



(Self-)Portrayals of Mixed Cultural Identities in the Works of Emily Carr and István Fujkin

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The proposed article examines the works of two artists, Emily Carr (1871 – 1945) and István Fujkin (1953), focusing on Carr’s early and mature “Indian paintings”, and Fujkin’s “Blue Owl series” completed between 2001 and 2005. The paintings chosen from among Carr’s works are thematically linked to *Klee Wyck* (1940), her first fictional work describing her travels and experiences with the First Nations People in British Columbia. Though the two artists come from different cultural backgrounds, since Carr was descended from English immigrants and Fujkin is a Hungarian born in the former Yugoslavia, there are similarities in their work. Both artists depict work across time and make use of transnational imaginaries of nature and Native Canadian cultural symbols that ultimately function as a bridge between Native and western culture. Fujkin’s talent lies in his ability to “paint the music” composed and performed by Canadian Mohawk musician Robbie Robertson. Emily Carr’s paintings offer images of her visionary world that transcends cultural identities and provides an insight into nature infused with spiritual and magical elements.

Keywords: Canadian art, Emily Carr, István Fujkin, Native Canadian cultural symbolism, nature symbolism, national identities.

The oft-quoted term, transcultural identities, is a major concept in our multicultural and globalized world (Nordin et al.). Claiming a mixed origin in the twenty-first century is considered standard and normal when contrasted with the earlier predominant monoculture. Within the last hundred years or so, the rapid technological changes and innovations opened new opportunities for individuals and groups to travel and move from one country to another or for that matter from one continent to another. Regarding the continent of North America, and specifically Canada, the fabric of a multi-structured and multi-cultured society in the twentieth century was undergoing gradual changes, and this shift demonstrated how the French-English bilingual policy expanded to introduce a multicultural arrangement (McNaught 329). The multicultural policies of the 1970s in Canada introduced and defined the cultural boundaries as being non-fixed and flexible entities and/or overlapping mosaics.

The many varied and descriptive labels that define identity as a concept are gradually changing as people of different ethnic groups live together in communities or in mixed marriage families. The conceptual frameworks have noticeably shifted bringing about the creation of quite a few expressions that are now being commonly used. The terms generally applied are hybrid, mixed, blended, hyphen, etc. Defining the concept of identity requires thorough research on a historical, social, and cultural level. And when an identity mixes, overlaps, and transcends another cultural identity a whole new meaning evolves. This shift is explained by Markus and Conner, who suggest that the many cultures that abound in our world “create different ways of being a person – which we call different *selves*” (Markus and Conner). The

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different selves form different cultures, and when the symbolic borders that define a culture are extended and expand beyond their usual limits, is when we speak of transcending cultural boundaries. According to Markus and Conner, there are “many different selves within our one-self” (Markus and Conner). How a self thinks, feels and reacts to different ideas, institutions and interactions define the culture of a person (Markus and Conner). The cultural interactions that we as individuals encounter throughout our lives define who we are and how we visualize the world around us.

The aim of the present article is to examine selected paintings by two Canadian artists that focus on transnational imaginaries of nature and the (self-)portrayal of mixed identities. Even though the artists chosen for the sake of investigating the concept of transcultural identity come from the dominant culture in Canada, my argument will posit that they understand and conceptualize the idea of “living in the hyphen” (Nakagawa). This concept of living between cultures clearly illustrates how they search for an identity in which they would feel comfortable. The essay will introduce two totally different *selves* or individuals, who transcend these cultural identities through their artistic works and thereby portray visual conceptions of another culture that they subconsciously link with their own (self-)portrayal.

The two artists chosen to illustrate the argument are the Canadian, Emily Carr, and the contemporary Hungarian-Canadian artist of Central European descent, István Fajtkin. The two artists come from two completely different cultural backgrounds, the first is of English stock, the second of the recent immigrant stock, and occupy a different historical era. Emily Carr (1871 – 1945) was born in Victoria, British Columbia into a rigidly Protestant Presbyterian upper-middle class ultra-English family. And István Fajtkin (1953) was born in the small village of Horgos, on the Hungarian-Serbian border as a member of the Hungarian ethnic community. Despite their divergences, there is a specific theme that connects the two artists. Though there is a notable gap in their respective periods, it is narrowed down and transcended through their interpretations of cultural hybridity and transnational imaginaries of nature.

