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All in the Same Boat:
Bill Reid’s ‘Spirit of Haida Gwaii’ as a Metaphor for Multicultural Canada

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*All in the Same Boat:*

*Bill Reid’s ‘Spirit Of Haida Gwaii’ A Metaphor For Multicultural Canada*

**ABSTRACT**

Bill Reid’s sculpture The Spirit of Haida Gwaii depicts a crowd of figures crowded in a canoe seemingly fighting for elbow room. The work, which Reid was commissioned to create by the government of Canada for the embassy in Washington D.C., now has copies at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau and at the Vancouver International Airport. While some interpretations of the sculpture have centred on the work as an Aboriginal piece of art, representing the resurgence of the Haida people, this paper argues that Spirit of Haida Gwaii has become a national icon because of what it tells Canadians about Canadians and about their country. By re-examining the text of the The Spirit of Haida Gwaii in the context of its three locations, what is revealed are messages about Canada’s position in the international community, its multicultural identity, and the competing identities within individual Canadians.

**RÉSUMÉ**


**KEYWORDS:**

Capital Cities, Multiculturalism, Aboriginal Art
Introduction

Capital cities are not only the centers of political activity within the nation-states, but are also symbolically central to nations as imagined communities\(^1\). This role is undertaken in no small part by the museums and other national institutions that seek to construct the national idea through the presentation of representative artworks and cultural artifacts. Bill Reid's *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* is a particularly telling example of an artwork that is used to centre the nation within its capital. The monumental sculpture depicts a crowd of figures drawn from Haida crowded into a canoe, seemingly struggling for elbow room, at times breaking into outright fighting but still managing to paddle in unison. The image evokes a multicultural Canada, in which the French and English, Aboriginal peoples and descendants of settlers, old and new Canadians, struggle to maintain their individual identities while still finding a place for themselves within Canada as a whole.

It is displayed in not one, but two, national capital regions. The original white plaster cast resides at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, directly in front of a wall of windows that open onto the Ottawa river and, across it, the Parliament of Canada. In Washington, the final bronze sculpture (also known as “the Black Canoe”) sits in front of the Canadian Embassy, in the capital

of a country that is both Canada's closest ally and the greatest perceived threat to our identity and independence, and only blocks from the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, designed in the same style as the Canadian Museum of Civilization by architect Douglas Cardinal and which houses its own collection of Haida artifacts.

A third copy of the sculpture, also in bronze but with a green finish, is also located in Vancouver International Airport, the gateway to a city that could be considered, in all but political terms, the capital of British Columbia. This copy of the piece, known as “the Jade Canoe” is one of the first cultural objects seen by many immigrants and visitors upon their arrival in Canada.

In addition to being displayed prominently in these public spaces, all highly symbolic in the Canadian context, The Spirit of Haida Gwaii has been featured on Canadian postage and is the most prominent of several examples of Reid's works that are featured on the reverse of the Canadian twenty dollar bill. This raises the question of how The Spirit of Haida Gwaii earned such iconic status as a symbol of Canada. “Could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?” asks the novelist Gabrielle Roy in the quotation printed on the same bill. How does this piece, in particular, help us to know each other as Canadians?

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The question this paper will examine is what message the piece tells about Canada, as a representative of the nation both within our boundaries and abroad. Does the sculpture merely resonate in as another opportunity for Canada to appropriate the autochony of its first peoples? Relying on primary sources and contemporary analysis of multicultural identity, this paper will argue that, on the contrary, the piece articulates a message that is very central to how Canadians see themselves and to how we distinguish ourselves from our neighbours to the south and from the European nation-states that dominated our colonial past. Canadians are prepared to accept a complex society, always characterized by dynamic tension between groups.

The enormous figure of Lincoln, like a god or king on his throne, or the monolithic Washington Monument may represent “one nation, united under God” in the U.S. capital, but there are no such unitary symbols in Ottawa. Canadians see themselves much more easily in the thirteen figures at sea in a canoe “a long way from Haida Gwaii, not too sure where we're going, still squabbling and vying for position in the boat, but somehow managing to be heading in some direction; at least the paddles are together, and the man in the middle seems to have some vision of what is to come.”

