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

Caro, M.A.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 5

Decolonizing the Native Body: Reconsidering Native Self-Portraiture

What anthropologists identify as the internal or emic view, I would argue, as an Iroquois, is central to reproducing Indigenous knowledge for the next seven generations. Further, I am suggesting that the process of making art is central to the ongoing reproduction of knowledge in Indigenous communities.

—Jolene Rickard (1996 5)

Up to this point, my discussion of the nationalist implications of the discursive production of the “Native as image” has analyzed sites of production that are predominantly institutional: the archive, the academy, and the museum. This chapter will be devoted to an examination of some strategies currently employed by Native artists in representing the Native body, strategies that locate the body as the operative site for the production of national or communal identities. Although placing an emphasis on the body as itself a marker of identity may be seen in the West as an essentialist position, the artists I will discuss understand that, as I mentioned in my introduction, it is predominantly through representations of the Native body that Western institutions have come to regulate the Native as image. These artists, however, cite the body not just in reference to Western racist and nationalist practices but also invoke notions of identity based on some of the ways in which the body is configured within Indigenous epistemologies. Although these are perspectives that are only recently being considered within the discourses produced by the institutional sites I have been discussing, it is helpful to keep in mind that, as Native artist and scholar Jolene Rickard states:

Native people have distinct epistemological, cosmological and ideological constructs of reality, identified in total as a world view. Any attempt at understanding the visual expression of Native people must be located within a framework familiar with their specific cultural construct or world
I have limited the mode of representation I will examine to the genre of self-portraiture, not only because of the greater agency implied by this form of representation but also because, as a mode for defining identity, the self-portrait’s address to the viewer is explicit. In terms of self-portraiture by Native artists, it is a direct address that, to some extent, attempts to eliminate, or at least minimize, the role of an institutional mediator, while, at the same time, underscoring the cooptation of the Native image that occurs within an institutional context.¹

The Syntax of Self-Portraiture

The process of viewing a self-portrait is an intimate engagement with an image that is always a representation of the other—even, or especially, when the viewer is the artist. For the artist, the self-portrait is an opportunity for reinvention and intervention, for purposely refracting the mirrored gaze. It is a thoughtful process of reconfiguring the self that takes into account not only internal but also external expectations of one’s identity. However, before considering the place of the artist in this process, I would like to take into account how the self-portrait communicates with the viewer and how the viewer’s response contributes to the process of identity formation. Considering the place of the viewer is crucial, not only because the artist is working with, and at times against, a viewer’s expectations but also because it is the viewer who ultimately determines the dialectical outcome of the enunciation of identity—the declaration of identity uttered by the self-portrait. In terms of a self-portrait identified as “Native,” responses can

¹ An excellent overview of many of the issues raised by self-portraiture, including the fact that despite its ubiquity and the central role it plays in the history of Western art it has not been adequately theorized, see Bal, “Allo-Portraits,” in Mirror or Mask? Self-representation in the Modern Age. On the discourse of portraiture see Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal,” in Art in Mind. For a general analysis of the dynamics involved in executing and viewing self-portraiture, see Brilliant, “Here’s Looking at You!” in Portraiture. On the emphasis on seeing as a form of knowledge in self-portraiture, see Clark, “The Look of Self-Portraiture.” For a discussion of the dialectic between self-portrait and viewer see Dunning, “The Concept of Self and Postmodern Painting: Constructing a Post-Cartesian Viewer.” For a discussion of the dilemmas of representing race in self-portraiture see Smalls, “The African-American Self-Portrait.”
range from a proximate identification with the subject to a distanced engagement by a viewer unable to acknowledge the subjectivity of the artist/subject. I would like to examine further the notion of self-portraiture as a form of address in order to consider how the structure of this address contributes, to some extent, to the reading of the image.

We can think of the syntax of a self-portrait as an “I” addressing a “you,” a first person to second person form of address. This can be contrasted to the way in which an engagement with a portrait is a communication that involves the first person “I” of the artist presenting the third person “she or he” subject of the portrait, to the second person “you,” the viewer. Therefore, in terms of the possibilities for self-representation, a self-portrait can be thought of as a less mediated form of representation, one in which artist and subject are the same. There is no “third person.”

By this, I do not mean to imply that the conflation of artist and subject somehow carries more weight in terms of anything like a viewer’s access to the artist’s intention. This approach would reinforce a humanist view of a unified and universal subjectivity. Rather, I want to emphasize a reading practice that is mindful of the artist’s agency while allowing for a dialectic engagement between viewer and the work of art. In her meditation on intentionality, Bal insists on attending to this kind of reading, one which locates meaning not solely with the artist nor with the viewer, but with “the process that happens between these two parties when the product of the former becomes the product of the latter, that is, when viewing becomes a new way of making” (2006 238). Thus, my emphasis on the syntax of self-portraiture’s address places the onus on the viewer as addressee.

Unlike the portrait, where the viewer is in something of a collusive relationship with the artist about the representation of the sitter—a third person at a distance—the self-portrait demands that the viewer confront the artist’s own image, a one-on-one encounter. It is a confrontation that requires the viewer to respond to a direct form of address, an address stated in the imperative mood: “Look at who I am.” And if we consider that the image is an artistic expression, then the demand made of the viewer is “Look at who I think I am.” It also asks
the viewer to take into account the creative aspects of producing that “I” by requiring an analysis of the manufacturing process. “Look at how I have come to create who I think I am.”

The imperative mood of the self-portrait’s address demands subjectivity. Unlike an ethnographic project, such as that of Curtis’s analyzed in chapter one, which is explicitly a first-person narrative description about the other, a “third person,” the self-portrait is autobiographical in nature. To examine this distinction more fully, it will be helpful to return to Johannes Fabian’s notion of ethnographic coevalness, the coexistence in time between anthropologist and the subject of her or his study. By applying the work of the linguist Emile Benveniste, Fabian considers the syntactical production of otherness found within ethnographic narratives. He is specifically concerned with the kind of grammatical structuring of ethnography that obstinately places the object of study in the third person. This determines that ethnography function as a dialogue between the first person author and second person reader. As Fabian states: “only the first and second persons are distinguished along the axis of personness. The grammarian’s ‘third person’ is opposed to the first and second person as a non participant in the dialogue” (1983 85). This exclusive conversation between ethnographer/author and reader not only eliminates the possibility of the ethnographic subject’s participation, it denies him or her subjectivity. As Fabian states, it is yet “another way to describe denial of coevalness” (1983 86).

Part of the purpose of Fabian’s analysis of ethnographic syntax is to point to the damaging consequences produced by a narrative structure that places the subject of study in the third person. Another objective of his critique is to analyze the ethical implications for the role of the ethnographer, the first person narrator, in the production of the other. However, I would like to dwell a moment

---

2 As an element that facilitates dialogue between first and second person, the function of the third person described by Fabian is not unlike that of Serres’s notion of the “third man” discussed in the previous chapter.

3 Fabian attempts to address this problem in Power and Performance, in which he describes a collaborative project that enacts an approach to ethnography that, in theory, permits coevalness. Fabian formats the book in such a way as to allow a group of Lub people from the Shaba province of Zaire, subjects who would otherwise occupy the
longer on the role played by the reader, the ethnographer’s interlocutor. In many ways, this second person collaborates with the ethnographer by corroborating his or her narrative. For Fabian, this second person is merely another anthropologist or a member of the scientific community and, therefore, a mirror of the first person (85). What are the consequences, however, when we consider the many other possible positions and functions for this second person, particularly if the second person is also the third person, i.e. the subject/object of the ethnography, or someone who identifies with that subject position? Given the specialized audience for ethnographic literature, Fabian may be justified in considering such a narrow group of readers. However, there are examples of other genres of writings about the other that can productively interrogate the position of the second-person reader.

