The Adventures of Dani Canuck vol. 1

Canada's Identity Crisis


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COMIC BOOK VERSION OF UBC UNDERGRADUATE HISTORY HONOURS THESIS:

‘ON THE BOTTOM OF THE MULTICULTURAL TOTEM POLE: A HISTORY OF CULTURAL ASSIMILATION, APPROPRIATION, AND MARGINALIZATION IN CANADA’

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History is taught as a core discipline because it is part of the foundation for identity formation processes. Understanding where we come from helps shape our understanding of who we are, both collectively as a community or nation... and our understanding as individuals, in relation to the world around ourselves.

Everybody needs a solid historical foundation to develop those frameworks for understanding. Personally, when I was growing up I felt like I was missing some pieces... after all, what binds us together as a nation is not the borders or lines drawn on a map...
...but the common historical ground we share...

...a collective journey that has led us all to where we are today.

In Canada, this process was inherently complicated. Unlike countries such as Britain or France which had been established for hundreds of years, Canada was physically and ideologically forming at the same time as writing its history.
Canada needed a national identity to stand out and alone from other countries in a rapidly changing and globalizing economy. Canada also needed to stand strong and established enough to attract immigrants to drive the industries of a developing nation. As a result, the long and complicated process of forming a national identity was forced and rushed to meet the greater needs of the nation at that particular point in history.

In an effort to quickly and effectively create a national identity that was at once manageable and marketable, Canada developed as a nation within a narrow and rigid cultural framework — one with very little room for diversity. Furthermore, the history of Canada’s national identity has been relegated to the margins of the mainstream historical narrative in an effort to maintain an ideal multicultural national identity. This abstract historical process has created some very real contemporary issues...

... this might have made sense given the historical context, but it doesn’t necessarily make sense to keep repeating history...
Canada is a nation full of diversity - from peoples, to regional landscape and industry, to opportunities...

In the diverse world of today, Canada has the potential to change things for the better...

... but first we have to stop following in the footsteps of what other nations have done...

... we have to change history, by coming to terms with ours...

... this is my research journey...
I chose to focus my research on the totem poles of the Pacific North West Coast First Nations because although I had grown up seeing them all over Canada, I didn't understand their history.

Part 2 - Pacific North West Coast Totem Poles

For the First Nations originally responsible for the tradition, the conception, carving and raising of totem poles was complex and they held a significant role in the socio-cultural frameworks of many communities. The totem pole was often commemorated at a raising ceremony usually with a feast or potlatch.

The potlatch was another important component to those Nations’ socio-cultural frameworks. Combined with the totem pole raising ceremony, these cultural practices would celebrate and commemorate the histories of those involved.

These customs held an important position in those First Nations’ frameworks and were also inter-connected with alternative belief systems that were at odds with the colonizers charged with creating a new nation and ‘civilizing’ it’s current inhabitants through Christianity.
Both the colonizers and First Nations had fundamentally different frameworks for understanding. This resulted in a cultural clash as one framework cannot fit seamlessly inside of another very different framework.

In historical reality, colonization happened more through a process of cultural superiority and subordination. Cultural assimilation would ideally take the shape of both cultures comprising and cohesively creating a new framework that is representative of all contributing facets.

In 1885, the Indian Act officially outlawed the potlatch ceremony. Late 1800s/Early 1900s brought international anthropological and private collector interest to the art of Pacific NW Nations. This was in direct contradiction with the local colonial assimilation agenda, as evidenced at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair where at Franz Boas had an exhibit of Kwakiutl nation members performing traditional dances to large audiences, in contrast with a Canadian exhibit that had First Nations’ children performing their model role in schools.

1920s/1930s is when local appropriation began – provincially, then federally. 1938 amendments to Indian Act allowed for subsidization of ‘Native Handicrafts’ (part of a provision within the training and welfare division) – meaning representations of totem poles could be sold before First Nations could legally engage in the cultural practice responsible for producing them.

Potlatch was not legally allowed until amendments were made to the Indian Act again in 1951.
In Canada's historical context, there was a need to quickly and effectively bring together a vast land of diverse peoples. However, as a result of religious ideology and cultural subordination, all socio-cultural elements of the various First Nations were processed through the Western Judeo Christian framework for understanding, and much of the original understanding was lost. We are not in that historical context anymore. As long as those ideologies continue to inform the way we think about our history, those same ideologies will continue to inform the way we all exist together in the present.

For example, there is no hierarchical structure to totem poles. The bottom isn't synonymous with the bottom rung of the social ladder. Totem poles are more like story telling columns, documenting narratives and histories. The meaning of the specific carvings and the pole in its entirety depend on a number of factors - which Nation(s) and individuals are involved, the type of pole, the location, the occasion... They are inherently complex and represent a very rich cultural framework, but not one that is hierarchical...

That particular hierarchical structure actually has its historical roots in the cultural framework that was imposed upon First Nations.

So even the saying 'on the bottom of the totem pole' is evidence of an on-going cultural conflict in Canada.