The history of the piece's creation locates it within two related contexts, both of them capital cities and both having to do with the idea of relationships between peoples. Firstly, Reid was commissioned by the government of Canada to create the piece for the Embassy of Canada in the Washington, DC. This locates it within the context of international relations, and specifically the close but often tumultuous relationship between Canada and the United States. Secondly, the sculpture was created at a time when first nations in BC, and the Haida in particular, were struggling for recognition from the Canadian government. It was a struggle that the Black Canoe itself played a role in, as in 1987, Reid halted work on the piece to protest clear-cutting on Lyle island, saying that he was not willing to have his work “used as window dressing,” for the Canadian government abroad.

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3 Bill Reid, *Solitary Raven: Collected writings of Bill Reid*, Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 2000, p. 228
while it was ignoring the rights of Haida at home\textsuperscript{4}. With this in mind, it is clear that the piece needs to be understood as speaking to the tensions between the Canada's dominant culture and its Aboriginal peoples, but in broader terms, it can be seen as encompassing all groups within Canada who, whether or not they hold national ambitions, are “in the same boat” as Canada's first peoples in the sense of struggling to retain, and gain recognition for, their collective identities.

\textit{The Spirit of Haida Gwaii} represents a truth found both in international relations and within multicultural Canada itself: that progress and co-operation between different nations are possible, but never without conflict and tension.

Literature Review and Methodology

Reid's own accompanying text to \textit{The Spirit of Haida Gwaii} is naturally the starting point for any examination of its politics, but as Tully notes, Reid himself is reluctant to assume any authority over the meaning of the piece, describing it instead as an onlooker might\textsuperscript{5}. He identifies the characters, or at least those whose identities he knows, but the tone is very questioning, as if to make clear that the viewer's interpretation of the piece is as valid as the artist's own\textsuperscript{6}.

The most in-depth study of the piece itself is Robert Bringhurst's book \textit{The Black Canoe}. Bringhurst unpacks the numerous allusions to the oral and visual cannon of Haida storytelling within the sculpture, and tells the story of the sculpture as primarily one of resurgence for the Haida people. While that is a valid reading, this paper will argue that \textit{The Spirit of Haida Gwaii} did not become a national icon because of what it says about the Haida, but rather because of the story it tells about Canadians. This analysis will be drawing a great deal from Bringhurst's analysis of specific elements of the sculpture, however, in an attempt to show that the Reid's Haida iconography speaks to Canada and Canadians in a more general way than suggested in Bringhurst's more local interpretation.

James Tully, in his book \textit{Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity}, considers the Black Canoe “a symbol of the spirit of the post-imperial age” as well as a challenge to engage in a constitutional debate about the nature of accommodation and co-operation in modern Canada\textsuperscript{7}. Just as each figure finds

\textsuperscript{6} Reid, 2000 p. 228-230
\textsuperscript{7} Tully, 1995, p. 17. Written in the midst of the referendum in Quebec.
room in the canoe in a unique, irregular fashion, so must Canada find a way to accommodate its own component parts in a fashion that is more realistic than strict individual liberalism.

This paper will not be analyzing The Spirit of Haida Gwaii primarily as a piece of Aboriginal art, although certainly it will be using the toolkit of the Haida cannon to read the piece. There has been much written about Bill Reid and his role in a revitalization of Northwest art and Aboriginal art in general beginning in the 1970s. What this analysis is concerned with is the iconic status of this particular piece as a symbol of Canadian national identity. It is featured, after all, on the twenty dollar bill and housed in an institution that represents the whole of Canadian history, with an explicit mission of nation building. Notably, the piece is full of allusions not only to Haida myth but also to British and American settler literature, reinforcing my position that the piece is meant to be read in the light of broader Canadian society.

