

**What Native Looks Like Now:  
Embodiment in Contemporary Indigenous Art, 1992–Present**

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Marina Tyquiengco, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2021

What does it mean to look Native and what do the stereotypes of Indigenous appearance have to do with actually being Indigenous in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This dissertation examines embodiment as a concept and an artistic strategy utilized by four contemporary Indigenous artists—Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord—who explore these questions in their artistic practices. Badtjala artist Fiona Foley (Australian, b. 1964) emphasizes Aboriginal womanhood in her multimedia practice, drawing from research and her Badtjala heritage. Christian Thompson (Australian, b. 1978) uses himself as a medium to enact Aboriginality as an evolving concept, exploring his Bidjara, Welsh, and Jewish background within the space of museums. Similarly, Fisher River Cree Nation artist Kent Monkman (Canadian, b. 1965) takes up his invented character Miss Chief to correct wrongs of colonialism, emphasizing intersectionality as a Two-Spirit, mixed Cree artist. The artist Erica Lord (American, b. 1978) uses her practice to demonstrate how, as a Tanana Athabascan and multiethnic woman, her appearance shifts while her connection to her family and community does not. This study considers how the histories of these artists' communities, which became Indigenous through the forces of settler colonization, is reflected in these artists' lived experience, and is reflected upon in their practices. Collectively, their art demonstrates the ways in which embodiment can articulate Indigeneity, not as an essential identity but as a plethora of possibilities. Drawing from art history, and Native and

Indigenous studies, this dissertation theorizes Indigeneity as an expansive and relational identity, irreducible to existing stereotypes.

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## Preface

This project would not have been possible without many individuals and support from many areas at the University of Pittsburgh. When I graduated from the University of Virginia, I told one of my mentors, George Sampson, that my next move was to attend the University of Pittsburgh to study with Terry Smith. Due to personal family tragedy, the loss of my beloved cousin Zachary Austin Brunt, this move happened some years later than planned, yet it happened nonetheless. Although it was only four hours away from Alexandria, Virginia, where I had spent over half my life, I had no sense of Pittsburgh, no idea of the truly fantastic place that it is, particularly for the kind of scholarship I wanted to take part in.

Upon admission, I received a K. Leroy Irvis Fellowship which provided me with support for the full first year of my program, as well as additional funds for books, and connected me with the wonderful Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Office at the Dietrich School of the Arts and Sciences. I was subsequently supported by Summer Research Opportunities for Students from Underrepresented Populations, which helped to support my first two trips to Australia as well as my participation in the first Pittsburgh Consortium Mellon Summer Seminar through the University of Pittsburgh's History of Art and Architecture Department. The History of Art and Architecture Department has been a great source of support not only financially through academic-year funding for opportunities to attend and present at conferences and visit exhibitions, but also through generous summer funding that allowed me to carry out extensive object research and artist interviews. Beyond the financial support, the staff at the Frick Fine Arts Building, Linda Hicks, Veronica Gazdik, Corrin Trombley, and her successor Karoline Swiontek have been endlessly

helpful in so many ways, administratively and beyond. I am also grateful to Barbara McCloskey who steered the ship of HAA as Chair of the department for much of my time in the department.

I am endlessly grateful for the mentorship and guidance of Terry Smith, who has served as my primary advisor. Terry agreed to work with me before we had met, when the idea of a comparative Indigenous art project was just that, an idea of mine. He has worked with me tirelessly over the past seven years to refine my thinking, focus my broad ideas, and sharpen my writing. I am very grateful as well to his wonderful partner Tina who, with Terry, opened their home to me and provided me a warm welcoming place in my visit to Sydney. In my subsequent trips to Australia, Tina and Terry have always taken time to make me feel immensely welcomed and provide words in support of my project. I could not imagine a better advisor than Terry, who has pushed me in my thinking and writing while also supporting my professional development, including encouraging me to teach at Brown University and to take my current position at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He also provided me with a wonderful example as a professor of undergraduates as I served as a teaching assistant for his Introduction to Modern Art class.

My committee member Jennifer Josten has also greatly contributed to my intellectual development and the expansion of my teaching skills. Jennifer has always asked me difficult questions about my research, most importantly, “Where are the women?” after I completed my Master’s thesis on only male artists. My dissertation project is focused heavily on women artists, in no small part due to her excellent question. Jennifer modeled for me how to lead a seminar in a way that allowed for intellectual curiosity and deep analysis, which I have attempted to replicate in my teaching ever since. She has pushed my thinking and pursuit of opportunities with a decidedly human approach, reminding me, and I am sure many other students, that in addition to hours of work, we needed to make time to buy groceries. I am so grateful to her.

My other two dissertation readers, Jessica Horton from the University of Delaware and Josh Ellenbogen from the University of Pittsburgh, have rounded out my truly phenomenal committee. Josh was my second reader on my Master's thesis and provided some of the most pointed and useful writing feedback that I have ever received. He has also consistently reminded me to think about the bodies of scholarship around the terms or ideas that I employ. I am grateful for his sharp mind and pointed questions. Jessica Horton's scholarship is the most directly related to my own work and her writing on Native American modern and contemporary art inspires and provides models for my own scholarship. She has taken great care to give thoughtful feedback on many chapters, which have significantly improved as a result of her questions and commentary. In her own work and her responses to mine, she reminds me to deeply consider the historical sources upon which these materials often build that there are many things that can be known and should be communicated in writing about Native American art.

Before coming to Pittsburgh, I benefited from great mentors at the University of Virginia. Professor Howard Singerman, now at Hunter College, taught the first class on Modern Art that I ever took and introduced me to Terry Smith's scholarship on contemporary art. He also graciously agreed to oversee my senior thesis and encouraged me to pursue comparative research on Native American and Aboriginal Australian photography before I even knew there was a field such as contemporary Indigenous art. Kluge-Ruhe Director and Professor Margo Smith also taught perhaps the most impactful course on me: Aboriginal Australian Art. Margo encouraged me further when I was a summer curatorial intern at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia. She has stayed in touch over the years and generously connected me with many brilliant artists and scholars in Australia. Leading up to my summer internship at the Kluge-Ruhe, I interned with Dr. Andrea Douglas, Executive Director of the Jefferson School African

American Heritage Center. Andrea made a successful arts nonprofit from her own tenacity, the site's storied history, and community support that she garnered. She was so inspirational, especially in the years before starting my PhD program, when the arts work that I endeavored was done out of love for the field on a shoestring budget. Stephen Gilchrist, now a lecturer at the University of Sydney, met with me during my senior year at University of Virginia and pointed me in the direction of many great thinkers in the field as well as his own work. I have benefited from our many conversations over the years when I was in Australia to sharpen my own thinking and learn from him.