The theme that intricately links the two personalities is Native culture and nature. The visual portrayal of nature, Native cultural symbols, artefacts, and spirituality feature strongly in many of their paintings, and as such function as a bridge between Native and western culture. Some of the symbols used by both artists are the totem pole, feathers (owl and eagle), shield, owl, raven, and the natural landscape of Canada. In general, both artists are attracted to the culture and spirituality of the First Nations Peoples and through their work aim to transcend the boundaries of culture, time, and space existing between the two cultures.

Why are Carr and Fajtkin attracted to Native culture? And what makes Native culture engaging in general? Unsurprisingly, some of the offhand answers might suggest that this is another form of self-expression, investment in a culture that is not European, involving spirituality, harmony with nature and the Mother Earth, and finally, containing some form of enchantment and magic. But these are nonetheless merely the outward characteristics of a culture with immense depth and intensity. The multi-layered facets of human nature probe depths that Walt Whitman appropriately sums up in his poem “Song of Myself”, where he writes, “I am large. I contain multitudes” (*Leaves of Grass*). “Song of Myself” is a well-known and popular poem in which Whitman is his own muse, who sings in celebration of the self. The poem illustrates how Whitman gradually opens himself to the world of nature aimed at experiencing and absorbing more and more new entities that life may offer. “He sets out to expand the boundaries of the self to include, first, all fellow Americans, then the entire world, and ultimately the cosmos. When we come to see just how vast the self can be, what can we do but celebrate it by returning to it again and again” (*Whitman Archive*). The self, then, has no limits and boundaries, but is defined by the individual’s capacity to interact with “a cosmos” (“Song of Myself”).

The multitude of selves that Whitman, but also Markus and Conner, allude to form the many layers, hence identities, of the human being, which in relation to the ideas and the environment influence our thoughts, decisions, and behaviour in the past, present and future. This notion of transcending cultural identities, probing their traditional limits and their effect on our perceptions of culture will be illustrated through the selected works of Carr and Fajtkin in the following observations.

The Many Selves of Emily Carr

Emily Carr is considered an outspoken rebel even today based on her personal written accounts and the stories that have come down to us from letters, diary entries and the Emily Carr scholarship. She was “born and bred in Canada”, therefore any links with England were only from the stories she heard from her parents and neighbours. She felt no direct loyalty to the country of origin, nor to the Monarchy, and Carr’s distinctions between the old and the new country are very clear in her writing. Emily Carr, therefore, considered herself foremostly a Canadian, and as such she was very attached to her hometown Victoria in British Columbia. Victoria was her home, a place she knew well like the back of her hand and for this reason her stories often reflect sentimental depictions of the locality and its natural scenery, there being a deeply felt affection behind her words.

During Carr’s lifetime Victoria was a sleepy town characterized by its ultra-Englishness and its extreme loyalty to the Monarchy which its inhabitants tried very hard to preserve. The racism and bigotry that was present clearly separated the English dominant culture from the other immigrant cultures and the native cultural element. Based on her writing in *The Book of Small* (1942), the sham and exaggerated pretence that marked both Carr’s familial and broader environment was something she seemed to reject from her childhood. To what extent this was true is difficult to ascertain, nevertheless, in her life-writing Carr presents herself as a misfit and a rebel. She was the only one in her family who, it seems, went outright against the unwritten social norms of her time.

Carr’s affinity with nature and animals is highlighted in all her written works. Examples relating to her bond with nature are found in her work titled *The Book of Small* (1942), where “Small” is an embodiment of Carr herself. In one of the sketches titled “The Cow Yard” the author remarks that, “Small was wholly a Cow Yard child”, since this is where she would be in harmony with the “good earth floor, hardened by many feet, [that] pulsed with rich growth” (Carr 15). It was there that Carr, the child, felt happy and free from inhibitions and her “happiness could not help giving song, in spite of family complaint” (29). Her singing reflects her pure enjoyment in being close to nature and the animals. The peace and harmony that nature, the natural landscape, and the company of animals afforded is to continue till the end of her life.

Carr never married; rather she chose to be a painter which was considered to be a male profession in her time and surrounded herself with many pets (a monkey named Woo, cats, rats, birds, and many dogs of various breeds). The beauty of the Canadian natural landscape, her animals and the First Nations Peoples were in Carr’s understanding an integral element of a universal harmony. And in following this path the understanding of native art and culture and its promotion became Carr’s mission in life.

