“Fine Arts Faculties and Indigenous Futures”

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Thank you, Edward Jerkowski, for the invitation. I am honoured by the opportunity and thrilled to learn from my colleagues France Trépanier and Andrea Fatona.

I am speaking to you from Treaty Four territory.
You are all familiar with territorial acknowledgements.
They are important courtesies, but are often rushed, their weight and implications blurred by recitation rather than resuscitation. Given the nature of our conversation, I’d like to take a minute to deepen my acknowledgement.

The numbered Treaties are legal and sacred covenants between the Crown and the original inhabitants and stewards of the Great Plains and north-central woodlands of the territory now known as Canada. “The Crown” is the legal name of the British government, whose rights in this matter were transferred to Canada’s ‘Crown’ at Confederation. According to British law, Canada’s legal existence depended upon securing written settlements with the people who were here first. Treaty Four, signed in 1874, is an agreement between, on one side, settlers, their heirs, and anyone accepting the social contract of becoming a Canadian, and, on the other side, people then known as “Indians;” in this case, the Nêhiyaw (Cree), the Anihšināpē (Saulteaux), and the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda. The spirit of the Treaties is that in exchange for sharing their land, First Nations people are compensated, have reserved lands, and special rights in perpetuity. Elders understand that the Treaty is with the Creator. It is a sacred obligation that includes our other than human relations. For Indigenous people, the idea of title to land and its surrender is inconceivable. Treaty is an agreement to share responsibility.

I acknowledge that in addition to the Treaty signatories, this area was shared at various times by the Métis, Blackfoot, and ancient others. I recognize the elders, knowledge keepers, land protectors, and cultural producers past and present.

I am a descendant of river lot people Eleanor and Laurent Garneau who, in 1872, moved from Red River to Amiskwaciwâskahikan, also known as beaver hills house, and Edmonton, in Treaty Six, where I grew up. I am a grateful guest here in Oskana, Regina, in Treaty four.

I have been a studio professor in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Regina since 1999. When I interviewed for the job, I did not tell my future colleagues I was Métis. While my portfolio had Indigenous content, it was likely read as my subject rather than my identity. I passed because I could. My fair skin accords me, in this society, privileges which include the unearned advantage of being read as a person before being read as a racialized person.

I repressed my Métis identity not because I felt the university would not welcome it. The opposite. I didn’t want the university to instrumentalize my Métisness. The posted job was to teach painting and drawing, not Indigenous studies. It seemed to me, at that time, that White folks taught White things, and whatever else they wanted, while Indigenous folks were expected

to teach Indigenous things. I wanted to keep my options open, again, exercising my tonal privilege.

Soon after being hired, I was visited by Métis art Elder and prof., Bob Boyer, who took me under his wing. He warned that once my Indigeneity became known, strangers would flood my inbox with requests to participate in committees, research projects…panels. In the upside-down world of the academy, in the era of selective inclusion, previous Indigenous deficit was now reckoned a boon, a resource. It would be difficult to know, he explained, which propositions to embrace. Most opportunities would be offered as a means to check an HR box—Indigenous participation? Check. Those invitations would have little to do with me and my actual interest, skills, and knowledge. In fact, performing as symbolic content rather than as an agent, little would be expected of me. Or, if I were positioned as a go-between, too much would be expected. Non-Indigenous academic agents would assume that I was replete with Indigenous knowledge and connections—an aquafer waiting to be tapped.

Worst of all, he professed, these offers would inflate my ego if I couldn't separate when *I* was being engaged from when it was just my Métis status, or the imagined contents of my Indigeneity that were being engaged. Equally tragic, would be how pursuing projects not my own would split me from myself, from my ultimate mission, and from authentic relations with my community.

If you knew Bob—the Harley riding, rock band T-shirt and leather jacket clad iconoclast—you know he didn't express it quite this way. More like: "Don't let the fuckers use you. Don't get a big head. You don't know as much as they think you know. Remember who you are, where you come from, who you serve, and what you're meant to do."

I did receive those invitations. They weren't all as disingenuous as Bob fore-shaded. Well, perhaps they matured as I did. Within the shelter of academic privilege, I had time, space and resources to paint, curate, and write my way into contemporary Indigenous identity, ideas, and practices beyond white projection, protection, and institutional utility. And so, the invitations changed their tenor: from applications from strangers to re-present a comprehensible and palatable version of the Indigenous, to invitations from and to colleagues to collaborate in creating new forms of knowledge and ways of being, to world-build.

Things got better as I refused the more obvious sites of misappropriation and misapprehension: dominant culture conferences designed to corral, mine, or 'professionalize' the Indigenous; any sort of debate; and committees designed to renovate rather than replace—well, I haven't quite managed to avoid these last ones entirely. Most importantly, the invitations and collaborations have increasingly come from Indigenous and the other than White academics, artworlds, and community colleagues. Aside from keynote talks, most of my work is within that space, the parallel academy, the shadow university.

So, why am I here, invited by a stranger to appear on a panel to talk about racism in the Fine Arts to a primarily non-BIPOC audience? In part, because of or in spite of Bob Boyer. He was invited into the academy because they needed him. In terms of academic qualification, he only had a BFA, but, in the 1970s, the university craved the rich range of his other earned offerings. As

academic requirements rose and he refused to pursue an MFA or PhD, he faced increasing pressure and the routine humiliations of a second class academic citizen. He, and so many in the first wave of Indigenous academics, were poorly supported, grew skeptical and resentful. They occupied untenable positions between worlds. The second wave, the terminal degreed, mostly urban, mostly pale, and without their Native tongue, are more amenable dual citizens. The third wave, mostly female, increasingly learning their languages, and looking to each other and community for kinship and direction. These folks, along with our Black and of-colour colleagues, disabled activists, allies and partners, in community, and around the world, are the university in-waiting.

