Alex Janvier's Morning Star: A Metaphor for Canada's competing cultures

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**ABSTRACT**

Alex Janvier’s *Morning Star* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization is a reflection of the First People’s shared experience of loss, displacement, renewal and reconciliation. This mural adorns 418 square feet of the dome area above the staircase located at the end of the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s Grand Hall. The artist’s use of colour, imagery and shapes constructs a historical narrative, in the form of a circular timeline, which depicts the experiences shared by Canada’s First Peoples. The circular timeline format of Alex Janvier’s *Morning Star* is a direct reflection of the role of Canadian historiography, in that, the issues of the past are continually being shaped by the present. This paper will examine the main themes of Alex Janvier’s *Morning Star* by investigating the context in which the mural was created, the narratives associated with the painting and the anthropological method First Peoples are portrayed in Canadian historiography. In addition, this discourse analyze will compare Janvier’s *Morning Star* narrative with the Canadian historical narrative to show its differing perspectives on history and identity.

**KEYWORDS**

Alex Janvier, Canadian history, First Peoples, Native Art.
The artwork produced by Canada’s First Peoples is a reflection of a shared experience of loss, displacement, renewal and reconciliation. These experiences exist outside the context of the Canadian historical narrative, which is dominated by the French and English European cultures. The Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) houses both conflicting aboriginal and non-aboriginal narratives, where these groups each have a separate space to transmit their history to the general public. A key museum piece that merges these two cultures into one historical narrative is Morning Star by Alex Janvier. This mural adorns 418 square feet of the dome area above the staircase located at the end of the CMC’s Grand Hall (see Figure 1). The artist’s use of colour, imagery and shapes constructs a historical narrative, in the form of a circular timeline, which depicts the experiences shared by Canada’s First Peoples.

Culture clashes still exist in the heritage sector, despite the 1971 Multiculturalism Policy ensuring equal representation among Canada’s English French and First Peoples. This paper examines these conflicting historical narratives that form the basis for the Canadian, Quebeccois and First Peoples identities. The main questions this study seeks to answer is how the Morning Star’s narrative fits into the Canadian historiography, what historical themes does it address and how is First People’s artwork connected to the Canadian historical narrative? First, a literature review and methodology will outline the context of Canadian historical narrative. Secondly,
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Janvier's *Morning Star* will be discussed within the context of the museum space. Then, the principle meaning of *Morning Star* is defined and analyzed by illustrating the connection between the artwork’s message and how First Peoples are portrayed in Canadian historiography.

**Literature review and methodology**

Artwork and identity are intricately linked in Alex Janvier’s work. Chris Dueker’s (2011) analysis on *Alex Janvier's Entangled Cartographies: Hunters' Dreams, Bauhaus Aesthetics, and the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range* shows that Janvier’s abstract style is fraught with multiple meanings ranging from the artist’s struggle for his own identity and the politics surrounding his family’s eviction from their ancestral land:

> For Janvier’s aesthetics intersect with a myriad of cultural, political, and artistic currents in which mapping is implicit, including the artist’s own exile from and hard fought return to his traditional homeland, his mentor’s Bauhaus grammar of lines as records of movement and expressions of environmental pressures, the geomantic reconnaissance of Dene hunters’ dreams, the power of military and oil concerns to qualify, control and redefine landscape, and the use of Traditional Land Use Studies to chart, and sometimes salvage, Indigenous ways of knowing land.1

Lee-Anne Martin and Robert Houle’s (1993) *The Art of Alex Janvier: His First Thirty Years, 1960-1990* tracks Janvier’s political and artistic development that earned him the title of the ‘father of aboriginal art.’ Lee-Anne Martin (1993) notes that “Alex Janvier’s history as an artist parallels the politics and history of Native art in Canada since the 1960s.”2 Native art grew from this period as being considered a craft to being an accepted artistic style by the Western art world. Houle (1993) summed up this reality of discrimination by indicating that

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Native art prior to the 1970s did not qualify as part of the contemporary artwork of Canada. It was restricted to the Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization) and not displayed in the National Art Gallery. First People’s representation in Canadian historiography follows similar lines of exclusion and discrimination in Ottawa’s national narrative. Studies on Canadian historiography by Jan Grabowski (2000) and J.R. Miller (2008) illustrate that Canadian history ignores the aboriginal presence in the narrative until the 1960s, where any prior analysis on this cultural group was completed in the anthropology discipline.

