

Canadian Art According to Emily Carr

The Search for Indigenous Expression

Although Emily Carr was initially committed to depicting First Nations cultural iconography and experiences in both her writing and what is considered to be her first of two phases of painting, she eventually focused her attention entirely on the landscape of the West Coast. Acknowledging the importance of the West Coast to her art, contemporary cultural critics have yet to examine at length the mechanics at work behind Carr's belief in how indigenous material was formed. No sustained investigation maps precisely how Carr saw the land operating in both her writing and her painting (which, in her attempt to discover "just exactly *what* [she] had to say," she regarded as interchangeable), and or explains why she shifted from featuring First Nations cultural iconography and experiences to images of West Coast landscape (*HT* 237).

For Carr, West Coast images in both media depicted the state within the nation-state: she regarded her subject matter and, more largely, her art as a centripetal force in the construction of what she perceived to be authentic Canadian national identity. She conceived of her images as akin to a spiritual icon within a Christian religious framework, that is, as transcendent and morally uplifting. If she believed her images were shaped by a spiritual impulse,¹ although not necessarily by religious principles, the anticipated "conversion" or transformation was not to a specific religion with a particular ideological framework as much as it was to a national ideal. Apparently, Carr envisioned her audience as comprised primarily of inhabitants of Canada who had been conditioned to be sensitive to and to appreciate the land, and who would also be, therefore, more amenable to the spiritual

influences she believed her work would contain. She believed that aesthetic depictions of landscape contributed to the creation of an imagined national community or ideal, a transcendent entity in which the self was absorbed into a larger whole.

Canadian critics generally approach Carr's aesthetic depictions of landscape in two ways. The first, although now considerably less popular, stream envisions landscape as "hostile wilderness." This pattern of English-Canadian cultural criticism was consolidated by Northrop Frye, who predicated his argument on the assumption that the wilderness was an "other" that caused artists to experience first intellectual and imaginative dislocation and then, the inevitable corollary, "garrison mentality" (1982, 49). In *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* (2001), Gerald Lynch interprets Carr's *Klee Wyck* (1941), the book that won the Governor General's award for non-fiction in 1942, within Frye's "admittedly selective and tendentious reading" of Canadian literature (116). He notes Carr's fears of "self-annihilation in wilderness space," and "appeasement of and accommodation within that threat" (117). Generally out of vogue in English-Canadian literary criticism, this stream persists in disciplines such as art history (Udall 43), sociology (Angus 128), and religious studies (James 64).

The second stream of English-Canadian cultural criticism, now entrenched within contemporary literary and cultural discourse, considers modern aesthetic depictions of landscape as, at least ostensibly, benign: the discourse ranges from refuting Frye's view of artistic endeavours of this period and demonstrating that such a view is more colonial than the subjects under his scrutiny (Brydon 14), to suggesting that Carr's endeavours reflect national concerns (Shadbolt 2002, 115), to arguing that the use of landscape may seem benevolent but is a function of the economic and political exploitation of indigenous peoples. Jonathan Bordo's essay, "Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness" (2000), is an example of the latter, politically engaged tendency in cultural criticism. He investigates how artistic depictions of landscape disguise the tensions and inequalities embedded in efforts to construct a uniform national identity, explores "the wilderness" as "a paradigmatic site for the symbolic staging of Benedict Anderson's imagined community of the nation-state," and suggests that, in such cultural endeavours, an implied witness apprehends and depicts, but remains absent from, the wilderness: "The specular witness performs a rather special and dual role. It exalts a picture that testifies to an unpicturable condition—the wilderness sublime—while simultaneously legitimating, as a

landscape picture, terrain violently seized, dispossessed of its indigenous inhabitants, and reconstituted as territory” (225).

