

Transcript of TIA House Talks Episode 3: Fred Wah Interviews David Garneau at Wisdom Council

[names in brackets are not accurate]

Introduction by Rebecca Geleyn

Hello and welcome to TIA House Talks, The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative Writing Podcast series. Today, we present an interview by Fred Wah of David Garneau. My name is Rebecca Geleyn and I am a research assistant for the TIA House project at the University of Calgary.

TIA House is honoured to be podcasting to you from Treaty 7 Territory. We specifically acknowledge the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation (comprising the Chiniki, Bears paw, and Wesley First Nations). We acknowledge also the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

This interview was recorded during a TIA House symposium called Wisdom Council in September 2019. Wisdom Council brought together a small council of senior practitioners in the arts, who are mostly Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, to sit in council over three days to discuss such topics as what our communities need now; memory and forgetting; care of elders in racialized communities; community formations they've experienced; and practices and strategies that might be of use or interest in the present moment. This interview was recorded as part of the gathering's work.

David Garneau, Métis, is a visual arts professor at the University of Regina whose practice includes painting, curation, and critical writing

Fred Wah is a BC poet who lives in Vancouver and on Kootenay Lake.

In this interview David talks about his time in the English Department at the University of Calgary when Fred was also teaching there. He discusses the connections he makes between writing and visual art and how this hybrid practice provides him with the theoretical foundations he craves.

Talking about the series of Untitled painting David highlights the tensions of rage, humour, and inexplicability palpable in the still life form. Fred and David's conversation then moves into the politics, ethics, and anxieties around sharing Indigenous knowledges particularly in aesthetic representations. David argues that giving only a small portion of sacred Indigenous knowledge in art acts as an invitation into not knowing and an invitation into asking.

Finally David talks about his decision and commitment to being a Métis artist instead of Simply an artist with Métis blood.

(intro music)

Interview

Fred (F): Well, hi, my name is Fred Wah and I'm going to interview David Garneau this afternoon.

David (D): Alright, I'm David Garneau and looking forward to the conversation.

F: Well, David, I'm... one of the... I've known you for... and known of you for many years and you were here I think at the University of Calgary—

D: Yep—

F: When I first arrived in the late 80s, early 90s?

D: That's right

F: And I— my memory of you, and you'll have to help me here because my memory's slipping but you were involved in publishing?

D: Mhmm, mhm, that's true. Well, I want to start by saying that: so I came, I was involved in the visual arts program first, for about four years and then shifted over to English. I was after my BFA, I actually went over to the philosophy department, I thought I wanted to be a philosopher, then one day I was sitting around in their common area and looking at all the philosophers, all guys... and I just had this profound feeling that I didn't want to be there. Didn't want to be in that league... and I said to myself that I was going to walk across the the quad or whatever, and by the time I got to the other side I was going to decide what to do with my life, literally. (both laughing) And I was walking across and I said: you know where I was happiest, was an English Department. It was able to bring together a lot of different kinds of people and I was always fascinated, 'specially with Vancouver type school, my Mum was born and raised there and since childhood, was there almost every summer, and Harry Kiyooka was was teaching in the University of Calgary, I never took class with him but I knew of his brothers work before that.

F: Roy.

D: Roy. And so that integration of image and text and do-it-yourself kind of mentality, but also the community really appealed to me, and literally I got to the other side of the green there, and I went looked up Susie Rudy's door and she happened to be in her office, and anyway... so I had to do... I didn't have an undergrad in English, had a lot of courses... I had to do four full course is one spring/summer set. Did 'em all and I aced them and I knew it was the right thing. But the story I wanted to tell was, right as...

F: Let's hold on a moment, though—

D: —yep—

F: —so, was this for an MA?

D: Yeah, I wanted to get in the MA program, and you know they said if you did well in these courses they would consider me. And they took me in. And you came to the program and I was in the second year of my MA, I was on my way out, trying to figure out where I was going to go and... you and Aruna were in the lunch area... in whatever it was, the Mac Hall and sitting down for lunch for some reason you beckoned me over there and I told you that I was Métis and I hadn't talked to Susan or any other... I didn't want that to be a part... somehow I thought, it doesn't belong in the setting or something... I don't know what I was thinking. And it was that conversation, you guys were just so open, and... I don't know what it was... and this was at the time of the Minquon Panchayat and other things and it allowed me to enter in to a larger discourse bringing those two things together. So I just wanted to acknowledge that. That was a very important casual thing you guys did but it was important to me. And of course I probably left English and didn't... but yeah, so this was—

F: But you were in the MA program, then.

D: I was in the MA program, yeah and didn't take a course with you or Aruna. I don't know... Aruna maybe just started around the same time or a little bit later...

F: But... could you help me out, though in terms of this memory of publishing, though? You were involved with what...?

D: So, I started a magazine with [Mary Beth LaVillette] and oh my god, I've forgot the name... and it was between Vancouver and Calgary called *Artichoke*...