This paper’s main goal is to show that the circular timeline format of Alex Janvier’s Morning Star is a direct reflection of the role of Canadian historiography, in that, the issues of the past are continually being shaped by the present. It will examine the main themes of Alex Janvier’s Morning Star by investigating the context in which the mural was created, the narratives associated with the painting and the anthropological method First Peoples are portrayed in Canadian historiography. In addition, this discourse analyze will compare Janvier’s Morning Star narrative with the Canadian historical narrative to show its differing perspectives on history and identity.

The Canadian historical narrative encapsulates both the collective identities of Canada’s diverse population and the pan-Canadian identity that is designed on a national scale to connect these different cultures. This study uses the Canadian historical narrative term in the context of identity and history represented by Jocelyn Létourneau’s (2004) A history for the future: rewriting memory and identity in Quebec and J.L. Granatstein’s (2007) Who killed Canadian history? Létourneau (2004) defines the Canadian historical narrative as a collective memory of identity, historical facts, self-reflections and

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scholarly debates that provides the necessary perceptions of historical events. These stories are from Canada’s pluralistic history, where anthropologists, historians and museum staff interpret the diversity of the inhabitants (i.e. their social, gender, spatial, ethnical and cultural factors) within the country’s framework. Granatstein’s (2007) interpretation of the Canadian historical narrative is based off a national and pan-Canadian identity that transcends the individual collective identities illustrated in the 1971 Multiculturalism Policy. The narrative is nationalistic in nature and it is design by Canadian governments to establish a shared identity among its diverse population. This study does not seek to redefine the notion of historical narratives, but to illustrate that Janvier’s Morning Star also criticizes the pluralistic notion of Canadian history by showing the First People’s perceptive as central to the narrative rather than as a secondary actor.

The primary sources used in this analysis consist of interviews with Alex Janvier done by museum staff who catalogued and studied his work, namely Chris Ryan (2005) and Gilles Pothier & Duncan Mousseau (1995). Secondary sources that address the narratives connected to the Morning Star come from art historians, like Chris Dueker (2011), and academics who specialize in the culture wars that dominate the interpretation of Canadian history, namely Jocelyn Létourneau (2004), J.L. Granatstein (2007), Sunerai Thobani (2007) and David Austin (2010). Particular emphasis will be on the interpretation of First Peoples in Canadian history, where ethno-historians like Alfred G. Bailey (1937) and Bruce Trigger G. Trigger (1989) merge the analytical methods of the anthropology discipline into Canadian history. This study will not include an in-depth evaluation of Janvier’s abstract artistic style, because the main focus is

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6 Létourneau, 71-72.
8 Ibid.
on the *Morning Star*’s narrative and its relationship to Canadian’s historiography.

**Alex Janvier’s *Morning Star* & The Museum Space**

The historical narrative expressed at the CMC, between non-aboriginals and aboriginals, adopts a separate but equal philosophy. The museum’s “…principal role is to preserve and promote the heritage of Canada for present and future generations, thereby contributing to the enhancement of Canadian identity.” This position of providing aboriginals and non-aboriginals with separate interpretive spaces is the product of Prime Minister’s Pierre E. Trudeau’s (1919-2000) Multicultural Policy implemented in 1971. The CMC’s History Division from the 1970s-1990s focused on the development of material history highlighting ‘new’ histories being presented to the Canadian public in the realm of social history.

The museum’s goal was to present values that Canadians share, and not to focus the cultural wars, dominated by English-French relations and First Peoples-European interactions, which produced much of the contested views of Canadian historiography. However, the CMC’s History Division abandoned the plan to have one central exhibit showcasing Canada’s entire population and adopted instead of presenting aboriginals and non-aboriginals in separate exhibits. This lead to the creation of the Canada Hall, which displays non-aboriginal cultures and the First Peoples Hall and Grand Hall that focused on aboriginal cultures.

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11 Dean & Rider, 40.

