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The native as image: art history, nationalism, and decolonizing aesthetics

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Introduction

The agency of the native cannot simply be imagined in terms of a resistance against the image—that is, after the image has been formed—nor in terms of a subjectivity that existed before, beneath, inside, or outside the image. It needs to be rethought as that which bears witness to its own demolition—in a form that is at once image and gaze, but a gaze that exceeds the moment of colonization.

—Rey Chow (144)

In this study, I attempt to identify various aesthetic strategies employed in the visual representation of Native Americans as part of the function of nation building. Whether used in the ongoing production of the United States as a nation-state or as Native efforts toward decolonization, the discourses that contextualize the Native as image are constantly being reconfigured.¹ I examine the role of art history and anthropology, academic disciplines intimately involved in defining Native visual culture, in order to locate and analyze institutional sites where these discourses are produced, preserved, disseminated, and consumed, namely: the archive, the academy, and the museum. I focus my discussion on case studies that illustrate various efforts by Native artists to decolonize these discourses, efforts that often rely on visual self-representation.

Ultimately, I analyze approaches to reading the image of the Native body, with particular attention to self-portraiture, as instances in which the body is produced as a sovereign site. My argument is that by considering these aesthetic practices within the context of nationalism it is possible to recognize the production of a gaze that, as Rey Chow describes in the epigraph above, “exceeds the moment of colonization.”

I have limited the scope of my analysis to the investigation of discourses in which the Native as image is actively contested. Although there is much overlap among them, the three institutional sites of my analysis are locations that are de-

¹ I am using Michel Foucault's broad notion of discourse, which he defines as those signifying “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972 49).

efined and organized by disciplinary, thus ideological, schemata. Within these institutions, the Native body is often negotiated by means of an essentialist invocation, whether by imperialist discourses seeking to reify the Native as subject or by avant-garde Native artists looking to disrupt the body's articulation within the project of empire. Although there are many other sites where discursive productions of Native subjectivity can be found (e.g., legal, popular, religious, medical), I have selected these three locations as primarily invested in defining Native visual culture.

My approach is indebted to Michel Foucault's formulation of discourse. The idea that an object does not precede but is instead constituted by those signifying practices that define it is particularly useful for investigating the discursive production of the Native as the West's fundamental other. In order to examine these practices adequately, my study requires an interdisciplinary approach, one that can be categorized as belonging to the practice of visual studies. Although defining the parameters and methodologies of visual studies has been the focus of scholarly debates for some time, what is useful for my investigation are the possibilities this approach allows to draw from disciplines as required by the conditions being analyzed.²

The disciplines most relevant for my inquiry are anthropology and art history, which, like most disciplines, are already innately interdisciplinary. I will especially draw from the self-critiques developed within these fields that re-evaluate their role in the production of the other. This process of self-criticism has been the object of methodological reevaluations from within both fields for some time.³

² The field of visual studies, also referred to as visual culture and visual (and) cultural studies, by definition resists a clear formulation of its interdisciplinarity. Designating boundaries for this approach would limit its pursuit of politically effective analyses. For a debate on the parameters of visual studies, and whether it should even be considered a field, see Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," and "Responses to Bal's 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture.'" For a history of the development of the field in the U.S. see Elkins, Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction and Dikovitskaya, Visual Culture. For a British perspective, see Jenks, Visual Culture, and Walker and Chaplin, Visual Culture: An Introduction.

³ Within anthropology, a selection of early self-critiques includes Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object (New York: Columbia University Press,

Anthropology has always demonstrated an anxiety about its engagement with the other, a subject position whose construction has been, to a great extent, the objective of the discipline. This anxiety has given rise to periodic reassessments of the fundamental aims of the discipline as well as its methodological approaches. Therefore, anthropology has been a field that carefully assesses the form as well as the content of its knowledge production. The traditional academic study of the other often includes traveling to a site in order to engage in a variety of exchanges—some public and formal, others private and intimate—exchanges that are recorded, digested, and then represented within the context of academic discourses. The site and process of fieldwork has traditionally depended on producing a narrative of face-to-face encounters with those considered different enough to be objects of study.

