

THE INVENTED INDIAN/ THE IMAGINED EMILY¹

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EMILY CARR WAS A DEDICATED ARTIST AND WRITER. She was not a very politically or socially conscious person. Raised in cultivated gentility and respectability, as an adult she lived on inherited capital as a *rentier* and small-scale entrepreneur involved in private teaching, dog breeding, and souvenir making. She even speculated a little in real estate. Aside from contractual teaching in private schools for a few years in Vancouver (and working as a decorator in California), she never had a “job.” Indeed, the thought of entering the labour force – as public school teacher, for example, or stenographer, retail clerk, teller, or telephone operator – was one she never seems to have entertained. Her unmarried sisters were similarly independent, Alice running her own elementary school classes and Lizzy being a physiotherapist.

Carr was, all her idiosyncrasies and eccentricities aside, a woman of conservative temperament. She did do some politically charged cartoons for the *Western Women's Weekly*, a women's rights magazine, but otherwise her comments on the economic order, on class relations, and on political questions are very rare. We have no idea how, after women received the franchise, she cast her vote in any election (or, indeed, whether she voted at all).

Few public events – national, provincial, or municipal – seem to have troubled her. World wars enter her concerns, of course, as did recessions, for they affected the rents she received. We know that she had harsh words for the single unemployed men who occupied the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1938, but, had it not been the gallery they

¹ This paper was a draft in progress at the time of Douglas Cole's death. Some minor editing was required to prepare it for publication. Special thanks go to Brian Dippie, Heather Gleboff, Alex Long, Gerta Moray, Jay Stewart, and Wendy Wickwire for their assistance.

occupied, we might never have heard even those.² By character she seems apolitical, and her views (with the exception of those on religion) seem conventional and conservative.

It is hardly surprising, then, to find Carr virtually silent about the relations between the Canadian government and its Aboriginal peoples. Part of this may be due to the unevenness of our sources. Few of Carr's letters written before 1927 have survived, and it is only after that date that we have her journals. So it is impossible to judge whether she had anything to say, or what it might have been, about such matters as the moving of the Kitsilano from their south shore reserve, agitation over the land question and the McKenna-McBride Commission, or the attempt to suppress the Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch during and immediately after the Great War. Nor is it at all surprising that Carr's view on the history and future of Aboriginal peoples in many ways conformed to the prevailing ideas of the times. Like others, she believed in the prevailing myth of the "vanishing Indian." She has recently been criticized for this by scholars who have judged her by contemporary standards. They, in turn, have imagined another Emily, for Carr's own writings, especially *Klee Wyck*, suggest a more complicated portrait of both Emily Carr and Aboriginal peoples.³

In 1907, after a holiday in Sitka, Emily Carr decided to make a record of Aboriginal villages and poles. Her decision resonated with what has become known as "the salvage paradigm," a broad phenomenon that moved anthropologists and museums frantically to collect the remnants of endangered Aboriginal societies and cultures. Behind the salvage paradigm was a realization that time was essential, that civilization was everywhere pushing Aboriginal peoples to the

² "I suppose they are *cleaning the gallery* how thankful they must [be] to get those brutes out. we have them here. now. They are like the grass hopper scourge." Carr to Nan Cheney, 23 June 1938, in *Dear Nan: Letters of Emily Carr, Nan Cheney, and Humphrey Toms*, ed. Doreen Walker (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), 91.

³ Editor's Note: The original manuscripts of Emily Carr's *Klee Wyck* are currently located in the E. Carr Papers, British Columbia Archives (BCA), MS-2181, box 6, fols. 11-32. These typed manuscripts are Carr's final drafts prior to publication and include minor handwritten revisions. According to Kathryn Bridge (Manager of Access Services at BCARS) and Maria Tippett (a recognized Carr scholar), many of Carr's journals and manuscripts were significantly revised by her editor, Ira Dilworth, and therefore differ from the published versions. But for *Klee Wyck*, unlike these other writings, handwriting analysis shows that Carr made most – if not all – of the revisions on the manuscript. There are two published versions of *Klee Wyck*: the 1941 edition and the 1951 edition, both of which Dilworth edited. For the 1941 edition, Dilworth made minor changes in punctuation but did not alter the voice, tone, or substance of the stories. For the 1951 edition, which still circulates today, he included a foreword and took greater editorial liberties, not only shortening Chapters 1 and 16 but also removing a chapter entitled "Martha's Joey." In this essay, Douglas Cole relied on the limited 1941 edition – the edition closest to Carr's original manuscript – for his interpretations.

