each artist's intergenerational property rights that allowed them to access and portray the images on each canvas (Myers 1991: 497). The land, and the events from the Dreaming that happened there, could only be shown by "the owners of the place, especially those whose own "spirits" come from that Dreaming" (Myers 1991: 497). Just as the use of a Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en chiefly name implies land ownership (a practice common on the Northwest Coast), so too does the use of an image from the Dreaming (Myers 1991: 497; Palmer 2000: 1042).

Without appropriate attention to context, claims to territory may then appear as nothing more than an aesthetically intriguing acrylic or a denotative proper noun. In Canada, while the court case did result in instructions that oral history could be admitted as testimony in a land claims case, it became evident that the skills needed to interpret oral history and give it the same weight as written historical evidence were not yet in place (Palmer 2000: 1041). By continually failing to fully comprehend the implications of oral history turned testimony for Indigenous populations, the courts have undervalued oral history with their preference for written or archeological evidence (Palmer 2000: 1046). Speech and written evidence are far from isomorphic, and the legal analysis that approaches oral history as a text simply read aloud will fail to appreciate the important differences in communicative styles (Hymes 1996: 38). *Delgamuukw v. B.C* features the process of erasing linguistic complexity; the centripetal force of linguistic uniformity in colonial contexts is one layer of this (Gal & Irvine 1995, Bakhtin 1981: 271, Hymes 1996: 84). The assumption of linguistic universality is not a feature that is limited to language, however, and reoccurs in the comparative example of Pintupi acrylics. In both cases, land claims were erased by the insistence of audience members to hear or see the message using their own discursive norms.

Following the 1988 Pintupi acrylics exhibition, Fred Myers demonstrates that most of the critical representations of Aboriginal art construct the Pintupi acrylics as part of the Western art world, either by making a contribution to modern art or by demonstrating a 'common humanity' (1991: 498). And while it is reasonable to expect that parties will generally approach interactions using their own cultural discourses (Myers 1991: 499; Basso 1988: 101), it is also reasonable that the group who has placed themselves in an interpretive role (i.e. a court of law, an art critic) take responsibility for accurate interpretation. Again, in both of these cases the block for the interpreter appears to be less about the decontextualized *content* of Indigenous communications and more about the implications of the communicative code, something just as or more essential for communications analysis (Bateson 1972: 140; McLuhan 1964; McLean 2013). In other words, while *Delgamuukw* is easily recognizable as a name and an acrylic painting might obviously contain an animal, if stripped of their context and connotations and *coding* most of all then that is all that they remain. The land claim disappears behind an aesthetically pleasing picture.

To quickly summarize where we have gone so far: one version of the colonial misinterpretation of these Indigenous sovereignty projects is the tendency to decontextualize, decode, and co-opt them without reaching a real understanding. Beyond just seeing the surface

meaning of these messages, audience members can create connotations for them using their own cultural backgrounds. This evaluates oral history by the same standards as legal testimony, and compares an Aboriginal acrylic to a piece of modern art. Incommensurable systems are used. There is another discursive pattern that emerges, however. Sometimes the audience does realize that it needs to contextualize these unfamiliarly coded communications. Interestingly, and unfortunately, with contextualization appears to come the attempt to undermine or disenfranchise sovereignty claims, often using discourses of inauthenticity or impurity.

Authenticity is a debate frequently raised or dismantled in anthropological scholarship whenever it is claimed that a culture has ‘invented’ their traditions (Briggs 1996: 463; Buntin 2008; Sahlins 1993). Ironically, the presence of an Indigenous spokesperson in so ‘modern’ a context as a gallery or court of law can be used to disenfranchise them, if they are seen as too ‘contemporary’ to truly represent a traditional people. In linguistic terms, Gal and Irvine might refer to this kind of semiotic essentialism as ‘iconicity,’ wherein a cultural group that demonstrates too much heterogeneity in language practices is considered untrustworthy (1995). Signs of this tendency to look for purity and static traditions can be seen in both of our opening examples. In the land claim trial *Delgamuukw v. B.C.* (the title itself a misuse of a chiefly name), “it is the occupancy of the land (and its associated built structures), and not the perspectives of the people, that is most heavily weighted” (Palmer 2000: 1044). In attributing more value to the most immobile aspects of traditional material culture, the court inadvertently undermines the similar but spoken claims of Indigenous individuals. Likewise, while Pintupi work is being mischaracterized as modern art, primitive art, artifact, or tourist trap, painters “continually stress [that] their paintings are “stories” (*turiku*), representations of the events in the mythological past of the Dreaming... that they are “true” (*mularrpa*), that they are not made up” (Myers 1991: 497). To appropriate, mischaracterize, or devalue the explanations of the Aboriginal painters “is to colonize doubly by denying them their own histories” (Myers 1991: 510). Despite this, Indigenous communicators may face criticisms of being inauthentic, reactionary, or sellouts, marketing their culture as kitsch for their own benefit. (Briggs 1996: 444; Buntin 2008).