Besides Stephen, many wonderful thoughtful scholars have taken time to meet with me to help advance my thinking for this project. In Australia, I would like to thank Tess Allas, Ian McLean, Judith Ryan, Andrew Baker, Bronwyn Bancroft, Tina Baum, Brenda Croft, Shaune Lakin, Leah King-Smith, Michael Aird, Cara Pinchbeck, and Judy Watson. Ian was gracious enough to answer questions about a volume that he edited for my first publication and has been very generous with his time when our paths crossed. Tess is a wonderful teacher and beloved member of the Sydney arts community. She has shared her insights and welcomed me into her home for many wonderful dinners. Judith has taken me around wonderful installations at the NGV Australia and voiced astute suggestions for my project. In Alaska, I am grateful for the time and thoughtfulness of Angela Demma, Mareca Gutherie, Angela Linn, Da-ka-xeen Mehner, Sharity Sommer, and Maya Selganek. Maya and Da-ka-xeen were incredibly generous with their time during a research trip to Fairbanks. I am also grateful to Bibiana Obler at George Washington University, who provided support and thoughtful critique of my work on Fiona Foley.

Many friends have supported me through my PhD process. Henry Skeritt and Annika Johnson were my compatriots in studying Indigenous art in Pitt's HAA department and I greatly

benefitted from their thoughtful scholarship, advice, and comradery. My first friend in my department, Krystle Stricklin, has so thoroughly inspired me and championed each step of the process for me. She is so supportive and brilliant in helping me carefully choose my words when writing. She also taught me the important lesson that no food is really free. My most-distant friend Dominique Glatt is the person I text the most, not least to commiserate over our shared pursuits of PhDs in very different fields. Dominique is a consistent ear who has reminded me that people far from you can stay close to your heart. Sophia LaBarge has sent me many sustaining snacks, and our conversations have provided much needed nourishment. As many women have experienced during the pandemic, I have been part of an all-friends' group chat that has sustained me through this difficult time. So, thank you to my wonderful friends: Ashley Mangan, Karen Neov, and Alexandra Rivas.

My partner, Benjamin Colin Driver, falls between friend and family. He is closest person to me and has been by my side since 2016. He reminds me to relax and take time for myself and his discipline in his studies inspires me to keep moving forward. He has never made me choose between my work and him, even though I have left him for months at a time for research trips every year except 2020. I am grateful to Ben for inspiring me to work and insisting that I take time for myself as well.

My sister Nicole Lia Eldh Tyquiengco has grounded me and challenged me for my entire life. Her hard work to improve the lives of others has given me great perspective about the potential, limitations, and impact of my own work. She has reminded me that I am smart and that I chose this path, reminders for which I am very grateful.

My own identity informs this project and all the work that I do. I owe my existence and my understanding of the world to my parents, Joseph Soriano Tyquiengco and Vickie Louise Eldh

Tyquiengco. For the first ten years of my life, my dad was my biggest cheerleader, instilling in me a sense of self-confidence and self-worth that have made so many things possible. He told me to claim my CHamoru identity proudly, no matter who or what other people thought I was. I have spent most of my life without him, but his memory consistently gives me strength. For my entire life, my mom has been my strongest advocate in all things. She pushed me to pursue my goals and supported me in every way imaginable. She inspires me to be better, to care deeply, to learn, and to teach. I try daily to be a human as good as my parents are. Si Yu'os Ma'åse' Tåtå. Thank you, Mom.

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Indian Looking?

*Untitled (Indian Looking)* is an intimate image made in 2005 by the Tanana Athabascan, artist Erica Lord (Tanana Athabascan and American, Inupiaq, Finish, Japanese heritage, born 1978), who is also the subject of the work (Figure 1.1).<sup>1</sup> In the photograph, a woman with long, dark hair crosses her arms over her breasts with her torso exposed. It is oddly cropped from below her belly button to right below her eyes, but much of her face, close-lipped and unsmiling, is still visible. At center, the words “Indian Looking” are tanned on her arms, from her shoulder to her forearm. The phrase “Indian Looking” presents a statement of identity or alternatively, a question: Is the woman Indian (meaning Native American), or does she simply look Indian?

The photograph is part of a four-part series titled *The Tanning Project* (2005–7), which was executed using the artist’s body, a tanning bed, and vinyl lettering, captured in a photo studio. *The Tanning Project* exemplifies Lord’s performance-based practice, critical exploration of race, and tendency to use her own body. The image that has circulated the most from this series is another photograph, *Untitled (I Tan to Look More Native)*, in which the artist has her back to the camera and turns her face to the side, with the phrase “I Tan to Look More Native” on her back (Figure 5.1). That photograph points directly to the stereotype of Native peoples as naturally brown-skinned. In contrast, *Untitled (Indian Looking)* refers to the ambiguity between appearance

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<sup>1</sup> Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, “Image 5,” <https://www.anchoragemuseum.org/exhibits/extra-tough-women-of-the-north/seeing-the-self/image-5/>.

and identity, a core concern of this study: the degree to which Indigenous identity is judged by looks and the inadequacy of this type of assessment, which is often based on stereotype rather than reality.<sup>2</sup>

The act of looking is central to this dissertation. I contend with the concept that Indigeneity is something that can be *seen*, i.e., understood visually through phenotypic markers. Although there are physical characteristics associated with being a member of a specific Indigenous group, reducing Indigeneity to how closely one looks or appears to relate to a certain group of stereotypical traits is extremely limiting. Indigeneity is a term used to articulate a set of relationships between and among people and the natural world, impacted by forces of colonialism, and collectivized through 20<sup>th</sup> century political action. It is broader than a racial or ethnic category, as globally many peoples are Indigenous. Reducing Indigeneity to a set of visual markers exemplifies what Jeffrey Sissons characterizes as “oppressive authenticity:” to be understood as Indigenous, one must fit a stereotype of the Indigenous that is reliant on presumed authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, basing one’s identity or ethnicity on physical characteristics entirely reinforces eugenics and other forms of racial science. These forms of pseudoscience categorize people based on races which are arranged in a specific hierarchy with Europeans/white people at the top and Africans/Black people at the bottom. Contemporary Indigenous people worldwide did not and do not easily map onto this hierarchy, since so many disparate peoples are recognized as Indigenous. Although these ideas are no longer understood as factually or scientifically accurate, the legacy of

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<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, Indigenous and Indigeneity are both always capitalized to center Indigenous peoples following Native and Indigenous Studies style guidelines such as Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples* (Edmonton: Brush Education, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Sissons, *First Peoples: Indigenous Cultures and their Futures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 39.



the racist logic that was spread across the globe by European countries and European settler-colonial states continues to exist today.

