

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Frances W. Kaye.** *Hiding the Audience: Viewing Arts and Arts Institutions on the Prairies.* Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2003. 328 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88864-376-6.



**Reviewed by** Russell Johnston (Department of Communications, Popular Culture, and Film, Brock University)

**Published on** H-Canada (May, 2004)

*Hiding the Audience* provides fascinating and suggestive new lines of thought for students of Canadian cultural history. Its author, Frances W. Kaye, is a literary scholar and professor of Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In this book, she offers a commentary on the development of regional culture in Canada, a commentary that is informed by theoretical insights from literary and cultural studies as well as by traditional archival research. Her goal is to sketch out the ideological and structural forces which have prevented Natives from actively participating in the development of a unique regional culture on the Canadian prairies. Ultimately, she hopes to show that a developing, meaningful inclusiveness within cultural organizations may signal a greater acceptance of Native culture in white prairie society. Along the way, she also demonstrates how Native viewpoints can be integrated into a discussion of “whitestream” Canadian cultural institutions and cultural history.

Kaye’s introduction sketches out the theoretical framework. It has two important elements. First, the analysis is heavily indebted to post-colonial literary theory, particularly Edward Said’s conception of Orientalism and Gayatri Spivak’s elaboration of it. Kaye’s starting point is a postmodern reading of European culture that identifies the processes and rhetorical strate-

gies through which colonizers from England, France, and Spain viewed non-European peoples as something less than human, as “others.” These processes and strategies were originally applied to “Oriental” cultures after European traders established relations with them. In time, however, they became the hegemonic discourses through which the peoples of the West understood the peoples of the East. This, of course, is Said’s thesis. Spivak’s contribution focuses upon colonized peoples rather than the colonizers, and reveals the “voice of colonized peoples cutting through the blanket of the colonizer’s discourse” (p. xvii). The assumption underlying Spivak’s work, and that of her associates in the Subaltern Study Group, is that the culture of a colonized society is rarely assimilated but instead accommodates itself to the dominant culture. Such accommodation allows for the survival and relatively autonomous development of a colonized culture. Under the right conditions, it may one day emerge from domination to re-claim full cultural autonomy; this is the moment when a society becomes post-colonial. Kaye comments that this theory was developed to describe societies in Asia and Africa, and that it does not accurately describe North America at the present time. Nonetheless, the theory is crucial to her argument. She seems too quick to apologize, and her theoretical and methodological choices could have been defended more forcefully.

In place of argument, Kaye demonstrates the applicability of this theory through historical interpretation. Chapter 1 provides a sketch of Canadian history which applies post-colonial assumptions and concepts to Native culture following the coming of “settlers”—her preferred term for newcomers who were mostly of European descent. It starts with a simple assertion: that there was an indigenous culture in North America before contact. Anthropological and historical research has given us some clues regarding the nature of this culture. This scholarship suggests that the early adoption of settler goods and tools by Native groups did not signal their capitulation to settler culture, but their active assimilation of these goods and tools into their existing culture and under their own terms. Later generations would not be so fortunate. Disease, land policy, and military power destroyed indigenous economies and forced them to accommodate to a settler culture which refused to view Native culture as its equal. Quite the opposite, by the twentieth century Native culture was thought to be alien and sub-human, something “other” which had to be eradicated if it would not disappear on its own. And yet, Native culture neither disappeared nor capitulated. Through various tactics, both group and individual, both positive and self-destructive, Native culture remained relatively autonomous and refused to lose its vision of the world. In Kaye’s terms, this was the crucial cultural resource which allowed Native communities to remain intact and coherent regardless of how threatened they may have been by settler culture.

The second element of Kaye’s theoretical framework is her concern for “audiences.” This, more than anything else, sets her work apart from other recent scholarship in Canadian cultural history. Most historians tend to examine cultural producers—people such as journalists, activists, ministers, college professors, artists, filmmakers, or advertising executives—without extended reference to the publics who consumed the products of their labors. This is often difficult if not impossible to do. The records of cultural producers are carefully preserved in our archives; the records of audiences are not. Kaye dodges this methodological issue with an interesting turn: she does not concern herself with the audience per se, but with the audience conceived by her cultural producers. This does not tell us much about actual historical audiences and how they received the texts she describes. For this reason alone, then, her ultimate conclusions may be problematic. Nonetheless, this turn provides Kaye with insights into the values and perspectives informing cultural production. Cultural producers are

dependent on attracting and holding audiences if they are to attract and hold their operating funds. This is true whether funding comes from the private sector or government grants. At the same time, cultural producers from a settler background who share the Orientalist vision will not see Natives as a vital audience for their work, and by extension are unlikely to be sensitive to Native values and perspectives in their novels, theater, exhibitions, and arts schools. Connecting these two ideas, Kaye concludes that “the extent to which Native people as a specific audience rather than as individuals are consciously or unconsciously included—or more commonly excluded—by arts institutions defines for me the extent to which a regional culture has passed through a phase of neo-colonialism to an intellectual post-colonialism that accepts an indigenous point of view, including a whole indigenous world-view, as not only valid but essential” (p. xx). Let’s call this an “audience test.” Kaye’s audience test works in conjunction with her definition of audience. It is neither sophisticated nor exclusionary. Quite the opposite—she notes that she will use it in a general way “to signify implied or intended audiences as well as varieties of literal audiences—not only people who actually attended a certain event or installation but those who read reviews, heard about it from friends, were vaguely aware of it, or who remained completely oblivious to both art and institution but were part of the ‘community’ in whose name the art was either praised or condemned, funded or removed” (p. xxi).