wall, destroying their material culture and even extinguishing the Aboriginal stock itself. "What can be done must be done now," wrote Germany's Adolph Bastian. "In a few years it will be impossible," the American John Wesley Powell commented, "to study our North American Indians in their primitive history." Anthropologist Franz Boas saw that the cultures of the Pacific Northwest were rapidly disappearing "and the whole work is becoming more difficult from year to year."⁴

The assumption behind salvage anthropology was that the traditional, pre-contact languages, customs, and societies of Aboriginal North America were rapidly disappearing. So too, it seemed, were the Aboriginal peoples themselves. Thus, the salvage paradigm shared in the larger intellectual tradition of the "vanishing Indian."

The "disappearing Indian" was an entrenched belief, one that has been dealt with superbly by University of Victoria historian Brian W. Dippie. He shows that a fully rounded version of the "vanishing American Indian" had won public acceptance in the United States by 1814. By its logic, Indians were doomed to "utter extinction." Poets, novelists, orators, and artists found the theme of a dying Aboriginal race congenial, while serious students of "the Indian problem" provided corroboration for this particular construct. Opinion was virtually unanimous: extinction was inevitable.⁵

The "vanishing Indian" was, of course, a construction, a "cultural myth," but that does not mean that it was a falsehood. In writing of the "vanishing Indian" as a constant in American thinking, Dippie's concern was not with "historical reality – the actual number of Indians, the actual causes and extent of population decline" – but with White perceptions of the Indian. While gathering a life of its own and prophesying the future, the concept of the "vanishing Indian" was "based on what was thought to be irrefutable evidence."⁶ Indeed, the evidence did seem overwhelming. The disappearance of the familiar Native American was empirically verifiable. There had been a drastic decline in the Aboriginal population, a large-scale replacement of their material

⁴ Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/University of Washington Press, 1985), 288; Franz Boas to M.K. Jesup, 19 January 1897, F.W. Putnam Papers, box 16, Harvard University Archives. The use of the term "salvage" for such activities occurred much later and was probably derived from "salvage archaeology," where it has only very recently been replaced by "urgent archaeology."

⁵ Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 10-11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

existence by European goods, and widespread conversion to Christianity. This was undeniable.

British Columbia's Aboriginal population had declined precipitously, the result of epidemics of introduced diseases such as smallpox and measles, and of less dramatic but no less deadly ones such as tuberculosis and venereal diseases. Warfare, impoverishment, and other consequences of social, economic, political, and cultural disruption had taken their toll. The Northwest Coast population may have declined by 80 percent in the first century of contact. British Columbia's Aboriginal numbers reached a low point of 22,605 in 1929. Some regions saw a modest reversal of the decline, though the Northwest Coast did not. The decline was halted there only later – as late as 1939 for the Nuu-chah-nulth. The Haida reached their low in 1915 when there were less than 600 people concentrated in two towns, with dozens of deserted villages having been left behind.⁷ In 1912 most Aboriginal languages were still alive, but some had disappeared: Salishan Pentlatch as well as Athapascan Tsetsaut and Nicola. The people, when still living, had been absorbed into neighbouring populations. Language decline continued long after the population had begun to rebound. Art production seemed to have drastically fallen off, replaced by trade goods, European-style homes, and Christian concepts and ceremonialism. By 1910 the majority of British Columbia's Aboriginal peoples were adherents, however nominally, of one Christian church or another. To the outside world, the "Indian" did seem to be "vanishing."

As a phenomenon of both the past and the present, the myth of the "vanishing Indian" seemed a reasonable extrapolation in Carr's age. Even if populations were stabilizing and in some places rebounding, the demographics of non-Aboriginal immigration and natural increase so tilted the ratio that Aboriginal peoples seemed inevitably swamped. In 1901, when Carr was already thirty, Aboriginal peoples still made up over 16 percent of the provincial population. The boom years of the next decade changed that; by 1911 they made up only slightly over 5 percent of the provincial population.

Carr's sense of the "vanishing Indian" was not imagined. It seemed an inexorable truth verified by all known experience. She saw the deserted villages – they were no myth – and she was witness to the tilted and rotting poles. She regretted their demise, whether to the forces of nature or to museum collectors.

