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

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Introduction

I would like to suggest that a group of us malcontents get together and perform the sacred ritual of the Dadaists for the origin of a new name. We will choose a new language that nobody can identify with and we will purchase a dictionary for it. We will shoot an arrow at this dictionary and the word upon which the tip of the arrow touches will be our new name. This will give us the freedom that we need, because nobody will know what to expect.—Edward Poitras.

Métis artist Edward Poitras wrote this statement for an exhibition called New Work By A New Generation (1982). His position must now be resurrected because it articulates a sensibility shared by an emerging artist—"a group of malcontents"—who represent a minority of all artists who could be universally labelled "aboriginal;" that is, those individuals who actively create art work for public and private use, as opposed to the "tribal" artist who generates works for personal and tribal use. Poitras's position was borderline, but it was honestly fundamental to a burgeoning group of aboriginal contemporary artists. In the end, the group never performed a sacred Dadaist ritual, nor did it find a new name that would have given it a new identity with meaning. However, as Kobena Mercer enlightens us: "Identities are not found but made; that they are not just there, waiting to be discovered in the vocabulary of Nature, but that they have to be culturally and politically constructed through political antagonism and cultural struggle" (427).

What Poitras and others did create was a new language that was both verbal and visual, and which has since given them an identity. As a result, there has been no need to purchase a dictionary. But, if a dictionary were ever needed, it would have to explain the effects of their perspectives and practices. Poitras's reference to "arrow shooting," for example, is no longer an innocent challenge to those in position of authority or control. Rather, it must be defined as a new sign of subjectivity or agency. What's more, shooting arrows is about chance, not antagonism or struggle. Finally, Poitras imagines a freedom that implies sovereignty. The problem is that for any group of like individuals who live within larger society(ies), total freedom could be dangerous because there would be no limits; society does not allow for that. Freedom, after all, has its price. Freedom and self-determination are not givens. Instead, they are struggled for and fought over; they demand that positions be taken.
But freedom within the art world has personal implications that are
fundamental to being an artist, and the space of freedom, which is under
constant threat, is ultimately where malcontents like Poitras can thrive
and test limits.

Poitras’s use of tropes such as metaphor and metonymy
particularly highlight distinct groups of artists situated in liminal spaces
between their place of origin, and where they are headed. This like-
minded group or tribe, Poitras suggests, comes together to perform
sacred (“codified”) rituals, to give its members meaning and purpose.
He never once mentions the space of practice; we only know that what
they do will be totally unexpected. We can therefore assume that this
tribe includes creative performers and thinkers.

Poitras’s reference to language and naming encompasses that space
of creative freedom to be different. Until then, he and others had under-
stood that being an “artist different”—based on sex, gender, ethnicity—
was a negation, negation being the relational component of, and distinct
from the positive. As a post-war articulation, the idea of difference
recognizes that creative individuals and ideas can come from virtually
anywhere. Until after World War II, Jordan and Weedon point out, the
“other” in the Western world had never affected Western society except
as a mythical, stereotypical and ideological other (399). In North America,
for example, the Indian has always been constructed within an ambiva-
lent framework. Peter Mason demonstrates that the “noble savage” was
a totally European construction that attributed both positive and nega-
tive characteristics to aboriginal people. They were perceived as both
innocent and uncivilized. Roy Harvey Pearce suggests that the “noble
savage” symbolizes a negation of the American will to progress; the
photographs of Edward S. Curtis position aboriginal people as a noble
yet “dying race;” Elizabeth Bird demonstrates the American compla-
cency regarding the popular construction of the American Indian;
Raymond William Stedman looks at how the Indian stereotype in
American culture sets up a framework many American Indians struggle
to resist; L. G. Moses examines the lives of “show Indians” who
guarded their cultural heritage through “Wild West” re-enactments; and
Hazel W. Hertzberg’s study of “pan-Indianism,” as distinct from tribal
interests and identities, constructs a new kind of Indian. It is thus this
vast range of difference that affords the aboriginal artist an ambivalency
that can be exploited for creative purposes.

