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La langue de l'autre (*The Language of the Other*)

France Trépanier and Chris Creighton-Kelly

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Invisibilities

In Canada, Aboriginal artists who are Francophones are almost invisible. The confluence of complex historical, political, and cultural forces has imposed a kind of triple marginalization on these artists and their artworks. First, they are hardly ever found in the mainstream Canadian art system. Their work is rarely exhibited in art museums, galleries, and artist-run centres, nor is it present in public and corporate collections, except in an ethnographic context.[1] Despite the vitality of their practices, these artists are generally absent from official Canadian art history.[2] We don't talk about them; we don't write about them; we don't consider them in university or art school curricula.

Secondly, francophone Aboriginal artists exist on the fringes of Québécois society and its cultural institutions. They are absent from the francophone artistic landscape and they rarely benefit from mainstream arts funding and infrastructure. Their voices are not present in academia, the media, or contemporary art debates. Who speaks for whom? Who speaks for them? Non-Aboriginal scholars, curators, and historians often debate Indigenous arts and culture issues in Canada. In Quebec this phenomenon is particularly acute.

Thirdly, francophone Aboriginal artists are in the margins of the Indigenous art scene in Canada. They are significantly underrepresented in Aboriginal art organizations, exhibitions, publications, and gatherings.

Despite their cultural differences, Indigenous peoples often share worldviews, traditional knowledge, and values. Aboriginal artists, both francophone and anglophone, are involved in the transmission of customary cultural practices in relation to contemporary art. Both groups have been part of the remarkable renaissance of Aboriginal art over the last four decades. They are involved with creative sovereignty and recovery/repatriation of Indigenous knowledge. And yet the language divide continues to create a distance between francophone and anglophone Aboriginal artists. This linguistic cleavage—which exists at the heart of the larger Canadian population—is also found among Aboriginal peoples. The reality of *les deux solitudes* exists in their communities, although it is expressed, as we will see, in a very different configuration than the mainstream.

Je me souviens (*I remember*)

We believe in the responsibility to remember. We believe in the importance of knowing about the past in order to better understand the present. Honouring ancestral ways helps to develop the vision that points to multiple futures. But, as Mi'kmaq artist Mike MacDonald explained, these ancestral ways are not always honoured:

> I once heard an elder say that the great crime in this land was not that the Natives had their language and culture beaten out of them in boarding schools—the great crime was that the people who came here did not adopt the culture of the land.[3]

1. However, an ethnographic context limits the meanings and discourses that accompany contemporary art. See France Trépanier, *Art autochtone contemporain au Québec, Rapport sur le potentiel d'œuvres* (Quebec, 2012).
2. This absence comes from the way in which the entire Canadian art system developed. From its beginning in the post-World War II period, this system rested on racist, colonial assumptions about art. See France Trépanier and Chris Creighton-Kelly, *Understanding Aboriginal Arts in Canada Today: A Knowledge and Literature Review*, Canada Council for the Arts (Ottawa, 2012), 29–35 and 43–59, http://canadacouncil.ca/council/research/find-research/2012/understanding-aboriginal-arts.
3. Mike MacDonald, cited in Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "First Nations Culture: Who Knows What?" *Canadian Journal of Communication* 23, 1 (1998).

Aboriginal languages are connected to the power and mystery of the land. They animate Indigenous cosmologies based on a sustained, historical relationship with a specific territory. They carry traditional knowledge about how to live in harmony with the earth. Sacred relationships, values, and responsibilities are embedded in the languages of Aboriginal peoples. At the moment of contact, these languages were the foundation of vital and sophisticated oral cultures. Doreen Jensen, Gitxsan leader and artist, elaborates,

> I would like to remind you of the Art that the Europeans found when they arrived in our country. … They saw dwellings painted with abstract Art that was to inspire generations of European painters. Ceremonial robes were intricately woven Art that heralded the weavers' identity and privilege in the community. Utilitarian objects, including food vessels, storage containers, and clothing, were powerfully formed and decorated with the finest, most significant Art. Each nation had its theatre, music, and choreography. The first Europeans found hundreds of languages in use—not dialects but languages. And in every language, our Artists created philosophical argument and sacred ceremony, political discourse, fiction, and poetry.[4]

Why did the European colonizers not want to benefit from such a critical body of knowledge? Why does Canada as a nation still undervalue the relevance of Indigenous linguistic knowledge that could benefit the relationship to the land on which all Canadians live? In Canada, the colonial project relentlessly imposed the languages of the French and English colonizers. This vast project to eradicate Aboriginal cultures along with their ancestral languages was undertaken across the entire Canadian territory.

