

Portrayal of Canadian residential schools in Indigenous art

Art is a powerful form of expression on a personal level, whether love, passion, anger or sadness, these emotions simply can't be portrayed with the same depth of significance as through art. Art is also a significant component distinguishing between cultures all over the world. Particularly in Indigenous communities across North America, "art is an index to the Indian will to survive culturally, even if it does not tell the whole story or apply to all tribes at a time" (Coe). The lands have influenced and shaped how Indigenous peoples see, interpret and express themselves in their work, whether it's traditional or performance art ("Umatilla, Walla Walla & Cayuse Arts and Artists. "). The imagery found in art from the Northwest Coast evolved from nature and the land the people have lived on for thousands of years, thus often includes the imagery of "bears, ravens, eagles and humans or legendary creatures such as thunderbirds" ("Canadian Native Art"). Northwest Coast art, meaning the communities on Canada's west coast anywhere from Alaska to the Greater Vancouver area, is very distinct from other styles of native art. Northwest Coast art tends to be identifiable by use of characteristic oval, the use of form lines and forms shaped similarly to 'u' and 's' ("Canadian Native Art").

Art is also a form of communication; it is a universal language that may be interpreted from different perspectives. Particularly in today's colonialism dominant society, Canadian courts do not adequately protect Indigenous peoples rights the same way as white people and descendants of European settlers. Thus, some people's voices simply aren't heard, due to the suppressing nature of the government and societal structure. Consequently, sometimes the only way of communicating opinions, is through the freedom of expression in art. The residential school era for example, is not nearly as discussed or taught in academic institutions like other historical events such as World War II, the American Revolution or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Significantly fewer people are familiar with the horrific conditions and experiences caused by the establishment of residential schools, than for example the Holocaust. Thus, this paper will

explore how a selection of Indigenous artists, native to British Columbia, reflect and portray the horrors of residential schools and long term impact on Indigenous societies due to the enforced assimilation strategies. Children are the future and are thus responsible for passing cultural beliefs, traditions and teachings from generation to generation.

The majority of society is unaware of the colonial impacts on Indigenous peoples and communities, that lead to the struggle for survival of Indigenous languages and cultures. In November 2016, I went to see the *čəsnaʔəm, the city before the city* exhibition the Museum of Vancouver. What stood out most to me was one of the museum labels that stated: “The predecessor of the Museum of Vancouver presented artefacts from čəsnaʔəm as the remnants of a vanished people. In doing so, they denied the ongoing presence of Musqueam in this region” (Čəsnaʔəm..Are). Čəsnaʔəm, an ancient and sacred Musqueam burial site was turned into an archaeological goldmine in the 20th century. Thousands of sacred objects were perceived as precious historical artefacts of an extinct nation, were sold to private collectors and museums and galleries to display in their exhibitions. The museum label stated that these ‘artefacts’ were actually the personal belongings of Musqueam ancestors, highlighting the continuity and richness of the Musqueam culture. The selling and public displaying of ‘Musqueam artefacts’ fuels the common misconception that Musqueam people are extinct (Čəsnaʔəm..Are).

A prime contributor to the diminishing of Indigenous cultures was the implementation of residential schools, aimed to strip Indigenous children of their culture, language and traditions. Residential schools in Canada were part of the assimilation strategy that ultimately aimed to turn Indigenous peoples into proper Canadian citizens, by Christianizing and civilizing them (Stabler). The first residential schools date back to the 1870s, when they were established by the churches and funded by the government to meet the common goal: “Kill the Indian in the child” (“About the Commission”). The last residential school closed in Canada in

1996, barely two decades ago. By 1996, over 130 residential schools had been operated and an estimate of over 150 000 children had been separated from their parents and communities and forced to attend residential schools. Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs, stated in 1920, that the intention was to eradicate Indigenous peoples until “there (was) not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic” (Truth and Reconciliation Canada). Settlers believed Indigenous peoples were savages and perceived themselves to be able to save these children by taking them away from their families and ‘uncivilized’ environments.