The social presence of a new cultural subject invoking identity, in
both perspective and practice, is central to this dissertation. Most often
it is the visual, literary and performing artists who consistently grapple with, and articulate, issues significant to aboriginal identity; that is, those issues connected with the land. For aboriginal people in general, the contested terrain is an assertion of sovereignty through land claims whose discourse embraces ideas of self-determination and self-government. This is where aboriginal identity is articulated. The artists know such a terrain is always contestable. As we will discover, opposition takes place at the site of language, where meaning is subject to varying interpretations, where the subordinate or subaltern appropriate dominant discourses, changing them, redefining them, and engendering rearticulated signs.

This kind of struggle underlines Mercer's observation on the construction of identity. It is not simply lying around waiting to be found. What happens, though, when one fails to define oneself? One risks having one's identity being defined and objectified by someone else. As Lawrence Grossberg points out: "Different people in different societies struggle to define the boundaries of human nature, if only to be able to exclude some people or practices: 'savages,' 'infidels,' 'the insane,' 'the criminal,' 'the sexually deviant,' 'women,' 'Blacks,' etc., have all been excluded, both semantically and functionally, at different times and places" (117). According to Mercer, the result is that the other becomes objectified as minority. Minorities, he says, are viewed as "minor" or childlike; no one speaks for them, and the state does not represent them (429). In Canada, there has been a systematic attempt to remove aboriginal identities. Aboriginal children, for example, were forcibly put into strict boarding schools. Adults were dealt with through government policy; specifically, the Indian Act 1876, which encouraged enfranchisement and assimilation as key policies directed towards the "civilization" of all aboriginal people. It was unlawful for aboriginal people to practise spiritual traditions, such as the Sun Dance, and other forms of cultural expression, including Potlatches and Powwows. Women's status was specifically defined in 1876 as well. They immediately lost their status as Indians, according to the Act, when they married any non-status person. If it were to be exercised, any idea of aboriginality was subject to an individual, rather than a collective anamnesis. This history of eradicating aboriginal identity was part of the process of subjugation by modern systematic means. Given its intended purpose and results, this is why historian Olive Dickason refers to the Indian Act as a "total institution" (160).

The aboriginal community that the government attempted to assimilate is radically complex and diverse, marked by an intriguing
variety of intellectual reflections, artistic creations, and social practices. Its vibrant diversity cautions against portraying the constitutive experiences of aboriginal cultures in monolithic terms. Aboriginal peoples make up hundreds of different tribes and bands, each with its language. They live in virtually every part of the Western hemisphere, except those regions where they have been forcibly removed by modern nation states. This is one of the reasons why identity is important for aboriginal people in general, and for aboriginal artists, in particular. The cost of assimilation was excessive. And in any case, assimilation happens naturally and in far more interesting ways. As this brief outline shows, the question of aboriginal identity definitely has a political history. Nevertheless, other factors, especially since the 1960s, have played a role in refining the articulation of that identity.

We now have sufficient perspective to see that the 1960s was a time when great changes took place globally. In the United States, the Civil and Women’s Rights movements, and the youth counterculture, were collectively seen to decentralize the establishment, which Charles Lemert calls the “lost centre.” What has happened, he explains, is that: “[...] since the 1960s and through the current moment, [world politics has turned] to the pen to destroy the sword, to words to overcome the centuries-long domination of eurocentrism” (98). David Theo Goldberg states that in the 1960s, the central monocultural core shifted from assimilation to integration: “The new model of integration that emerged left cultural groups with effective control of their private autonomous cultural determinations and expressions at the sociocultural margins, while maintaining a supposedly separate and, thus, neutral sort of common values to mediate their relations at the center” (6). In Canada, Indian people were recognized as citizens only in 1960; and, although Indian women who had lost their status had already been made Canadian citizens, they were still disenfranchised from aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people in Canada were sufficiently influenced by global cultural changes and world events to push for their own political recognition. Without a doubt, these powerful forces affected the consciousness of many enough to signify that identity politics was to emerge as an effective opposition and struggle for recognition. Art was one domain in which this struggle took place.