⁷ Robert T. Boyd, "Demographic History, 1774-1874," in *Northwest Coast: Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 7, ed. Wayne Suttles (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press,

Traditional Aboriginal life in British Columbia was in decline. It grieved her, but she accepted it, with resignation, as inevitable. "I began to realize that these things were passing," she recalled, "and I started in earnest to make a collection of paintings of the villages and totem poles."⁸ She thus participated in the salvage paradigm, "reflecting a desire to rescue 'authenticity' out of destructive historical change."⁹ Her travels in 1928, during which she revisited some of the sites she had seen over a decade before, confirmed her view that "the old places and people are passing away rapidly" in the north. Few poles were left, few old-type houses, and very few old people.¹⁰

In drawing these conclusions, Carr was not an uninformed or superficial observer. She had grown up in nineteenth-century Victoria, where Aboriginal people were a ubiquitous presence. As a child, she saw the family's laundress weekly and accompanied her mother to "Wash Mary's" funeral. Aboriginal people were frequent visitors to her father's store. She visited a West Coast village as a young woman, something that remained an indelible memory. She was close enough to the people to gain an appellation – "Klee Wyck" – which she treasured, perhaps romantically, all her life. "We seemed to understand each other," she wrote; they called her Laughing One "because they said they could not understand my talk, but they understood my laugh."¹¹

Over the course of her life, she visited reserves throughout Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland, in particular those of the Songhees, Squamish, and the Nuu-chah-nulth. She also visited the old and new Haida villages on the Queen Charlotte Islands as well as a number of villages among the Kwakwaka'wakw, the Nisga'a, the Coast Tsimshian, and the Gitksan. She met numerous Interior peoples during trips to the Cariboo (in 1904) and Lillooet (in 1933). In her Vancouver years, she made friends with Sophie Frank, a Squamish basket maker.

Ideas of salvage and of the "vanishing Indian" brought with them a tendency to think that Aboriginal cultures existed only in the past, that Aboriginal peoples ceased to be "authentic" as soon as they altered their way of life or adopted, or adapted to, non-Aboriginal ways. "In spite of centuries of contact and the changed conditions of Native

1990), 135; Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia*. Vol. 1, *The Impact of the White Man* (Victoria: Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology, 1964), 39-45.

⁸ Emily Carr, "Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast," Supplement to *McGill News*, June 1929, 21.

⁹ James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 121.

¹⁰ Carr, "Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast," 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

American lives, Whites picture the 'real' Indian as the one before contact or during the early period of the contact." Indianness was conceived of as ahistorical and static, with adoption of White ways making the Indian "ipso facto less Indian."¹² Such adaptations were, moreover, often seen as contaminating, or degrading, the "real Indian." Aboriginal peoples sometimes appeared to accept White vices as much as their virtues and so become "those imperfect creatures, the degraded or reservation Indian," neither noble nor savage but possessed of the vices of both societies.¹³

Carr's painting, from 1907 to 1912 (and perhaps to a lesser extent from 1928 to 1933 or so), was within the salvage paradigm. It was premised on the "vanishing Indian." While this is indubitable, it would be misleading to think that she accepted the associated idea that "Indianness" was ahistorical, static, or that the Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia were necessarily any less "Indian" because of the altered conditions of their lives. Indeed, Carr's recorded perceptions defy that stereotype.

Carr's *Klee Wyck* (1941) records her experience with British Columbia's Aboriginal peoples from her childhood through to her 1928 northern journey to the Queen Charlottes and the Skeena Valley.¹⁴ It is her only sustained literary treatment of Aboriginal life, which makes it all the more remarkable that several recent commentators on Carr and Aboriginal peoples have almost ignored it.

Carr's portraits are of a people living in a transient present, caught in conflicts between old and new, between traditional and colonized modern, who are making their way as best they can. The span of the impressionistic stories is some fifty or so years, and its locales move from Victoria, the Cariboo, and Vancouver, to the Charlottes and the North Coast. The narration is personal, the voice variously mischievous, ironic, and wistful. Carr wrote the twenty-one "short sketches or glimpses" over a long period, sifting her memories, filling in "gaps" with "research" and invented dialogue, using all the literary devices available to her. She wanted, she said, to be "true to the places as well as to the people" – though it was difficult "to avoid slopping over to fill up [the gaps]."¹⁵

What emerges is an apparently unselfconscious portrait that records, with the artful eye of a sensitive observer, the Aboriginal

¹² Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 28–9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁴ Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941).