F: Right!

D: and so, it was a cheap web press thing and it was very democratic, everybody got paid 50 bucks for an article. No matter whether it was a little review and 50% of our writers had to be new, so we... It was just a thing we set up cuz we wanted to keep it fresh. We were responding to, actually, the death of *Fuse Magazine* (F agrees) the very first piece of publishing I got in was in *Fuse*... and then it foldend, then I had just this sort of, this stray art column we decided to build a magazine around just these leftovers.... And Pauline... oh, now I forgot her name, [Paula Augustusson] was our main person in Vancouver and she had a craft interest too, so we managed to bring Indigenous craft, all the things that were part of *fuse*, wel,, craft wasn't , but yeah we wanted to bring it to for a reader friendly type of approach. so yeah that started in '89 and it ran for 10 years. I was only involved with the first four or five.

F: But, you were writing then?

D: Yeah, while in school.

F: But, weren't you publishing some writing? In the magazine?

D: Yeah, so I was writing for the, for *Avenue Magazine*, for the University Papers, *Fuse Magazine*, then *Canadian Art*, and *Border Crossings*, all in the early '90s.

F: Well, see, that's what I remember about you, as when I first knew you.

D: Yeah.

F: You're in writing and you're a writer in publishing. And then you pulled this disappearing act into art!

D: Ayy! (both laughing)

F: Well, I shouldn't call it a disappearing act, but...

D: No...

F: But I was... and ever since, I mean, I've known you as an artist and a critic, primarily, but I've always been curious about that... that jump and that connection that you've made between writing and art.

D: Yeah, there was... it's been a draw either way so... non-fiction writing, critical— I always called myself a critical writer— was always there. It's the things do two different jobs, I guess. One thing that I like to build, still like about art, is that it has a presence that I guess is tied to a circle time but it literally is a physical object in a space, and a book is the same way, but essays and writing seemed more occasional to me or something and I wanted the paintings to be more timeless, and I felt the need, I've always felt the need to to try and be in both worlds. And the discourse in the writing it seemed at that time, anyways, was very different from the art world. But at the moment of [**minquonpun? triad**], and all these things came together, the people, our writers and artists, with common interest outside of their own person and I found that very attractive, so I guess that's been, maybe about 27 years ago or so.

So, I wrote my first significant piece for parallelogram where I am broke into that area was called: *Beyond the Pale looking for (E)quality* with the E in brackets because there was a debate whether this work was any good... and I found that so offensive. That Indigenous work or SouthEast Asian work didn't count as Canadian art, and I just... I'm a logical thinker and it just made no sense, it could only be racism, I wouldn't want to call it that at the time... it just seemed stupid at the time, that thinking.

F: Well, let's just step back. So, after you did your MA in English (D agrees) and then you went to... into doing a degree in art?

D: No, so I... first thing I did was in the early eighties I was in early childhood education. So I worked in daycare... I worked for the city doing kids art programs, then I finally got the courage to go do my BFA. I didn't do well in high school so I didn't qualify right away, so I went to Mount Royal College, and it was a wonderful experience including writing. I'll never forget, I told two different English profs that I wanted to write and they said "well, write!" And they allowed me to do projects separate that I got them to read and just get feedback, to see whether I had some stuff. And I got good grades generally, so, yeah, so I was there, but I didn't have a community at that point. So, when I came back to do the BFA that was mid-'80s through till '89, I graduated. Yeah, I was an artist, but I couldn't find a graduate program that I felt satisfied what I wanted to do, and so the English Department provided that. So, it's theoretical rather than the practice and sort of formalism that ran the school...

F: So you're training in art, in visual art, in painting and drawing and those skills.

D: Yeah

F: That happened in your BFA.

D: Yeah, definitely in the BFA.

F: and then you didn't follow, you didn't proceed, you didn't go any further than that?

D: I didn't go to the MFA because... I needed... well, what happened was in my second year I met Sylvia, my partner still, and she was going to go to Halifax, and I said, it was within a month of meeting her, I said "I hope you like company, we're going together" so, I went there, and I forgot her name but there was a post-modern theorist that just blew my mind. And when I came back to Calgary, you know once you've been to Paris you can't go back to the farm.... so there was no theory of that calibre in the visual arts department, so it just seemed wrong, backwards. But it was an English... so those courses were so fascinating to me, so when I decided to go back to a master's degree, English made the most sense. And I'm so glad I did. I mean it helped with the writing but also thinking through the visual but also the necessity of publishing, of writing about art.

F: So you learned about Roy Kiyooka when you were doing your BFA?

D: No, as a kid in Vancouver, I'm trying to remember... I also met a ManWoman in my childhood. He was in Edmonton at that time. All these artists that aren't in the history books or wasn't in that time. But also, this is going to sound strange, I attended lectures— I don't know if they were through UBC, or whatever— but flyers would come out and I'd be visiting my grandparents, so this would be like '78/79 and... you'd go to a punk club or sometimes there was a feminist lecture...

