

An Afterword by Loretta Sarah Todd

From: Bill Reid and Beyond

Why is he as he is? And why are we always speculating? Is he a difficult poem? A lost son gone home? Northrop Frye meets Michelangelo? Is he the Indian Pierre Trudeau always wanted to be? Maybe he was just a really good jeweler.

I was wondering when he started to sink into the psyche of Canada. Did his voice all those years ago on CBC radio carry a subliminal ancestral message? Was he a fierce warrior using his power to protect the sovereignty of his Nation? Or was he a prince of the “New World” – forever making pretty things for the overseers?

And what of the pretty things? He once said that artists always did and still do serve elites. Was he railing against Duchamp? Telling the world to stop pretending that art can be freed from ruling classes and the object? Or was he cozying up to his benefactors - who still, despite their public belief in the democratization of the art, secretly long for the tiara?

And now he's gone, though “every shut eye ain't asleep”, and certainly Bill Reid isn't asleep – if for no other reason than we keep him awake with our racket of speculation and our need for him to represent – something, somehow. It would seem Canada needs some art stars, maybe not quite so tragic and complicated as the American master Jackson Pollack, or quite so Marxist and sensual as Diego Rivera, the Mexican master. Sure, there are the elusive yet taciturn Seven and the clutterer Emily Carr, but here in Reid is the gentleman, country-born but with the bearing of a country squire.

So it would seem he's needed.

I look at his piece that stands in Vancouver International Airport and the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC and imagine the pride and sense of purpose it must engender in the Canadian people, despite its kitsch excess or perhaps because of it. It is large, but not monumental, daring but not shocking, narrative but not poetic. It holds its space as unmoving as a boulder, even while it holds figures in a canoe obviously en-route on the water. It is tragedy and comedy - together in a pea-green sea.

I wonder how many remember or are taught that he was prepared to stop making the piece if the Canadian government didn't relent on its plans for Lyell Island? Tragedy and comedy indeed.

I once interviewed him when I was doing research for a documentary called *Hands of History* (about four women artists). I asked him if Haida women, or Northwest Coast women, ever carved totem poles or masks. He was absolute that they did not - but he later allowed that perhaps they had carved small utility objects. I guess my relative youth stopped me from questioning him further on this.

He did talk about mastering craft as a prelude to greatness, or even as a prelude to being an artist – as if anything before was simply practice. He dismissed some artists' claims that forces worked through them – that any sense of being overtaken by a force was simply the moment when those artists mastered their craft. Then and there an

artist no longer had to think about the technique, because the work became, I guess, like breathing.

Again, I didn't ask more questions. Still, my thoughts were given to reflection. I had renewed confidence in how I seek precision at all levels of my film production – if only because he helped me realize it was something I strove for from the beginning. I even vowed to ask questions with more precision.

So, I did learn from our brief meeting. And perhaps I've learned more from Bill Reid's "legacy" and his relationship to Euro-Canadian culture and its dynamics with the concept of "Indian" and its relationship to "man".

*But when classicism says "man," it means reason and feeling. And when Romanticism says "man," it means passion and the senses. And when modernism says "man," it means the nerve. Hermann Bahr (1891)*

What does "man" mean when aboriginality is said? There is a complicated relationship, not only because of the anthropology / art duality, but because ultimately we are about relationships, and this relationship seems fraught with its own risks.

Bill Reid, I think, was perhaps the first "Aboriginal" artist that was experienced as a "man" – not just a shaman, or a hunter, or a drunk, or a dreamer or even a carver -- by the Euro-Canadian culture. And though he liked the term "trickster," he wasn't that in the Euro-Canadian estimation - though they expected trickster behavior. In a way, he was one of them. But wait, this isn't simply a case for Reid as White – no, not at all.

I keep thinking of the film *Notting Hill*, with Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts, where Julia, the movie star, falls in love with Hugh, a nebbish bookstore owner. Julia Roberts stands in front of Hugh Grant, and declares, "I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her." I see Bill Reid as Julia Roberts and the connoisseur art world as Hugh Grant and then, of course, sometimes the other way around.

*Notting Hill?* Bill Reid as Julia Roberts? And no, this isn't satire or even an earnest effort to find simile – it's to illustrate this emotional connection that Reid was afforded. He was up-right, infatuated with himself and at the same time self-deprecating. He liked all the pseudo indicators of what has passed as high-brow culture in Canada, and he even worked for the CBC, once the venerable storehouse of all things pseudo high-brow. He was an on-again off-again lover of the Canadian ruling classes, but wait there is more.

What is this "man?" It is a construct of power and knowledge if we are to follow Foucault – which I think is important to do, but not simply to evoke Foucault. Reid understood power and knowledge. If anything he was like Foucault, in that he saw the simple episteme or a discursive formation (I'm not a Foucault devotee, just a simple evoker). He knew that he had to be a "man" in the estimation of the Powers-That-Be, if he was to be in their purview of power and knowledge.

