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

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Where To Practise? The Politics of Position

The problem of where to practice is as pressing as how.—John Tagg

Introduction

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the aboriginal contemporary artist is frequently at the centre of socio/political and cultural struggles, sometimes on the reserve, and at other times in urban areas. Bordering these two extremes are the spaces in between. I argue that these spaces signify the locations mapped out by the members of the new tribe, allowing them to move about freely. This is what makes them different from aboriginal traditional artists. In addition to the two extremes—the political geography of the reserve and urban complexity—are other socially ambiguous and perceptual spaces: traditional/contemporary, centre/periphery, museum/gallery, art/craft, aboriginal/non-aboriginal. These are spaces of articulation which the aboriginal contemporary artist frequently crosses, experiences, interrogates, and negotiates, giving them new identities. There are also spaces of resistance and articulation for a new self-identity in the post-reservation world. The aboriginal contemporary artist claims a location that is ambiguous and indeterminate, a space of “in between-ness,” which is socially constructed and politically charged; where shifting allegiances crisscross permeable grids and boundaries, and where identities are to be understood more as “nomadic subjectivities.” As I will show, these artists form a kind of “communitas,” a space of camaraderie, in which they support each other artistically, politically, and socially. The location of in between-ness is abstract, yet it signifies a strategic position of marginality and a subject position. This allows aboriginal contemporary artists a location from which to see and act, thus giving them distinct identities.

In the previous chapter I described the appearance of an emerging aboriginal contemporary artist: one who is a phenomenon of the post-reservation period; who is generally, although not always, art-school trained; who has experienced various forms of “marginality,” yet is highly conscious of his/her “aboriginality;” and, who might be heavily involved in local concerns. For some, this notion of being an “aboriginal” artist is inconsistent with the modernist paradigm that sees art as a pure, self-conscious expression, free of the constraints of tradition. The modifier, “aboriginal,” is not, of course, a sign of a true modernist. The paradox for aboriginal contemporary artists is that they are breaking with a past;
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one with which many modernist artists were preoccupied—a modernity
classified by uncertainties, despair, bureaucratization, and mecha-
nization. (These kinds of issues also seriously affected the Indian of the
reservation period.) Many modern artists had the luxury of extricating
themselves from the tyranny of tradition. Aboriginal artists, on the other
hand, were part of the hegemonic and systematic rupture from their
ancestral past, enforced by the federal government. Most did not have
the advantage of inheriting the complex discursive practices that all
cultures develop; instead, they struggled to find new identities for them-
selves. Thus, formed within the historical and political framework of
marginality, their artistic practice allowed them opportunities of explor­
ing their cultural and artistic identities outside local and within larger
urban places. Though they remained marginalized, they began focusing
on the shifting space of in between-ness.

This concept of the spatiality of in between-ness would not be
possible without the shifts in thinking brought about by post-modernist
ideas of pluralism and multiculturalism. The institutions of art have
also had to shift their approaches, but at a slower pace. Thus, I will
discuss two artists, Edward Poitras and Jeffrey Thomas, who play in
the space of in between-ness. Installation artist, Poitras, effectively
uses Coyote, the culture hero, a radical form of “masking and masquer­
adning,” as his alter ego for the post-modern age; while, Thomas, the
photographer, examines the urban space as marginal for aboriginal
people. Poitras’s figures play and inhabit interstitial spaces; Thomas
captures figures that lurk and implant themselves in impossible spaces.

Space and Identity

Before examining the perceptual spaces of in between-ness, I want to
address the space Pierre Bourdieu (1993) calls the “field of forces,” which
is the field of art. As members of this discursive field, aboriginal con-
temporary artists are constituted as subjects, where they often face various
oppositional struggles—centre/periphery, traditional/contemporary,
museum/gallery, aboriginal/non-aboriginal, art/craft. Many post-
modernist artists consider these oppositions need to be decentred, or at
best, problematized.

Bourdieu conceptualizes the field as a (socially) structured space
he calls the “field of forces” or “field of struggles” (30), within which a
discursive formation, like art, functions. His “cultural field” (33), for
example, situates artistic works within the social conditions of their
production, circulation, and consumption, which in turn exist within what he calls a kind of autonomous “cultural circuitry,” made up of various social agents (artists, dealers, curators, collectors, and so on) acting in complex social situations or contexts. Within this field of cultural production, complex relations and struggles arise. The field of cultural production consists of agents, and it is their relative and diverse positions that Bourdieu calls into question. His idea is that agents occupy spaces, from dominant to subordinate. The struggles or “politics of position” occurring within this field of force are political acts aimed at acquiring specific forms of “symbolic capital,” such as prestige. Within the field of force, moreover, Bourdieu posits:

The generative, unifying principle of this “system” is the struggle, with all the contradictions it engenders (so that participation in the struggle—which may be indicated objectively by, for example, the attacks that are suffered—can be used as the criterion establishing that a work belongs to the field of position-takings and its author to the field of positions) (34).

Thus he suggests that to be part of the field is to understand struggle as an inevitable, unwritten rule.

The initiative to force change within the cultural field comes from those who have the least cultural capital; Bourdieu refers to the young artists who endeavour to displace older artists. I would also include women and the historically non-Western artists. Bourdieu’s notion of “position-taking” is achieved by the younger/marginalized artists through the establishment of their difference. He says that they endeavour “to impose new modes of thought and expression, out of key with the prevailing modes of thought and the doxa, and are therefore bound to disconcert the orthodox by their ‘obscurity’ and ‘pointlessness’” (58). This is the logic by which the rules (discursive practices) are established.

Many articulate groups of aboriginal artists have used politically motivated means to gain entry into the field of force. For example, the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) and Atlatl in the United States, were both formed in the 1980s to give collective voice to marginalized aboriginal artists. These two groups created their own national networks, maintained common bonds of interest, and are united by an intense regard for their aboriginality. Both groups still exist, often hosting conferences to share common concerns. Though SCANA has built good relations with major institutions in Canada, Atlatl finds itself in a much larger field where its members’ voices go virtually unheard.
SCANA has used its influence to “represent” aboriginal contemporary artists; although this was short-lived, SCANA did do well for the artists. Atlatl does not have the same political clout and organizes itself to create and tour exhibitions across the country. Both organizations have achieved their goals. SCANA has almost disappeared; Atlatl continues to be an important organization for younger artists. My belief is that former SCANA members feel a sense of accomplishment in that the organization’s strategies are no longer essential to their establishing an identity. They are reassured by the way they have taken new positions within the field.

In addition to Bourdieu’s notion of the field of force, it is helpful to consider Michel Foucault’s view that to understand space, one has to understand the relationship between power and knowledge. He posits that in the construction of knowledge, a specific discourse establishes its domain or field, regulated by what he calls an “administration of knowledge”—“practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.”

Once knowledge can be analyzed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power. There is an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge and which, if one tries to transcribe them, lead one to consider forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and territory (1980:69-70).

Using Foucault’s idea of knowledge as a form of power inscribed by an “administering power,” I would like to suggest that a similar spatial domination is constructed within a field of art. Compare this to a “gatekeeping” ideology where boundaries are maintained by marginalizing the “other” outside the borders. I am always confounded, for example, by Hollywood’s depiction of Indians attacking the brave white men and women behind fortress walls. This depiction begs the question: What was in the fort that was so interesting? The answer is, of course, nothing. There is merely an allusion to something tantalizing, and recognized as “other.” Similarly, this field as a discursive space is a place of potential struggle—Bourdieu’s “field of force.” Within this field, for example, the discursive practice of regulating itself marginalized non-Western artists. There was a pejorative insinuation that their work was neither art, nor of a quality that could be taken seriously. Concurrently, aboriginal
artists were being recognized by another discursive form—ethnography—which was more interested in artists as contemporary manifestations of tradition, than in their modern identities. Their works were viewed as ethnology rather than art. A space was secured for them. But aboriginal artists reacted to this subjectivity because they realized their work would be seen more as artifact than art. It has always been in the discursive space of art that aboriginal artists have sought to develop their practice; yet, it was often the museum collections that most inspired them. Ironically, museums held the ancestral treasuries that could give them their artistic identities.