F: And you're just a teenager!

D: There was this whole other world... Just a teenager and a fly-on-the-wall never speaking up, but also, I'm tryna remember the gallery that his work came in... It's a photo series... a number photo series that he did.... but I was just so impressed by the poetry and the images coming together... it wasn't my art, but it was just this other world, this collision of images and text...

F: *Stoned Gloves*, maybe?

D: I don't even know it to this day. Later on in the 80s he did some self-portraits which I thought were incredibly poignant. Yeah, so I don't know the culture so well but it was always there as the background—

F: Ok, just curious, I'm just curious because it's a background we share...

D: Ok!

F: Roy Kiyooka was a very important artist to me all through the 60s, 70s...

D: Ok...

F: You know, all the way until he died in the 90s, you know, but, anyway, so, let's get back to this hybrid practice you've set up for yourself. You've always settled up as a kind of contestatory—(both laughing)

D: I would agree with that. That's how my mind is...

F: —situation... and we can talk about some of the critical writing because I've read some of your critical writing when I can, when I can get ahold of it... but I'd like to talk a little bit about... you showed yesterday a series of paintings...

D: Yes.

F: I forget what they were called I don't know if you—

D: — I don't have a title for the set, yeah

F: Ok, but these were stunning paintings of... sort of prodding the whole Indigenous context and the discourse around indigenities, if you use that term, but they were also kind of... I shouldn't say violent... because they were also very humorous, you know, but putting a rock between two books and that type of thing—

D: And binding them (laughing)

F: Binding and the pressure. Every one you showed there was this pressure on things. So, could you talk a little bit about that sense you have in thinking about.... I don't know it's just

about... I don't know if it's just about Indigeneity, but probably it's generally something in your mind, this kind of aggressiveness?

D: Well, part of it is... part of it is I've always been fascinated with still lives because they were a marginal art practice way down the ontological hierarchy of our history often it was the only thing women would be able to do.... They would get to a high-level and they weren't allowed to work from the bodies and so they were excluded from doing history paintings. And so often you'll find incredible subtexts, sometimes literal memento mori type themes, in the still lives there are also essays on conquest. I mean, items coming from all over the place, that Foucauldian notion of... oh, now I've forgotten the terms, now I'm feeling this DEA agent thanks but all these other places that's what fascinates me about are generally aged thing... (both laughing)

F: You're an elder (laughing)

D: Yeah... the idea of the garden and the library being these places that concentrate all these other places. That's what fascinates me about art generally, but particularly about still lives, and so I've been interested in how can I indigenize this, how can I bring in these themes that are important, how can I give a hint of the complex arguments and difficulties that are happening right now, but not in the way just as a punch line / illustration, though some of them seem like one liners there's quite as series of levels. So, if you've got a rock bound between two books, which two books they are to me are important. So they're all are, almost all of them are Indigenous authors writing about Indigenous experience or other things. And this is our equivalent to the Harlem Renaissance. Before indigenous people are writing basically to affirm their humanity or all the abuses that have been heaped on folks and now we're writing critically to and about each other trying to figure out who we are and, more particularly, where we want to go, what we want to be. This is particularly true for Métis spaces there aren't a lot of Métis, there are some writers, but almost all the Indigenous folks are mixed blood people, and they're definitely all bicultural. And so how do we express that bicultural experience and tensions? So for me the still lives have tensions. So there is either the weighted tensions of books on top of a rock, the rocks referred to as grandfathers, and if you're talking to elders or with people who identify more with land than with books, these are symbols or actual presences of Earth knowledge and people have very special relationship with stones as signifiers of that knowledge. And books are antithetical to that until they're not... and so we live in this really anxious moment, so... Not that long ago Elders would say this knowledge is secret and sacred and we're not going to share it because we were burned in the pasts by letting non-Indigenous artists, authors, turn them, or academics turn them, into books and then they became fixed. And we heard quite a bit of that this weekend. The need for process orality, endurance, but also embodiment and sharing. But lately because of the climate crisis, I've seen this in the west coast and Blackfoot territory here and Cree territory north of here, and in Saskatchewan, where elders are saying there's certain knowledges that people need to know. And t's ok if it's published, it's ok if a non-Indigenous person does it because this is extrapersonal and extracultural knowledge (takes a breath) I have anxiety about that too. Because, again, that was what was felt before with the salvage efforts, you know, anthropologists because Indigenous peoples knew that this might be a loss so then they gave it away too.

So then it's just so complex. So I value these books deeply and yet see them, or am concerned that they're displacing actual persons.

F: Ok, I'm non-Indigenous, so I look at these paintings and I don't know what the books are. But you do (D agrees) These are important (D agrees) YOU're communicating to someone there, you're communicating to people who might know which books these are.... How do you?