¹⁵ Maria Tippett, "Emily Carr's *Klee Wyck*," *Canadian Literature* 72 (Spring 1977): 55, 52–3.



Plate 1: Emily Carr painting poles at Tanoo, Queen Charlotte Islands, 1912. Clara Russ ("Louisa"), one of her guides on this trip, also appears in the photo. Courtesy of the RBCM, #PN 554I.

people she meets. They live in Carr's present, not in an ahistorical past. The Haida she describes are not "imagined," seldom traditional, and certainly not stereotyped into a false authenticity. An occasional note of wistful regret over the disappearing past intrudes, but the people she describes live in partitioned houses, engage in the commercial fishery, even prepare herring roe for the Japanese market. They live in a world of missionaries, cannery bosses, schools, policemen, and Indian agents.

Her friends, Jimmie and Louisa (William and Clara Russ), who talk "Indian" together, seem thoroughly modern yet still "Indian." "Louisa's house was the best in the village."¹⁶ It had a garden and veranda, a large kitchen with a cook-stove and sink, a living room and double parlours. The outer parlour had become a music room with player piano, organ, a cabinet for the player rolls, and a bench, sofa, and rocking chairs for seating, leaving "scarcely any space for people." Carr's bedroom contained a brass bed (fitted with heavily embroidered pillowslips) and a fine drawer, on top of which was a candle in a beer bottle and a tin pie plate for hairpins.¹⁷ The asides are mischievous but not malicious; the incongruities are light touches, not lapses into "half-civilized" discourse.

Juxtaposed to the modern Louisa and Jimmie was Louisa's mother, the more traditional Mrs. Green (in real life, Mrs. Brown). "A remarkable woman," she lived in a cabin in Skidegate and "clung vigorously to the old Indian ways." Carr saw the older woman outside her home preparing herring roe and helped her put the roe-filled trunk on a boy's wagon and trundle it to the wharf, there to be transported to Prince Rupert for sale to Japan. Carr assisted Mrs. Green with her store order: groceries, a plaid shawl, some pink print, a silk handkerchief, and a tobacco pipe with a little tin lid.¹⁸ Mrs. Green's "old Indian ways," Carr tells us, "sometimes embarrassed Louisa." Louisa was uncomfortable when her mother spit in the woodpile behind the cook-stove in Carr's presence, and she was "a little ashamed too, of her mother smoking a pipe; but Louisa was most respectful of her mother – she never scolded her."¹⁹ (See plate 1). Now much of this may be invented – most certainly much of the dialogue is. Carr was writing years later, from memory, constructing a marketable storyline for a non-Aboriginal public. But her portrayal of generations, of differential acculturation,

¹⁶ Carr, "Friends," in *Klee Wyck* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 100-1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

of ambivalence and embarrassment is a sensitive acknowledgment of human predicaments. It is a literary construction, rekindled from memory, that captures the intimate, the transitory, the ambiguities and conflicts of colonization and change.

Other mixtures of old and new can be found. Carr travels to Yan in a tippy little canoe that carried a ragged flour sack as a sail. She remembers the "Indian" attributes of the young girl who paddles her, but she also, passingly, remembers her print dress.²⁰ At Skedans non-Aboriginal halibut fishers had constructed rude driftwood tables in an old bighouse, but the Haida "use[d] the floor for their tables and seats."²¹

Carr's most moving story is about her friend Sophie Frank. There is something untouchable about this relationship. Sophie is an urban woman living in a three-room home on the Squamish reserve on the north shore of Burrard Inlet. She crosses the water by ferry to sell baskets in Vancouver. Her kitchen has a cook-stove, a coal-oil lamp, and, at least in winter, the family bed – though Sophie herself sleeps on a mattress beside the stove. The kitchen floor, Carr emphasizes, was scrubbed clean.²²

Cleanliness is obviously a primary virtue to Carr. Sophie's friend, Mrs. Johnson, the widowed Squamish wife of a non-Aboriginal man, keeps her house clean "beyond words," "the cook-stove was a mirror, the floor white as a sheet from scrubbing." Each of Mrs. Johnson's kitchen chairs had its own antimacassar and cushion, and her bed had a tautly pulled crocheted spread and embroidered pillowslips – all the work of Mrs. Johnson's hands.²³ Neither Sophie nor her friend are stereotyped as "authentic," romanticized, invented "Indians," nor are they "degraded, half-civilized savages." They are, in Carr's emphasis on cleanliness, perhaps subversive counter-stereotypes, but they are certainly not essentialized Aboriginal women.

