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## How the New Sun Conference and A Tribe Called Red look for the future in the past

by NATALIE BERCHEM on Mar 6, 2014 · 10:40 am

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"Grandmother, please tell me a story?"

"I have no story to tell."

"Grandmother, *please* tell me a story!"

Michael Kusugak can remember running sled dogs across Repulse Bay, on the edge of the Arctic Circle. The dogs who loved to run had the longest lines. The lazy ones, he says, got the short lines. They would travel all day, and at night they would build an igloo.

Tucked in and just about ready to sleep, he would beg his grandmother to tell him stories. At first, she would always tell him she had none. But after much cajoling, he says, she would come up with a short tale.

She had many stories to tell, after all.

"You're on your sacred journey and we're all together," Elder Jim Albert said. "We're all on that journey and we all have our stories."

The Algonquin Elder then blessed the room, and the New Sun Conference began. Now in its 13th year, the conference is founded and hosted by Carleton University's New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture, Dr. Allan Ryan.

It's a bright spot in a typically grim media landscape, highlighting the achievements of Aboriginal artists. This

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year's theme was 'Narrative Heart,' focusing on stories of "past, promise, and possibility."

"Who we are, where we work, is all part of our personal narratives and where we will go," says Sandra Laronde, who is both the artistic director of Toronto's Red Sky Performance and the director of Indigenous Arts at the Banff Centre in Alberta.

Laronde began her artistic journey as a dancer, but remains a very visual person. Image, she says, is the language of the soul. It influences all the other arts – from music and dance to writing and painting. But no matter the shape the story takes, the storyteller's history always plays a role in shaping the final piece.

"Our skin and our nerves remember it as it appeared, and our rush of imagination is our flooding," says Laronde. "So basically, artists are really about remembering. And I like to remember."

For photographer Meryl McMaster, image didn't just influence her art. She exposed her lineage, history, and culture by flashbulb and examined it in series of negatives and proofs. She sought her identity through the camera lens, capturing crisp realism and beautiful imperfections.

Her skin and nerves recall the tense history between aboriginals and colonizers. Her father is Plains Cree. Her mother is of western European descent.

"From an early age, I knew the challenging history between my Aboriginal and European ancestors," she says, "and this has always caused conflict in me, and how I understand myself between these two opposing cultures."

Out of the conflict grew 'Ancestral,' a photo series that combines archival images of Aboriginal peoples with portraits of her father and herself. The series also allowed her to challenge the stereotypes and misrepresentations of aboriginal peoples. It would be the first of many exploring her dual identity.

"I wanted to start to release these bodies by removing them from these misrepresentations," she says, "and develop the feeling that my ancestors were stepping through me into the present."

Finding herself "betwixt and between," photography became a way for her to connect with her Aboriginal identity. But she doesn't feel pressured to explore these issues of identity. They are simply what was in her heart at the moment.

The stories they share also bind people across nations, says Kusugak. Many of the old tales his grandmother told him featured an Inuit folk hero named Kiviuq. In these tales – some of them hundreds of years old – he is said to be the first human. He is still alive today, hard as stone, but one day he will grow so old his heart will also turn to stone and beat no more.

On that day, the world will end.

Today, there are stories of Kiviuq from Repulse Bay to Greenland and into Siberia. Years ago, the children's author had told a story featuring the Inuit folk hero in Finland. Afterwards, a man approached him and commented on the name.

He said, "We have that word in Finnish, too. It means 'man of stone.'"

Language does not always need words, though. The work Laronde does at the Banff Centre and with Red Sky does not rely on ancient, or even modern, cultural ties. Instead, she creates links where there were few or none before.

It's an attempt to create an indigenous movement that allows all cultures to come together, while retaining their individual aspects.

"It's more about the distinctiveness of each culture," she says of the movement, "so it doesn't become pan-Indian or pan-anything but actually is a real collaboration, let's say, as an example, between Canadian and Mongolian indigenous people."

The example isn't purely hypothetical. Some of the music featured in Laronde's videos for Red Sky combines Inuit throat singing with the horse head fiddle, a traditional Mongolian instrument.

The cultures don't merge into a sound that is neither one nor the other. Instead, the song is a unique fusion of two very distinct musical traditions from two very different cultures. Two stories become one narrative, without losing their individual strands.

"Indigenous storytelling is international," says Laronde in a video for the Banff Centre, "but it can also inform who we are as Canadians."

There's an incredible growth in – almost a renaissance of – aboriginal culture, says Jean LaRose, CEO of Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN). The network's viewers are both aboriginal and non-aboriginal, which means the stories are crossing both country and cultural lines.

"We can share our stories and build bridges with other Canadians," said LaRose. "People are tuning in in increasing numbers to share our rich stories."

Culture and language are inherent to identity, he says. On top of English and French, APTN broadcasts in several indigenous languages, including Cree, Dene, Inuktituk, and Ojibway.

The stories told are a glimpse into what Aboriginal peoples are thinking, and what they want to see in and for Canada, he says. It's a view often overlooked in mainstream media, occasionally losing coverage to the ridiculous. During the Idle No More protests, LaRose says, protestors competed with a chimp running through



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Ikea for airtime.

And we do ourselves a disservice when we ignore each other's stories. Sharing stories – be it in person or over the television – allows Canadians to better understand one another, says LaRose.

"People need to know where aboriginals are coming from when they say, 'Our history is not your history'," he says. "Your history was not kind to us."

But just as McMaster has taken her historically conflicting roots and turned them into something beautiful, one Ottawa DJ trio has turned a crash course in cultural sensitivity into a night-long party.

"We can have a political message and it doesn't have to be heavy," says DJ NDN (Ian Campeau) of A Tribe Called Red (ATCR). In fact, you can even party to it.

Their songs are a mash-up of pow wow and electronica. Eagle cries soar while the bass drops, and people of all backgrounds and ages mingle on the dance floor at Ottawa's Babylon nightclub.

It's a scene that re-created itself in Carleton University's Fenn Lounge during the conference's lunch buffet. A Tribe Called Red performed, and in the audience Mohawk elders danced with young students, who in turn wirtled past middle-aged professionals.

"We started by throwing a party for indigenous groups, and everyone showed up," DJ Bear Witness said.

Not only did they show up, they started asking questions.

The group was at a show in Guelph not too long ago, and one of the managers came up and asked them how the bar should handle someone turning up in war paint or a headdress. He was prepared to have a bouncer refuse to let them in, said Bear Witness.

And what amazed him most? This was not an indigenous person raising these issues of appropriation and appropriate dress.

A Tribe Called Red's Electric Pow Wows at Babylon are creating new stories for aboriginals and non-aboriginals alike. They're also changing the way people think about the aboriginal experience in Canada, past and present. It's a very fragile thing they're doing, says Bear Witness, and they have to be careful.

But these eggshells they're walking on aren't breaking. In fact, they're flaking away to reveal something new and something beautiful.

"We now have a thing in pop culture where we can say, 'That's ours. That's us.'" Witness says. "It reflects who we are, and people across Canada are owning it."

And perhaps one day, grandchildren will look to grandmothers the way Kusugak looked to his, and say, "Grandmother, please tell us a story."

And she will say, "But I have no story to tell."

And they will say, "Grandmother, *please* tell us a story."

And she will relent, and tell them stories of the little seeds of a cultural revolution.

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**Natalie Berchem** is an assignment editor for CanCulture.

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