

A Drum in One Hand, a Camera in the Other: Contemporary Aboriginal Winter Life – A Photographic Essay

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Teaching is a form of art.

- Herman Michell (Cree)
“Teaching from an Aboriginal Perspective”

Boozhoo. Tansi. Hello. We would like to share some stories with you. They are stories about our art, our culture, our lives. We are pleased and honoured to share them with you.

At the Fourth Annual Conference of the Canadian Aboriginal Science and Technology Society in 1996, renowned Native¹ architect Douglas Cardinal (Blackfoot/Métis) remarked that the First Peoples of Turtle Island² still have the tools to live strong, happy, prosperous Indigenous lives, in spite of the colonial

¹ Our peoples are known by many names, including “Indian,” Native,” Indigenous,” “Aboriginal,” and “First Peoples.”

² The name of North America, as it is known in our territory.

experience. All we have to do, Cardinal said, is continue to carry our teachings into the future, while always having the courage to struggle with the world around us while we do it. He stated that,

Elders remind us to face the future with a computer in one hand and a drum in the other... There is only tremendous opportunities if you're willing to stand out there and leap off the edge. Because that's where true creativity exists; that's what we have to do to create a new life not only for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, but to make a contribution to other people living in a small little world. (Keynote)

To Cardinal, one of Turtle Island's best known architectural artists, adopting, appropriating, and using the tools originating outside Aboriginal society does not mean a loss of Native integrity, as current hybridity theorists would have us believe.³ We are now using institutional systems, such as governments, schools,

³ The notion of hybridity has emerged in the wake of post-modern theory which, as Frederic Jameson has reminded us, is characterized by the idea that all subject positions are multiple (1964). Post-modern theorists, working from the Freudian notion of displacement and the Derridean notion of difference, have argued that identity is created from the mediation of multiple subject positions, which are "Displaced but not *replaced*," (original italics, Bammer xiii). In other words, human beings occupy different positions at different times which are mediated but are not privileged. Post-colonial critics have used this approach to explain that human culture is created from this condition. To them, all humans have "multi-cultural identities" which are "distinctively plural and hybrid" as a result of being in constant contact with one another, and the world around them (Pope 144). The implication of a "hybrid" identity is that it is always shifting, as positions continually inform each other through their presence and influence. The notion of "hybridity" has been extremely influential in the ways these critics have examined the world all colonized peoples live in, and has "become one of the most significant and influential aspects of contemporary post-colonial theorizing" (Thieme 121-2). American Arnold Krupat, an "ethnocritic," who throughout his career has argued for "an 'indigenous' criticism for Indian literatures," (*Ethnocriticism* 44) has not shied away from applying hybridity to Indian identity. In his 2002 book *Red Matters* (and in earlier works), Krupat uses hybridity to strongly articulate a case for Native literary criticism. Italian Elvira Pulitano, in her 2003 book *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, picks up on Krupat's theory. Pulitano asserts that "any attempt to recover a 'pure' or 'authentic' Native form of discourse, one rigidly based on a Native perspective, is not possible since Native American narratives are by nature heavily heteroglot and hybridized" (13). She critiques and creates an evaluative hierarchy of six Native writers, judging harshly those who are "literary separatist," because they reinforce oppressive power structures and end up "perpetuating the discursive paradigms of Eurocentric thinking"

and churches that have historically sought to enslave us, in Indian ways. Things such as universities, cars, and computers are now strengthening Native identity, and continue our celebration of Indian life into the new millennium. There is still much more work to be done. Our Indigenous lives are here for the taking, but we must have the courage to risk living them.

It is most fitting that here, at the First Nations University of Canada (FNUC), in a building that Cardinal himself designed, we began a project with a drum in one hand and a camera in the other. We all participate in a first year education course named "Introduction to Aboriginal Elementary Arts Education," where we, as pre-certification teachers, study fine arts education in preparation for our future careers as public school elementary educators. The class is focused, as most of our courses are at FNUC, on Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge. There are 13 of us in the course, and as is also the case with many of the classes here, the majority of us are Aboriginal.

