CAN THE QALLUNAAT SPEAK ABOUT INUIT ART PROPERLY?

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While there have been recent improvements, there is still very little diversity in aesthetic teaching, research, and debates among experts, despite such variety in art. In addition, we do not hesitate to make aesthetic judgements (taken in a very broad sense) about artifacts whose cultural anchors we do not know, acting on the premise that our views and concepts are universally shared. This paper takes a closer look at the Inuit art view to show how Inuit cultures may help us broaden our aesthetic views by questioning the Western opposition between tradition and originality. Why Inuit art? Inuit cultures have been the subject of prolific scientific writing and, thus, abundantly observed and studied. However, it is still misunderstood and exoticized by the Qallunaat or the "non-Inuit people" in Inuktitut.

For discussion purposes, I raise and discuss a few tensions in how we approach and understand Inuit art. I also discuss the impact this may have on a possible "aesthetics of Inuit art". I then focus on the reception of Inuk visual artist Annie Pootoogook (Kinngait [Cape Dorset], 1969 - Ottawa, 2016) and discuss it as both a case study and a tribute. Her visual artwork is an excellent example of misunderstood work (or, should we say: a work approached with the wrong hermeneutic reading). Inuit art fits no (Western) category, and Pootoogook's stunning artwork adds to the puzzle by not even fitting the category of 'Inuit art'. Therefore, we will try to answer the question: How can philosophical aestheticians adjust to Inuit art so as not to sink into either exoticization or misunderstanding?

Despite recent improvements, philosophers tend to formulate their aesthetic views based on a very narrow range of artworks. Although there is variety in art, the same canonical examples are used repeatedly (*Guernica*, *Brillo Boxes* or Pollock's *Number 5*), as if it would be dangerous to pick a different one. This can, of course, be explained by the desire to be understood, as a famous example will be known to all. However, it also shows something else. Philosophy experts usually see their own culture as a point of reference, yet do not hesitate to make value judgements (taken in a very broad sense) regarding artefacts whose cultural anchors they do not know, acting as if their views and art-related concepts were universally shared.

This paper takes a closer look at the Inuit perspective on art to expose how Inuit cultures[1] may broaden views on aesthetics, namely by questioning the Western opposition between tradition and originality. Why Inuit art? It has been documented for a while, as Inuk scholar Heather Igloliorte and art historian Carla Taunton states: "While the writing and framing of Indigenous art histories—arguably a diachronic project of linking past and present—is not a new initiative, it continues to be an urgent one" (Igloliorte and Taunton 2017, 5). Abundantly observed and studied, Inuit cultures have been the subject of prolific scientific writing by ethnographers, anthropologists, and linguists (Duchemin-Pelletier 2015, Graburn and Stern 1999). However, it is still misunderstood and exoticized—i.e., seen as *strange*, simply because it is foreign—by experts (Fanon, 1952; Root 2007) and the *Qallunaat*, or the "non-Inuit people," as they are called in Inuktitut. While some improvements can

1 Colonial history of 'Canada' is far more complex than it may look from the outside. In the Canadian Constitution, Indigenous people are grouped legally into three distinct categories: Inuit, First Nations, and Métis. Each category bears a very specific history: First Nations and Inuit People have had cultural contact only relatively recently and have been impacted very differently by European colonization, so they cannot be lumped together under one category. However, for the sake of readability, I will use the term "Indigenous" as a general category. Discrimination against Indigenous people is intertwined with other forms of colonialism and discriminations (for example, economic discrimination between French and English settlers' descent). See also (Guimond 2019).

be observed, there is still a lot of work ahead. As Higgins (2017, 340) states, "Few in academia would defend the idea of Western cultural supremacy [...] Most Western aestheticians in my experience happily acknowledge that the aesthetics of other cultures should be studied and taken seriously. There is a gap, however, between that conviction and standard practice within the field."