12 Dean & Rider, 35-40.
The concept of historical firsts is an outlining factor for national narratives, because being first in these narratives gives a cultural group authenticity to their claim within the context of the nation-state. The First Peoples Hall is at the front of the museum, where visitors see this exhibit first, then move onto the Canada Hall where the non-aboriginals are depicted within the order of their arrival to North America. As the visitor passes up the staircase at the end of the Grand Hall, they encounter Janvier’s *Morning Star* just in front of the Canada Hall. Within the context of the CMC, Janvier’s artwork is appropriately situated between both competing narratives, where “[it] is a commentary on the clash of cultures that took place after Europeans arrived in North America and encountered Native peoples. This is one of the major themes addressed in the Museum’s permanent exhibitions.” The First Peoples and Canada Halls both follow the linear timeline format of peopling the land. First Peoples Hall uses archaeology findings and along with oral history to show their connection to the land. Canada Hall’s largely Eurocentric narrative shows a connection to the land through economic, political and social history. In this framework, the First Peoples are viewed as the outsiders in the Canadian narrative. The opposite model of presenting history is found in *Morning Star* and the First Peoples Hall, where non-aboriginals are presented as the outsiders. However, *Morning Star* historical framework differs from the First Peoples Hall, because its shape presents the visitor with a circular timeline.

**The Principle Meaning Of *Morning Star***

The principle meaning of Janvier’s *Morning Star* is ‘finding direction.’ This concept comes from the artist’s Dene culture and it is used as a metaphor for aboriginal identity and competing narratives. First, its use of colour and abstract shapes illustrates the cognitive

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<http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/tresors/treasure/283eng.shtml>
thought process of how Janvier’s family mapped out the land in their hunting trips, where these spatial features represent the natural forms of the land.\textsuperscript{15}

My people had used the morning star as a guide in the early mornings of the winter hours. They would leave camp…maybe 4 o’clock in the mornings and head in some direction…According to the stars in the sky, and especially one, they well have an idea the direction that they are going to.\textsuperscript{16}

Janvier’s statement also illustrates the spatial context of the mural. Its location on the ceiling of the Grand Hall shows that the narrative is connected not only to the physical realm of human beings, but to nature and in-turn the Spirit World. Secondly, this artwork is a circular timeline that intersects historical events, people and places through thematic viewpoints. Janvier states, “I am painting and I am also telling the story of the way things happened to me and to my tribe and to my people and it’s a true story.”\textsuperscript{17} The artist’s comment of ‘a true story’ is a critique of the narrative flaws and biases in Canadian history and anthropology on its depictions of First Peoples. In addition, Janvier is making a political stance, because First Peoples are in the position today to tell their own view of their group’s narrative to the non-aboriginal society.

**Four Periods Of First Peoples History**

*Morning Star’s* colour coordinated sections (yellow, blue, red and white) illustrates the four periods of First Peoples history (see Figure 2). The yellow section represents the *Period of Harmony*, when First Peoples lived in harmony with each other, the Great Sprit and with nature.\textsuperscript{18} The blue section depicts the *Period of Contact*, where First

\textsuperscript{15} Dueker, 540.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
Peoples were overwhelmed by European cultures. The red area shows the Period of New Optimism & Revival in that First Peoples were taking charge of their own future and fighting for their rights. The white section is the Period of Healing & Unity, where First Peoples are returning to traditional values and working towards reconciliation and restructuring with non-aboriginals.

This artistic expression symbolizes cultural norms and Janvier, through his artwork, uses a tangible medium to promote intangible values. Thus, the historical component to this artwork includes a circular timeline and it adds to the First People’s and Canada Hall

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
narratives within the Canadian Museum of Civilization, because it also provides a different perspective for Canadian historiography.  

**First Peoples In Canadian Historiography**

The culture clashes between English, French and First Peoples are illustrated within Janvier’s four periods of First People’s history. However, this narrative shows the ‘other side of the coin’ of Canadian history. Europeans in this context are the outsiders, while the First Peoples are central to the geographical and cognitive space of North and South American.

*Period of Harmony:*

*Morning Star’s Period of Harmony* is “…when there was a sense of harmony with the land and among the various groups of people […] before white people came.”  

The First Peoples Hall depicts this period with creation stories like Skywoman and archaeology finds that provide scientific proof that they’re culture arrived on the continent before Europeans. In Canada Hall, the Norse who arrived in Newfoundland around 1000 A.D. is proved with archaeological evidence in L’Anse aux Meadows. 

Both First Peoples and European narratives use archaeology to map their claim on Canada. However, First Peoples narratives employ a spiritual connection to the land that is absent from the European context, which focuses on economy being the basis for history and whose connection is tied to old world traditions.

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23 Duiker, 537.