Music therapist Carolyn Kenny (Choctaw) posits that,

As First Nations people we experience and define beauty in relation to the way we live. Our relationship to Mother Earth and to each other, the way we live, together in a place, our appreciation of holistic aspects of life all coalesce to give a sense of coherence to our worlds. It is our ability to sense this coherence that can give us the confidence to express ourselves fully, *define ourselves authentically*, and assist us in the creation of our own stories. Through this sense of coherence, we know who we are and we can

(100), and lauds those who "embrace the dialogic crosscultural approach" of hybridity (191). For a critique on hybridity theory and how it de-legitimizes Native sovereignty, see Craig S. Womack's forthcoming essay "The Integrity of American Indian Claims (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Hybridity)" or our instructor Niigonwedom Sinclair's essay entitled "Tending to Ourselves: Hybridity and Native American Literature."

see the visions of who we might become in the future. This visionary landscape is rich in image, metaphor, symbol. It is punctuated by texture, song, color, story, prose. It is implied in the pattern of a basket, the shape of a carving, and reflects the lands that we inhabit, our experiences on it, and the knowledge that we acquire because of our respect for place. *This is our sense of art as First Peoples.* (77, our emphasis)

For Kenny, Aboriginal art is in the everyday lives of modern, real, First Nations peoples, manifested in their experience of beauty today. This is the mission statement, the pedagogy, the theme, of our course. It is what guides us in our understanding of what Aboriginal art is now, and what gives us meaning as Indigenous peoples, students, community members.

Our project was simple. We first formulated an understanding of what constitutes a beautiful Aboriginal life today, here, in Cree-Saulteaux territory,⁴ in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada during January 2006. We listed all of those aspects that are beautiful in our lives.⁵ Then, we set out to create our art. Guided

⁴ The First Nations University is located on Treaty Four territory. For more information, please see the school's website, at www.firstnationsuniversity.ca.

⁵ Here is the (non-exhaustive) list we came up with in one class period: technology, computers, internet, coffee, money, books, teepees, lodges, clothing, smoking, tobacco, ceremonies, cars, visiting, family, children, women, men, success, problems, alcohol, Christianity, Traditions, Buddhism, job, Cree, Saulteaux, Lakota, writing, reading, painting,, medicines, drama, grades, graduation, classes, success, failures, Chiefs, police, playing, joking,, dreaming, fasting, visions, kissing, school, nature, makeup, Nintendo, movies, candy, bannock, stew, electricity, circles, cement, underwear, DVDs, VCR, tv, bed, pow-wow, drums, songs, printers, backpacks, ink, pens, moccasins, Gitchi Manitou, language, keys, tea, candles, Christmas, Halloween, Easter, New Year's Eve, literary criticism, theory, allowance, politics, art, laptop, pyjamas, couches, fans, air conditioning, stories, camping, sweat lodge, wolves, totem, fish, eagle, squirrel, bumble bee, dogs, pillows, circles, expression, perception, Canada, United States, warrior, tomahawk, jingle dress, feasts, knowledge, sacred items, names, plants, lamps, day care, cameras, sand teaching, airplanes, baby, marriage, sovereignty, magazine, Brad Pitt, Ang Jolie, Oka, Phil Fontaine, colour, Kookum, grandfather, pasta, pizza, hair spray, jeans, remote control, glasses, coins, birchbark biting, beadwork, moon, sun, snow, heat, Raven, Nanabush, Wasakaychak, traveling, voting, soup, bologna, deer, hunting, moose, death, life, survival,

by our instructor Niigonwedom Sinclair (Anishnaabe) and sponsored by the Indian education department and its chair, Angelina Weenie (Cree), we purchased disposable cameras and set it upon ourselves to photograph contemporary Aboriginal life in small groups.⁶ Then, remaining in groups, we assembled our photographs, and found a common theme that brought the photographs together.

Our project names are: "Pipona Oskana Ka-asteki, Winter in Wascana," "Stories About Us," Aboriginal Eye View," and "Our Future Looks Bright." A small selection of these projects have been included here. We are pleased and honoured to share our findings with you.