The multitude of selves and/or images that Carr creates of herself in her autobiography *Growing Pains* (1946) and her other writings give a subjective account of her life-story. She introduces various versions of herself: the woman artist, the lover of nature, the admirer of native culture and artistry, the friend of Sophie Frank, the pet lover, the rebel and misfit, the landlady and the spinster. But do we really know who Emily Carr was? Susan Vreeland in her novel *Forest Lover* (2004) examines the female side of Carr, a woman struggling to achieve recognition as an artist, a sole woman in a male oriented world, and a woman struggling with her sexuality. These allusions portray a somewhat different image of Carr, exploring manifold sides of her femininity. This, however, is a layer of her identity that she does not openly describe in her personal writings. Obviously, her Victorian upbringing and ultra-Conservative social environment placed greater restrictions on her than one may dare think.

In her fictional writing on Carr, Vreeland places greater emphasis on Carr’s interest in native culture and her friendship with Sophie Frank, a First Nations Salish basket maker. This friendship with Sophie Frank had been an important issue in her life, lasting over three decades, which is quite evident in her personal accounts; nevertheless, there is a certain distance in Carr’s own writing. The fictional presentation of love and warmth evident in Vreeland’s version is missing in Carr’s sketch of Sophie in *Klee Wyck* (1941). Here, Sophie Frank is given a chapter in which their friendship is mentioned, but the overall tone is extremely distanced and objective, lacking the emotional depth one would expect from a longstanding friendship. She is mostly described as “kindly, passive, and silent, an illiterate woman

who spoke Pidgin English” (Bear and Crean 68), the latter most probably not true, since the “Catholic Church had been teaching the First Nations children to read since the early 1800s” (Ibid.). Obviously, this was a side of Carr’s life she did not want to share with the outside world. This friendship according to Susan Crean has never been researched even though there are letters that prove the intensity of their relationship:

And we know from her writings that Sophie Frank meant a great deal to her; not just Sophie Frank the woman of warmth and companionship, but the very *idea* of Sophie Frank. To Carr, the story of their unlikely friendship was something to cherish. But she also understood the significance of being able to claim first-hand experience of First Nations culture. This was ultimately invaluable to her work as an artist and writer. (Ibid.)

Through Sophie Frank, Carr is given a greater insight and understanding into Indigenous culture, the art of basket weaving, and native pottery design. The knowledge Carr acquires on the totem poles and their cultural relevance is supposedly also connected with Sophie Frank. In this sense Frank may be considered the key that opens another world for Carr. Being a notable misfit requires that Carr find another “self” for herself to which she can relate and use as an identity to give expression to her (self-)portraits. Indigenous culture, therefore, is an existing element within her environment, but one that is looked down on and dismissed by the dominant white settlement, and only through an “insider” like Sophie Frank, can Carr access Native culture.

The notion of “living between cultures” (Nakagawa) and experiencing this vacillation in daily life was considered quite normal at the turn of the century Victoria, B.C. Furthermore, Emily Carr was fully aware of the many cultures that were present within her own surroundings. Her early experiences were, therefore, more of an onlooker; however, following her trip to Alaska in 1907 she found her purpose in completing a project intended to record the ruins of a quickly vanishing indigenous race. In this sense Emily Carr cast herself very much in the mould of Paul Kane (1810 – 71)¹, a documentary artist. In 1913, Carr gave an exhibition of her “Indian paintings” in Vancouver, where she places herself in the role of a missionary whose intent is to save Native culture. An excerpt from her speech highlights this concern: “I am a Canadian born and bred. . . I glory in our wonderful West and I hope to leave behind me some of the relics of its first primitive greatness. . . . Only a few more years and they will be gone forever, into silent nothingness, and I would gather my collections together before they are forever past” (Francis 197).

Though many of the native villages that Emily Carr visited were by the turn of the 19th century abandoned and left to decay, she never writes or concerns herself in depth with questions as to why the Natives have left their villages and what might be the causes of their drastic decrease in number. Instead, she highlights the intense harmony that exists between the Natives and nature. But her knowledge of Native culture as such is highly questionable, and she tends to romanticize these journeys in her writings. *Klee Wyck*, therefore, may have won a Governor General’s Award in 1941, but cannot be taken at face value to present concrete facts; rather, it was a collection of short adventure stories or “sketches” that highlight the beauty and immense spiritual power of the West Coast forests.

