

The pitfalls of counter-representation

From Indigenous reconciliation to free speech advocacy, we must cautiously examine how challenges to the status quo are portrayed in the post-truth universe

By [Ibnul Chowdhury](#)

Representation is necessarily misrepresentation. When an elite claims to reflect the complex interests of whoever they deem to be ‘the people’ — a people imagined to be singular — institutions of power frame, define, and pursue the populace’s interests. Representation, in this sense, means simplification, homogenization, and reduction.

By creating a singular imagination and truth, representation marginalizes narratives that dominant groups find uncomfortable, and centres that which is palatable and affirming to the people.

The popular imagination of Canada — which is portrayed as a nation of diversity, openness, and tolerance — is one such representation that now faces challenges to its rhetoric in the form of counter-representations. In an era where governments are now speaking openly and frequently about reconciliation, the most relevant source of counter-representation is that of Indigenous peoples.

At the University of Toronto’s Art Museum, Cree artist Kent Monkman’s *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* exhibit told some of the stories that were necessarily lost in the forging of a Euro-Christian imagination. Whereas the nationalist celebration of Canada points to 150 years since Confederation this year, Monkman starts our story from 300 years ago and examines the colonial history of Canada from an Indigenous lens. Paintings like “The Subjugation of Truth” and “The Scream” were among the exhibit’s dark, absurdist, and poignant animations of residential schools, urban violence, and land dispossession, demonstrating the intergenerational

persistence of colonialism that continues to this day. These counter-representations remind us that the birth of Canada has two legacies: one that celebrates the creation of a Canadian identity, and the other that mourns the erasure of Indigeneity from the landscape.

To look past the singularity of representation and truth is to challenge the status quo and demand change. Fortunately, at U of T, Indigenous cultural counter-representation is more visible than ever. Re-Indigenized street signs, the REDress Project on campus, which draws attention to the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and the Powwow and Indigenous Festival are among the most conspicuous examples. President Meric Gertler's public embrace of the 32 Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations for the university in January projects bright possibilities for reconciliation.

One should, however, be hesitant to conclude that we are now moving past representation and embracing truth in its plurality — in its counter-representations. Quite to the contrary, the new culture of counter-representation can be used to obfuscate the persistence of representation and its colonial functions. For instance, Indigenous visibility at the university is meaningless if Gertler continues to refuse to divest from fossil fuels, since that refusal sustains the drastic impact of climate change and undermines the environmental stewardship worldviews that underline Indigenous self-determination.

In a recent CBC piece, Clayton Thomas-Müller defines “redwashing” as the process by which corporations and banks sponsor Indigenous visibility in the Canadian imagination to overshadow the destructive initiatives that they impose upon Indigenous lands. In other words, we now face the appropriation of Indigenous counter-representation to advance the original project of colonial representation.

This space of plural truths, and the perverse contribution of counter-representation to the advance of representation is not just exclusive to the Indigenous context. Around the world, the cascade of disillusionment with the status quo and elitist establishment has emboldened self-proclaimed alternative political movements that claim to speak for a majority of people. However, rather than empowering marginalized narratives — like the colonized Indigenous do through counter-representation — the idea with these movements is that the majority identity narrative is itself marginalized and needs revival.

Enough analysis has been conducted about right-wing populism in the form of Trump, Brexit, and Marine Le Pen. However, its local replicas on campus are worth noting as part of the broader pitfall of counter-representation. This is especially true for figures like Professor Jordan Peterson and former Reboot candidate Micah Ryu: although they hold different levels of power, each has exploited counter-representation to advance the original intent of representation, which is to exclude and erase marginalized narratives.

Peterson occupies a high level of power on campus as a tenured professor. His conflation of gender self-determination with totalitarianism this year is well-noted — but it remains staggering how his counter-representation narrative frames the fact that the majority is allegedly marginalized and needs protection. The staunch opposition that he faces from the transgender community and their allies has been framed as an assault on free speech rather than a defense of human dignity.

Indeed, by many proponents of free speech he is lauded as a hero, earning him thousands of views online and numerous media appearances, more than doubling his income, and exporting him to other university campuses like McMaster and Western.

Peterson finds himself connected to a transnational, trans-campus free speech movement, where the refusal of campuses to host the exclusionary vitriol of Ben Shapiro and Milo Yiannopoulos grants the movement legitimacy by an ironic claim of victimhood. It is an infectious phenomenon, by which views that uphold the colonial status quo representation — whether it be the gender binary or the Muslim ‘Other’ — are framed as counter-representation, resistance, and freedom. Indeed, the loss of the right to oppress has now become oppression in and of itself.

Likewise, in UTSU student politics, Reboot presidential candidate Micah Ryu led a campaign that used this growing anti-establishment “outsider” framework to advance exclusionary politics. His criticism of student politics as the domain of an elite group of insiders is ostensibly consistent with the exclusivity of representation. However, his solution via austerity measures that would have cut down and decentralized the UTSU as a means of accountability only sustains the status quo de-politicization of the organization.

In fact, We the Students presidential candidate Andre Fast condemned the suggestion that the UTSU should remain distant from equity issues, and pointed out that, disappointingly, the union has become depoliticized this year. He stated that the union “does have a really big role to play on issues of

social and environmental justice, on affordability issues” — all issues that matter most to marginalized students.

Ryu’s personal Queerphobic comments in light of this year’s gender identity controversy, and his campaign’s hostility toward the Black Liberation Collective’s condemnation of anti-Black racism within the UTSU only further demonstrates the bankruptcy of this anti-establishment narrative.

What’s more, in response to the accumulation of demerit points that led to Reboot’s eventual elimination, some students reacted in a way that suggested that this allegedly anti-establishment party was a victim and martyr of the establishment — inadvertently excusing Ryu’s otherwise inexcusable behaviour. Yet, Ryu’s exclusionary behaviour and pledges to de-politicize the UTSU under an anti-establishment outsider narrative have hardly helped the most anti-establishment outsider students on campus — Black, Muslim, and Queer folks — all of whom need more support from the student body given the events that occurred this year.

What we can take from this is that it is necessary to challenge dominant narratives that become culturally objective, to shed light on marginalized narratives, and to turn discomfort into productive change. Indigenous resurgence on campus reminds us that counter-representation is possible and powerful.

However, we should also be wary of certain counter-representations that insidiously uphold and even deepen oppressive structures of power that correspond to the original exclusionary logic of representation. In this era of alternative facts and multiple truths, we should fight for a future that captures the imagination of the heretofore unrepresented.

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