One category of writing that has generated much discussion, particularly within literary studies, is the testimonio. This is a type of writing that provides a cultural account of the other from the simultaneous perspectives of the first- and third-person, a mixture of autobiography and ethnography, a kind of autoethnography. A unique feature of testimonios is the multiple subjectivity it allows the first-person narrator, an individual who, concomitantly, represents a community. As literary theorist Doris Sommer argues, the subject of the testimonio can be thought of as a “plural subject.” She elaborates on the complexity of the narrator’s voice:

The singular represents the plural, not because it replaces or subsumes the group, but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole. . . . [T]here is a fundamental difference here between the metaphor of autobiography and heroic narrative in general, which assumes an identity by substituting one (superior) signifier for another (I for we, leader for follower, Christ for the faithful), and metonymy, a lateral move of identification-

third-person position, a clear voice, sharing in a dialogic exchange in the place of the second person. However, as Bal meticulously analyzes in her aptly titled essay, “First Person, Second Person, Same Person” (chapter 5 of Double Exposures), despite the agency suggested by the transcribed collaboration, the voice of the Lub group, which appears in Swahili and English, is still framed by Fabian, whose voice remains that of the first-person narrator, no matter how self-critical.
Testimonios complicate the genre of autobiography by substituting the individuality of the first-person narrative, modernism's unified subject, with a multiple singularity. A clear example is the narrative offered by Rigoberta Menchú in her *testimonio*, which begins:

This is my testimony . . . I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people . . . The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people. (1)

The testifying performed by Menchú is a witnessing not only of her experience but also that of her community.  

This multiple address, as a subject who speaks as member of a community and, at the same time, as one who speaks for that community, is an address that also complicates its reception. The multiplicity of the narrator of a *testimonio* poses a particular challenge for the reader. While an autobiography invites the reader to alternately identify with and differentiate from a singular narrator, a play of identification that, much like an encounter with a portrait, ultimately establishes a stable distance between first and second person, a *testimonio* sustains this play, deferring a fixed distance between author and reader. A *testimonio* requires the reader to consider the “I/We” of the narrator while occupying the “you” of the reader. But this is not just the singular “you” addressed by autobiography; it is also the plural “you” summoned by the communal “we” of the author. In other words, the reader of a *testimonio* is obliged to consider a dialogic relationship with the author in a similarly multiple way, as a multiple interlocutor.

I would like to suggest taking the syntax of the *testimonio* and applying it to the similar relationships established between the artist and viewer of a Native self-portrait. If we take a self-portrait’s singular address to be similar to that of an autobiography, a Native self-portrait can, at times, function much like a testimonio.

---

4 Despite the authoritative voice of Menchú’s testimonio, the anthropologist David Stoll challenged her credibility by finding factual errors in her account. See Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. For a broad analysis of the significance of Stoll’s research, see Arias, *The Rigoberta Manchú Controversy*. 
in that its subject is portrayed as an individual but also as a member and representative of a Native community. The first person address does not only emanate from the singular “I” but, at the same time, the first person plural “we.” These multiple subjective positions demand a postmodern analytic framework. In the case of the Native self-portrait, I want to identify the use of postmodern strategies, such as the appropriation of artistic styles and techniques, in addressing the construction of Native identity within the institutional sites I have explored. 5

In my analysis of these sites, I have emphasized their incoherence by noting how their intersections and overlappings are defined and facilitated by the interdisciplinary nature of their discourses. One way to think about the ways in which institutions contribute to the production of identity is to consider the Marxist notion of interpellation, an ideological call to an individual, a summons to occupy a subject position prescribed by an ideological state apparatus (Althusser 153). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have noted a shift, which they feel coincides with the transition from modernism to postmodernism, in the ways in which institutions attempt to recruit individuals. They describe this as a situation in which institutions are “everywhere in crisis and continually breaking down” (196). This breakdown, however, does not disable the ideological workings of these institutions. Instead, it leads to their fragmentation such that “the production of subjectivity . . . tends not to be limited to any specific places. The indefiniteness of the place of the production corresponds to the indeterminacy of the form of the subjectivities produced” (197). In terms of the sites I have been discussing, the traditional location of the archive, stored in institutions often difficult to access, is now more accessible and widely dispersed through digital imagery available on the internet; the museum, likewise, is a more decentralized site, many major museums having satellite locations, annexes, and exhibitions that include off-site and virtual components; and, finally, the academy has also widened its reach through distance learning programs, civic engagement projects, and the global

5 This testimonial function is, of course, not exclusive to Native self-portraiture. It is a function that can be ascribed, and is often institutionally ascribed, to any set of self-portraits grouped by a modifier that determines a communal identity (e.g. Chicano, lesbian, working-class, among others.)
availability of its publications and lectures online. According to Hardt and Negri, the dispersal of these kinds of sites, and the greater access they provide, increase opportunities for interpellation.

Although the politics addressed by Native artists are varied, complex, and continually in flux, there are some fundamental issues that remain urgent and are shared by most Native peoples. These include struggles for the preservation of sovereignty, the reclamation of land, and the ownership of culture. In many ways, it could be said that these issues greatly contribute to the definition of Native identity today and are at the heart of Native efforts to end colonization. This is not to say that Native identities are formed merely in reaction to the colonizers, only as a response to oppression. Nonetheless, I have focused on examples of self-portraits by artists who are consciously responding to the legacy of Native representation that, to a great extent, has been produced, maintained, and disseminated at the discursive sites discussed in the previous chapters.

Native artists are not only intimately familiar with the history of this oppression; they are also well acquainted with the theories that have been developed to think beyond colonization. These theories include those produced in the West, such as those that fall under the rubric of postcolonial theory, as well as those developed from within Native communities and based on traditional knowledge. It is important to keep in mind that, in addition to the strategies and tactics that, since their initial contact with the West, there have always been efforts to produce counter-colonial theories from within Native cultures. As McMaster reminds us: "The passive acceptance of colonial messages by aboriginal people was largely fiction, and resistance to colonization existed everywhere" (1999 84). And the role of the Native artist in developing theories of resistance has always been crucial.

So far, I have been discussing the enunciatory possibilities offered by self-

---

6 For a discussion of the varied processes individuals may undergo to come to identify as American Indian see Mihesuah, “American Indian Identities: Issues of Individual Choice and Development.”

7 Two volumes that anthologize these issues are Champagne, Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues and Jaimes, The State of Native America.
portraiture. In particular, I am concerned with the testimonial possibilities of this form of self-representation that complicate the first-to-second person address of ethnography by multiplying the possibilities for both addressee and addressee. The complexity of the I/we-to-you(singular)/you(plural) address offered by testimonios when applied to the analysis of certain Native self-portraits focuses on the nature of the fragmented self, which has been the focus of much postmodernist art production during thirty or so years. Therefore, it would follow that an assessment of Native self-portraiture as a genre would require an analysis informed by postcolonial theories of history and self-representation, an engagement with the voice of the subaltern, a thinking through of non-Western notions of essentialism. Unfortunately, there has been an overwhelming resistance to the adaptation of postcolonial theory in the U.S. Of the major Anglophone countries with significant Native populations, the U.S. is the least engaged in applying postcolonial theory to the production of the cultural analysis of Native issues. Because I contend this theory’s importance for the analysis of Native self-portraiture to be great, the following is an analysis of the relevance of postcolonial theory to Native self-representation.

**Postcolonial Time**

Within academia, efforts by intellectuals who identify as postcolonial subjects, i.e. those who originate from nation-states that have gained independence from European imperialism, to analyze the workings of power in the production of colonial discourses have led to the development of theories that constitute the field of postcolonial studies. However, many Native American intellectuals within North America have been reluctant to adopt theories they feel have been developed to specifically address situations elsewhere. Although their apprehension is understandable, there is much that can be useful in adopting postcolonial theory for the analysis of Native art.⁸

---

⁸ The situation has been different for Latin Americanists who have readily accepted the possibilities offered by postcolonial theory. North American academics invested in analyzing the colonial history of Latin America have worked to adapt the models of resistance offered by postcolonial theories onto various Latin American situations. See Klor de Alva, “The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience: A Reconsideration of
An obvious difficulty with "postcolonial" as a term to describe the condition of Indigenous peoples in the Americas is that most Native peoples are still living in a state of colonization. Postcolonial theory, however, has been aware of the dilemma from its inception. From the perspective of the analysis of culture, the term is related to postmodernism and, therefore, responds to those modernist impulses at work in the production and consumption of culture. The relationship between postcolonialism and postmodernism has been outlined by Jorge Klor de Alva:

From a modernist perspective the term is a misnomer because the postcolonial condition, strictly speaking, has yet to occur among those who became colonial subjects of the empire and, later, of the nation-state . . . From a postmodern/poststructuralist perspective I agree . . . that postcoloniality does not need to follow from "actual" colonial condition. . . . The dismissal of the modernist view of history as a linear (teleological) process, the underminding of the foundational assumptions of linear historical narratives, and the rejection of essentialized identities for corporate units lead to a multiplicity of often conflicting and frequently parallel narratives within which postcoloniality can signify not so much subjectivity "after" the colonial experience as a subjectivity of oppositionality to imperializing/colonizing (read: subordinating/subjectivizing) discourses and practices. (245)

The "postcolonial" is meant to denote a state of resistance that is not marked chronologically, at least not in the linear chronology imposed by the colonizer. The postcolonial condition occurs at the very moment of colonization. It is unfortunate that, despite this explanation, the general use of the term has superficially focused on how it connotes the aftermath of colonization.