What we found is that Aboriginal life is as dynamic, powerful, and spiritual as it ever has been, appropriating all sorts of things into continuing the beautiful ways our elders have maintained for us for years. It is not "hybridic," because all of these parts of our photographs are part of our Aboriginal life today. They have been appropriated and are now Indian things. Some parts are easily seen as beautiful, such as our children, our activities, our studies, our homes, our grandparents. Some parts are not so easily seen as beautiful, such as alcohol, Christianity, English, capitalism, and pollution. All of these things,

continuance, e-mail, farming, Band office, assignment, feather, Pocahontas, Little Mermaid, laughing, teasing, sitting, bus stop, hatred, passion, dance, drama, love.

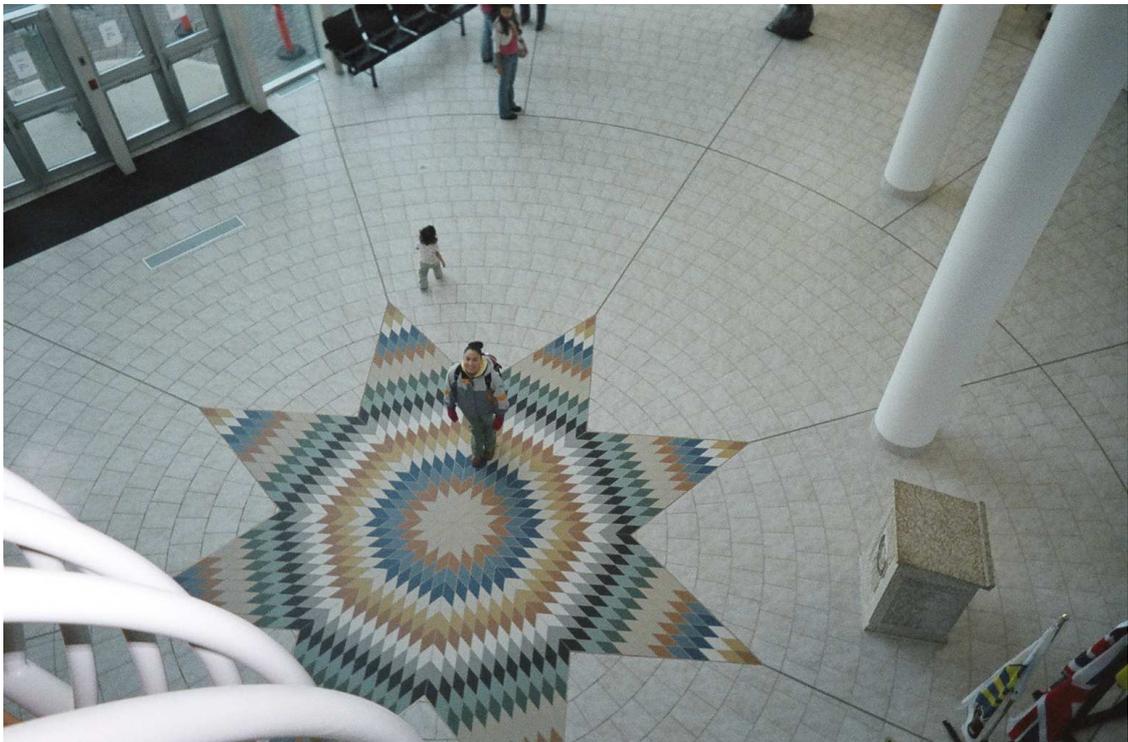
⁶ Our project is inspired by the international art project "Kids With Cameras," a "non-profit organization that teaches the art of photography to marginalized children in communities around the world." The project is best known for its work on the Academy Award-winning documentary Born into Brothels. For more information, please see their website: <http://www.kids-with-cameras.org>. It is our hope that we can eventually bring this project into our classrooms as future educators.

however, make up our lives, as First Nations peoples today, and they are beautiful, vibrant, Indigenous lives. Yes, we would like to improve and change some things (We mean, who wouldn't?), but we believe these things will be done, with time, so that we can continue, and give our children the beautiful lives they deserve too.