Renowned for her beautiful prints, Susan Point, is one of the first female Coast Salish artists. Point began making prints in 1981, a time during which Coast Salish art wasn't as successful as today. However, driven by the vision of revitalizing Coast Salish art, Point is now on the forefront of Coast Salish culture, “both as an artist and as a conveyor” (Croes). Point's early prints mostly portrayed the oral stories that had been passed down by her ancestors, which she explains by comparing her artwork as a “visual language to help carry the torch, the torch that was lit by my ancestors” (Croes). However, *Butterfly Grid* (2016), represents her own experiences from attending residential school as a child., as seen in Figure 1. When I went to the Vancouver Art Gallery to visit Susan Point's *Spindle Whorl* exhibition, I was expecting to decide on one of Point's prints that I had seen in *Works on Paper*, for my research, however I was deeply intrigued by the powerful symbolism and imagery in *Butterfly Grid* (2016), conveying her residential school experiences and how she was impacted by



Figure 1: *Butterfly Grid*. 2016

assimilation strategies. At the age of nine years old, Susan Point was removed from her family

and forced to go to residential school in Sechelt, BC, where she remained for five years (Gary). *Butterfly Grid (2016)*, represents “the disconnection from the traditional wisdom and teachings of the Salish, and the loss of our Hul’q’umni’num’ language”, which she endured as a young child (Point). Point is from Musqueam, a Coast Salish village at the mouth of the Fraser River in Vancouver. Growing up surrounded by the Coast Salish culture and designs, most of her works incorporate traditional forms drawn from her cultural heritage and based on Coast Salish imagery her ancestral artisans created, but were taken away from her as a child. Point however, introduced her own contemporary style into her works (Point).



Figure 2: close up of *Butterfly*

pointed out how “the edges of this piece are fragments of butterfly wings” (Point), metaphorically represent Indigenous children's freedom, as this was taken away from them when they were removed from their families and forced to attend residential schools. The butterfly wings portray the removal of Indigenous’ children's freedom to be who they are but also their physical freedom, seeing as they were locked up in residential schools and forced to adopt European ways. Meanwhile, the decorative carvings in the butterfly wings continue to symbolically enrich Points work. The symbolical meaning of salmon is the idea that they are the primary source of life. Particularly amongst the Musqueam people and nations on the Northwest Coast, salmon were a crucial source of nutrition, sustaining Musqueam people for thousands of years. I remember when Elder Larry Grant held a lecture in class at the beginning

Butterfly Grid (2016) consists of 16 spindle whorls, within each, the imagery consists of butterfly wings decorated with salmon and eagle designs, both of which are distinctive Coast Salish designs. The butterfly wings overlap in a circular format, similar to that of the spindle whorl, which represents the circular nature of the cycle of life and the Musqueam people close relationship to land. Point

of the year, he stated something along the lines that 70% of Musqueam DNA is from resources of the sea and very little is traced back to mammals (Grant). It is also important to note that each spindle-whorl is engraved with four salmon. The number four has great significance in many cultures, including Indigenous cultures in Canada; there are four directions, four winds and four seasons. Salmon lives are also measured in four parts. The first being when eggs hatch in rivers and creeks far away from the ocean, followed by the newly hatched salmon making their way to the ocean where they live until they make the long journey back to the place they began their lives where they lay their eggs before dying. This is when the cycle starts again. ("Circle of Life") The cycle of life, illustrated by the salmon's life cycle, emphasizes how everything is connected and how everything we do makes a lasting impression in places we may not even be able to see. One may interpret this as a metaphor of the impacts of residential schooling on the cycle of life. Residential schools posed a horrendous threat to Indigenous cultures, traditions and languages, by interrupting their traditional ways of living. Prior to colonization, Indigenous children were educated by their own parents, grandparents and other community members on their ways of life. They were free to speak their own languages and practice ancient traditions. Hence, separating children from their communities and stripping them of their identity interrupted this cycle of life. In place of Indigenous cultural and traditional knowledge, Indigenous children were forcibly taught the European way of life, preventing future generations from learning and passing down their languages, customs, teachings and practices. Point experienced disconnection from the traditional wisdom and teachings of the Salish, but also lost the ability to speak her native language, Hul'q'umni'num'(Point).