In sovereignty cases, if an Indigenous mediator or claimant in a modern setting either faces criticism for being too integrated with the modern world, or finds their message being decontextualized and approached entirely on colonial terms, one interesting question to ask is *what it takes* for an Indigenous litigator, artist, spokesperson, businessperson, etc. to successfully navigate cross-cultural communication. Briggs uncovers the paradoxical demands implicit in such a role in his exploration of Indigenous dance troupes in Venezuela, arguing that for artists and choreographers to be deemed ‘authentic,’ they must refer to a distant and immortalized past (1996: 448). Simultaneously, selling themselves as the bearers of ahistorical traditions “problematizes their extension into the future, for it envisions Warao culture as threatened with extinction due to its reliance on direct transmission by people who are motivated by an unconscious attachment to local forms that has purportedly been uprooted by modernity” (Briggs 1996: 448).

As such, Indigenous mediators on colonial stages must be prepared to “decontextualize... culture vis-à-vis its unmediated, local variants and to recontextualize it in discursive spaces that permit it be appreciated by the national society” (Briggs 1996: 454), while making themselves ready to face criticisms for being an improper cultural representative if they have attended an education institution, lived away from others of the population, or asked for money for their work. Just like the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en in Canada and the Pintupi artists in New York,

when an Indigenous communicator is contextualized, they may be undermined if their context does not meet standards of immortalized, ‘traditional’ Indigeneity. The next section will, among other things, examine what happens when an artist works willingly with the state and other commissioning bodies to represent traditional material culture as both authentic and dead, without the context of lived culture.

3. Power and Representation

Bill Reid (1920-1988) is a well-known Canadian artist of both Haida and Anglo-American descent. His works have appeared on Canadian currency, outside of the Canadian embassy in Washington DC, in the Vancouver airport, and in both galleries and museums in Canada and internationally. Throughout his career he has worked for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, but has also protested alongside the Haida and changed his position on the vitality of Indigenous art forms over the decades spanning his artistic life (Remillard 2011). He provides an interesting case study to add to this discussion of discursive themes because he has situated himself as both Indigenous and modern (both ideologically and artistically), and at times has aligned himself explicitly for or against colonial interests. As his friend Robert Bringhurst claimed in a memorial speech, “by his own account, Bill became a Haida artist long before he became a Haida” (2005: 187).

One of the themes thus far has been of decontextualization, and Bill Reid was initially a master of Haida form but attributed no cultural meanings to his work (a stance that changed later in his career) (Bringhurst 2005; Remillard 2011). As an artist, his early success could be attributed not only to considerable talent, but also to his willingness to promote his work as interpretable to a wider Canadian audience. One might say that his art was appealing to a preexisting aesthetic tradition just as we are to be happy to entertain land claims if we are convinced that we already own all the territory. I mean this both in the sense that we use familiar communicative codes, and in a very literal sense, wherein legal judgments “are made entirely within the context of an assumption that the Crown has the underlying title to all land, rather than in the context of an assumption of nation-to-nation relationship, where different systems of law (and different understandings of what constitutes a person or spirit) might be treated as commensurate” (Palmer 2000: 1049).

As such, one way for an artist with Indigenous subject matter to gain prominence is to keep their work subservient to the nation state and, thus, to be an interlocutor in a way that is acceptable to the resident dominant perception of what it means to be Indigenous in a “modern” context (Briggs 1996: 448). Both Canada and Australia, for instance, have made various efforts to use Indigenous peoples as a part of national identity. Myers discusses the value of Aboriginal spirituality, artwork, and ‘authenticity’ to Australian tourism (1991: 502). The Australian environmental movement, similarly (and ironically), constructs Aboriginals as the guardians of spirituality and environmental respect (Myers 1991: 502) in order to oppose state policies. As a Canadian, it is easy to see parallels in the use of Indigenous symbols for the Vancouver Olympic Games (Piccini 2010), in the ubiquitous presence of totem poles, and, indeed, in Reid’s *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* sitting outside of our embassy. When I say that these are decontextualized, I mean that they are removed from the lived cultural experiences and meanings of their Indigenous origins and turned into generalized symbols of what is ‘native,’ natural, untouched, pure. They do not challenge state interests on a modern platform because they are not modern. They fit unproblematically into dominant discourses in many ways: by reinforcing notions of a happy multiculturalism with static and uncontested cultural boundaries, by referring to a state of

nature and a ‘common humanity’ (now surpassed by modernism but shared by all), or by turning them into wholly modernized fine art that has left colonial history behind for the better.