In addition to questioning the teleological historical framework demanded by modernism, another important aspect of the approach offered by postcolonial theory is its global scope of analysis. It is mindful of the interrelations among projects of colonization, particularly in terms of their economic, political, and cultural inter-
dependencies. Although my focus has been the relationship between the cultural and the political—particularly the visual aesthetics of nationalism as it relates to the production of Native subjectivity—it should be kept in mind that these are only part of a larger and more complex weave of dynamics that have come to define the current condition of globalization.

As I have been arguing, an analysis of the relationship between nationalism and aesthetics is crucial for interpreting work by contemporary Native artists. Here, I am particularly interested in looking at the politics of Native artistic self-representation within the colonial dynamics of globalization. By examining this larger context, it becomes apparent that the forms of address offered by these artists are not only directed at the immediate colonizer, they also depend on broader global discourses of Indigeneity. It is through the process of revealing the conjunctures among these layered forms of colonization that these images perform their postcolonial critiques.

To begin to consider this wider scope of analysis, it is important to acknowledge that there is a direct connection between the colonial history of the Americas and the history of the development of the nation-state. It was, after all, in the Americas that, in the name of liberation from Europe, the nation-state was advanced as the preferred political form for self-determination. It is ironic, however, that the creation and promotion of the nation-state as a process of decolonization became, at the same time, an integral part of the mission to colonize Native America. The postcolonial condition in the Americas is marked by a duplicity in which the colonial subject gains independence by, in turn, becoming itself an autonomous colonizer. This analysis of the dynamic shift between colonizer and colonized, however, often leaves the place of the Native unexamined, a place marked as subaltern, a subjectivity without access to historical representation. This condition provides the backdrop for a contemporary Native art production that at times employs the colonizer’s own aesthetic practices, a form of appropriation that speaks the language of the colonizer in order to curse that language itself.

It is within this historical framework that the visual manifestations of Native cultural and political struggles must be considered. An analysis of the relationship
between nationalism and aesthetics within Native art raises important questions. For example, should all Native art that is counter-hegemonic be considered nationalist? What alternative forms are there for liberation struggles that do not promote the formation of a nation-state? How can such a vision be conveyed through decolonizing art practices?

For the purposes of my discussion of self-portraiture, I will limit my focus to thinking about a more basic question: Is the aesthetic production of a “Native self” outside hegemonic prescriptions of identity possible? If so, how can such representations be legible within a paradigm of representation regulated by dominating ideologies? In other words, using the linguistic metaphor I have alluded to above, how can a Native self be articulated through a colonizer’s language intent on eradicating Native subjectivity?

The answers to these questions appear to be obvious. The production of the Native subject outside the dominant signifying system is not only possible; it has always occurred. Native identity predates and, to some extent, continues to exist outside a Western episteme. Although it is difficult to surmise fully the extent to which the West participates in regulating the production of Native subjectivity, it is important to stress that the formation of Native identity is not merely a response to hegemony. If we acknowledge that Native notions of the self often antecede Western paradigms of Native identity, an immediate question then becomes how can Native conceptions of the self that are incompatible with Western perceptions of identity be made legible in the West?

One approach has been to undertake a sustained campaign to either undermine or expand dominant conceptions of Native identity. An important aim of this approach, which is not often emphasized, is not only to disrupt the stability of Western notions of Native identity, but also to recognize that indigenous views of identity are, themselves, plural and, at times, irreconcilable. Therefore, I will continue my discussion by analyzing artwork that explicitly deals with Native self-representation in multiple ways, which includes an address aimed at the artist’s own community. As examples I will examine the work of Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo), who invokes the figure of an alter ego as a critique of the expectations of her role as an artist within her Pueblo community; Hulleah
Tsinhnahjinnie (Muskogee/Seminole/Dine’), whose self-portraiture addresses occasions in which Native communities have been complicit with the U.S. government’s efforts to legislatively regulate Native identity; Jimmie Durham (Cherokee), who has employed irony in addressing issues of cultural authenticity; Joe David (Nuu-chah-nulth), who provocatively disrupts the expectations of traditionally carved masks to address traditional communities; and Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) who inserts her own image within works of art that use non-traditional media to convey traditional iconography, some of which is exclusively addressed to her community.

An event that brought together much of this critical work was the quincentenary of Columbus’s arrival to the Americas, an occasion that in 1992 provided opportunities for widespread critical responses by Native artists and scholars. One of the more notable artistic responses was Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs, an exhibition curated by Jaune Quick-to See Smith. The show featured the work of thirty-seven Native artists who provided a vision of the significance of the legacy of the encounter from the perspective of contemporary Native Americans. In redressing the history of Columbus’s travels, many of the artists used strategies of aesthetic appropriation to address issues of cultural appropriation. 9

A good example is a collaborative project produced by Robert Houle (Saulteaux/Ojibwe) and Greg Staats (Mohawk) for the Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs exhibition titled Extinct/Distinct (Figure 37). The work is a diptych in which the artists reference the German artist Lothar Baumgarten’s Monument for the Native People of Ontario, a work which was meant to commemorate the tribes indigenous to Ontario.

9 Some of the scholarship produced in response to the quincentenary includes Josephy, America in 1492; Churchill, Fantasies of the Master Race; Jaimes The State of Native America; and a special issue of Art Journal, “Recent Native American Art” edited by Rushing and WalkingStick.

For a review of the Submuloc exhibition, see Rushing, “Contrary Iconography: The Submuloc Show.” In terms of a Western response, many museums and libraries exhibited items in their collections that had the slightest relation to the encounter. An example of how ostentatious these endeavors could be is the National Gallery’s Circa 1492, which attempted a comprehensive synchronic survey of cultural production around the globe during the period of Columbus’s travels. For a discussion of the massive literary output dealing with the quincentenary see Axtell, “Columbian Encounters: 1992-95.”
Baumgarten’s piece, a detail of which is featured in the left panel of the Houle-Staats diptych, is a minimalist homage of engraved text running along the top of the walls of the Walker Court at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The names of the eight tribes—Algonkin, Huron, Iroquois, Neutral, Nipissing, Ojibwa, Ottawa, and Pej-tun—were featured as part of the exhibition titled “The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today” held in 1985.

An interesting aspect of Baumgarten’s strategy to represent various Native nations is his avoidance of using the body as a means of representing the Native subject. Instead, he used upper case text to name each of the Indigenous communities. Four of the names were placed over the four arches of the gallery, the letters in red and underlined in black. The other four, placed in between the arches, were black letters underlined in red. The font used to commemorate these names, Perpetua, was based on a font developed by the type designer Eric Gill, who was inspired by the lettering found in ancient Roman monuments. An explanatory plaque, with a map showing the original land base of the tribes also hung in the gallery.¹⁰

---

¹⁰ A detailed description of Baumgarten’s piece can be found in Beddoes, “The Writing on the Wall: The Ironies In and Out of Lothar Baumgarten’s ‘Monument for the Native Peoples of Ontario, 1984-1985.”
Baumgarten integrated the classical aesthetic of his work into the classical architecture of the gallery. His work, a minimalist piece whose lettering recalled engraved names found on tombstones, was a gesture that these artists interpreted as yet another pronouncement of the demise of the Native subject.

The pathos invoked by Baumgarten’s work was co-opted by Houle and Staats and turned into a celebration of self-determination and survival. They have photographed the lettering commemorating the Ojibwe and made the image one of the diptych’s panels. They contrast this view of the engraved lettering with an image of a doorway leading into a contemporary traditional longhouse. Their work emphasizes the way in which the space of the museum, a space described by Theodor Adorno as functioning much like a mausoleum, contrasts with the welcoming space of a traditional longhouse, a space that continues to be full of life. As the artists state:

Symbolically, the liberation of one’s tribal name becomes a demarcation in the political struggle for sovereignty; and the ritualistic juxtapositioning of the ancient Iroquois longhouse completes the medicine wheel . . . . It was important that our work express our 500 year history of annihilation, marginalization, misrepresentation and invisibility. This litany honors the “extinct” First Nations of North America and expresses the “distinct” character of our contemporary sisters and brothers. (Roberts 1992 34)

Houle and Staats radically disrupt Baumgarten’s eulogy by appropriating the form and recontextualizing the content of his work.

