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They Can Still Act Chinese and be Canadian at the Same Time:

Reflections on Multiculturalism and the Alberta Art Curriculum

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As I read through the 200 some questionnaires completed by Grade 6 students from Calgary schools after visiting the Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre, this remark jumped off the page at me. This answer to the question, “What have you learned about Chinese culture in Calgary that you did not know before visiting the Centre?” seemed to contain the gist of the complexity of multiculturalism in Canada. It expresses the notion that ethnic minorities have the right to enact their cultural traditions while participating as citizens of Canada. On the surface, this is a positive statement, respectful of the cultural diversity that is part of the Canadian demographic landscape. Although this is encouraging, the statement also signals an underlying problem. Sometimes acting Chinese, or Pakistani, or Sikh, or Iranian can be seen as not being Canadian at the same time. Despite the 1985 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, “An Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada,” some of our citizens do not feel that acting out their ethnocultural identity is being Canadian. The space that is created by the hyphen that identifies one as Chinese-Canadian, Indo-Canadian, or Iranian-Canadian can be pal-

pable. The fact that there are hyphenated Canadians and nonhyphenated Canadians is telling. Even more telling is that the child began her response with "They." If there is a "they," there must then be an "us." There is a separation and there is no "we."

In her 2004 essay, "But Where Are You REALLY from? Reflection on Immigration, Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity," Melanie Ash explores this phenomenon. She writes:

There is an ironic coming of age for all Canadians of colour: the moment when you first become aware that you are not seen as a Canadian. That you will forever have to justify your presence in your country in a way that white Canadians, and even newly-arrived white immigrants, never will...

The startling disjunction between the common self-perception that Canadians are white, and the reality that Canadians are multicultural and come from a large variety of ethnic and racial origins is deserving of study. In the face of Canada's proclamation of multiculturalism, how does Canadian identity remain a white identity? (p. 399)

This paper will explore this question through an examination of the ways in which cultural diversity in Canada has been promoted and controlled in law and in practice through Ja-keet Singh's (2004) notion of "culture-blind multiculturalism." It will then turn to one instance of this kind of myopic cultural reproduction through an examination of the Alberta Education program of studies for elementary art. Within this latter review, I will indicate spaces within this very dated and culturally bi-ased document that are available for real engagement with the diversity that is Canadian culture. Finally, I will suggest that Tully's concept of dialogic multiculturalism might be used as a model for revisioning the ways we teach art in culturally diverse societies.¹

Let me first turn to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1985. Although Canadians are intensely proud of our multicultural policies, most of us have never actually read the Act. Further, citizens of other countries often cite Canadian multicultural-

ism as a goal to which their nations should aspire. It is important to actually examine the Act itself to know what it is, and what it is not.

The sections of the Act most germane to this paper are concerned with ensuring that Canadians are able to pursue their cultural traditions without fear of exclusion from Canadian institutions or penalty from Canadian law. In the preamble to the Act, we read,

...The Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada..." (CMA, 1985)

Important to notice here is that, yes, cultural diversity is recognized as a "fundamental characteristic of Canadian society." However, as Fleras (2004) points out, official multiculturalism is really about ensuring that all Canadians, regardless of their ethnicity, are able to participate equally within Canadian society and be protected equally under Canadian law. She writes, "Put bluntly, official multiculturalism was not about celebrating diversity, but primarily about neutralizing differences to remove disadvantage and ensure integration" (2004, p.432). We can see this in the Act in some of the articles of section 3. For example, the Act reads, "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to (c) promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation..." (CMA, 1985). With Fleras, I believe that this is a shortcoming of the Act. Rather than finding a way to enshrine the essential pluralism of Canadian society, and the accompanying diversity of cultural influences, in Canadian law, the Act enshrines the essential Anglo-Franco cultural traditions of these founding cultures and provides ways for "others" to "fit in."

In section 3.1, articles f, g and h we find statements that refer to the cultural expressions of Canada's ethnically diverse population and the place of these expressions within Canadian society. They read:

3. (1) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to ...

(f) encourage and assist the social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character;

(g) promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins;

(h) foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures... (CMA, 1985).