Inuit cultures may enrich contemporary aesthetic debates, namely by questioning the opposition between tradition and originality through various cultural exchanges. I will argue that decolonial aesthetics is not merely a matter of adding new categories, but instead requires assessing and revising existing categories. In particular, as I will show in the next section, the distinction between art and craft, problematic from the start, might be one key to a better understanding of the full value of Inuit art. For discussion purposes, I will end with some remarks on Inuk visual artist Annie Pootoogook (Kinngait [Cape Dorset], 1969 - Ottawa, 2016), discussing it as both a case study and a tribute. If Inuit art fits no (Western) category, but is, without any doubt, stunning art, Pootoogook's work adds to the puzzle by not even fitting the 'Inuit art' category. This singularity has led to a misunderstanding of her work: Pootoogook's drawings have been treated with a double bias (racist and sexist), which has prevented the public from perceiving their relevance. Nevertheless, the good news is that we can learn from this.

Art versus craft: a wrong distinction from the start

We often have a stereotypical view of Inuit art, namely the one seen in tourist stores: soapstone-carved animals. However, as Graburn and Stern (1999) note, "commercial art" (the objects Inuit artists began crafting at the request of Southern tradesmen) is grounded in Inuit traditional techniques, but this craftsmanship is the result of recent socio-cultural changes that also address gender issues. Since the 1950s, Inuit women have developed new production opportunities in commercial crafting, in which both men and women have been very successful.

This grew into a phenomenon of competition and emulation that led Inuit artists to discuss the aesthetic dimension of art forms and the place of modernity in their practice.

In fact, our portrayal of Inuit "craftsmanship" is distorted by the fact that many of the so-called traditional objects were originally made smaller to be given as toys or exchanged as gifts for the South.[2] They were not supposed to serve as a yardstick for gauging the state of the advancement of visual arts in Inuit culture. However, the commercial demand generated by the "exotic charm" of these artefacts has changed community practices. To ensure economic development, artists were forced to adapt to a conceptual and institutional framework that did not necessarily suit them but in which they were integrated. Thus, the contact with Southern cultures greatly impacted what we believe (misleadingly) to be traditional Inuit craftsmanship. Even the relation between men and women within the communities was affected due to the assigned gendered role in art production.

Moreover, outside Inuit communities, another major change in Inuit art production occurred when Inuit artists began to widen their practice to commercial art and attend Western art schools in the South. While the need to "distinguish 'craft' as a process and practice from 'craft' as a category of disciplines" (Shiner 2012, 232) may still be relevant in some ways, this label remains pejorative: *ethnic art* is often seen as a synonym of *craft* and a euphemism for *naïve* or *primitive*.

Inuit increasingly made their own the Western concept of "ethnic arts", for they had not much other option. After all, any artist, whoever they may be, belongs to an ethnic group—including the great Western masters. To identify with this label "ethnic art" means to endorse the

[2] On that point (the effects of commercialization on so-called traditional artistic practices), see: Burns Coleman, Elizabeth. 'Appreciating "Traditional" Aboriginal Painting Aesthetically'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2004) 62, 235-247, <https://doi-org.biblioproxy.uqtr.ca/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2004.00156.x>

precedence of Western art as the reference point over "non-Western" art (the "other"). Inuit artists were stuck—until recently, they had no voice to contest such labels in academia or art-related institutions, as the epistemic power relationship was biased.[3] However, with a decolonial approach to their own craftsmanship, Inuit artists have no other label to endorse than that of "Inuit" if (and only if) they wish to claim it.[4] But this does not protect them from the risks of cultural marginalization (Hitomi and Loring 2018).

Contact between Inuit art and the West has been, in some cases, an opportunity for creativity (Bouchard 2006). However, it has also come with backlash:

> [The] persistence of Indigenous conceptions of art and the local investment of Western artistic criteria make it clear that contemporary Inuit art has not been emptied of its cultural substratum. Far from having submitted entirely to the diktat of the Western art market, artists have been able to negotiate openings for the expression of their artistic understanding. Or rather, [...]: they have incorporated Western limiting criteria into their practice, trying to do the best they can with or against their will. (Duchemin-Pelletier 2015, 54, our translation)

The relation between the dominant group and the artists themselves was, indeed, unbalanced. The Inuit had already produced for Western buyers since the middle of the 19th century as whalers and then mis-

3 "[T]he "coloniality" and all the concepts that we have introduced since then are concepts created not in Europe but in the "Third World". This means that all these concepts come from the experience of coloniality in the Americas. They are certainly closely intertwined with modernity, but no longer 'apply' the categories born in Europe to "understand" the colonial legacy. On the contrary, we have converted Europe into an area of analysis rather than a provider of "cultural and epistemic resources" (Diallo 2014).

