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The new tribe: Critical perspectives and practices in Aboriginal contemporary art

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Preface

Aboriginal people tolerate the impropriety of being “looked at.” It is as if they are thought to be incapable of returning the look. Peter Mason sees the aboriginal as a text, “the site of a signifying activity” (173). It is “in the text and image the difference by which native peoples of America are constructed as Europe’s other [...]” (173). As “other,” the aboriginal is also object.

From an early age, aboriginal people come to sense their otherness over and against *Moon-yaw Ween-wuk* (meaning “White People,” but, its literal translation is “people from Montreal”). They, like everyone else, are looked at by friends and enemies, and authority figures like parents, teachers, police; there is always someone watching. Being looked at and being watched make one self-conscious. You police yourself; you become disciplined; your actions are careful; you are on the watch for something to happen. For aboriginal people, being looked at is a persistent concern. But aboriginal people also look at others. The “Indian” has long been the site of a signifying activity. Thus, as a text, the Indian has been inscribed with multiple identities—social, cultural, historic, economic, and political.

For me, this being “looked at” began in earnest soon after entering the local public school, where all the children from the Red Pheasant Indian Day School had been transferred to be integrated with non-aboriginals. Though I have told this story elsewhere, it fits the context. As young children, we regarded our coming into contact with *Moon-yaw awasis-uk* (“White children”) as a new and exciting experience. That attitude lasted but a moment. I remember one boy blurted out loud enough for everyone to hear, “INDIAN!” The remark was not intended as a humorous surprise, but more an insulting wisecrack. I don’t know how the other Red Pheasant kids felt, but I was stunned. Honestly, I did not know what to say or do. Lacanian psychoanalysis would call this an instance of the “mirror stage,” the moment when one apprehends self and other; and indeed, oneself as other (Silverman 1983:157). Other epithets were thrown at us—“squaws” being the most uncreative yet damaging barb. The term—a loan-word from the Cree *isquew*, which literally means woman—was uttered derogatorily, in the same manner one would say “bitch.” Both objectify. The goal of the invective was to produce in us (the other) an inferiority complex; or, to distance themselves from what they too had learned from broader society, was “other.” The boy was the mirror, which was being held up to us very early in our lives. He determined our difference. When his utterance hit its intended

target (us), he was preserving his position of superiority. Being looked at, it seems, is not innocent. The action of looking is inextricable from attitudes and positions of power derived from historical structures.

Following high school graduation, I moved to Saskatoon in search of a steady income and something exciting. I secured a job with the newly formed Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College to work alongside Sarain Stump developing an art program, which we were to take out to Indian schools. I knew nothing about Indian art, let alone teaching it. From Stump, however, I learned quickly. I admired him for many reasons. He was extremely knowledgeable about Indian art and culture; articulate, in helping me see the world differently; wise, given his ethical commitment to raising young aboriginal people's dignity; catholic, based on his extensive travels and good sense of others; and inspirational, in that he openly expressed his "Indian-ness," by growing his hair, speaking an aboriginal language, and asserting a spirit that gave everyone around him hope. Until then I had never given identity very much thought. That year I experienced a transformation in how I saw myself in relation to others.

In 1973 Wounded Knee changed everything. Through political activism, it renewed the spirit of being Indian in many people across the continent. For so long, it seemed individual Indians everywhere did not know of each other's existence. The media blitz showing the armed stand-off ignited a pride in being Indian. Indians were at the height of an intense socio-politico-cultural reconstruction. Cultural identity was critical, but it needed to be expressed in new ways. New signifiers had to be created; they had to be visible even if they were at times reduced to stereotypes the larger society had constructed. Recognition was an explicit factor. The Indian was a trope, a metaphor for an imaginary identity. The politics awakened a sense of nationalism. So many wanted to be "Indian"—movie stars, musicians, artists, writers—but many did not know what it meant. It was as if there were some lost neo-primitivist tribe that suddenly appeared, resurrecting the noble savage. As Hazel W. Hertzberg observed in 1971: "Indians are attractive as an example of the small, non-urbanized, oppressed, and exotic peoples so currently appealing to those in retreat from a mass industrialized society.[...] As in the past, non-Indians thus use Indians as symbols for their own dreams and discontents" (296). It was cool to want to be "Indian;" the joke of the day was that everyone who wanted to be Indian claimed to have a Cherokee princess as a grandmother. Indian or not, being "other" was cool. To be "other," adornment was essential: as a thing of pride, long