The banning of ceremonies such as the potlatch and the Sundance, the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples onto Indian reserves, the adoption of the Indian Act (which is still in effect today), and the imposition of the residential school system were just some of the measures that make up what is now regarded as a cultural genocide[5] perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples. "Loss of language," writes Kainai philosopher Leroy Little Bear, "is equivalent to the loss of spirit; without our sense of spirit we become vulnerable to the negatives such as the addiction and violence epidemics currently engulfing many Indigenous communities."[6]

In Quebec there were six religious Indian residential schools and five secular Inuit residential schools. Children were taken away from their families and often deliberately sent to faraway schools. Aboriginal youngsters,

Figure 1. Sylvie Paré (Wendat) and Robert Laliberté, *Aataentsic, femme du ciel*, 2012. Acrylic print on paper, 335.3 × 457.2 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artists.

4. Doreen Jensen, words spoken at the opening of INDIGENA: *Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years*, Museum of Civilization in Hull, QC, 1992.

5. The term "cultural genocide," although controversial, has recently been used by many prominent Canadians, such as Justice Murray Sinclair and Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin. See CBC, "Justice Murray Sinclair on 'Cultural Genocide'," *The National*, December 10, 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/thenational/justice-murray-sinclair-on-cultural-genocide-1.3098008, and Beverley McLachlin, "Unity, Diversity and Cultural Genocide: Chief Justice McLachlin's Complete Speech," published in *The Globe and Mail*, May 29, 2015, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/unity-diversity-and-cultural-genocide-chief-justice-mclachlins-complete-text/article24698710/.

6. Leroy Little Bear, *Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge*, Synthesis Paper. Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, University of Saskatchewan, 2009.

in addition to being evangelized, were forced, sometimes violently, to abandon their languages and to speak only French or English. Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin speaks from her own experience: "Your language is taken away from you, and then people say, 'you are so stupid, you don't even speak your own language.'"[7]

Figure 2. Eruoma Awashish (Atikamekw), *Réinterprétation du sens*, 2011. Acrylic on fabric, feathers, and wood, 60.9 × 91.4 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Bilingualism(s)

In non-Aboriginal, mainstream Canada, a bureaucratic-in-origin official languages policy has attempted to bridge the gap in our French-English discursive duality. Has it worked? The answer depends a lot on perspective. The linguistic landscape of Canada has become increasingly complex over the past three decades. The number of bilingual (French *and* English) Canadians has levelled off in the last few years at around 20%. Every year there is a growing number of bilingual Canadians who speak one "official" immigrant language (French *or* English) and another "unofficial" immigrant language(s).

In an Aboriginal context, the idea of bilingualism takes a completely different shape. Current bilingualism law—as with much other Canadian-state legislation—is fundamentally flawed for Indigenous people. Can an official languages policy bridge the gap between francophone and anglophone Aboriginal peoples? No, not really. For Aboriginal peoples, bilingualism means speaking their ancestral language along with the French or English that they already use.[8] There is already a critical *problématique* throughout Canada regarding this type of bilingualism (an Indigenous language and French *or* English). Important efforts are currently being deployed in Indigenous communities to galvanize the revitalization of ancestral languages. Aboriginal artists concerned with these issues have been emphasizing this Indigenous notion of bilingualism in their work.

In 2015, Perry Bellegarde, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations called for designating the almost sixty Indigenous languages in Canada as "official," along with French and English.[9] These Indigenous languages are the mother tongues of this territory we now call Canada, of this land that continues to speak to us. Surely mother tongues are as important as Fathers of Confederation. Given Canada's colonial history, Indigenous peoples have a justified resentment, or at least a suspicion, toward any official Canadian policies. For example, many Aboriginal persons do not recognize

7. Alanis Obomsawin, *Cultures, Diversity and Everyday Life*, Report on the International Workshop, Council of Europe and Department of Canadian Heritage, 2002, p. 5.

8. Our art world colleagues, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are often surprised by the simple mentioning of several Aboriginal communities in which French is spoken. They are located in Quebec, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Ontario. In Quebec, French has become a first language among the Huron-Wendat and Abenaki. For the Micmac, Malecite, Atikamekw, and Innu, French is often spoken as a second language. In other communities, such as the Mohawk, Algonquin, Inuit, Naskapi, and Cree, French is usually a third language after ancestral languages and English.

9. Gloria Galloway, "AFN asks Ottawa to declare all aboriginal languages official," *The Globe and Mail*, published July 08, 2015, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/afn-asks-ottawa-to-declare-all-aboriginal-languages-official/article25378218/.

nation-state boundaries (i.e., Canada-USA) or identify as "Canadian" citizens. There is a cultural and political resistance to state-imposed language requirements that are needed to access certain government positions.

For Aboriginal artists, there is little or no interest in learning a new European language. Why, when you are studying your own ancestral language, would you want to learn a second colonial language! Because bilingual (French *and* English) Aboriginal persons are not normally plentiful at "national" art gatherings, there are only a few bridge persons that can easily facilitate introductions, conversations, or discussions about art.