4 See also: Igloliorte, Heather, et al., "Killjoys, Academic Citizenship and the Politics of Getting Along." *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 38 (2017): 187-208. <muse.jhu.edu/article/709227>

sionaries, trading post managers, and other visitors until they formed a self-managed association (Duchemin-Pelletier 2015, 60, footnote 2). Hence, their art was stuck between two labels: 'exotic' or 'naïve'. Not because they are, but because of our inability to question our conceptual framework and to see Inuit's contribution to aesthetic and artistic debates; their views about it were not transmitted by Western institutional means (until recently, see: Igloliorte 2017).

Research in aesthetics is still reluctant to consider anything that comes out of the usual canons and categories, even when the data exists. In other words, having documentation is not enough to conclude that a culture is integrated into the field of knowledge. Knowing things about a given culture does not guarantee that those things will be interpreted at their fair value. Moreover, the data collected show that Inuit artists living outside their communities must often identify their work as "ethnic art" in order to establish themselves as professional artists, as if they would not be fully-fledged artists otherwise. But this label, as noted above, does not fit their production, for the relation between tradition and innovation is far more interesting than the blunt dichotomy used in Western theory.

Inuit & the Qallunaat's Dilemma

The Qallunaat [non-Inuk] dilemma occurs when I, a Westerner, want to try to understand, enjoy, and speak about Inuit art by fitting it into my own conceptual network.[5] It happens when I try to appraise its value, originality, and so on, with the theoretical background and vocabulary that usually describes it as traditional (non-original), naïve (basic) or amateur. 'Inuit art' (as a label) is a vibrant example of a concept that does not fit the categories. In other words, even if I love Inuit art, I am

[5] See also the work of Indigenous scholar Margaret Kovach, who proposes to reframe epistemology as conversations between paradigms: *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (University of Toronto Press, 2nd edition, 2021).

likely to see anything through the filter of my previous learnings and thereby approach any artwork expecting it to be original according to the standards of my own cultural tradition, that is, by *cultural imperialism* (Coulthard 2014). As Higgins (2017, 344) asks, the question remains: "How do we assert our views as scholars without presenting our own perspective as though we took it to be authoritative and without substituting our own words for those whose work and tradition we wish to engage with?"

Getting out of cultural imperialism: easy to say, not easy to do

As "we have manifold reasons to extend our attention to the entirety of the globe," any philosopher of art could ask, with reason, "[w]hy then have we as a field not done this?" (Higgins 2017, p. 342), while it has been done elsewhere. Following Fanon's (1952) influent work, the concept of decoloniality was developed in Latin America by intellectuals[6] in reaction to debates on postcolonial societies (Boidin 2009). They called for a major change in the intellectual posture[7] because, while recognizing the existence of a distant (or recent) colonial past, postcolonial theorists would leave the situation intact: they would make observations rather than call for corrective action. They recall that:

> [T]he coloniality remains in force in public and civil institutions of a social nature (governments, schools, the Church, museums, etc.). Society and its production space (the city in its contemporary form), with their systems of transmission of values (learn-

[6] Intellectuals like Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (who developed a critique of Marxism linking systemic racism to capitalism), Argentine philosopher Maria Lugones (who developed a theory of mixed identity influenced by Black Feminism), essayist Gloria Anzaldua, or Argentinian curator and researcher Walter Mignolo (who proposed to apply it to aesthetics) are all examples of abundant, rich, autonomous and critical complex thought outside paradigms imposed by Western intellectual centers.

[7] If the labels "North" and "South" are convenient to distinguish between rich countries from emerging ones, it is somewhat ironic that for the inhabitants living in the Arctic Circle, "the South" refers to the rich cities and capital where many of the decisions that concern them are taken.