What cultural decontextualization does, in other words, is situate Indigenous work either as firmly pre-modern (connected to nature, of the ‘noble savage’ stereotype) and dead or surpassed, or as modern (part of the state apparatus, aesthetically modern, high art not ethnographic material culture). Indigenous spokespeople who fit into neither category – who reject state sovereignty and insist on being complex, alive, and contemporary individuals and societies – may face the double bind we identified earlier. If they claim to be Indigenous, they must be “monolingual, illiterate, and relatively unfamiliar with institutions of the nation-state” (Briggs 1996: 454). If they claim to be both modern and Indigenous, then they must treat their Indigeneity as a safe, static, reified traditional culture that poses no threat to the dominant cultural apparatus. This is perhaps one reason to regard any successful land claim as a fairly miraculous sign of progress.

With this double bind in the background, I will turn to some common themes in two further examples: that of Bill Reid and his artistic and political career, and a now anthropologically well-known exploration of an New York 1984 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) entitled “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern” by James Clifford (1988). The latter instance details an exhibit where famous modern art was placed next to tribal artifacts in order to demonstrate aesthetic similarities. As a starting point, it is important to note that both Bill Reid at the beginning of his career and the MOMA exhibit assume ‘art’ to be a universal category, though defined by Western sensibilities. In New York, modernist artists “are shown promoting formerly despised tribal “fetishes”... to the status of high art and in the process discovering new dimensions of their (“our”) creative potential” (Clifford 1988: 152). Similarly, when Reid began sculpting using Haida images, he asserted that those who “come and appreciate [art]... who understand its emotional impact are Europeans with art training. People who live with it all their lives just haven’t got the background in art to appreciate it or appreciate what went on here” (Reid in Remillard 2011: 166). While this point of view changed as his career progressed and he began to identify more and more as Indigenous, this initial stance assumes the same principles as the modernists: that ‘primitive’ art is best interpreted by those with western aesthetic training.

There again is one of the conditions for ‘acceptable’ Indigeneity: to remove whatever contextual codes these material culture items might have had and approach them using a western framework, aesthetics. Decontextualization permits Reid’s career as an interlocutor: “a bridge between cultures, a conduit through which ancient imagery was uncoupled from the tangles of a static pre-contact context, modernized, and regenerated in novel Western-inspired expressions” (Remillard 2011: 169). Clifford identifies the same tendency in MOMA, in that the primary characteristic of modernism evident in the exhibition is “its taste for appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image, for discovering universal, ahistorical “human” capacities” (Clifford 1988: 152). Interestingly, the theme of western modern artists finding affinity and inspiration in Indigenous artwork has happened more than once. In the case of the Surrealists and Northwest Coast material culture, for instance, modern art’s absorption of Indigenous elements had a recognizable impact on the genre (Carpenter 1975: 12). Specifically in regards to art, the tendency to always approach material culture with an aesthetic interpretive framework has been characterized by Alfred Gell as a failure to use ‘methodological atheism’ (1992: 41). In other words, a sociologically atheistic approach to religious studies does

not have a parallel in the art world, where the only available interpretive framework remains firmly in the realm of aesthetic and art-world analysis, itself a cultural product.

Again, the flip side of the ‘modern’ inclination to believe that it owns all the territory (be it land, linguistic code, or material culture tradition) is that it will accept Indigeneity that is safely mischaracterized as ahistorical, static, surpassed, no longer a challenge. Art and language have both been used to serve this purpose, with “dead” languages tied to entire peoples (Gal and Irvine 1995). One reason this is so prevalent in the colonial imagination could be salvage ethnography: as pieces of material culture were ‘saved,’ treated as representative of a culture, and scattered throughout “museums, textbooks, and popular media, the entire project of collection and display worked to reinforce, entrench, and naturalize an essentialized version of Indigenous culture (and by extension, people) as anachronistic and unchanging” (Remillard 2011: 163). A friend of Reid spoke of him that “the essence of Haida art, once the lifeblood of an entire people, now survives within him, at a depth...” (Carpenter 1975: 27). The curatorial decision in New York to display non-Western artifacts without specific time periods is similarly telling. What both Clifford and Remillard note is that both decontextualization and reified ‘primitivism’ serve the same purpose, which is to eliminate the possibility of living, hybrid cultures, which have survived colonial history but still bear its marks. As Clifford states quite clearly, “the concrete, inventive existence of tribal cultures and artists is suppressed in the process of either constituting authentic, “traditional” worlds or appreciating their products in the timeless category of ‘art’” (1988: 156).