The spindle-whorls were arranged to portray a Christian cross, as seen in Figure 3. My immediate observation was the dominance of the colour white in this installation. The 16 spindle-whorls making up the cross, were all completely white, which is pretty unusual to see in Points work. The dominance of white in this piece represents purity but also the European dominance over Indigenous peoples since their arrival. It reflects the purity the Churches and Canadian government were trying to achieve by ‘civilizing’ Indigenous children by removing them from their ‘savage’ environments and converting them into Christians, thus becoming pure in their eyes, and eradicating the existence of Indigenous peoples. It also enhances how Christians perceived



Figure 3: Butterfly Grid (2016)

themselves, thinking of themselves as good people for ‘helping’ these children. Yet the irony is, that behind this image of purity, the residential school system was anything but pure, portrayed by the photograph of the residential school Point attended in Sechelt, which was strategically placed behind the cross. The photograph portrays the Church’s opening ceremony for the Sechelt residential school in 1904. This also creates the sense that the Church has the power to get away with anything, no matter the gravity of their actions, highlighting the “assumption that European civilization and Christian religions were superior to Aboriginal culture” (Truth and Reconciliation Canada). However, the white may also be interpreted as a sign of hope. Despite all the efforts to eliminate Indigenous peoples and their cultures, they still thrive to this day, although in much smaller numbers. Susan Point concluded by stating that this is “piece is a symbol of power for those of us who had strength and resilience and survived the residential school system” (Point).



Figure 4: *Residential School Dirty Laundry*

Another piece drawn from personal experiences is Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's mixed-media installation, that was part of the *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories* exhibition at the Museum of Anthropology. I distinctly remember this piece, as it highly differed from the rest of his exhibition that mostly consisted of large vibrant paintings, yet it's simplicity provoked a very emotional response. *Residential School Dirty Laundry* (2013) addresses the sexual abuse that occurred at the hand of the Catholic

Church in residential schools. Piles of white boys' and girls' underwear formed a large white crucifix on the floor, some of which were stained with red paint meant to resemble blood, representing the pain inflicted on thousands of students but also those who died whilst in residential schools. In the centre of the crucifix laid a white plaque, also in the form of a cross, that read the bible verse "For this child I, I prayed..." (1 Samuel 1:27). Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun stated in an interview that he created this piece as "a symbol of all the rape and destruction that's been done to little children" (Siebert). Yuxweluptun himself attended residential school as a child, although he himself wasn't a victim of sexual abuse he knows what it meant to suffer in the hands of the priests.



Figure 5: Cross plaque – *ReResidential School Dirty Laundry*

On the walls surrounding the crucifix, two paintings of individual residential students hung. *Portrait of a Residential School Girl* (2013) was made around the time ‘reconciliation’ was starting to become a topic of debate following the recent publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada which began publicly addressing the impact of residential schools, including intergenerational trauma and the goal of “revitalizing the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canadian society” (Portrait..Girl). In this acrylic painting



Figure 6: *Unceded Territories* exhibition at MOA

Yuxweluptun, honours the child. The young girl portrays the “enforced conformity” of residential schools, through her white blouse and clipped back hair (Portrait..Girl). Contrasting with her European influenced hair and blouse, both which are easy to change, her face is covered with spiritual markings of strength and protection. Behind her head, appears to be a halo, which is also covered in Indigenous designs.



Figure 7: *Portrait of a Residential School Girl*



Figure 8: *Portrait of a Residential School Child*

This portrait evokes the sense that

no matter how hard European settlers try to eradicate and conform Indigenous peoples, this will never be possible to successfully achieve. *Portrait of a Residential School Child* (2005), conveys the same message as the former, however the painting techniques and use of medium differs. *Portrait of a*

Residential School Child (2005) is more abstract, closer to surrealism or ‘visionism’ as Yuxweluptun would describe

it and incorporates a larger variety of vibrant and contrasting colours. The child in the portrait once again has spiritual markings covered on his/her face, as well as on the halo. The child also

wears an ironed blue shirt, clearly indicating the Church's involvement in attempting to replace his/her Indigenous beliefs with those of Jesus Christ and God.