The disciplinary production of narratives of encounter with the other is given the name of ethnography, a form of narrative writing whose critical reassessment by James Clifford and George Marcus marked a key moment in the history of the field. By questioning the primacy afforded the voice of the ethnographer—whose presence in the encounter is privileged and authorized by the narrative itself—and proposing a more self-conscious and dialogic form of writing about the other, Clifford and Marcus unsettled the discipline's methodological foundations.⁴

Within art history, critical practitioners have come to understand and take responsibility for their role in the production of knowledge about the other. They have inserted themselves within the space of analysis and acknowledged their role in the process of representation. As art historian Hans Belting observed early in this

1983); Clifford and Marcus, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography; Clifford, The Predicament of Culture. A selection of art historical scholarship critical of the field's dealings with native art includes: Berlo, The Early Years of Native American Art History; Jonaitis, Chiefly Feasts; Cole, Captured Heritage; Phillips, "Why Not Tourist Art? Significant Silences in Native American Museum Representations," in After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Post-Colonial Displacements; Rushing, Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde; and essays by Nemiroff, Houle and Townsend-Gualt in Land, Spirit, Power.

⁴ Clifford expanded his criticism in his The Predicament of Culture. For a comprehensive overview of anthropological scholarship focused on Indigenous art production, see Rebecca Dobkins, "Art," in A Companion to the Anthropology of American Indians.

period of re-assessment: “Art history . . . studies vehicles of representation, namely works of art. But we often forget that art history itself practices representation” (57). Therefore, particular attention has been paid within the discipline not only to how its objects of study are selected but also to how and by whom they are historically and critically framed. This is an analysis that pays close attention to historiography, the process of writing history, and, more recently, to the way in which art history writes its own history.⁵ This has been particularly important for the subfield that concentrates on the history of Native art.⁶

Much of this criticism has focused on the perceived distance, both temporal and spatial, between scholar and the object of study. Both art historians and anthropologists have reconsidered their relationship to the ways in which distance has been invoked to support claims of objectivity while, at the same time, objectifying other cultures. As the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas explains: “it must be recognized that anthropology is a discourse of alterity, a way of writing in which us/them distinctions are central, and which necessarily distances the people studied from ourselves” (1991 3). Janet Berlo, a historian of Native art, noted the self-critical turn within her discipline:

[W]e see the history of American Indian art history in terms of shifting truths, falsehood, appropriations, scholarly formulations, and public responses—different conjunctures for different historical moments. . . . The last quarter of the twentieth century is clearly an era in which self-evaluation and a self-critical stance are central to the enterprise of encountering other cultures and their arts. (1992 15)

Mindful of the self-criticisms developed within, and at times across, these disciplines, I have taken care to not only employ their methodologies as tools for analysis but, at the same time, I have also included them among the subjects of this study.

⁵ A selection of provocative takes on the writing of/as art history, Derrida, The Truth in Painting; Holly, Past Looking. Much work produced in the name of “visual culture” is self-conscious about the role of the historian and critic in the production of narratives, some verging on solipsism.

⁶ For a history of the development of the historiography on Native American art, see Berlo, “Introduction: The Formative Years of Native American Art History,” in The Early Years of Native American Art History.

As I mentioned above, my selection of the particular discursive sites I have chosen to analyze (the archive, the museum, and academia) has much to do with their function in the production of the nation. In his description of the emergence of the nation-state in the West, Benedict Anderson categorizes these kinds of discursive sites as “institutions of power.” The particular institutions he discusses—the census, the map, and the museum—form part of a process he describes as “a systemic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the education system, administrative regulations, and so forth.” For Anderson, the imposition of an official nationalist ideology is complemented, and at times contested, by a “genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm” (163). My interest in examining these visual sites, however, is not to discern an official from a popular nationalist narrative, but, instead, to consider Native strategies enacted within and against these institutions that may propose alternatives to the hegemonic nation-state, official or otherwise.⁷

