

About the Future
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By Loretta Todd (no reprinting / reuse without permission)

I'm driving late at night. I'm speeding, yet 4 x 4s stream by and disappear into the night. On the radio, a documentary about time is on CBC.ⁱ Professor and philosopher Leroy Littlebear is talking about time, as are Steven Hawking, poets, artists, scientists, thinkers. Ideas from Einstein frame the discussion. The radio host quotes Einstein as once saying: the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, even if it is a stubborn one.

Stephen Hawking asks, "Where does the difference between the past and the future come from?"

Leroy Littlebear says, "Really there is no such thing as time. Humans have invented time."

The night races by as I drive, marking, yes, time and space. But driving at night on this stretch of the highway I could be anytime and anywhere. All there is, is a dark road with few lights and no visible horizon. Thus begins my imagining of a "future" for Aboriginal Art.

In the radio documentary, Littlebear is explaining his concept of time, as expressed in his language and cultural matrix. To illustrate, he offers an image of time as a river that doesn't flow, but one in which we can move freely up and down stream, rather than standing on the banks of the river and time flowing past. When I was making *Kainayssini Imanistaisiwa: The People Go On* in Kainai territory for the Kainai, Leroy Littlebear and his wife Amethyst First Rider guided my understanding of their philosophy and knowledge, including that there are no words in the Blackfoot Language for the distant past or faraway future. In fact, Frank Weasel Head says in the film, "The future has no meaning to me in my language."ⁱⁱ I took this to heart and created ways to represent "history" in a cinematic way that doesn't place the past beyond our experience and vision or the future beyond our knowing. In the film, I placed large banners on the landscape and projected photos and film onto them as they waved in the strong winds of southern Alberta at sunset and night.

How do we talk about the future of Aboriginal art without talking about our concepts of time? And for that matter, how do we talk about Aboriginal art without talking about where and when our art and artists are located within the spectrum of concepts of time?

Of course the future, and present, of Aboriginal art should afford more opportunities and resources so more rather than fewer artists can make a living and support families and contribute to communities. But I want to imagine a future beyond the arrow of time, where ideas and creativity circulate in a multidimensional experience of time. This essay explores some of my experiences with time and Aboriginal art.

Is this our future: Evolution?

Recently, a contemporary Aboriginal art website used the word “evolution” to demarcate before and now – that contemporary Aboriginal art is the evolution of our art and by extension, what was before was earlier on that evolutionary path. The word was removed from the site, but for a time it stuck out like a dagger. Is this a sign that we have so internalized the colonizers’ thought processes that we now proudly proclaim their ideologies for them? Although the word was edited from that site, it appears frequently enough in the context of Aboriginal art to wonder – is our future our evolution?

Why that word? *Evolution*. Art is supposedly well within the digital age of fusion, beyond boundaries and anthropology. It implies an arrow of culture and cultural development that progresses away from its past toward a positive future.

It is strange how the word has crept back into discussions about our art these days. Back when anthropologists were defining our work, sure, that would make sense, but now?

A quick survey of previous academic writing about Indigenous art (Phillips 1989, Youngman 1991, Cardinal-Schubert, 1990-2009, Ryan 1999) suggests that the word *evolution* was dispensed with in the 1990s.ⁱⁱⁱ Back in the day, Vine Deloria called out Carl Jung for defining the Trickster “archetype” as a construct of primitive humanity and an “evolutionary” precursor to civilization’s need for a Messiah.^{iv}

Jung and [Paul] Radin seem to suggest that the Trickster represents unstructured primordial unconsciousness as it experiences a civilizing process There is certainly a modernistic value judgment involved in the evolutionary framework...It further suggests that, apart from cultural quirks and historical accidents, each human society would inevitably march along a civilized incline the goal of which would be scientific, technological society holding the same beliefs and adhering to the same interpretation as that which we presently enjoy.^v

Perhaps the word “evolution” is being used for strategic reasons. After all, since most Aboriginal artists operate at the poverty level passing the “evolutionary” threshold could be a means to validation and future cultural capital. Non-native artists operate at the poverty level as well, but their career threshold would be discussed with concepts other than “evolution”.

Of course, biological evolution as conceived by Darwin, “time plus chance,” has nothing to do with the “evolution” of Indigenous art. But one of the bastard ideas attributed to Darwin, “survival of the fittest” (something Darwin never actually said), just might. Survival of the fittest has become a prevailing tenet, a mantra of Western culture. And no wonder, it is seductive and easily applied to the competitive arena of the arts.

