

# WOVEN HISTORIES- France Trepanier and Chris Creighton

[00:00:00] **France:** My name is France Trépanier. I am an, an artist and a curator of Kanien'kéha:ka and French ancestry. So my family is originally from, from Quebec and, um, I've been living, uh, on the beautiful land of the Saanich people where I'm talking to you from today. So, um, more specifically the unceded territory of the Tseycum First Nation, in this place now called Sidney by the Sea. So we are just by, uh, on the, on the little peninsula on Vancouver Island, uh, just by the Salish Sea. And it's an absolutely gorgeous land.

**Chris:** And, um, my name is Chris Creighton-Kelly. And along with France, we are the two co-directors of Primary Colours. My own background is, um, South Asian and British. So I'm what used to be called an [00:01:00] Anglo-Indian, and I too am so grateful to be an uninvited guest on this territory.

We also work, uh, and live in Victoria, BC, we're about half an hour away from Victoria, which is also the unceded territory of the Lekwungen-speaking people, which includes the Esquimalt and the Songhees Nations, as they're known today. And like France I'm very grateful to be here. It's a lovely part of the world.

**France:** Well, I was trained as a visual artist. Um, and I started my work in the artist-run centre movement. I was the co-founder of an artist-run centre back in the eighties. Um, and, um, I've, I've had a practice as a visual artist for a long time. I've been, um, I think maybe shifting more to multidisciplinary practice, including media in my work. Um, [00:02:00] And, uh, then, um, out of necessity, I think, uh, came to curation. Um, and I think that this practice has informed the work that I do, that we do at Primary Colours in the sense that the idea of curation for me is, is, comes from the idea of care, of caring for people, caring for, um, the spaces that we occupy and caring for the art, the ideas that, that we present. So what the artist comes forward with. Um, and in that spirit of care, I think that the work, it really, it's the foundation of the work that we do at Primary Colours, creating spaces of, of care, spaces where people can, Indigenous, um, Black and People of Colour can come together um, in, in productive spaces and safe spaces, safer spaces, um, to, um, to [00:03:00] talk about the state of their practice today and, and how we are shaping the Canadian art system and our place in it, and our place in the history of, uh, the arts in, in Canada. That's a short answer.

**Chris:** Sort of. It's always difficult to talk about oneself because you know, you could really indulge yourself. But I'll try my best to just touch a couple of highlights to, uh, to try to answer to you about artistic practice. Um, France used the word multidisciplinary, and I don't want to get lost in the weeds of these words, but for a long time, actually almost all my artistic career, I have thought of myself as an interdisciplinary artist. And there's a distinction between these two things. Multi-disciplinary, and I know what France means by that, is a person who does a... France has some massive drawings in her studio right now, but she's also working with augmented reality. She [00:04:00] also writes, there are different aspects. Interdisciplinary on the other hand is bringing together elements of different artistic, uh, traditions, uh, in a way that may or may not, depending on the success of the artist, um,

create something new. That's, that's the difference between interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. So I've always been trying to do that. And I think that comes from my past is a hybrid person. It comes from being a, you know, a university person, a university trained person, but also learning Sitar when I was young and learning at the feet of gurus and... Cause learning, as you both know, learning doesn't just happen in universities or colleges, it happens all the time in a day to day practice. And for me, my actual training is in communications. I have communications degrees, but along the way I've taken all kinds of courses in various, I've played in bands, I've done all kinds of activities. Um, and I'm constantly trying, [00:05:00] mostly in performance—I do not like the term performance art—um, to create an environment where people can discover something about themselves rather than about me imparting knowledge to them. How that informs Primary Colours is that, as a Person of Colour and as a person who has been working for a long, long time, like 40 years, to look at the Canadian art system and see who it excludes, we felt, and it's not me, it's together, us, and with our colleagues, that the old stale conversations about multiculturalism and access and inclusion and all this rhetoric that is used, that accomplishes very little, needed to be updated.