Chief Leonard George (Salish) of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation has said "that our songs and dances are the essence of our spiritual life as Aboriginal people." Kenny adds to George by writing that "I believe that our song, dance, art, carving, basketmaking, and other art forms can provide the foundation for our autonomy, solidarity, self-determination, and the means for keeping our spirit alive" (77-8). We believe that photography can also be added to this list. We would like to donate our photographs as part of our vision from their words. This is the way we are continuing our lives, Aboriginal existences, through our cameras. Miigwetch. Ekosi. Thank you.

*“Pipona Oskana Ka-asteki, Winter in
Wascana”*



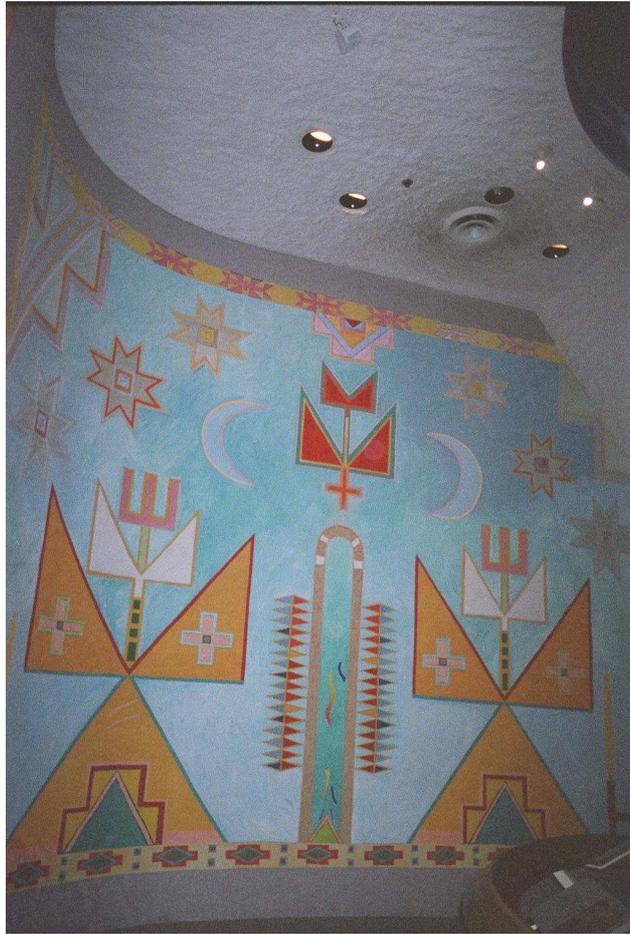






“Stories About Us”







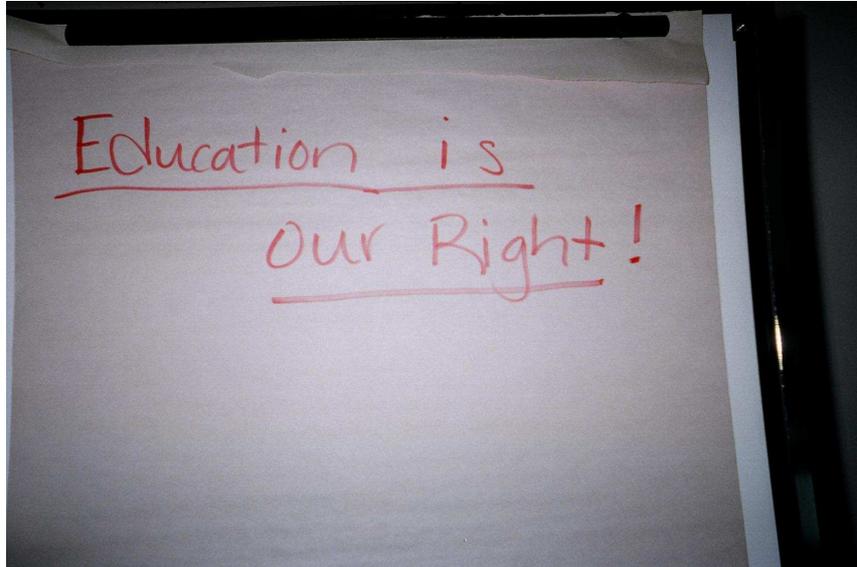
“Aboriginal Eye View”







“Our Future Looks Bright”







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