Like the other artists that are part of this project—Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, and Kent Monkman—Lord is a living contemporary Indigenous artist. She is an enrolled member of the Tanana Athabascan tribe with Inupiaq heritage, who engages with Indigenous issues, including history, identity, and relationality, in her U.S. based practice. In this dissertation, the focus is primarily on artists' use of embodiment to articulate Indigeneity, accounting for their use of their bodies in their art to consider a complex range of topics related to Indigeneity and being Indigenous. In bodily practices, projected through photography, film, and performance, contemporary Indigenous artists seek to understand and engage with the layers of historical and present misunderstanding that have accompanied presentations of Indigenous peoples' bodies, from World's Fair attractions to objects of scientific study to icons of alluring exoticism. All of the artists discussed in this study are as much aware of contemporary art practices involving the body deployed by non-Indigenous artists as they are of the role of the body in Indigenous ceremony within their respective communities. I am not Indigenous to any of their communities and thus it would be inappropriate to share community-specific Indigenous knowledge involving these practices. Therefore, while some of these practices are or may be ceremony-adjacent—meaning that they draw from community-specific beliefs and ceremonies—the embodiments discussed here are positioned as art and are examined as such.

The title of this dissertation, "What Native Looks Like Now," draws from a statement made by Lord. She has explained her practice of using her body in art simply as, "This is what Native

looks like now.”<sup>4</sup> By that she meant that she, Erica Lord, is a contemporary Native person, precisely because she does not physically conform to the stereotype of an “Indian” or Native American person. She has further argued that the stereotype of a Native person does not apply to most living Native people.<sup>5</sup> Her artistic practice often employs her own body and face, sometimes situated on a spectrum of racialized identities. Like the other artists examined in this study, Lord emphasizes the body to diminish the tendency to conceptualize Indigeneity as purely bodily. Instead, she and the other artists assert that Indigeneity is relational, resulting from family ties and alignment with global Indigeneity. It is also experiential, both through the lived experiences of artists as contemporary people in the world and the inherited experiences of their families. Articulating Indigeneity through embodiment, I argue, is not a singular tactic, but a range of approaches that the artists of this project use to make compelling, nuanced proposals about what it means to be Indigenous in the twenty-first century.

In titling this dissertation, I elided part of Lord’s quote—the first two words, “This is”—to remove the singularity of the statement. Building upon the work of scholars of Indigeneity and many artists, I propose that what looks Native or Indigenous now, or more precisely what it means to be Indigenous now, is in fact to be immersed in a myriad of possibilities. Yet, it is not so broad as to be meaningless. Instead, by critically examining Indigeneity in relation to contemporary art practices, I present a theoretical lens particular to the artists of this project but applicable to many more artists working in similar modes. With an intentional view toward history and art making, numerous Indigenous contemporary artists can articulate Indigeneity through acts of embodiment,

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<sup>4</sup> Mike Dunham, “Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity,” *Alaska Daily News*, August 1, 2009, <https://www.adn.com/our-alaska/article/nenana-artist-grapples-ethnic-identity/2009/08/02/>.

<sup>5</sup> Erica Lord, “America’s Wretched,” in *The Alaska Native Reader*, edited by Maria Shaa Tláa Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 309–17.

employing their bodies in performance, film, or photography, as well as through the making of objects for the body.

Although Lord's words inspired the title, the artist who first pushed my thinking around this topic is Badtjala artist Fiona Foley (Australian, born 1965), who I interviewed at a very early stage of this project. I had been aware of Foley's practice since I first studied Australian Aboriginal art in 2010. The dissertation was conceptualized around Indigeneity and embodiment, considering Indigenous contemporary artists of combined Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage. The fact that the artists on whom I write have both Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage, as I do, was an essential part of the project: particularly the consideration of how this mixed background was integrated into, or reflected by, their practices. Foley challenged me to rethink that framing when I asked her about her background and she replied, "My culture comes from my mother."<sup>6</sup> While I initially understood this statement to be a refusal of her non-Indigenous roots, I have come to understand that it was more complex. As part of a generation of Aboriginal artists who came of age in major Australian cities in the 1980s, Foley's authenticity has long been challenged based on a stereotypical concept of who an Aboriginal person is. While Foley does not deny her father's European heritage, she aligns herself with her mother's Badtjala culture above all else. In contrast, Lord, who began working decades later in a very different context, the United States where Indigenous arts largely lack the popularity and institutional support they have in Australia, conceptualizes herself as Athabascan and her other ethnicities all at once. In her understanding of Indigeneity, Lord is able to identify with her Athabascan heritage without having to deny or diminish the rest of her background. In both cases, each artist's self-identification is not about refusal but alignment, with strong implications for their artistic practices.

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<sup>6</sup> Fiona Foley, interview with the author, Lismore, New South Wales, Australia, June 18, 2017.

Separated by thousands of miles and several decades in terms of their professional practices, Lord and Foley both engage with embodiment to explore Indigenous identities in their works. The distinctions in their identifications and approaches do not diminish the shared conceptualization of articulating Indigeneity through embodiment, because the complexity of Indigeneity and embodiment calls for multiple forms of engagement. I was initially drawn to Foley’s practice because she reimagined ethnographic photography with her body as the subject, in a way that was historical and haunting. Similarly, I was intrigued by Lord’s deeply evocative use of text on her body. One artist claims she is Indigenous, full stop (Foley); the other asserts that being Native can also include her other ethnicities, which does not lessen her Indigeneity (Lord). As artists who begin and conclude this study, they sit quite particularly on the range of embodiment and Indigeneity that this dissertation identifies, as two of four artists who present some of the numerous possibilities for articulating Indigeneity through the body in the contemporary world.