And we needed to talk about anti-racist technologies, sorry, methodologies, pardon me, and also very importantly, decolonizing methodology. To answer directly, the artistic practice, and I always think of it this way, is not just the work that takes place in a theater or in a gallery. [00:06:00] It's, I think of the artist as a facilitator, the artist is bringing people together, France said it perfectly a few minutes ago, creating spaces for—and one thing about what she said that she didn't say, is when we bring people together, we're not necessarily centering whiteness. There's a really unfortunate situation in this country where whiteness is always at the centre. Even if we're talking about Indigenous people, even if we're talking about Black and People of Colour. So we wanted to de-centre that. It's not, it's not like we don't like white people. We even invited a few of them to our events. But we want the conversation to be about the hidden stories and the hidden connections and make new connections among Indigenous artists, their practices and the practice of Black and People of Colour. That's a, probably a more complete answer to how we came to be where we are today.

Oh, we're changing the world. Like we, okay, you [00:07:00] go.

Well I think,

**France:** um, one of the things that we, we do and we haven't done obviously in the past year, but it's bringing people together. So creating, hosting gatherings, um, where it can, people can spend time together. Um, and as Chris was saying, uh, when you bring people together and you're not centering whiteness, really interesting stuff happens, right? And the conversation doesn't have to go back always to the basics. So, so, so that it creates a space for people to connect in so many different ways and having, and I'm not saying that these are easy conversations because it's complicated, right? It's, it's, it's complex. It's multi-layered uh, but we, we really try hard to, um, use methodologies that we call polyvocal. So creating space for many voices, and even when those voices are [00:08:00] dissonant or, or discordant, we welcome that. That's okay. Um, we value actually the different positions and

again, it's working from, um, uh, a methodology of the circle, where every point of the circle has a value. And so we value each, each other's experiences.

Um, and we also value the embodied knowledge that we all have. Uh, so these are some of the, the decolonial methodologies that we activate when we, we come together. And I think, um, some of the, um, uh, benefits I guess, or the outcomes of, of some of the work that we have done. Um, it has been really to create new networks and to create alliances.

And I think there has been a lot of bridge-building in bringing different communities, sometimes like even in the Indigenous [00:09:00] world, Indigenous communities with French as the, as their colonial language, um, are often, uh, alone by the Indigenous communities who have English as their colonial language. So there is a linguistic divide. Uh, among Indigenous people, but also among Black people and People of Colour, communities of colour. So by, by bringing different communities, I think that we are, um, allowing, um, that connection to be there, to foster.

Um, and we've seen over the years now, how much generative, um, this networking has been. Where, uh, scholars, artists, historians have decided to work on specific projects, have, they've been visiting. Uh, people have regrouped and create, um, you know, localized projects. So there's a multitude of impacts. And, and maybe, I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about the [00:10:00] Incubation Projects.

**Chris:** I could, yeah, sure. This thing that France is talking about, about polyvocality and people speaking, we are at a very interesting moment in history right now—and both of you know this cause you're young, and the way you encounter and deal with it, with what you deal with in your daily lives—where a lot of voices that have historically been silenced and marginalized are speaking. And for once they're actually being heard, even if it's a little bit. Another part of the work we do, and I will get to incubation projects briefly, but we also look at the institutions of Canada and how they replicate the power structure. So we spend a good deal of our time talking about Canadian culture. We just got off a call before you, talking about a specific museum that we're working with and how those positionalities are replicated in the day-to-day work. And for that matter how they came to be, why is it that we, you know, have [00:11:00] this arts and culture system, the way it is that is so Eurocentric that we're like, why are we even having to have this conversation?

Shouldn't these institutions be reflecting the people who live on this territory called Canada? I suspect both of you have roots in other countries, you know exactly what I'm talking about. So that's a really like an ongoing problematic, and some institutions in Canada are trying their best to accommodate this and to learn—accommodate's the wrong word—to change. Others are resisting like, like it's day one of all this. So the decolonizing work that we do is also that. It's both personal as France described, in decolonizing our minds and the way we interact with one another, but it's also decolonizing institutions and there's even a question, can an institution even be decolonized? And one of the strategies, to be more specific about methodologies, is something we call Incubation Projects where we seed money into small, well not small, but [00:12:00] smaller projects that are very locally based. And there's a few of them across communities.

**France:** That are emerging from communities.

**Chris:** Right. So we meet somewhere in Winnipeg or Halifax or whatever. Somebody goes, you know what? It would be really good if we could... Okay, well we can throw five grand at that or whatever. And it's always small amounts, but we see it as seed money to get something going. And then we provide a little bit of advice and the thing just goes on its own. Some have been really, really successful, others not so much, but it's not even about that, about their success. It's about seeding conversations and projects.