> ing), give up other knowledge, so-called endogenous (Indigenous, African, Arab, feminist, queer ...), which they consider “primitive”, “old”, “obsolete”, “backward”. Or, they assimilate them and transform them into exotic or nostalgic goods. (Benfield et al. 2012, 36[8])

Inuit cultures perfectly exemplify this tendency since they have dealt with both ‘primitive’ and ‘exotic’ labels. Since the Arctic Circle looks geographically remote from Europe, observers apply the qualifier to the culture itself and are then surprised—because it does not fit their narrative—when they notice that Inuit cultures were in constant evolution far before they had any contact with Western colonizers (Petersen 1995).

Decolonizing aesthetics requires more than adding excluded artistic manifestations to the field of aesthetics (Gómez et al. 2016, 104-105). It requires changing its vocabulary and challenging current models (for example, the historicist reading of the evolution of art from Hegel to Arthur Danto) and curatorial practices of museums of so-called ethnic art. This includes rethinking “the amount of authority entrusted to big-time collectors and dealers” (Price 2010, 15). To address this flaw of contemporary aesthetics requires accepting that criticizing the claim to universality bared by modern and contemporary aesthetics does not mean falling into the scourge of sophistic relativism. It also requires particular attention to misleading or useless concepts, for example, ‘craft’, when intended as pejorative or as opposed to ‘real art’ (Thériault 2015; Bastenier 2007).

When realizing that so many cultures are absent from aesthetic teaching and curatorial practices, one risks generating a “decolonial aesthetics” that frames non-Eurocentric artefacts through Eurocentric art concepts. Scholars must acknowledge there is no miracle cure: simply adding new concepts (e.g., ‘ethnic art’) is no help if the traditional concepts are maintained and the necessary critical work to question the

8 Translations from the original French are mine.

foundations on which they are erected remains unresolved. Decolonial aesthetics must lead to action (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012, 2).

Decolonial aesthetics is not a rejection of centuries of artistic production, but a call to put this heritage in a critical continuity to cover the blind spots, per what is required by any honest philosophical approach. After all, the distinction between manual craft (devalued) and liberal arts (prestigious and legitimate) is conventional from the start, something that the Inuit knew all along (Graburn and Stern 1999; Xhingnesse 2018). Decolonizing aesthetics requires scholars to be willing to accept a profound critique of the outstanding figures in the history of art and aesthetics and to be able to escape the hegemonic framework. In fact, the power relationship between those who hold cultural legitimacy (i.e., those who are able to confirm and maintain the rules and explicitly disqualify anything that derogates from them) forces others to give up their own perspective. From there, the *other* must bend before that of the strongest:

> One must know, of course, that excluded manifestations [...] must always accept the precepts of aesthetics to be included; in other words, obey these rules. This is the logic of modernity that requires the excluded to "bleach", so to speak, epistemically and aesthetically. This is how coloniality has operated historically, first offering a religious salvation, followed by access to culture and civilization and, finally, to development. (Gómez et al. 2016, 104-105)

In short, even a so-called openness to artistic practices outside the usual canons of institutionally recognized works maintains a hierarchy; the forces that forge these hierarchies are precisely what must be questioned. For this reason, the mission of decolonial aesthetics is colossal, but the potential value is well worth it, for power issues appear in many

different forms (racism, patriarchy, Eurocentrism, and sexism). Taking a decolonial turn in aesthetics requires being concerned with how aesthetics operates as a powerful regime that, through the art/non-art distinction, exerts an ontological classification that has an impact on human lives (Gómez et al. 2016, 104).

There is still so little diversity in introductory aesthetic classes, a context where institutional aesthetics has access to significant data and literature that, unfortunately, we know –and care– little about. The main reason we rarely discuss so-called 'non-occidental art' is not a lack of data or relevance. It is, in many cases, a lack of moral and political commitment—many scholars do not seem ready to give up on the implicit belief that the only valuable art is the one recognised by Western institutions. They are not willing to do the work required to fill their field of ignorance, even if "a growing body of anthropological, art-historical, and psychological evidence [that] indicates that our concepts of art and art-kinds reflect entirely arbitrary historical interests with a limited range of application" (Xhingnesse 2018, 194-195). Some scholars are unaware of the extent of their ignorance; they are well-intentioned but lack expertise. This is why a decolonial shift is mandatory.