Bordo’s perspective is of particular interest because it registers a politically sensitive approach in contemporary cultural criticism—that is, this approach recognizes the shifting (and shifty) idea of a uniform national identity, and gestures toward the complicity of such twentieth-century artists as the Group of Seven in the perpetuation of a homogenous national identity that often elided difference and effectively erased First Nations presence from artistic representations, or appropriated First Nations cultural production. Marcia Crosby, among other critics, adopts this ideological posture in relation to the artistic endeavours of Carr. She criticizes her work, and all of the reviews that praise her unreservedly, for the underlying “assumptions of loss and salvage”: “the paintings represent the land as devoid of its original owners . . . thus lending tacit support for the actual dispossession of the property of First Nations people” (274).² Crosby’s critique might be extended to Carr’s writings, not just her paintings, given Carr’s sense that the medium was *not* the message, but interchangeable: if the idea “was crystal clear,” then “the medium would wrap it round” (*HT* 237). Since Carr often included, if she did not focus on, First Nations totem poles and iconography in her landscape paintings and wrote about First Nations cultural groups (primarily in *Klee Wyck*), her artistic endeavours have also been linked to the trope of vanishing culture thus: “Like most individuals of her era who were embroiled in fantasies of colonial fulfillment, Carr saw First Nations culture as in eclipse—and consequently in need of documentation and salvaging before it disappeared entirely” (O’Brian 9).

Such a perspective is limiting, however, and does not incorporate what Carr herself believed she was doing, or how she engaged in sometimes subtle and complex ways with the idea of the nation, First Nations culture, and landscape. Focusing on Carr’s impulse to preserve imposes expectations, moreover, that are part of a post-colonial ideological inheritance, and, in so doing, dismisses Carr’s remarkable artistic precociousness, her sense of self-agency in relation to the dominant ideology of the period, and the innovative ways in which she was interacting with First Nations communities and depicting their cultural artefacts when her own peers would not have considered the subject worthwhile. To some extent, Carr was involved in what Gerta Moray has called “aestheticized nostalgia,” that is, the belief in (and hence contribution to) the demise of First Nations peoples and in the need, therefore, to render aesthetically their cultural artefacts (1993, 25); however,

to castigate her for not living up to late twentieth-century political truisms or to fail to consider her own perception of her efforts seems to be critically reprehensible. Although Carr's notions of national identity and of indigenism were certainly partly fostered by the prevalent ideas of her time, her initial attention to First Nations iconography (what she conceived of as paying homage to one part of her cultural inheritance) and, later, to landscape demonstrates that she was also actively engaged in contesting or resisting dominant imperial forms. Her use of what she regarded as indigenous material served an anti-colonial function, that is, it was used to express difference from imperial approaches.

If Carr were a "specular witness" who participated in the enforced exile of indigenous inhabitants, she herself believed that her artistic endeavours served quite another function: first, she maintained she was following the artistic example of and then exalting First Nations culture and iconography in the interest of finding an indigenous form of expression; and second, she believed she was aligning herself with the marginal status of First Nations people. Rather than "beautifying" Canada with imported feathers (and hence justifying Frye's original indictment of English-Canadian artistic endeavours in his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*), Carr sought to develop a style and expression that was indigenous to the country. She impugned the notion that "we are obliged to bedeck ourselves in borrowed plumes and copy art born of other countries and not ours"; instead, she believed that artists ought to "search as the Indian did, amid our own surroundings and material, for something of our own through which to express ourselves, and make for ourselves garments of our own spinning to fit our needs."³ Carr is generally concerned with First Nations cultural forms because she believed they were "taken straight from nature" and the materials from "the country itself": "The Indians of the west coast of Canada have an art that may be termed essentially 'Canadian' for in inspiration, production, and material it is of Canada's very essence and can take its place beside the art of any nation" ("Modern and Indian Art" 2). She valorized aboriginal art and its corresponding value system because it was not inherited from or tainted by imported forms:

[T]he Indian [found] that great Art of his . . . not in academics, or travel, or pictures, or books. He got it from profound observation, absorption of his material by all of his five senses. Only when he had made himself familiar with his material from bones to skin did he venture to express the thing in his art.⁴

By extension, Carr believed that only after she immersed herself in the West

Coast forests and absorbed her material with all her “five senses” would she too be able to express “the thing” in art. A direct response to nature was pivotal. Such a belief informed her own aesthetic sense, as is apparent in the justification for the original title of *Klee Wyck*, “Tales in Cedar.”

