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Art Incarnating an Act of Ethnic Resistance and Transcending National Boundaries: Allen Sapp

L'art qui incarne un acte de résistance ethnique et qui transcende les frontières nationales : Allen Sapp

Oksana Weretiuk

Abstract

The essay aims to discuss the notion that Aboriginal people, by their mere existence, incarnate an act of resistance. Continuing to live, despite the 19th-century Canadian policy that wanted them to die out and disappear, they kept their ethnicity, and even when adopting the dominant group's culture they present a unique cultural space in Canada. Among those who have drawn their artistic inspirations directly from Aboriginal community and folk art is Allen Sapp (1928–2015), a Canadian Cree painter who resided in North Battleford. He was one of the first Canadian Indigenous artists to enjoy international acclaim. Sapp recorded the everyday lives and festivities of the Cree and other prairie peoples, and that could be read as a form of ethnic resistance. On the other hand, Allen Sapp absorbed the artistic achievements of the European school, creating Canadian art which transcends the national boundaries of his ethnic community.

Keywords: Allen Sapp, the Cree, First Nations artist, resistance, Canadian art

Résumé

L'article vise à discuter de la notion selon laquelle, par leur existence, les peuples autochtones incarnent un acte de résistance. Continuant à vivre, malgré la politique canadienne du XIX^e siècle qui voulait qu'ils s'éteignent et disparaissent, ils ont conservé leur appartenance ethnique et, même en adoptant la culture du groupe dominant, ils continuent à présenter un espace culturel unique au Canada. Parmi ceux qui ont tiré leurs inspirations artistiques directement de la communauté autochtone et de l'art populaire, il y a Allen Sapp (1928–2015). Il a été l'un des premiers artistes autochtones du Canada à bénéficier d'une renommée internationale. Sapp a enregistré la vie quotidienne et les festivités des Cris et d'autres peuples des Prairies, ce qui pourrait être interprété comme une forme de résistance ethnique. D'autre part, Allen Sapp a absorbé les réalisations artistiques de l'école européenne, créant un art canadien qui transcende les frontières nationales de sa communauté ethnique.

Mots-clés : Allen Sapp, les Cris, artiste autochtone, résistance, l'art canadien



i speak cree to myself
ni nehinawewimison
so i will not lose my tongue again
esa mona kihwam ni wanihtahan ntayamowin
my voice should be cree
ntaki ayamiyan nehinawewinihk
my other voice should stand back
kotak ntayamiwin ta ki nipawiht otanahk
let my voice be heard
ntayamiwin ta ki pehtamek
so that you can understand
kittu ki nisitotamek
we did not disappear

Duncan Mercredi, from “Two Poems”

Allen Frederick Sapp was born on Red Pheasant Reserve on January 2, 1928, to Cree parents Alex and Agnes Sapp, and died on December 28, 2015, in North Battleford. The legendary Cree Chief Poundmaker (1842–1886) was among his ancestors. Sapp began his life on the Cree Nation reserve located 34 km south of North Battleford (in west central Saskatchewan), in an area known as Eagle Hills. Fifty years before Sapp’s birth, in 1878, the Cree were settled on a reserve in the Eagle Hills and were referred to officially as the Red Pheasant Band. In those times the First Nations who either roamed the less fertile plains or became accustomed to the lifestyles of their oppressors, hence acquiring their cultural traits, were forced to resettle to reserves, where diseases, poverty and famine took their toll. During Sapp’s childhood, his mother was in poor health and lived in a sanatorium for an extended time, so he grew up with her parents at Red Pheasant. Sapp’s parents and siblings resided at Little Pine Reserve, about 100 kilometres northwest of Red Pheasant. His mother died of tuberculosis in 1942, when Sapp was fourteen. According to Christian Thompson, “Allen Saposkum, who later shortened his last name to Sapp, was a sickly child who spent most of his childhood in bed as the result of spinal meningitis. As the result of his illness, Sapp’s formal education was limited and he could barely read or write in English” (2004, 119).