Given the abundant literature—ethnographic, anthropological, linguistic—on Inuit art, such expertise is readily attainable. Sustainable and amazingly inventive (the proof is in the effectiveness of their techniques to live in complete self-sufficiency in frozen territories), they are also getting credit for productions with a unique aesthetic of great symbolic richness. Noting that the concepts traditionally associated with Western aesthetics, such as 'beauty,' had not been precisely studied, scientists collected the already existing data on beauty in order to enrich their reading of Inuit's view of their own traditional and contemporary arts:

> The Inuit are probably the most thoroughly described and written about native people in the world [...], yet almost nothing

> has been written about their indigenous concepts of beauty. *We can only speculate why this is the case*. Nonetheless, the Inuit did and continue to have a well-articulated understanding of beauty. (Graburn and Stern 1999, emphasis ours)[9]

One possible answer to this void is, sadly, the fact that scientists may have taken for granted that Inuit's view on beauty and art was not worthy of (scholarly) interest. Though Graburn and Stern do not stress the difference between "art" and "beauty" (two very distinct concepts often wrongly used as synonyms by non-specialists in aesthetics), their observations nonetheless reveal the relevance of adopting an Inuit perspective on these issues. Among their observations is that the Inuit have had, of course, a very precise conception of beauty close to Western 'goodness'. Their ethnographic data, as well as others, indicate that only the Inuit concept of goodness, *piujuk*, corresponds closely to the Indo-European notion of beauty and overlaps many domains of both traditional and modern Inuit culture. At the very end of their article, Graburn and Stern (1999) also underline some apparent similarities between the Inuit conception of beauty and the Platonic principle of goodness. But they also underline a point of tension since, for Plato, goodness and beauty are ideal, non-sensible forms, whereas, for the Inuit, they are part of our everyday interaction with the world.

Anni Pootoogook's Case

A sadly eloquent example of the difficulty we have in integrating works from non-Eurocentric cultures into fair critical discussion can be observed in the trajectory of the Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook (1969-2016). Art critics and scholars have noted that the work of the artist born in Cape Dorset (Baffin Island, Nunavut) does not belong to what might be called "Inuit traditional art" because of its great contempora-

[9] The article was originally published in French but an English version is available online: <www.academia.edu/9077658/_Goodness_its_beautiful_a_look_at_beauty_amongst_the_Canadian_Inuit_`, accessed May 22, 2023.

neity, but remains firmly anchored in it:

> Culture has always been mixed, contradictory, difficult. Pootoogook's work illuminates many of these issues, reminding us again that one of the reasons people make images is to exemplify the world they inhabit, and to show how this world works in new and unexpected ways. Contemplating Pootoogook's images of Northern life, the viewer sees that the old, discrete categories "Inuit art" and "contemporary art" are no longer relevant. (Root 2008)

So-called non-Western cultures are often wrongly considered immutable, and the dichotomy between European cultures (associated with progress and originality) versus indigenous cultures (perceived through a folkloric distortion when apprehended as an external eye) reinforces the belief in the superiority of art recognized by the representatives of the Eurocentric institutions. Thus, an inattentive eye that cannot perceive the subtleties of Inuit cultures, especially the way Pootoogook puts her finger on the challenges posed by the cohabitation of traditional ways of life and the sedentary life imposed by colonization (Galloway 2016).[10]

Such an eye would not hesitate to describe the drawings of Annie Pootoogook as naïve, but *Bringing Home Food* (2003–2004) and *Cape Dorset Freezer* (2005) are anything but naïve. *Cape Dorset Freezer* shows people living in the Arctic lining up in front of freezers to buy frozen industrial food, which is quite ironic. This expression of the disruption of lifestyles and its aberrant results seems naïve because of the bright colors and materials used (for example, crayons, usually used by children). However, it is fiercely lucid and frankly directed at those respon-

[10] On the self-representation of cultural identity among Inuit youth, see: de la Sablonnière, Roxane, Donald M. Taylor, Fabrice Pinard Saint-Pierre, Jason Annahatak, 'Cultural Narratives and Clarity of Cultural Identity: Understanding the well-being of Inuit Youth', *Primitivism: A journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous community health* (2011) 9:2, 301-322.

sible for this situation.