The end of the nation-state as the legitimate international expression of sovereignty has been proclaimed for some time. Recent work by Marxist theorists has reconsidered the historical claims made for the nation-state as a liberatory vehicle. As Giovanni Arrighi argues, during the rise of capitalism:

the leading agencies of the formation and expansion of the capitalist world system appear to have been organizations that are either something less (city-states and quasi-states) or something more (quasi-empires) or something different (business diasporas and other transterritorial capitalist organizations) than nation-states. (41)

Although he does not deny that “at a decisive moment of its evolution, the Eurocentric capitalist world system did become embodied in a system of nation-states,” Arrighi stresses the importance of considering the function of other formations of power (41). However, no matter what form the nation takes, it is the imagining and, for the purposes of this study, the imaging of community into a

⁷ In the revised and extended edition of his treatise, Anderson includes a chapter on the census, the map, and the museum as institutions of power that “profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion” (164). For a critique of the Western trajectory outlined by Anderson, see Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

coherent political unit that has allowed for substantial and ongoing change on the world stage.

In their provocative reconsideration of the relationships between postmodernism, postcolonialism, and globalization, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri continue to argue for the efficacy of nationalism, particularly for its usefulness for those communities resisting domination by imperialist nation-states. They insist that, "whereas the concept of nation promotes stasis and restoration in the hands of the dominant, it is a weapon for change and revolution in the hands of the subordinated" (106). In this view, it is clear that the nation, whether manifested in the form of the nation-state or not, remains an endeavor productive of oppressive as well as liberatory goals. Therefore, we need to keep in mind this plurality and think in terms of nationalisms.⁸

Although nationalist projects may have multiple agendas, it may be helpful to divide them into two groups: imperialist and anti-imperialist. This is what cultural theorist Timothy Brennan has proposed in order to distinguish the political impetus of nationalist movements. He defines imperialist nationalisms as those "project[s] of unity [formed] on the basis of conquest and economic expediency" while anti-imperialist nationalisms are those that take on "the task of reclaiming community from within boundaries defined by the very power whose presence denied community" (1990 58). Within this framework, Native communities dedicated to maintaining and exercising their sovereignty would be operating under the banner of anti-imperialist nationalism, a project of decolonization that aims to preserve a pre-existing community.

It is important to consider that most Native communities seeking decolonization do not have to imagine themselves anew. In fact, it is by resorting to their pre-colonial epistemologies that Native resistance to imperialism has often been enacted. This is explicitly the case in terms of cultural manifestations of the nation. It is from these historical legacies, from traditional indigenous epistemologies, that the artists I will discuss primarily draw for their anti-imperialist aesthetic projects. Imperialist nationalisms, however, also depend on their own traditions,

⁸ For a critique of Hardt and Negri's theory of resistance, see Brennan, Wars of Position.

on legacies of images produced and systematically arranged as forms of knowledge about the other. Hence, this study considers the tensions, conflicts, and responses of these competing nationalisms, particularly as they are manifested within the visual realm.⁹

The history of the Western production and circulation of images of Native Americans is much older than five hundred years. As anthropologist Peter Mason has observed:

Before America was discovered it already had a place in the European imaginary. The myth of the Golden Age, the Wild Man and Wild Woman, Atlantis, the travels of Marco Polo, the “travels” of Sir John Mandeville—these had all prepared the ground for an encounter with the New World in which the New was already familiar. (1990 7)

The source of the image of this familiar other, as is the case with most Western origins, can be located in ancient Rome and Greece. Mason traces many of the images used to narrate the early histories of Native Americans to monstrous races described by writers such as Pliny and Herodotus. These ancient writings describe horrible deformed creatures with human forms, often disfigured or with multiple appendages. And their monstrosity increases the farther they are found from the centers of civilization, i.e. Greece and Rome.