Carr also writes of Sophie's hospitalization and of her friend being put into a "little Indian ward." (Carr does not omit this segregation, but she makes no comment on it.) She visits Sophie there, poking fun at herself for thinking that Sophie would find it more comfortable than her kitchen floor. Sophie quickly puts her right. "Me ole'-fashion, Em'ly. Me like kitchen floor fo' sick."²⁴ The irony is light, even unintended. Old-fashioned here means sleeping on a kitchen floor mattress, not on a longhouse mat.

²⁰ Carr, "Sailing to Yan," in *Klee Wyck*.

²¹ Carr, "Skedans," in *Klee Wyck*.

²² Carr, "Sophie," in *Klee Wyck*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

While we learn something of Sophie's milieu in the Squamish community across the shore, what we remember most about Sophie is her children, some twenty-one (according to Carr), who were carefully nurtured but, nonetheless, died. (One is reminded that infant mortality was high among Aboriginal peoples.) They were buried in coffins, their graves marked with tombstones. When Sophie, a Roman Catholic, took Emily to see the tombstones, she wore her "best plaid skirt" and a "yellow silk handkerchief" round her head. "She wore her shoes when she walked with me," Carr wrote, "if she remembered."²⁵ The point is not that Sophie is "half-civilized" – only that she is Sophie.

Carr's memory sometimes leads us in other directions. She has Sophie, apparently jealous, telling her friend that:

"I don' want you know Mrs. Chief Joe [Capilano]."

"Why?"

"You fiend for me, not fiend for her."²⁶

Local rivalry resonates here. This is no "imagined Indian"; this is the discourse of everyday life.

Some of Carr's villages are "going modern," [with] new buildings replacing the old community houses"; women bake bannock, fathers are out with whalers; boys play football in a village street. Some Aboriginal people have schooling, many do not. Carr has Sophie say that her husband had learned "school English. Me, no. Frank laugh my English words."²⁷ And Carr does not miss the residential school experience.

Louisa and Jimmie's Methodist pastor wanted Carr "to influence them into sending their boys to the Industrial boarding school for Indians." Carr refused. "In Louisa's house now there is an adopted child, a lazy, detestable boy, the product of an Indian Industrial School, ashamed of his Indian heritage." The two remaining boys were not well, and there was a school in the village. Carr told the pastor that Louisa "can send them there and own and mother them during their short lives. Why should she give up her boys?" The pastor raised the advantages; Carr countered with "And the disadvantages!" A poignant scene follows over young Joe's too pink cheeks and too shiny eyes, symptoms of tuberculosis. Louisa asks, "If he were your boy Emily, would you send him away to school?" The vignette ends with Carr's resounding "NO."²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 44-5.

²⁵ Ibid., 36.

²⁶ Ibid., 41.

²⁷ Carr, *Klee Wyck*, 50, 62, 99, 35.

²⁸ Carr, "Friends," in *Klee Wyck*, 106-7. This conclusion to "Friends" is omitted from the 1951 and 1965 Clarke-Irwin paperback editions.

The past is there too – not just tilted poles but the haunting presence of the great smallpox epidemics. And Carr slips in a comment concerning how the missionaries came and “took the Indians away from their old villages and the totem poles and put them into new places where life was easier, where they bought things from a store instead of taking them from nature.”²⁹ *Klee Wyck* is a testament to an outsider’s perception of the transitions in Northwest Coast Aboriginal life during Carr’s lifetime.