Unfortunately, the artist had to deal with much worse than poorly sound art criticism, since she was *de facto* stigmatized by blunt racial and sexist stereotypes,[11] which shadowed her artwork (and shows the entanglement of intersectional discrimination). During a troubled period before her death, the value of her art, though recognized in Canada and abroad, was sometimes overshadowed by elements of her personal life revealed by sensationalist media treatment. A Western male artist with the same background and lifestyle would probably have been labelled as a 'rebel' or 'troubled artist', in accordance with the genius stereotype and would have gained more notoriety as a result. Some art specialists have noted that, had it not been for the Inuit origin of the artist, such elements would not have been published[12], as if her artistic condition was secondary to the stereotypes associated with its culture and above all, improbable. Yet, Pootoogook, from a lineage of Inuit artists herself, was able to distance herself from her original culture and develop her own aesthetic language, making a lasting impression on Inuit visual arts:

> Although still firmly rooted in Northern experience, [the] drawings reflect broader — and more personal — concerns. [...] Annie Pootoogook's drawings, [...] are characterized by a more detached quality. In their uniquely deadpan presentation, however, they communicate a similar kind of connection with the artist's inner world and reveal something of the conflicts that arise from

11 There is a growing literature of the under-representation of women in the artistic and critical tradition, following the founding essay by American art historian Linda Nochlin. See also: Zeglin Brand, Peg, "Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art", *Theories of Art Today*, Noel Carroll, ed. (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, 175-198).

12 Commissioner Jason St-Laurent spoke on this subject in a radio interview whose report is available online: 'Stereotypes plagued Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook in life as in death, says gallerist', *As It Happens*, CBC Radio, September 28, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.3780850>.

> the confrontation of that inner experience with the outer reality of life in the modern North. (Bingham 2013)

The artistic and critical circles would describe her work as naïve or amateur, which is, as I will expose, a clear case of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2018). However, a closer look at Pootoogook's artwork, I assert, should lead to a better understanding of Western bias. In the end, it should appear that Inuit aesthetics (which include both Inuit artists' views on their own productions and some data collected by external observers) offer a significant contribution to aesthetic debates. The Qallunaat misunderstand the value of Inuit art but can learn to broaden their understanding and improve their aesthetic judgment through a process of self-criticism of their own shortcomings.

In "Inuit Art and the Limits of Authenticity", art critic Deborah Root recalls that *authenticity* is a "floating category, able to migrate and legitimize or de-legitimize certain kinds of images", a phenomenon that can be observed in the reactions to Pootoogook's art.[13] The critics did not appreciate her drawing technique, let alone the subjects she chose:

> Inuit work depicting contemporary objects, such as snowmobiles or helicopters, was very much a minority taste. Most buyers preferred the sublime images of the natural world and traditional ways of life that Southerners have come to associate with Inuit art, she said, because there are more authentically and recognizably 'Inuit'. For such buyers, authenticity resides in what is sometimes termed the "ethnographic present," a timeless place untainted by modernity. (Root 2008)

Similarly to Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Root points out that it

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[13] On this element, see the exhibit catalogue edited by Inuk curator and scholar Heather Igloliorte: SakKijâjuk: Art and Craft from Nunatsiavut (Goose Lane Editions, and St. John's: The Rooms Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Provincial Art Gallery Division, 2017).

is expected for Inuit artists to “exis[t] in an eternal past”. In other words: the Qallunaat attempt to keep Inuit artists in the “authentic” category, which is sometimes a constraint (a form of orthodoxy) and pejorative label. But, adds Root, “[t]he question always remains of *who is deciding* what is genuine” (2008, my emphasis):

> As a category, ‘Inuit art’ is simply too broad, and too culturally determinant, implying a unified aesthetic vision that does not exist even within work that takes traditional life as its subject.[…] And “Inuit art” is too restrictive a category for the work of Annie Pootoogook, whose contemporary vision transcends older limitations. (Root 2008)