Growing up in severe poverty, Sapp was the third of seven children, four of whom died as children. Nevertheless, it appears that Saposkum had a happy and rewarding childhood. After all, the artist states this in his autobiographical book: “I was lucky: I was born into a loving family, whose roots gave me a strong sense of identity” (Sapp



1996, 4). Never having learned to read or write, he found refuge and satisfaction in drawing pictures. His Nokum (grandmother) was a very warm and caring person, who taught him to value his heritage and always encouraged him to continue his painting. She believed that one day he would become a real artist and imparted in him this faith in his talent. Being bound by illness to his bed at the reserve, Sapp received a more traditional education, and was taught his Cree language and culture; he could speak very little English even as he grew into adulthood.¹

It was from his grandmother, Maggie Soonias, that Sapp developed his sense of self, his values, his spiritual guidance, and his respect for his Cree heritage. As a child, his favourite activity was drawing and sketching. Maggie Soonias made Sapp's small confined world a place of traditional storytelling that aided the development of his inherent love for drawing (see Thompson 2004, 119). For centuries many Amerindian tribes used storytelling to transmit educational messages to the next generation. This traditional pedagogical method was and still is effective because Indigenous stories present essential ideas and values in a simple, entertaining form, show “how language shapes the world, not merely reflects it” (Kurzen 2014, 207), and in this way they develop creative skills in children. According to Neal McLeod, “storytelling is a visionary process because it challenges us to rethink, reorder, and reimagine the world” (McLeod 2007, 100). Therefore, the Cree storytelling of Sapp's grandmother fostered the development of his visual and imaginative abilities.

The Red Pheasant Cree gave an Indigenous name to Sapp when he was eight years old and suffering from a childhood illness. The future artist was given his name through detailed information received during the spiritual experience of an old matriarch, his grandmother's sister. In English the name Kiskayetum is translated as “he perceives it”. Perhaps this name (to perceive - to become aware of (something) through the senses, especially the sight; recognize or observe) heralded his special powers of imagination and expression. Subsequently, the artistic development of the self-educated painter began at the reserve. It is interesting to know that in 2016, shortly after Sapp's death, Kjelti Katherine, a singer-songwriter from Battleford, wrote a song titled “He Perceives It.” Inspired by Allen Sapp's life, the song stresses in the very title the prophetic meaning of the name and the power of the Indigenous roots of the Saskatchewan Cree celebrity.

Sapp “spent a couple of years at the Anglican Residential School at Onion Lake” (Sapp 1996, 8). From 1883 until the beginning of the 1940s, the policy of Indian Affairs regarding First Nations education still focused on residential schools as primary vehicles for “civilization” and “assimilation”. The Cree children, like other Indigenous children, were permanently isolated from their families by being

1) Some fragments of Sapp's biography were published in Weretiuk, “Indian Endurance in A. Suknaski's Poems and A. Sapp's Painting.”



placed in educational institutions, where they “experienced the shock of entry, the loneliness, the harsh regimen, and significantly the ethnocentric academic and religious curriculum” (Coleman 2007, 194). Consequently, many of the youth became irreversibly assimilated into the prevailing social group and numerous tribes and their traditions were permanently lost. The schools would force children to abandon their traditional languages, dress, religion and lifestyle. Allen Sapp recalls:

There were about sixty of us there, all Indian, but it was not a very happy experience. [...] We were forbidden to speak Cree – but Cree was the only language I knew. If we were caught speaking Cree to one another we would be punished. One particular day I was caught speaking Cree to one of my classmates and told that I would have to go up and remain in my room. That afternoon there was a cowboy movie showing in town and I so wanted to go to that movie. I sat in my room and cried. I look back at the days I spent at the Onion Lake School, and wonder – maybe if the teachers had been more understanding, perhaps if they had been able to speak Cree, it may not have been so difficult for us to learn English. (Sapp 1996, 9)

Perhaps the lack of Cree in his school years and adolescence provided him with a stimulus for painting – he was forbidden to speak his mother tongue, but he was not forbidden to render the Cree in paint, using the language of colours.