Period of Contact:

Janvier’s mural labels the Period of Contact as one of declined, where Canadian historiography characterizes it as period of growth and nation building. *Morning Star* depicts this era as a clash of cultures. First Peoples were overwhelmed by European culture, treaties were implemented and native beliefs went underground. The pre-contact and contact periods of First Peoples history are dominated largely by ethno-history, which is the combination of the disciplines of anthropology and history.

The Canadian historical narrative did not acknowledge the existence of an earlier historical period that predated Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) and Samuel de Champlain (1567-1635) until the 1930s. It was during this decade that Alfred G. Bailey’s graduate thesis, *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures, 1504-1700: A Study in Canadian Civilization* (1937), took the approach of analyzing both the views of the aboriginals and the white people living in the area. Bailey (1937) is considered the founder of Canadian ethno-history, where he saw the merits of utilizing anthropological methods in historical studies. His work was the first to note that the effects of European contact was more extensive on aboriginal populations and began far earlier than most anthropologists realized. Bruce G. Trigger (1989) stated “[Bailey] was also among the first Canadian historians to promote the study of social and regional history, which is now flourishing in this country.”

Despite cultural interest in First Peoples in the early twentieth century, this period still “[reduces non-European] groups to the status of the Native [as] read uncivilized, backward, primitive and cultureless [and] this historical mythology lies at the base of and has

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26 Pothier & Mousseau, 14.
29 Trigger, 4.
direct bearing on contemporary Canadian politics and culture wars.”

The ‘Native’ concept derives its meaning from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712-1778) ‘noble savage’ myth, where non-Europeans are defined as being close to the state of nature and existing outside the realm of civilization. While, this term on the one hand idealizes First Peoples, it also discriminately labels them as inferior than their European counterparts.

Anthropology in this period was dominated by the teachings of Franz Boas (1858-1942). Boas assumed that one could get an accurate representation of a pre-contact society by talking to elders or studying aboriginal groups who were located away from European settlements. This method of study continued into the 1960s, where any information found that illustrated the effects of European contact were ignored or considered an obstacle to understanding a specific Native culture. In addition, the narratives of explorers (Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) and Samuel de Champlain (1567-1635)), fur traders (Hudson Bay Company), military leaders (General James P. Wolfe (1727-1759) and Louis-Joseph de Montcalm-Gozon (1712-1759)) and politicians (John A. Macdonald (1815-1891)) dominated Canadian historiography in this period. Two models of nation building used to explain the economic development of the fur trade and the settlement patterns of Europeans are the Staples Theory of Harold Innis (1894-1952) and the Laurentian Model of Donald Creighton (1902-1979). Thus, historical topics outside the areas of the military, politics and economics were not popular during this period.

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31 Trigger, 8.
32 Ibid.

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Period of New Optimism & Revival:

Janvier states the Period of New Optimism & Revival (1960-1993) “…depicts a time of revival and a new optimism. Struggle and disenchantment give way to a new determination on the part of First Peoples to take charge of their own future.”

It is also a period of time, where social history, women’s studies and aboriginal history dominated historiography over publications on military and political history. Trigger’s (1989) own work is credited by Jan Grabowski (2000) as promoting an interest in First Peoples history. His 1986 article, The Historian’s Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing from Charlevoix to the Present lead to an increase of papers published in the field, where from 1988-1996, academic articles written in Canadian history on the First Peoples rose from 53 to 190 published over a twenty-year period.

There was a growth of social, feminist and cultural narratives in Canadian history, because the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the 1971 Multicultural Policy and the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This ‘new’ history aimed to promote narrative of the cultural ‘other,’ where “…the path chosen is to correct the past, to heal wounds so that they will eventually disappear.” The cultural ‘other’ includes groups that are characterized as “…marginalized communities – primitive, exotic, post-colonial societies that are distant somehow from mainstream western thought.” The popularity of these ‘new’ histories continued into the 1980s, where historiography had

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34 Trigger, 12.
36 Ibid, 554.
37 Létourneau, 83.
developed between the colonizer and the colonized relationship in former colonial states.\(^{39}\)