Apparently, every component of cedar was used: “The fibre of the bark” was employed for “weaving clothes, mats, baskets and the trees themselves they used for the carving of their totem poles.”⁵ Like the “Indian totem poles,” Carr wanted to create “stories in cedar”—to make use of indigenous material about her—in order to capture and convey the “flavour” of “the West Coast.”⁶

As the title, *Klee Wyck*, also demonstrates, Carr identified with First Nations individuals, who provided her with “a sympathetic echo of her own condition”: she felt marginalized from conservative Victorian society (Shadbolt 2002, 12). At the same time, she conceived of herself as a mediating figure between First Nations cultural groups and white, Western culture. She claims that the Nuu-chah-nulth gave her the name “Klee Wyck,” meaning “Laughing One,” a gesture that signaled her acceptance into the community. Specifically, Carr suggests that the name is bestowed upon her by Mrs. Wynook, a First Nations woman who persuaded Carr not to paint “the old Indians [who] thought the spirit of a person got caught in a picture of him” (26). The function of laughter in *Klee Wyck* is confirmed when, in “Kitwancool,” Carr explains how it “bridged the gap between their language and mine” (146) and results in the dissipation of cultural “strain” (144): more generally, Carr, as “the laughing one,” perceived herself as an intermediary figure between two distinct cultures.

Although the story of her re-naming may be regarded as an attempt to “become Native,” as Terry Goldie suggests of such tendencies, and thus as a seductive but pernicious way to justify her appropriation of First Nations iconography, she fully recognized that she was not a part of First Nations communities, or, at least, not consistently regarded in that manner (13): “When the Indians accepted me as one of themselves, I was very grateful” (145). She was, moreover, initially committed to including their cultural artefacts, rather than “erasing aboriginal presence,” and giving them the attention that either ran counter to period stereotypes (in, for example, the paintings of Cornelius Krieghoff or the novels of Ralph Connor) or were refused entirely by her contemporaries (13). Robert Fulford astutely remarks upon how Carr did not appropriate “Indian art for the use of whites,” nor did she “[ignore] the native culture of her own time”:

[S]he was not an artist seizing on Indian art for purely formalist reasons; all to the contrary, her art was a public, political act, owing as much to her civic conscience as to her artistic sensibility. She specifically opposed the white authorities, whether missionaries or government employees, who were urging natives to change their way of life, and she saw the totem poles as part of 'an integrated and complex native culture.' (38)

He adds that Carr also maintained that if First Nations persons actually desired assimilation, they "were ignoring or destroying the evidence of their cultural past, and she wanted to persuade them that this art was worth saving" (39). She perceived her work as a small attempt to counterbalance the fact that totem poles of such "northern tribal groups as the Haida and Tsimshian" were no longer being carved; the totem poles "appeared to be under threat, carried away for museums and private collectors, damaged by weather, neglect or vandalism. Those left standing in deserted villages were rotting or being consumed by the rain forest" (Laurence 12).

In fact, the original manuscript and first edition of *Klee Wyck* reveals her anger for the manner in which Native people were being treated.⁷ "Friends," a significant excerpt that caps the story in the original manuscript and the first published edition, but that was cut from subsequent editions, demonstrates Carr's indignation: in this excerpt, she narrates her argument with a "Missionary" who demands that she "use [her] influence" to persuade Louisa and Jimmy, a First Nations couple, to "send their boys to the Industrial-boarding school for Indians." (KW 106) Carr's initial response—a resolute "No"—is only elaborated upon when the Missionary insists upon a reason for her refusal to intercede. Louisa's child, who is the "product of the Indian's Industrial School," Carr claims, learned to feel "ashamed of his Indian heritage": Louisa, she maintains, is able to attend to [her own children]" (KW 106) Although Carr has been depicted as unaware of "political implications", and as "fitting in with the Canadian government's plan to absorb the original inhabitants of the country," the early drafts of the manuscript demonstrate her considerable outrage at efforts to assimilate First Nations cultural groups and suggest one of the original purposes for her interest in recording their work (Shadbolt 2002, 15).

Yet Carr is engaged in a situation, a cultural double bind, as it were, that effectively ties her artistic hands. What she writes or paints about will never be deemed appropriate in our period: if she refuses to include traces of First Nations culture, she is contributing to the erasure of aboriginal presence (Bordo 1992, 98; Crosby), but, if she includes it, she is negatively appropriating it (Shier, Goldie). To approach Carr's painting and writing entirely

from this point of view, obscures her own anti-colonial impulses, her refusal to pander to imported standards, which she perceived as impeding indigenous, national growth. Carr's artistic endeavours may be seen as a hybrid formation: she participates in a limited fashion in what John O'Brian has called "fantasies of colonial fulfillment" by subsuming First Nations cultural material into her own (or refusing it representation in the later canvases), but, she also resists her own imperialist ideological inheritance.