## **1.2 Dissertation Overview**

“What Native Looks Like Now: Embodiment in Contemporary Indigenous Art, 1992–Present” brings an expansive view of Indigeneity and embodiment to the practices of four artists working today in the English-speaking settler-colonial world. The artists on which this dissertation focuses are Fiona Foley (Australian, born 1965), Christian Thompson (Australian, born 1978), Kent Monkman (Canadian, born 1965) and Erica Lord (American, born 1978).<sup>7</sup> Each use the practice of embodiment to articulate their complex senses of Indigeneity in relation to larger

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<sup>7</sup> Here I have identified artists by their nationality to emphasize the transcultural nature of this dissertation. In shorter forms of writing, I would and will always identify artists by their Indigenous affiliations and countries of origin.

colonial histories and their particular backgrounds. Through their bodies, these artists communicate Indigeneity beyond existing stereotypes and binaries, in ways that are aligned with recent scholarship on Indigeneity. They represent two generations of artists and three different countries. They all possess high levels of education as well as traditional Indigenous knowledge in the form of language, beliefs, and cultural practices. A selection of these artists' works is examined to explore the connection between embodiment as a practice and Indigeneity as an identity formulation that opens up the abundant potentialities of fluid identities.

In each chapter, I focus on one artist in order to delve deeply into their embodied works, backgrounds, and histories. I examine the artist working earliest Fiona Foley in Australia first, followed by the Bidjara and Welsh artist Christian Thompson, also based in Australia. This discussion leads into a chapter on the Swampy Cree artist Kent Monkman, who is based in Canada, and concludes with Erica Lord, who works in the United States. The chapters on Fiona Foley and Christian Thompson build upon each other to demonstrate changes that have taken place in Australia in the urban Aboriginal art world during the last thirty years. The chapter on Kent Monkman includes a discussion on queerness and sexuality, issues which are also addressed in relation to Christian Thompson's work. I consider feminist theory and feminism in relation to Indigenous women in the chapters on Fiona Foley and Erica Lord, as both artists create work that highlights Indigenous women's experiences. These chapters demonstrate the ways distinct artists with many similarities in practices but differences in background address complex intersections of identity. Originally conceptualized as articulating Indigeneity through selfhood, the project has evolved to focus instead on embodiment as an artistic practice and as a means to present multiple potential senses of Indigeneity. Though individual artists and their specific works are highlighted here, selfhood is not a sufficient concept to encompass how Indigeneity is explored in these works,

because even though each of these artists use their own bodies as their primary medium, they reveal in several different and striking ways that Indigeneity is always relational, that it finds its core meanings in its relation to specific places, communities, and practices.

The artists explored in this study affirm that being Indigenous and of mixed ethnic heritage amounts to an identity that is as valid as so-called “full blood” Indigenous and as any other racial inheritance. In the cases of Thompson, Monkman, and Lord, their assertions of multiplicity are not equivalent to claiming partialness. Instead, the combinations of peoples and identities in their personal histories and cultural memories lead them to explore more complex questions about identity, gender, sexuality, and indeed, Indigeneity, evoking Jodi A. Byrd’s concept of Indigeneity as a form of transit.<sup>8</sup> Borrowing from Byrd, these artists articulate Indigeneity “as a condition of possibility,”<sup>9</sup> to exist in a network of relationships and relationality, responsibility to community and land.<sup>10</sup> Many scholars and individuals recognized Indigeneity as an active process that individuals including artists of all kinds can enact and embody, often simultaneously.<sup>11</sup> A close consideration of the body, which is how Indigenous identity often is measured outside Indigenous communities, risks an oversimplification of Indigeneity as purely based on appearance or the physical. It is instead relationships, words, and actions that make one Indigenous and distinguish art as both contemporary and Indigenous.

United by shared colonial histories, Indigenous peoples are diverse and distinct groups with common problems in relation to the colonial, non-Indigenous states that rule their location. The

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<sup>8</sup> Jodi A. Byrd, *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix.

<sup>10</sup> Taiaiake Alfred, and Jeff Corntassel. “Politics of Identity—IX: Being Indigenous; Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,” *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 605.

<sup>11</sup> Many scholars have written on Indigeneity as an active process. See *ibid.*, 597–614.

broader global colonial project, as it has been defined by external conquest, made local peoples Indigenous, doing so differently in each place. The Comanche scholar Paul Chaat Smith argues that colonization flattened the many distinct groups of Indigenous peoples on the North American continent into one category: Indians.<sup>12</sup> This logic applies to the artists of this study from Canada and the United States, as well as those from Australia under the category of Aboriginal. Consequently, there is no singular Indigenous aesthetic, nor an essentially Indigenous perspective. Nevertheless, contemporary Indigenous art as a field of study and a category of art exists. Many scholars have delineated this term in connection with specific colonial contexts, artists, and periods. In this study and in my understanding of the field more broadly, contemporary Indigenous art is art that exists in and within time, is created by Indigenous peoples, and is related to Indigenous issues including originary stories and beliefs, traditional styles, and local and national history. The third criterion—subject matter—is the most important for a useful and definitive concept of contemporary Indigenous art. The works discussed in this dissertation are contemporary Indigenous artworks by virtue of when they were produced, their creators' backgrounds, and in their core subject matter, which explores the history of Indigenous people in museums, historic and contemporary violence against women, and precolonial notions of sexuality.