As an adult, in 1960, seeking better living conditions for his wife and his son off-reserve, he moved to North Battleford, to pursue a career as a professional artist. As luck would have it, one day he met Dr. Allan B. Gonor, a North Battleford physician who discovered the Sapp’s talent as a painter and encouraged him to paint reserve life as he knew it. The life at the reserve was what Sapp knew best of all. These realities were the basic nature of his identity. Dr. Gonor noticed this earlier than Sapp himself did and helped him to get access to academic painting lessons, which closely followed conventional, academic European models – in this way Sapp would be able to adapt European influences to reflect the Cree reality. The artist met with great success in his first show, which Dr. Gonor and Wynona Croft Mulcaster (a Canadian painter and teacher from Saskatchewan, a master of prairie landscapes and Sapp’s teacher) arranged in 1968, and where he sold most of his paintings. The public response to Sapp’s pictures led to his showings being extended to other major Canadian and American cities, as well as to England, which further strengthened his Cree artistic credentials. His art crossed the borders of his ethnic community, Canada and the continent. At the same time, the artist – assimilated and acculturated to some extent – returned to his prior Indigenous identity, which had been partly “blunted” by him in Battleford – at any rate, in his outward appearance and customs. As Sapp’s biographer recalls,



Moving to North Battleford, they [he and his wife] rented the upper story of a house, and Sapp re-created himself into an image he felt would be accepted in the white culture. He cut his hair short, and wore an ill-fitting suit coat and horn-rimmed glasses. He began to paint. He painted simple scenes of mountains, streams, and animals and sold them for a few dollars apiece on the street [...]. (Thompson 2004, 119)

A beginner in visual art, Sapp tried to satisfy a white culture in order to survive in some way, to the detriment of his Cree ancestry. But after his first successes the painter

reunited himself to his heritage, as not only the descendent of chiefs Red Pheasant and Poundmaker, but as the grandson of Maggi Soonias. He braided his hair and again wore boots and jeans, except when at powwows in his colourful beaded regalia. Dancing at powwows and participating in traditional ceremonies was Sapp's way to remain true to himself and his grandmother's teachings. (Thompson 2004, 120)

Sapp's paintings in a realistic way reconstruct his life at the reserve. Mostly made in acrylics, sometimes in oil, very colourful and bright, they centre on family and community. A lot of his canvases form a Child Cycle. Among them are the following: *Native Child with Feather*, N.D., acrylic, 10 × 8 (portrait of an aboriginal child with braids and a feather in her hair);² *Nice Day to Play*, 1983, acrylic, 10 × 12 (summer scene, blue sky, four kids playing ball. There is a well in the middle ground, and a house with three people and a dog in the background); *Kid Has Two Dogs*, 1981, acrylic, 24 × 36 (winter, mostly grey colour scene, house and horses and dogs in background; dogs are habitués of Sapp's paintings); *Brother and Sister Playing*, 1976, acrylic, 16 × 20 (winter scene; a boy and a girl, presumably siblings, are playing outside a house); *Playing Hockey*, acrylic, 60 × 78; *Lil' Fellow Watching His Dad*, 1994, acrylic, 55 × 85 (winter scene, a man cutting wood, a little boy and a dog watching); *Playing Hockey at Sundown*, 1995, acrylic, 60.96 × 60.96 ("A little bit of ice behind the house would be all that was needed for a few children to play hockey" (Sapp 1996, 52). An amusing sundown, two dogs not far from the children); *Two Lil' Kids Sliding/Boys Sledging*, 1993, acrylic, 40.6 × 50.8 (one boy is knee-deep in snow and holding his sleigh, the second is happily sliding); *Lil' Fellows Playing*, 1990, acrylic, 40 × 50 (a little boy with a little sled and a dog). Allan Sapp's life-long love for children and his desire to help them was recognized by UNICEF (the only organization within the United Nation system dedicated exclusively to the welfare of children), when, after

2) The painting described here are available online at http://www.allensapp.com/about/the_life_and_art_of_allen_sapp.html and <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/allensapp/peinture-paintings/details-eng.php?CatID=1>