Carr’s love of nature included her fascination and attraction for the native way of life that embraced the whole concept of living in total harmony without any of the vital necessities of civilization. Her “Indian paintings”, therefore, are a testimony to her deeply felt appreciation for a culture, which allowed a freedom of expression that Carr always felt that she was denied in her childhood and adulthood. This notion is further given emphasis by the fact that in her later life it was eventually nature and landscape painting – absent from any form of civilization (human beings and cityscapes) – that became her sole trademark.

¹ Paul Kane (September 3, 1810 – February 20, 1871) was an Irish-born Canadian documentary painter, famous for his paintings of First Nations peoples in the Canadian west and other Native Americans in the Oregon Country. Kane travelled across the continent to document a changing world, but then succumbed to the tastes of his audience when presenting his final work (“Paul Kane”).

The shift from a dominant white culture to that of a foreign-yet-near Native culture clearly shows Carr experimenting with ways of incorporating and even appropriating the other culture and art to bolster her own identity. This is the point where Carr transcends her cultural identity and liberates her “self” from former limitations and beliefs to ensure her individual growth, irrespective of instrumentalizing the other culture in the process.

Carr’s early experiments within the Indian theme offer striking differences from the canvases painted in the late 1920s and 1930s. The work titled *Cumshewa* (1912)² (Figure 1) is one of her earlier pieces painted shortly after her return from France. The work is lively, colourful, and not bold or sculptural at all. This sketch in watercolour employs the colour technique and the black outlines that give shape to forms, which she had learnt in France. Here, “she did not entirely revert to the documentary impulse, but she reined in her creative expressiveness to represent the poles as accurately as possible. She began once again to paint what she saw in front of her, rather than exploring the significance and expressive power of the totems themselves” (“Early Totems”).

The various tones of light blues, greys, and white containing streaks of yellows with oranges depicting the hillside and the sky, offer the Fauvist colour scheme Carr had acquired in France. The central figure in the painting is a huge raven figure facing sideways. The solitary raven image dominates in its centre position rising above the hills and touching the clouds. The bird figure therewith intricately links the earth and sky creating a greater universal unity. The raven is a very important symbolic character within Native culture (“Raven cycle”) and a creature of metamorphosis, symbolizing change, and transformation (“Symbolic Meaning”). Due to its ability to transform and shapeshift the raven is also a trickster figure directly linked with magic, and a “harbinger of messages from the cosmos” (“Symbolic Meaning”). Whether Carr had any knowledge of Native raven symbolism is questionable; nevertheless, her illustration captures the essence of the raven imagery with which the artist’s self obviously identifies.

The 1912 painting in comparison with the 1931 painting titled *Big Raven* (Figure 2) features precisely the same image and landscape the only difference being a lapse of twenty years. However, the difference is certainly striking. While *Cumshewa* may be said to be pleasant and mellow in its colour scheme, *Big Raven* is impressive, bold, and sculptural using strong vibrant colours in oil and geometric shapes. This painting shows Carr at the height of her artistic career fully in control of her theme, which has intensity, assurance and depth, something that was totally missing in *Cumshewa*. The Raven figure seems to blend into the landscape in the early work, whereas in the later one it dominates the surrounding nature from its central position in the painting. The dark brown-black and bluish tones of the sculptural figure symbolize self-assurance, courage, and majesty as if braving the outside world to contradict this impression. The landscape featuring the forest, foliage, hill, and immense sky seem to be in a swirling and continuous motion all radiating and highlighting the central figure of the raven. Furthermore, one may even add that the raven figure is Carr’s portrayal of the artist’s self. Self-assurance radiates from the image, which dares to challenge the onlooker or viewer to contradict her interpretation and understanding of Native culture.

The depth and intensity of the Native themes portrayed in the 1930s are relevant in understanding Carr’s development as an artist and the identity or self she wishes to portray. The portrayal of the feminine potential as explained by Carr are the well-known D’Sonoqua or Zunoqua paintings from 1930 and 1931. The two works are described in the sketch titled “D’Sonoqua” in *Klee Wyck*. The description of the first work resembles a gothic thriller, where the reader is made to feel the menacing presence of *Guyasdoms D’Sonoqua* (1930) (Figure 3):

Her head and trunk were carved out of, or rather into, the bole of a great red cedar. She seemed to be part of the tree itself. . . Her arms were spliced and socketed to the trunk, and were flung wide in a circling, compelling movement. Her breasts were two eagle-heads, fiercely carved. . . . The eyes were two rounds of black, set in wider rounds of white, and placed in deep sockets under wide, black eyebrows. Their fixed stare bored

