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

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Conclusion

My aim in this study has been to locate the visual production of the Native image within the disciplinary confines of institutional sites dedicated to the study and presentation of Native images. I have emphasized the nationalist character of the production, preservation, dissemination, and consumption of the various discourses that locate these sites. Taking into account that these are sites of complicated power negotiations, I have attempted to identify situations in which the Native artist intervenes by using strategies that often involve a reference to traditional aesthetics and epistemologies. These are interventions that attempt to decolonize the legacy of Western imagery of the Native by positing anti-imperialist approaches to the production of Native visual culture.

In analyzing the complexity of these sites, it becomes clear that there are many tropes and methodologies that overlap and unite these hegemonic loci.²⁷ For example, the image of the vanishing Native is a constant trope, a figure that disappears that, ironically, constantly appears in many guises at various sites. The image gains force through an aesthetic manipulation, a methodology highly effective in the provocation of nostalgia. This figure inhabits the archive, the academy, as well as the museum. Significantly, the invocation of nostalgia is a methodology that has also been helpful in the preservation of alternate counter-histories, those testimonial images produced by Natives themselves. Thus, the deconstruction of the Native as image is a process that can also incorporate appropriated of colonial tropes and methodologies.

The overlap of practices among these sites is worthy of analysis in order to consider the workings of ideology within these institutions. What follows is a look at several of the recurring themes I have identified in this study that help identify some of these overlaps, namely: the recurrence of the traumatic return; the production of a nostalgic desire; the enunciation of speech-acts and the propriety of space; and the testimonial witnessing of invisibility.

My introduction began with a scene of a traumatic return, an example of

²⁷ On the tropography of history see White, Tropics of Discourse, and Ankersmit, History and Topology.

the reemergence of monsters, originally conjured in ancient times, and re-inserted into an eighteenth-century ethnography of Native Americans via a fifteenth-century print. The eruption of the headless Blemmyae creature in North America may have been seen as the return of the repressed by someone like Lafitau, a return of stories of monsters he refused to believe but that, at the same time, guaranteed the connection he sought between the ancients and Native Americans. In fact, his comparative analysis eventually led him to the conclusion that the Huron and the Iroquois were descendants of the Spartans and the Lycians (Pagden 201). By definition, however, a traumatic event cannot be recalled at will; it cannot be conjured up. It is obvious that in this case the trauma was manufactured to fit Lafitau's universalist theory that "all peoples observed certain basic religious customs and beliefs" (200).

In my analysis of the academic siting of Native imagery, we can see that, while not necessarily entreating traumatic returns, Warburg's project is involved in recognizing and identifying these kinds of reappearances. Warburg was invested in comparing the cultural contexts under which certain iconographic traditions continued to emerge. The traumatic return of the serpent as a religious icon was an example that led him to compare depictions of ancient Greek rites with their reappearance during the Renaissance. While in America, this comparative approach led him to take account of the Hopi snake ceremony as yet another instance of the traumatic return of the serpent. The epigraph to his lecture reads:

Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern,
Athen-Oraibi, alles Vettern.

It is a lesson from an old book:

the kinship of Athens and Oraibi (Steinberg, 1)

That this kinship was factored can be surmised from the prescriptive nature of this lesson. Although, as these examples show, a comparative approach to history may itself overdetermine a traumatic return, I compared the current moment of Warburg's own return within current scholarship with that of his own historical horizon to note similarities in the workings of imperialism, then and now, particularly in terms of the academy's dealings with Native communities.

My investigation of the site-specificity of the museum pointed to the possibility of recognizing something like the traumatic return of sovereign space. Dioramic displays as instances of the reproduction of Native space allows for the productive recoding of these sites as sovereign spaces, ripe for return. This reclamation of space has also occurred with those traditional dwellings—not dioramic representations but presentations of the real thing—found within various Western museums. These are instances in which, because of their actual use as traditional ceremonial spaces, the return has been publicly enacted.

Unlike trauma, nostalgia is the product of a desire and, as such, it can be induced. I examined this process not only in Curtis's massive project, but also in the projects by Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie and Larry McNeil. Their manipulation of their photographic imagery, often based on the use of aesthetic elements from their traditional communities, worked to produce a nostalgic desire for a past whose images replaced that produced by a Western nostalgia. While images produced by photographers such as Curtis worked to invoke a desire for the vanishing Native, a desire that belied the presence of the contemporary Native, the work by Tsinhnahjinnie and McNeil represents a desire for images from the past that testify to their continued presence in the present.