**The Three Canoes**

As Tully notes, “The Spirit of Haida Gwaii” means “Spirit of the place of the people”, so this article will be placing the sculpture in different three theoretical contexts that map onto the three physical and geographical contexts in which the sculpture is located. The Black canoe is located at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, so it is appropriate to look at the piece in terms of what it says about international relations. Given that context it can be no accident that two of the characters on the boat are the beaver and the eagle, nor that the eagle is at the centre of the most ferocious cluster of conflicts aboard, bitten by the wolf and attacking “seemingly in retaliation” the Bear. In this context, the piece represents Canada's paradoxical struggle to maintain independence and sovereignty though a foreign policy based on multilateralism and (sometimes worryingly) close relationships with far more powerful allies.

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9 Reid, 2000, p. 229
10 Reid,2000, p. 229
11 For the argument that multilateralism is the defining feature of Canadian foreign policy since the Second World War, see Tom Keeting 2002, *Canada and World Order: The Multilateralist Tradition in Canadian Foreign Policy* (Don Mills: Oxford)
The second context corresponds to the Canadian Museum of Civilizations in the Canada's National Capital Region. Capitals are the symbolic centres of countries, and in the case of Ottawa, this is literally true as well, since the capital was chosen specifically for its location on the border between the French and English Canadas. The sculpture's prominent installation in one of the premier cultural institutions in the capital region, one devoted not to art but to the Canadian Civilization, symbolically brings not only Aboriginal people but also the west—both of which have been treated as peripheral to Canada, although to greatly differing degrees—into the centre of the country. In this context, The Spirit of Haida Gwaii represents the Canadian approach of to multiculturalism, which recognizes and celebrates the constant tensions between various groups within the nation, and the ability to somehow work through them, making progress even if the destination is not always clear. Most obviously, this refers to the relationship between Canada and its Aboriginal Peoples, but issues of gender and class are also evident aboard the canoe. There are two immigrants represented, as neither the wolf nor the beaver are native to Haida Gwaii, though both have come to occupy important roles in its folklore.

12 While the capital is on the Ontario side of the Ottawa river, it is also considerably closer to Montreal than Toronto.
Finally, the third copy of *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* is the Jade Canoe. Located at Vancouver International Airport, its takes on a more local variant of the centring role that the White Canoe performs for the country. The airport is a high-tech hub for modern travellers, and its Aboriginal Art collection brings indigenous traditions into the urban landscape of a city that is, in all respects except the formal, political sense, the capital of British Columbia. The Jade Canoe is among the first physical examples of Canadian culture that many immigrants and visitors encounter as they enter the country. In this context perhaps it is appropriate to look at the piece as an examination of competing identities within individual Canadians.

Reid, who was not raised in the Haida tradition, certainly struggled with his own Aboriginal identity, and with whether the Haida tradition was even viable in modern Canada. Yet somehow, like the Jade Canoe paddling forward, Reid was able to draw personal and artistic growth out of this internal strife.

Following Tully’s ideas, this paper will be attempting to read the piece as a political manifesto about the demands of multiculturalism. The foundation of my arguments will draw from Tully to an extent, and are also informed by John Ralston Saul, whose notion of Canada as a Metis nation informs my assertion that internal tension and collective progress go hand in hand, but much of my evidence will be drawn directly from my source “text,” the sculpture itself.

**Crossing Boundaries**

Perhaps surprisingly, given its aboriginal iconography, the immigrant is well represented aboard the canoe. The beaver, shown here paddling a way without complaint, is a species that was imported to Haida Gwaii in the 1950s. Perhaps he is here to remind us that Canada itself is a nation imported to Aboriginal land. The aggressive wolf, bent around the Chief’s central figure and digging claws and teeth into neighbours on both sides of the sculpture, is a creature that was certainly known to the Haida, but not native to their islands.

![Figure 5: The Beaver](Credit : Stephen Cudmore, February 2011)
Likewise, the Frog, with its skinny legs and clawed feet (figure 4), looks less like the Western Toad of Haida Gwaii and more like the true frog found elsewhere. If the frog, too, is meant to be an immigrant, then he is well suited for the role, since the frog is the creature who symbolizes the ability to cross boundaries. Breathing air or water as it needs to, the frog is capable of living both on land (the world of man) and below the waters (in the world of the Gods). He hangs on to the starboard gunwale of the great canoe, half in and half out of the boat. What an appropriate depiction of the immigrant who must learn to strike a balance between the survival of their own culture and their connection to their new home.