Carr was motivated by the possibility of developing another authentic national culture. She initially felt compelled to include First Nations cultural artefacts in her work because, aside from recognizing these artefacts as being steadily obliterated, she conceived of abandoned villages and their totem poles as indigenous, national "relics":

I glory in our wonderful West and I hope to leave behind me some of the relics of its first primitive greatness. These things should be to us Canadians what the Ancient Briton's relics are to the English, only a few more years and they will be gone forever.⁸

She believes that such art, rather than her own artistic expression, might be deemed indigenous. To employ First Nations images, especially totem poles, was to foster a national art freed from or not associated with European conventions, even if she depended on techniques acquired abroad in order to do so. Although the idea of painting "Western forests did not occur to [her] in that period," the shift from First Nations iconography to the West Coast forests, which she conceived of as the spiritual force behind the totem poles, is consistent with her artistic aims:⁹ to forge an indigenous artistic language and expression that reflected larger, national concerns.

As for her canvases, by the 1930s Carr had decided to shift from First Nations cultural iconography upon which she had become too dependent for the development of indigenous forms of expression. As she suggests in *Hundreds and Thousands* (1966), her posthumously published journal, her sense of her artistic maturation is matched by her belief that her paintings ought to reflect a distinctly Canadian subject in an indigenous style (and, as such, share an affinity with First Nations cultural endeavours, but not depend on them for artistic expression). Part of this shift may also be accounted for by Lawren Harris's encouragement to look directly to nature for the source of both material and techniques and to "saturate [herself] in our own place, the trees, skies, earth and rock," and to allow her art to "grow out of these. It is the life that goes into the thing that counts."¹⁰ Shortly after the East Coast exhibit, therefore, she began to regard First

Nations artefacts and culture not as subject matter, but as models of how to approach Canadian landscape:

We may not believe in totems, but we believe in our country; and if we approach our work as the Indian did with singleness of purpose and determination to strive for the big thing that means Canada herself, and not hamper ourselves by wondering if our things will sell, or if they will please the public or bring us popularity or fame, but busy ourselves by trying to get near to the heart of things, however crude that work may be, it is liable to be more sincere and genuine. ("Modern and Indian Art" 4)

Most importantly, she regarded totem poles as authentic expressions of indigenoussness from which "newer" Canadians might learn. Although the poles "had served her well," and "had taken her into different places and kinds of nature," Carr's work began to reveal that "she was also reacting to and seeking out for the purposes of her changing art the various offerings of nature" (Shadbolt 2002, 112): she turned entirely toward depicting landscape.

Appreciating Carr's approach to landscape in both her writing and her painting, and her conception of its function in creating an English Canadian national identity, must incorporate the cultural system referred to as the nation-state. That phenomenon, as Benedict Anderson argues, emerged only within the past three centuries and was once organized according to spiritual principles. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991), Anderson traces the rise of the nation and argues that it is imagined as both limited, that is, as separate and distinct from other nations, and sovereign, an entity that was born of the decline of the hierarchical dynastic realm, the monarchy being one example of this system. Ultimately, it is "imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). He identifies how religious-based imaginings and impulses are similar to those that are nationalist-based, notwithstanding his tempering such an argument with the assertion that "it would be short-sighted to think of the imagined communities of nations as simply growing out of and replacing the religious communities and dynastic realms" (22).

Yet, when the nation was being imagined, as it was in early twentieth-century English Canada by such artists as Carr, a fervour inheres that bears resemblance to religious devotion and identification. Carr's spiritual and religious rhetoric concerning art, especially in relation to nation-building resides in the notion that the nation-state (as defined by Anderson) evolved from the dynastic system. As the "contents" of that system altered, the

structure remained: an ideal that involved imagining the nation as a transcendent entity—landscape replaced the figure of the monarch as the spiritual apex of the hierarchy. Cultural and artistic activity in early twentieth-century English Canada provided spiritual orientation and centripetal, nation-building iconography, specifically images of the land. Carr, in like manner, believed she was contributing to a sense of national unity and identity.