All the more remarkable, then, that some recent observers have condemned Carr for accepting the whole “vanishing Indian” paradigm, including the associated ideas of an idealized past now lost in contamination and degradation. Carr was an artist, writes Daniel Francis, “who took for granted that Indians were vanishing and sought to preserve an idealized image of them, and not the reality of Native people.”³⁰ Scott Watson judges that Carr’s “life’s work involved the presentation of the ruins rather than the living fabric of First Nations people.”³¹ The rapport she sought with the ruins and the allegory of nature overwhelming the old totem poles “eclipsed the possibility of any understanding of the social, political and cultural struggles that are involved in the territories she depicted.”³² Art historian Robert Linsley finds that her work “has perhaps contributed to the false perception that native culture had effectively died out by the twenties and thirties.”³³ Carr “mourns, in paint, the loss of a culture that she and others of European descent believed was dead or dying,” reads the wall poster for Vancouver Art Gallery curator Andrew Hunter’s dialogic encounter between Carr’s work and that of contemporary Salish painter Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. (The exhibition was originally planned to consider “the problems of perpetuating Carr’s view as an authentic view of ‘Indianness.’”) Carr, Hunter writes, had a religion that was “balanced” by anthropology’s perpetrated belief that “when cultures adopt and incorporate aspects of another, they die – the only authentic culture being a fictional ‘pure’ culture.”³⁴

Among the most widely cited critiques of Carr has been Marcia Crosby’s criticism of her as an artist whose

²⁹ Carr, *Klee Wyck*, 91, 31, 73.

³⁰ Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1992), 38.

³¹ Scott Watson, “Disfigured Nature: The Origins of the Modern Canadian Landscape,” in *Eye of Nature*, ed. Daina Augaitis and Helga Pakasaar (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1991), 109.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Robert Linsley, “Painting and the Social History of British Columbia,” in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 232.

³⁴ Andrew Hunter, Yuxweluptun-Carr Exhibition, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1997.

paintings of the last poles intimate that the authentic Indians who made them existed only in the past, and that all the changes that occurred afterwards provide evidence of racial contamination, and cultural and moral deterioration. These works also imply that native culture is a quantifiable thing, which may be measured in degrees of "Indianness" against defined forms of authenticity, only located in the past.³⁵

There is, of course, some truth in this criticism, but it is more half than whole. Carr did mourn the passing of the old ways and did feel that Aboriginal peoples had lost something. The poles were passing – "only a few more years and they will be gone forever, into silent nothingness."³⁶ And, when she went north again in 1928, for the first time in sixteen years, she saw everywhere "miserable change creeping, creeping over villages." The Indians, having lost faith in their totems, were selling the best poles to museums and doing meaningless work for tourists.³⁷ The young were fast absorbing White ways, not valuing the poles "as the old ones did."³⁸ She could also fall into the discourse of moral decline. In 1913 she spoke of Aboriginal peoples being unable to differentiate between the good and the bad among Whites: "there is so much bad, and they copied it."³⁹ And she did believe that Aboriginal peoples were losing touch with their traditional cultures.

What she did not do, however, was assume that Aboriginal peoples would necessarily disappear or that change necessarily challenged their authenticity. *Klee Wyck* makes that abundantly clear. Louisa, Jimmie, Sophie, and Mrs. Johnson are "modern," Westernized people who are nonetheless "Indian." Whatever one wishes to read into Carr's paintings, her writing does not imply "that Native culture is a quantifiable thing, measured in degrees of 'Indianness' against defined forms of authenticity only located in the past."⁴⁰ This is incongruent with *Klee Wyck*. Her writing contests the judgments of her commentators.

The critique seems to have hit a chord in postmodern and post-colonial thought. "Words like those of Emily Carr," writes Judith Mastai, "have been used by Canadian society to point out the diffusion of Native culture into Canadian culture in order to deny Native peoples' claims for Aboriginal title."⁴¹ But this description, even if it

³⁵ Marcia Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 276.

³⁶ Emily Carr, "Lecture on Totems," 1913, Carr Papers, BCARS, MS-2181, box 7, fols. 33-4.

³⁷ Emily Carr, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1966 [1946]), 237.

³⁸ Carr, "Kitwancool," in *Klee Wyck*, 142.

³⁹ Carr, "Lecture on Totems."

⁴⁰ Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," 276.

can be read into Carr's paintings, is contested by her writings. Carr, in her carefully crafted stories and vignettes, in her journals, and even in her autobiography, writes of the "real Indians" as she knew them. In these I find little evidence of the kinds of things that Crosby, Francis, and others allege. They have "invented Emily."