Also illuminating the idea of discursive space are Michael Keith and Steve Pile, who argue for new “radical geographies,” that are deconstructive and revolutionary. They use the term “spatiality.” Their idea is that all “spatialities” can be viewed as either political and personal, or as space that is purely social (225). Politics is territorial and “simultaneously real, imaginary, and symbolic” (224). Politics encloses, delimits, constructs borders and walls (discourses), sealing itself off and marginalizing the other. Preventing oneself from being marginalized, which I see as the politics of position, is an attempt to prevent one’s exclusion. Keith and Pile provide a new set of terms from which to explore the effects of marginalization, such as “displacement,” “dislocation,” and “fragmentation.”

How do we understand spatiality in this context? It is concerned with differentiating space and movement, and with discrete entities. It means not being tied to place or to stable identities, but moving in and out of various spaces, like “nomadic subjectivities.” This kind of spatiality focuses on moving in and out of place (communities), back and forth, physically and intellectually.

Furthermore, how do we understand spatial identity? The essence here is people’s interrelationships with each other and their environments, like artists relating to each other at different times. A spatialized identity does not tie one to a specific community or the social pressures of a community, neither is it what Isabel Hoving calls “free mobility.” Furthermore, Hoving argues that creating a space for new identities calls for “a violent struggle” (93). In this instance, it is political, in the sense that artists entering the field of force do so either individually, or as a group. Individuals entering the field of force must of course make sense of the relations around them and run risks of acceptance or rejection. The group approach has the advantage that artists help one another. This group-ness is more in line with a kind of tribalism of shared
sensibilities. The artists of this new tribe, however, are more concerned with artistic issues outside of aboriginal communities; and inside the field of force. Conversely, those artists positioned within aboriginal communities who saw borders set up between art and everyday life now find these borders are eradicated. They enter these tribal/community spacesapolitically, sharing in other relations. The anxieties of identity are no longer a major issue.

The spatial identity is also a search for others who share similar social, cultural, and political values and attitudes. Thus artists who live and work in large metropolitan centres will more than likely seek out others who share their interests. This does not mean, however, that they will remain tied to these groups, which are often loose and heterogeneous. In recent years, a number of artists have been drawn to strategies that evolve in certain spaces more generous and accepting of their practices. In Canada, in artist-run spaces in particular, artists of aboriginal ancestry are more likely to be included, and to find space where they can create and experiment. As well, provincial and federal arts councils help make this space more accessible through grants that facilitate these new practices and productions. The politics of inclusion/exclusion that once marked the 1970s and 1980s have shifted rather dramatically. Artists are not so much concerned about being excluded because of identity. Rather, their concerns centre on the highly competitive nature of the field of force where, to some extent, quality is still the major issue. Part of the struggle may not be with quality of expression, of making the best and most original mark, but with what that mark means. In other words, from a semiotic perspective, it is not the sign that is the issue but the signification. It is at this point that notions of identity come into play because signs are read in different ways by different people. This may not be a political act, but a shifted artistic one, a way to articulate issues that interest and concern the artist, where artists are trying to make sense of the complexities and contradictions, not only of everyday life in the modern world, but in the Indian world as well. These new rhetorical strategies are intensified by the burgeoning national profiles of First Nations across the country, particularly in articulating positionality within the signs of reclamation and sovereignty.

Coyote: The enemy of boundaries
One rhetorical strategy employed by aboriginal writers that visual artists are also finding efficacious, is the character of Coyote. Who is Coyote?
Or more specifically, what is the idea of Coyote that has created such an interesting artistic discourse? First of all, the word “coyote” is from the Aztecan or Nahuatl word, coyotl. In many tribal narratives Coyote is a cultural hero. Coyote is also Trickster. Trickster is an ambiguous figure, who is always wandering, always hungry, and who is free of the normal conceptions of good or evil. He is the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries. It is this Trickster theme that has stimulated a growing number of aboriginal writers, playwrights, performers and visual artists, for the past twenty years. Alan Velie observes that, “since the trickster is the most important mythic figure in most tribes it is not surprising that he would be a major archetype in contemporary Indian fiction” (121). For Gerald Vizenor (1993): “The tribal trickster is a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination. . . . the trickster is a language game in a comic narrative” (187). And William Bright explains that Native Americans refer to personages like Coyote, Frog, Bluejay, and Bear not as animals, but “First People”:

[...] members of a race of mythic prototypes who lived before humans existed. They had tremendous powers; they created the World as we know it; they instituted human life and culture—but they were also capable of being brave or cowardly, conservative or innovative, wise or stupid. They had names that we now associate with animals, and they sometimes had features, physical or psychological, that we now associate with those animals. When humans came into existence, the First People were transformed into the species of animals that still bear their names (XI).

In contemporary aboriginal cultures, animals still play a large part in stories, dances, personal names, and art; this interdependence reflects an important aspect of aboriginal identity. Contemporary artists ensure that this philosophical view persists.

Though art can never replace a true relationship, it remains a way of evoking it. For example, Coyote allows artists a kind of licence, a persona with which to practise their art. Indeed, this has always been the case with the ancient warriors, magicians, artists and shamans. Coyote is freedom of expression. Coyote is the crossed of boundaries, yet this can be very dangerous to those who do not understand the strategy. Coyote is the enemy of structure and thus can be dangerous to those who create structure. Coyote does not exist to destroy, he is more a deconstructivist. The Coyote persona asks us to look at ourselves, to examine our foibles.
Coyote is creative, always looking for possibilities, always adapting, but never arrogant for arrogance’s sake. So in a way, Coyote’s persona for contemporary artists is a check on one’s limitations and corporeality. Coyote allows someone to be “other” with stipulations: Do not destroy; be creative. Nothing is gained by being destructive. We can see this contradiction in our cities. Some would argue that graffiti destroys; others see it as creative, where one sign overlays another. Burglars, thieves, hoodlums, colonizers are destructive. Artists on the other hand have different objectives: they make.

One artist I have known for over twenty years whose works personify the highly contingent issues of identity is Edward Poitras. In this section, I will examine his work particularly his critical use of the tribal trickster Coyote.

Edward Poitras
In the summer of 1995 the Venice Biennale celebrated its 100th anniversary. Regina-based artist Edward Poitras, and I as curator, were Canada’s representatives at this prestigious event. Together we worked for over a period of one year, from initial discussions to the actual presentation in the Canadian pavilion. The key image for Poitras before, during, and after the Biennale, has been the trickster figure, Coyote. Poitras differs from the American artist Harry Fonseca, who began his Coyote Series in 1979, for two reasons: first, he is a three-dimensional artist, using sculpture and installation as narrative structure; second, he avoids literal depiction, preferring to have the viewer work at understanding.

I regard Poitras’s artistic strategy as an “aesthetic of tricks.” This idea frames a particular practice Poitras (and others) have developed over the past ten to twenty years out of the profane use of an aboriginal culture hero, Coyote (fig. 1). Although Trickster is no single figure, Poitras prefers the character of Coyote. He could have easily used “Raven,” “Wesakaychak,” “Iktome,” or “Glooscap;” they all function as prominent figures in aboriginal origin narratives, and many of them are also regarded as Trickster because of their tendency to use ruse-like tactics to get what they want. Poitras uses Coyote because of its indigenous nature and transformative abilities. By using Coyote, Poitras is able to realize more creative possibilities. Poitras is also the pre-eminent aboriginal artist whose use of Coyote transcends the realistic representations of other aboriginal artists. Instead, Poitras’s Coyote is more trickster-ish, subtle, ambiguous, perhaps even evasive. This was the strategy that drew
my and others' attention. Trickster emanates from many guises, and as the Venice installation developed, it became Coyote's site.

In *The Big Dog House* (1995, fig. 2a), we first see a large gold wall. We are not sure what it is. Is it covering, hiding, sheltering, suspending, or anchoring something? The wall itself is the most obvious work in the show and surely one of its most enigmatic. Some clues appear, like surface designs, a portal at a lower end indicating it is small house for the female coyote who stands beside it, or the gold-leafed surface itself. The wall stands approximately nine feet high by twenty-four feet long and is covered entirely by twenty-four carat gold-leaf, painstakingly and experimentally applied by Poitras and an assistant.