² The Emily Carr paintings (*Cumshewa*, *Big Raven*, *Guyasdoms D’Sonoqua*, *Zunoqua of the Cat Village*) discussed in the article are part of the public domain and freely accessible.

into me. . . Her ears were round and stuck out to catch all sounds. The salt air had not dimmed the heavy red of her trunk and arms and thighs. Her hands were black, with blunt finger-tips painted a dazzling white. (Carr, *Klee Wyck* 33)

The work successfully brings across the strength and intensity of the figure representing the “wild woman of the woods” (Carr, *Klee Wyck* 35). Her artistic technique, similar to *Big Raven*, is dark and sombre, with vibrant dark shades that highlight the centrally positioned figure of D’Sonoqua. The other painting titled *Zunoqua of the Cat Village* (1931) (Figure 4) further enhances the mystery surrounding the image:

Like the D’Sonoqua of the other villages she was carved into the bole of a red cedar tree. Sun and storm had bleached the wood, moss here and there softened the crudeness of the modelling; sincerity underlay every stroke. [...] She appeared to be neither wooden nor stationary, but a singing spirit, young and fresh, passing through the jungle. No violence coarsened her, no power domineered to wither her. She was graciously feminine. (Carr, *Klee Wyck* 39–40)

This painting is also dark in its colouring, encompassing a continuous swirling motion as the cats seem to be caught up in the waves of endless vibration all circling around D’Sonoqua’s enticing figure. Both paintings illustrate D’Sonoqua, “the wild woman of the woods” yet Carr’s interpretation provides two aspects of the same figure, perhaps with the intention to show the different selves of the same entity. D’Sonoqua can be at once frightening and threatening, but also “graciously feminine” (Carr, *Klee Wyck* 40). In her writings Carr maintains a discreet distance from her fictional selves and in the end manages to remain a mystery, an eccentric old woman and artist. Obviously, Carr wanted to keep her true self/selves and identity/identities hidden from the eyes of the outside world. This conscious effort of the artist is evident if not so much from her writings then certainly from her paintings; however, these works tell their own story of their creator. Therefore, if we wish to discover the many selves of Carr only a close examination of the paintings parallel to the fictional works might offer an insight into the actual person behind the canvas.

Carr’s late Indian paintings, therefore, are not merely descriptive documentaries of another culture, but rather depict various interpretations of the artist’s own portrayal of herself, as a “multitude of selves” within Native culture. Thereby, Emily Carr, the artist, is at once the metamorphosis of *Big Raven* and *D’Sonoqua*, “the wild woman of the woods” (Carr *Klee Wyck* 40), who is also “graciously feminine” (Ibid.) and an integral element of the natural landscape. And though these paintings were created over seven decades ago, still these (self-)portraits are as true and emotionally far-reaching today as they were in Carr’s lifetime. These works, therefore, are an appropriate image the artist can hide behind, while they grant her the freedom from social constraints that she requires.

István Fujkin’s *Art of Music Vision*

Connecting the visual with the audible is not a new concept, hence Kandinsky and the aesthetics of modernism also considered music as “the most transcendent form of non-objective art” (“Wassily Kandinsky”). The technique of metamorphosis that involves the subjective interpretation through our senses is one of the essential features of modernism. However, the Hungarian-Canadian István Fujkin transforms music through his own visual interpretation onto canvas. His artistic visualization is not non-objective art, but always relates to a concrete non-abstract theme, which in this article connects with Native Canadian spirituality and nature symbolism.

Fujkin was born in 1953 in the former Yugoslavia³, in the small village of Horgos, close to the present-day Hungarian-Serbian border. As a member of a Hungarian ethnic minority Fujkin grew up in an ethnically multicultural environment. During Fujkin’s childhood the ethnic distribution of the popula-

³ Officially, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, bordering with Hungary, is located in the northern part of Serbia, today in the Pannonian Plain.

tion within the village and the area was originally 90% Hungarian and 10% Serbian. However, with the instability that followed the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s mass emigration took place, which led to a large percentage of the younger population to look for work and financial stability in western European countries, leaving behind mostly ageing and elderly population.

