

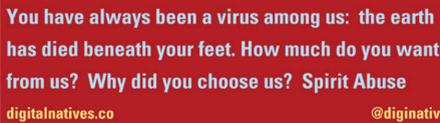
THE "C" WORD

a blog on censorship and other challenges to literature...

THURSDAY, APRIL 7, 2011

Digital Natives Controversy (Vancouver, BC)

The following post comes in the wake of a controversy related to an art installation for Vancouver's 125th Birthday Celebration. Clint Burnham and Lorna Brown are co-curators of the project. Burnham had this to say about the project:



As part of the 125 celebration for the city of Vancouver, Digital Natives is a public art project curated by Vancouver artist Lorna Brown and myself. The project consists of putting twitter-like messages up onto the billboard next to the Burrard Street Bridge among the regular advertizing. We have solicited messages from 30 native and non-native artists and writers from Vancouver and across North America, including (associated with SFU) Jeff Derksen, student Mercedes Eng, alumni Roger Farr and Emily Fedoruk, and writers in residence (past and future) Larissa Lai, Michael Turner, Lisa Robertson, and Rachel Zolf.

More information about the project and details of the installation can be found in a number of recent articles in [The Globe and Mail](#) and [The Tyee](#). The whole thing seems to be quite an incredible idea and is worthy of much attention. And there has been. But not all of it has been positive publicity. Dr. Burnham states:

...there has also been censorship on the part of Astral Media, who at the last minute (in the past week) demanded context for some messages, at first refused to run any of the messages in First Nations languages (!), and have still, as a final statement, refused to run a message by respected American Indian artist Edgar Heap of Birds and by UBC professor and poet Larissa Lai (including Larissa's message in Squamish). We (including Barbara Cole, of Other Sights, the umbrella organization thru which Lorna and I work) have been working with the City of Vancouver - which has been tremendously supportive - and the Squamish Nation - especially the formidable and amazing Deborah Jacobs - to try to make Astral see the error of their ways.

One of the contentious messages in question comes from Edgar Heap of Birds':



But a lot of the controversy surrounding this message involves translation difficulties. "Heap of Birds' political message is almost entirely written in the (conceptual) language of the colonizer. His work is very powerful (he loves using the phrase 'Imperial Canada' and does so in a poster work that I walk by every day at SFU), and yet it owes a debt to that colonial language. Heap of Birds' critique is untranslatable from English."

Brown and Burnham write, on the [Digital Natives](#) website:

We are disappointed that Astral has refused to broadcast artworks by such renowned artists. Their decision compromises the intent of the project and does a disservice to the artists, whose viewpoints about public space are highly valued.

"Unfortunately," they add, "Astral's censoring of artists and writers shows how difficult it is for Canadians to gain access to public space, and to express themselves in public space. This is an issue of censorship, of the suppression of artistic expression, clear and simple."

I have to say that I am extremely surprised and disappointed that there would be controversy around this work of art. This freedom of speech comes along with a similar story where a girl was prevented from riding the Skytrain for wearing a pin that stated her opinions about Yoga (F*** Yoga). Is this the start of a new rash of censorship around the rights of people to express opinions and points of view in contemporary Vancouver? I would hope not, but this move by Astral Media contradicts my hope.

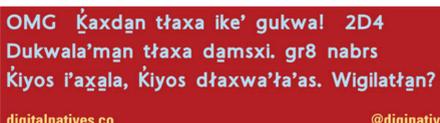
The purpose of the project is to engage viewers (readers) in discussions and dialogue, and that is what is happening. So perhaps this censorship controversy will help publicize the installation? Censoring books seems to help sales, so hopefully this act of censorship will bring greater attention to the matter. The project is, by nature, sort of controversial since it deals with First Nations and Colonialist attitudes and opinions:

The name of the project plays off of two meanings for "digital natives" -that generation - like our students - who have grown up with internet media (as opposed to us old geezers who are "digital immigrants") and the role of First Nations people in digital communication (the sign, operated by Astral Media, is located on Squamish land). So part of the project entailed my facilitating of workshops with aboriginal urban youth at the Native Education College - generating messages from the youth. Messages have been translated into Squamish and Kwak'wala (and are presently being translated into Musqueam).

All I can say is, "Kudos to Clint and Lorna for putting together an amazing and significant project."

I'm glad it's starting dialogue, but it's unfortunate that the dialogue is starting from a point of censorship rather than the project itself.

Thanks for listening.



Posted by Rob at 11:51 AM

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ASTRAL MEDIA / ART MALADIES
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Karyn Huenemann Apr 9, 2011 12:56 PM
Great post Rob, thanks for taking this on and making us all more aware.
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THIS IS ME...

Rob

I'm a student. I like books. I like intellectual freedom. I find people odd. I want to understand things.

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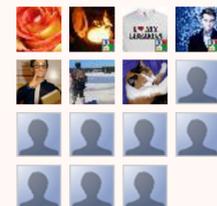
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