Just as the dynastic realm's legitimacy was secured by the notion that it was divinely ordained, as Anderson suggests, so Carr's belief in both First Nations cultural endeavours and Canadian landscape as sources of national identity and authenticity was derived from and legitimated by spiritually-oriented principles. This connection explains why she felt certain that her visual and verbal renderings of West Coast essence and indigenouness were, as she believed of Lawren Harris's painting, religious in inclination: of Harris, she asserted that "his religion, whatever it is, and his paintings are one and the same," and of his canvases that "[t]here is a holiness about them, something you can't describe but just feel." On July 16, 1933, in *Hundreds and Thousands*, she wrote, "Once I heard it stated and now I believe it to be true that there is no true art without religion. If something other than the material did not speak to [the artist], and if he did not have faith in that something and also in himself, he would not try to express it" (41). Only a few days later, on July 17, she reveals the source of her own "faith": "God in all. Nature is God revealing himself, expressing his wonders and his love, Nature clothed in God's beauty of holiness" (42). She expressed great disappointment, therefore, when she observed a priest strolling casually by Harris's canvas, "Mountain Forms," at a Royal Canadian Academy exhibit because she assumed that "the spirituality of the thing [ought] to appeal to one whose life was supposed to be given up these things" (*HT* 13). Many of these ideas were shaped by her contact with the Group of Seven, whom she met in 1927 when, at the invitation of Eric Brown, Director of the National Gallery, she travelled to Ottawa to view her canvases and Native-designed crafts displayed for a National Gallery exhibition (held in conjunction with the National Museum) entitled "Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern." She claimed that their paintings were a "revelation" about how to approach Canadian landscape aesthetically. Her response was spiritually charged; she documented the experience in *Hundreds and Thousands*:

Oh, God, what have I seen? Where have I been? Something has spoken to the very soul of me, wonderful, mighty, not of this world.

What language do they speak, those silent, awe-filled spaces? I do not know. Wait and listen; you shall hear by and by. I long to hear and yet I'm half afraid. I think perhaps I shall find God here, the God I've longed and hunted for and failed to find. (*HT* 6–7)

Consistently after this experience, Carr describes the West Coast as essential to her—and others'—spiritual transformation and, more largely, to the creation of a distinct, national aesthetic. Canadian landscape, especially that of the West Coast, becomes a spiritual entity providing unrestricted, unregulated “space,” both literal and imagined, in which she might forge indigenous artistic expression and language.

Even as she drew from the language of the religious establishment, she believed that art contained a spiritual force that operated outside of institutionalized religion. Conversely, she expressed considerable disdain for the Christian establishment and its missionaries because of their condescending and heedless attitude toward First Nations individuals. In the opening of *Klee Wyck*, in a passage of remarkable subtlety, she makes reference to the practice of repeating the “Our Father” in church as she gazes outside the window toward “a grand balsam pine tree”: “The Missionaries’ ‘trespasses’ jumped me back from the pine tree to the Lord’s Prayer just in time to ‘Amen’” (*KW* 4). Carr insinuates that the Missionaries are responsible for “trespasses” and for regressive rather than progressive movement, whereas the “pine tree,” a natural element, provides her with authentic spiritual orientation. Her paintings mediated this spiritual essence. “Art,” a means of rendering God in “Nature,” becomes “an aspect of God.” She echoes the Group of Seven’s own conviction that their canvases are “witnesses” to the spiritual potential of Canadian landscape. When one of her own canvases received attention for “showing spirituality,” she was delighted and exclaimed, “Oh, if it *were* really a ‘spiritual interpretation.’ Will my work ever really be that? For it to be that I must myself live in the spirit. Unless we *know* the things of the spirit we cannot express them” (*HT* 88). When she received a letter from Hanna Lund about how her painting, entitled “Peace,” “represents Divinity,” Carr recorded in her journal that “my soul spoke to hers, or rather, God spoke to her through me. Then he spoke back to me through her thought of writing [to] me. I am humbly grateful that my effort to express God got through to one person.” God “speaks” to her, she claims through nature: the woods are a source of the “profoundly solemn” from which, “as from the Bible, you can find strength.”¹¹ Not only are they “God’s tabernacle,” but she could “eat the woods as one eats the sacrament” (*HT* 201, 196). This curious metaphor of the eucharist suggests

an obligation to internalize the West Coast forests, and that this process, like the receiving of the sacrament, was an act of faith. These references indicate the principles of legitimation employed in dynastic realms: that is, she perceived both the land and her canvases as “divinely ordained.”

