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Imagery and Identity: Exploring Curtis Gillespie's "Learning to Unlearn"

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An initial reading of Curtis Gillespie's "Learning to Unlearn" reveals the journey of a man recollecting the absence of Indigenous culture in Alberta in the 1960's and 1970's when the whole of his exposure existed in visual snippets and brief, personal encounters. Gillespie's perceptions of Indigenous culture dramatically shifted when he was asked by *New Trail* magazine to "consider what (Canadians) might actually do" regarding the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (par. 8). His journey begins, as he recollects in the article, with a poster in his childhood bedroom of an Indigenous man in full ceremonial dress In his youthful innocence he never deeply considered it, despite seeing it every day. Gillespie then walks us through his experience of unlearning his own assumption of the collective Canadian identity. In spending a significant amount of time with Indigenous individuals, he comes to see a collective Canadian identity through their eyes, and realizes that if we truly aspire to be identified as Canadians we must, like him, *unlearn* who we think we are. Like Gillespie's narrative on the poster, what we see presented every day of Indigenous Canadian identity passes by us seemingly unnoticed. The media, institutions, and even Indigenous people themselves, play a large role in creating our individual and collective narrative. I propose that to unlearn our assumptions, we must evaluate what representative imagery has existed, from the late Nineteenth Century to the present, and how our own personal encounters with Indigenous Canadians can help us learn a new collective Canadian identity.

The photograph of Thomas Moore Keesick is one of the earliest representations of a narrative that needs to be unlearned. Keesick, presented as Thomas Moore only, is pictured in a juxtaposed image of himself just prior to admission to an Indian Residential School, and subsequently as a student post-admittance. "The Archaeology of an Image: The Persistent Persuasion of Thomas Moore Keesick's Residential School Photographs" by Miranda J. Brady and Emily Hiltz thoroughly deconstructs the image, but their overall point is to assess the misrepresentations created by those who have used it in

various environments over the course of one hundred years. The images favoured the era's notions that a cultured Indian is the ideal in Canadian society. Brady and Hiltz also highlight the misplaced blame towards the government regarding the agenda behind the photo, as well as the institutionally perpetuated incorrect dating of the photo, indicating "the (role of) metadata in contextualizing visual evidence" (72). When visuals continually appear in singular context, misrepresentations of identity tend to follow. The Canadian Museum of History is also implicated; they do not address what should be obvious to them. The photo is staged.

Institutions also found responsible, according to Brady and Hiltz, are education systems. Several authors point to a similar concern; Kristi Belcourt states that the education system is currently teaching the historical relationship between Europeans and Indigenous but leaving out the nasty parts detailing assimilation and erasure (*Keetsanak* xvii). Roger I. Simon uses the term *symbolic optics* to describe the introduction of the Indian Residential Schools history into current curricula, because it would have to be taught inside the scope of an uncomfortable national identity for any social transformation to occur (135). Curtis Gillespie himself, in his *New Trail* article, writes that we have power in the education system to start early with equality and tolerance, except it first has to be a sold idea to the educators (par. 69). Educators still use the Keesick photo out of context to guide discussion on Indigenous issues.

A modern image misrepresenting Canadian identity is the photo titled "Face to Face" by Shaney Komulainen. Shot during the Oka Crisis, it depicts what can be perceived as a standoff between a Canadian soldier and a Mohawk warrior. It has a palpable sense of charged emotion. Rima Wilkes and Michael Kehl in "One Image, Multiple Nationalisms" put this photo in the category of Iconic, because it has "a particular essence" that allows it to reflect and represent "culturally resonant themes" (484). "Face to Face" has been seen as colonial imagery, an example of enforcing the binary narrative of the colonial and the displaced (482). Wilkes and Kehl propose that war and conflict imagery may reflect plural nationalisms, which are presented through a preferential, often hegemonic meaning, but this meaning is "neither singular nor fixed" (481). The initial narrative of the photo has since switched in this manner, as the "hero" became later disgraced, and the "challenger" was discovered to not be the individual originally implicated.

Promulgating these malleable identities is the Canadian media. Isela Perez-Torres comments on this, saying that the media is responsible for the nationwide identity. They must avoid subscribing to a "discourse of discrimination and contempt directed towards the victims" which weakens the possibility

of citizen support (161). We see this happening in the case of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). The *Highway of Tears* documentary addresses the failure of the media to provide fair and unbiased representation of Indigenous women who are victims of the crisis. The story only gained momentum when the disappearance of Nicole Hoar, a white girl from Red Deer, saturated the news (09:59). Her photo appealed to the contemporary narrative of Canadian identity. Samira Saramo also draws attention to media representation of MMIW, and in her article, describes the viral #AmINext campaign which used pictures of Indigenous women challenging Prime Minister Stephen Harper to action (210). Saramo's article itself displays a Liberal Party image of Prime Minister Stephen Harper that was used to incite bipartisanship over the issue (209).

In response to a burgeoning national awareness of the MMIW crisis, we see a resurgence of Indigenous visual art. Louis Riel once said "My people will sleep for 100 years, and when they awake it will be the artists who give them back their spirit" (qtd in Findlay 221). Indigenous art has long been a part of the colonial-controlled narrative, but modern work seeks to change the Canadian perspective. Marybelle Mitchell states that "the vestiges of colonialism are being challenged daily by artists" (93), and what bold and beautiful work it is. On her website, Christi Belcourt explains that her extraordinary stained glass window, *Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead)*, "in Centre Block of Parliament was commissioned to recognize the survivors of Indian Residential Schools and their families, as well as the Prime Minister's historic Apology in 2008." The window represents the arc of the experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada, with the Apology at the apex. The story runs from the bottom left, pre-colonialism, and then up through the apex, and down the right pane, leading the way to restoration of Indigenous identity. It is full of symbolism and realism, with culture and beliefs intertwined in creative genius. However, Lara Fullenweider comments that the location of the window can be considered a constraint to recognizing Indigenous sovereignty, as it is sitting in the house of the Hegemon (44).

A striking advancement in visual art is the REDress project, now nationally recognized as a companion to MMIW awareness. A Métis artist, Jaime Black, has used the tangible imagery of hauntingly disembodied red dresses, signifying the absence of the Indigenous women meant to wear them (Saramo 214). Modern artists seek not only to show Canada what our reconciled identity is, but also have created a space for people's interaction. Gillespie points to his unlearning as coming from joining in the experience of the people who helped him (par. 8-9). Art installations like Belcourt's

Walking With Our Sisters, furthermore invite us to enjoy the visual, but also a ceremonial experience, so that non-Indigenous people can come and identify with a part of the Indigenous story (Saramo 215).

Gillespie presents us with a challenge to reorient our Canadian identity by unlearning what we thought we knew about our Indigenous neighbours. There is a power found in imagery that influences what we understand of a culture. We must discard the habit of seeing Indigenous visuals presented by colonial institutions and favour those presented directly by Indigenous members. The former, seen in media, education and government, have historically served a bias under the umbrella of a colonial identity. Gillespie is correct that we have a personal responsibility to engage in others' perspectives, and we have seen the emerging opportunities presented by new Indigenous art to do so. However, our national, social transformation faces a large barrier because of said institutions. What we thought we knew, we will always face inside the present tense, until the momentum of new visuals and experiences have overtaken as a new reality; a whole and reconciled Canadian identity.

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