Many students who provided evidence for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada spoke of being raped and taken advantage of their innocence. As of 2015, over 30,000 students claims to receive compensation for sexual abuse “as part of the Independent Assessment Process, set up under the Settlement Agreement”, had been resolved and almost 6000 claims were still in progress (Truth and Reconciliation Canada). In other words, 48% eligible to apply for compensation for sexual assaults did so. These numbers are significantly high. The TRC report suggests that poor supervision in residential schools is a contributing factor to the high number of sexual abuse cases. “Child neglect was institutionalized, and the lack of supervision created situations where students were prey to sexual and physical abusers” (Truth and Reconciliation Canada). Assaults included anything from being forced to kiss another person, to being raped, or being humiliated whilst members of the staff insisted on watching students take showers. The vast majority of sexual assault victims never reported any of these acts of violence, either because they were too afraid, ashamed or too young to understand what was happening to them. Others feared nobody would believe them or were afraid that they might get blamed themselves. In a few cases, victims were known to have been given little treats in return for their silence, others were threatened with death if they were to report the assault. Not having a support system such as family members and constantly being victimized resulted in many students feeling isolated and betrayed, but also felt themselves distancing from their home teachings. Those new to the residential schools were especially vulnerable after experiencing a traumatizing separation from their parents and loved ones, in addition to being put into a terrifying and unfamiliar environment. In some cases, it was other students who sexually preyed upon their fellow students. Agnes Moses, one of the thousands of ex-residential school students who came forward to give a statement on their traumatic

residential school experiences, talked about how a group of older girls molested her at a hostel in northern Canada. Such “betrayal by fellow students has contributed significantly to the school's’ long-term legacy of continuing division and distrust within Aboriginal communities” (Truth and Reconciliation Canada). The residential school system’s severe lack of ability to protect students from such violence, particularly from those working within the residential school system, “represents one of its most significant and least-understood failures” (Truth and Reconciliation Canada).

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s piece expresses his anger towards the Church and is a bold statement reminiscing what the Church did to him and his friends as a child. *Residential School Dirty Laundry (2013)* also acts as a personal monument honouring the cultural sorrow children were forced to endure and mourning the thousands of lives lost. Thus, this piece represents both a place to pray for the survivors, hence the inscription “For this child I prayed.” on the cross, and to mourn the dead, which is enhanced when looking at it in person - from this perspective it evokes the sense that one is looking down at a grave. The piling of the underwear in the form of the crucifix enhances Yuxweluptun’s anger and blame towards the Church, since the layout makes it clear as to who is to blame for the deaths and sorrows of thousands of innocent children. I also thought the title was quite intriguing. My personal interpretation of *Residential School Dirty Laundry (2013)*, was once again the idea that the Church is always able to get away with committing crimes or at least believes they are capable of doing so. The *Dirty Laundry* references evokes the sense that these crimes are easily erased and forgotten, just like dirty laundry is easy to clean and wearable the next day. This is why Yuxweluptun believes one must record these things and “the Catholic Church has to pray for its sins”, otherwise if we simply continue to wash our dirty laundry, such horrible events continue to happen (Siebert).

The colonial belief of Christianity being superior to Indigeneity, is also the focus of Bracken Hanuse Corlett's *Womb Speaker*, a "homage to children forced into Christianity" (Rose). This painting also depicts how children were removed from their homes and forced to speak English and live a European way of life in order to give up their language and culture. Corlett's use of traditional Northwest Coast art techniques and symbolism however, represent that their Indigenous birth rights



Bracken Hanuse Corlett, *Womb Speaker* (2012)
Photo credit: Amica Artist Run Centre

Figure 9: *Womb Speaker*

"remain in their blood memory", despite being forced to adopt a foreign culture (Rose). *Womb Speaker* is one out of three paintings that were created as an opportunity to heal and were also meant as an offering to residential school survivors. In a way, one can interpret *Womb Speaker* as a reassurance that no matter how disconnected someone is or feels from their ancestral culture, customs and languages, these birth rights will always be in their DNA, no matter the measures people will go to convert them and or strip them of their cultural identity. It also provides hope for those suffering from intergenerational trauma. Corlett's mother, just like Susan Point was forced into the Sechelt residential school, meanwhile her parents died in a non-peaceful manner whilst herself and most of her siblings were away. This undesired separation and inability to say their final goodbyes, due to the fact that they were forced to go to residential school, "caused a huge rupture and disconnect" in his mother's family (Rose). Although these events occurred over 50 years ago, Corlett's is aware that "intergenerational healing process is still fresh" (Rose). Corlett is aware of the roots of his family's suffering being the residential school system, thus created *Womb Speaker* to help himself and his family

with healing by emphasizing the importance of his family's DNA, something no colonialists or priests can take from them (Rose).

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Figure 2:

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