Figure 6:
The Ancient Reluctant Conscript
Credit: Stephen Cudmore, February 2011.

And if these passengers are not truly natives of Haida Gwaii, then they are not alone. Stowing away along with the Haida figures are a handful of allusions to English and American literature. The first of these is the small human figure paddling stoically at the starboard aft of the boat. Reid calls this character, a self-portrait modelled after Reid, the Ancient Reluctant Conscript, after a poem by American Carl Sandburg, which is full of references to European history. Reid says he is:

Present if seldom noticed in all the turbulent histories of men on earth. When our latter-day kings and captains have joined their forebears, he will still be carrying on, stoically obeying orders and performing the tasks allotted to him. But only up to a point. It is also he who finally says, “Enough!”

Finally, again there is the Frog, whose skinny arms and hemispherical eyes recall an earlier work by Reid, Phyllidula: The Shape of Frogs to Come. If this frog is Phyllidula, then Reid not only fulfilled the prophesy of that title by including her in his final work years later, but included another allusion to English literature. In Ezra Pound’s poem, Phyllidula “is scrawny but amorous,” granted by the Gods the dubious blessing of always receiving more pleasure than she is capable of giving.

15 Reid, 2000, p. 229
The Bear family, too, are in-between worlds. Like so many Canadian families, this one is the product of an intercultural marriage. Bear Mother is a human, raising her semi-human children in the world of the bears who, according to Haida storytellers, live and speak as humans in their homes, only putting on their Bear skins when they go outside. Soon enough, the bear brothers will be uprooted and have to go to live in the human world, when their father is killed by their mother's brothers, out of revenge for her kidnapping. The Southern Salish have their own stories about twin brothers who are half human and half bear, who they call the “Transformers” and associate with ideas of balance and duality. Reid adds yet another wrinkle when in his text companion to the sculpture, he jokingly identifies the Bear brothers with those in A.A. Milne's children's poem “Twice Times.”

Reid's assistant George Rammell observed that “English Literature provided Bill with inspiration to relocate the grand narratives of the Haida in a linguistic sea of puns and metaphors. His satirical titles statements and antics poked fun at our vanity and failed attempts to understand each other,” such as the afternoon he spent walking around Granville Island pulling Phyllidula around behind him on a

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17 Bringhurst, 1992, p.50
18 Reid, 2000, p.228
Reid's incorporation of western allusions into *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* goes beyond the literary, though, including visual signifiers as well. The dogfish woman acts a kind of rosetta stone, in that her tiara clearly marks her a member of the upper classes to viewers of European decent, even if her lip labret, which signifies the same thing in Haida culture, is opaque to them. Bringhurst calls her “a link between Haida and French neoclassicism.”

Beings who are part human and part animal are a theme in Haida stories, of course, but never more so than here. Besides the Bear family, we have the two transforming women, Dogfish Woman and Mouse Woman, both of whom are keepers of secrets, possessed of great magical power. Along with the Wolf and the Beaver, from across the strait, the tricky Raven who transgresses boundaries as fast as he can find them, and the other animals with their human hands, it seems that the frog is not alone in crossing between worlds.

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19 Reid might have found it hilarious, then, to know that the touch-screen presentation that accompanies his piece in the CMC mistakenly designates the bear brothers as Milne's invention.
21 Bringhurst, 1992, p. 56
Only one figure here is firmly anchored in a single world: the chief at the centre of the boat. He towers authoritatively above everyone else. Above the melee, he is neither in conflict with any of the others nor with himself. He knows who he is: a human. He is a very atypical human for that very reason, though. In Haida art humans are usually small figures, secondary to the animals they appear beside, or hidden within the parts of their body.

Figure 9: The Chief towers above the other figures. Credit: Stephen Cudmore, February 2011.