**France:** It's for all of us to imagine, right? That's what we're doing in a way. That's why we're talking, because we're imagining what this future is going to look like. Are we going to, you know, what, what, what, what can it be? Um, and one of the, um, one of the things I think is important in this [00:13:00] work of imagining what the, you know, in the decolonial future, what will the arts look like is, um, for us to understand what the colonial project was about and how it functioned, and how it was constructed and how it has created lenses that have become invisible, um, but are still very operative. Um, and, and I think that wanting to jump quickly to the decolonial future without understanding how this huge edifice was built, um, can lead us to, to very shallow solutions.

Um, and I know it's boring and sometimes it's like, you know, um, to, to have to look back at history. And sometime it's not very comfortable because it's not a very pretty story sometimes, right? Some pretty nasty stuff has happened and we have, to own that. [00:14:00] And so it's, it's, it's not just a, um, a process that is outside of ourselves as individuals. It's, we have to embody that. And, and we, we, we carry our ancestors with us every day, right? And so we have to embody their story. We have to embody, they, we, we are embodying that story. But to better understand that in a way that, uh, will make sure that we will transform it in a positive way. So paying attention to history, paying attention to how this was made, uh, is, is paramount.

And, and, and this is why telling the stories is so important, and not just the story of the, the Western art and the Western cultures. Uh, but all of those stories that are alive on the land right now. Um, for me, that's the way, that's what is leading us, uh, to, to better understand where all of that comes from, because that's [00:15:00] show—you can not understand where you're going if you don't know where you're coming from, I think. Um, and, and paying attention to where we're coming from together, um, is, is, uh, for me a beacon of light and hope for the future. It's for all of us to imagine it and to make sure that there's a space for all of our imagination in that new place, right?

I know it sounds hopeful, um, but, but that's the dream, right? We have to dream big and we have to, to keep that, that, um, that faith in what is possible. And I'm optimistic and mainly because of you, because of your generations and the work that you're gonna, you're gonna do.

Shall we start with the cultural genocide that was perpetrated here? Maybe that's the place we need to start, right? [00:16:00] Um, and I, I'm not trying to be dramatic here, but it's just the truth. Um, unfortunately, you know, there's a, um, Mike MacDonald was a Mi'kmaq artist. He is still a Mi'kmaq artist but he's passed now. And he, um, he quoted one of his

elders, uh, was, was telling to him, um, the elder said, "Mike, you know, the real tragedy of Canada is not really about the residential schools and it's not because, you know, it's not really that children was prevented from speaking their own languages. The real tragedy of this country is that the newcomers then adopt the cultures of here." And I think it really encapsulates, um, the, in a way the tragedy of it all, where you had people coming here who didn't understand what they were encountering. And they, they totally misunderstood [00:17:00] um, what, what they were seeing.

And, and because of, um, because of Christianity, because of the idea that they were in the presence of vanishing races, cause that's what they thought at the time, that they were savages that were just a, you know, a, um, uh, uncivilized population that was just on the brink of extinction. Um, and that gave them the permission to just take the land and, and take the objects and sometimes even take human remains to put them in their museums. Um, and, and they didn't see the, um, they didn't see the art. Um, they, they, they declassified. So the Western art lens had a way to declassify the arts of here. So the art forms became either, uh, artifacts. Uh, so objects to be put in museums, or they became crafts and [00:18:00] therefore they had no place in, in, in, in institutions or art galleries or any of that.

And it seems like ancient history, but we had to wait in this country, uh, until the seventies and eighties for Indigenous artists to be considered as professional artists. So, and to this day, I would say that we're still living with, um, the legacies of, of these views. Um, and a concrete example is the fact that, um, when the, uh, this country Canada decided to, um, build its arts infrastructure. So there was a moment we call it the, the, the Nation Building Period, um, where the country decided to invest in museums, in art galleries, in theatres, in concert halls. Like all of the infrastructure that was, that is there still to support the [00:19:00] arts in Canada. The libraries, the publishing houses, the archives, all of that, when all of that was built and a lot of resources were invested in, in that effort, the understanding of what art was, was completely excluding Indigenous art. It was mainly Western art. So we have in Canada, a whole system that was built to support foreign European art forms. And so we're still, today this is, this is, you know, what artists are still struggling with. Because there is no Indigenous museum. There is no Indigenous National Gallery. There's no Indigenous Theatre. We're still—