In looking at the academy as site, the contemporary treatment of Warburg and his methodology also reveals a certain nostalgia for a lost past. This is an unsettling vision. The fascination with the romanticized figure of Warburg disregards not only the subject he and most commentators today use as a focal point, the Hopi snake ceremony, it also neglects to consider the imperialist parallels between the two historical horizons, ours and his.²⁸

The museum is often a site overdetermined as nostalgic. While many contemporary art spaces may offer up visions of the future—or at least predictions of present art movements as avant-garde—the view presented within historical museums is more often of the past, and then of an idealized past. They are involved in presenting works of art or artifacts in an ideal state, keeping their restoration

²⁸ Although Michael Steinberg's treatment does address some of the oppressive conditions of Jews during Warburg's time, he does not make explicit reference to parallels today.

and conservation efforts out of sight. By contrast, tribal museums tend to emphasize the endurance of the past in the present, providing opportunities for the community to engage each other and their past in maintaining traditions. When nostalgia is invoked in these museums, it is often in efforts to establish a link, rather than a rupture, with the past.²⁹

The nostalgia that seems appropriate in a Western museum is made improper by instances where space within the museum is recoded as active in the present, a recoding that, as with the production of space mentioned above, may be seen as traumatic. We could consider, then, the site specificity of tropes such as trauma and nostalgia. The production of nostalgic desire may not result in the desired effect if it is improperly sited. For example, a Curtis photograph found in a Native home may be read as a celebratory signifier of continuity rather than as a salvaged remnant of a “vanishing race.” Similarly, a traumatic return may require a proper site for its recognition. Although unidentified trauma always remains traumatized, and therefore unrecognized, I have already considered situations where traumas have been misrecognized (e.g. Lafitau's *Blemmyae* in the eighteenth century or Warburg's Greek snake symbol at Oraibi), misrecognitions resulting from their infelicitous sitings.

In terms of analyzing the relationship between propriety of sites and the project of imperialism, the colonizer is always inappropriately sited, forever out of place. Within the visible realm, justifications for this infelicity abound, hence the legacy of Native imagery in the West. It is also within the visible where we can locate an intersection between notions of site-specificity and representations of an essential identity. The properness of body to place is a feature found in the work of many Native artists addressing ideas of sovereignty. Although it can be noted in the work of all the artists I have discussed, an artist who particularly succinctly and explicitly expresses this connection is the Maori artist Darcy Nicholas (Te Atiawa, Ngati Ruanui, Tauranga Moana). As he explains:

²⁹ The visibility of the past in the present becomes very literal by employing display techniques that provide the visitor full access to materials in storage. Early development of these techniques occurred at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology and have been employed most recently at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Land is the foundation that we spring from; we come from the land itself. The Maori word for who we are as a people is tangatawhenua: tangata being the people, whenua is the placenta planted in the ground. So land is very important to us. When I paint a face or a portrait, it's really a landscape . . .³⁰

Many of his images, such as Spirit of the Land, feature images in which landscapes and Maori figures are conflated to the extent that they are impossible to differentiate (Figure 44). The belief of having a maternal connection to the earth is common among many Native cultures and their visual representations of this belief are often literal and legible. It is telling, however, that the directness of such a forceful declaratory statement, a kind of manifesto, is often easily dismissed. Within the Western art world, this occurs when these kinds of visual statements are ghettoized and relegated to the ethnographical Indian art market. Nonetheless, this image, and all the other images I have discussed circulate within an Indigenous art world, one which at times exists in a heterotopic relationship to the West, one in which the avant-garde value of this work is fully recognized.

The relative invisibility of this Indigenous art world points to the function of the trope of witnessing. I discussed this in terms of secrets and their annunciation as declaratory speech acts, as gestures that point to a deliberate absence, making visible an invisibility. There are instances, such as the use of the color red in Rickard's self-portrait, in which the viewer is summoned into the position of witness, confirming the void of signification, acknowledging the significance of being presented with a signifier whose signified is openly being withheld. This process of witnessing, however, does not function as a countersignature; it is not required to authenticate the act of self-representation. Rather, works of art that address the process of decolonization, such as those by the Native artists that I have discussed, function as performative speech acts; their address functions more like a promise, which enacts what it says in the process of being uttered. Austin contrasts this form of speech to a constative, the act of merely making a

³⁰ Transcript of interview from Gathering of Indigenous Visual Artists, prod. and dir. Sandy Osawa, 14 min., Upstream Productions, 2001, videocassette.

statement (6). If we consider the role of the addressee, or viewer in this case, ignoring a constative utterance will have little effect while refusing to witness the performance of a promise has its consequences. Decolonization does not require the acknowledgement of the colonized. However, a willful refusal to acknowledge the process of decolonization, once recognized as such, becomes an endorsement of colonization.



Figure 44. Darcy Nicholas, Spirit of the Land, 2001, acrylic on canvas.