Part of Mason's project is to trace how these images and descriptions travel through time, how they are modified and transformed to describe various instances of Europe's encounter with the other. An example of how these images are articulated from one situation to another is the adoption of the Plinian race of Blemmyae—beings without a head but whose mouth and eyes are in their chests—to describe Native Americans. An early visual representation of the creature is found in a fifteenth-century history book by Hartmann Schedel, which shows a variety of the images that were added to illustrate these ancient narratives (Figure 1). The top image on the left column depicts a member of the Cy-

⁹ For a comprehensive study of early European imagery of Native Americans, although without a self-critical framework, see Honour, [The New Golden Land](#). The book is based on an exhibition organized by the Cleveland Museum and the National Gallery of Art to commemorate the bicentennial of the United States. For the catalogue of the exhibition, see Honour, [The European Vision of America](#).

nocephali, a race of men with the heads of dogs. The next image below it shows a one-eyed Kyklopes. The third image shows one of the Blemmyae in a gesture of animated conversation. We can compare this image with one printed in the eighteenth century as an illustration for a text by Joseph Franoise Lafitau (Figure 2). The images on this page were derived from the ethnographic studies by John White, with the exception of the Blemmyae depicted in the top row.

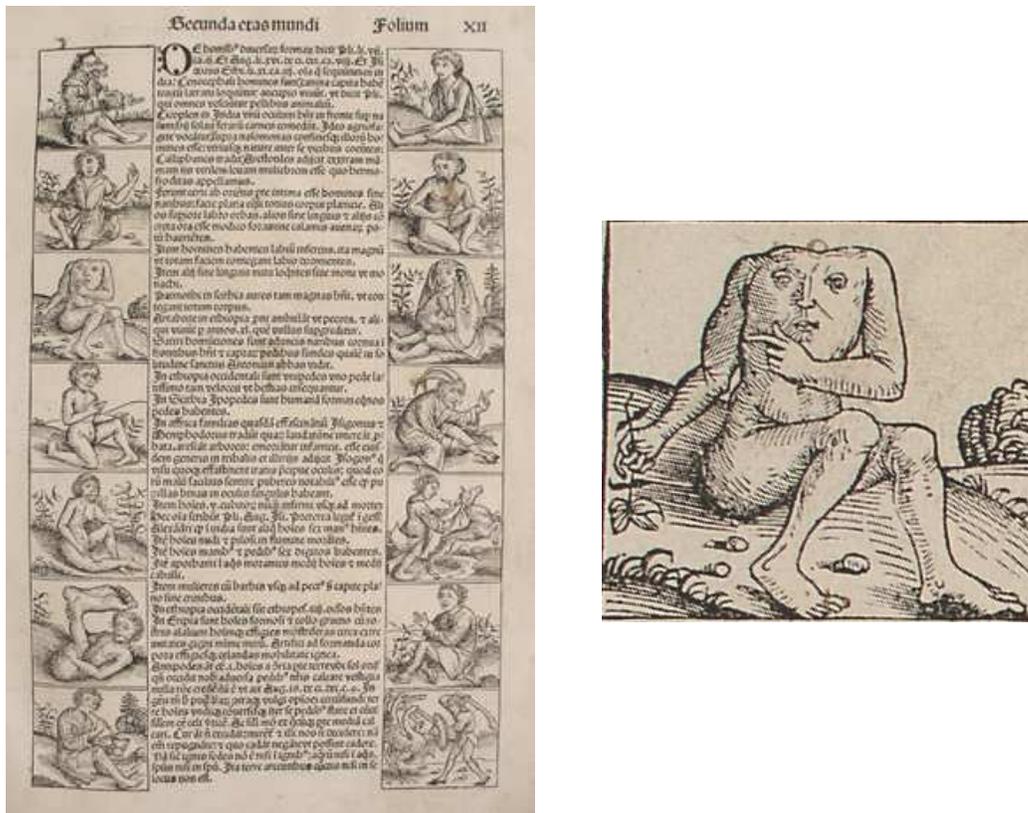


Figure 1. Page from Hartmann Schedel, *Nuremberg Chronicle*, 1493, folio xii, with detail of Blemmyae figure.