The *Big Dog House* (fig. 2b) presents a female coyote standing at the door entrance in the lower right. For the Venice and Ottawa installations, Poitras dealt with this in two distinct ways. In Venice, the wall came away from the back wall and behind it he built a platform, which was invisible to the visitor. But, from a distance, we could see a ladder leading up to it and make out some objects resting on the platform. Behind this wall we could see the frame construction of the dog house, which presented us with an incongruity that was absent from the second installation. We may read it as Coyote's secluded apartment with his "stuff neatly piled."
For me, this work, like so many of Poitras's others, lends itself to numerous interpretations. Its apparent simplicity belies powerful references to colonization, materiality, and pretentiousness. I cannot help but wonder what a prairie boy would be doing working with a material that has neither cultural relevance to himself nor common usage locally. Does Poitras see gold in universalist terms, as a "globalized" object? Or, does
he see it simply as an object with interesting possibilities? In an interview I conducted with the artist (see McMaster 1995) Poitras spoke of gold affectionately as any artist would after becoming absorbed by its seemingly plastic qualities. In this particular work, then, I believe that the materiality of the gold itself offers far more challenging interpretations than the coyote figure, which will be discussed separately.

Poitras spoke of his big trick. What was it? Did he realize it? How do we know it happened? Did he or Coyote do the tricking? My interpretation is that Coyote is Poitras’s alter ego, his “other.” And it is this otherness that makes the idea of alterity so appealing to think about. In ancient times, aboriginal people often spoke of separate realities. Often these could be considered as dream states, altered consciousness brought on by fasting or drugs. Warriors described being spiritually connected to their spirit guides, and before battle would go through ceremonies in which they would enter a different level of consciousness; in effect, they would become something else. Although I have never heard of warriors taking the spiritual persona of coyote, I cannot say it never happened. Usually, these personae were seen as helpers, because they would instill some value that would enable the warrior to succeed in his pursuit. We can see this in the contemporary “Powwow” where dancers act out or become another “other.” Their identity shifts.

This shifting persona is strategic. It isn’t a loss or crisis of identity; rather, it allows us to be comfortable with ourselves. To look at this another way, in many aboriginal societies, not just the Plains, individuals often carried more than one name or they would acquire other names through their lifetime. One’s identity, it seems, was constantly shifting. It is as if this allowed one to play. It also meant one was always comfortable with who one was. It became problematic only after Christianity enforced one name on aboriginal people. I remember that when my great-grandfather was converted to Christianity, he was forced not only to be selective about his wives, but he also had to hold on to his name: Wuttunee as surname, and then to add a Christian name. In other words, one system of naming overlaid an ancient system that seemed very much in keeping with the aboriginal quality of life. We, of course, know that the Christian system of naming had more to do with maintaining records for heirs, but in the aboriginal cultures of the Plains, people didn’t own land in the same way that Europeans did. In fact, aboriginal people believed that the land owned you; indeed, our bodies all return to the land, so the notion had conflicting interpretations. The consistent renaming process was not indicative of some identity loss; rather, it was seen as attaining
another level of self. Somehow, I suppose, we were never whole, but we were layering ourselves to match the event, honour, or stage in our lives. We could also ask: was this about the death and rebirth of a self? In a way it probably was, for the institution of naming made provisions for the fact that we change, we are never the same, and this wasn't just a personal view, but the view of others. The systems allowed for the shifts. Today, however, this system does not allow for this possibility and consequently, I would argue, we run into an identity crisis.

Poitras played with the concept of identity in *Treaty Indian Card* (1993, fig. 3), which I first saw in a local Ottawa exhibition called *Three Lemons and a Dead Coyote*. The work was simple. In the centre was a treaty card, bisected by a Maltese cross. He juxtaposed the words "Paint" and "Her" next to the treaty card (not shown). This is whimsical, yet deceptive. While we see the artist's face painted in a clownish manner, he invokes Trickster. We recall that Poitras once said, "I am a Métis yet I carry a Treaty Card!" This somewhat sharp statement makes our conception of what an Indian and/or Métis is much more confusing, and that's what Poitras is doing. He makes us realize the often confusing array of terms used to describe aboriginal people, that identity is indeed much more confusing than we once thought. It's no longer easy to target

anyone. Appearances do not always befit the reality. Yet, I am still puzzled why he would use the feminine case, although it rhymes with ‘painter.’ Perhaps it is the feminization of the trickster, about crossing boundaries; or, possibly it refers to the Indian Act’s disenfranchisement of women when they married non-Status/non-Treaty/non-Indian men. This would have painted or marked them differently. In this work, the artist has removed his laminated photo and replaced it with one that he has painted over. With his face painted in a clown-like manner, he deconstructs the photograph by the mask of paint. The clown make-up is evidence of the transformation of the Coyote. In the colour version, the lips are large and red. I do not think that he originally feminized himself; rather, the later application of the text only added to the disorientation. My reading is that it signifies the ambiguity of the original legislation and its intended effects on Indian women—a principal opportunity to disenfranchise them, and thereby a greater chance to eventually reduce the numbers of Indians (as defined under the meaning of the Indian Act). Thus, “Paint Her” becomes the embodiment of the struggle to refuse definition or codification. It is rather ironic that aboriginal peoples are the only peoples in Canada to be defined. Yet, it is the very definition of the word “define,” of “marking boundaries or of stating an exact meaning,” that becomes problematic when it comes to identity, especially when you have no control over your definition of self. This is the key problem of otherness, or stereotyping, of lumping together characteristics of many peoples into one view that is at stake in the struggle over identity.

Finally, I realized sometime later that his card had an ironic side to it. Certainly Poitras had not noticed it either, but, beneath his name there is a blank space to insert “Alias—Nom d’emprunt” if one so chooses. Somehow it was too easy to miss, for it allows someone to insert a nom de guerre, like Coyote for instance.

In Stone Books (1995, fig. 4) we see the male coyote standing on top of a pile of stone books. Through the books runs a line of small stones, roughly in the form of a snake. This coyote has a presence that announces not its maleness, but rather its attitude towards what I see as the conflicting paradigms of knowledge. Here we see the ruse is Coyote, innocently and discreetly standing on a pile of books, aloofly staring out, and given that its mouth is open, apparently ready to let loose a war cry or a simple howl. Coyote’s ambivalent act can be read to suggest that knowledge is power, but what kind of knowledge? The books represent Western knowledge, yet what represents aboriginal knowledge? What is there that suggests a smidgen of possibility that there is even a
reference to aboriginal knowledge? For me, it’s Coyote. He represents aboriginal knowledge. He is the one that we learn about in the oral narratives, because in the narratives we frequently know him to be the cultural hero, the one who is always getting into trouble. He is the one from whom we usually learn what not to do. Coyote represents orality, the changing quality of speech, how messages are passed from one generation to the next, the importance of the unwritten word, the organic quality of the sign, the power of the word, and perhaps its creative quality in the speaker.

In *Stone Books* there is a *double entendre*, oppositionality and consolidation, between two forms of knowledge: Western (signified by the books) and aboriginal (signified by Coyote). This is not particular to Canada, but is a worldwide phenomenon as more and more cultures vie for intellectual space. This space can be read as the struggle to insert or juxtapose the various histories, ideas and perspectives, alongside those of the Western mainstream. What we see is a meeting of epistemologies, of ways of seeing the world. The contradiction for aboriginal people, for example, is found in their efforts to acquire knowledge through books, of Western sources of evidence of who they are, of the world around them. We understand the power of the written word as signified by the stone books. The suggestion is that something written down is written in stone. It is inalterable, as opposed to orality, which is much more ephemeral, ever-changing, organic, and creative. So, is Coyote telling aboriginal people to be careful, or is he saying take advantage of

[Fig. 4 Edward Poitras, *Stone Books*, 1995.]
what is available? It is not necessary to read this negatively; that is, in opposition. Indeed, aboriginal people have come to understand the importance and power of the written word over the past several centuries of assimilation. What aboriginal scholars are doing is taking Western writings about aboriginal people and reading them for their peculiar perspectives, of how Western man viewed aboriginal man through the centuries, in an attempt to answer questions like: what is history; what were the cultures like in the past; what were the people like in the past; what were the attitudes? All the information in these books centres on aboriginal people in the past.

