

Truth and Reconciliation in the Arts and Culture Sector

Menon Dwarka, Senior Vice President

Canada will recognize its first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on Thursday, September 30, 2021. This new statutory holiday will give Canadians a chance to reflect on the legacy of Canada's residential school system, which sought to destroy Indigenous cultures through forced family separation, ancestral language suppression, and the forbidding of all Indigenous cultural expression under the guise of a national network of Christian boarding schools. These children were subjected to the most brutal abuse one can imagine and the damage to these nations will likely take decades to repair. McGill University has eloquently described the need to "...recognize and commemorate the intergenerational harm that residential schools have caused to Indigenous families and communities, and to honour those who have been affected by this injustice."¹

The day after this historic holiday, however, many of the issues plaguing Canada will remain. The news continues to reveal tragedies on a regular basis but for many outside the Indigenous community, knowing how to turn sorrow into concrete actions alludes them. As an arts and culture community, many people will post orange squares² on social media or scour the web for the best songs, books, and films by Indigenous artists to assuage feelings of guilt. The more righteous will chide this behavior, pointing out the myriad of statistics that demonstrate the cruel reality of Indigenous life in Canada today.

In the six years since its report was issued, the government's own Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has only implemented 13 of its 94 Calls to Action, including number 80, which calls "upon the federal government, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, to establish, as a statutory holiday, a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to honour Survivors, their families, and communities, and ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process."³ This edition of *Arts Insights* explores the kind of substantive change that the arts and culture sector could bring to this conversation and whether there is a special role the arts can play in healing this deep, national wound.

Framing Ideas

While they are not intended as a 'how to' with respect to working with Indigenous communities, the Canada Council for the Arts / Conseil des arts du Canada has outlined several guiding principles through its Creating, Knowing and Sharing: The Arts and Cultures of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples program. Through this program, the Canada Council affirms the following guiding principles:

- Respect Indigenous worldviews, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples, as articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).
- Support and uphold the principles of reconciliation, articulated through the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).
- Support artistic activities that respect and encourage First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultural self-determination and the vitality of Indigenous artistic practices and communities.
- Recognize the distinct and unique place of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists in Canada as creators, interpreters, translators, and transmitters of an inherent Indigenous cultural continuity, as well as unique contributions made to Canadian cultural identity.
- Recognize and support customary and contemporary artistic practices by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists.
- Support and develop a Canadian arts landscape that is deeply ingrained with perspectives, voices, stories, struggles, and aesthetics of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada.

¹ National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, McGill University, <https://www.mcgill.ca/indigenous/national-day-truth-and-reconciliation>.

² "The Significance of Orange Shirt Day," Indigenous Peoples' Commission, <https://ipc-cpa.liberal.ca/blog/significance-orange-shirt-day/>, September 29, 2017.

³ "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action," Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf, 2021.

- Recognize the distinctiveness of the many unique and self-defining First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada.
- Recognize a wide variety of artistic and cultural practitioners within First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.⁴

The Canada Council has modeled how these guidelines might look in practice through its {Re}conciliation Initiative. Developed in partnership with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, this Initiative "...aimed to promote artistic collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, investing in the power of art and imagination to inspire dialogue, understanding, and change."⁵

Outlining outcomes is certainly helpful and most Canadians would support the Canada Council's guiding principles, yet the sector continues to struggle with moving forward in an actionable way.

Challenges to Implementation

Part of the difficulty in facing these challenges is knowing what problem needs to be solved. Even though the residential school system was a catastrophic force in the lives of many Indigenous families, there were deeper motivating forces that led to their construction. Colonialism is a term that is bandied about in many contemporary conversations but people sometimes fail to remember how pervasive it was, and continues to be, in the lives of Indigenous peoples. As Paul Nicolas Cormier states in his paper *British Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples: The Law of Resistance-Response-Change*:

"Indigenous peoples in British colonial countries like Canada grow up under foreign societal structures and cultural norms. Components of a larger colonial project, these structures have become a normalized aspect of the Canadian fabric and include such well-known systems as the legal system, child welfare system, the education system, religion, health, resource management, and post-secondary education including graduate studies. Canadians often forget that Indigenous peoples "have become part of a political system based not on their own legal traditions but created and defined by Eurocentric traditions." Consequently, the colonization of Indigenous/Aboriginal peoples in Canada and abroad has never ended; assimilation into the State remains the ultimate objective."⁶

Colonialism began as a commercial enterprise designed to transfer the wealth of the world to Europe but quickly developed into an opportunity to impose hierarchies indiscriminately on whole continents of people. Defining who held power was essential to keeping the whole system running. One of the best descriptions of hierarchies is neither an advocacy nor a condemnation from Harold J. Leavitt's "Why Hierarchies Thrive," which reveals as much about the structures of global capitalism as it does about colonialism, given that their roots are one in the same. Even though he is speaking in a more general tone, Leavitt could just as well be speaking about colonizers when he states:

"...hierarchies can be very effective at providing some of the psychic nourishment we all need. Of course, many are even more effective at draining that nourishment from our minds and souls. Too often, we come to depend on these structures as a kind of protective parent guarding us against the dangers of the outside world."⁷

Imposing hierarchical structures on Indigenous people was a way for colonizers to protect themselves against the most dangerous thing in the world—vulnerable contact with human beings who share different ideas about the way the world is organized.

Differing Viewpoints

Quantifying some of the differences between hierarchical and non-hierarchical systems can also be helpful. Towards Braiding, a collaborative process between Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti with Sharon Stein, provides an eloquent and poetic description of these models of behaviour:

"A social cartography using the metaphor of construction bricks (transcendence) and knitting threads (immanence) proved very useful in engaging Indigenous artists in conversations about the tensions of working in non-Indigenous institutions and the essential steps that could enable possibilities for new forms of

⁴ Creating, Knowing and Sharing: The Arts and Cultures of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples, Canada Council for the Art, <https://canadacouncil.ca/funding/grants/creating-knowing-sharing>.

