

An Uncertain Latitude

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I wonder about artistic privilege. The advantages, attention, and public money granted to select artists, but especially the social margin, passage, and exception we occasionally enjoy. In exchange, artists make the absent present. We reflect the fleeting known in condensed, beautiful, novel, and more permanent or replicable forms. We recite, repeat, refresh, and invent. Artists fabulate the real. We devise the displays by which a people know and show themselves. We entertain. We educate without looking you in the eye. Slow, by seduction, through pleasure and mystery rather than rote, humiliation, trial, and test. We devise insoluble puzzles, medicine dissolved as needs require. We also create comfortably disturbing distractions and abstractions. We aestheticize suffering, and anesthetize it, too.

Most artists are reflective, they stimulate, satiate, and reproduce the known desires and meanings of their patrons. Others are reflexive. Seeing, for example, injustice and erasure, living it, they resist and refigure the social imaginary by performing presence and giving figure to critique. Artists are relied upon not just to picture and resemble but also to see, show, and tell what the dominant imaginary cannot yet admit to consciousness. This is an evolutionary impulse. Healthy societies tolerate contrary people. Artists are given latitude in the hopes that their difference might generate improvement, which is fitness for unpredictable futures. Because this impulse concerns long-term survival, healthy societies permit difference even if it contradicts or threatens the dominating class and ideology. Such systems require dissenting possibilities because any one of these differences might prefigure more successful modes of future being.

Some artists are awarded artistic privilege, are temporarily freed from mundane toil so they can engage extra-rational toil. They research and produce public experiences considered a social good. If their effort is not baldly education or social work, they may bathe in art's aura, one that dazzles the viewer; a scrim that shields with art's illusion the machinery of our superfluous purpose. While most of this work is reflective, customary, fashion, education, and entertainment, occasionally it is difference, dissent, and transformative. In this margin, difference is embroidered, becomes a tangible pride and showy presence, a needful disruption of more than is necessary.

Healthy societies give some artists a wider berth out of hope, but also out of fear. The powerful are anxious about the power of unmoored embodied critique, affective dissent, and creative revisioning that exceeds their dominating imagination. However roomy, a berth is still an allotted space. Artist-run centres, in part, received public funds to contain the radical imaginations that emerged in the 1960s and 70s. They were the necessary nuisance grounds where bricoleurs repurposed social waste for audiences that rarely exceeded themselves.

I was fortunate to attend the *It's a Cultural Thing: Individual Expression, Collective Inspiration* gathering in Calgary in 1993. Organized by the Minquon Panchayat, First Nations and of colour

artists disturbed, and eventually re-figured, the white spaces and culture of the artist-run network. While the resulting changes to the network are significant, it was the fact and mode of gathering that rocked my world. A quarter century later, I attended *Primary Colours*, a gathering of more than 120 Indigenous and of colour artists, curators, cultural activists, thinkers, and doers at the Songhees Wellness Centre, Lekwungen Territory, Victoria, British Columbia (Sept. 23 - 26, 2017). *It's a Cultural Thing* was about justice, inclusion. *Primary Colours* was too, but the main message I felt was the importance of these gatherings as an alternative to mainstreamed "alternative" art culture.

I recognize these meetings as a performance of what Richard Rorty describes as new forms of social cohesion and momentum that can emerge when grand narratives lose their credibility, when shared stories and beliefs fail to include and inspire community. His three principles are contingency, irony, and solidarity. Emergent communities are liberal, in that numerous narratives are entertained but none rule. It is recognized that truth is contingent on experience, self-knowledge and self-authorship rather than reliance on accepted meta-narratives. Such a position is ironic in that knowers are always in doubt because competing narratives about like situations and things are compelling. Nevertheless, we must live, do things, together. So, it is solidarity, the will to include difference without subjugation that provides social cohesion and momentum.

Primary Colours, the Summer Intensive Institute at the University of British Columbia in Kelowna, and numerous other Indigenous-centered gatherings of recent years, are centers that endeavor to hold without containing. They are gentle vortices drawing divergence close, but only for a moment, and not with the desire to puree. They are contingent. For artists who dissent for reasons other than art fashion, these temporary eddies succeed artist-run centers by not aspiring to become institutions, but to nourish relationships. Institutions are designed for survival despite their momentary occupants. Relationships between non-institutionalized actors only exist because they aspire to respond to the immediate and changing needs of their participants.

Primary Colours is ironic in that it was a gathering of differences. While mostly conducted in English, there were numerous French speakers, simultaneous translation, and folks who spoke many other tongues, and who came from a great range of territories and cultures. I am Métis. While also a Canadian citizen, I glimpse my Canada rarely; this was one of those times. Organizers, France Trepanier and Chris Crieghton Kelly, centered the Indigenous, but it was often uncentered by the active and welcome presence of Black artists. Whether it was the reminder of Black and Indigenous colonial slavery, or the need to recognize Canada's continuing colonization of territories beyond Turtle Island, the violence of borders, and our communion 25 years ago in Calgary, I felt a sense of fragile relations renewed. The possibility of solidarity. I felt a shift from seeking solitary spaces of artistic privilege, to shared places of artistic responsibility. I felt a turn from a desire for inclusion in the mainstream, alone, and toward also engaging and creating communities of like *Others*, territory beneath, above and aside from the one pulled over us, called Canada, or not, located at an uncertain latitude.

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