**Chris:** Though there is an Inuit one, there's an Inuit one.

**France:** We're still just struggling to start to build an infrastructure to support the artistic production and the presentation of those art forms. [00:20:00] So you know? It's, it's a big, we have a huge deficit in terms of infrastructure, and that has a huge impact, direct impact on the capacity of, of Indigenous artists to produce work and to present it. Um, and despite all of that, um, the Indigenous arts in this country are thriving in every discipline and, and they, they are presented around the world and they, um, they are appreciated around the world.

So it's a story of resilience. It's a story of, of, um, strength, um, and, and incredible, um, artistic, uh, uh, strength and power and merit.

Um,

**Chris:** Good question.

**France:** Well, maybe I should just mention that these five RS, which are Respect, Responsibility, uh, Relationality, Relevance, and Reciprocity, [00:21:00] um, are, are big words, big concepts and big guiding principles that have been developed, uh, by many, uh, Indigenous scholars, uh, mainly in the field of research. So Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Shawn Wilson and many, many others, um, have contributed to this. And really, it, it it's, it, it was developed in a more scholarly context. But, uh, we've been working with the, I've been working with those 5 Rs in my own practice as an artist and as a curator, uh, because I find that, um, although it might seem very simple, those five RS, those five words, um, to work with them, to activate them in any project that I undertake, uh, is a very stringent and rigorous process. Um, and it's like a grid. [00:22:00] Um, you know, cause sometimes we have these ideas of, uh, um, you know, a creative project or a collaboration or partnership or wanting to engage a community. Um, and it seems so relevant to us, right? It's so important and we get really excited and, and we want to do it. Um, but, but to go through, uh, the process of looking at, okay, what's, what's a respectful position with, you know, with, with this community or with this project or this idea, and what are my responsibilities in there? And this project might be relevant to me, but how is it relevant to the people that want to work with who I want to partner with?

**Chris:** Especially when they tell you we don't want to do this, then what do you do?

So really using

**France:** them as, as a, as a grid, as a moment of reflection. And, and it allows, um, it allows me anyway in my practice to um, be thoughtful and to build [00:23:00] in from the onset, uh, ways of relating, um, to, to the people I'm going to be working with and making sure that I'm not just going somewhere or either imposing my ideas or just taking, doing rest resource extraction or knowledge extraction.

What's what's what, what am I leaving? What is, what is the reciprocal relationship here and how am I nurturing this relationship? Uh, cause you know in Indigenous communities, for decades, centuries, um, people would just go in—and it's still happening—people go into a community, they want to do a project or they have the research project or whatever. Uh, they do their thing and then they leave. Um, and then the community stays there. Right? And, and so activating those guiding principles is, is a way of making sure that you nurture relationships ahead of time, during the project, but [00:24:00] also after.

It goes back to the epistemological understanding of memory.

**Chris:** Oh, boy, you're going to go there.

**France:** Well, right?

**Chris:** How is memory constructed, yeah.

What is

**France:** memory and what is it that we want to remember, and for whom and how, right? So if you come from a culture that is based in orality, uh, the responsibility of remembering takes a very different shape, right? We're on the West Coast of Canada right now where, in some communities here, um, there's a function for people, there's a role that is called witnessing. They're witnesses. And it's a real thing, it's not just "Oh I was there." Um, it's, it's people that have the responsibility of remembering an event in all its detail.

**Chris:** Without writing it [00:25:00] down.

**France:** All from memory. And those people, when you accept the responsibility of being a witness, you can be called upon by that community, as long as you live. And you have a responsibility of transmitting that memory to your, your, the people after you. So there's a huge, like millennial tradition of, of how we handle memory.

Um, and then, so, so this has been disrupted somewhat, although it's still, it's still happening. Um, but I think that our idea of archiving, of preserving memory, um, it's been, uh, objectified in a way.

**Chris:** Therefore the critique of multi, the critique of one version of history is not enough, because we have to begin to think about how do the various narratives of history come together to aggregate into something [00:26:00] bigger. So if, if I say like, you know, I want to understand history, uh, from an Indian point of view, I want to know what happened in India. And I know quite a bit about Indian history but I don't know very much compared to some people. And then I incorporate, "Oh okay, so that happened. So when the British went there..." But then that teaches me nothing about Norwegian history or the history of Antarctica or the history of birds.