Reid says that he “may or may not be The Spirit of Haida Gwaii.” If Haida Gwaii is translated as “the place of the people,” then this figure could be the spirit of the nation itself, inspiring some direction and unity. Perhaps, though, he is something more than that, for Haida Gwaii could also mean “the land of the humans.” This title seems to fit the great leader better than anything, for if anything could lead this squabbling crew to somehow learn to work and live together, it would be the understanding of their common humanity.

**Appropriating Human Culture**

Setting up *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* as iconic touchstone for Canadians raises questions about the appropriateness of using of Aboriginal culture to represent the dominant Canadian mainstream. Mackey, for instance, has argued that postmodern narratives of the Canadian nation which purport to celebrate diversity and include Aboriginal peoples and imagery instead:

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22 Reid, 2000, p. 229
(…) reproduce, in subtle ways, not only particular forms of white settler identity, but also key concepts such as progress... representations of Aboriginal people are used to help the settler nation find and articulate a 'natural' link to the land-- to help settlers become indigenous.23

However, The Spirit of Haida Gwaii does not invoke the land, or the link between it and Aboriginal people. The relationships it meditates on are between people, not places. As already noted, the place can certainly come into play when reading the piece, but place is the context of the piece, not a part of the piece itself, which was intended for one landscape, but is equally meaningful when placed in others which the author could not have anticipated.

As to concerns of cultural appropriation, Reid never saw his art, or Haida art in general, as belonging to the descendants of any one race “I don't know the words in the other languages of the Northwest coast, but in the Haida language, Haida means human being,” he wrote “As a descendant, in part at least, of the Haida people, I wish for each of us, native or newcomer-- or as so many of us are now, both-- that however we say it we can recognize ourselves someday as Haida.”24 Reid’s masterpiece draws upon the Haida cannon, but it belongs legitimately to all Canadians, to share with the world. As John Ralston Saul notes, the link between cultural survival and definitions of racial belonging is “entirely the outcome of a European imposed approach, one that had noting to do with the Aboriginal idea of expandable and inclusive circles of people.”25

Conclusion

Reid presents to us a vision of the possibility of co-operation amidst conflict and of common purpose without a common all-consuming identity. It's a lesson that, placed before our embassy in Washington, can illuminate Canada's particular brand of multilateral diplomacy. Housed in our own capital, in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, it stands as a challenge to Canadians to treat our own country as we do the world: as a place so diverse and precious that it is imperative that we recognize and accommodate its complexity. Reid has selected a crew in which the themes of transformation and transplantation repeat themselves, granting us permission to cross cultural boundaries to find our own identities and embrace our own humanity—our Canadianess.

24 Reid, 2000, p. 145
25 Saul, 2008, p. 8
The notion that internal division can be strength rather than a weakness is perhaps uniquely Canadian. John Ralston Saul argues as much, proposing that the source of our unique genius as a civilization is the ability to recognize, at least when we are true to ourselves, that we are a whole made up of parts, not a monolithic society in the European mold:

But if you think of civilizations as great rivers you see that the true line of a society can keep rising to the surface if you allow it to. It is a matter of riding the current of the collective unconscious. It is there, carrying us, even when we deny it and are caught on snags or sucked off into eddies. We may float along, half-consciously, lying to ourselves about our society—for example that we are a slow and cautious people because we are the product of an anti-democratic Tory tradition devoted to order. But the current will still be there...

The better we can understand the current, the better we can move down the river like an experienced canoeist, with purpose, taking full advantage of the eddy line.  

Reid knew that it was a proposition fraught with peril, like a small boat filled with a few too many passengers somewhere out in the vast ocean. If the look on the face of Reid’s Chief is any indication, our sense of purpose is guiding us toward our destination, but where it is or whether the trickster Raven will keep us faithfully on course until we get there is hard to say. Nevertheless, the paddles are still hitting the water in unison. We have not capsized yet.

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26 Saul, 2008, p. 169
All in the Same Boat: Bill Reid’s *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* as a Metaphor for Multicultural Canada

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