We have remarked that among Aboriginals who are Francophones there is often a kind of *repli linguistique*—a folding-in of identity and a linguistic withdrawal—from the larger group that is mostly non-French speaking. Even when there is simultaneous translation (both in French and English), they tend to hang with one another in the informal parts of the event. Some francophone Aboriginals have learned—in a manner similar to internalized racism—not to speak; to be wary of their accent, their near invisibility. Atikamekw activist Lucie Basile describes what this feels like:

> After all these years during which we were told to be silent, to refrain from making ourselves known, to simply live and breathe—you must now give us time to catch our breath.[10]

We believe that this linguistic folding-in does not have to be inevitable. And we hope it will be temporary. In any case, we wish to emphasize that the challenge of speaking across the French-English cleavage will be taken up by Indigenous peoples, on Indigenous terms. This is a problem that cannot be solved by the Canadian mainstream. And certainly not by Canadian official languages policy in the way that it has been historically constructed. Persuading individuals to learn another "official" colonial language falls on skeptical ears and actually exacerbates the situation. Considering the precarious state of many Aboriginal languages this matter is particularly pertinent for Indigenous youth. As Cree leader and Member of Parliament Roméo Saganash proposes,

> In Canada, despite all of the assaults that were allowed against Aboriginal cultures and languages, many of them still survive. We could accomplish a great deal if we reversed the situation and implemented measures to ensure the preservation and revitalization of Aboriginal cultures. Young Aboriginals feel the need to cling to their roots, their language.[11]

Aboriginal artists have been exploring the concept of "Indigenization"—revealing and renewing Indigenous meanings by activating traditional knowledge and infusing it into the contemporary context—in their work. Indigenization is a more fruitful frame within which to address the challenge of different, evolving definitions of "official languages policy" in a multilingual Canada. This challenge is intractable but not futile. We can imagine more public signage in Aboriginal languages; all students in Canadian schools being taught the Indigenous language of the specific territory where they live; Indigenous words being spoken in formal settings, such as the House of Commons, universities, and courtrooms. These are just three humble suggestions that point to hundreds of others.

Imaginings

What is to be done? What can anyone do to alleviate the invisibilities of francophone Aboriginals? Can the framing of art history be revised or has it been constructed to not open itself to Aboriginal art practices? Artistic practice, even art itself, cannot hope to "solve" this question. Indigenous artworks connect to long-standing histories, techniques, and materials, even when they are understood as contemporary art. They are sometimes manifestations of traditional practices based on orality. To understand these Aboriginal

10. Lucie Basile, in France Trépanier, *Diversity and Francophonie, Conference Report*, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2005, p. 27.

11. Roméo Saganash, in France Trépanier, *Diversity and Francophonie, Conference Report*, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2005, p. 12.

artworks from other territories, we need to experience them.

The first step is to create awareness and stimulate knowledge of these francophone Aboriginal artists, their artworks, and their communities. This must begin in francophone academia and art worlds. Develop scholarship on Aboriginal art in Quebec and its impact on Canadian art history. In francophone universities, prioritize the hiring of Indigenous scholars. Offer more Indigenous visual culture programs, Indigenous curatorial courses, and Aboriginal art history programs. Secondly, across Canada, curate and exhibit the work. Ensure the ongoing presence of francophone Indigenous artists and curators in mainstream art museums and galleries. Collect the work, making deliberate efforts to correct the absence of these artists in the majority of Canadian public and corporate collections. Talk about the work and develop a critical discourse around it. Write about it. Invite Indigenous curators to do so. Put the artists and their work in dialogue with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. Conduct research with—not on—Indigenous artists and communities. And thirdly, adequately support the Indigenous arts organizations that are working to bridge the gap between the francophone and anglophone Aboriginal arts communities. And the gap between artists with customary practices and those who more strongly identify with contemporary art practices.

It is often said that Quebec is a francophone island in an anglophone sea: a minority "nation" trying to preserve its language and culture. The Québécois people *de souche* who comprise this minority have a tendency to ignore the linguistic, artistic, and cultural aspirations of other minorities. This is certainly true for the many Indigenous communities where French is spoken.

To take this seriously, this notion of minority languages within a context of *a* minority language is complex work. But this task is both necessary and possible. Canadians, Francophones and Anglophones alike, are once again hearing the call for building nation-to-nation relations with Indigenous peoples. This, too, will be difficult work. It will turn much of what we take for granted about founding nations, languages, bilingualism, and Canadian identity(ies) on its head. It will shake up assumptions, mythologies, and official histories.

We contend that art—and those of us who make it, teach it, curate it, write about it, look at it, study it, fund it, and collect it—has a critical, consequential role to play in this disruptive transformation. We construct myths, after all. Reconfiguring the concept of official languages, other immigrant languages, and—most importantly—of all ancestral Aboriginal languages, will manifest in fresh understandings of this land. The result will be nothing less than a new creation story for Canada. ¶

Figure 3. Sonia Robertson (Ilnue), *Mawie'was'gl – Nitassinan – Territoires*, 2013. Coins on display cushion (partial view of installation), 30 × 22.8 × 20.3 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.