The connection between Foley's, Thompson's, Monkman's, and Lord's practices extends back to the shared English colonies that gave rise to their nations. Australia, Canada, and the United States were places with many names and peoples before they became the modern settler colonial nation states of the present. In regions settled by the English (as well as by the French in Canada and the Spanish and French in regions of the Americas), the colonial model of settling is

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4.

cultivating land: growing and making a place into a version of the colonial center through farming, peopling, and organizing society. This means that each modern nation state, as well as Aotearoa/New Zealand, originated from a common model that remains influential today. Unlike the Spanish colonial model, which considered mixing inevitable and eventually codified the blending to maintain European supremacy, the mixing of English and Indigenous peoples was not largely accepted as a logical consequence of colonization, though inevitably people intermarried or mixed through violent exchanges. In the English colonial model, especially with the introduction of enslaved African peoples to the North America in 1619, the ideal was separation of people. The exchanges and encounters that made the settlers of these colonies markedly different from the peoples of their mother country also resulted in changes among the first peoples of these places.<sup>13</sup>

The artists of this study are all based in what have been termed settler-colonial countries, a term which includes Australia, Canada, and the United States. Beyond the shared colonial legacy of English common law and language, the idea of and continued presence of settler colonialism greatly affects the nature of these nations. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have defined settler colonialism as “different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain.”<sup>14</sup> As it is based on making a new home of a place, rather than purely accumulating wealth or extracting resources, settler colonialism has led to the complex identification of Indigenous peoples in this context. If the colonizers remain through their

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<sup>13</sup> See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014). The author acknowledges that there have been multiple credible challenges to Dunbar-Ortiz’s claim of Indigenous heritage.

<sup>14</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5.



descendants, culture, and government, decolonization can never fully be realized. Settler colonial states are principally highly developed liberal democracies whose foundational myths rest on land that they have no intention of leaving behind. In most of these countries, the non-Indigenous population outnumbers the Indigenous population as a matter of design and disease, not divine intervention.

Throughout the establishment of English colonies which became settler colonial states in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, Indigenous peoples intermarried or formed procreative relationships with non-Indigenous peoples. Yet the later generations who carry on the legacy of their communities have been perceived as less Indigenous than their Indigenous parents, based on non-Indigenous notions of mixing and identity. For much of society at large, even now, this is still the case. Asking someone how Native they are is not only acceptable but normalized. Mixed-race people, including mixed Indigenous people, often experience this questioning or challenging of their identity or ethnicity. Always invasive, posing this question evinces a kind of privilege not afforded to people who are automatically racialized, as racially ambiguous people can sometimes have the option to identify or not identify with their non-white racial identities.

The racial logic of fractions of certain ethnicities was for most Indigenous communities a totally foreign concept; put differently, lineage has been imagined otherwise within most of these communities. Descent in many Native American communities was and is matrilineal, determined through the mother's line, regardless of a child's father's identity. As artists such as Monkman have pointed out, membership in Indigenous groups was conceptualized much more expansively for many reasons.<sup>15</sup> Bringing people into communities was much more common than forcing them

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<sup>15</sup> Here I am particularly referring to Kent Monkman's *Miss Chief Justice of the Piece* from 2012, discussed at length in Chapter 4.

out for lesser degrees of relatedness. This is something that Indigenous communities and peoples have become increasingly insistent upon, as exemplified by artists such as James Luna (Luiseño, Mexican, 1950–2018), who defined himself as Mexican and Luiseño. Many Indigenous people eschew breaking their identities down into fractions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous, which is institutionalized in the United States by measures such as the degree of Indian blood—a fraction based on descent often drawn from historical lists of Native Americans. Instead, many Indigenous people now conceptualize themselves in relation to an Indigenous group *and* another qualifier. The using of “and” rather than “part” is deeply radical and anticolonial, refusing entirely outmoded racist sciences and contemporary rules of membership that apply to many First Nations, Inuit, and Native American communities. This is a relatively recent shift, not wholly present by any means in all Indigenous communities or even families.<sup>16</sup> In this study, the artist Erica Lord articulates this idea most directly when she states that all Indigenous peoples now are mixed in some way.<sup>17</sup>

The specific shared roots of the English colonial model present one entry into this project. Indigeneity as a theoretical concept, and what it means to be Indigenous today, provide an even more central set of concerns. The anthropologist James Clifford argues that in the twenty-first century, “the word ‘indigenous’ describes a work in progress.”<sup>18</sup> Scholars such as Francesca Merlan have identified Indigeneity as both criterial, based on a set of criteria, and relational, based in practice on relationships with land, community, and the nonhuman world.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Indigeneity has theoretical, political, and legal definitions, which have given rise to the growth of a global

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<sup>16</sup> I draw this point out from years of study of Indigeneity as a concept and from engagement in networks of other Indigenous peoples. Most significantly, there has been a growing visibility of people in North America as Black and Native which greatly shifts the conversation around which communities one claims and highlights the distinction between racialization and Indigeneity.

<sup>17</sup> Lord, “America’s Wretched,” 314.

<sup>18</sup> James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Francesca Merlan, “Indigeneity: Global and Local,” *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 3 (2009): 305–6.

network of people who identify as Indigenous. In 2007, the United Nations issued the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, based in part on José R. Martínez Cobo's definition of "indigenous" as a series of criteria.<sup>20</sup> Many countries with sizable Indigenous populations, including Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, did not initially approve this resolution.<sup>21</sup> Legal and political definitions, though useful, are often too broad to provide theoretical bases for scholarship. In Canada and the United States, the criteria to be considered a member of a First Nations, Native American, or Inuit group is based on individual tribal rules, such as blood quantum that reflect colonial ideas of race.<sup>22</sup> Presently in the United States, there are nearly six hundred Indigenous nations and tribes that are recognized by the federal government and many more that have state recognition. Many Indigenous peoples are still fighting for federal recognition because of the patchwork nature of treaties in the United States, which were negotiated on a case-by-case basis and often broken.<sup>23</sup> In Australia, "Aboriginality" is more loosely defined, though most Aboriginal peoples have specific rules regarding membership, including self-identification and acceptance by the community as a member.<sup>24</sup> The complexity of Indigenous group membership and the generally unresolved nature of Indigeneity is an integral fact of the works explored in this study.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, 2007, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>22</sup> Sissons, *First Peoples*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> For more details on United States treaties see *Nation to Nation: Treaties between the United States and American Indian Nations*, ed. Suzan Shown Harjo (Washington, D.C.: NMAI and Smithsonian Books, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), "Proof of Aboriginality," *AIATSIS*, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family/before-you-start/proof-aboriginality>.