So who has the authority to determine if an Aboriginal artist or their art is evolved? Who gets to decide what is required for Aboriginal art to be the evolution of what went before? What are the codes and determinants? Were Aboriginal artists who made argillite carvings for the art market in the early days of collecting more evolved than those artists who made poles and masks for ceremonial and governance purpose? Were Inuit carvers who created playful Elvis figures more or less evolved than those artists who carved reified sculptures of spiritual realms? Is performance art more evolved than painting? Is hip-hop more evolved than rock? Is it better to make high-art references or postmodern?

Where does the futuring of Aboriginal art and artists fit on our already cluttered ethnographic topography? Are we at risk of being “given” just enough space for a few examples of what was, what is and what might be in our art? By marking our art on an evolutionary time-line, does the art world and all its many institutions and environments – from galleries to websites – “enact lingering myths of hierarchy” where “creative works become surrogates with which time-worn dramas of inclusion and exclusion are performed?”^{vi} Are Jeff Wall and Margaret Atwood placed on the past, present or future timeline or are they signified as timeless?

Our “past” was once the pre-occupation of the colonizers and we developed codes to negotiate the performative nature of being the Aboriginal of an imagined past. Now our future is the growing preoccupation, but the power dynamics seem to remain the same, perhaps reinforcing an “epistemological dependency ... on the very terms of reference and expression that are required in order to participate in the Euro-Canadian political and social system” including the art system.^{vii} Thus our “evolution.”

Aboriginal scholars, such as Marie Battiste, Linda Tuhiwai Smith Willie Ermine, Lee Maracle, Jo-Ann Archibald, and others have created a substantial body of research and writing about Aboriginal knowledge systems. (*footnote: I’m not comfortable making lists, since many are left out. I will add a few more and keep in mind there are so many other brilliant scholars, so search out their work: Robert Warrior, Paul Chaat Smith, Maria Campbell, Shawn Wilson, Winona Wheeler, Marcia Crosby, Jan Hare, the late Paula Gunn Allan....*) They have resisted situating their work in the context of the future (or past) of Aboriginal thought. Instead they seek to understand who we are in the world and universe, where we are and even when we are in the context of our concepts of time and place/space. Feeling alienated and “fragmented” by Western epistemologies and pedagogies leaves “many people scattered along a continuum of progressively exclusive knowledge ownership.”^{viii} Aboriginal scholars assert the sovereignty of our existence, including our knowledge systems and our consciousness. The courage to apply similar rigour and sophistication in our discussions of our art and expression is emboldened by their example. I move away from the performance of my evolution.

Or is this our Future: Pastiche?

I’m sitting on a panel organized to discuss the Vancouver Opera’s staging of a “Native” version of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (2007). We are here to talk about the issue of appropriation. But it doesn’t really fit here. After all, in a production the press dubbed “Mozart meets Musqueam,” an Austrian opera celebrating Freemason philosophy and denouncing a late 18th century Austrian royal matriarch was being turned into an Aboriginal themed-opera.^{ix} If anything, appropriation was working the other way. Aboriginal art was appropriating European high culture to make something supposedly Indigenous, although the Vancouver Opera Association (VOA) initiated the project as a populist move to be do something “westcoast.”

For some reason restaging *The Magic Flute* into different cultural milieus is an opera world thing: the Magic Flute as “spiritual operatic ancestor” someone once proclaimed in the opera world. There is a South African version, one using Cambodian culture and history and one using African art motifs and what looks like black-face (from the Salzburg Festival 2006 staging of the Magic Flute, directed by Pierre Audi) and I’m pretty sure there are others. I publically shudder at this, not actually liking this particular opera in form or message.

I applaud the artists and advisors who layer Aboriginal art to make this opera different. The costumes by John Powell and Debbie Sparrow are especially provocative and sublime, a bold synthesis of the demands of theatrical traditions needed for the staging a well-known opera with the theatrical traditions of First Nations art and art practices.¹

On the panel, I try to counter the myth held by traditional opera-goers in the audience that “us Natives” don’t know anything about opera. I remind the audience that in remote communities throughout Canada, CBC radio was the main source of media for many decades. Our people, like Canadians everywhere, listened to opera, Hank Snow, radio dramas, talk shows and the news. That was my grandparent’s generation, but that experience lives on, circulated in the cultural literacy of our people. Still people in the audience can’t get their minds around Native people ever hearing opera – except perhaps for a few “lucky ones” privileged to be brought up in a classical western tradition.

I also point out that in the not-so-distant past, there were operas composed in North America that combined musical, aesthetic and narrative conventions of European opera with Indigenous music and narrative. I don’t give specifics, but here I will. *Daoma: Ramala (Land of Misty Water)*, Oliver Cadman’s collaboration with Osage author Francis La Flesche, performed at New York’s Metropolitan Opera, New York in 1912 and *The Sun Dance*, co-composed by Lakota writer and artist Zitkala-Sa, which premiered in 1913. Not to mention a myriad of other American operas using Native themes and music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.^x

And then there was *Tzinquaw*, composed by Frank Morrison and Abel Joe performed in 1950, incorporating Cowichan narratives and music, and Harry Somer’s opera *Louis Riel*. I can’t say if any of these would be considered worthy of the VOA’s effort to represent the west coast and access Aboriginal art resources to allow for the largest VOA opera budget to-date, but it is important to reference this history.