First Nations peoples have made great efforts to maintain their way of life, and new generations are actively involved in the repatriation, new art creation, and historical documentation processes. The issues I am trying to highlight through totem poles are as a result of appropriating and amalgamating various and vastly diverse Nations into a single Indigenous piece of a larger multicultural national identity without acknowledging or engaging critically with the history of that process. This results in a poorly constructed national identity with no solid historical foundation.
If as a nation we have a limited understanding of who we are because we have a limited understanding of where we come from, how has this affected us as individuals?
SO MUCH DEPTH AND COMPLEXITY EXISTED WITHIN THE VARIOUS FIRST NATIONS’ CULTURES BEFORE COLONIZATION, REGULATION OF IDENTITY, AND RESTRICTION OF HISTORY. FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURES, THE WAYS IN WHICH WE ENGAGE WITH OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, AND MORE . . . .

ONE OF THE CARVINGS BY MUNGO MARTIN ON ONE OF THE TOTEM POLES I WAS STUDYING AT THE UBC MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY REALLY GRABBED MY ATTENTION. THE SISIUTL, OR DOUBLE HEADED SERPENT FIGURE OF THE KWAKIUTL NATION.

I QUICKLY BECAME FASCINATED BY IT’S DUALISTIC NATURE. SISIUTL WAS AN IMPORTANT FIGURE IN THE SEA AND UNDERWORLD, HOLDING A DUALISTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH RAVEN. SISIUTL WAS REPRESENTATIVE OF MANY DUALISMS, INCLUDING NIGHT AND DAY, LIGHT AND DARK, LIFE AND DEATH—THE SISIUTL WAS EVEN CONSIDERED HERMAPHRODITIC (EMBODYING BOTH GENDERS AT ONCE) AS WELL AS BISEXUAL. THE SISIUTL, LIKE TOTEM POLES, PROVIDES A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THE DIVERSITY THAT EXISTED HISTORICALLY WITHIN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING.
WHEREAS WESTERN FRAMEWORKS UNDERSTAND GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY LIKE THIS...

... SOME FIRST NATIONS FRAMEWORKS UNDERSTOOD IT LIKE THIS...

IDENTITY WITHIN FIRST NATIONS' CULTURES TENDED TOWARDS INDIVIDUALIZATION, DIVERSITY, AND DUALISMS. IDENTITY WITHIN WESTERN CULTURE TENDS TOWARDS GENERALIZATION, CATEGORIZATION, AND DICHOTOMIES (OPPOSITIONAL CATEGORIES THAT CAN ONLY BE DEFINED BY WHAT THEY ARE NOT).

While living at the N.W. Company’s Post, on the Columbia River, as the wife of one of the Canadian servants, she formed a sudden resolution of becoming a warrior; and throwing aside her female dress, she clothed herself in a suitable manner. Having procured a gun, a bow and arrows, and a horse, she sallied forth to join a party of her countrymen then going to war; and, in her first essay, displayed so much courage as to attract general regard, which was so much heightened by her subsequent feats of bravery, that many young men put themselves under her command. Their example was soon generally followed, and, at length she became the principal leader of the tribe, under the designation of the “Manlike Woman.” Being young, and of a delicate frame, her followers attributed her exploits to the possession of supernatural power, and, therefore, received whatever she said with implicit faith.

“Um.... we’re still here...”

There is evidence of diversity and the existence of two-spirit individuals in the margins of the dominant history. This is not just an abstract and irrelevant historical discussion. Today, everyday, peoples of all nations are discriminated against for not fitting into the “normal,” “natural,” and “historically correct” cultural framework.

- Excerpt from John Franklin’s “Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Seas, in the Years 1825, 1826, and 1827”
Power structures have shifted throughout the history of the world. If we don’t understand the history of where power structures came from it makes it harder to understand how they continue to work in the present.

Simplifying the story we keep telling doesn’t simplify the actual history. It only complicates our present understanding of how we got here.

Canada was forming physically and ideologically as a nation in a unique historical context. With entrenched ties to Europe, a threat to sovereignty coming from the U.S., and a need for successful immigration policies, Canada needed a national identity that would bind everyone together as a united nation that would stand strong and apart from others.

In this context, multiculturalism was used more as a tool of the state to retain authority and manage a range of differences - the history of our national identity was written in the same context, subject to the same influences.

Historically, Canada is truly multicultural and rich with diversity and potential, but after everybody and everything was processed through the dominant framework for understanding, we lost much of our history. This might have made sense in that context, but we are not in that context anymore...
we are now in a new context, and new point in history, where we are beginning to think about nations in new ways. the ways in which we relate as both individuals and nations to others in a diverse, fast-paced, multicultural, globalized world are also changing. we are now in a context where we are beginning to think about nations, nationalism, and histories of national identities differently.

we have to acknowledge that a nation’s identity is not made up of lines drawn on maps, symbols, anthems, or sensationalized stories. what binds people together is the common historical ground we share.

when our history was written, it was written in the same way as other countries that existed for hundreds of years had written history. it was done this way to meet the greater needs of the nation at the time.

times have changed.

what greater needs does our history serve today? how is it helping us to stand strong together and apart from others? who is it benefitting?

2012 Evaluation of Multiculturalism Program
Funding for the program has gradually decreased since the 2008 transfer from Canadian Heritage to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)
(75% in 08/09 - 37% in 10/11 - 23% in 11/12)
* titles currently listed under the CIC ‘immerse yourself in Canadian history’:
  - Black History Month
  - Asian Heritage Month
  - Games and Puzzles
  - Canada and the Holocaust
  - The War of 1812 -
In a world still at war over differences, Canada has the potential to be a new leader: as a young, vast and diverse nation that doesn’t just tolerate difference, but embraces it, and uses it to benefit everybody.

To change the future, we have to first change history.