<sup>25</sup> Non-Indigenous people who claim Indigenous heritage and use it as a platform for self-advancement is a major issue in the arts and culture spheres of Australia, Canada, and the United States. In these countries, since roughly the time of affirmative action, there have been opportunities specifically for Indigenous people to recognize and change systemic inequalities. People who misrepresent themselves as Indigenous and pursue such opportunities often take opportunities away from Indigenous peoples. There is also the darker nonmaterial issue of positioning oneself as part

Although there is no universal definition of the word “Indigenous,” Native and Indigenous scholars have made several contributions to understanding Indigeneity. The 2015 anthology *Native Studies Keywords* highlighted several key terms and concepts surrounding the field of Native and Indigenous Studies. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle Raheja consider the term “Indigenous,” its increasing use over time, and its limitations within the international political context.<sup>26</sup> They point out that many Indigenous peoples do not identify as racial minorities, even when they are quantitatively in the minority, as this positioning negates the possibility of self-determination.<sup>27</sup> Thus much of the framing around minority populations does not apply to Indigenous peoples. The authors position Indigeneity as an analytic that can be employed in different ways, rather than a positive or negative attribute.<sup>28</sup> Finally, they identify the potential power of Indigeneity to foster further and future political resistance.<sup>29</sup> The work of several scholars has contributed to their concise consideration of Indigeneity, notably that of Jodi Byrd, Jeff Corntassel, and Kim Tallbear. In each chapter of this dissertation, Indigeneity is defined according to the key characteristics that Teves, Smith, and Raheja identify.

Global awareness of Indigeneity is rooted in the political activism of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, to many people today, activism might immediately come to mind when thinking about Indigenous peoples. Most Americans today have at least a passing awareness of the huge pan-Indigenous protests that occurred at the Standing Rock Reservation against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline but may be largely unaware of the monumental activism that occurred

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of a marginalized or historically wronged group for the purposes of self-advancement, literally using someone else’s inherited trauma for gain.

<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle A. Raheja, “Indigenous,” in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle A Raheja (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 109–18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

worldwide in previous decades. The most recent wave of international attention paid to Indigenous people is a result of collective action and activism from the 1970s onward, including the American Indian Movement and similar efforts throughout the globe, though resistance to colonization has always existed.<sup>30</sup>

As Teves, Smith, and Raheja argue, Indigeneity is a potentially potent means to confront continued colonialism, which takes the form of continued devaluation of Indigenous culture or attempts to take Indigenous land and resources.<sup>31</sup> Scholars Tuck and Yang argue that “Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories about how we/they came to be in a particular place—indeed how we/they came to *be a place*.”<sup>32</sup> This distinction between coming to a place and being of or belonging to it is a highly significant aspect of Indigeneity. Even in the absence of a singular creation story, the connection between Indigenous people and place goes beyond ownership—often termed stewardship in Australia—but is based on a mutual relationship. Connecting these sources, Indigeneity indicates a connection to place in time immemorial and acknowledges relationships with other people who trace their lineage and history to that place. Self-identification is relevant in many contexts, but Indigeneity cannot be reduced to a person identifying as Indigenous since this does not always indicate a real connection to place. Similarly, being recognized as Indigenous by powers outside of one’s community, such as the federal, state, or local government, cannot always be a criterion as these forms of recognition are usually not created by the communities themselves. The meaning of being Indigenous and of

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<sup>30</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “The International Indigenous Peoples’ Movement: A Site of Anti-Racist Struggle Against Capitalism,” in *Racism after Apartheid: Challenges for Marxism and Anti-Racism*, ed. Satgar Vishwas (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 35–37.

<sup>31</sup> Teves, Smith, and Raheja, “Indigenous,” 116.

<sup>32</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” 6.

Indigeneity is a topic taken up in each chapter of this study in relation to specific artists and contexts, acknowledging the global structure and local circumstances of Indigeneity.

### 1.3 Embodiment

The term embodiment dates to the 1600s, first meaning “to put into a body; to invest or clothe (a spirit) with a body,” and later taking on the meaning, “to impart a material corporeal, or sensual character to.”<sup>33</sup> Embodiment, specifically of Indigeneity, is considered here in each of these senses and is conceptualized as a range of practices that employ the body in performance. Embodiment has a long history within the philosophical field.<sup>34</sup> The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his much-cited book *Phenomenology of Perception*, argued against the separation of the body and perception, proposing that the two are in a perpetual feedback loop—in sum, that one cannot perceive without possessing a body.<sup>35</sup> Covering topics such as phantom limb syndrome and relative location of one’s body, he considered the body as an essential part of the range of human experiences, which taken together constitute perception. Interestingly, there is no French word for “embodiment;” instead, his preferred term is closer to the English word “incarnation.” Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the fundamental role of the body in seeing and perceiving the world has influenced generations of scholars. In this study it is accepted that possessing a body is necessary

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<sup>33</sup> “Embody | Imbody, V.” OED Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, December 2020), accessed February 06, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60907>.

<sup>34</sup> See Justin E. H. Smith, *Embodiment: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), for a broad discussion of the many valences of embodiment.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 85–90.

for perception, but of greater concern is how the body is perceived by others in terms of Indigeneity, race, and gender.

Being Indigenous, if considered in relation to the body, can be seen as a complex identity that does not diminish in the presence of other identities, but rather branches out as Indigeneity or other forms of identification that can be ethnic, racial, or a matter of gender/sexuality. As artistic practice, embodiment indicates the myriad ways that artists employ their own bodies, and those of others, as well as bodily adornment as medium, object, and/or subject. These practices, I argue, become embodiment within the intentionality of the artist to confront stereotype, racialization, and the nature of Indigeneity itself. To embody Indigeneity is not to follow one practice, but to afford many potentialities.

#### **1.4 Contemporary Indigenous Art**

In focus and intent, this dissertation is a study of contemporary Indigenous art. While the field of contemporary Indigenous art is a recent, interdisciplinary subfield of art history that is growing, it remains smaller and newer than many other subfields. The consideration of embodiment as an artistic practice to articulate Indigeneity among Indigenous artists in English-speaking settler countries has not yet been the subject of a major art historical study. Because of the relative recentness of this field, exhibition catalogues are a major source of scholarship. There have been exhibitions on related topics, such as *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor* (2010–11) curated by Kathleen Ash–Milby, which focused on the relationship of skin to Native American, Inuit, and First Nations identity. Several recent exhibitions have helped define the field of

contemporary Indigenous art more broadly, including *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* (2011) and *Sakahān International Indigenous Art* (2013). Such catalogues, however, are not sufficient alone, as due to format constraints they usually fail to provide the necessary space to deeply consider the depth and breadth of contemporary Indigenous practice.