In *Stone Books*, Coyote stands on top of the books like a teacher. In fact, the culture hero seems ready to address his audience. Yet, Coyote seems to caution aboriginal people not to forget traditional ways that are based on orality. That stories, myths, and perspectives are passed from one generation to the next is what manages to sustain oral cultures. He says, do not forget. Yet, the irony is that Coyote is smart. I argue that he is acknowledging the existence of knowledges, in the plural, that the two knowledges, Western and aboriginal, can now be combined to inspire even greater possibilities. This is evident, for example, in university programs and colleges that have aboriginal studies programs. Coyote then comes to signify, not a new-age teacher, but a new kind of instructor who struggles to realize the importance of one’s tradition in the face of rapid and continuing change. The irony here is that the written word becomes tradition; and the one that is continuously changing is a culture of orality. This is the *double entendre* that I suggest inheres in this notion of tradition and change. Thus Coyote becomes representative in a corporeal sense, of the mutability of humanity. We can see the power in understanding various perspectives and in so doing, see our perspectives. To know the other is to know oneself.

*Three Lemons and a Dead Coyote* (1995, fig. 5a) has been featured in several exhibitions since Poitras installed it as part of *JAW-REZ* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Once again, it references Coyote, not so much in a coyote-like form, but more in the essence of the Trickster. I would argue this to be one of Poitras’s most successful workings of the Ruse. In this present/not present form, “transformation” is the key to tricking the intended audience. Poitras creates a kind of *bricolage*, not so much a real Coyote but an idea of Coyote, in a virtual sense. By this I mean that Coyote is believed to be always/already amongst us and that s/he/it can transform into and out of anything: that is the value of the Transformer. He is always tricking his intended audience. The sum of Coyote’s parts
and tricks, the sum of his being, the sum of the possibilities for change, are enormous. So, he can be at once a chair or anything. He is there, but how do we know he is there? We really cannot tell by looking at any of the elements here. We see a chair and a tail-like electrical cord trailing out the back with a stone attached to the end. But wait! There he is. With his foot caught in a bowl of milk. He is there, but not there. The trick is in the shadow (fig. 5b). The shadow reveals and gives away the ruse. His

fig. 5a,b  Edward Poitras, *Three Lemons and a Dead Coyote*, 1993.
disguise has been caught and frozen by the cast light. So, we do not actually see the ruse and his trick; rather, Coyote is being tricked.

We progress along the cord towards the rear of the installation and here we find a kind of altar. We notice the tail halted by a stone book. Just behind this is a pan containing three gold miniature coyote jaw bones, and a skull (buffalo?). There is a suggestion of someone panning for gold. Here I think Poitras makes the suggestion that the “three lemons” are not what they appear to be—three gold jaw bones. Coyote is like the “lemon car.” He exists but never really works. Is this then the idea of the fool as in “fool’s gold”? Who is being tricked? Is he really what he is cracked up to be? We get the sense that Coyote has tricked us once more. Gold is an element that Poitras explored prior to the Gold Wall. He presents us with the conjunction of the value. Gold, he seems to say, has both material and commodity value. Which one does he prefer or choose? In my discussions with him in a published interview, he speaks of gold’s materiality, of its surprising plasticity and malleability, of how he at first treated it with a kind of reverence because of its monetary worth. He later discarded this notion upon realizing gold’s creative possibilities. He leaves the reverence for the buffalo skull. Overall this work plays with our imagination, like so many of his works. We are never sure what to expect or to what extent he wants us to know his strategies. We can only speculate. This is the power in his art.

Finally, I wish to discuss Wevoka’s Hat (1996, fig. 6), which Poitras created while in residency in Saint Hyacinthe, Quebec. This oversized hat refers to the Paiute Indian prophet Jack Smith, a.k.a. Wevoka, who came from Utah. He was largely responsible for the “Ghost Dance” religion in the late nineteenth century. The devotees of the Ghost Dance believed that if they danced and sang certain songs, and wore specially painted clothing with appropriate designs, somehow the souls of deceased Indians would reappear, and the white man would disappear. Neither of which happened. But Poitras presents us with the persona of a man who was not only a religious prophet, but a magician as well. Does Poitras equate religion with trickery? I do not think so; rather, what he says is that one needs maneuvers that “win friends and influences enemies.” It is said that Wevoka knew when the sun’s eclipse was to happen and he used this knowledge as a sign of great power; as well, he once predicted ice in the middle of the summer would flow down the river. On another occasion, Wevoka asked someone to shoot him with a shotgun, and then produced the pellets as a sign that he remained unharmed. His insistence that all devotees wear specially painted clothing, or sacred clothing, was
really an extension of the sacred undergarments all Mormons supposedly wear. It was believed that Jack Smith was once a converted Mormon who felt that the sacred shroud should be accessible to him. But he was denied it, perhaps because he was an Indian, or because his request was considered too outrageous.

Reminiscent of both Australia's Ayers Rock and Arizona's Monument Valley, *Wevoka's Hat* sits enigmatically on the floor. Similar in shape to the hat worn by Jack Smith, Poitras chooses to colour it with a dry, red-earth pigment, signifying the spiritual nature of the Ghost Dance. Poitras, however, sees the hat as having more than a spiritual context.

In the summer of 1995, Poitras and I did a joint installation, *Untitled*, at the Westfälischen Museums für Naturkunde in Münster, Germany (Fig. 7a), to which Poitras brought only a hat. This hat can be seen inverted beneath one table leg, suggesting that a trick could be pulled from it. References to Wevoka as shaman therefore also encompass his role as a necromancer, especially when we recall the objective of the Ghost Dance. Thus the foot of each table leg is wrapped in fur, denoting Coyote, the impostor. And on top the table is a "hide the pea" game. Moving over to the right, we see Coyote looking inside the tipi frame, beside him is a dog dish. Behind him are three lodge-pole pines with a flag representing the Spanish colonizers. The next image (Fig. 7b) shifts inside, where we see four blind-folded ducks and a beaver dancing around a camp fire, and a hand drum. Not seen are a chipmunk and several scavenger birds,
fig. 7a,b  Edward Poitras and Gerald McMaster, *Untitled*, 1995.
The New Tribe kicks the backside of the ducks, forcing a realignment of their anatomy: that is why ducks waddle, their feet are far behind. As well, the beaver narrowly escapes but not before Coyote steps on his tail, permanently flattening it. And chipmunk escapes but gets his back clawed, creating the stripes we see on them today. The magpies, of course, look on hoping there will be leftovers. The narrative moves from ancient times, through the colonization of the Americas and then land settlement, up to the present. The point of the narrative is that the idea of Coyote remains alive; that aboriginal people’s last stronghold of resistance is found in their narratives and culture. Coyote represents the struggle to occupy the space of dominant culture through the strategies of articulation.

In the end, Poitras, like Fonseca and others, has brought Coyote alive. They have resurrected the spirit of Coyote and other Tricksters, allowing them not just creative possibilities, but more significantly, a capacity to articulate an aboriginality. In so doing, Coyote gives aboriginal contemporary artists an identity grounded in North America.

Areas of “In Between-ness”

I got those Reservation Blues
Traded my moccasins for those whitman shoes
I got both feet in two canoes
I got the Reservation Blues
– Curtis Johnie

When will this end
This senseless battle
Between my left and right foot
When will the invisible border
Cease to be
– Alootook Ipellie

G    C
I’m too red to be white
G    D
And I’m too white to be red
G    C    G
A half-breed, in-breed, no breed I’m called
– Shirley Flying Hawk d’Maine

In the above excerpts, aboriginal writers Curtis Johnie, Alootook Ipellie, and Shirley Flying Hawk d’Maine sum up the anxieties of seeing the
limited possibilities of their subject position. Johnie sees two sides: “I got both feet in two canoes;” Ipellie sees an “invisible border” between two spaces; and, Flying Hawk d’Maine sees herself as not completely part of either side. These poets’ observations relate to a new radical geography I want to propose—one that is between the two spaces—reserve/urban, traditional/contemporary, centre/periphery, museum/gallery, aboriginal/non-aboriginal, art/craft. This is a geography that exists as a socially ambiguous zone, a space of articulation, which many aboriginal contemporary artists frequently cross, experience, interrogate, and negotiate. It is a perceptual space for various practices, including resistance and the articulation of self-identity in the post-reservation world. This ambiguous and indeterminate space, this space of in “between-ness,” is socially constructed but politically charged. Here, shifting allegiances crisscross permeable grids and boundaries, and spatial identities are understood as nomadic subjectivities. For my approach, nomadic subjectivities work better than hybridity in that they involve movement between the binary spaces of the urban and reserve. Hybridity has been criticized for overlooking local differences, which a number of aboriginal contemporary artists are now articulating (see Chapter 7). Furthermore, hybridity has racist overtones from a colonial era; in Canada the Métis would not be considered hybrids because they fought for recognition as a cultural rather than racial group.