D: This is so funny it's like this conversation has picked up from 30 years ago or something because I remember talking to you and I can't remember who else was in the room... and I was trying to get into the headspace of... I think it was *swiftcurrent*.... the early computer stuff you were doing, and other things where they were conversations like with Roy Miki or others and they were so innie. And I said "you guys are writing to find people!" and then when I was painting, this wonderful new book by Leanne Simpson that I just keep wrestling with, because when I've talked to people, actually it was someone in the downtown east side of Vancouver saying they couldn't identify with people who have access to reserve lands, say, or they've been disenfranchised from their communities so they don't have the knowledge and relationship to community, so are they Indians? Are they Cree or what are they? What is this position when they're disenfranchised from the thing that is supposed to make them who they are?

F: These are like, urban—

D: Urban Indians, yeah, which is more than half of us... and I was thinking about that conversation because okay I'm going to put this Leanne Simpson book here and I'm going to put it against a more anthropological book and someone who has these two books.. Or lets say three books... that's gonna be five people. And I've took the covers off but lately I've been putting the covers back on just to make sure people get their some jokes here... but I want those people go back to their books and say "okay maybe you're saying this but in that reference they're not going to know what I'm saying" I'm just putting a juxtaposition.

But this goes to something that happened, this is a bit oblique, but one of my grad students, I've been very fortunate to have Indigenous grad students every year, I've been teaching at the university of Regina, and they've been complex, histories, and ideas it's just been great. Keith Bird's one of them and he wanted to bring teachings from sacred ceremony from Sundance and they're not supposed to be represented. And he said to myself and to Roy [Bize] "I just want to give kids a sense of this whole other world, urban kids, that they, indigenous Urban kids, this whole other world that they can access just by asking but they don't know how to get in" and he wanted to make the gallery into like this portal and the elders said, now this is an interesting problem. "we agree with you, but you're right they won't even come to the first level of ceremonial pipe ceremony to get to the next levels" and so they went away, and the elder said "I'm going to have to take this to a council and figure this out." And he comes back later and says "10%. We've decided how you can do it, you can represent 10%, because that's not going to give everything away, you're not going to be able to illustrate even a full object our ceremony. But..." So Keith did this gallery full of these

images that were oblique and completely illegible to not Indigenous folks and I was lucky I have been to Sundance so I can recognize them, “ok this whistle and that might be that” but there were other knowledges that I couldn't tell and so but then I would have to ask... but I found that fascinating. So, these still lives, there's an immediate joke that almost anybody can get, whether you're a student and feeling pressure or like an apple between two books, you know, the idea of being red on the outside and white on the inside. There's so many other levels. So I was interested in giving 10% of what this experience might be like.

F: Oh... ok, ok.

D: Yeah, so it's not available for everybody but then you can ask a question then suddenly we'd have this big conversation but then you're already in it.

F: That's an interesting aesthetic proposition in terms of the poetics of the non-referential and that (D agrees) so that you... you're deliberately playing around in a shadowy area... (D agrees) That only, as you said, you and five others know about at the same time, it's an invitation into not knowing.

D: To not knowing and to asking, but also to find some sort of equivalence to find for yourself from your position. I mean one thing I do love about poetry is that all those empty spaces and not concluding... you know? Not drawing to a conclusion, you know: here's my thesis. It's this experience, and you know I've seen people circulating *Diamond Grill*, and that was an important book too because you know there's a lot of senses in that book. Last night or the night before and the banging of the doors, and when I heard you say that I remember reading that and feeling that. But there's smells, there's perceptions, but it's not leading to some conclusive “therefore” and I find that wonderful about painting too. And I tend, not always, but I tend to write in a realist style, so that's your entry point? You know the allusion, the pleasure of the sticky substance becoming something real—

F: Yeah....?

D: — and then what, you know...?

F: at the same time I'd like to tie this in with another sense that you've talked about.

D: Ok.

F: I'm quoting here one of those pieces “of particular interest is the role of the artist not as teacher or perpetuator of customary culture but as a provocateur.”

D: Yeah.

F: “unreliable but necessary agent who plays between and among disciplines and cultures to create startling non-beautiful needful disruptions and build hybrid possibilities that resist containment by either the colonial or the traditional...” ok...

D: Yeah, I'm still proud of that I'm still— (laughing)

F: I love it!

D: Ok, yeah, yeah...

F: So, You're a provocateur?

D: Yeah, definitely.

F: So, being an agent provocateur you have to... you're adopting, so we're talking about this particular unnamed series, that's provocative, you're provoking, you know, you don't include all of the information. (D agrees) So, what is that provocation? What do you hope that provocation does? Or do you? Or are you just playing with it?