Many consider the 1992 exhibition *Indigena*, curated by Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History) to be the first exhibition of Indigenous contemporary art that used the term “indigenous” to describe the work of First Nations and Inuit Canadian artists, using its Latin root as the title.<sup>36</sup> Since the 1990s, there have been an increasing number of transcultural Indigenous exhibitions, a context of global Indigenous contemporary art within which all the artists discussed here—Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord—have shown their work. Curators who identify as Indigenous, including Gerald McMaster, Brenda Croft, and many others, have organized some of the largest and most well-attended of these exhibitions. In the context of an exhibition, the label of “global Indigenous contemporary art” can mean that artists included fall along a broad spectrum of art-making practices. But by allowing their work to be included in these exhibitions, Foley, Thompson, Monkman, and Lord are actively participating within this growing ecosystem of global contemporary Indigenous art. Kent Monkman and Christian Thompson both participated in *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, though because of timing they purportedly were not able to interact with each other.<sup>37</sup> These exhibitions have been responsive to the existing networks of artists working and interacting with each other in the contemporary field who identify as Indigenous. Exhibitions, created through the work of many individuals, often are produced more

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<sup>36</sup> See Gerald McMaster and Le-Ann Martin, eds., *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives in Canadian Art* (Quebec: Craftsman House, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Gilchrist, interview with the author, University of Sydney, Australia. June 14, 2019.



quickly than monographic studies on contemporary Indigenous art. This project recognizes the importance of such transcultural contemporary Indigenous exhibitions while proposing that exhibitions can serve as a starting rather than an ending point for inquiries into the field, which can also lead to more exhibitions.

The Métis artist and curator David Garneau notes that there is a growing community of Indigenous artists and curators who are cosmopolitan and globe-trotting, acknowledging their specific heritages but moving beyond their peoples' traditional art practices.<sup>38</sup> For Garneau, artists such as Kent Monkman exist in a third stream between the mainstream and Indigenous art worlds.<sup>39</sup> His concept of a third space situates Indigenous artists in a liminal position between Indigenous artists who work in traditional styles and do not participate in the wider art world and non-Indigenous artists who possess formal training and are fully integrated into the art world. To be considered Indigenous contemporary artists according to Garneau, artists must refer to their heritages, while at the same time satisfying the criteria of contemporary art. The artists of this project meet these requirements, but they have been working long after what could be termed Indigenous Civil Rights movements in their respective countries. Also, the necessity to strictly separate their practices as either contemporary or traditional is less important or necessary to artists working today. Garneau's idea of a third stream identifies a phenomenon occurring among artists working now but leaves out artists whose practice in more traditional mediums engages with historical and contemporary concerns. For example, Erica Lord uses beadwork to represent disease, as an increasing number of (mostly women) artists have done, on different scales and with different diseases. Beading is considered a traditional form of art, yet as is discussed later, Lord's

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<sup>38</sup> David Garneau, "Indigenous Art: From Appreciation to Art Criticism," in *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015), 311–26.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

work reflects scientific imaging other timely concerns around lineage and descent. Garneau's ideas, though formative to the early thinking around this topic, thus do not sufficiently define the field.

The related fields of cultural theory and anthropology also inform this project. Anthropology is notable as the first scholarly field to take Indigenous art seriously as an object of study, albeit primarily for its cultural meanings rather than for its aesthetics. The shift to make anthropology more inclusive and less colonial has been a decades-long process initiated in part by the 1980s generation of anthropologists who turned to reflexive practices, including James Clifford and Johannes Fabian.<sup>40</sup> Fabian asserts that anthropologists seek to create a separate time for their subjects, "the ethnographic present," which exists outside of any Western temporality, an assertion that prompted widespread reflection within the field.<sup>41</sup> He argued that the recognition of coevality, the sharing of time and space between the anthropologist and the subject of his/her study, could remedy this bias.<sup>42</sup> The historical lack of coevality, acknowledged in these terms or not, can also trigger the creation of artwork, a material way to establish presence. Clifford's thinking on the concept of Indigeneity and Fabian's on coevality inform the framing of this dissertation, but I depart from their framings to interrogate the specific articulations of Indigeneity asserted by the practices of Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord.

More to the point, the separation between white Europeans and non-European colonized peoples becomes something of a false division for the many contemporary Indigenous peoples of mixed heritage. To whose time do they belong? Although they might not use the term "coevality"

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<sup>40</sup> See James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: a School of American Research Advanced Seminar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>41</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–32.

in describing their motivations, the artists of this study are engaged with the notion as their practices insist upon their work as contemporary *and* Indigenous. Erica Lord, Kent Monkman, and Christian Thompson engage quite directly with museum techniques of describing and presenting Indigenous bodies. Previously, the display of people's bodies as other, and the colonial character of museological framing, contributed to a lack of coequality. Foley's and Thompson's works concern the anthropologically related topics of ethnographic photography and Indigenous self-depiction through traditional portraiture. While it is a significant consideration within this project, coequality or sharing of time is an entry point for these artists and their practices rather than the highest goal. Attending major universities, receiving degrees, and participating in the art world at large, the artists in this study arguably already exist at the same time as artists with settler inheritances, but their ability to conceptualize their practices and understand their history and contemporary experiences goes far beyond simply sharing the same kinds of time.

Until recent decades, Indigenous cultural creations were not studied as art but anthropological objects. Things made by Indigenous peoples were collected and regarded with intellectual or scientific curiosity, but they were largely understood as existing beyond the proper scope of Western art history. Anthropologists in Australia, starting notably with Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer, were the first to study Aboriginal art, mostly for its symbolic value and esoteric meanings. The situation was similar in the United States and Canada, where there was always a trade in and fascination for Native American objects, but little of it was considered art.<sup>43</sup> In the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, white gallerists and art teachers promoted creation and sale of Native art and a small market of collectors regularly bought it. The 2008 anthology *Exiles*,

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<sup>43</sup> See Janet Catherine Berlo, ed., *The Early Years of Native American Art History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).

*Diasporas, and Strangers*, edited by the art historian Kobena Mercer, included many specific histories of white artists promoting Indigenous artists and often profiting from their work.<sup>44</sup> Early and more recent anthropological sources value Indigenous art for its meaning and unique modes of making, yet their framing often interprets objects as expressions of the culture at large rather than as individual artistic contributions. In contrast, in this project I review the practices of individual artists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, focusing on their ability to speak to broad cultural constructions of their respective peoples and their individual talent, ideas, and experiences.