I am here because, unlike my mentor, Bob, I have reason for optimism. I do experience change. While, I enjoy producing with and circulating among my Indigenous and non-colonial colleagues, if this is to be more than a separatist site and, perhaps, an enclave of class privilege, the movement must extend beyond our bubble. While there is not yet a critical mass of colleagues who will tip the institution into a fully realized anti-racist, non-colonial, non-patriarchal, non-capitalist, non-ableist, more than humanist community simply by shifting their weight; there is a growing network of BIPOC students and academics who can nudge the shift for them.

My thoughts are simple:
The very imaginary of the Fine Arts makes it difficult to see our own racism. Evolutionary change is a means of replicating ourselves with minor, seeming, improvements. Real change is sudden and disruptive. Non-colonial, anti-racist institutions engage not only individuals but also make Treaty with groups.

The Fine Arts has long been the site of consciousness raising. And artists often figure themselves as beings replete with knowledge and conscience—or at least see themselves as vessels through which that wisdom flows. Additionally, because art is illusion, re-presentations of absent things, or are complete fictions, and because artists are imagination activists who try to stimulate the conscience of our publics, we are adept at mistaking symbolic change for real change. It is difficult for illusionists to see our real conditions, our role in perpetuating racism, and recognize the Fine Arts as a network of institutions formed within racist and colonial ideology and habit.

Nevertheless, we're smart and compassionate people. Experienced and creative. There is little I can tell you that you don't already know. You know that it is unjust that our students are far more diverse than our faculty and administration. We are all familiar with how institutions, faculty, reproduce themselves, and how difficult it can be to first, see, then entertain, then 'make space for', then accommodate, then embrace, then share space. This evolutionary model of change asks for patience; asks that we delay justice while settled folks get comfortable with unsettling.

Real change is sudden. It is cluster hires. It is a shift from diversity management, the management of diversity, to diverse management. It is extra-personal. That is, it is not about thinking in terms of increasing representation—in the sense of improving presentation, display. And not even increasing diversity, if that word only suggests including more individuals of racialized difference rather than also engaging content and methodology differences. A goal of

anti-racist work and non-colonial practice should ultimately engage whole groups and discourses. Our goal should be Treaty.

Evolutionary models of institutional change recognize that Fine Arts institutions exclude, tokenize, oppress, and distort BIPOC artists, histories, and representations as historical wrongs in need of correction, but do so in slow motion, and under the institution's terms, timetable, and governance. Colonial institutions can only afford to accommodate those changes they can recognize, and recognize as supporting their existing members and imaginary.

The first role of any institution is self-integrity—keeping the body whole. Its members have difficulty picturing and building futures that do not include themselves, ideas, and modes of being at the center. Such institutions and folks intuitively know that real change threatens institutional and disciplinary integrity—as they see and perform it. For example, radical inclusion, transformative engagement, will include the things and practices formerly unrecognized as art, and certainly not seen as Fine Art. It will include new modes of evaluation and critique. And non-colonial Fine Arts institutions are decanonized.

The heart of white supremacy and colonialism in the Fine Arts is the canon. The centering of reiterations and re-presentations of canonical works perpetuate anarchic and oppressive ways of knowing and being. The very idea of a canon, rather than polyphony, is the imposition of institutional will on creative expression. While canonical works can be critiqued, deconstructed, and played with, engaging with them always reinforces their centrality. Picture Fine Arts studies, histories, and performances one, two, five centuries from now. Assuming some continuation of the university, and human life, teaching 'the' canon or even surveys will be impossible. There will simply be too much material to cover, too many things and no agreed dominant ontology of value. This isn't news. Many of us have moved beyond 'the' canon and survey and toward new ontologies of value—when we can.

Real change is sudden, disruptive. It comes as a surprise to non-instigators. Unfortunately, colonial institutions are resilient and individual resistant energies are eventually coopted, they soon find themselves replicating the model they sought to displace—new bodies, familiar behaviours. The only check on this is if change agents do not identify primarily as individuals but as members of non-institutional networks. Such collectives are universities-in-waiting, shadow theaters, itinerant and occasional circles—networks of thinkers, makers, doers, radical feelers, and intuiters who work collectively to picture change before action.

Changes we now see, for example, in the increased hiring of Indigenous curators and the re-formation—possibly—of some artist-run centers, was preceded by the heavy lifting by, for example, the Minquon Panchayat, the Indigenous Curatorial Collective, and Primary Colours. Non-colonial institutions go beyond engaging individuals; they make Treaty with groups. This is not about a Fine Arts Department, a theater company, dance company, or whatever, having formal agreements with political organizations—such as a First Nation band office—or relationships with Elders. I am talking about agreements among equivalent knowledge keepers, knowledge generators, and creative makers: for example with Black, Indigenous, or BIPOC art collectives, curator circles. The point being that non-colonial institutions Treaty with groups rather than just individuals.

I believe that in our hearts, in our unconscious, conscience, in wherever you site your better self, the shift has already happened for many. Generations of testimony, critical thinking, and lived experience, of activism, of friendships, of art, has created discontent with the way things are, and has occasionally figured alternatives. If the heart has changed, how now do we move the rest of the body along?