The Submuloc show, and the many other Native projects produced to question the hegemonic commemoration of Columbus’s encounter with the Americas, created the possibility for disparate engagements with the legacy of European colonization to simultaneously address the ideological implications of commemorating Columbus’s arrival. It was specifically as a response to the celebration of this event by the U.S. Government that Quick-to-See Smith organized the exhibition (Roberts 1992 iii). Of the many issues shared by these artists and the communities

11 Theodor Adorno wrote that the “museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are the family sepulchers of works of art” (Crimp 44).
they represented, sovereignty was paramount. The artists in the show were united against the hegemonic nationalism of the United States while advocating for their right to self-determination.

Despite the fact that I have been arguing for an approach to reading these images that identifies a common counter-hegemonic stance shared by the aesthetic practices of Native artists, it would be a mistake to posit all Native art as exhibiting a similar nationalist agenda, or any similarities at all. Although it is tempting to read resistance in all contemporary Native art, it is important to remember that such an approach runs the danger of homogenizing all Native art as nationalist. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider those features shared by work that explicitly proclaims resistance. As I have mentioned in my discussion of the use of nostalgia as an aesthetic strategy, a term that can be used to describe this common resistance is anti-imperialism. While in chapter two I adapted the notion of “anti-imperialist nostalgia” to describe certain types of aesthetic strategies employed by Native artists, here I would like to recall cultural theorist Timothy Brennan’s use of a similar term, “anti-imperialist nationalism,” to bring the various indigenous claims for sovereignty under a common classification. It is this notion of political and cultural resistance that I think is useful when applying “testimonial self-portraiture” to describe Indigenous art strategies for representing the self and/as community that explicitly addresses conditions of colonization.

I have argued for the necessity of applying postcolonial theories to the analysis of Native art in general, and, more specifically, to testimonial self-portraiture, in order to consider the contemporary re-negotiation of Indigenous subjectivity within visual art practices. However, the self-representational voice offered by self-portraiture is deafened when it is ignored within contemporary art discourses that define and value avant-garde production. When it comes to a critical assessment of art production within the contemporary western art world, the voice of the Native artist often remains subaltern.

12 Aijaz Ahmad made a similar critique of Fredric Jameson’s claim that all third-world texts should be read as national allegories. See Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” and Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory.’”
Legibility and Irony of Avant-garde Aesthetics

A challenge imposed on Native artists who attempt to produce work addressing imperialism is that if their work is to be legible by Western audiences, their work needs to incorporate, or at least address, those aesthetic practices that in the West are considered avant-garde. It is not enough for them to employ aesthetic approaches based on traditional Native practices, which are often illegible from within a Western context. Native artists are continually challenged to breach the incommensurability of Western notions of avant-garde aesthetics, which, in theory, are demonstrated by works of art advancing political reform, with indigenous art practices that are often employed to conserve Native traditions.

One of the ironies of this challenge is that, in theory, avant-garde art is illegible as such to a contemporary viewer, regardless of its aesthetic strategies. Art critic Hal Foster has likened this process to trauma. He explains that avant-garde work “is traumatic—a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it, at least not immediately, at least not without structural change” (29). Despite the idea that the description, even less the prescription, of an avant-garde aesthetics is impossible in the present, the art world, and more precisely the art market, functions on a speculative model. And, it is the art critic who speculates on the future return of identifying contemporary art as avant-garde. Therefore, despite the theoretical impossibility of identifying contemporary avant-garde aesthetics, there are always contemporary practices identified as such.

The chasm between Western and traditional aesthetics makes the identification of contemporary Indigenous art as avant-garde more difficult. Not only do these two aesthetic frameworks have different approaches to evaluating art, they also have different methodologies for valuing work. This means that a Native artist may have to negotiate at least three levels of criticism: the critical evaluation by community members, the valuation by an Indian art market—a phenomenon mainly driven by collectors who value the work mostly for its ethnographic value—and the appraisal by a Western contemporary art market. However, if we consider the avant-garde potential of Native art outside a market system, or even outside the framework of Western aesthetics, its political efficacy would be lost on most viewers not having access to the aesthetic criteria of the artist’s community. There-
fore, despite the radicalness of the message, if a Native artist avoids the use of a Western avant-garde aesthetic, his or her address may be lost on a Western viewer, an important audience and often, though not exclusively, the target audience. Native art highlights the restricted nature of an avant-garde address.

In light of the nationalist framework within which these works operate and the challenges of appreciating their avant-garde aesthetics, I would like to return to my discussion of Native self-portraiture to consider how this genre questions the critical reception, or lack thereof, of Native art as legitimate(d) avant-garde art. We not only need to ask how and when is a work of art avant-garde but also for whom? How can art as postcolonial critique be effective within an art system constituted by legacy of colonial discourses?

![Figure 38. Kwakwaka'wakw transformation mask, n.d. Wood, pigment, fur, hide, cord, metal, baleen. American Museuem of Natural History. Catalogue number 16/2359.](image)

These are some of the questions posed by Native self-portraiture, and they are posed directly to the viewer. There is no third person, or so it would appear. As I discussed earlier, this kind of address, one that engages the viewer both as an individual and as member of a specifically situated community, requires a comparative consideration of these differences: individual/communal Western/indigenous avant-garde aesthetics invoked within (anti)imperialist nationalist
frameworks. A good example of this layered complexity is the work of Joe David (Nuu-chah-nulth), an artist who often invokes portraiture in his mask imagery, although it is often in the guise of a deity or a spirit. In Just Be Yourself, David playfully references the transformation mask, which is traditionally used in Northwest Coast performances where the narratives often involve characters that undergo change from one form into another. An example of the traditional approach to this practice is a Kwakwaka’wakw transformation mask made sometime before the late nineteenth century, when it was acquired by the American Museum of Natural History. This mask was meant to be used during performances in which a story would be narrated through song and dance. At a climactic moment during the performance, the dancer would pull strings attached to both halves of the outer mask to reveal another mask hidden inside (Figure 38). In this case, the transformation is from the figure of a wolf into a raven. (See inset image.)

![Figure 39. Joe David, Just Be Yourself (closed and open), 2000, red & yellow cedar, horse hair, earth pigments, 9" deep x 26" wide x 33" high.](image)

In his rendition titled Just Be Yourself, Joe David takes this traditional form, still used in traditional venues within many Northwest Coast tribal communities,
and shifts its meaning in order to address many anxieties felt by Native peoples today (Figure 39). David’s mask features a human face on the outside, which is also a portrait of the artist, that then opens up to reveal an exact duplicate inside.\textsuperscript{13}

The multiple interpretations of this work include reading it as a statement negating change, a call to maintain a traditional identity, an identity that remains constant despite its transformations. The mask can also be read as an affirmation of the subjectivity of Natives who have not had access to the traditional histories and customs but who can still depend on a Native identity based on an essential sense of self. The artist is very familiar with this situation. David is known for nurturing Native artists who have grown up without access to their traditional communities but who are, instead, engaged in forming and maintaining urban Native communities. These are not mutually exclusive readings. The form of this type of transformation mask, one that relies on a simple mechanism for opening and closing the mask, usually determines a sequence narrated by the accompanying story, David’s mask, however, disrupts such a chronological reading. The story of transformation enacted by this mask is continuous and indeterminate.

A viewer who espouses an orthodox perspective on traditional forms may perceive David’s use of this form as an irreverent application, one that fails to fulfill its traditional function. However, the work may also be thought of as playful self-appropriation. In terms of a Western aesthetic, this approach is akin to the type of appropriation that defines postmodernism, but is also a gesture found in traditional Native art. This is especially true of the representation of the figure of the trickster, which I mentioned in chapter two. The challenge of work that appears traditional is that in order to notice its radicalness, the viewer must first know the conventions it is addressing. In essence, many of the works are inside

\textsuperscript{13} It is important to distinguish this mask, which features an exact duplicate of the human figure inside and out, from transformation masks which feature the same human figure but in a different state on the inside from that on the outside. An example of the latter type is the mask that is part of the Kwakwaka’wakw Siwidi dance cycle discussed in Ostrowitz and Jonaitis, “Postscript: The Treasures of Siwidi.” For an overview of Kwakwaka’wakw transformation masks see Waite, “Kwakiutl Transformation Masks.”
jokes in which the outsider is unaware of the work’s subversive qualities. This exclusive address to a home community works to affirm its coherence by uniting its members in the process of recognition.\textsuperscript{14}

A more accessible example of the dialogical address of Native self-portraiture, one which clearly illustrates a legible rupture with the traditional use of a medium is the work of Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo). In a series of sculptures done in micaceous clay, a material traditionally used for pottery, she depicts Pearlene, a figure that is a sassy alter ego (Figure 40). In \textit{Mud Woman}, Naranjo-Morse gives this character a voice in her poem “Pearlene’s Roots.” She talks of nylons that sag, long nights at nameless bars, her passion-blue eye shadow, and graying bouffant.