**Period of Healing & Unity:**

Janvier’s “…last quadrant is [painted] white to link back to the white center of *Morning Star*, [and it] portrays healing, renewed self-respect, reconciliation and restructuring – a return to a state of harmony.”\(^{40}\) The *Period of Healing & Unity* “…represents the [era] following the point at which Janvier created *Morning Star.*”\(^{41}\) This view of recognizing the positive and negative events of the past is a current trend in Canadian historiography, where it is responding to the problems generated by multiculturalism. The problem of multiculturalism dominating history is that its philosophy also promotes selective memory of the past similar to the traditional English and French colonial narrative of politics. Sunerai Thobani’s (2007) *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* indicates that multiculturalism promotes the policy of erasing Canada’s colonial history of violence and inequality from the national narrative.\(^{42}\) The concept of silence even made its way into the world stage “…by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper at the G20 meeting in September 2009 saying that Canada has no history of colonialism.”\(^{43}\) Thus, multiculturalism still follows the same pattern of silence as the pre-1960s historical narratives.

The uniqueness of Janvier’s narrative is that it focuses on recognizing past mistakes, dealing with them and moving forward to build a positive future. This perspective coincides with the historiography being promoted by Jocelyn Létourneau’s (2004). He

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
<http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/tresors/treasure/283eng.shtml>
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
\(^{42}\) Dean and Rider, 21-22.
\(^{43}\) Austin, 21.
states that history should be used as a healing process. It should not be used to promote nostalgia for the past and entrap a culture within a false narrative. According to Létourneau (2004), the whole principle of history is to allow everyone to deal with the past issues and move forward in the reconciliation process.\(^4^4\) He indicates there are two interpretations of viewing Canada’s original inhabitants within the historical narrative:

The first view (the Native peoples as “founding peoples” and “ancestors of the nation”) originates from the desire to alter the meaning of the past for the sake of the immediate imperatives of the consensual, harmonious building of a future freed of history and its wounds. The path chosen is to correct the past, to heal the wounds so that they will eventually disappear. The second view (aboriginality as a structural dimension of Canadianness) arises from a decision to leave the wound open in order to regenerate the bruised body. It means recognizing the existence of the wound so as to transform it into possibilities for the future. This idea of the transformation of wounds into possibilities – a transformation brought about through the narration of an interpreter seeking to rediscover the lost spirit and practice of Canadianness – is interesting. This may perhaps be a new horizon that could orient those who want to rethink and rewrite the history of Canada.\(^4^5\)

The concept of transforming the past instead of rewriting it, presents a new perspective of in Canadian historiography. Alex Janvier’s son, Dean, who helped in the creation of Morning Star summed up the totality of the mural:

This is a period of time, I think we are at now. We are beginning to say [that w]e can’t continue to destroy everything. We have to start to help each other. We will go back again to where things were more harmonious and mankind could live together in a state of harmony. That’s the idea of the mural.\(^4^6\)

These views also correspond to J.L. Granatstein’s (2007) summary of the state of history in his critically acclaimed book: *Who Killed*

\(^{4^4}\) Létourneau, 86.
\(^{4^5}\) Ibid, 82-83.
\(^{4^6}\) Pothier & Mousseau, 14.
Canadian history? Despite, Granatstein’s (2007) negative outlook on the conflicting narratives in Canadian history, “…[he still] believe[s] the past can unite us without its being censored, made inoffensive to this group or that, or whitewashed to cover up the sins of our forefathers.” Therefore, the theme of ‘finding direction’ not only applies to the narrative of Canada’s First Peoples, but also to their white counterparts.

In conclusion, Alex Janvier’s Morning Star contains a narrative that differs from Canada’s national history as generally promoted by Harold Innis’s Staple Theory and Donald Creighton’s Laurentian Model. Canadian historiography has shifted over the course of half a century from focusing on the military and political side of the male elite to the history of women, aboriginals and immigrant cultures. This shift in perspective is illustrated in Alex Janvier’s Morning Star, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, where the notion of a circular timeline format and its thematic focus of events, people and places coincide with the focus of social history. The mural’s framework does not allow for the Canadian historiography to be rewritten or distorted. The spatial imagery it employs shows a connection to the land. Peopling the land is a common theme between Morning Star and the Canadian historical narrative. Both narratives use this concept to assert their claim in the Canadian historical space. In addition, both recognize the clash of cultures in Canada and the relationship between aboriginals and non-aboriginals. Through this examination of Janvier’s Morning Star, the development of Canadian historiography is tracked from being highly Eurocentric, silencing the past and then finally acknowledging the merits of negative historical events along with the positive ones.

47 Granatstein, 18.
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