At first, Reid was complicit – cutting down totem poles and taking them away. Reid was born at a time when there were very few Indians, even fewer Haidas. In this power

relation, we were already dead. When we didn't actually die, it became much easier to control the body of the "Indian" as artifact in a museum. He had to be a man – one of them – to take part in that process. He was part of the embalming, but then something changed.

It would seem that Reid also knew that "a subject dies when no longer a useful element of discursive practice." He needed to keep the "Indian" subject alive and he did, starting with his seductive voice, his rakish good looks and his raconteur ways.

"Indian / Native" is always at risk of death. *Le sauvage* is after all, an invention that predates Europeans wandering onto the shores across the Atlantic. The Green Man, the Wild Man, the Hairy Man – these informed the Europeans' imagining of whom they encountered. A fictional character, sometimes carved into the stone on churches, he represented the cycle of life, Nature, the pleasures, the pagan. We, too, were near to becoming like those frozen, long ago forgotten figures.

Reid, it would seem, had the insight of Frye, Foucault and perhaps Umberto Eco and certainly Vine Deloria – understanding sign and signifier, myth and irony, absence and presence. He knew to evoke new and fancy ways to mean "Native / Indian" and he did so with style – and great professional benefit. He understood the dynamics at play between the concept "man", which is meant to evoke something wholly related to Judeo-Christian culture and the Enlightenment, and the concept "Native / Indian", which was meant to evoke something quite apart from "man."

Like some Aboriginal alchemist, he could pour mercury and other secret potions from one bottle labeled "man" and another labeled "Native / Indian" and mix and match. It wasn't about identity politics – it was beyond that. Alchemist, Hermes, Raven - he worked the proverbial room. He played them like a conductor.

So what does this legacy mean to the "Native / Indian" artist, now "Aboriginal / First Nations" artist? The Reid legacy for me is on a few fronts.

One, is that I can make pronouncements – and if they are backed up with thought, research, integrity and knowledge, then I needn't shrink from the discussion, or even the argument. So, in keeping with his teachings:

We can't simply put on Indian Happy (or Tragic) face stickers and make it (us) Indian. Well, we can, but with the humour and irony that Reid understood so well.

The mise-en-scene of our images and stories is at risk of being flattened into so many postcards. Like an elaborate mise-en-scene, layering foreground and background, light and shadow, lace curtains and branches of trees, our representations of our worlds should be thick with meaning. It has become too easy for the Powers-That-Be to take the postcard, or even the scribble and proclaim it "Native, Aboriginal, First Nations, etc" and say they have fulfilled their cultural quota or broadcaster CRTC requirements or whatever. And we've been too quick to deliver the postcard.

That intelligence is our legacy – and our right.

That imagination is our right – and our legacy.

There is discipline and talent to our image-making – even if we all want to tell stories.

We can all tell stories – even if we don't all have the talent or the discipline to create art.

There is another lesson that has become apparent as I examine what I know of Bill Reid's influence. In the end, something else happened – and it wasn't just strategic essentialism. The dichotomy between myth and reason that Reid exploited no longer belonged to separate worlds.

I imagine Reid dangling myth and dream like a carrot on the end of a stick for his patrons. But was he a believer? Perhaps, when myth was considered as metaphor – or even as archetype or as lesson. But he was a son the Enlightenment – even if he was an alchemist of social dynamics. Manufacturing belief is a convenient ruse for some.

But Haidas who had no apparent reason to love him – loved him. Haidas who had no reason to trust him – trusted him. Sure he had, and I imagine still has, his detractors, but there came understanding. It must have been humbling for such an independent man.

You've likely heard it a thousand times – the power of story, the necessity of story. How there is nothing but story, and, yes those Natives are always going on about story.

Bill Reid was part of a story. The Lootas up the Seine? Part of a story. The Lootas making the almost 1000 kilometre voyage to Haida Gwaii? Part of a story. You can't escape story.

Everything has to begin – and Bill Reid had to begin somewhere. Iljuwas (one of Bill's Haida names) began before Bill Reid. But both began in the imagination – in the realm of myth and story.

N. Scott Momaday (I'm not giving up the Indian classics) once asked the question in an essay called *The Man Made of Words*: "What is the relationship between what a man is and what he says – or between what he is and what he thinks he is?"

Momaday answered that "the state of human *being* is an idea." Momaday also spoke of a storyteller named Pohd-lohk, who believed a man's life proceeded from his name, like a river proceeds from its source.

Bill Reid had an idea of himself, and idea he realized through the language of his life and his work. But perhaps he came to realize that his idea would be nothing without the language of his life – a language that proceeded him. He imagined himself as he was imagined. And in that way, he was no longer alone.