Inuit art curator Nancy G. Campbell draws a similar conclusion, stating that the “unenthusiastic reception of these artworks [Pootogook’s] points to the ways that notions of exoticism, ethnic novelty, and an exploitation of difference continue to permeate today’s contemporary art world” (Campbell 2020, 15). When realizing that so many cultures are absent in aesthetic teaching and curatorial practices, one risks promoting a ‘decolonial aesthetics’ that forces Inuit art into ill-fitting, pre-existing Eurocentric aesthetic categories.

Scholars must acknowledge there is no miracle cure. The conceptual foundations on which they are erected remain unresolved (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2012). As we are reminded by Littlechild, Finegan, and McGregor, integrating concepts and knowledge of Indigenous and Inuit cultures requires “an approach grounded in transformational change, not one focused on an ‘add Indigenous and stir’ pedagogy“ (2021); it requires us to “ethically engage” with it. Additionally, the “efforts to ‘Indigenize’ the academy requires an emphasis on anti-racism, humility, reciprocity, and a willingness to confront ongoing colonialism and white supremacy” (Littlechild, Finegan, and McGregor 2021). So, despite trying to do some justice to cultures that have been left out, a qualification is

that any error on my behalf may add to the injustice (Kovach 2013).

Conclusion

What does Inuit aesthetics reveal to scholars willing to develop a decolonial perspective? First, it shows that tradition and originality are not incompatible (as Pootoogook's art has shown), nor are commercial art and creativity. Then, it shows that we need to continue critical work and the inclusivity approach, which first requires accepting a more modest attitude (Gómez et al. 2016, 105). It displays the need to embrace the complexity and diversity of the many coexisting artworlds. Learning to see how wrong our theoretical framework can be is a necessary step to get on a better track.

From there, what do we know for sure? Nothing, actually. But by taking a closer look at the historical narrative on Inuit art, we can see that the conceptual distinction between traditional and original art relies on a set of potentially misleading Western art concepts. Additionally, sometimes, some experts are no help at all. If I am not doing classic aesthetics, that *is* a start: not being able to achieve a literal 'decolonial shift' but leaning into it (even if it means "failing better every day") is already something. Learning from the flaws of theory that, ultimately, I really know very little is the real Socratic irony. Yet, at least I do not have an all-white-all-male syllabi anymore. So yes, as a Qallunaat, I can talk about Inuit art, but at some conditions, namely:

1) To look at with a suspicious eye any "expertise" on Inuit art that comes from the outside;

2) To accept that I will remain, at best, a "well-intentioned ignorant" and never be an expert;

3) To accept that being the best ally I can is the best I can do.

This conclusion may look disappointing, but that little spot where *I can* do something right is something. What the academy (and aesthetic

theory) needs is more people willing to take the risk to approach Indigenous artwork, at the risk of failing, sometimes. These mistakes are less damaging than the status quo, for "Indigenizing' the academy can better encourage humility, reciprocity, and a deep commitment to anti-racism. Thus, universities need more than new Indigenous-centered content" (Littlechild, Finegan, and McGregor 2021).

How can we even try to change a whole system? First, by changing the language we use and recognizing that the current concepts inherited from classical aesthetics are not adapted to an inclusive aesthetic. Scholars must acknowledge there is no miracle cure: simply adding new concepts (for example, 'ethnic art') is no help if the traditional concepts stay in place, for the necessary critical work to question the foundations on which they are erected remains unresolved (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2012). What is at stake here is not only to make aesthetics more comprehensive for ethical and political reasons (Fricker 2003). Aesthetics that is silent on anything but a narrow slice of art history has meagre cultural or pedagogical value. This is a long path, but decolonial shift may happen when we look closer at our own research methodology and teaching habits, one step at the time.[14]

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[14] Thanks to Anne-Charlotte Côté and to the anonymous reviewers for their attentive reading and helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. Thanks also to the participants of the 79th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics held in Montréal in 2021 for sharing their views on this topic.

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