In these statements what I believe to be relevant to this discussion is the role that institutions are meant to play in fostering, promoting and including diverse cultural traditions within their function. Canadians have recently become aware of the strength of these articles, when coupled with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms' statement on Equality Rights. Successful Supreme Court rulings such as that regarding Baltej Singh Dhillon of Sikh decent wishing to wear his beard and turban while on duty in his RCMP uniform (1990) or Gurbaj Singh wishing to wear his kirpan to school (2006), reveal the success of the legislation in protecting these cultural traditions. Thus, the law does uphold these rights to cultural expression in the face of opposition from institutions that might wish to censor them in the name of conformity to an abstract idea of "Canadianism." Fleras (2004) explains this,

In short, Canada's official multiculturalism is organized around a deceptively simple proposition. A society of many cultures can be constructed as long as cultural differences don't get in the way of living together... The current version of multiculturalism remains focused around commonality by means of shared citizenship to enhance

national unity. Clearly, then, a culture-blind multiculturalism revolves around a persistent theme: namely, a commitment to Canada-building by balancing national interests with minority concerns without forsaking the foundational principles of a monocultural constitutional order. (p.433)

The two Sikh citizens had to challenge the institutions to accept their religious practice as acceptable for the institutions to comply. These were very contentious court cases in Canada and to this day there are citizens who do not agree with the courts and feel it is *not* Canadian to be wearing a beard and turban with one's police uniform or a kirpan to school. Somehow, there is a sense that to allow these differences to exist in fundamental institutions is to undermine Canadian culture. But what is Canadian culture if it does not provide a space for the traditions of all our citizens?

This hesitancy is amplified in our major cultural institutions, our art museums, our performance halls and our libraries. High Art in Canada is synonymous with western, European, white art. Yes, our government policies provide for the support of folk traditions. The CMA provides for a minister who may, notice the qualifier, "encourage the preservation, enhancement, sharing and evolving expressions of the multicultural heritage of Canada..." (CMA 5.1.e). However, the mandate of the National Gallery of Canada is as follows:

... to develop, maintain and make known throughout Canada and internationally its collection of more than 36,000 works of art. With a focus on both historic and contemporary art, with a special but not exclusive focus on Canadian works, the National Gallery is also committed to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of art in general among all Canadians. (www.gallery.ca, October 2, 2008)

Notice that the mandate of our *national* gallery, funded by the Federal government and meant to represent the visual arts for all Canadians mentions nothing about reflecting the cultural diversity that is inherent in Canadian art. Further, when one examines the National Gallery's website, one is struck

by the western bias of the information found there. The collections cited on the gallery's website include, "Canadian and Aboriginal; European and American; Contemporary Art; Inuit Art; Modern Art; Photographs Collections; Canadian Prints and Drawings; European and American Prints and Drawings." Looking further into the website's information about the Canadian collections, one finds the gallery predominantly highlights works situated within western, European aesthetic traditions: François Baillairgé; William Berczy's; Cornelius Krieghoff; Joseph Legaré; Robert Whale; Paul Kane; Robert Field; John O'Brien; Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté; Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven; Edwin Holgate; Emily Carr; Charles Comfort; Marc-Aurèle Fortin; E.J. Hughes; Jean-Paul Lemieux; Alex Colville; Painters Eleven; Plasticiens; and the Regina Five.² The National Gallery, in what today is probably its most used promotional material, privileges historical works by Anglo and Franco Canadians over contemporary work of Canadians of diverse ethnicity.

Thus, despite the existence of legislation that explicitly articulates support for the cultural diversity of Canadian culture one of our major cultural institutions does not seem to adequately engage in such activity. Section 3.1.h of the CMA injures, "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures." Yet, the National Gallery of Canada is frustratingly vague in their mandate with regards to what they consider to be Canadian art and exhibit an obvious bias in their promotional materials, if not their actual collection.