Carr had been consistently searching for a way to mediate spiritual transcendence (“the God I’ve longed and hunted for and failed to find”). That search was also informed by and couched in the rhetoric of the sublime and American transcendentalism. Specifically, some of her ideas were informed by her thorough reading of and admiration for the work of Walt Whitman. In her journal entry, dated August 12th, 1933, for example, she mentions she is reading Frederick Housser’s *Whitman to America*, which, she claims, “clarifies so many things”:

[L]iving the creative life seems more grandly desirous (opening up marvellous vistas) when one is searching for higher, more uplifting inspiration. I find that raising my eyes slightly above what I am regarding so that the thing is a little out of focus seems to bring the spiritual into clearer vision, as though there were something lifting the material up to the spiritual, bathing it in the glory. Seek ever to lift the painting above paint. (*HT* 48)

She concludes this entry by examining her struggle to apply these principles to the mountain she is trying to paint: “it began to move, it was near the speaking, when suddenly it shifted” (48). She wonders about this particular failure by asking herself, “Did I carelessly bungle, pandering to the material instead of the spiritual? Did I lose sight of God, too filled with petty household cares, sailing low to the ground, ploughing fleshily along?” (48–9). She took these failures seriously and struggled because she wanted to build “an art worthy of our great country, and I want to have my share, to put in a little spoke for the West” (*HT* 5).

The diction in such journal entries derives from the sublime, from that which rises above ordinary experience and ambivalence. The sublime both expresses attraction to and fear of the subject matter, a simultaneous sense of serenity and terror, although the terror is “regenerative” (Glickman 139). In *Hundreds and Thousands*, Carr repeatedly makes reference to her search for a new vocabulary to articulate these experiences, those spiritually transformative in nature, that defy existing forms of expressions and representation. This problem is central to the sublime: the difficulty is not only how to articulate that which has no verbal or visual equivalent, but also how to capture an unfamiliar experience and a geography that elude containment. As Susan Glickman suggests, however, the Canadian sublime was also used to develop a sense of itself in opposition to British conceptions of the picturesque.

If “[a]rtists from the Old World” were alarmed by the West and found it “crude, unpaintable,” and if they felt “[i]ts bigness angered, its vastness and wild spaces terrif[y]ing,” Carr, as a New World artist, “loved every bit of it.” (*GP* 103) The West Coast forests offer her the opportunity to express difference and to mediate transcendence, to rise above personal and individual concerns, and to experience the sublime ecstasy of belonging to something higher, communal, and anti-individualistic.

Such temporary ontological dislocation, which Frye condemned because it apparently contributed to the stifling of English-Canadian artistic endeavours, is integral to the experience Carr wanted to capture and convey: the human mind subdued and overpowered by the sublime, by the “recognition of the vastness surrounding it” (Glickman 139). The experience of the sublime has been uncritically conflated with a part of the anxiety and sense of inferiority connected with colonial-mindedness. Yet, in the early twentieth century all Canadians were asked, implicitly, to share in this experience, through which Carr and others believed that they would be made “Canadian”: Canada’s “wild magnificence”—that is, uncultivated land, or what Jonathan Bordo has defined as “wilderness”—was a source of inspiration and was given “parity with civilization in the expression of national character” (Glickman 49). English-Canadian depictions of a sublime landscape operated as a part of a larger national discourse that would create like-minded citizens.

That experience involves the dissolution of boundaries between self (or inhabitant of Canada) and other (wilderness). In the process, another larger self—an imagined Canadian national identity—and another “other,” imperial Britain, are forged. This form of the sublime may be fruitfully contrasted with that elicited by Carr’s experience in London. The “same feeling flooded over” her whenever she visited London: “[in] the stomach of the monster, [there was] no more You an individual but You lost in the whole. Part of its cruelty part of its life part of its wonderfulness part of its filth part of its sublimity and wonder, though it was not aware of you any more than you are aware of a pore in your skin.”¹² This description of the sublime corresponds to Frye’s now popularized notion of the “garrison mentality,” but Frye’s garrison is generated by the Canadian wilderness and not, as Carr here suggests, by a city and certainly not by the imperial centre. Carr regards the experience of the sublime in Canada as a positive, if terrifying experience, which results in the undoing of any connection to British imperialist ideas and which is the matrix for the forging of a distinct Canadian identity. In a letter to Ira Dilworth, her editor and friend, she directly compares the “air-

