

Being W̱SÁNEĆ: Indigenous Culture and Identity

Reconciliation is a word that is regularly used in both government speeches and everyday conversations, and yet it has a definition that is far from universal. Some consider reconciliation to concern economic and infrastructural policies towards Canada's Indigenous communities; however, to even begin to consider how to create meaningful change, a greater issue must be considered: that of being able to understand Indigenous identity and culture itself. This theme emerged through interviews with the W̱SÁNEĆ First Nation Elders Charles Elliott, John Elliott, PENÁ Elliott, and Chris Paul; the focus on using Indigenous culture as a means of advancing reconciliation in Canada by provoking thought about Indigenous identity is important because culture is an inclusive and accessible conduit that can connect all peoples together to make lasting change. This change can begin with an appreciation of their cultures, and specifically, visual art.

Art is a universal medium that depicts themes which resonate between all groups of people. In terms of Indigenous art, visual art can be a more accessible way to create conversations and connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. For example, traditional totem poles serve as “ambassadors” who “meet”, “greet”, and “get [non-Indigenous] people’s interest” (C. Elliott). By acting as “silent ambassadors” for the “First Nations people” as a whole, totem poles serve a greater purpose than just being a carving to look at (C. Elliott). That purpose is to raise awareness in the Indigenous peoples, and in this case, the W̱SÁNEĆ people, which leads to a greater respect of their culture. Indigenous art can also connect all those who live in Canada together because all Canadians can intrinsically relate to it. It provides a valuable opportunity for “Canada to actually know itself” and “understand the fabric” of its vast nation, which will eventually lead to a greater sense of belonging for all peoples (Paul). Finally, the issues that concern works of Indigenous art are ones that demand attention from all Canadians. For example, the print *Message* is a creation about a “conversation between the orca and mankind in general”, where the human is apologizing to the orca for “what we’ve done to you” and promising that “we’re going to try to make things right” (C. Elliott). This symbol of the climate change crisis transcends the term ‘Indigenous art’, because it is simply art, and can provide wisdom and inspiration to all about humankind’s relationship with nature. While art is a form that can highlight the similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and can therefore act as an agent of connection, language tends to feature the parts of Indigenous cultures that make them unique.

Language is a way of giving back honour to marginalized groups, while also being a medium that can share ubiquitous ideas for all peoples. First of all, promoting language encourages respecting a group's cultural history and lineage. When a language declines in its usage, like the SENĆOTEN language of the W̱SÁNEĆ people did for centuries, it resulted in a "loss of history", and eventually, a "loss of culture" (J. Elliott). Losing one's language is also a ceding of "control" of its education system, indicating that in order for a culture to thrive, a unique language is a crucial component of passing down stories and wisdom (J. Elliott). Another reason why preserving traditional languages can be helpful in advancing relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is that speaking it gives pride to a culture. The syntax of a people's language "is the key", because it is only "in that certain language" that certain ideas can be communicated (P. Elliott). Every culture has a unique identity, and that identity is best expressed through its unique language. Finally, language can promote positive ideas surrounding nature that benefit all peoples. Specifically, the W̱SÁNEĆ people believe that "languages [are] connected to the land", and that it is their responsibility to "take care of the land" (P. Elliott). Traditional language rituals such as "speak[ing] to a tree [...] before we harvest" can lead to a more intimate understanding of one's natural surroundings, possibly providing a new framework for how to appreciate nature (P. Elliott). This framework can also extend beyond nature and to improved relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in general.

Through hearing the authentic wisdom of W̱SÁNEĆ First Nation Elders, it can be understood that appreciating Indigenous culture is necessary in order to connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples because doing so encourages respect and learning. Visual art is a medium that can provoke thought and reflection, while language sparks learning and gives power back to marginalized groups. Ultimately, by taking the time and effort to comprehend the rich and vibrant fabric that existed long before any colonialists arrived, individuals create an atmosphere of respect that makes Canadian society more inclusive and cohesive. It also encourages humility and growth from within, helping to foster a sense of compassion within every Canadian. Perhaps, with time, that foundational sense of compassion will become interwoven with the Canadian identity as a whole.

Works Cited

- Elliott, Charles. Interview. Lucas Hung. 2 July 2019.
- Elliott, John. Interview. Lucas Hung. 2 July 2019.
- Elliott, PENÁ . Interview. Lucas Hung. 3 July 2019.
- Paul, Chris. Interview. Lucas Hung. 2 July 2019.