hair made one look more Indian; jewellery—be it beads or turquoise—was another signifier that became art. In spite of these visible illusions of otherness, one form of resistance that lay outside boundaries of contact was humour. I would characterize it as “rez talk,” which used rhetorical forms of banter, but never as offensive scorn. Although English was always the language of choice, this banter nevertheless intensified that sense of identity. We used the rhetorical strategies amongst one another, although on occasion an outsider might be implicated. For example, on one occasion I was stopped by European tourists who asked to be photographed beside me. I knew I was encountering a type of objectification women often experience, yet it mattered little. Being other and being looked at were now part of the game, whether the tourists knew it or not. It was not me the tourists wanted to touch, but what I represented; for them, I was a “real, live Indian.” For me and for others like me, it was a chance to parody their conception of a primitive “other.” Wounded Knee changed everything. Yet ironically, this visibility only fed romance and eroticized the contemporary Indian. Being looked at now worked both ways.

Since those days, the Indian has become a project for me to look at, both as an artist and a scholar. In 1990, for example, I used the “cowboy and Indian” metaphor as the subject of a show called *the cowboy/Indian show*. Then in 1992, I worked on the “museum and gallery” metaphor in *Savage Graces*. In both cases, I held that the “Indian as subject of representation” needed to be problematized. In *Savage Graces*, however, my focus was the subject of the gaze, particularly how the “Indian as object,” was or was not presented. It is Silverman (1996) who most clearly theorized being looked at as the “gaze.” In the “museum/gallery as gaze,” I came to understand the objective distance in which each discursive practice positions itself: museums want to contextualize cultural identity, whereas art galleries hold it is not an aesthetic issue. Regardless, aboriginal people/artists often feel anaesthetized by the two. In both cases, the “Indian” is represented by two competing discourses: the scientific and the aesthetic. Whereas the former looks at the Indian microscopically, the latter looks at surfaces; one places the Indian within display cases, the other places images of the Indian on surfaces. One says: “We’re interested in everything about you;” the other rejoins: “We only want to see you from a distance.” Both these discourses see “Indian” at an objective, critical distance, but I wanted to implicate the two, discursively. Like Franz Fanon, however, I felt, “It [was] not possible for me to be objective” (86), given that I had not seen any work like

this before. As an aboriginal Canadian, I had always understood that I was the subject of the gaze. Now, I wanted to return the look. Like me, the real subjects are beginning to speak; specifically, aboriginal artists. The boundaries between the aboriginal and non-aboriginal discourses have since become reified. The struggle of aboriginal artists to come to terms with these competing discourses has made up much of the debate, as we will see in Chapter 5. In a small measure, I have tried to answer the question—Where do Indian representations belong?—with a slight shift in focus. Thus in *Savage Graces*, rather than playing the Indian, I wanted to “play with” the Indian—not as cowboys and Indians, but examining how the Indian is represented. I wanted to know how the Indian had been represented, from a curatorial perspective; and, from an artist’s perspective, I wanted to play with the Indian.

Some very good work is being done by aboriginal and non-aboriginal scholars, curators and artists critiquing this phenomenon; Deborah Doxtator’s popular *Fluffs and Feathers* (1988) exhibition about stereotypes is one good example. Personally, I am not lured by attacking only stereotypes—simplified conceptions of otherness—because it is like trying to change the weather. Instead, I believe one has to consciously adjust and be ready when a gust strikes unexpectedly. As a proponent of cultural analysis, I will examine the work of aboriginal artists in which they critique notions of objectification, read how their subject positions have shifted to one of agency, of speaking and acting as subjects, and how this has influenced their work.

Now I am looking, with a critical rather than a criticizing eye, at artists whose works are intelligent reflections of the world. The school-yard jolt was my awakening to question culture in its many appearances.