In other words, again, she is concerned with the motivation and intentions of cultural producers, and how they expected their wares to appeal in the marketplace of cultural products. If a cultural organization could not perceive that an entire, identifiable demographic group living within its own community was part of its potential audience, then this clearly indicates the extent to which that community was culturally integrated.

Kaye’s history is composed of four case studies separated by time and place but linked by a common element: cultural products created within settler communities but inspired by local Native culture. Chapter 3 examines the artistic movements which informed the teaching philosophy and style at the Banff Centre for the Arts; chapters 4 and 5 look at the founding of the Glenbow Museum in the 1960s and then one notorious exhibit, “The Spirit Sings,” in 1988; chapter 6 assesses memorials to Louis Riel in Manitoba and Saskatchewan; and chapter 7 discusses *Jessica* (1982), a play staged by the 25th Street Theatre, Saskatoon, and produced by Native writer Maria Campbell. As Kaye has constructed her book, each case study

provides one step in the development of contemporary Prairie culture.

The starting point is the Banff Centre. The center was originally conceived as an extension project of the University of Alberta in 1913 to bring European high culture to the sod-busting folk of the prairies. It was a decidedly white, middle-class project bent on cultural reform. Kaye notes that it had the support of local members of the “government generation” such as Leonard Brockington and E. A. Corbett, as well as local businesspeople who were eager to become patrons of the arts. The United Grain Growers and its organ the *Grain Growers’ Guide* were early supporters, and they lent some credibility to the center’s populist self-image. Nonetheless, its early financing was dependent on grants from the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations. To maintain its profile among this class of patrons, a School of Advanced Management was added in the 1950s. In Kaye’s estimation, the center was essentially a conduit for the import of metropolitan artistic movements to the prairies (p. 90). A case in point: in the 1950s, the center was more eager to introduce nude drawing with live models than it was to respect community standards among its students. Although an attempt was made to document prairie social history and thereby preserve stories to inspire future artists, this was marginal to its overall program. Kaye suggests the prairie history project mainly served to generate publicity for the center among rural folk. More importantly, while the farm and working-class settlers of Alberta may have been the intended audience for this cultural uplift, local Natives were not considered at all, nor were their artistic traditions emphasized in the programming offered to students and patrons. As a result, the Banff Centre stands as a stark symbol for the establishment of European settler culture on the Prairies, at the expense of—and active exclusion of—the existing, indigenous Native culture. The ideological and financial resources of settler society, including the education system, mass media, business sector, farms groups, and charitable foundations, all participated in this process.

Flash forward to the 1990s. Kaye implicitly argues that cultural organizations founded by settlers gradually developed a willingness to represent Native culture. To say this is not to say that these organizations did so willingly or well. Nonetheless, there is in Kaye’s narrative a suggestion that such organizations progressed from utter silence on the issue of Native culture, to simplistic representations, to critically informed attempts at sensitive portrayals, to, finally, Native-settler co-operation in the production of cultural products. Kaye’s concern for

the audience is revealed at each of these stages. The first three are characterized by a common ignorance of the fact that Natives, as an identifiable demographic group within society, should have been a potential audience for the cultural products in question.

This ignorance came to a crashing end with “The Spirit Sings” exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in 1988. The exhibition was intended to showcase the unique and remarkable contribution of North American Native tribes to world art, and was timed to coincide with the Calgary Olympics. The organizers, however, did not consider its relationship to another contemporary event: a controversy surrounding land claims for the Lubicon peoples of northern Alberta. The Lubicon had no financial or political leverage with the provincial government which oversaw the claim. Instead, they initiated a boycott of the museum, arguing that its supposed celebration of Native artifacts was hypocritical given the government’s actual treatment of its Native citizens. The lack of Native input was notable. No Native interpreters or docents were hired by the museum throughout the duration of the exhibit, nor were there special tours for Native schoolchildren (pp. 146-147). Further, the museum planned to “repatriate” Native artifacts from foreign museums for the exhibition. Once it was over, the Glenbow planned to turn these artifacts over to the Museum of Civilization. It was never suggested that they might be returned to the relevant band councils (p. 140). The immediate effect of the boycott on the museum can be debated. Canadian and foreign museums, numbering eighty-nine altogether, loaned artifacts; thousands attended; and among the visitors must have been Kaye herself—who more than once describes the experience as “stunning.” In the museum community, however, the boycott sparked heated debates over the legitimate use of artifacts and prompted strong, cautionary resolutions from organizations such as the International Council of Museums of Ethnography (pp. 150-151).