In doing so, they are ironically guilty of the same offense of which they charge her. They have taken the commonplace ideas of our time and invested them upon her. They have read of "the White man's Indian," of "the vanishing American," of the salvage paradigm, of "the imagined Indian," and of various other constructions and inventions, and they have superimposed these upon Carr. They have essentialized her as the White colonizer. It all makes for a superficial fit. She did paint "for history"; she did mourn the loss of the old poles and the old ways; she did talk of "relics"; she did have a sense of the traditional past; and she did regret its passing. But *Klee Wyck*, her most intimate portrait of Northwest Coast Aboriginal peoples, contradicts the new bottle into which some wish to pour her. This book is not about a passing, dying race. It is not even about "the past."

Even in urban Victoria, Carr was able to observe and to note the cultural continuity of Aboriginal British Columbians. In February 1931 she wrote:

went to a dance and potlatch at the Esquimalt reserve, stayed from 8 to 11:30 p.m. It was *grand* – the great community house and smoke holes both pouring sparks into the sky, and the rhythmic victory of tom-toms, the inky darkness outside, then the sea of faces – Indians seated on benches in tiers to the roof, many of them with painted faces, two enormous fires which were fed fast and furiously by the young men with huge pieces of cord wood. The different reserves were all allotted places.⁴²

What does one make of this? Here she celebrates the living tradition of the Coast Salish in a zone of urban contact and assimilation. Carr's journal entry directly contests Linsley's comment that "the glamour of the noble savage that surrounds the Haida and other northern

⁴¹ Judith Mastai, "Hysterical Histories: Emily Carr and the Canadian West," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 314.

⁴² Emily Carr, Unpublished Journal, February, 1931, quoted in Gerta Moray, "Northwest Coast Native Culture and the Early Indian Paintings of Emily Carr, 1899-1913" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1993), 393. Dr. Moray's dissertation offers a superb analysis of Carr's work, milieu, and shifting reputation.

tribes in her work could not belong to the natives of the Songhees reserve in Victoria.⁴³ Carr's potlatchers *were* Songhees.

Even in her formal lectures and writing, where she assumes a different authorial voice than the one she uses in her journals or *Klee Wyck* stories, there is a sensitivity to continuities amidst change. She writes of totem poles and beliefs as situated in the past, then goes on to describe Aboriginal people as she knows them in the present. Indians, she writes in 1929, move from place to place, fish, make oolichan oil, smoke salmon, potlatch, follow the canneries.

Though she accepts the hegemonic attitudes of her time – “The old places and the old people are passing away rapidly.”⁴⁴ – she cannot quite embrace them. She had painted her pictures “for history,” but “[she] hoped that some day they would be put in a place where their children’s children could see them and admire the work of their ancestors.”⁴⁵ Although the young seemed to be fast absorbing White ways and were half ashamed of these things now, she resisted extrapolating from such tendencies. “By and bye when the white race has absorbed them, something deep down within them must surely respond to the great art of their past.”⁴⁶ As she says to Mrs. Douse of Kitwancool: “I want to make pictures of them, so that your young people as well as the white people will see how fine your totem poles used to be.”⁴⁷ Here Aboriginal people remain distinct, unabsorbed, a category separate from “white people.”

Six months before she attended the Esquimalt potlatch, Carr made a journal entry about a visit to Quatsino Sound. Her reflections on this visit reveal a mood almost post-modern in its ambiguous sense of the transitory nature of culture: “The Indian watches his race disappear yet not disappear, appearing in a new civilization new manners new customs new looks yet with a thing in them of himself, the new Race gathering sifting sorting.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Linsley, “Painting and the Social History of British Columbia,” 232. There is a half-truth to Linsley’s comment. The Songhees, like the Squamish, did not have poles, such as those of the central and northern coastal peoples and, following its removal from Victoria Harbour in 1911, the new Songhees village probably did not retain the distinctive Salish house posts. On the other hand, Carr took note of the change incurred by the dismantling of their permanent village. In a “Lecture on Totems,” delivered in Vancouver in April, 1913, she drew attention to a small painting of the former Songhees reserve she had made prior to 1911, noting that with the construction of a new village in a new locale, “a phase of Indian life ... has now passed into history.” (Maria Tippett. *Emily Carr: A Biography*. [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979]), 114.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Carr, “Kitwancool,” in *Klee Wyck*, 142.