Nomadic subjectivities, to borrow from John Fiske, then, are agents freely moving among various subject positions, “negotiating the problems of everyday life within a complex, highly elaborated social structure [...] who can move around this grid [...] as active agents, not subjugated subjects” (24). The agent’s quest is to negotiate the contradictions, and from them to construct relevances and allegiances. Fiske further clarifies that what these agents have in common is just how different they are, one from another.

Within Fiske’s “grid” of everyday life are interstices or areas of “in between-ness” that can be claimed by the new tribe. For example, Hugh Brody views the Skid Row of Vancouver as a community that stands “between the limitations and constraints of a rural reserve and the rejection and alienation of white-dominated city life” (n.pag.). American Indian photographer Richard Ray Whitman’s series Street Chiefs depicts the homeless, the forgotten and the resistant, who are marginalized from both aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities. As we will see, Jeffery Thomas’s series, Exploring Metropolis, discovers a new kind of Indian lurking in the interstices of urban spaces. On certain
reserves today, newly enfranchised Indians under Bill C-31 have begun to feel a community indifference mirroring the alienation so often experienced by aboriginal people in the city. On some reserves, people who have gained this new identity under the Bill’s provisions are labeled as such. It may take a generation for both sides to make adjustments. Then again, once you are given an identity in small communities, it is hard to change it.

Shedding light on this state of in between-ness is Michel de Certeau’s tactical notion of “making do” and “making over.” Certeau’s concept centres on constructing a space within and against the “other,” of speaking the “other’s” language, in order to “make over” new meanings. He emphasizes the tactics employed by subordinate groups to win small victories from larger, more powerful, and ultimately determining systems. He asserts that while members of popular culture cannot gain control of the production of culture, they can and do control its consumption. By controlling the ways in which it used, they are “making do.” Popular culture is creative, with its members continually seeking new ways of cooption, while all the time appearing to acknowledge their subjugation. This process Certeau terms “making over.” A victory of the weak over the strong. For both Fiske and de Certeau this “art of being in between” (36) encompasses personal practices of resistance, or gestures of negation, that can be mitigated. For more complex situations, however, resistance to ideological domination requires a counter-ideology—a negation—as self-defence. Gerhard Hoffmann (1990a) sees the in between as an area of contemplation, where new strategies of negation are playful (451). This in between spatiality exists either at every margin, or at interfaces between the centre and margin. It is this ambiguity and indeterminacy that create its interesting “playful” possibilities. Spatiality at the margins reflects dislocation, displacement, and fragmentation. On the other hand, spatiality at interfaces between centre and margin offers more hopeful possibilities. For this reason, I will focus on the latter as a practice of the aboriginal contemporary artist. In my own analysis, I combine two terms as one metaphor: “zone,” which recognizes an area (in the abstract sense), and “border” which demarcates spaces, such as the slash in centre/margin or inner/outer. For my purposes, the border zone as a spatiality offers many possibilities. By using these metaphors, I hope to illustrate various ways that aboriginal contemporary artists negotiate identity.

Location and Sites
Social sites are those locations where subjects can find relatively free expression, safe from control, surveillance and repression. These social
sites need not be sequestered locations. They can, however, be secure sites in terms of linguistic codes, dialects and gestures that are untranslatable to the “other.” These social sites can be privileged places for the transmission of popular culture—embodied in games, songs, and disorder. I think of artist-run centres or Indian reserves as examples. In fact, everyone creates social sites and his or her own patterns of discourse. In the context of a dominant/subordinate position, struggle is for control of the sites—Bourdieu’s “field of struggle.” For the subordinate, the struggle is not just to occupy a space deserted by the dominant, but also to coopt and defend it.

The struggling subjects are likely to be socially marginal, working in relatively unmonitored spaces to create and disseminate new discursive practices. In Bakhtin, for example, these spaces were important for developing themes for the carnivalesque. The subjects’ critical distance from dominant values arises from their skills and their marginality. They are both cultural brokers and the social links between communities—thus, socially anchored and more autonomous.

Historically, secular and religious authorities saw that such sites threatened their power, and therefore abolished or controlled them. In the United States, slave owners routinely employed strategies to overcome clandestine discourses; in Canada, Indian agents were deployed across the country on reserves to maintain surveillance. The idea was to make subordinates entirely dependent upon the supervising authority, using isolation and surveillance. The greater the enslavement, the more adaptive and creative the subordinates became. Sun Dances and Potlatches, for example, continued to be practised long after they were outlawed, and aboriginal languages thrived despite isolation. Only in boarding schools did the idea of eliminating social spaces and social ties, where unauthorized discourses might be created, prove more successful.

In the field of art, aboriginal contemporary artists take their cue from the mainstream, though not from the modernist site of centrality. Rather, they draw on a pluralist notion of site that now declares “practice can happen anywhere.” The place of activity is no longer fixed, or site-specific; instead, artists are now experimenting with new sites, be it in museums (see Chapter 5), outdoors (see Chapter 6), or in aboriginal communities (see Chapter 7). Locating sites for aboriginal contemporary artists is very much their practice. They have seen how the traditional notion of site has been disrupted; they have taken their marginality outside the mainstream and are now finding new centres. The social site of the border zone is not a site that suffers from overcrowding, there is
room for everyone. It is an alternative site for the marginalized; it is a liminal space on your way, or coming back, to somewhere. In this zone artists may find others sharing a social location that empowers them, or gives them a place to stand.

Liminality and Communitas
To further demonstrate in between-ness as a location, let me invoke Victor Turner's concept of “liminal phase or liminality” and conjoin it with the idea of border zone. I contend that within the border zone, various social spaces intersect where emergent social agents/subjects experience, interrogate, and negotiate their conditions of existence. This liminal phase (from the Latin, limen, signifying “threshold”) is indispensable for any “rites of passage,” as Van Gennep (in Turner) concluded long ago from his study of initiation rites in certain non-Western societies. Liminality is the threshold between two states, hence a state of ambiguity, a state of suspension in which the initiate loses rights and obligations. The initiate is “betwixt and between,” in an ambiguous and indeterminate phase, where the experience is one of separation or detachment from the social structure, the cultural conditions, or both. This detachment can result in the search for camaraderie to help the initiate cope with the new station in life. During this phase, rank and status are no longer important. Turner calls this friendship making/seeking “communitas”: “society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated ‘communitatas,’ community, or even communion of equal individuals” (96).

Turner points to the fact that initiates in the liminal phase are reduced in status, and he compares this liminality to death, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, wilderness, the eclipse of the sun and the moon. The test of initiation by impoverishment is to enable one to cope with new realities. It is at this point that emotional bonding and friendships are made through the sharing of experience. Hence, when returning to society, the initiate is a changed person who successfully experienced the transformation. For Turner, the communitas is an unstructured community of equal individuals who submit to general authority. In “closed” or “structured” societies, it is marginal or inferior individuals, or the outsiders, who symbolize the communitas (111). Communitas is always contemporary whereas structure is past and future. It is spontaneous and immediate as opposed to the governed, institutionalized, abstract nature of social structure. Turner suggests that the products of the communitas are art and religion, rather than legal and political structures.
“Communitas transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency” (128).

Being in between is a phenomenon aboriginal people in the post-reservation period have come to experience. The liminal experience, aside from its connotations of the tribal quotidian Turner addresses, is a profound signifier that originated when aboriginal people from reserves and communities across Canada began emigrating to urban centres after World War II. The “Urban Dancing Grounds” is what Jeffrey Thomas calls it; it is a contingent space where aboriginal people have difficulty establishing identity. We recall Poitras’s *Offensive/Defensive* in which urban and reserve spaces are seen as contingent. It is in the urban, where liminal activities like Powwows, conferences, museum performances, gallery exhibitions, and other gatherings are held, that the urban subject finds communitas. For the aboriginal contemporary artist, liminal spaces whether on or off the reserve, offer creative opportunities. On the reserve, for example, artists are now re-examining the potential for bringing back ideas fostered in urban environments, and vice versa.