The artist came from a very poor family, unable to provide him with the means to study art, even though he knew from an early age that this was to be his calling for life. Perhaps it was a combination of fate and irony that he did become a professional housepainter, a profession in which he literally never worked. Therefore, he considers himself a self-taught artist and a “visionary with a distinct techno-surrealistic style of music-canvas fusion called ‘Art of Music Vision’” (“Art of Music Vision”). Fujkin has worked as a visual artist since 1974. As Fujkin recalls⁴³, he too began painting in the “realistic mode”, but this did not seem to satisfy him and gradually worked on incorporating surrealistic elements in his works. In the early 1980s Fujkin designed LP and CD covers for well-known Hungarian rock music bands, which ultimately helped establish “Fujkin’s music vision”. From 1985 onward he also illustrated and wrote comics, including strip cartoons, and illustrated the various songs of contemporary rock bands both in Yugoslavia and abroad. He moved to Hungary in 1990 and joined the “Laser Theatre” in Budapest, where he worked as a visual designer until 1994 (Simándi and Kertész 73).

This concept, therefore, of painting and illustrating a musical tune on canvas was developed and refined gradually over the decades. The term “music fiction” coined from the term “science fiction” was originally given by Zsuzsa D. Fehér, Hungarian art historian⁴, but this did not last long as the term to be applied to Fujkin’s art came to be known as “techno-surrealist”, this last being a characteristic feature of his painted figures resembling robots. Since the 1990s the artist’s style and approach continued to change and develop, gradually coalescing into an “artistic style [that] builds upon various pre-existing styles. His uniqueness comes from his imagery of the techno-surrealistic metamorphosis of the world of music into visual arts” (“Art of Music Vision”).

Fujkin’s art is highly individualistic, because it is deeply emotional and reaches the depths of the subconscious. His inspiration and method of creation is summed up by the artist as follows:

in order to begin creating I need to be taken over by a tune. As I’m immersing myself in the melody, “vision-like images” begin building the visual expression of the tune. As an artist, I’m getting to befriend the process of transformation of the musical subject into a visual object. I sense a spiritual presence while the metamorphosis takes shape like a voice in my soul. The images might have been converted from a different dimension and turned into inspired paintings, but as the process takes place in me, they become undeniably and inseparably part of me. (“Art of Music Vision”)

The artistic creations that are inspired by a musical tune provide an expression, (self-)portrait, of the artist. These are an extension of his own multiple selves which bring forth visual images in a variety of themes.

The height of Fujkin’s artistic career was given a further boost after he moved to Canada in September 1997. Here, he had the “overwhelming feeling that he finally arrived home” (“Art of Music Vision”). Fujkin’s initial encounter with “Indians” reaches back to his childhood and originates from the popular Karl May *Winnetou* novels and the Hollywood “cowboys and Indians” movies. According to László Péter, becoming a “Hungarian Indian” meant not only studying the life of North American First Nations Peoples, but also absorbing the whole mythology created around them (18). Being a “Hungarian Indian” was not just about mutual sympathy for and understanding of another culture, but also involved being a rebel (Péter 19). This was a silent rebellion, much like that of the North American Indians, although in Fujkin’s case, it went against contemporary communism and its restrictions of movement, speech and thought. The freedom that Fujkin and his pre-1989 generation craved for was to be found in the western world, perhaps even more so on North American continent. It is not surprising then that

⁴ Information provided in the article is based on several interviews and personal correspondence with the artist.

Fujkin was already acquainted with Robbie Robertson's Native music while still living in the former Yugoslavia. In Canada, he had the opportunity to acquaint himself with the authentic traditions, the musical instruments, dancing, healing, and spiritual ceremonies. Fujkin regularly visits Pow Wows and has on several occasions taken part in sweat lodge spiritual healing ceremonies, which have enabled him to deepen his knowledge of the field and provided him with an inspiration in the completion of his *Blue Owl Project*.

The paintings published here⁵ are an integral part of the *Blue Owl Project*, which consist of altogether twenty-one paintings, mostly inspired by Robbie Robertson's⁶ contemporary native music. The paintings function as a bridge between the First Nations and the world Fujkin ultimately originates from. These paintings provide an immensely powerful, spiritual interpretation of personal expression, hence a self-portrait of the artist's cultural identity. The following paintings illustrate Fujkin's method of transcending cultural identities. Whether this is a case of cultural appropriation or merely a channel used to formulate his own artistic visions is debateable and goes beyond the present discussion.