Underlying some of the criticism of Carr is the fact that she did not take a more political stance against colonial oppression. "Carr's failure, and that of her contemporaries, was the failure to recognize or value non-traditional political activities of the various First Nations communities they depicted in decline."⁴⁹ Carr, according to Watson, "seemed to have little knowledge of the real legislative oppressions of her First Nations friends and encouraged the view that they were part of natural, rather than human, history."⁵⁰ First Nations peoples and cultures were being done in "by government policy and unbridled entrepreneurial greed," and he faults Carr "for, in the end, not knowing where she lived."⁵¹ According to Francis, Carr was "no social worker; nowhere does she ask her audience to confront social reality."⁵²

Again, while none of this is wrong, to a degree it condemns her for not sharing the contemporary political views of her critics. To expect Carr to have been a crusading social and political reformer is to ask her to have assumed a role to which she was intellectually and temperamentally unsuited and uninterested. They are imagining an Emily that could never have existed.

On the other hand, they miss whatever is critical in her art, especially in her writing. In juxtapositions between White and Aboriginal, Carr's partisanship was clearly with the colonized. Missionaries are almost invariably condemned, as are residential schools. The subtlety of her subversion of authority in her "Kitwancool" story could pardonably be missed by those unfamiliar with the long history of that village's resistance.

At a moment when government and settler interests lay in minimizing Native claims and grievances, the acquisition of such a vivid and positive testimony to Native culture could hardly be seen as expedient. In addition, Carr clearly sought to change her audience's preconceptions about Native peoples. Both her lectures and her images did, in many respects, contradict the ideas about Native culture propagated by other agencies of White society – agencies that sought to regulate Native affairs.⁵³

⁴⁸ Emily Carr, Unpublished Journal, 19 August to 11 September 1930, quoted in Gerta Moray, "Northwest Coast Native Culture and the Early Indian Paintings of Emily Carr, 1899-1913," 396.

⁴⁹ Hunter, Yuxweluptun-Carr Exhibition, Vancouver Art Gallery.

⁵⁰ Watson, "Disfigured Nature," 109.

⁵¹ Scott Watson, Letter to the Editor, *Canadian Art*, March 1994.

⁵² Francis, *Imaginary Indian*, 37-8.

⁵³ Moray, "Northwest Coast Native Culture," 128-9, see also 340, 354-5.

Carr's concern with poles was an act of respect. She worried that their fate was either to "rot and topple to the earth" or, perhaps worse, to be taken by Whites to museums where "they would be labelled as exhibits, dumb before the crowds who gaped and laughed and said, 'This is the distorted foolishness of an uncivilized people.'"⁵⁴ Again, there is a subversion, a contestation, even a partisanship in Carr's writing that goes against the grain of White colonization.

Certainly Carr appropriated Northwest Coast Aboriginal peoples in that she incorporated them into her conceptions of Canada and the West. Carr's celebration of the "primitive greatness" of the province's Aboriginal inhabitants gave them "a meaning that has to do with her national identity, not the national identity of the people who own the poles." "The induction of First Nations peoples' history and heritage into institutions as a lost Canadian heritage," continues Marcia Crosby, "should be considered within the context of the colonization of aboriginal land." Daniel Francis makes something of the same point. "By appropriating elements of Native culture, non-Natives have tried to establish a relationship with the country that pre-dates their arrival and validates their occupation of the land."⁵⁵ While the implications that Crosby and Francis draw are contestable, the fact that Carr incorporates Aboriginal peoples into her own conception of who she is is not contestable, nor, for that matter, is the fact that Canadians incorporate Carr's images and writings into their conception of what Canada is – or ought to be. Drawing upon distinctive regional or national attributes during the act of identity-formation is a widespread phenomenon, one that continues in such trivial ways as wearing engraved silver bracelets or buying calendars or silk-screen prints made by Aboriginal artists. This process, as it occurs in Carr, deserves to be highlighted and examined.

One last act reflecting Carr's relationship to Aboriginal peoples needs to be mentioned. Carr willed her paints, brushes, and unused canvasses to George Clutesi, a young Nuu-chah-nulth artist whose ability to tell stories would rival hers. What exactly Carr had in mind we do not know. But she must have recognized in Clutesi an artist, an Aboriginal artist, a living one, younger than she. This posthumous contesting of post-colonial tropes by the Imagined Emily has been largely unnoted.

⁵⁴ Carr, "Greenville," in *Klee Wyck*, 73-4.

⁵⁵ Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," 276-7; Francis, *Imaginary Indian*, 190.