AHIS 310: Assignment 4
Word Count: 1196

All art and artists are products of their time - cultural upbringing, place in society and art training all combine to create the art and artist. An artist's legacy, however, is subject to the whims of time, popularity and social change. Emily Carr is a Canadian artist whose work and legacy was closely examined in the early 1990s. Her practice has been explored, defended and criticized by Canadian art writers Gerta Moray, Robert Fulford and Marcia Crosby. The resulting variety of opinions demonstrates how an artist's legacy – like their art – is all in the eye of the beholder.

Armed with a wealth of knowledge, contemporary awareness of cultural issues and a sense of post-modern criticism, Moray, Fulford and Crosby tackled Carr's legacy. Each, in their own way, recognize what Moray describes as "the complexities and contradictions" and "shifting meanings of [Carr's] work in changing contexts" (231). There are surprising similarities in their respective approaches. Moray, a Canadian art teacher and Carr scholar, used all available material on Carr for her doctoral thesis (Fulford 38). This thesis is referenced by Fulford, along with other sources, in his 1993 essay "The Trouble with Emily". Fulford finds it "natural" to investigate Carr's impact on Canadian culture "and what in turn it says about her time, our time, and the relationship of culture to social justice" (37). Crosby states that contemporary academics "should have a broad enough perspective to consider what Carr did not and perhaps could not see" (221).

Moray's European birth and education (Stoffman, 2007) possibly provides the necessary detachment that makes her excerpt, "Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images", an even, mediated approach. She traces how Carr learned to paint in the European tradition with an emphasis on the art of "primitive" cultures as seen by Europeans (231). Carr was sincerely motivated to "experience, record, and learn to understand as well as possible the context and meanings of Native cultural traditions" that were quickly changing with the "introduction of Euro-Canadian industrial goods and political pressures" (Moray 232). A stickler for accuracy, she researched her subject according to works available at the time (Moray 232) and "translate[d] local realities" (Moray 233). Moray finds that Carr was "subjective" in choice of subject yet also "systematic" with her devotion to accuracy (233). Yet the colonial appeal of her images, as well as artistic success, became cemented in "Canadian" heritage years after their creation (Moray 229).

Robert Fulford chooses to address the many ways the "past can be a great burden for the living" (39). Against the politically correct atmosphere of the 1990s, Fulford rails against definitions of "appropriation" and "ethnic possession" (38) and launches perhaps a sly attack on Crosby when arguing that people are not "inherently more knowledgeable" of a culture because they are from that culture (38). Fulford suggests that West Coast indigenous nations are simply late to experiencing the effects of cultural appropriation; he doesn't consider it a "unique problem" (39). He gives examples of other ethnicities, such as Greeks, Italians and Egyptians (39), who learned a long time ago about having their culture co-opted and carted off to museums[1]. At the

time he felt that "Western intellectuals" were distorting the past to create "historic guilt" (38). Fulford frets that Carr is the latest among artists and writers who have been reduced to being "evidence to prove academic theories about race, sex, and imperialism" (37).

Fulford would have been 61 in 1993 according to his website resume (Fulford, n.d.); no doubt he grew up with a sense of the "imagined modern-Canadian national identity" (Moray 229) laid out by Carr and the Group of Seven. It would be easy to dismiss Fulford as a privileged old white man, but for that his strong defence of Carr – which he likens to a “battlefield” of “post-modern revisionism” (37) - is an example of how his notions of personal and national identity are threatened by new academics like Crosby. This is the sort of “sacred cow” attitude (221) Crosby attempts to slay.

Marcia Crosby, a Tsimshian member of the Haida nation (Fulford 37), was an art student at the University of British Columbia when she wrote "Construction of the Imaginary Indian" in 1991. She understands in a very personal way, a way that Moray and Fulford can only understand academically perhaps, what it means to have others consider one's culture to be in need of "saving" or to be perceived as a "dying people" (220). Carr is just another part of a long and entrenched "Eurocentric approach to natives" (Crosby 219) that results in "dominating or colonizing" native people and culture (Crosby 219). Crosby cites one contemporary example of attitudes that are stuck in the past and shaped by the past - a land claim where contemporary indigenous lifestyles were considered inauthentic (222). However, Moray feels that Crosby's

"verdict" is based on the concept of Carr developed by popular culture and "as a mediator of Native traditions for Canada's white settlers" (230) for the six or so years she painted indigenous scenes. Regardless, Crosby, now a PhD student (Beyond Anti-Racism Speaker Biographies, 2008), adds breadth and depth by placing Carr in an indigenous context for contemporary art histories.

65 years after her death, Carr, of course, is not here to comment. Crosby finds it unfortunate that Carr inspired many artists after her, such as Jack Shadbolt, who "continue the colonial process" (222). She does not believe that paintings by Carr were meant to be "inclusive" but instead have had a "parasitic" effect on Canadian culture and mythology (222). Just as indigenous people tend to be lumped together, Robert Fulford seems to feel that Emily Carr's paintings and life are being lumped together in the same homogeneous way. Carr was "an artist, not a reporter" and it is impossible, Fulford argues, that Carr could have guessed work she enthusiastically captured "would one day be resented" (33). Similarly Carr could not have predicted becoming a "Canadian cultural icon" or that she and her work would result in being viewed in an "autonomous and mythical" way (Moray 230).

The case of each of the three authors makes for Carr’s legacy are informed by cultural changes, changes in academic discourse in the 1990s and the cultural backgrounds of the each author. The conflict over Emily Carr and her work has no right or wrong answer; it simply proves that an artist and their work can be judged differently by different time periods. Each judgement is parsed through the relativism of an individual’s

experiences, as Fulford and Crosby passionately demonstrate. At the very least, Crosby and Fulford can agree to disagree. A third option is found in Moray's middle ground as she uses extensive research to help art viewers understand Emily Carr in a historical context. Art does not exist in a vacuum, after all. In considering an artist's legacy in modern times, the best approach seems to be awareness and respectful acknowledgement of individual motives, meanings and opinions.

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1. A sure way to cause my dad to bust a vein is to get him going on the repatriation of the Elgin Marbles.

Works Cited

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