**The Border**

Emily Hicks analyzes “border writers,” who for my purposes are analogous to the artists of the border zone. She argues that cultural borders are between cities, genders, and economies, where the dominant cultures are seen in terms of “inter-active” relations, rather than as cultural models. At the border, there is a displacement of time and space. Hicks asserts that border writers have a particular “attitude” towards more than one culture. These subjects are bicultural and they emphasize the difference in reference codes between two and more cultures; they are smugglers, coyotes, and tricksters. For them, the borders are cultural, not physical. Border writers hold up a “reflecting mirror” to the dominant society, implying that they can and will be subversive, particularly by disrupting the one-way flow of mass media that attempt to control images of society. In Bakhtinian terms, the border zone is a zone for “heteroglossia” (a multiplicity of languages within a single language). It is a de-territorialized and political zone. The appeal of the border zone, the space between cultures, is the access artists have to many languages (discourses) from different communities. Renato Rosaldo says that “our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones” (208). He describes these as “social borders” that are often marked around such lines as sexual orientation,
gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, food, or taste. Along with “our” supposedly transparent cultural selves, such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transition zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation (208). The border zone is a place for new cultural practices that involve improvisation and the recombination of disparate cultural elements, creating a diverse cultural repertoire.

The border zone is indeterminate, as is the liminal zone where everyone is status-less. The border zone is free for interpretation. Nevertheless, it is possible to enter into an established (determinate) territory, but only if the rules and regulations are obeyed and “illegal” conduct is restrained. Thus someone like American artist, Jimmie Durham, with his self-imposed exile outside the United States, is able to plan and play out his tactical maneuvers from within his own border zone. He is also aware that when entering certain spaces, local tensions are inevitable. Since the mid-1990s Durham has deliberately exiled himself, first in Mexico, and more recently in Europe. His fondness for ruses is what landed him in hot water initially, especially in terms of the Indian Arts and Crafts Law 1990, PL. 101-644. This law made it mandatory that anyone wishing to sell his/her works, and advertising as an “Indian artist” must be registered with a “federally recognized tribe.” Durham never was registered. He offers instead, his own self-definition:

I hereby swear to the truth of the following statement: I am a full-blood contemporary artist, of the sub-group (or clan) called sculptors. I am not an American Indian, nor have I ever seen or sworn loyalty 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 a mixed-blood: that is, I claim to be a male but in fact only one of my parents was male (quoted in Churchill, 1991).

Since the law was enacted, some artists and others who did claim and advertise themselves as “Indians,” have voluntarily withdrawn, or were pressured to disengage. This is an obvious and extreme example. Elsewhere, quieter maneuvers are routinely enacted. Durham is a maverick, and there are others. I consider the border zone as a space for shared experience not just for exile, though this is the ambiguous nature of this spatiality. Indeed, this is what Keith and Pile argue that spatiality “expresses people’s experiences of displacement [and] dislocation” (225).
New tribes
As a communitas in the social space of the border zone, the new spatiality of aboriginal contemporary artists can be viewed as an arena for tactical creative acts. These artists now form a new tribal ethic in place of what was once called (often derogatorily) “pan-Indianism.” Syncretic/hybrid possibilities have been dismissed as being tradition-less, although so-called pan-Indianism did involve hybridity. As noted above, aboriginal contemporary artists hybridize new cultural practices through the improvisation and the recombination of disparate cultural elements. The result is a diverse cultural repertoire. These artists often live, create, and appropriate between two and more spaces, responding, for example, to home markets for ceremonial productions (on the reserve), while competing within the larger commercial art market. This is a tactical position, allowing artists to live and create new styles. As well, this position allows them to challenge deeply rooted artistic practices that are value-laden, including oppositions like art/culture, elite/popular, traditional/modern, and political/aesthetic, an intellectual process known as “deconstruction.” The idea here is that in binary opposites (concepts of reality), one is privileged at the expense of the other; thus, deconstruction is a tactic of decentring. Hence these artists become aware of their position as marginal and attempt in turn to subvert the other. But stopping short of total subversion creates “free play,” preventing fixity, institutionalization, and hierarchization.

In this way, the border zone becomes a creative arena, a heteroglossic site of languages and styles as artists maneuver to control and determine meanings. Their works are self-referential and deploy self-parodying devices that poke fun at the clichés, stereotypes and conventions of aboriginal representations. Michel de Certeau might say that aboriginal contemporary artists are simply “making do” and “making over” the styles at hand. To be sure, these artists have assimilated the lessons of modernism; in fact, their art is sometimes attacked for being too obscure. Artists in the border zone also engage in theoretical works (writings, lectures, books) that highlight social contradictions and injustices in order to advance the interests and viewpoints of the exploited.

The artistic is the articulation, the artifice, of everyday life. As de Certeau notes, the individual, “[is] increasingly, constrained, yet less and less concerned with [...] vast frameworks, the individual detaches himself from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them” (xxiv). These artists’ operations he calls an “aesthetic of tricks” (26). Columpa Bobb, a
The New Tribe

A fourteen-year-old aboriginal poet, amusingly describes the Native experience of survival as creative. She says:

One might say that it is to have the “Injun-uity” that the Natives have had since the early days of this proud country, enabling them to sustain themselves with their simple, but thrifty usage of such nifty trinkets as bows and arrows, woven baskets, and soft furry blankets. Or that it is myths and fairy tales that have kept a people carefree and happy even to this day (45).

This “Injun-uity” is an aesthetics of tricks. Contemporary Native literature often invokes a character that personifies artifice, a figure that is recycled from traditional narratives: s/he/it is Trickster. Michael Hurley describes Trickster as an ambiguous figure, who is constantly wandering, always hungry, indifferent to the normal conceptions of good or evil. He is either playing tricks on people or is being tricked. He is the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries. Trickster is Dionysian. Today’s tricksters are artist-tricksters; some are political and others activist. Lucy Lippard sees the political/activist artist as subversive rather than authoritarian. “‘Political’ artists,” she says, “tend to be socially concerned and ‘activist’ artists tend to be socially involved—not a value judgment so much as a personal choice. The former’s work is a commentary or analysis, while the latter’s art works within its context, with its audience” (1984:349). In recent years, I have worked with these two types of artists, in exhibitions and catalogues titled Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives, and more recently Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art. I have foregrounded those aboriginal contemporary artists who are more consciously aware of cultural pluralism, identity, and the practices of the border zone. I have concentrated on those artists who revel in these spaces, as opposed to those who simply work unconsciously within one of the many existing options. Artists who practise in the border zone understand what plurality implies and see that all tendencies are of equal merit and that all are valid. Those artists who simply work unconsciously, on the other hand, pass in and out of the border zone. They are not comfortable. They require the safety of a known territory (tradition, conservatism). They are its social subjects. Nonetheless, they are nurturers and catalysts within the community. They resist outside intervention, and often they are less critical than those in the border zone. Their sense of the community is in helping others to improve the cultural environment by raising levels of consciousness. In the mid-1970s, the late Native American artist T. C. Cannon
(Kiowa) asserted: “Art is big, and there’s room for everybody. I used to argue the old arguments about the traditional painters and the modern painters [...But now I think] there’s room for every kind of painter” (quoted in Hoffmann 1986:281).

The maneuvers in the social site of the border zone typify the practices of the new tribe. Although many of the artists whose works I chose to examine may consider the designation “new tribe” to be deceiving, my argument concerns their practices and spatial strategies since the post-war period. Their artifice is not unlike others who claim to be involved in post-colonial critiques.

In this next section, the photographic works of Jeffrey Thomas address the indeterminate spaces of the city where he feels that aboriginal identity is known only in its anachronistic state as statues, which he says, “lurks in the shadows.”

Jeffrey Thomas
Self-taught photographer and freelance curator, Jeffrey M. Thomas (Onondaga/Cayuga Iroquois) was born in 1956 on the Six Nations Reserve, raised in Buffalo, New York, and now lives in Ottawa, Ontario. In 1996, I worked with him on an exhibition called *Portraits from the Dancing Grounds* in which he presented three perspectives: first, he wanted to probe the work of Edward S. Curtis by juxtaposing his own; second, he revealed a series of behind-the-scene photographs taken at a Powwow; and third, he examined the phenomenon of the urban Indian. I will expand on the last two ideas.