less desolation of London”—the “factory outskirts, the smoke, grime, crowding people” and the “condensed horror heavier than weight itself, blacker than blackness” with the West Coast in which she never experienced the “desolation of utter loneliness” which overcame her.¹³ Her employment of the rhetoric of the sublime harkens back to the dynastic system, although the contents and specific effect—that is, a new kind of imagined community organized by different principles—have significantly altered.¹⁴

Carr thus regarded Canadian wilderness as a civilizing force, not as a force to be civilized. She envisioned the Canadian West Coast as the matrix for spiritual experience and growth, for the creation of indigenous art, and in turn, of national development and identity: rather than grappling with issues of faith, she was endeavouring to generate or create faith and belief in national identity as she saw it being shaped by geographical uniqueness. As Stephanie Kirkwood-Walker argues, “To accept a part in imagining the national soul, to join with the Group of Seven in devising images for the Canadian imagination, was to adopt a persuasive and compelling rhetoric that rested easily on the shoulders of a modern artist in a young country” (58). Bordo’s sense that landscape was used as the “paradigmatic site for the symbolic staging of Benedict Anderson’s imagined community of the nation-state,” did not necessarily exclude First Nations cultural forms nor promote the demise of First Nations cultural groups. In fact, Carr’s interaction with First Nations communities indicates that she was quite uniquely engaged with the process of “shaping a nation” and with the English-Canadian nation-building discourse that was prominent at the time.

NOTES

- 1 In “Toward Defining Spirituality,” Walter Principe traces the root and application of the word, and suggests that, at its origin, it stood in opposition to another way of life: a spiritual person is one “whose life is guided by the Spirit of God” whereas a “carnal” person is one “whose life is opposed to the working and guidance of the Spirit of God” (130). To appreciate its significance, one “must take account of the link between the objects of faith and the reactions aroused by these objects in the religious consciousness” (137). In early twentieth-century English Canada, the “spiritual” or “spirituality” would have meant that which deals with experience outside of and in opposition to the material, corporeal world, but that experience is made in response to an object of faith: transcendence is thus integral to spiritual experience, articulated as something which is above and beyond individual concerns and the material world, and the object of faith was the land, as representative of the nation and its potential.
- 2 See also Reid Shier’s interview with the Salish artist, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun in *Mix* (1998).

- 3 “Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast,” *McGill News* (Supplement) June 1929: 4.
- 4 Emily Carr, notebook, no date, quoted in *Sunlight in the Shadows*, np.
- 5 BCARS, Parnall Collection (MS 2763), box 2, file 24. Ira Dilworth, letter to W.H. Clarke, 5 May 1941.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See Gerta Moray’s “Wilderness, Modernity and Aboriginality in the Paintings of Emily Carr,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33.2 (Summer 1998): 43–65. In this article, Moray discusses the editorial cuts made to the first edition of the book, which was “[sanitized . . .] for use in Canadian schools” (52).
- 8 Emily Carr, “Lecture on Totems” (pp. 52–53), as quoted in Moray 1993, 211.
- 9 Carr, “Modern and Indian Art” 6.
- 10 Lawren Harris, letter to Emily Carr, 4 November 1932, Carr papers. As quoted in Tippet, 175–6.
- 11 “Quatsino,” *Opposite Contraries*, 28.
- 12 *Growing Pains* ms, as quoted in Blanchard 81.
- 13 BCARS, Emily Carr Papers, MS 2181 (microfilm, reel 1224). Emily Carr, letter to Ira Dilworth, 23 November 1941.
- 14 Although Carr’s “national imagined icon” is more specifically focused on images of the West Coast, her canvases might still be regarded or invoked as if they were the “semiotic equivalent of nationhood” (New 142). Artists of the modern period seemed to have few difficulties with seeing specific geographical locales as representative of the nation as a whole: her work was regarded as carrying “cultural resonances or assumptions” and as generalizing “from particular details to a panoramic truth about a characteristic—even if metaphoric—‘Canadian’ landscape” (144).

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