She was a Towa,

\begin{quote}
  beneath the veneer
  of Avon
  and fast,
  hard times.

  Signs of her Pueblo roots
  surface,
  crooning
  in thoughtful
  respectful songs. (1992, 68)
\end{quote}

Naranjo-Morse is obviously playing against the common perception of a traditional Native woman. As she states: “[Pearlene] was undermining the stereotypical view of a Pueblo woman, at the same time, she was also creating a storyline . . . of a woman who knew with great certainty, her roots. You can’t be that sassy without an explicit foundation of certainty about your identity."\textsuperscript{15} While Pearlene’s appearance and behavior may not coincide with an outsider’s stereotypical conception of Pueblo identity, they also do not necessarily meet an insider’s expectations. Naranjo-Morse’s address is multiple; she speaks to an outsider at

\textsuperscript{14} For the use of humor in Native art see Ryan, \textit{The Trickster Shift}.

\textsuperscript{15} Personal correspondence with the artist, February 9, 2004.
the same time that she addresses her own community. The implication may be that the acceptance she demands of the non-Native viewer is also the tolerance she asks of her own people, whether it is an acceptance of a different way of dressing, behaving, or of using micaceous clay for producing non-traditional forms.

Figure 40. Nora Naranjo-Morse, *Pearlene’s Roots*, 1989, micaceous clay, 38” X 12”.

The challenge issued by both of these artists depends on knowledge of the various communities, Western and Native, to which the artists belong. These communities ultimately intersect along a variety of dimensions (cultural, economic, and geographic.) What I would like to pursue is the intersection of aesthetic practices that may read as having similar effects but that have radically different histories. The overlap noted in these two examples is between a trickster sensibility and postmodernist irony. I am particularly interested in pointing out what may appear postmodern about a Native practice in light of the resistance to postmodernisms from within many Native communities. Are these traditional trickster strategies or postmodern avant-garde aesthetic approaches? Does the difference matter in terms of their effect?
A book that attempts to address the relationship these issues is Steven Leuthold’s *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media, and Identity*. One of its chapters is specifically concerned with postmodernism and its deployment of postcolonial theories for the analysis of aesthetic production. Leuthold characterizes postmodernism as countering those nationalist projects that emphasize the anti-colonial imperatives of various Native populations. He proclaims that:

The general postmodern critique of nationalism as a basis of political organization directly confronts the importance attached to sovereignty as a political goal by many contemporary natives. At the same time that postmodernist theory employs a postcolonial critique of the ideas of nation and borders, native communities are increasingly defining themselves as sovereign nations, or according to more limited notions of sovereignty. Thus, even “progressive” views, such as those found in cultural studies, may incorporate frameworks that limit our understanding of native self-representation. (31)

Leuthold’s discussion of the ambivalence of postmodernist strategies for Native subjects proceeds to weigh the advantages of a nationalist Native art production (such as the possibility of Native self-representation within an international community) versus the disadvantages of more traditional modes of production. Whether the work of art is meant to operate as self-representation within an international community (nationalist Native art production) or as an instance of the commodification of ethnic identities (traditional mode of production), Leuthold stipulates that “the artworks of contemporary artists will function as indigenous representations if the artist themselves are part of indigenous communities; if their work is primarily defined by and for non-Native communities, it will not act as indigenous representation” (43).

There are many problems with Leuthold’s formulations, most of which result from his facile use of binaries such as local/global, contemporary/traditional, and insider/outsider. Of interest to me, however, is his insistence on the durability of Native aesthetic expression within changing modes of production. Leuthold’s book focuses on film and video produced by Native artists, in which, he attests, a persistent indigenous aesthetic is to be found. He believes that “if distinct indi-
genous aesthetic expressions can be discovered in indigenous film and video, this would seem to point to the durability and importance of Native aesthetic expression in general" (4). While Leuthold appears to advocate an essentialist approach to the analysis of Native aesthetics, one which would claim to discern the Nativeness in the work of art, there is something else that unites Native art. That something, however, is found neither in the form of the work nor in its content. What unites the work is the place it occupies within the matrix of colonial oppression.

**Appropriating Postcolonial Theory**

As I have mentioned, the application of postcolonial theory to an examination of Native American cultural production has been limited. In fact, there has been something of a resistance to the adoption and application of theories perceived as having been developed for situations elsewhere for analyzing conditions faced by Native Americans.16 This resistance to postcolonial theory is, in fact, widespread among various indigenous populations. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori cultural studies scholar, notes that: “Many indigenous intellectuals actively resist participating in any discussion within the discourses of post-coloniality . . . because post-colonialism is viewed as the convenient invention of Western intellectuals which re-inscribes their power to define the world” (14). Loretta Todd, a Metis filmmaker, questions:

> But what of our own theories of art, our own philosophies of life, our purposes for representation? By reducing our cultural expression to simply the question of modernism or postmodernism, art or anthropology, or whether we are contemporary or traditional, we are placed on the edges of the dominant culture, while the dominant culture determines whether we are allowed to enter into its realm of art. (75)

Another scholar who has expressed skepticism about the possibilities for applying postcolonial theories to Native American conditions is Elizabeth Cook-Lynn who states that:

---

16 It is interesting to note that, unlike the resistance to postcolonial theory found in Native America, other indigenous groups are using it to theorize their positions within the West. An excellent example is the work the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith.
For American Indians . . . postcolonial studies has little to do with independence, nor does it have much to do with the actual deconstruction of oppressive colonial systems. . . . Postcolonial thought in indigenous history, as a result of the prevailing definition, has emerged as a subversion rather than a revolution. This fact has been a huge disappointment to those scholars whose interest has been in Native-nation status and independence. (14)

The apprehension to adopt yet another set of theoretical tools developed within the Western academy is understandable enough. Nonetheless, in the Maori context, the theory is being appropriated to suit Native needs.¹⁷

There are ways in which one can find voices within Native American Studies that speak about such issues as hegemony, the performance of identity, and the dynamics of power in different terms. What postcolonial studies provides is a way to think about these issues within a global perspective, one which takes into account a range of discursive strategies employed in the production of empire. This imperialist impulse has now given way to the worldwide deployment of the nation-state, which, in turn, has been translated into the post-nationalist impulses toward globalization visible today.¹⁸ There is—and in many ways there has always been—a Native response to globalization. In fact, an argument can be made that the notion of the Native as localized rather than global subject is a Western construction. Native peoples around the globe have always operated, through trade and warfare, on a global stage.

Because the concept of “the Native” plays a key role in the development of global politics, the issues of identity developed by Native American artists can be thought of as addressing identity within a global context. My argument is that, al-

¹⁷ Graham Smith, a leading Maori researcher, conceptualizes the Native use of critical theory as a form of empowering appropriation. Personal conversation.

¹⁸ On the relationship between globalization and culture see King, Culture, Globalization and the World-System; Tomlinson, Globalization and Culture; Appadurai, Modernity at Large; Gupta, Disrupted Borders; Fisher, Global Visions; Willis, Illusions of Identity; Neil Lazarus, Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World; Bartolovich and Lazarus, Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies; Papastergiadis, Complex Entanglements; Araeen, Cubitt, and Sardar, The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory; and Mosquera and Fisher, Over There: International Perspectives on Art and Culture.
though the work of Native artists is often invoked within discussions of aesthetics and identity politics, these artists are not merely contesting their place within the art world. While their work can be seen as part of their effort to seek greater control over their visual representation, as is the case with most of the work by practitioners who identify as belonging to marginalized groups, the Native artists I am discussing here are, at the same time, producing work that eschews a Western paradigm of art. Their contestation does not merely address the world of aesthetics; it also seeks to produce identities based on the various notions of Native community, notions that for some can range great distances, both spatial and temporal.