So it's really a huge conceptual thing to try to understand all of that in a new way. And your generation is going to have to really deal with that. And especially people like you that are moving around and that are hybrid and that, you know, you've got more than one culture to deal with. And that is the deepest irony of all because the people that are most useful to figure that out are people who are biracial, who come from different backgrounds, who have traveled, who've lived in different countries. We are the ones that have knowledge of Western history and other history. And yet the people that only know about white history, [00:27:00] Euro-centric history, they're the ones that mostly are in charge. So it's a really problematic thing because their perspective is limited.

**France:** Well I think the project that Chris was just mentioning, um, "Telling All Our Stories," is certainly, uh, an ambition, ambitious, a big project for Primary Colours. Um, and we've been, um, trying to also adapt our ways of working to the realities of the pandemic. Um, so it has had an impact, but dreaming that project I think is, is, is the next big step.

And it can be an important contribution to, uh, to many communities, um, and to the scholarship around, around these questions as well, um, coming from outside universities. Um, and, and using different approaches, methodology. So that that'd be, um, that'd be my answer as for [00:28:00] the future of, uh, the arts from IBPOC, I think that, um, it's a bright future. I mean, I think that's, we are, um, you know in the past year I really feel that the

tectonic plates have moved. Um, and, and there's a real shift that is happening that I've, I've, I'm witnessing. There's stuff happening right now that I didn't think would happen in my lifetime. And that makes me feel very, very, very hopeful.

**Chris:** One other project it's a smaller project is when, uh, George Floyd was murdered. Um, there was a lot of performative allyship going on about, you know, uh, "We'd like to take a stand against racism" in this kind of... we didn't do that for a number of reasons. But, you know, as if People of Colour or Black people need to know that racism is bad. They already know.

So we didn't want to get involved with making ourselves look good by 'taking a stand'. We already take a stand against racism in every single [00:29:00] thing that we do. So we waited and we decided to listen a bit. We talked with many of our Black colleagues that we work with. Um, and three messages came from those informal and formal conversations.

One, we need to work with Black artists, which we already did. So we felt like, okay, we can tick that box. We did that. Then the second one was centre Black artists more. Put them more, give them more opportunities, let them speak more. Back off and let them be the ones, like we do with Indigenous artists.

So we reflected on that because we felt like we could do better there. Um, and I'll tell you briefly about the project that came out of it. And then the third one, which is the hardest one is because of where we situate Primary Colours in this kind of dialogue between Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour, um, that there's anti-Black racism within our own communities. We have a project that we're going to launch on the first anniversary of George Floyd's murder, um, called, uh, Black Lives [00:30:00] Matter Equals Black Art Matters. And we're going to have, uh, some Indigenous—so you you'll be, it'll be on our website—sorry not Indigenous, Black artists talking about that, speaking about that, without editorial comment from us. We'll just create the context and people will speak. And we can go on and on about our projects. There are many, um, that we have cooking right now. But as I said, the pandemic has set back a few things. It's set back our funding and set back our ability to be in rooms with people. We have to be very cautious because we're old and we don't want to die.

That's something that, it's not just useful for the various communities we work in. Because many of our white colleagues, probably people that teach both of you in institutions, universities and colleges are always saying, you know what? We're tired of teaching Eurocentric art. So we want to, we want to open what we do, we want to show other, but we don't know where to go to find this. [00:31:00] There's no books about South Asian art practice in Canada. You might find the odd article if you spend hours on Google, but you know, it's...

**France:** Oh, they might know though.

**Chris:** Oh they might know of course, of course.

**France:** I can see, I can see that.

**Chris:** The point is—

**France:** The search engine going.

**Chris:** There are, there are articles and thanks to multicultural... We have abundant articles about when did everybody come here and where did they come from. You can find all of that. What you rarely find is when people came to this territory, what happened to their art practices and how did they evolve when they were here?

And that's what we're trying to, the art aspect of that question. Not who eats what food, not that there's anything wrong with the food, but it's more about the art practices. So I think people have, all kinds of people, have a hunger for that knowledge.