The 1960s produced a few individuals who came to signify the new Indian artist in Canada: Norval Morrisseau in the East and Bill Reid in the West. Morrisseau’s successful exhibition at Toronto’s Pollock Gallery in 1962 was an important turning point, not only because he
received recognition, but also because he made the public recognize him as Indian. Elizabeth McLuhan states that “Morrisseau’s personal search for identity appealed to the Canadian (non-Indian) public [...] and to a country in search for a culturally distinct national identity” (28). She maintains that Morrisseau offered “Indian art” as a key to identity (107). Bill Reid gave contemporary Northwest Coast artists an artistic identity first by imitating old poles and masks that were commissioned by anthropology museums, and then by fusing this new language with Western art. He showed younger artists how their rich artistic heritage makes sense, not just by copying old artifacts, but by giving their works a sense of contemporaneity. Both these artists attracted a great following. Reid died in 1998; Morrisseau occasionally surfaces for an exhibition.

Politically, the year 1969 saw a much less dramatic but equally defining moment when the federal government tabled a document entitled “A Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy.” Ironically, it became known as the White Paper. In short, its aim was to give Indians legal, social, and economic equality with other Canadians, thereby terminating their special status guaranteed by legislation and treaty rights. Dickason writes: “The result was that when the policy was issued, it hit a solid wall of opposition. Amerindians achieved something approaching unanimity for the first time since the arrival of Europeans, and probably for the first time ever” (386). This highly effective opposition by the aboriginal leadership was crucial for recognition of aboriginal identity and for the eventual process leading to self-government.

Above all, the most critically defining moment for aboriginal peoples across North America was Wounded Knee in 1973 when the American Indian Movement took control of a small South Dakota village. Every major media source in North America began filing pictures from the front lines where the United States Army confronted a large group of radical Indians. For aboriginal people who watched the nightly news, it was an empowering time. Wounded Knee and its attendant media currency gave Indians recognition. The public now knew Indians were alive, well, and angry. The fifteen minutes given to them was enough for all of North America to see and hear; and enough to inspire, empower, and instil a sense of pride in being Indian. Aboriginal people understood, for the first time, the power of the media. Since then, at least in the United States, Indian people have rarely been heard, except of course in Dances with Wolves as another fiction that revisits Curtis. Altogether, there have been more than forty books written on both Wounded Knee I (1890) and Wounded Knee II (1973), from various perspectives.
Aboriginal people are constituting themselves in the present by the pen and through new language games. Land claims, self-determination, and self-government are good examples. Reclaiming, as an act, sets up relations with those who illegally expropriated land from various aboriginal peoples. But it also determines certain parameters for tribes regarding inclusion of their own members, like: the return to traditional forms of kinship identification; as well as the repatriation of sacred and sensitive objects from museums and restoration of their ceremonial use; the reintroduction of aboriginal language as a means of articulation; and, the social affirmation of being with those who share similar attitudes, beliefs and values. Other discursive language includes the rights to “self-determination” and “self-government.” These refer to how aboriginal people are to institute their power structures of authority and hierarchy: socially, culturally, economically, and politically. They will determine who they are and how their communities are structured, leading to the larger political notion of “nationhood” as reflected in the term “First Nation.”

For this dissertation I am interested in idea-based artists who are acutely sensitive to the ramifications of these political changes: artists who derive inspiration from concepts based on new theoretical ideas; artists whose approach to their work is demanding, earnest, and often humorous; artists who are philosophers in their quest for subjecthood based on their existence and how they fit in the world; artists whose outlook on life can be described as “tricksterish;” artists whose beliefs are inspired by tradition, yet who are fired by the passion of a promise of tomorrow; artists whose opinions are never lacking in meaning; artists whose attitudes are informed by an ever-expanding interest in the world; artists whose convictions are founded in the efficacy of their ideas; and whose view of the world is neither tradition-bound nor modern, but both.

By a close examination of several works of art, I hope to demonstrate a critical depth of interpretation often ignored by critics, curators, and scholars. For this purpose, I will use some of the following questions as analytical principles: what do the works illustrate; what readings do they open; how do they say; what do they reveal; how are they made; how do they articulate identity; and, how do they position the artist?