Mason offers an explanation for the odd inclusion of an ancient monster into a study of Native Americans. He explains that, despite his usual skepticism of the accounts described by Pliny and others, Lafitau conceded to the inclusion of the image after hearing of an Iroquois hunter's own encounter with a similar creature (1990 106). We should also consider the nature of Lafitau's comparative methodology as contributing to the juxtaposing of these images. His idea was to compare the customs of Native Americans with those of the ancient civilizations

so that one could help to explain the other (Pagden 208). The connection between ancient civilizations and contemporary Native Americans becomes personified in the figure of the Blemmyae, a familiar cipher for the unknown Native.¹⁰

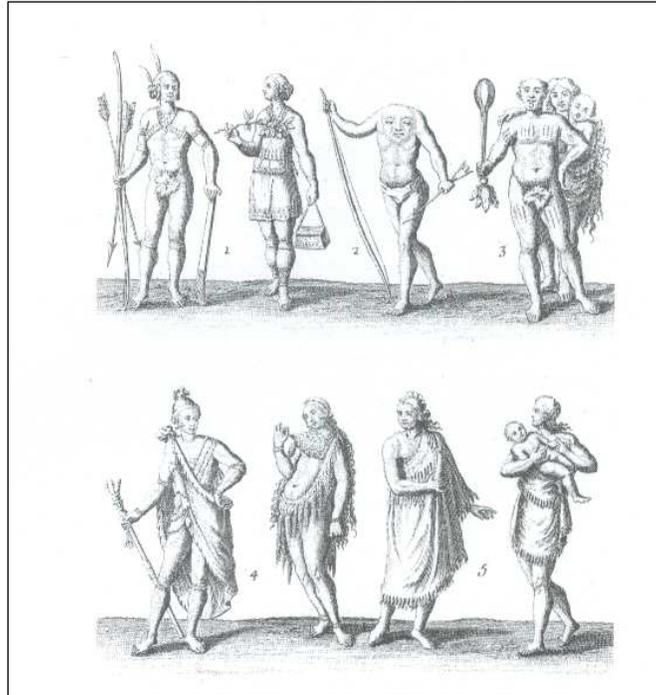


Figure 2. J.F. Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*, Paris 1724, 2 vols.

In many ways the monstrous image of the Blemmyae does belong beside White's more ethnographically informed images of Native Americans. Regardless of claims to their accuracy, his images are also European projections of indigenous subjectivity. The Native as the image of Europe's other belongs to an economy of images produced to affirm, once again, the primacy of the West, to substantiate the origin of civilization as Western. This legacy of the Native as image is one that Native artists continuously engage in their projects of decolonization.

¹⁰ As Lafitau explained: "The ancient authors have given me information on which to base happy conjectures about the Indians, the customs of the Indians have given me information on the basis of which I can understand more easily and explain more readily many things in the ancient authors" (Pagden 200).

In each of the chapters that follow, I analyze the ways in which Native art production constitutes not just a decolonizing response to a Western gaze but, at the same time, an enunciation of sovereign subjectivity. In chapter one, my analysis takes the photographic archive as a specific situation where images of Native Americans have been produced in accordance with aesthetic strategies that place Native communities as precursors to the development of the United States as a nation-state. I take as an example the vast body of work by Edward Curtis (1868-1952), analyzing its ideological implications specifically within nationalist discourses, not only by examining the content of his work—the image of the authentic Native before disappearing forever—but also its aesthetic deployment of nostalgia. While this desire for a distant past, occupied by Natives no longer existing in the present, was convenient for the building of a nation, the aesthetic strategies used to incite nostalgia have also been valuable for Native artists eager to affirm their own history.¹¹

By critically observing how Curtis straddled the ethnographic and artistic practices of his time in the name of nation, the relevance of his archive today is made clearer. Chapter two looks at the impact of Curtis's work on the way that both Native and non-Native viewers imagine the Native subject today. This chapter focuses on the direct and indirect responses to this oeuvre by contemporary Native artists. The legacy of Edward Curtis's massive archive of the photographic documentation of the vanishing Indian is continuously co-opted into the practices of various artists who have approached his representations as belonging their own iconographic traditions. The theoretical framing for this first chapter introduces a discussion of nostalgia as an effect that is aesthetically, and, in the case of Native artists, retroactively produced in the name of nationalist unity.