Singh might attribute this phenomenon to the "difference-blind liberal approach" to multiculturalism she examines in her 2004 essay. Singh describes "difference-blind" multiculturalism thusly:

The notion of multiculturalism can be, and most often is, construed in a way that makes it simply an extension of a "difference blind" liberal approach to political inclusion and belonging. This traditional liberal approach is chiefly concerned with achieving inclusion and belonging

through neutrality or impartiality. A society is inclusive, by this view, if it maintains a neutral or impartial public sphere that favours no particular identity and, therefore, deals equally and fairly with all. (p.446)

Singh (after Dworkin as cited by Taylor, 2004) identifies two kinds of moral commitments that exist within the liberal tradition, the “substantive” and the “procedural.” Substantive commitments are those that deal with views about the ends of life, what constitutes the “good” life. Procedural commitments are those that allow us to deal fairly and equally with each other, regardless of our individual ends. A liberal society, according to Dworkin, is one in which no particular substantive views about the ends of life are adopted. Instead, society is united by procedural commitments to treating each other fairly and equitably. Singh identifies the central problem with this taxonomy when applied to multiculturalism:

When multiculturalism is construed so as to simply fit into the traditional liberal model, the picture of the “multicultural” society becomes one in which “cultural” commitments are treated as substantive commitments and are, therefore, restricted to the private sphere. By this view, the procedural public sphere has no substantive commitments and is, therefore, culturally neutral. (p.447)

Of course, Singh points out, there is no culturally neutral space; the status quo becomes the culturally neutral. In Canada, this is the culture of the first colonizers, the English and the French. This is the neutral “Canadian” culture that pervades the public procedural realm, as we saw in the case of the National Gallery.³ Ethnocultural aesthetic expressions of minority groups are relegated to private, substantive realms of “Cultural Centres” and “Festivals” that do not disrupt the status quo.

If this “culture-blind multiculturalism” pervades Canada’s most prestigious institutions, it is not surprising that it should also pervade the more humble. Turning to the Alberta Education program of studies for elementary art, one is struck by a similar ubiquitous western bias to the learning outcomes set forth therein. Published in 1985, the same year that the

CMA was enacted, the curriculum writers can be excused for not addressing the principles set out therein. The fact that a new curriculum is only beginning to be written today, almost twenty-five years later, is telling of the both the value of the arts in general education, and also the cultural bias of the curriculum. When Art is seen as a universal language and is “culture-blind” then the curriculum that educates a country’s citizens in that language does not need to change as new peoples add their voice to the cultural dialogue; we all speak the same language.

The “Program Rationale and Philosophy” makes five broad statements about the nature of art education:

(i) Art education is concerned with the organization of visual material.

(ii) Art education is concerned with having individuals think and behave as artists.

(iii) Art education is concerned with pointing out the values that surround the creation and cherishing of art forms.

(iv) Art education deals with ways in which people express their feelings in visual forms.

(v) Art education deals with making and defending quantitative judgments about artworks. (Albert Education, 1985, A.1)

These are laudable claims that resonate with many of us engaged in the arts and in arts pedagogy. However, a closer examination of the statements is revealing.

Art education is concerned with the organization of visual material.

The foundation of many art programs is considered to be a study of the elements of art and the principles of design. The former are usually understood to be: line; shape; colour; texture; value; volume; and mass. The latter are usually defined as: balance; unity; variety; pattern; movement; focus; or em-

phasis. This seems fairly neutral, even universal. However, what if the fundamental principles are joy, line, blending of feeling and emotion, and union of heaven and earth as Li (1999) proposes in *A few questions concerning the history of Chinese aesthetics*? This is not a problem if curriculum resources are able to support different understandings of organizational principles. Unfortunately, the “Authorized Resources” available to teachers through Alberta Education are deeply rooted in a western design tradition. For example, Alberta Education lists Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone and Clayton’s 1994 *Art Fundamentals [7th edition]* and Gatto, Porter and Selleck’s 2000 *Exploring Visual Design: Elements and Principles [3rd edition]* as design resources. Both texts are embedded in a standard western design paradigm.

Art education is concerned with having individuals think and behave as artists.

This seems to make sense. If one wants to learn how to make art, should one not behave as an artmaker? Artmakers are a cross-cultural phenomenon. Even in cultures that do not have a professional artworld per se, there are individuals who engage in the creation of objects or the embellishment of objects for aesthetic appreciation.⁴ Here is an opportunity for the Alberta Education program of study for elementary art to really engage students in a crosscultural dialogue about the different ways one can be an “artist.” However, again, there is a problem. When one turns to the “Authorized Resources” (<http://www.education.alberta.ca/apps/lrdb/>) one finds support materials about many artists – professional artists who make discrete objects for exhibition and/or sale within the artworld. There is a film about Douglas Cardinal, the architect who designed the Museum of Civilization in Hull and initiated the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington. There is another film about David Blackwood, the intrepid printmaker from the Canadian Maritimes made famous through the cover of Annie Proulx’s *Shipping News*. The Inuit artist, Kenojuak⁵ is featured in a film essay that describes her prints that have been sold all over the world. A film series about northern and southern Alberta artists reviews the work of painters over the last one hundred years. All of these