D: So I'm not an agent provocateur or a player in the sense of, like, a catalyst, or a catalytic agent, the catalyst is something that causes a change without itself being changed.. I feel changed in each of these things, and the writing, and the painting, particularly in the writing. that passage, that section I'm still very proud of because I'm interested in... I've described it as three varieties of Nativeness and the traditional is traditional, it's customary, it's things as they are, and no culture can exist with only keeping that kind of traditionalism, it's always at tension with change, but it's it's a it's a grounding feature, but the contemporary, even the word art... so, the customary and traditional aren't held by the term art. ART is a term applied to a preexisting thing in that case... but art... art doesn't know itself.

So, painting has a history, sculpture has a history, art doesn't really have a history except of contestation. I've not been able to find a single person able to define that word, you know, it's a set of practices, it changes from time to time... and so, that to me is a productive site... and that similarly goes for the identity of Métis. It's got a history, a very contested and unusual one that people keep trying to settle but it's always been the space in between and not a comfortable space. It's never going to be a reified space. And so that's why I luxuriate in the space of art because it is a space of possibility and it's wise that culture leaves us some room to do something that it knows not what it needs. Whether we call that poetry or art. And it's not all art or poetry, but all those people who practice that, and they're not just expressing themselves... something g overcomes you in that space of exploration and play... yeah... but it's it's uncontainable.... and that's why I was trying to describe and I still am not successful... in wanting to make art works that will persist beyond my identity, beyond this particular time period.

It's interesting, when they were showing those slides, I had slides from 20 years ago or from 15 years ago or 20 years ago. To me they all look the same. I don't think there's a sense of progress in them at all. They are exactly what they're meant to and that passage too, it's not tied to nouns that are stuck in a particular historical moment, I think that those are kind of timeless thoughts, but they will have, coming out of my mouth, they'll have a particular type of resonance. And it's funny that passage comes from an essay that's very particular, it's grounded in **[Barracka Banmore]'s Yell** and this very specific altering thing that her voice

did in a space. And other sites of incompatibility and someone else pretending to behead a woman or this kind of thing, or [Terrence Wool]'s Gut and these things that are very specific, very particular, but not containable. And I just love that about art. We think we've got a handle on it, another generation unhandles it, you know?

F: Ok but the, one of the... I'm really fascinated by this because I'm also very fascinated in hybridity, and have worked almost all my life trying to articulate it's dynamics... and this notion of provocation—

D: Yeah.

F: —interests and fascinates me... and then you... I just want to quote another—

D: oh no! Let's see if I agree with myself now!

F: Well, just because this starts to tie it together. You're talking about irreconcilable spaces of aboriginality and aspects of the indian residential school legacy that are discouraged from disclosure in truth and reconciliation commission events such as rage—

D: mmmhmmm...

F: —the refusal to forgive—

D: yeah...

F: —the naming of names, the details of intergenerational effects, the use of indigenous people in the schools—

D: yeah...

F: —the deformation of masculinity there, talking about what happened at payout money and how it distorts individuals, families, and communities, and so on... so there's this anger, rage, friction, dissing, behind... that goes along with this provocation, right?

D: Yeah, so these, so these were all the things that were not permitted by the discourse of the TRC... and I was very lucky thanks to a SSHRC grant, Ashok Mathur was part of this Keavy Martin, Dylan Robinson, and we were able to go to the events in Vancouver, Edmonton, where else was part of this...? Montreal... and I had other personal smaller events that I went to, and I was and I actually wrote this before this stuff (laughs) the first draft that Ayumi helped me edit. And I was predicting these things and then they were true. But some things I didn't know I knew that the names would be allowed, but the rage I want to talk about a little bit. So, my career trajectory was that I'm the eldest of five kids, and I worked at a summer camp in, it would be like 1977 or so, at the age of 16, called the Atonement Home. And so this was a place where primarily Indigenous, Métis, and First Nations kids, primarily from Edmonton and the North, when there was a crisis at home they would go to this place. And it could be overnight, could be as long as a year. And I worked...

I thought it was like summer camp and in the summer camp version it pretty much was, but it was run by nuns and Catholic nuns. I was raised Catholic and the Atonement Home that had come in to work with them after High School was set up like a Canadian residential school. So you have the nuns floor, the girls floor, the boys floor, the beds. Everything was the same except they went to a day school nearby, but they were in Residence there.

And, just so many things collided for me there, and I don't want to talk about them all, but I was implicated in a system where I won't say there was abuse there, certainly not sexual abuse that I was aware of, and I've been trying to track documents and stuff, and I haven't been too successful... everytime I'm in Edmonton I find an Indigenous person and no... because often they didn't know because the kids were taken to these places, and I remember one child, his father killed his mother in front of him, you know, and so they were probably it was like a shelter, so sometimes these histories are just erased and displaced. The building exists, but the place doesn't. (takes a breath) Yeah, I'm getting choked up thinking about it... but whatever happened there, I just realized the wrongness of it and that's what led me to early childhood education.