One of the reasons this paper begins with a discussion of land claims is to show that these discourses have real power to affect lives and Indigenous communities’ sovereignty. Interpretation, representation, and power have collectively shaped the recent histories of Indigenous populations and the states in which they live (Miller 2000). The latter portion of Bill Reid’s career is, for this reason, fascinating. He begins to use his power as a ‘safe’ representative of Indigenous art forms in order to disrupt dominant notions of dead, dying, or static Haida culture. In 1985 he applies for Indian status, and begins to take part in activist projects such as the 1986 Haida protest against deforestation (Remillard 2011: 175). Most strikingly, when invited to take part in an exhibition in Paris, Reid carves the canoe *Loo Taas* and sends it up the Seine with Haida paddlers using Haida Gwaii passports, “not as a representative piece of formal aesthetics, but as an object of lived ceremonial, cultural, and ritualistic significance” (Remillard 2011: 176). Interestingly, Reid’s trajectory parallels the millennial move in language revitalization scholarship to characterize recorded but unspoken languages as “sleeping” rather than “dead” for the purpose of embracing cultural and linguistic dynamism (Hinton 2001).

Thus, despite powerful discursive constraints there are ways to challenge the double bind that Indigenous interlocutors find themselves in (though in Reid’s case, this ability may rely on positional privilege: Thomas King (2011) also identifies class as an important intersectional factor). In what ways can we continue to interrogate colonial structures and make room in ourselves and our systems for decolonization?. The final section of this paper will explore the various interpretive pitfalls discussed this far and offer a few thoughts about the ways in which to engage responsibly with unfamiliar codes in order to communicate effectively between lived cultures.

4. De-coding and Erasure

De-coding has two meanings here, because before we turn to ideas about how to more accurately communicate between culture groups, it is important to identify some of the reasons

why the current communicative problems exist. There is a striking commonality between the colonial discursive moves identified, in the simultaneous tendencies to (1) decontextualize then re-interpret using our own system and (2) allow contextualization if it looks authentic, where ‘authentic’ means static, ahistorical, and dead or dying. What they have in common is that either way, the rules of exchange erase colonial history. In discourse one, everyone is wholly “modern”. The Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en are property claimants in a national judicial system, the Pintupi are modern artists, Bill Reid is at the forefront of Canadian fine art, the affinities between tribal and modern art demonstrate that all of humanity has always had modern sensibilities. In discourse two, there are moderns and pre-moderns, each group on one side of colonial history with few signs of mixing or contact. ‘Authenticity’ appears to mean asking Indigenous populations to bear the burden of proving that colonialism never happened. Ironically, these two discourses do not actually belong side by side; they intuitively cancel each other out. Unfortunately, it is not usually the colonial audience that notices or has to cope with this opposition. Instead the double bind is created for Indigenous agents who fall anywhere in between those two extremes.

This is meant to be a theoretical sketch of discursive patterns rather than a deterministic proclamation. In fact, so many of the sources in this paper have identified similar themes in their analysis that I am optimistic about the growing awareness of this rather messy hypocrisy in the ways that various settler institutions interpret and represent their engagements with Indigenous peoples. Additionally, many Indigenous artists and activists continue to make progress despite the different ways they can be discursively undermined. As such, while I cannot realistically voice optimism that we will soon see states literally ceding territory on a nation-to-nation basis (even Canada’s latest successful Title case left provisions for crown incursion: see *Tsilhqot’in Nation v. British Columbia* [2014]), I do think that there is room for people and institutions to put more effort into understanding unfamiliar communicative and coding practices. This responsibility is particularly important in cases where there is a jurisdictional or power imbalance.

There are reasons to put in this effort beyond the wish to be a good ally or interpreter. To guide this section to a discussion that may read as more lyrical than political, I want to point to the fact that naming practices and art pieces share the ability to say much with little. The most important reason to take a more critical approach to engaging with Indigenous interlocutors is, of course, social responsibility and justice, but I will suggest with this section that a secondary and related reason has to do with poetry.