The criticism of postcolonial studies has also come from within the field. Much of the work on postcolonial theory, in fact, has focused on a self-critical approach to the role played by the postcolonial critic. In fact, the work of theorists such as Neil Lazarus, Epifanio San Juan, and Arif Dirlik, falls much in line with the art production of the artists mentioned above. What follows is an attempt to compare the self-critical approach taken by these postcolonial critics to those found in the work of the Native artists under discussion. This comparison allows us to consider the possibility of thinking of these Native artists as postcolonial critics.\(^\text{19}\)

The field of postcolonial studies was first developed as a critique of those knowledges produced in the service of colonial domination. The process of producing and disseminating knowledge in the service of domination has been described by Gayatri Spivak, a leading critic of colonialism, as epistemic violence, “a violence against the other produced by the inevitably dominatory systems of knowledge which constitute that figure of the other” (Chrisman14). And still, this process of producing knowledge in order to maintain power is one that is continuously reproduced, in most cases, as a necessary part of the transition from colonial oppression toward liberation. The passage from subjugation to self-determination has involved, at least since the end of the eighteenth century, the creation and maintenance of a nation-state as an efficient means of exercising sovereignty. During this process, epistemes enforced from the outside are replaced by those produced from within.

\(^{19}\) Dirlik, The Postcolonial Aura; Lazarus, Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World; and San Juan, Jr., Beyond Postcolonial Theory.
In many ways, the process of liberation involves the duplication of power structures previously set in place to dominate. This is further complicated by the fact that, at least in economic terms, no nation can stand alone. The nation-state can be conceived as operating like the sign within a Saussurian semiotic schema. It signifies because it operates within a system of nationalism that relies on difference. Like linguistic signs, whose ability to signify depends on difference, on the necessity of one sign being differentiated from another, nation-states rely on borders to give them significance.

As I mentioned above, postcolonial theorists constantly rethink their place within the intellectual economy that exists between the West and the rest. If anti-colonial knowledge production follows the logic of the colonizer in its construction of the nation, is it not replicating those old power dynamics? In what role does that place the postcolonial theorist? Is nationalism not still a form of colonialism? And what of the place of the artist in this process?

It is important to recognize that strategies developed to counter a visual history of the Native produced by the West are being developed from within the art world itself. These are interventions that have originated from a Native epistemology and any attempt to reconcile Western and non-Western epistemologies will inevitably come to an impasse; it will point to the limits of traversing the divide that defines alterity. Nonetheless, the work of these Native artists situates them as powerful critics of colonization.

An early critique of the role played by postcolonial theorists was put forward by Kwame Anthony Appiah. His voice was an early warning against the dangers of institutionalizing postcolonial theory. He described the situation as “the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (348). This harsh image of postcolonial theorists as middlemen in the commerce of culture is relevant to my discussion of contemporary Native artists, who can also be seen as negotiators between Native and Western art worlds. Appiah feared that: “Perhaps the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual is simply that as intellectuals . . . we are, indeed, always at the risk of becoming otherness machines, with the manufacture of
alterity as our principle role” (356).\textsuperscript{20}

In terms of thinking about the process of Native self-representation, we appear to be back to Hal Foster’s critique.\textsuperscript{21} It should be clear by now, however, that what we are seeing here is not merely a group of artists producing themselves as “other.” Their address is not merely to an art market or to a viewer expecting a politically correct message. There is always also an address to their own communities, and one that is often critical.

Native American self-portraiture as genre is distinguished by a particular tension between self-scrutiny and self-revelation. These visual autobiographies are also marked as important sites for working out where the boundaries against assimilation are set. One such work is Jimmie Durham’s Self-portrait from 1987 (Figure 41). A strategy he effectively employs in this image is the use of irony. He redefines the appearance of the Native body by using the same iconography that in the West produces the stereotype of the Native American. By altering the scale, quantity, color and/or location of arrows, fur, skulls, and the body, Durham inflects the history of Native representation with what may read to a Westerner as a distinct foreignness. It is, however, an approach to representing the other that references Western signifiers of the Native in such a way as to frustrate the viewer’s ability to easily locate the Native body. Miwon Kwon notes that “The multiplicity of voices in the Self-Portrait confuses the exact location of Durham as a source for the auto-representation” (1993 128). The dislocation of the subject is one that works also to dislocate the viewer as well. This process occurs not only by the deployment of a plethora of Western signifiers of Indigeneity but also by the text written on the roughly constructed effigy of the Native body. Durham’s body speaks to the viewer in a voice that must be enacted by the viewer. There is no avoiding the ventriloquism necessary to read Durham’s description:

\begin{quote}

\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} The term “otherness machine” comes from Suleri, Meatless Days, 105.

\textsuperscript{21} Interestingly, Foster ends his discussion by citing the work of Native American artists James Luna, Edgar Heap of Birds and Jimmie Durham as examples of artists who are aware of the pitfalls not just of representing but also becoming representatives for a communal identity. According to Foster, they are examples of artists able to legitimately negotiate alterity.
Hello! I’m Jimmie Durham. I want to explain a few Basic Things About Myself. In 1986 I was 46 years old. As an artist I am confused about many things, but basically my health is good and I am willing and able to do a wide variety of Jobs. I am Actively seeking Employment.

Mr. Durham has stated that he believes he has an addiction to Alcohol, Nicotine, Caffeine, and does not sleep well.

I am basically light hearted.
I have 12 hobbies!
11 house plants!
People like my Poems. (Mulvey 60)

The viewer is asked to sympathize and empathize simultaneously with the artist’s subject position. The text compels us to occupy various positions; the first person address (Hello!) places us in dialogue with Durham while the next paragraph shifts to a description where he is placed in the third person (“Mr. Durham has stated.”) We are left to wonder whose voice this is. At the same time, the body represented before us is no longer a subject but an object being described.

The playful disorientation produced by the text is a strategy often used by Durham. Viewing these works becomes a collaborative performance that often requires the viewer to play the role of the colonizer. In a work from the series titled The Caliban Codex or A Thing Most Brutish (1992), in which he adopts the role of Caliban—Shakespeare’s paradigmatic Native—he addresses Prospero, who, in the Tempest, has enslaved Caliban and forced him to learn his language.22

22 For an anthology that takes the theme of appropriating the colonizer’s language, see Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: Contemporary Native Women’s Writings of North America, a powerful collection of writings in English and Native languages by Native women.
Dear Dr. Prospero,

May I, with great humility, please present to you, as an embarrassingly inadequate small token of my extreme gratitude for the constant encouragement, extreme patience and inspired friendship (I hope!) which you have so generously employed to show me a Better Way, this self-portrait? I hope you will always remember me. (But I still wish I knew what my nose looks like! ha, ha!)

Your grateful student,

Caliban

The overly ingratiating tone with which Durham’s Caliban addresses Prospero contrasts greatly with that of Shakespeare’s Caliban, who rebelliously proclaims “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!” (1140). The viewer is left to determine whether the servile tone of Durham’s Caliban is an earnest expression of
gratitude, the tone possibly imagined by those advocating the assimilation of the Native, or whether this is yet another instance in which Caliban (Durham) has appropriated the master's language in order to curse him. It is this schizophrenic state that Durham attempts to convey, particularly in response to U.S. attempts to legally define Native identity.

A legislative effort to determine Native identity was the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, which was passed in 1990. The act was advanced as being mainly concerned with promoting “the economic welfare of Indian tribes and the Indian wards of the Government through the development of Indian arts and crafts and the expansion of the market for the products of Indian art and craftsmanship.” It quickly became clear, however, that the force of the law was meant to protect the consumer, the collector of Native art, rather than the Native producer.

The actual effect on Native artists was to emphasize further the differences that exist among Native American groups regarding the legal constitution of Native identity. While some groups have maintained traditional ways of establishing membership in their tribes, which at times include provisions for the adoption of members who are not directly related to the tribe, other groups have held to notions such as blood quantum as criteria for determining who should belong to their tribe. There are also others who have come to adopt arbitrary criteria for figuring out who they will accept as their own. An example provided by Gail Sheffield, a legal anthropologist, is the Oklahoma Cherokee, who define “Indian” as “a person enrolled or a lineal descendent of a person enrolled in a recognized Indian tribe, band, or pueblo, or on a U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs enrollment listing” (Sheffield 109). In this case, what determines Native identity is having your family name recorded by a federal agency as being part of the tribe, rather than criteria strictly based on race.