My main point is why the *Magic Flute*? What about this opera is supposed to convey a specific set of signs and signifiers that make it suitable to be adapted for First Nations representation, specifically Coast Salish with elements of other pan-Pacific First Nations? Of course, Western culture habitually sees their cultural capital as the market and cultural universal standard, so from that perspective, *The Magic Flute* is considered suitable for being adapted/layered over any another culture.

But I wonder, if they are truly seeking common ground, why not a more romantic opera that would better reflect our power relationship with the neo-colonial politics of BC – like *Aida*.² Or, since the VOA version of *The Magic Flute* starts in the modern-day, then why

¹ John Powell, Kwakwaka’wakw from Comox, fought for the production to visually represent ten of the NWC principal nations, “Magic Flute Blends Mozart with Musqueam,” *The Vancouver Sun*. Musqueam artist Debra Sparrow designed Coast Salish graphics for costumes and helped create and design the costume for the Queen of the Night. Robert Jordan, “West Coast Magic,” *Opera Canada* 48, no. 2 (March-April 2007): 18-21.

² I’m not suggesting *Aida* because of the west coast First Nations former class system, but because of the theme of political struggle in the *Aida* narrative.

not an adaptation of *La Bohème*, an opera that speaks to the commonalities of lived experience.

The panel slips between those who think “the Natives” on the panel – myself and the brilliant scholar and writer Marcia Crosby – are going to shout down this worthy effort because of the supposed “appropriation;” to a rather impassioned plea by anthropologist Wade Davis to let real Aboriginal people tell their stories because “they” are dying (for some reason his “they” doesn’t reference any of the Native people on the panel or in the audience). The opera’s director remains strategically minimalist in his presentation.

In other words, it becomes an example of what I call “ironic” Canadian moments. Wade Davis becomes the advocate for the original Aboriginal voice and Crosby and I attempt to negotiate the space of pluralism. The reality is that Aboriginal people have now, then and forever encountered and had conversations, dialogues, exchanges and inter-marriages with difference and the unknown, and have brought to bear our knowledge systems, technologies and pedagogies (there has got to be a better word) to these encounters.

There is nothing “new” in the staging of *The Magic Flute* for us – even if the VOA hasn’t done anything like this before. However, the notion of social evolution automatically places us in the deficit position to those who assume authority and power over Western high culture. Even our own artists are heard to welcome the “trickle” down value of this exchange (not the actual participants of the collaboration). I know the Aboriginal collaborators work hard to assert their cultural sovereignty in the developing of the relationship. In terms of learning from one another, I think most opera-goers feel we have the most to learn, but for many of them, *The Magic Flute* collaboration will be their first real encounter with difference and pluralism within their comfort zone of cultural expression.

There may be too much “whiteness” in this particular opera for my taste, but it isn’t objectionable just pastiche. It feels like we’ve all sold ourselves short in building a uniquely revolutionary experience – one where equals exchange – rather than one side playing catch-up.

This is my future: Freedom

Many in my family, and yes me too, have a healthy mistrust of authority, which I admit occasionally veers into the absurd. I used to think this was due to the fall-out of colonization, but I know it is more than that.

Vine Deloria wrote about the old-time Indians he grew up with, who didn’t like to be told what to do. When rapper Ostwelve asked Woody Morrison if there was a word for freedom in Haida, Woody checked with his Elders who said as best as they could tell, there is no word for freedom in Haida because there is no word for oppression.

Decades ago anthropologist Paul Radin wrote about the difference between so-called major historic civilizations and Aboriginal nations. The former, he said, functioned with “essential instability” with “pain and suffering as the lot of the common man.”^{xi} Of Aboriginal societies he proclaimed three cornerstones of what he persisted in calling “primitive” culture:

- 1, the respect for the individual, irrespective of age and sex.

2. the amazing degree of social and political integration achieved by them.
3. the existence of a concept of personal security which transcends all governmental forms and all tribal and group interests and conflicts.^{xii}

Despite his adherence to many Western anthropological attitudes, Radin's assessment of our values as the foundation of our unique social systems is a pretty apt view – and helps us frame an imagining of our future as freedom.

When Aboriginal leaders declare sovereignty for the daily life of their people and the governance of their Nations, their leadership is often called into question, and as citizens of our Nations, our very existence is called into question. But it isn't just for constitutional rights that we stand so strong. It is for the freedom.

