

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, April 2010

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Let us not forget the power of the artists

"To speak when not spoken to was a courageous act – an act of risk and daring..."

– bell hooks

Prior to the 1950s very few of our people, with the exception of our leadership, spoke up against the tyranny, injustice and racial policies used to take our land and resources. The humiliation and degradation of loss, of displacement and dispossession, along with the pain of hunger for over a 100 years had taught us to be silent.

Not even the removal of our children by government agencies motivated us enough to stand up and be heard. Then something happened in the 1960s that changed us forever. The happening was "a movement."

Acimoowin, nukumoowin, neemeetowin, keesimowin – story, song, dance and prayer took their place beside the politics of the day and they created a strong sense of identity. The energized and inspired us to take collective action to improve our lives and ensure our survival. Led by elders and knowledge keepers, the way was paved for creative expressions by artists, writers, poets, singers and dancers to show us another way of seeing ourselves, a way that was grounded, in the spiritual traditions and values of our past.

In Saskatchewan it was knowledge keepers like Smith Atimoyoo, Ernest Tootoosis, Ida and John Macleod, Lizzette and Ivan Ahenekew, Alex Bonaise, Jim Kanipitehtew, Adam and Stan Cuthand, Eli Bear, Mederic McDougall, Pierre Vandal, and many more who told us "restless youth" olden time stories of great leaders and heroes who saved the people from all manner of evil. The evil was of course, being over a 100 years of colonization. Our knowledge keepers were just a wee bit political.

Many of them crisscrossed the country holding sweat lodge ceremonies, facilitating cultural gatherings and literally, for many of us, smudging away the alienation brought on by residential schools, foster homes and dysfunctional families; giving us hope for a better future and in the process, birthing an artistic and intellectual movement deeply rooted in "place" and reflecting "our perspective."

Across Canada the art reviews and written words of "real native artists" could be found in native newsletters which became newspapers and native magazines and on the CBC's radio program hosted by Bernelda Wheeler, called Our Native Land. This was in the days before artistic grants were available to us, the days when publishers laughed at your manuscript if you dared to send it to them and galleries were considered "brave" and "revolutionary" if they hung the work of a Native artist.

The speed with which this all happened was phenomenal. One day there were two, maybe three, published books by native writers, two or three artists and almost

over night there were hundreds. The speed it happened reminds me of the speed Chief Dan George wrote about in his famous essay. I have traveled.

"Was only yesterday that man sailed around the moon? You and I marvel that man should travel so far, so fast. Yet, if they have traveled far, I have traveled farther, and if they have traveled fast, I have traveled faster. For I was born in a culture of bow and arrows. But within the span of half a lifetime, I was flung across the ages to the culture of the atom bomb ..."

And the wildness with which the change happened always reminds me of Serain Stumps's There is my People Sleeping.

And,
It's with terror, sometimes
That I hear them calling me
But it's the light skip of a cougar
Detaching me from the ground
To leave me alone
With my crazy power
Till I reach the Sun makers
And find myself again
In a new place.

I am also reminded of the haunting lyrics of Shannon Two Feathers when I think of the political awakening and incredible urge to just knock it down and change it.

Muskrats and welfare
And red willow trees
Tar paper shacks that fall down
in the breeze
The old folks are dying
But the government don't care
All we got left is muskrats
and welfare.

Today, there are literally hundreds of artists, writers, poets, singers and dancers both traditional and contemporary, but the times are not as exciting or swollen with the promise they once were. Last week I attended an art show. It was filled with white folk and four of us. Another day I attended a book launch and reading by a writer and poet. There were maybe 20 people. Not all that long ago, we would have filled those places, giving support and love. We would have been excited and we would have had great discussion.

Norman Bethune, a mixed blood doctor, writer and revolutionary wrote in 1937:

"The function of the artist is to disturb, his duty to arouse the sleeper. Shake the complacent pillars of the world ... In a world terrified of change, he preaches the revolution: the principle of life. He is an agitator, a disturber of the peace, quick, impatient, positive, restless and disquieting. The creative spirit of life, working in the souls of men and women."

Hiy, hiy, mercii. Have a good mee oos kumic and give those students at First Nations University your support.