For the purposes of assuring the authenticity of objects purported to be made by a Native artist, the act defined “Indian” as: “any individual who is a

---

member of an Indian tribe, or . . . is certified as an Indian artisan by an Indian tribe.” This wording was meant to acknowledge the sovereignty of tribes in determining their own membership. An important side effect of the wording, however, is that it has helped to fuel the efforts of groups such as the Native American Artists Association, a Santa Fe group that is “dedicated to unmasking bogus Indians.”

Durham, who is of Cherokee descent, made a public statement in response to the law:

I am not an American Indian, nor have I ever seen or sworn allegiance to India. I am not a Native “American”, nor do I feel that America has any right to either name me or un-name me. I have previously stated that I should be considered mixed-blood: that is, I claim to be a male but in fact only one of my parents was male. (Papastergiadis and Turney 36)

The flippancy with which he addressed the issue is meant to highlight the absurdity he finds in the passing of the law. He is one of the artists whose Native identity continues to be questioned as a result of the legislation.

Figure 42. Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Would I have been a member of the Nighthawk Society or the Snake Society or would I have been a half-breed leading the whites to the full-bloods? 1990, digitally manipulated photographs.

---

24 The sovereignty of tribes to determine their own membership was established in Santa Clara Pueblo v. Martinez, 436 U.S. 49, 98 S. Ct. 1670 (1978), a Supreme Court case that was brought by a Pueblo woman who sought membership for her daughter, who was raised in the pueblo but was being denied membership because her father was Navajo. The Supreme Court determined that the tribe’s sovereignty precluded it from being sued in federal court.
We can contrast his humorous response to that of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Muskogee/Seminole/Dine´). In Would I have been a member of the Nighthawk Society or the Snake Society or would I have been a half-breed leading the whites to the full-bloods? she has superimposed over a self-portrait abstract patterns that recall traditional facial designs (Figure 42). The images are also reminiscent of mug shots and the bar coding that are essential tools of state surveillance. She has also included the number 111-390, her Bureau of Indian Affairs identification number, yet another sign of the state’s intervention in the process of Native identification. Like Durham’s, her response is derived from personal experience.

I respect Natives who did not accept the Dawes Act of 1887, those who refused enrollment. I recognize the survival tactics of those who became invisible to survive. I have made a decision to remain faithful to those “renegade savages” who hid in the everglades, the desert ravines, the redwood forest. . . . Native history is not simple. As survivors we should not be eager to simplify native identity. The “good intentions” behind this law fail to recognize the complexities and the frightening implications of standardizing native identity. (1995 np)

Tsinhnahjinnie’s work makes clear the complicated nature of the history of enrollment. Many Native Americans who did not end up on government rolls did so as an act of resistance. Her research led her to a quote by Eufala Harjo, a full blood Creek and leader of the Four Mothers Society, a collective of Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw and Chickasaw, who recounted in 1906 that:

After our country was divided they would send the half-breeds around, the half-breed Indians would go out and hunt for the names of the full-blood Indians without their consent, and they would take the names down and go present them before the Dawes Commission . . . (1995, np)
Another artist who uses her own image in her photography is Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) (Figure 43). Her address is as confrontational and challenging. It also aims at frustrating the non-Native viewer. She is adamant about noting the differences that exist between a Native and a non-Native view of the world:

Native people have distinct epistemological, cosmological, and ideological constructs of reality, identified in total as a world view. Any attempt at understanding the visual expression of Native people must be located within a framework familiar with their specific cultural construct or world view. Yet, within the field of art history there is no recognition that specifically calls for an Indigenous intellectual framework to critique the work of contemporary Native American artists. (1996 1)

In Three Sisters, she inserts her image as part of a triptych composition. The flanking images are of cornhusks. The title gives the viewer a clue to the significance of the work. Rickard is alluding to important foods for the Haudenosaunee: corns, beans, and squash, which are referred to as “the three sisters.” That she has placed herself into one of the three panels may signify to the viewer her intimate relationship to these foods. What may not be readily apparent, however, is the significance of the color red in the image. And it is here that Rickard performs her act of resistance. Although she often shares the significance of much of the
iconography she uses in her work, there are moments when she will refuse the viewer access to certain meanings. It is a refusal that signifies a limit, a threshold between her Tuscarora nation and the dominating communities outside.

Her defiant act of denial is not unlike that attributed to Rigoberta Menchú, the Quiché Maya activist whose autobiography, I, Rigoberta Menchú, has helped to galvanize sovereignty issues for Native women around the world, and who I discussed in the previous chapter. Doris Sommer has written about instances in Menchú’s writings when she clearly pronounces that what she is refusing to share is a secret. Sommer writes:

... it may be useful to notice that the refusal is performative; it constructs metaleptically the apparent cause of the refusal: our craving to know... whether she is withholding her secrets because we are so different and would understand them only imperfectly; or whether we should not know them for ethical reasons, because our knowledge would lead to power over her community... It is the degree of our foreignness, our cultural difference that would make her secrets incomprehensible to the outsider.

(34)
The “foreignness” that is elicited by these denials of access to Native knowledge thwarts the imperialist desire to know the other.25

The multiple forms of address of testimonial self-portraiture I have endorsed thus far has taken, for the sake of my argument, self-portraiture as a coherent genre. However, it is useful to problematize Native self-portraiture as a category in order to emphasize the role of the viewer. I began this chapter by describing a syntax of self-portraiture that considers the possibility of a multiple address of the artist as both self and as representative of a Native community. However, the multiplicity of self-portraiture is further complicated when we keep

25 Jimmie Durham has also performed this kind of denial of access when he has used Cherokee language in his work. When asked about viewers that don’t know Cherokee he responded: “What I want them to know is that they can’t know that. That’s what I want them to know... The first text is the real things, turquoise, worlds, gold, emeralds, obsidian and flint, the second text is the Cherokee counterpoint, and the third text is the fact that you don’t know what the Cherokee means” (Townsend-Gault 540).
in mind that the category of “self” is itself already considered fragmented within Western discourses of identification. This is particularly important when reading for the political agency in these images, an approach that can easily ascribe intentionality to the artist. The onus is on the viewer to read these images beyond a mode of reading that claims the legibility of intention, which would re-inscribe the artist as a unified subject, the legacy of a humanist definition of a unified individual. It is this notion of individualism—the product of enlightenment humanism—that has promoted the dissemination of the Native as image within colonial discourses.

Native Self-portrait as Allo-portrait

In her article titled “Allo-Portraits,” Mieke Bal observes that, “In early modernity, individualism was establishing itself as a ‘natural’-enough value to become an ideology—in the sense of a value no longer perceived as man-made” (2003 14). Bal’s essay is an analysis of self-portraiture as a genre that so much depends on this humanist idea of individualism as to operate as a given. As she notes: “because we think we know what a self-portrait is, we don’t question the notion of whether there is such a category” (12). Bal addresses this lack of analysis by methodically exploring the genre. Her approach focuses on considering the “allo-portrait,” which she identifies as taking three forms: 1) the self-portrait as “trionie,” or type; 2) an image produced by another artist made to look like a self-portrait; and 3) a self-portrait that features the artist in disguise, often as a historical figure within a historical painting (17). While her intent is to “empty out the category of self-portraiture” because of its appeal to Western individualism, I would like to take her analysis as an opportunity to consider the self-othering at work in the production of Native self-portraits.

While the second of Bal’s categories is interesting in that it describes instances when the determination of authorship shifts the image from being a portrait to a self-portrait, or vice-versa, making the distinction tenuous, it is the first and third of Bal’s definitions of an allo-portrait that pertain more directly to the category of Native self-portraiture. Both, the self-portrait as type and the self-portrait of the artist in disguise, refer to images that portray the artist in the guise
of another, recognizable as both the artist and as the role she or he is playing. Of course, the “self” of self-portraiture is always a performance, even before its representation as a portrait. These self-portraits as allo-portraits foreground the performative aspect of the process of identification. In terms of Native self-portraiture, the artist’s identification as Native functions as the guise of the self. Whether the artist is identified merely as a generic Native or as occupying a specific Native national identity, self-portraiture categorized as “Native” foregrounds, or at least alludes to, Indigenous identity as a subject position. Therefore, the reception of these works requires paying attention to a wide spectrum of contexts specific to Native political and aesthetic histories.