resources reinforce the notion that artists create non-utilitarian objects that are either exhibited in museums or are sold for individual appreciation; objects that conform to western art aesthetic values. The artist is presented as a producer of objects for consumption. There is one interesting exception listed on the Alberta Education Authorized Resources website. It is titled, "Kw'nu'te': Micmac and Maliseet Artist. The annotation reads:

Kwa'nu'te' is a peace chant that invokes the power of creation, a way of bringing back and honoring those spirits that share their visions of healing in a wounded world. The eight Maliseet and Micmac artists from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia who are portrayed in this film all share this spiritual consciousness in varying degrees. In the opening sequence at her home in the Tobique reserve in New Brunswick, painter Shirley Bear speaks about the virtues of fasting, the importance of the grandmothers and the inspiration of the rock art petroglyphs... (<http://www.education.alberta.ca/apps/lrdb/>)

It seems that this film reveals another role for the artist within society. It is an opportunity for a teacher to move beyond the white, western stereotype of the inspired genius artist, usually male and often spiritually or emotionally tortured, (Efland, 1990) to include another vision of the artist, as a healer. One can only ask oneself how much more rich the program of study would be if there were resources that revealed further definitions of "the artist" for students.

Art education is concerned with pointing out the values that surround the creation and cherishing of art forms.

This statement is usually wrapped up in a rubric that deals with appreciating art. Stated thus, the idea allows for a wider and more encompassing understanding of how art exists within the many differing cultural contexts. Again, it opens up a space in which teachers can encourage a dialogue about the value of creating and taking care of art forms. But when I reviewed what a teacher has available to help her initiate the dialogue, I was inundated with materials celebrating predominantly western aesthetic values. The authorized textbooks for

Alberta's schools (*Art in Action* (1987) and *Adventures in Art* (1994)) are not only published in the United States and feature predominately American artists. The former is over twenty years old and the latter over ten. Newer, Canadian resources need to be identified and added to authorized list. Further, when one reviews these resources one discovers within the pages that the texts reinforce the notion that the value of art is its visual, expressive or historic storytelling properties. These are important values, they are seen in many cultures, not just those of the western world. What concerns me is that there is a dearth of support for teachers to learn about other values that surround the "creation and cherishing of art forms." For instance, what of the First Nations medicine bundles? What of Chinese calligraphy? What of Indian mehndi? These artforms carry with them values that go beyond the surface visual effects. They are not about individual expression and they are not about telling stories in a straightforward narrative way. If teachers had resources that helped them understand the value of these artforms, it would allow them to introduce them into a dialogue with their students about the value of creating and cherishing artforms.

Art education deals with ways in which people express their feelings in visual forms.

For me, this is one of the more problematic of the statements in the preamble. I believe that it is a particularly western understanding of the function of art. When I think about the sand painting of the Aboriginal people of Australia, mosaics and rugs from the Muslim world, intricate basketry from Panama, I am reminded that not all peoples make art to express their feelings. As one looks deeper into the program of studies, this theme of expression is reiterated in the concepts and outcomes outlined therein. Indeed, one quarter of the curriculum is devoted to "Expression." While this is an important concept, relevant to the art of many peoples in Canada, it reveals the bias of our program of study in Alberta. Perhaps in addition to "deal[ing] with ways in which people express their feelings in visual form" we might examine how identities, cosmologies and spiritual values are expressed in visual form.

Art education deals with making and defending qualitative judgments about artworks.

In the paragraph that develops this concept, the authors' state:

Becoming a perceptive critic attunes the individual to the unique contribution of the artist. By adopting the stance of critic we can develop methods of qualitative differentiation. We gain a sense that not all art is the same, and we are able to articulate reasons for preferring one work over another. (Alberta Education, 1985, A.1)

In a multicultural society that embraces cultural diversity, this skill is important. Individuals within a culturally pluralistic society need to be able to carefully observe and understand another's situation. One needs to be able to understand why one is more comfortable with one context than another. The study of different artforms allows us to practice this kind of sensitive criticism. I applaud the curriculum writers for their insight in including this concept of art education in their document. But, as we have seen from our examination of the four previous statements, the curriculum really is unable to support an examination of diverse artforms. In reality, students study a preponderance of art from the western canon with the possibility of some First Peoples' art being included if the teacher chooses to do so. It would be difficult, given the resources available to them, for most generalist elementary school teachers to provide the kind of crosscultural experiences in criticism necessary to fulfill this ideal.