For Thomas, his series *Exploring Metropolis* is a spatial metaphor for changing cultural identities, of living, playing, and creating in urban social sites. Urban spaces are for him lived “spaces of representation” where social sites come alive, especially in areas inhabited by the new urban Indian. In the three-layered triptych, *Dream Escape—Bear Thomas* (1995, fig. 8), for example, Thomas shows a graffiti wall, a boy riding a bus, and a store-front sign. The graffiti signifies a Thunderbird, the boy is the artist’s son Bear, and the sign reads “Dream Emporium.” In the first image, the Thunderbird represents a sign of resistance. Many aboriginal cultures say this universal, supernatural, and spectacular creature called the Thunderbird causes thunder when it ruffles its feathers, and lightning when it blinks its eyes. In some Plains cultures, Thunderbird is said to be the patron of warriors, who in turn use its image as a power source. In historic times, aboriginal people needed to make sense of the
fig. 8 Jeffrey Thomas, *Dream Escape – Bear Thomas*, 1995.
supernatural world around them and thus conceptualized natural and supernatural phenomena. It is unusual to see highly sacred images in such profane spaces. The Thunderbird image floats on the side of a building, overlaying some less than clear writing. In this urban context, contemporary Indians feel they need Thunderbird as an identifier to help make sense of who they are in their complex environments. Thus Thunderbird exists in counter space, a space of resistance, against the dominating order. This space provides the potential for young urban Indians to transform city spaces into their own. In the second image, Bear Thomas sits in a bus looking out towards the streets; his stare is indifferent as if he is imagining being elsewhere. His expression sums up a fairly apathetic view of city life: “I’m bored.” Could it be that he is dreaming? Thomas wants us to believe that Bear is entranced, perhaps thinking about flying. There are too many possibilities. In the final image, Thomas shifts the focus upwards towards the sky, as if awaiting a sign of Thunderbird; for now, however, we see a factory chimney that brings us back to reality, back to the dream emporium. Is it about selling dreams? What is a good dream for an urban Indian? Is it a spiritual one, as Thomas’s ancestors would have affirmed, or is it more materially based? This is one contradiction of being aboriginal in an urban space: there is no place to practise spirituality, you can only dream about it. Urbanity is much too artificial; modernity cancels out that relation. Art offers us the only option, which is why Thunderbird is trapped on the wall; the boy ponders his reality; the city offers dreams.

The next image is Dancers, Niagara Falls, New York (1985, fig. 9), showing three adult male dancers in full traditional costume. A small boy trails them. Thomas places them somewhere in an urban dancing ground. Or are they lost? Their smiles indicate they aren’t. Indians in the city, unlike urban Indians, present a photographic theme now a century old. For Thomas, however, there are other reasons for extending the theme of Indians performing in urban spaces. He is interested in such contradictions to their historic identity. In this photograph, the contradictions play themselves out. In the first instance, numerous signs point to modernity: the lamp posts, cars, fence railings, manicured lawns, perfect trees, and concrete sidewalks. In the second instance, the four dancers carry signs of their historic, traditional, tribal identities: animal skins, bird feathers, porcupine hair head roaches, face paint, long hair, and soft-soled moccasins. The numbers they wear are subtle signs of modernity. The signifiers clash: the Indians are removed from nature by the fence and sidewalk, they must obey these signs of modernity which say
that certain spaces are taboo and cannot be transgressed. These are impossible spaces that cannot be crossed. The relations of power are clearly marked: You are guest.

Though the dancers are powerless in urban space, they are part of a more powerful social network: the Powwow. Thomas has had many occasions to photograph what he calls the "dancing grounds." The Powwow, as metaphor, is a new and powerful cultural, social, and political force that is reaching beyond borders, sometimes not respecting them. It is a spatial practice in that it has now entered places where it was previously unknown. It is a highly influential spectacle, especially as a social site to feel pride in being Indian. For more than thirty years, Powwows have routinely taken place on the Prairies and Plains. Now, however, their influence is being felt far beyond the Plains, having reached into many urban centres. During those early days when Indian people moved into cities, the Powwow was the social site for urban Indians of varying tribal identities to congregate as either spectators or participants. The recent dominance of the Powwow as a socio-cultural activity has reached levels where its value is both monetary and political. Politically, it is now a pan-tribal activity and as such now is practised in traditional, non-Powwow areas; in monetary terms, its contests are central to its attraction. The numbers these dancers wear are not merely roster counts, but identities when being judged in competition. Indeed, these men may be professional

fig. 9  Jeffrey Thomas, Dancers, Niagara Falls, New York, 1985.
Where To Practise? The Politics of Position

Dancers following the Powwow circuit all summer long; or, some of them may have professional jobs during the week, and on weekends become “virtual” warriors. The personae, or facades they present, are artistry. This is also an art of in-between-ness: they occupy liminal moments, like the weekend between the weeks, to practise tradition.

It is in this vein of urban sociality that the mix of tribal identities has been both resolute and contradictory: resolute in the shared sense of camaraderie and community, values and circumstance; contradictory in the sense of discomfort and uncertainty about oneself. Thomas examines these issues in Exploring Metropolis. He calls these bleak spaces, that capture so well the essence of confusion and complexity of urban life, the “urban dancing grounds.”

My urban series reflects a city topography that does not reflect or enforce a positive aboriginal sense of self. In fact, it undermines a cultural sense of self on a subconscious level. Since we do, as of yet, use photographic dialogue in dealing with urban isolation, I present these public spaces, architectural structures, and monuments as factors in the marginalization of a cultural and Iroquoian self.16

In these works, Thomas draws out old definitions of the Indian by examining monuments to Indians as synecdoche, a part signifying the whole. For example, in Nepean Point Indian Guide: Champlain Monument (1993, fig. 10), we see the West’s alter-Indian, the Indian of Western imagination. Here, Thomas frames them in their classically posed, totally out-of-place urban environments. But are they really out of place? Their unbelievability somehow gives them an “Indians-R-Us” kind of credibility. Thomas plays with their presence/absence: they are everywhere/nowhere, they exist/do not exist, they are real/not real. These lurking Indians, he suggests, can be seen in the most unusual places, frequently just behind a more dominant element. Their placement as decorative art belies what Thomas sees the Powwow as accomplishing; that is, a participation in and contribution to society, making and being part of a strong social fabric. Instead, Indians continue lurking in the shadows. That Indians are represented by bronze statues of unknown figures is but another example of the Indian being out of place and invisible in urban spaces. The problem is that the bronze Indians are not real and never were; instead, they were the Indians of romance, the Indian everyone wished would exist. But being and becoming are too far apart. Exploring Metropolis is an attempt to efface the romance. Thomas exposes a reality of the urban dancing grounds, where real Indians do lurk in the shadows, where nobody really wants to know their
names because they would not correspond to the stereotypes. Contemporary Indians are so very much part of the urban environment that it is difficult, and even downright ridiculous, to pigeon-hole them. Today's Indians can exist unobserved, until, of course, they participate in the dancing grounds of the Powwow.

In spite of the negative aspects of urban living, Indians are making new, more positive cultural spaces. They are contributors to the social fabric; in some Canadian cities the aboriginal population is steadily increasing giving them significant impact. Estimates of urban Indian populations compared to reserves at about fifty percent. Furthermore, city living can be difficult. Aboriginal people value humour against uncertainties. An example of the discursive humor of today's Indian is invoked in the somewhat ironic poses of *Founder of the New World, Winnipeg, Manitoba* (1989, fig. 11) and *Bear Thomas, "General Store"* (1994, fig. 12). As in figure 11, Thomas uses his son as subject, object, and alter ego: as subject because of Bear's lived reality, as object because Bear is positioned in contexts created by the artist, and alter ego as the other of Thomas himself. How are we to read the first photograph? Did the boy know who Christopher Columbus was, and the significance and implications of the T-shirt? Wearing this T-shirt, after all, has become a modern way of scalping (read: critique); it is a victory trophy of survival against a man who represents everything destructive in colonization. The boy questions the statement, "Founder of the New World." Yeah, right!
fig. 11 Jeffrey Thomas, *Founder of the New World*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1989.

Indians, as he called them, will continue to haunt Columbus and his legacy; this young Indian boy is only the beginning. Bear stands in some industrial zone of the city, somewhere on the wrong side of the tracks. Behind him sits a cargo van. With his rather defiant look, we're not sure if he's just done something or not. It is an unusual place for a photograph.