So I wanted to be an artist, but I needed to understand pedagogy, I needed to understand the psychology. I needed to understand these things. And I didn't indigenize it at that point, it was adults and kids. And I worked at daycare and all... every summer that I worked... I was a student, I was working in daycares in the summers... and I needed to work some of that stuff out for myself and it.... yeah.... it began and ended with rage personal and family things, but particularly finding myself an agent in the space, so I was hired to work with kids with no qualifications. And the nuns, the institution didn't care. I was able to take a boy from Edmonton on the bus to Calgary.... I was 18 years old.... because I wanted to meet my parents and I was naive and when I think about that now.... The possibilities for abuse were enormous... and I just, yeah, so it begins about rage. When I read that, hear that list again, it brings up those things.... and I've had so, such minor experiences compared to all the Indigenous folks that I know...

F: Well, I'm kind of aligning this to myself since when I was writing Diamond Grill, my sense was that I was writing out of a deep anger, a racial anger that I have that I have to deal with. (D agrees). I wrote that in the '80s and I was trying to get it out, so I'm really fascinated by this notion that you're playing with in this critical writing, I think that that's a beautiful kind of statement to make on the TRC about that list of things that aren't allowed (D agrees) so that in a sense it puts a stop and puts us right back into where we come from (D agrees) right, that whole sense of rage and resistance and a kind of anger behind that. So, you're obviously very aware of that. You're Métis. I'm part Chinese Swedish, I'm mixed blood. Anyway... Do you think there's a kind of energy that's generated by being between?

D: Yeah... so this rage, there's a personal rage that I don't think I'll... I'll rarely talk about, you know, it's mostly on the behalf of others. Growing up in a group of kids on the edge of Edmonton and watching them slowly be disenfranchised and disenfranchise themselves from futures... you know growing up with kids where we're all the same... better at, you know soccer, or whatever we're interested in and kids turning to drugs turning to really see no possibilities for themselves in the systems as they are. It was just astounding and horrifying

to me. And then seeing the mechanisms that make that possible and necessary in terms of prejudice and education systems and employment and so on... it's just astounding to me, which means recognizing my privilege and so what beyond having a good life am I to do and so... I'm already aligned with these folks and it's a gradual alignment... a gradual... I think I'm a very late bloomer... in interviewing Richard Fung I just can't believe his consciousness at such an early age.... and I didn't have that.... As I mentioned, just sort of being a fly on the wall in Vancouver or even in Calgary, here, and not really going to things as.... And becoming a presence until with Minquon Panchayat That was at the Chinese Cultural Centre and I worked at the bookstore next door and was able to take off the Saturday cuz this thing was happening but not this Sunday because this was a bookstore... but it was proximity and if that hadn't happened I wouldn't be connected in so many ways to people who have been lifelong friends.

F: Well, you've always struck me as being a very deliberate and intentional person in practices and...

D: Yeah... but not community oriented... now it's becoming more... actually it's true, but maybe just not feeling myself as invested whereas now.... It's central. Almost all my work is collaborative now.

F: I mean I've always known you were Métis. But one of the things that struck me since you went to Regina and been more public with your Métis-ness... Is that... I guess what I'm trying to get at is... what position does that recognition of yourself... or your willingness to pronounce yourself Métis... How does that affect your practice and how does it affect your community and what kind of community, what kind of relationships has that allowed you to make up? You told me that you didn't tell University of Regina that you were Métis...

D: No.

F: Then you came in and said, "ok but don't you realize you hired a Métis!"

D: I'm gonna tell a story, that's great, I really appreciate this. So... well, I'm going to tell a couple of stories I've told before....but in 1980 when I was working at the Atonement Home I had my first my first art show it was in a gallery called the Bear Claw Gallery which still exists on a different location. A reporter comes in there, I've done some figures— Joe Fafard type figures— of men on the street... sculptures... and they were called the Boyle Street Boys because I really identified with these men growing up, I learned chess, I learned magic tricks, stories from these guys, so it was between the library and Winston Churchill Square, and the Art Gallery... the Edmonton Art Gallery and then the mission and the Marion centre we had our church kind of thing... and that was my centre and we learnt from these guys. So when I decided to be an artist I was making these figures. The reporter comes in and she says, you know: "Well, you're Métis."

I'd never heard that word before. And I said "I don't know what you're talking about—"
(laughing)

“Well, you’re Garneau, are you a descendent of Laurent Garneau....”

I said “Yeah.”

“Well, he’s one of the most important Métis people around this area and the neighbourhood’s named after him.”

And of course I knew that ... I grew up with all these stories, but they were family stories, they were personal stories... what’s that got to do with me? Indian blood that was all we knew. And then she says, but “you know, you’re showing in an Indigenous Gallery, an Aboriginal gallery” and I’m looking around and these are just art I love and I did not identify in that way, so I went and talked to my dad and he gave me a book called *One and a Half Men* which was about basically the Marxist Métis of the 1920s and 30s of whom I’m related to and it begins with a little thing on Laurent Garneau and it’s like “whoa! What is this?” But the idea of these family stories were part of a larger history...