The following artistic interpretations have been chosen from the *Blue Owl Project* with the permission of the artist. The work titled *It is a Good Day to Die* (2004) (Figure 5) was inspired by Robbie Robertson's song and lyrics "It is a Good Day to Die". The painting at first glance is an illustration of a native headdress drawn in minute detail; however, its originality lies in its composite illustration of intricately drawn musical instruments. The headband features a keyboard consisting of pearls, directly above which we can see small organ-pipes, then rattles⁷, and finally the feathers, their ends illustrating the head of a bass and electric guitar. The instruments featured in the painting are not limited to those used in Robertson's music, but rather adapt to the specific forms within the image itself. The round knob on both sides resembles a drum, which has the symbolic function of fastening and binding the whole headdress. And instead of two hanging feathers we have two saxophones that complete the picture. The background uses tones of brick-red at the top and beige from mid-centre to the bottom. These colours are symbolic of the soil and the Mother Earth, hence highlighting the bond between Native spirituality and nature. There is no distinct background landscape or identifiable form. The intention of the artist with this blurred, hazy background is to symbolically illustrate the confusion, uncertainty that preceded the final decision of the Native Peoples before going into battle. These warriors are prepared to die for what they believe in, and this symbolism is illuminated by the blood dripping or trickling downwards. The images on the painting, consisting of the forms and colours used by the artist, are rich in symbolism, which highlight the emotional message of the song. Through a metamorphosis of the music the melody and tune take on specific shapes and colours. And the music is reconstructed according to the visual attributes of Fujkin's "Music Vision" ("Art of Music Vision").

The second painting titled *The (Not) Vanishing Breed* (Figure 6) from 2001 was inspired by Robbie Robertson's song "The Vanishing Breed". The song and painting mutually enhance and highlight the notion of the "vanishing breed", though it is obvious that this "breed" did not and will not "vanish". Fujkin here proves that the past, present and future are intricately linked, which he illustrates through the image of three owls, representing the past, present and future. As in the first painting, Fujkin uses darker and lighter brown tones, which symbolize the Mother Earth, nature, and the First Nations Peoples' harmonious connection with this ever-present entity. The first owl on the right representing the past is made of rock and stone, material that is hard and durable. Compared with the other figures, this one is almost hidden alluding to the mystery and secrets of days gone by, which only the owl can keep alive through its wisdom and pass on to future generations. The owl represents the "silent battle" that the Native Peoples have been fighting all along. However, this may also signify the "silent battle" fought by the Hungarian ethnic community within the Vojvodina region since 1920 following the Treaty of Trianon.

Here, the past is a bridge that connects with the present, the second owl, in the form of a wooden totem pole. The body of the pole is dressed as a drum, the wings as a keyboard, while the beak is the

⁵ The three paintings mentioned in the article are published by permission of the artist István Fujkin.

⁶ Robbie Robertson of Mohawk and Jewish parents, is a contemporary singer, songwriter, actor, and producer.

⁷ This is an instrument used by Native dancers.

drumstick, which gives the rhythm and the beat. The eyes of each owl in the painting show a keyboard, while the ears form the scroll of a violin or a cello, since its deeper sound suits the theme better. The wooden owl image is the messenger that ultimately links the past and the future with its “peaceful wooden sound”⁸. The third owl is made of steel, a material that represents the future and offers a somewhat different (higher and greater) sound that conforms to the anticipation of the future. The stomach of the owl is a steel guitar (an acoustic guitar), its breast the tension rod of a drum, the wing is the body of an electric guitar, the eyes are keyboards, and the beak is the mouthpiece of a saxophone, while the ears are the scrolls of a cello.

The background of the painting is divided into two distinct sections. The lower half shows misty, blurred clouds that represent movement and uncertainty. The upper half, however, illustrates a clear, unicolour expanse of sky signifying an undisturbed and optimistic future for the Native peoples, who will not vanish. The size of the three owls varies in the painting. The shift from the larger rock formation to the smaller wooden and finally to an even smaller steel owl figure symbolize the transition from the past to the present and into the future. This is an allusion to the historical developments that hint a silent battle symbolized by the owl representing wisdom rather than the power and strength of the eagle. As a result the population of the First Nations was drastically cut. Though their numbers were reduced in the more distant past events, with time, they have gained a voice and strength that the steel owl depicts.