UNICEF's careful selection processes for greeting card designs four of his paintings were selected: *Puppies* (in 1986), *Nokum Coming to Visit*, *Lil' Fellows Playing*, *Two Lil' Kids Sliding* (all in 1996). All of them are presented from the child's perspective. We see Sapp's children playing with each other, helping around the house and being in close contact with nature and animals. They are happy in their place with their family, as Sapp himself was at the reserve, when not at the residential school. A fragment from Cree author Larry Loyie's autobiographical children's novel *As Long as the Rivers Flow* perhaps serves as an illustration of Sapp's childhood. The novel is about a child who, along with his siblings, was taken from his parents, from his happy childhood and forced into a residential school. "What was this school? He didn't want to leave home. He played with other children all day. He was learning to hunt and fish to help feed the family, and he was pretty good at it, too" (Loyie 2003, 33).

The overwhelming majority of Sapp's paintings reflect Cree activities at Red Pheasant. First of all, the author presents his closest people: Granny, mother, father, siblings, but also neighbours, acquaintances, friends or anybody he ever met. For example, *Springtime at Red Pheasant Reserve*, 1972, acrylic, 24 × 18, shows his beloved Granny, Maggie Soonias, feeding chickens in her yard. There is a forest in the background. *My Grandfather Stretching a Weasel Skin*, 1993, acrylic, 40.6 × 50.8 (a brown-grey scene) features an old man sitting and working in a cabin with a hammer, stretching the skin which could be used to make clothing and moccasins. *Father Bringing in Groceries*, 1970, acrylic, 20 × 16, apparently presents his father standing at nighttime in the doorway of a house. There is a sledge to the left of him. This is a typical winter scene at Red Pheasant.

A part of Sapp's paintings reflects traditional Cree activities: hunting, fishing, cutting wood, gathering roots, berries, and seeds, knitting, cooking, etc. *Bringing Jumping Deer Home*, 1969, acrylic, 18 × 24, is one such canvas. It is a winter scene with a clouded sky. A man on a horse is dragging a deer with a rope attached to the horse towards a house on the horizon line. *Nokum Making Bannock*, 1988, acrylic, 60 × 91 (Nokum is sitting near the fire and making flat quick bread, round bannock; there are several versions of this motif, all of them present traditional cooking); *Making Beadwork*, 1974, acrylic, 40.6 × 50.8 (a woman sitting and doing beadwork³ with Cree motifs) – all present traditional work.

In traditional Indigenous life, work is always directed to a distinct practical purpose, and Sapp's pictures present his fellow tribesmen and tribeswomen doing the work that needs to be done. First Nations were always seen as being practically minded. Their practical orientation, their skills and resourcefulness, and their adaptability to

3) Originally, beads were carved from natural materials like shells, coral, turquoise and other stones, copper and silver, wood, amber, ivory, and animal bones, horns, and teeth.



the natural environment, were adopted by the first European newcomers in North America. Kenneth McNaught offers an insight into these relations:

The Indians were indispensable to the early Europeans in North America, who acquired many pioneer skills from them, but the conflicting ‘white’ interests of private greed, religious evangelism, imperialism and race were later to corrupt and embitter the Indians, intensifying their indigenous tribal rivalries, and rendering them either uncertain allies or implacable enemies. (McNaught 1982:19)