It would be instructive to examine the remainder of the program of studies. However, I believe, that this brief look at the preamble is sufficient to illustrate that the culture-blind multiculturalism that Singh describes sifts into Alberta's program of studies for Art. With the best of intentions, with guiding principles that provide for the examination of the breadth of Canadian aesthetic values and practices, the teacher's ability to actually accomplish this is limited by the authorized support materials at her disposal. Through this neglect, the Alberta program of studies for Art continues to protect the dominant values of the founding colonial cultures (the British and the

French), pushing the aesthetic values of other Canadians to the margins. It is a culture-blind curriculum.

So, is there an alternative to a multiculturalism that protects Canadians' ethno-cultural identities only so long as they remain substantive commitments and do not interfere with the procedural commitments of the state? Singh (2004) believes there is. She suggests that rather than isolating "cultures" within the private, marginalized arena that can never affect the public institutions of Canadian society we should instead, "think of multiculturalism as a kind of ongoing conversation among the diverse cultural identities within Canadian society." Singh quotes James Tully, a political theorist, in articulating her vision of a healthy, functioning multiculturalism as:

...the democratic approach of enabling citizens themselves to reimagine and create the appropriate sense of belonging to their culturally diverse association by means, and as a result of their participation in the struggles over the political, legal, and constitutional recognition and accommodation of their identity-related differences and similarities over time (p.453)

The way in which we can overcome the culture-blind multiculturalism that has permeated our institutions is to break down the substantive/procedural divide and to engage citizens in the ongoing, organic development of the country's institutions. This dialogic process would mean that we would all change as we affected each other. It would mean that the National Gallery of Canada would be in a continual process of examining the art of Canada and continually learning new stories to tell about its evolution and its meaning to Canadians. It would mean that art education curricula would be responsive to non-Western aesthetic principles and values, forms and histories. When we teach the elements of art and principles of design, we would have to include "joy" as a principle along with "emphasis". When we study artists' behaviours we would look at Micmac healers and Chinese calligraphers as artist. When we examine the value of art, we would discuss why, traditionally, totem poles were left to decay and return to the forest. We would understand that not all art is about expressing feelings and we would study art that is created to make a place safe

from evil spirits, like a false-face mask of the Iroquois. Finally, by providing our students with opportunities to engage in dialogue through and about art from our culturally diverse citizens, we would gain a deeper, more sensitive critical attitude. Indeed we would change Canadian art itself.

Returning to the grade 6 student's response to my question, "They can act Chinese and still be Canadian," I wonder what the student would respond if her experience that day at the Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre had engaged her in the kind of dialogue Tully suggests. Would she still have said "They?" Would she have perceived the cultural traits she engaged with as not Canadian? Would she understand that the behaviours are Canadian? In fact, would we have a Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre at all? Or would the student have been engaging in Canadian art in a mainstream art museum?

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Endnotes

¹For the purposes of this paper, “multiculturalism” will be used to refer to multiple ethnicities.

²Although this paper is concerned with ethnicity, it is interesting to note that only one of these artists is a woman!

³“Canadian Art” is the art of Homer Watson, the Group of Seven, Emily Carr, Marc-Aurèle Fortin, Jean-Paul Lemieux and Alex Colville, the art of artists of British and French decent. The National Gallery does not list the work of

Paul Wong, Richard Fung, Ken Lum, or Gu Xiong on its website (although all are included in their permanent collection of Contemporary Canadian art). One must know that they are contemporary Canadian artists and do a search within their website to find reference to their works.

⁴For further discussion of this idea, see Dissanyake (1988) who discusses this principle eloquently in her book *What is art for?*

⁵Referred to as an “Eskimo.” Although the Alaskan indigenous people’s are still referred to as Eskimo, Canadian people of the north refer to themselves as Inuit (notice the lower case “i”. The Inuit do not capitalize this.