The final and third painting is a spiritual and political summary of the previous two works. This is titled *Psalm* (2005) (Figure 7) and was inspired by Robertson’s two songs, “Pray” and “Peyote Healing”. The background here is lighter than in the previous works, and illustrates a parchment, almost like an official written document, with a noticeable folding and crease positioned towards the bottom centre. In the centre we have a shield, which viewed from above is in fact a drum, with a blue owl placed in the middle. This blue owl functions as the main symbol of the whole project. Why a blue owl? According to Fujkin⁹, blue is his favourite colour and this he combines in such a way as to make the feathers circle the owl’s head creating a keyboard. The feathers hanging from the shield are owl (darker, with stripes) and eagle feathers, which symbolize stringed instruments, thereby laying emphasis on balancing the strength and power of the eagle with the silent “softer” wisdom of the owl. This balance is maintained throughout the work. The text in the bottom left corner is written in ancient runes with the following text: “Our nest is now deserted, and plundered, our offspring are educated by others . . . to oppose us. Let us hunt together again”.¹⁰

The arguments presented here refer to the dilemma of social exclusion and the notion of being a stranger in your own land. These thoughts convey a double meaning since they clearly refer to the First Nations, but there is also an implied reference to the Hungarians living in Vojvodina, Serbia, today, on whom new borders were imposed after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. And the four small stones at the bottom in four different colours are clearly a native symbol symbolizing the four races of the Earth, the four seasons, the four phases of human life, and the four cardinal directions. These symbols unite native cultural and spiritual beliefs with western cultural beliefs. The background illustrates a lighter shade toward the upper half contrary to the other two paintings. This alludes to the purity and clarity of the individual subconscious, hence a gradual unburdening of the body and soul. The individual selves portrayed in these paintings show the artist transcending his inherited or imposed cultural identities.

Conclusion

Carr’s and Fujkin’s highly individual artistic creations are a testimony and self-expression of their own identity, roots, and spiritual beliefs. They are both comfortable within Native culture, but Fujkin identifies himself, nevertheless, as a Hungarian-Canadian, while Carr remains within her English-Canadian identity. Fujkin’s paintings within the *Blue Owl Project* are a bricolage of images relating to Native

⁸ An expression used by István Fujkin.

⁹ Based on the information provided by István Fujkin.

¹⁰ My translation; the original Hungarian version is the following: “Fészkünk elhagyva és kifosztva, utódainkat mások nevelik . . . ellenünk. . . Add, hogy ismét együtt vadásszunk”. Text provided by István Fujkin.

culture, symbolism, and the Mother Earth but the underlying messages move toward the hybrid potential as they draw very distinct parallels with native cultural beliefs and the beliefs of the Hungarian ethnic minorities beyond the borders of Hungary. Carr's paintings delve into native spiritualism but move toward a more pronounced depth in colour and nature imagery in her later works. The time gap between Carr and Fujkin, representing past and present, literally disappears through their highly individual interpretations of Native cultural symbolism and the imaginaries of nature. The two artists effectively project a universal (self-)portrait and do it by blending clearly distinct cultural identities.



Figure 1. Emily Carr, *Cumshewa* (1912)

http://www.museevirtuel.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/emily_carr/en/popups/pop_large_en.php?worksID=1378



Figure 2. Emily Carr, *Big Raven* (1931)

http://www.museevirtuel.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/emily_carr/en/popups/pop_large_en_VAG-42.3.11.html



Figure 3. Emily Carr, *Guyasdoms D'Sonoqua* (1930)
http://www.museevirtuel.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/emily_carr/en/popups/pop_large_en.php?worksID=1592



Figure 4. Emily Carr, *Zunoqua of the Cat Village* (1931)
http://www.museevirtuel.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/emily_carr/en/popups/pop_large_en_VAG-42.3.21.html



Figure 5. István Fujkin, *It is a Good Day to Die* (2004)
Inspired by the song “It is a Good day to Die”
by Robbie Robertson Oil on canvas 160 cm x 100 cm (by permission of the artist)



Figure 6. István Fujkin, *The (Not) Vanishing Breed* (2001)
Inspired by the song “The Vanishing Breed”
by Robbie Robertson Oil on canvas 130 c x 130 cm (by permission of the artist)



Figure 7. István Fujkin, *Psalm* (2005)
 Inspired by the songs “Pray” and “Peyote Healing”
 by Robbie Robertson Oil on Canvas 130 cm x 90 cm (by permission of the artist)

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