There is a connection between giving a chiefly name in a land claims case and the other artistic examples in this paper beyond the critical responses to their respective Indigenous communities. Theorists in linguistic anthropology and elsewhere recognize naming practices, as well as art objects, as signifiers that carry far more with them than what is immediately apparent. One of the most famous discussions of this comes from Keith Basso in *Speaking With Names*. After spending time amongst the Western Apache and slowly learning the significance of their dialogue, he eventually succeeds in discerning and communicating as much information as he possibly can but concedes that a translation of placenames, “both the richness of their content and the fullness of their spirit” (Basso 1988: 123) cannot ever be done fully. Art and poetry, and naming, and anything expressed succinctly with much hidden beneath it has much to lose from a poor interpreter, and that is what we have noticed thus far. While language and linguistic phenomena have significant unconscious effects at any level of communication, certain forms

(such as poetry, narrative, naming, and figurative language) appear to harness submerged meaning for particular effects (Chamberlin in Battiste 2000; Hymes 1996: 185-6)

When Basso first begins conducting fieldwork, the brevity and apparent meaninglessness of Apache interactions is bewildering to him, but after time, exposure, and a great deal of help from his interlocutors, he begins to understand the significance of place names and the stories that lie behind them. Finally, he is able to express his appreciation for the communicative patterns and depth of meaning within each toponym, within each succinct and economical exchange (Basso 1988: 114). Most importantly, he continually asserts that while it does help that his informants provide an explanation, a “straight path to knowing” (Basso 1988: 108), the wisdom itself cannot be directly explained or translated. Straight explanation is not a replacement for submerged meaning: “poetry is not a sort of distorted and decorated prose, but rather prose is poetry which has been stripped down and pinned to a Procrustean bed of logic” (Bateson 1972: 145). The same thing is often said of art: “If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it” (Bateson 1972: 147). Art is not only submerged meaning, but also submerged skill: for an artist to excel at their craft, they have immense technical ability which they have so internalized that the product of their labors appears to be effortless, almost magically so (Gell 1992: 55).

Artistic and linguistic efforts both imply a message. As such, both the content and the coding of the message may not be immediately evident – it may be submerged – and if this is the case, then there is an opportunity for the audience to learn and appreciate. It may be far more valuable to learn the vocabulary of signifiers and signified, to try to access the meaning of an art piece, poem, or name as best as one can, than to either give up on ever understanding or to try to create an entirely conscious, rational ‘straight path to knowing.’ The same logic that makes such bare explanation a poor replacement for poetry should carry weight here.

In the anthropological, linguistic, and artistic communities, interpretation is never without value; however, in the time-honored tradition of interrogating our methods, it is inevitably essential to be aware about what is lost in the interpretive process. This paper has tried to deal with the responses that Indigenous interlocutors face when they bring communications to other groups. As such, refusal to interpret could be called a refusal to hear. While my main goal has been to talk about ways in which our hearing is poor, ways in which we can hear better, it is also essential to attend to original source material: responsibly and respectfully. This, I believe, is one key element in a scholar’s ability to play a “mediative” rather than an “extractive” role in work with Indigenous groups (Hymes 1996: 60).

By way of conclusion, I will reiterate a point from the beginning of this paper: that the use of the word ‘colonial’ is meant more as a call for self-awareness than it is as an accusation. Colonialism is a history that many of us would likely prefer to forget, and we certainly try to whenever we evade responsibility by claiming temporal separation, erasing the past as a living entity in today’s people, relationships, and institutions. One of the main points of this discussion has been that when non-Indigenous interpreters erase colonialism, it places Indigenous peoples in an awkward double bind. To accept the label of ‘settler-colonial’ is, I hope, one step towards avoiding the traps identified here, because it implies a commitment to take history seriously. In our roles as academics, citizens, cultural consumers, or humans in colonized nations, accountability and self-awareness are tools we may consider using, along with attention to coding, context, and content in communication. Perhaps most importantly, however, I would argue that the opportunity to approach intercultural communication mindfully is not just a responsibility; it is also a gift, for: “in showing their paintings, Aboriginal people may require

that to have seen something is to be responsible for understanding it” (Myers 1991: 506). While intercultural communication may be full of hurdles and the potential for power imbalance, it also provides some of the most valuable opportunities to work on recognizing the simultaneous diversity of human knowledge and the fundamental temporality of human difference.

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