A significant attempt to contextualize the genre of Native self-portraiture was an exhibition titled “About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations, and Inuit Artists,” held at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe between November of 2005 and April of 2006. The show, co-curated by Zena Pearlstone and Allan J. Ryan, featured self-portraits by forty-eight artists covering a broad spectrum of cultural groups and media. Unfortunately, the logistical limitations of the venue and funding did not allow for a more substantial treatment of this genre. The curators attempted to compensate for these limitations by supplementing the exhibition with a catalogue that included essays on the history of Western self-portraiture (Joanna Woods-Marsden); the beginnings of Native self-portraiture (Janet Berlo); the role of the body in contemporary art (Joanna Roche); and the role of gender within the genre (Lucy Lippard).

There was also a contribution by the curators that provided a close analysis of the images they selected and a historical overview that incorporates discussions of important works missing from the exhibition, such as Jimmie Durham’s Self-portrait from 1987, documentation from James Luna’s seminal performance, The Artifact Piece, and Nora Naranjo-Morse’s Mud Woman’s First Encounter with the World of Money and Business, or Pearlene: A Self-portrait, all of which I have discussed above. While the catalogue provides the opportunity to supplement the exhibition with images that are essential to a discussion of Native self-portraiture, the text falls short of defining Native self-portraiture as a genre. Realizing the difficulty of narrating a coherent story from such diverse perspectives,
Pearlstone and Ryan developed five categories under which to gather the works they have selected: (1) “cultural celebration” includes works by artists highlighting their Native identity; (2) “cultural continuity” brings together works that celebrate hybridity; (3) “cultural separation” features works that emphasize the difficulties of reconciling Native and non-Native backgrounds; (4) “cultural response” includes work that reacts against stereotypes; and (5) “idiosyncratic” is a miscellaneous category that includes a variety of works the authors describe as “personal visions.” However, it is this last category that fully acknowledges the difficulty of trying to construct a system for such a disparate sample of works. On the whole, the curators’ categories for this genre, while helpful in pragmatically organizing an exhibition, contradict the notion that a self-portrait defines the artist as an individual, even, or especially, when that voice is also the testimonial voice of a particular community.

The other essays in the catalogue attempt to give a historical context for the development of Native self-portraiture as a category. Yet, here again there is a lack of coherence. “The Beginnings of Self-Portraiture in the West” by Woods-Marsden provides a brief overview of the Western tradition of self-portraiture. It is a history in which the vision offered by the artist is that of a self-defining individual, whether elaborating the artist’s role as intellectual rather than manual laborer in the sixteenth century, or the role of the artist as a unified subject capable of representing a coherent self in the twenty-first century. Despite the lack of a critical analysis of the notion of a unified subject, which has been a crucial part of the discussions on the representation of subjectivity during the latter part of the twentieth century, what is missing from this short essay is any attempt to connect this history with the history of Native art practices. This lack within the historical narrative of Western self-portraiture, however, does provoke some questions. How does, or should, one place the development of self-portraits by Native artists who exclusively employ traditional aesthetics within this Western narrative? How does one explain, for example, the development of the work of artists such as Joe David, who uses Nuu-chah-nulth iconography to inscribe notions of the fragmented self into his self-portrait? (Just be Yourself was included in the exhibition.) Then there are many works by artists who employ a combination of West-
ern and Native imagery. Is there room in this history of self-portraiture to account for cultural hybridity as manifested by iconographical hybridity? It is evident that what may be required are multiple histories of self-portraiture, each developed by a narrative based on discrete cultural contexts.

Although not addressing these questions, Janet Berlo’s essay complements that of Woods-Marsden’s European history by claiming an origin for the history of Native self-portraiture in the U.S. She marks the beginnings of the genre as coinciding with the appropriation of a mimetic mode of representation by Native artists. Berlo specifically points to the production of ledger drawings by South Plains Natives imprisoned at Fort Marion in the 1870s as the beginnings of this representational practice. She also briefly discusses an interesting aspect of the development of Native self-portraiture: the influence of photography, a medium that plays a substantial role in contemporary Native art, and the development of what Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie describes as “visual sovereignty.”

Lucy Lippard, who has written on Native art off and on for some time, takes on the challenge of addressing the issues of gender and Native self-portraiture. She acknowledges that, given the limited selection of art, which is “for the most part stylistically and conceptually unrelated except for their authorship by Native people, it seems irresponsible to draw any overall conclusions about gender in Native self-portraits” (71). Nonetheless, she is able to identify certain aspects of this genre that are specific to gender, such as the prescribed relationship between gender and certain traditional media, the recurrence of representations addressing the legacy of sexual violence, the gendered nature of humor found in some images, the playful use of masquerade by some female Native artists, and the uniqueness of two-spirited gender identity. These are all rich issues but, as with the rest of the exhibition, the categories have been produced to fit the particular set of items on display.

The discussion of the role of gender in Native self-representation obviously

---

26 This term is a more recent formulation of the notion of “photographic sovereignty.” For an excellent overview of the state of contemporary Indigenous photography see Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie and Veronica Passalacqua, eds., Our People, Our Land, Our Images: International Indigenous Photographers (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2006).
leads to thinking about the ways in which the body is figured in these works. Joanna Roche’s essay provides an opportunity for such an analysis. Her treatment of the works by Pipilotti Rist, Cindy Sherman, and Tom Knechtel promises to consider the representation of the body within a wider contemporary art context. She notes how these Western artists have a tendency toward the obfuscation, distortion, or even outright elimination of the face and/or body. It is unfortunate, then, that Native artists are mentioned in her analysis only briefly at the end of each of the three sections that cover the Western artists whom she identifies as being part of the “dominant culture.” She mentions only one Native artist by name, Nisha Supahan, as someone who, through her direct, frontal image affirms “the self as Indian, as woman, and as artist” (54). Such praise for this artist’s ability to declare her “self” triumphantly becomes suspect when Roche later states that Native artists have a different approach, one prone to celebrate unified subjectivity because “these Native artists have experienced such personal and cultural pain in their lives that art has become one vital tool in the search for wholeness, rather than an exercise in self-destruction,” as though the examination of the fragmented self were the exclusive purview of Western artists (57). In contrast, Pearlstone and Ryan note in their essay how a number of the Native artists in the exhibition fragment and even deface their own images. A fuller discussion of the representation of the face, and the body, in these works, however, would have brought this discussion more fully in line with contemporary criticism on essentialism. Critical approaches to the relationship of the body and identity are wary of making any concrete links that prescribe an essential connection between the two. Native discourses on identity, however, often involve what would be considered an essentialist tie between identity and the body.

While there were opportunities missed in critically assessing the genre of Native self-representation, the exhibition “About Face,” along with its publication, marks the beginning of a useful exploration of this genre. I wonder how this exhibition would have differed had it included a Native curator, or if one of the essays for the catalogue had been written by a Native theorist. The lack of a Native voice in the exhibiting and critical assessment of Native self-portraiture in this exhibition, which focused on a genre that appears to promise optimum oppor-
tunities for self-representation, points explicitly to the ideological nature of the epistemic contextualization that occurs at the various sites I have been discussing throughout this study, at the relationship between power and (self-)
representation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed self-portraiture to argue for a critical analysis of Native art that is conscious of the nationalist implications of such a practice. This approach allows viewers to recognize the complex address of works that simultaneously make interventions within a Western art world while also contributing to the production of Native identities. The aesthetic concerns of the former are not unrelated to the latter efforts. The relationships between the problems faced during the production of art and the power struggles for meaning involved in the consumption of art are intricately intertwined.

These relationships may at times be indiscernible if the viewer is unaware of how the art is being consumed “at home.” While much of this art works to represent Native identity to a dominating culture, it is, at the same time, contributing to the construction of identity of the community being represented. These are identities that are produced along the contours of these, often competing, world views. It is not necessary, possible, or even desirable, however, to have access to more than one of these views in order to appreciate contemporary Native art. What is essential is to recognize that the construction of Native identity is a process regulated by access to power, access that defines sovereignty.

I have also argued for the deployment of postcolonial theory, a set of tools developed to analyze the power dynamics involved in the discursive production and dissemination of knowledge about the other. The implementation of these tools in analyzing the discourse of Native art history can help to identify strategies employed by both colonizers and de-colonizers. Of particular interest is the use of postcolonial theory to recognize strategies devised by Native artists that posit alternatives to the liberatory nationalism of the nation-state, alternatives such as the anti-imperialist nationalisms practiced by the artists I have discussed above.