Chapter 2 traces the problem of aboriginal identity through an historical background of how it has been formulated—politically, legally, and symbolically—for the most part in Canada, and to a lesser extent in the United States. In both countries, “Indian” people are the only ethnic group to be legally defined in the constitution. As well, I show how identity has been politicized by various aboriginal groups.
Chapter 3 outlines the discursive spaces that aboriginal contemporary artistic practice works in, through an historical framework, from World War II to the present. This chapter introduces a new type of artist, one whose objectification of cultural identity through perspective and practice has become key to a new consciousness that is repeatedly played out on a national and international level.

Chapter 4 analyzes the subject position of this new type of aboriginal contemporary artist who moves freely about, living and creating in multiple spaces. I will illustrate this position through the works and practice of Edward Poitras, an artist who recognizes art’s unlimited potential to express and critique issues and situations, personally or pan-tribally, locally or globally. This new artist finds comfort in the mainstream, in his or her local aboriginal community, and somewhere in the liminal zone between the two. This space is a socially ambiguous zone and a site for articulation that the contemporary artist frequently crosses, experiences, interrogates and negotiates. Through the work of Jeffrey Thomas, I will examine this kind of negotiation and analysis of the socially ambiguous zone.

Chapter 5 theorizes the idea of “object” and the museum as discursive space: the object’s displacement through collecting practices; its discursive identity as artifact; how issues of sanctity are played out and by whom; how aboriginal contemporary artists critique the museum; and, how objects are being reconstituted through repatriation. Specific works by Rebecca Belmore, James Luna, Jimmie Durham, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, and Jane Ash Poitras, will be discussed in terms of how they contest the institutional space and discursive practices of the museum. Interestingly, these artists have never been denied access to research or exhibit in the museum, although museums have now opened a dialogue that makes explicit a new relationship with aboriginal people.

Chapter 6 focuses on artists who relate ideas of land and language to fundamental notions of aboriginality. For aboriginal people, land holds special meaning. It clarifies a complex relationship often summed up in the statement: We don’t own the land; the land owns us. This view is highly contestable especially in courts of law, but land claims discourse of “aboriginal rights” and “title” bolsters confidence. The works of Edward Poitras, Lance Belanger, Alex Janvier, Carl Beam, Teresa Marshall, and Rebecca Belmore, will illustrate the many perspectives of aboriginal concepts, as well as areas where language is key to articulation.

The final chapter examines the work of several artists who help define the idea of “community,” their varied relations with aboriginal
communities, and the search for new reference points. We are realizing that in recent years aboriginal contemporary artists have begun returning to the communities they have long been inspired by. Although this moving back is now a common event, creating art in these spaces is more problematic. The installation works of Mary Longman, Nora Naranjo-Morse, Marianne Nicolson, Shelley Niro, Jolene Rickard, Mateo Romero and C. Maxx Stevens, provide a window into these complex and contradictory communities. This is the metaphoric space, which I call "reservation x," that situates the new tribe.

Notes
1 Throughout this dissertation, various terms will be applied referring to the original inhabitants of North, Central and South America, before the arrival of Europeans. These names are not necessarily interchangeable as some would like to think; rather, they each have particular uses and meanings. These names include: Aboriginal, Indigenous, Native, Native American, American Indian, Amerindian, Autochthonous, First Nations, First Peoples. The label "Indian," however, is the one that has consistently retained the most powerful and highly contested inscription. Chapter 1 situates their various uses.

2 See Paulo Herkenhoff’s “Incomplete Glossary of Sources of Latin American Art,” a kind of dictionary of words—“intended to address the general public [...] the text ends up being a list of the author’s doubts [...] scattered notes on diverse themes in alphabetical order” (55)—that would come close to Poitras’s Dadaist dictionary.

3 The struggle to make sense of the systemic assimilation of aboriginal children has been recently documented by J.R. Miller: “Although the residential school had in the nineteenth century begun life as the product of both Indian initiative and European cultural aggression, it had gradually become the vehicle of the newcomers’ attempts to refashion and culturally eliminate the first inhabitants’ way of life and identity.”

4 This term’s efficacy and usage began in the early 1980s to describe differences and relations to the English and French cultures, the so-called “two founding nations.”