I think some non-Native people think ours was a simple communal existence and because that communal existence seems broken for whatever reason, and because they believe only Western culture is based on individualism, non-Native society (progressive and conservative) believe we should accept our social evolution and become fully modern. But within the “essential instability” of Western culture, the individual has always been under threat, even today. War, class, extreme capitalism, state communism, fascism, poverty, consumerism, colonialism, economic bail-outs – all these and others pressure, define and limit individual freedom. Freedom is especially unstable today, where surveillance is the norm and pack behavior encouraged (even mandated).

Fear of exclusion, fear of poverty and a scarcity mentality are all used by mainstream culture to reproduce its social order and control. There is an explosion of creativity challenging that authority globally but at the same time there is an economic melt-down created by bank greed and on-going war that is shrinking any commitment to the social well-being of individuals, communities, nations and yes, Mother Earth. It is into this continuum and sense of the future our arts are being included and placed on the evolutionary fast-track.

Instead, could we as Aboriginal artists of all mediums strengthen our freedom and individualism, as well as the well-being of our people, communities and the environment? Yes, the oft-quoted Riel statement about artists leading the way is being evoked here but perhaps in a bigger way than we've imagined before.

To me individualism and freedom are expressions of being alive and expressing an on-going relationship with “all my relations.” In the Western mentality, artistic success is afforded to only a few within reified enclaves. Subversive artists operate sometimes within and outside of these using various art practices, which I could name to parade my understanding, but we know the drill.

But to me, we need all the artists we can get. Then if 100,000 of our people step forward to be artists, we wouldn't see that as a threat to limited resources or prestige, but as a reflection of their freedom. And we would look closely at what they had to say and how we might enable them to say it.

If 1000 youth decided they wanted to become astronauts, I can't imagine our Elders saying, “What a stupid idea, who needs 1000 astronauts.” Instead they might say, “Why are these young people wanting to go into space? What is this telling us about our Earth

and the universe? How can we make this happen? Should we try to start a mega-casino to raise money for our own NASA or should we imagine innovative technologies that can build better spaceships or maybe find out about what the old time Indians were saying when they told stories about journeys beyond this earth?"

Or, if even one of our mothers stepped forward and said she didn't want one more family to live in mouldy houses with contaminated water, then as artists and scientists and Elders and politicians and carpenters we could say, "How can we make this happen?"

That is my challenge. For us as artists, scientists, carpenters, electricians, bookkeepers and politicians to jump-start our independence from the mainstream art realm and its sense of our fragmented future. Instead, how about it a Giant Safe-Dwellings Digital Media Interdisciplinary Interactive Public Earth Art project? How about we all take a year of our lives to go build houses, or plant gardens or hold daily feasts or create jobs or create technologies that build houses from trees or create an alcohol that doesn't get people drunk?

In 20 years or even 10, will we, as artists, be able to say we forged a new future, to live our lives with freedom and honour or will we still be battling it out in the same-old same-old for diminishing returns on a toxic earth?

ⁱ Cindy Bassalio producer, "Time Kaleidoscope," Ideas, CBC, 13 July 2010.

ⁱⁱ Loretta Todd, Director, *Kainayssini Imanistaisiwa: The People Go On*, NFB, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ruth B. Phillips, "What is Huron Art? Native American art and the New Art History," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 9, no. 2 (1989), 167-191; Joane Cardinal-Schubert, "Surviving as a Native Woman Artist," *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 50-51; Alfred Young Man, "Towards a Political History of Native Art," *Visions of Power: Contemporary Art by First Nations, Inuit and Japanese Canadians* (Toronto: Earth Spirit Festival, 1991); Allan Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).

^{iv} Vine Deloria, "The Trickster and the Messiah," *Spirit & Reason: the Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*, Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner, Sam Scinta eds. (Golden CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999): 17-31.

^v Ibid, 19 & 20.

^{vi} Lawrence Rinder, *Art Life: Selected writings, 1991-2005* (New York NY: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2005), 9

^{vii} Douglas A. West, "Epistemological Dependencies and Native Peoples: an Essay on Native/Non-Native Relations in Canada," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 15, no. 2 (1995), 280.

viii Woorama, "Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Comparing Aboriginal and Western Ways of Knowing," suite 110.com, <http://www.suite101.com/content/indigenous-knowledge-systems-a26760>, posted July 31, 2007.

ix "Magic Flute blends Mozart with Musqueam," *The Vancouver Sun*, January 25, 2007, D15.

x Elise K. Kirk, "Native Americans Through Symbolism and Song," *American Opera* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 139-159.

xi Paul Radin, *The World of Primitive Man* (New York NY: Grove Press, 1960), 7.

xii Ibid, 11.