⁵ {Re}conciliation, Canada Council for the Art, <https://canadacouncil.ca/initiatives/reconciliation>.

⁶ Paul Nicolas Cormier, *British Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples: The Law of Resistance-Response-Change*, Peace Research, Vol. 49, No. 2, 2017.

⁷ Harold J. Leavitt, "Why Hierarchies Thrive," *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2003/03/why-hierarchies-thrive>, March 2003.

collaboration. We present the distinction between bricks and threads in this section. Like all metaphors, this one is partial and limited, and thus we also include several caveats.”⁸

Brick sense and sensibilities stand for a set of ways of being that emphasize individuality, fixed form, and linear time where:

- The world is experienced through concepts that describe the form of things and places them systematically in ordered hierarchical structures;
- The value of something is measured against its capacity, achievement, or potentiality to move things forward; and
- Self-worth is dependent on external validation.

Thread sense and sensibilities stand for a set of ways of being that emphasize inter-wovenness, shape-shifting flexibility, and layered time where:

- The world is experienced through sensorial events involving movement, rhythm, sound, and metaphor;
- Every ‘thing’ (including humans, non-humans, and the land) is a living entity;
- Every entity is valued for its intrinsic (insufficient and indispensable) inherent worth within an integrative and dynamic whole; and
- Self-worth is grounded in connection with something beyond the individual self, but also found within it.⁹

In light of these distinctions, reconciling the differences between brick and thread sensibilities might lead to greater empathy for those who do not share one’s personal viewpoint, which in turn would help everyone share ownership of the TRC’s Calls to Action. The creators of Towards Braiding have also included two worksheets and a series of questions for those willing to embark on this journey.¹⁰

Reconciling through Partnership

Before Truth and Reconciliation can take place with Indigenous communities, arts and culture institutions must transform from within to breakdown the colonial systems that thwart efforts to heal this collective trauma. Arts and culture organizations are a long way off from true reconciliation but they can begin to decolonize their practices by starting sustained dialogues with Indigenous communities. At an isolated summit, board members should read the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s report along with Indigenous partners, leaving time for reflection and questions. Boards should partner with Indigenous communities so that they can self-determine how the organization can support their work instead of simply incorporating Indigenous work into subscription programs. By accepting that many of these traditions may be inherently cross-genre, arts and culture organizations can marshal resources to present those practices as authentically as possible instead of categorizing an Indigenous artistic and cultural practice into the predetermined disciplines of colonial training.

Navigating these waters is a difficult proposition for both sides and there are no guides that know a perfect path forward. Therefore, arts and culture leaders should find willing partners who can help both sides in this process.

Conclusion

Understanding that there is a parity of purpose in partnering with, and the healing of, Indigenous communities, working together can help remove the barriers that have so far delayed the full implementation of the TRC’s Calls to Action. Most still have little contact with Indigenous peoples but work with artists, audiences, and communities can provide an opportunity to best incorporate thread sensibilities throughout arts and culture organizations. Can these institutions use that experience in preparation for serving Indigenous creators and audiences? The very act of decolonizing institutions will be a form of reconciliation. As George J. Sefa Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh stated in their article *The Power of Social Theory: The Anti-Colonial Discursive Framework*, “The indigenous identity continuously confronts the colonial/imperial order, and it is through such a perpetual confrontation that a sense of ‘indigeness’ is acquired.”¹¹

⁸ Toward Braiding, Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures, <https://decolonialfutures.net/towardsbraiding/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ George J. Sefa Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh, “The Power of Social Theory: The Anti-Colonial Discursive Framework.” *The Journal of Educational Thought*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23767242>, 2001.

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Menon Dwarka, Senior Vice President

Menon Dwarka joined ACG in 2021 and has held numerous arts leadership positions in Canada and the United States over the last 25 years. His innovative approach to the arts has always resulted in increased audience engagement and community development with a focus on equity, diversity, inclusion, and access. His expertise resides in leveraging technology in service of creating more diverse programming and administrative spaces. A disruptor of stratified ecosystems, Mr. Dwarka has also led grassroots organizations like Toronto's 918 Bathurst Centre and served as a board member of Canadian Opera Company, guiding its equity, diversity, and inclusion taskforce. His cross-sector work to achieve public/private sector partnerships demonstrates his unique ability to work with a variety of stakeholders to ensure the viability of arts spaces and venues across urban and suburban settings. Mr. Dwarka has worked as a peer reviewer of grants for the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, Manitoba Arts Council, City of Ottawa, and Toronto Arts Council, where he currently sits on the Music Committee. Organizations that he has led have received support from all three levels of government, as well as the Metcalf and Jackman Foundations, among others. A sought-after public speaker, Mr. Dwarka has been featured on numerous television and radio programs, including a regularly occurring segment on *Sesame Street*. He was part of the inaugural cohort of the Banff/Toronto Arts Council Cultural Leaders Lab as well as the City of Toronto's Economic Development and Culture's Strategic Planning Committee, which oversaw the creation of Toronto's 2018-2022 Culture Plan. In addition, Mr. Dwarka served as Support Lead for the Metcalf Foundation's Creative Strategies Incubator and is Chair of Humber College's Program Advisory Committee and Canadian Opera Company's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee. He holds a bachelor of music and master of music in music composition from the University of Toronto.

**Contact ACG for more information on how we can help your organization
redouble its efforts to address Truth and Reconciliation and disrupt systemic racism.**

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