Contact between the Cree and European fur traders and settlers rapidly accelerated societal change: new tools, kitchen utensils, dress, new activities. A great number of Sapp’s paintings present new activities which were cultivated at the reserve by newcomers. It is worth mentioning that an Indian Reserve was (and remains) a tract of land set aside under the treaty agreements for the exclusive use of an Indian band. Band members possessed the right to live on reserve lands, but the European colonizers tried to “civilize” Aboriginal peoples by introducing them to agriculture, Christianity and a sedentary way of life. The reserve system was, in fact, a government-sanctioned displacement of the First Nations. The Cree tried to fight for their Indigenoussness. The Métis-led Red River and North-West Resistances of 1870 and 1885 were uprisings against the Canadian government aimed at protecting Indigenous ways of life, but both were ultimately defeated (for details, see Stanley 1992, 48–49, 67 et seq., 255–280).⁴ During the 1870s, most Aboriginal people were forcibly relocated to reserves, where government agents tried to introduce them to new means of subsistence, primarily agriculture. At the time of Sapp’s childhood these changes had taken hold. That is why we see Sapp’s fellow tribesmen harvesting, cutting and drying hay, threshing, milking cows, etc. *Getting the Cows a Cold Drink*, 1968, acrylic, 16 × 20 (winter scene with a man holding an axe near a small pool of water; multiple cows surround the man); *Loading Hay*, 1991, acrylic, 12 × 16 (winter scene, a man is loading hay into a hayrack); *Taking Water Home*, 1975, acrylic, 24 × 36 (winter scene, a man in a traditional red shirt, on a sleigh, with two horses and a water barrel on the back); *Milking a Cow*, 1968, acrylic, 20 × 16 (indoor scene, a man crouched down milking a cow; there is a lantern hanging from the ceiling – a sign of civilization); *Men Threshing*, 1970, acrylic, 24 × 36 (summer scene: blue sky with clouds, golden field, a man standing on top of the hay rack feeding hay into the thresher); *Planting Potatoes*, 1986, acrylic, 45 × 60 (a man working with a hand plow pulled by a horse; an old woman (Nokum) and a child (Sapp as a child) have buckets in their hands; a beautiful spring sky with clouds – Sapp is a master in painting skies); *Paintings of Red Pheasant Reserve. Collage*, 1971, acrylic, 18 × 24 (a compound

4) Stanley’s book is not devoid of racist prejudice against Indigenous Peoples.



of small paintings surrounding a slightly larger painting, reflecting everyday life at Red Pheasant).

The painter preserved in colours the traditional entertainment at the reserve. *Dance Hall at Stoney Reserve*, 1969, acrylic, 30 × 48 (winter scene, people entering a dance hall) reflects the traditional Aboriginal practice of dancing, even on snow or in a simple log cabin; *Getting Ready to Sing*, 1990, acrylic, 18 × 24 (summer scene with summer dance, line of tents and tipis, with four dancers standing nearby; next to them there is a man holding a drum and, in the immediate foreground, a woman with a blue scarf sitting next to a pot hanging over the fire); *Pow Wow at the Battlefords*, 1971, acrylic, 30 × 48 (summer scene, cloudy sky with light green forest background; tipis set up from the foreground to the background with people milling around; a woman cooking by a fire in the foreground; a man dressed in ceremonial feathers in middle ground). It must be mentioned that Allen Sapp himself for a very long time (as long as his legs allowed) continued to dance at powwows. *The Round Dance*, 1987, acrylic, 101.6 × 152.4 (three men with hand drums in the foreground, dancers with joined hands in a circle in a log cabin in the background). The Round Dance is usually held indoors in different homes.

One of Sapp's favourite motifs is the Sun Dance: two typical examples are *Sun Dance at Night*, 1969, pastel on paper, 43.18 × 59.68 and *Sun Dance on the Reserve*, 1992, acrylic, 121.9 × 182.8 (people are praying, with a tall central, sacred pole in the foreground). Sun Dances are sacred to the Cree. This North American Plains Aboriginal cultural ceremony performed in honour of the sun is celebrated in summer to give thanks to creation and to ensure collective survival; it involves fasting, seeking visions, and physical self-sacrifice. Traditionally, Sun Dances united the Cree and other North American tribes, strengthening their identity and cultural vitality. The ceremony bands and tribes congregated at a predetermined location. The Sun Dance was forbidden under the Indian Act of 1885, but this ban was generally ignored; only as late as 1951, however, was it dropped from the Act. The dance remains an importance ceremony for many communities (Gadacz 2006).

As Sapp notes, "At Sun Dance, prayers are said for all people and vows to Manito, the Great Spirit. Those participating will fast for two days and nights, and there is also singing and dancing [...]. The Sun Dance would go on for two days and nights and seemed to be particularly spiritual and impressive at night under the moon and the stars" (Sapp 1996, 3, 25). In accordance with tradition, the ceremony is arranged by a medicine man, either as a request for supernatural aid or in response to a vision. On the final day of the ceremony different versions of the same dance take place.