In figure 12, the bravado is once more evident. This time the boy is a young man, who appears as an Indian rapper. His smile has an ironic twist to it; whereas in the previous photograph, the boy directly confronts the viewer. Behind him is an image that is at once ugly and menacing. The painter managed to pull together all the stereotypes; against this background, Bear grins. The signs of urbanity collide with old-fashioned
stereotypes. Another theme of urbanity, aside from Indians in the city, is Indians juxtaposing themselves with their constructed otherness alter. Aboriginal people, seen as the other shaped by European discursive practices of the self, now use juxtaposition to play with this alterity. The invention of the Indian essentially constructed a discourse of otherness within which the West could articulate its relationship. The Indian came to be seen rather quickly as degenerate, therefore "savage." The relationship was signified by domination and hierarchy. The Indian/savage, discursively marginalized as lacking what it took to be civilized, thus
never would or could achieve resemblance (sameness) in anything the
European did, unless of course the Indian changed (that is, assimilated).
The Indian of European imagination was and continues to be, in effect,
alter, a fiction, an artifice. This constructed Indian is alter to both European
and aboriginal people alike, which is the explanation why these curious
juxtapositions are done and why they work. The critique of this inven-
tion now forms a part of contemporary aboriginal discourse.

Jeffrey Thomas’s portraits are not only images of Indians every-
where; they depict Indians he knows personally. In Tail-gate Portrait at
Smoothtown (1991, fig. 13), it is the family he grew up with, the legacy
of who he is, and what his children will always be distinctly Indian/Iroquois. Thomas shows us the modern Indian: not the Indian of Western

fig. 13 Jeffrey Thomas, *Tail-gate Portrait at Smoothtown*, 1991
imagination, nor the ironic Indian, but the Indian of everyday life. Here are people whose identity is not worn on the lapel, but exists in their consciousness and heart. Sitting on the back of a pickup, giving little or no indication of their tribal identities, they are like everyone else. But what Jeffrey Thomas sees is a group of people he knows and loves, Indians who are unafraid to smile and joke, unlike the many who posed for Edward S. Curtis and his contemporaries. Here there is a shared intimacy, a pride in family and in oneself; here there is little to fear. *Exploring Metropolis* thus is a personal exploration of examining the spatial identities of the urban dancing grounds. Photographs like this fill vast numbers of family albums that are taken by everyday people in aboriginal communities. There is nothing unusual that you would not find in anyone else’s album. Bear Thomas sits with his relatives and laughs with them; he is not playing with our minds, nor is the artist behind the camera.

Thomas makes us examine our stereotypes of the Indian by forcing us to look at the contradictions posed by seeing aboriginal people in urban environments. Somehow, this image does not fit our expectations, even though urban spaces allow many to escape the pressures of small rural communities, it is more difficult for those seeking an aboriginal communitas. The artist’s posing of his son in numerous spaces suggests a new urban warrior who must struggle to create space; yet, the contradictions implied are the most ambiguous and ultimately the degree by which the aboriginal contemporary artist is most creative.

**Conclusion**

Where to practise? More so today than in the past, the aboriginal contemporary artist has had to commit to a practice within a space that is highly competitive, critical, and indifferent. So what is the attraction to the art world? Driven by a passionate awareness of a big and exciting world, many aboriginal people began to see the advantages of articulating cultural identity, while overcoming frameworks and stereotypes imposed upon them. In doing so, they also developed a sense of their relative position within and outside the aboriginal cultural community. Many artists began combining contemporary media with traditional aboriginal iconography—for example, the so-called “Woodlands School of Legend Painters.” Artists along British Columbia’s west coast revived carving techniques in cedar with tribal clan designs, while many others combined social, historical, and political messages with new media to expose the inequities and conditions of aboriginal people in the modern world. The
first two groups attracted a popular audience along with a circle of scholars interested in their works more as ethnography than aesthetics. These artists tended to be located closer to, and often within, aboriginal communities. The last group is somewhat looser, heterogeneous, and often art-school trained; consequently, they are positioned outside aboriginal communities. This is the group that constitutes the new tribe.

This new tribe is a community of individuals driven by a common passion of engagement around and in between multiple spatialities—rural/urban, traditional/contemporary, centre/periphery, museum/gallery, aboriginal/non-aboriginal, art/craft. In finding a location to practise, aboriginal contemporary artists first tried to come to terms with the idea of “two worlds”—Indian and non-Indian. The late Woods Cree artist, Jackson Beardy, once pictured himself split down the middle: one half showed him wearing a traditional Powwow costume as a reminder of his roots; while in the other half, he saw himself competing in the non-Indian world, and to do so, he had to wear a suit. With the influence of the post-modern and post-colonial theory, we now come to realize that we in fact inhabit multiple positions and locations; that we are in constant flux, where we frequently cross, experience, and negotiate competing spaces. Artists of the new tribe, however, play in new social sites and create new patterns of discourse. They occupy the spaces in between. Their in-between-ness, both by choice and circumstance, requires a particular attitude, which I argue is stimulated by the tribal trickster, Coyote, the enemy of boundaries. Thus, the work of many aboriginal contemporary artists centres on this awareness of multiple spatialities.

Notes
1 Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital is based on the idea of symbolic power, a form of capital that is not based on economic capital. Symbolic capital could refer to a “cultural knowledge” which, for example, Native artists can bring to the field of art.

2 Bourdieu indicates that the site of struggle most often occurs between two principles of hierarchization: “the field of cultural production and the field of power. The field of cultural production is based on the principle of autonomy (e.g. ‘art for art’s sake’), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise [...]. The field of power, on the other hand, is based on the principle of heteronomy: favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. ‘bourgeois art’)” (40).

3 Post-colonial writers such as Gayatri Spivak (1994) point out that minority or subaltern groups have had little means to control their representation, and consequently are viewed as always subordinate. She argues, however, that it is the intellectual who must represent the oppressed: “Representation has not withered away. The female
intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (104). Similarly in my example, SCANA took upon itself to represent aboriginal contemporary artists to major national institutions to make their case known. In some cases, they became advisors to such exhibitions as Indigena and Land Spirit Power.

4 See Chapter 4 for further analysis.

5 During the initial planning stages, such tremendous pressure was placed on me to complete the catalogue text that there was no opportunity to speak about any of Poitras’s pieces. Instead, I wrote a catalogue that contained two contextual essays, the first framed two theoretical issues—identity and alterity—while the second addressed specific pieces Poitras created over a period of ten years. See Gerald McMaster Edward Poitras: Canada XLVI Biennale di Venezia, 1995.

6 Fonseca, a Maidu Indian from California, was likely inspired a few years before with a work called The Maidu Creation Story. See Margaret Archuleta, Coyote: A Myth in the Making (1986).

7 The “Powwow” is not the stereotyped dictionary version of two or more people gathering. Its more recent usage refers to the now highly popular weekend celebrations that take place during the summer, on weekends, all across North America. Tens of thousands of aboriginal people now make this weekend movement part of their everyday lives, not just to see dancing and singing competitions, but to see and meet people. So popular is the Powwow, I see it now in terms of a culture of its own.

8 I am reminded that this practice is very much a part of our everyday lives, in particular when women marry and change or append their last names to that of their husbands.


10 Edward Poitras once told me that as a youngster growing up on the Gordon Reserve he was “seen as Métis; but, then when I was in the city I was being called an Indian. I was getting it from both sides.” Personal interview, 1993.

11 See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies (New York: Routledge, 1998), 118-121, for some of the criticisms of this concept.

12 Ken Hirschkop argues: “When previously separated and independent social groups are thrown together by the sudden onset of capitalism and its urbanising effects, the result is that coexistence of distinct languages which seems to define heteroglossia” (18).


14 Hazel W. Hertzberg says this term was seldom used by “Pan-Indians, except by a few anthropologists and other intellectuals […] as a term] applied to secular as well as religious Pan-Indian manifestations and to […] contemporary movements “(291).

15 The concept of “representational spaces” are defined by Henri Lefebvre in The Production of Space (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 39. Edward Soja uses the term “spaces of representation” (67). In both cases, the writers define these spaces as “lived,” as opposed to perceived or conceived spaces.