The alternative for Kaye is demonstrated by Thomas King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). Chapter 2 of *Hiding the Audience* is an analysis of that novel and King’s use of a Native perspective to re-tell settler stories. He structures his narrative around the Sun Dance. Much European and North American literature is written with the assumption of a shared cultural heritage among author and readers. Certainly the Bible, Shakespeare, and Hollywood movies informed English letters in the late-twentieth century. King, too, writes his novel according to an assumed cultural tradition, but it is one rooted among North America’s indigenous people. Rather than

the “great code” of the Bible, he uses the Sun Dance as his template and then “re-centers” stories from American history, Hollywood movies, and the Bible itself. And while he uses the Sun Dance in this manner, he does not explain it, thus mimicking and mocking the pattern of European literature. Out of deference to King, Kaye also does not explain the Sun Dance (a decision which may annoy her readers). However, she sees King’s integration of settler stories and values into a Native world-view and cultural product as a model for how a truly inclusive culture might be developed.

Anyone who believes in the power of art to transform society will find something of value in this book. Cultural history in Canada has been moving away from studies of high culture and institutional histories of cultural organizations, and towards an understanding of culture which investigates the structures and patterns of everyday life. Kaye tries to bridge these two approaches by using the institutional histories of cultural élites to develop general insights about values and rituals in their local communities. Methodologically, then—and to some extent thematically—the book may provide interesting contrasts with Sarah Carter’s *Capturing Women* (1997), Ian McKay’s *Quest of the Folk* (1997), or Keith Walden’s *Becoming Modern in Toronto* (1997). At the same time, it is the institutional histories which are the weakest elements of the book. Dates are not often mentioned, and as a result the timing of documents, events, and movements is frequently obscure. For example, it was not clear to me when the Banff Centre actually opened, or what the precise relationship was between the Luxton and Glenbow Museums into the 1960s, or when the statues of Riel in Winnipeg and Regina were removed from their original placements. Similarly, certain information is assumed on the part of the author which the reader may not know. Artists and writers are named whose significance is either not indicated or not explained until much later in the book.

A definite advantage of the book is its use of case studies to flesh out her argument. As Kaye notes throughout the book, culture happens locally; it is the product of human interaction at the most basic level in the communities where we live. By examining local cultural organizations rather than national associations or regulatory agencies, Kaye uncovers the myriad negotiations which occur at the grassroots over representations, inclusiveness, funding, and politesse. By extension, she also uncovers the myriad hidden assumptions, values, and beliefs which informed these discussions. In this respect, her research shares some common themes and ap-

proaches with Carol Tator et al. in *Challenging Racism in the Arts* (1998), which explores recent representations of ethnic minorities among select cultural organizations in Toronto. The drawback to this approach can be a fascination with details. At times, Kaye’s writing seems to be dictated by the documents she found rather than the flow of her argument (e.g., pp. 160-163). As well, some of the documents themselves might have been better supported with corroborating evidence. A case in point is her analysis of the human figure classes at the Banff Centre. Much of her historical case is based upon a fictional account written by a former instructor at the center. It is not clear when the story was written or what the author’s relationship was to the class; it is also not clear to what extent the events were embellished in the telling (pp. 69-72).

One hidden assumption underlies much of the book, and it concerns the formation of the settler culture itself: that all immigrant groups participated equally in the construction of a settler culture on the Prairies. Perhaps this is not Kaye’s assumption, but the issue of one immigrant group’s cultural domination over the others is not directly addressed. Perhaps it should have been. While she does acknowledge that there are authentic cultural differences among Native communities, she does not consider the authentic cultural differences among the variety of immigrant groups that arrived during the period under study. Surely these groups also posed challenges for the established cultural organizations seeking to build their audiences. Were Chinese, Ukrainian, or Jewish settlers consciously sought as patrons and publics for the Banff Centre or Glenbow? Were they more or less welcome than Native groups? How quickly were their cultural traditions embraced and celebrated? Answers to such questions might have provided some valuable insights into the relative treatment of indigenous culture.

Last, it should be noted that Kaye made a conscious decision not to examine cultural organizations operated by Natives. She justifies this by stating that, as a white woman of settler ancestry, she did not want to speak for Natives or attempt to explain Native cultural expression (p. xxii). The one exception, of course, is Thomas King. Some may see this as a remarkable oversight given that her stated goal is to find a way to integrate Native and settler cultural elements, to work towards a genuinely inclusive prairie society. One might reasonably ask if Native cultural organizations are following a similar pattern of development and actually seek a settler audience. In her defense, it is immediately apparent that such a question would require another book. At the same time, however, the book is titled *Hiding the Audience*, and pre-

sumably that audience is the Native population of prairie Canada. That audience is rarely heard from in this book, apart from the leaders of Native organizations criticizing the “Spirit Sings” exhibition or statues of Riel. As noted above, this is a direct consequence of her methodological decision to look at how cultural producers envisioned the audience rather than looking for the historical audiences themselves. Still, this is a thought-provoking book with a clearly stated theoretical and political agenda. Hopefully, Frances Kaye will find that the responses are numerous, interdisciplinary, and above all interesting.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

**Citation:** Russell Johnston. Review of Kaye, Frances W., *Hiding the Audience: Viewing Arts and Arts Institutions on the Prairies*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9383>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).