Many anthropologists especially emphasize the religious meaning of the ceremony rituals. Åke Hultkrantz (1981) discusses different approaches to this topic; Phillip M. White (1998, 35–39) gives an annotated bibliography on it. Sapp



also wanted to raise the importance of the religious aspects of the Sun Dance. He was aware that religious thought and action were integrated into every aspect of the sociocultural level of traditional Cree life. In fact spirituality is considered by all Indigenous Peoples to be a natural component of everything in the world. They perceive themselves as a part of the total living universe and think that people must live in harmony with the natural world. Such ideology penetrated Sapp's painting. The overwhelming majority of the characters in his canvases – in accordance with North American Aboriginals' life style – spend their time in the open air, in a natural habitat. Dogs, horses, cats, hens, rabbits, grass, birch, maple and pond accompany the Cree on weekdays and holidays.

Allan Sapp is one of the most prominent Canadian Indigenous artists. Many Native people in Canada were wrenched away from their families and lost their identity. By good fortune, Allen Sapp received a more traditional Cree education, and later on he could explore issues of identity, relationships and self-determination by means of his canvases. His realistic, regional art incarnated an act of resistance while evincing the resilience of the Cree. For a long time, there have been two traditional ways of literary presentation of Indigenous people, or a dual pattern of their image, named by Margaret Atwood the "Victor/Victim" dualism (Atwood 1991, 91). Sapp's canvases do not correspond to either of these literary traditions: he perceived the Aboriginal dilemma of living in new conditions. His paintings bear evidence to the true history of Canada: the Aboriginal people are the true First Nations of the North American continent, present long before their countrymen of historically European origin. Allen Sapp's paintings give us an intimate portrait of his own people and their determination to survive. The artist strove to capture and preserve these forgotten scenes of the Saskatchewan First Nations' heritage for us and subsequent generations. Moreover, Sapp himself has become a testimony to the Indigenous People's endurance, showing a great ability to endure and to overcome an unpleasant and difficult situation. The artist in his art and in his own lifestyle manifested the act of Indigenous resistance in Western Canada, in Saskatchewan. His canvases clearly manifest the presence of the Cree in Saskatchewan, whose very name comes from Cree, meaning "swift flowing river."

Sapp was one of the first Canadian First Nations artists to enjoy national and later international acclaim. The artist from Red Pheasant Reserve was elected to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1975. He was named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1987. Sapp's almost documentary recording of the everyday lives and festivities of the Cree could be read as a form of resisting oppression, obliteration, reconciling with his situation, and transcending ethnic/national boundaries. His canvases speak Cree, his mother's speech, but at the same time they speak in different languages because of their universal importance.



On the wall of one of the rooms of the Allen Sapp Gallery in North Battleford, in September, 2010, I noticed a poem by Ovide William Mercredi,⁵ Cree activist, politician and author of a volume of poems titled *My Silent Drum* (2015) (Compare the title of Sapp's book *I Heard the Drums*, which may be read/received metaphorically). Although Cree is his first language, Mercredi wrote *My Silent Drum* in English, with some Cree words here and there. In his poem placed in Sapp's exhibition room the poet presents the essence of the history of the Cree nation. Allen Sapp did the same in his canvases.

The River

If I could be a river, any river
I would be the Saskatchewan
If I could decide the age, any age
I would choose time before Canada.
Around about when Neheywak came
Shortly after the Manitou made them
To them, I was a powerful Spirit
Offering tobacco to seek my kindness
Before travelling on my belly in their canoes
I took them up and down my entire being
From the Rockies down to Lake Winnipeg
Carrying their goods and families to and from
I watched them drink from my shores
I let them bathe and clean their brown bodies
And to use my water for cooking their foods
I was happy when my water was in Ceremony
Neheywak knew how to pray with me.⁶

5) Ovide William Mercredi is the brother of Duncan Mercredi, whose poem has served me as a motto.

6) The print version of the poem's title is "A River" (Mercredi 2015, 71).



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