While in the first two chapters I emphasize an analysis of the vast production of and struggles for control over visual representation located at the site of

¹¹ For a discussion of the photograph as simultaneously documentary evidence and archival record, as an object that catalogues itself, see Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography between History and Monument," in Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art.

the archive, chapter three looks at how academic methodological approaches to the archive can obscure, and at times render invisible, the Native subjects represented. My focus is on the figure of Aby Warburg, considered one of the “fathers” of art history and a contemporary of Curtis. While they have little in common, a trip Warburg took to the American southwest led to an engagement with Native communities there that resulted in his production of photographic documentation and acquiring a large collection of objects. His memories of this excursion, along with his many notes and photographs contributed to the development of a now famous lecture, which he delivered twenty-seven years after his trip. Of all his work, this lecture—which includes a sensationalized description of the Hopi snake dance ceremony—has become emblematic for scholars today of an intrepid interdisciplinarity.

My analysis of current treatments of Warburg and his engagement with the Hopi is a case study of the limits of the capacity of interdisciplinary fields to be self-critical about their role in the production of the Native as image. While much emphasis has been placed on Warburg's methodology and his art historical milieu, I also examine his engagement with anthropology to better understand his trip to the American southwest. His journey provided him with the opportunity to develop insights into the persistent re-emergence of ancient symbols, leading many of today's scholars interested in his work to praise his unorthodox approach as highly productive. However, his comparison of the ceremonial activities of Native Americans that incorporate the snake with those of ancient Greek cults that also focused on this highly symbolic creature, ignored the significance of these ceremonies for the Hopi, thus, denying them subjectivity in their performative enunciation of their identity. Today's scholars, whose focus is on Warburg and his method, repeat this denial. A comparison of Warburg's anthropological influences with Curtis's allows for a better contextualization of the aftermath of Warburg's visit to the southwest, the influences, for example, of his collecting activities in the development of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, a significant institution in defining Germany vis-à-vis the Native other.

And it is the site of the museum that is the focus of the fourth chapter. An analysis of various exhibitionary practices of museums allows for a consideration

of the importance of location and the negotiation of space as constitutive of Native identity. I am particularly interested in the site specificity of museums—the meaning produced by the visitor's journey there—and the contributions by these institutions to the production of communal identities, especially through their production of ideologically charged space. By applying Mieke Bal's work on the process of exhibiting as a speech-act, I explore the representation of Native bodies within the space of the museum to consider the agency of Native artists to intervene in the production of the museum as place. I also compare traditional western museums with tribal museums to argue for the different readings prompted by their geographic location. Part of this analysis involves not only looking at the significance of place in engaging museums, but also looking at how space is produced within museums, particularly through the use of display technologies such as dioramas and replicas of traditional dwellings. My treatment ends with an exploration of a few examples that show how the significance and function of traditional Indigenous dwellings have been reclaimed, a reclamation that also converts the spaces as Native places.

In the final chapter, I look at the work of contemporary Native artists in order to reverse the perspective on the production of otherness and consider the production of the self, primarily through an analysis of self-portraiture. I look at the multiple forms of address of Native self-portraiture, which engages the viewer as a figure explicitly representing both an individual subject as well as a member of a Native community. In this sense, I liken this genre of self-portraiture to testimonial literature in which the author tells his or her own story as also the story of a people. I also discuss the role of postcolonial theory as a means of framing this type of visual production in order to consider these images as postcolonial critiques in themselves. The chapter ends with an analysis of "About Face," a recent exhibition exclusively dedicated to Native self-portraiture. Using Bal's definition of an "allo-portrait," a self-portrait depicting the artist in the guise of someone else—a self-othering, I analyze the show's failure to adequately define the genre of Native self-portraiture. I argue that, while self-portraiture may promise an unmediated opportunity for self-representation, its dissemination always requires a discursive framework. the inability of the show's curators, and the contributors to

the catalogue, to contextualize the work within categories that take Native perspectives into account points to the discursive framing that self-portraiture requires, a framing that, as a form of representation in itself, has the potential to, once again, silence the voice of the Native. As with the whole of this study, I advocate a reading of Native imagery—both that of and by Natives—that is attentive to that voice.