F: And this was in 1980?

D: This was in 1980, so I was 18. So, fast forward to Minquon Panchayat had this incredible year so, Sharon L’Hirondelle she comes up to me... so we were living, I don’t know if you remember, there were all these... Ashok... no he didn’t actually live there... a bunch of MFA students were all living on Capitol Hill, it was Weed’s Cafe and there were... A bunch of us for ten years it was all writers and artists living there, maybe still are, but... and Sharon Hirondelle comes to me one day and says “Garneau...” I didn’t [unint] magazine at one point and “Garneau... you have a responsibility now... I’ve let it slide until now but you’ve got to join up now,” basically.

So that was the main reason that I went to the Minquon Panchayat meeting and wrote that article *Beyond the Pale* and did other reviews and was part of that circle more on the edge but was very supported and identifying more and more with it. When I moved to REgina in 1999 now, now I have a position, which I never thought I’d be a professor.... I was a sessional at ACAD and definitely identified with all of the Indigenous students there, but there, first thing I go to my office and second week or so someone put a “proud to be Métis” pin on my door. And then Bob Boyer walks in and I’d known him for about a year before that and he comes in and lets some soft eyes and says “Garneau...” ah, what was the line... something like...”you could’ve sat on the fence in Alberta, but not here. You’re gonna be a white guy or you’re gonna be a Métis guy and therefore an Indigenous guy or not.” and then he left. And I had to stew on that because, I had made what I would call Métis Art shown at the Alberta biennial, an important video to me, but I literally had to soul search for six months because it meant that I... if I was going to be a Métis artist, not just an artist with Métis blood that was going to be a serious commitment... and I decided at that point... and I fell into some wonderful friendships there, that allowed that to be possible.

F: Excuse me, now what date are we talking about?

D: 1999.

F: Right...

D: So then, 1999 and then 2000...

F: But you had this... hadn't you decided before then?

D: Oh yeah, and with my family, so my dad had published— this is the other thing, the genealogy, he'd published this huge website that's still up... that traces the genealogy very thoroughly, he was used... referenced by many others... he called himself Métis, but not politicized, so all those things became possible. But it caused turmoil in the family as to what that means. So, but I have to credit that as well.

So that's when the story becomes public but what does this mean as a person in the world? When I talk to you... that'd be 93 or 92 right around that same time what I was saying was I didn't want to be left off the.... I have white privilege... I don't want to be left off the hook during the culture wars of that time, and side with Indigenous and therefore bad white people or whatever... to me I've always understood my relationship as a as a contested site... so even when you say about articulating Métisness, this is a central part of what I'm doing in the last 5 years with the public art projects...

So, just an example, so a public art project I'm doing in Edmonton... I have a meeting, I asked the Métis Nation of Edmonton to assemble a group so that I can consult elders and sit around the table... and I said okay I've been doing all kinds of research, I have 400 images to come up with and I've got a number but I need your help. I want to articulate ourselves visually, so they said okay, they've done their research, they come in with the binders and the pictures and I said well, look at this: I put up my slideshow and everything that they showed I had already done the paintings for... not just research... and I said, "ok... we've got another hour and a half, tell me more" and what they realized was that that was the limit of the visuality of Métisness and it was stuck in the 19th century and some 20th century things, but not really, and they require artists— they need us to articulate our positions and their complexity— and to do it in painting, so, different from photography from prose, they need the poets, they need the storytellers and not to illustrate and represent in that way but to imagine.

And so that is an incredible thing for an artist to have. you know, what I feel like... I'm not comparing myself to Michelangelo but... the idea of Michelangelo being needed by a community rather than just making commodities for whoever... that's been life-changing... and it's meant that I need to collaborate in a true sense with all these people. Yeah, it's led to all kinds of projects...

F: Well, let's get... one of the things that I've run into in my thinking and trying to deal with hybridity is this sense of equivocation. We're caught between. I feel caught between between a white world and a non-white world and... I don't... and I've always resisted kind of going totally to one or the other... I tried to eek out a space where that betweenness as I said

the other day “standing in the doorway” is where I want to be... I don't want to be in either room exclusively... does that? How does that effect...?

D: Oh, yeah, it's for me it's what I was saying is that space of art is that... because it's not definable, you know, and it keeps evading description. As a critic you might come to the end of your tether and get bored and then you see something new that just refreshes you again... and your thinking has to catch up to it... and so the way I've always articulated it is I'm I'm humbled before the product, before the object. I'm seeing if I can measure up and see if I can learn something new from that thing. And it's sort of a discreet work of art but also particularly literature and poetry. I don't think I'll occupy the liminal space as much... I need the liminal space because it's a protected space, right? Not being one or the other and as I was articulating the other night, I need that for myself, I need to be able to have a Room of One's Own, you know, where I'm drawing or painting that is outside of surveillance. That, more than anything else I need that, for thinking to take time. And university offers me that. They offer me a studio and so on I give them service, I think pretty good service, but what they give me is incredibly valuable in terms of that space and the opportunity to have a subject position as a professor... I mean, what is that? As a professor, you know you get a picture, but it's never an art professor or creative writing professor that comes to mind. And so these things escape the scrutiny of the age and in a pretty successful way, and until we fully instrumentalize ourselves, we can keep that space... but if we articulate ourselves into a place of complete service, we will lose that. So, that's very complex and difficult, but art is more resilient than most things that way.

As a Métis person, though, I will have to say that Métis culture is incredibly... it's always been, well except in its golden time, under a phenomenal stress, and it's got a depth in people.... I have to be very careful here. What I would say is that I've been very interested in the last little while in the spiritual, Indigenous spirituality and relations to the land and I've had to go to the Cree for that. Or to the Stoney Nakoda for that, or other Blackfoot tribes, so I've been very grateful to be able to talk with elders and learn. I just came from a... I guess you could call it camp, but it was a four day four night, intense, just a small group of us in a quonset hut during the creation story and, as the elder was saying, it was the introduction to the introduction. The real thing takes four months to tell the story... but I got enough glimpse of it... it was profound... and so knowing that there is something beyond the doorstep that is not mine but that I have been given access to and they gave me access to that because they want that to inform my paintings. And so to be involved in a community not in a fictional sense or in a selective sense, but an obligatory sense, has been profound to me. And I'm still weighing the consequences.

So in the Bridge Project it's caused me to paint ways that I don't paint. But also to work with you, know, about a dozen other artists and give them a sensibility and a colour palette, and they're doing their own thing, but none of them is expressing themselves either. Trying to express this in-between culture.

F: Maybe you could finish off with this dynamic that you're illustrating in this series of... we have to get a name for those...

D: Oh, those still lives (both laughing)

F: The still lives, right, with the bound rocks and apples and so forth. And they're great. One of the wonderful things about it is the humour. It's just... it's really so attractive and I think you've, personally, you've come across a device, a way of moving into that that is really useful in terms of attracting people into the art. Can you talk a little bit just briefly about the sense of using humour cuz I think... I have a suspicion that I didn't get that sense from earlier work.

D: Well, I've used humour throughout, but ... maybe people weren't getting my jokes (laughing)

F: Sorry, no! I know some of your cartoon style...

D: Yeah, cartoon... but in this case I feel they're mature, confident works, and it's interesting because I made them, and I was showing them once a week on Facebook and getting some wonderful responses but you almost always get wonderful responses to art. But this time I showed them and people were laughing out loud, which is what I need... And they were going by kind of quickly but already people were getting a sense of them. And in fact, the editor of Canadian Art came to the studio and couldn't stop looking at them, we were there doing other business, and she ended up doing a conversation with me, it was in the last page of the most recent issue... and I feel that it's approachable work and yet, the different themes that I want people to get to are there, but it's the 10%, I want them to go to read those books too. I want them to ask other people well, what does it mean to be Indigenous in the institution? Is that an oxymoron, or? How do people navigate it and we all do it differently, you know, some people become SuperIndians and traditional, others become cosmopolitan, there's such a range. And I'm so excited by these possibilities that are more numerous than at previous times.

F: Well, I must say that humour's a very interesting way into your rage, David (both laughing)

D: I want to say I don't have a lot of personal rage... I really really don't... What I was what I was articulating in that passage was... it goes to a variety of masculinities that I really wanted to do a PhD on but I just didn't find a place for myself in English... um, I want to go back to the visual but... I was very interested in how these men were not allowed to be angry because they would be threatening. You know? (F agrees) And yet, I was watching, especially later, I was watching the faces of grown men who were at that instant boys and that empathetic rage is what I felt more... and I feel that my even-temperedness is my greatest privilege, next to being able-bodied at the moment, and having the energy to make representations or make statements somewhat on the behalf of others without speaking for them... so I don't come from a place of rage except in the inequities...you know what I mean?

F: Yeah, I know, I wasn't implying that your work was rooted in rage...

D: Yeah, I know, but I think that's in *Diamond Grill* too there...

F: There's the anger, yeah.

D: A simmering, whether you're slave labour or...

F: Yeah, well... anyway, thanks very much for this...

D: Thank you too.

F: I really look forward to seeing that series of paintings and that... just beautiful...

D: Thanks for your generosity in this conversation, Fred.

F: Thanks David.

Outro by Rebecca Geleyn

We hope you enjoyed this interview of David Garneau by Fred Wah. I'm Rebecca Geleyn and you're listening to TIA House Talks. The interview you just heard was recorded during the TIA House symposium, Wisdom Council.

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