The omission of Indigenous art from Western-oriented art histories has led many scholars to theorize it as explicitly contemporary, while others attempt to place it entirely in its own category. Underlying these conceptualizations is the fact that, although many Modern artists were deeply inspired by global Indigenous arts and aesthetics to the extent that they sparked entire movements and visual languages, Cubism most notably, these arts were not considered modern. The scholar Ian McLean has argued that Aboriginal art is contemporary because it does not share the progressive aim of modern art, does not represent a break from the past, and is decentered.<sup>45</sup> McLean's arguments are highly convincing, yet they stand somewhat in contrast to larger understandings of the shift from modern to contemporary accepted by much of the field of art history. To suddenly become contemporary, or to be accepted as such, is a conceptual and temporal jump that may not align with how Aboriginal artists are conceptualizing their own practices. Similarly, to be modern meant to be placed with a lineage of modern practices that started for the

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<sup>44</sup> Kobena Mercer, ed., *Exiles, Diasporas, and Strangers* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Ian McLean, "How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art," in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011), 333–45.

Western art world in the nineteenth century, a time when Indigenous artistic expression or the art of colonized peoples was overwhelmingly not considered to be art. With more expansive definitions of modern art and modernity, however, there is still room for and utility in projects that reconsider particular Indigenous art objects and moments/movements to be modern.

The art historian Jessica Horton, in *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation* (2017), reorients twentieth-century Native American art as explicitly modern, arguing that this art has always been a project of modernity.<sup>46</sup> Aligning with my statements about the activist roots of Indigeneity, Horton examines the practices of artists working around the time of the American Indian Movement, an important and widespread movement emphasizing the importance of civil rights, sovereignty, and educational and other opportunities for Native Americans. The Native American art historian Nancy Marie Mithlo addresses the question of how Native American art is understood by its practitioners in her article “No Word for Art in Our Language?: Old Questions, New Paradigms.” Mithlo argues that in Native communities, art is considered part of life, not a separate cultural sphere.<sup>47</sup> She further asserts that contemporary Native artists do not want to be seen exclusively as Native American artists because such labeling could limit the scope of their careers.<sup>48</sup> This is the case for many contemporary artists of color who do not want to be limited by ethnic identification. Anthologies such as the recent *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism* (2019), edited by Elizabeth Harney and Ruth Phillips, and *Double Desire: Transcultural and Indigenous Contemporary Art* (2015), edited by Ian McLean, have helped to define the field of Indigenous contemporary art through specific

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<sup>46</sup> Jessica Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017),

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Marie Mithlo, “No Word for Art in Our Language: Old Questions, New Paradigms,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 113.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

examples of contemporary Indigenous art rather than comparing and incorporating work from distinct cultures.<sup>49</sup> The slippage that exists and continues in studies of and between modern and contemporary art also applies to Indigenous art. Although seemingly simplistic, theorizing Indigenous arts of the recent past as modern, and thus breaking down the space between these and contemporaneous modern art practices, and theorizing more current Indigenous arts as contemporary to position it as outside the linear progression of modernity, are highly useful framings that contribute to the acceptance of the study of Indigenous art more widely.

This project considers not only the field-specific roots of the art practices discussed, but acknowledges their more practical roots. Indigenous peoples have used the body in ceremonial and aesthetic ways since time immemorial, but this project considers bodily practices staged and presented as art. The work of the artists of this study is connected to Indigenous cultures, but in presentation to an audience if live or shown in museum or gallery settings, it is tied to more recent art practices. The use of the artist's body in a work is a global practice, as is self-portraiture and documenting the disguised body.<sup>50</sup> Artists working in the decades after the 1960s followed a tendency to question categories by visualizing them or reducing them to visual elements. "Direct confrontation with a 'different' body," the art historian Sally O'Reilly argues, "was a tool of critique employed by feminist artists of the 1970s to demolish totalizing concepts such as race and gender."<sup>51</sup> However, there is often more at play than simply dismantling racial and gender categories. The art historian Amelia Jones, in her book *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, explores the paradox of how image and reality can never really be

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<sup>49</sup> See Elizabeth Harney and Ruth Phillips, eds., *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press 2019), and McLean, *Double Desire*.

<sup>50</sup> Sally O'Reilly, *The Body in Contemporary Art*, World of Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

separated in contemporary art. She argues that self-portraiture fulfills the viewer's desire to see the artist in the work and understand the artwork as an extension of the artist.<sup>52</sup> This latter idea is considered in this study in the specific frame of embodying Indigeneity as a global phenomenon; the artists consciously insert their own bodies within the legacy of colonization and racialization, drawing from their own experiences of being gendered and racialized in society. Although the frame of embodiment is used to examine all the artists of this study, there is not a singular theoretical framework to approach art practices centered on the body, nor should there be due to the distinctions between the ways of working and individual identities expressed through the body.

Embodiment has long been employed by Native and Indigenous artists as a practice and has been theorized by other scholars without explicit use of the term. The practices that I theorize as embodiments have been referred to as performance art or actions, broader terms that do not lend themselves to the specificity of this study. The long history of protest as a form of art practice has often been left out of much of the art historical record and is not considered in this study. For example, the famed Anishinaabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore began to gain recognition from *Artifact-671B*, her 1988 performance staged as part of a larger protest movement against the Shell Oil Company in Calgary.<sup>53</sup> Awareness of other forms of embodiment in contemporary Indigenous art (beyond the underexplored area of protest) and studies exploring these forms has increased in recent years. In 2010, the scholar Tavia Nyong'o identified embodiment as a tool used by artists to examine the archive, particularly referencing Erica Lord's practice.<sup>54</sup> Jones, nearly a decade

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<sup>52</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42.

<sup>53</sup> Rebecca Belmore, *Artifact-671B*, <https://www.rebeccabelmore.com/artifact-671b/>.

<sup>54</sup> Tavia Nyong'o, "Out of the Archive: Performing Minority Embodiment," in *Action and Agency: Advancing the Dialogue on Native Performance Art*, ed. Nancy J. Blomberg (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2010), 149–79.

later, specifically articulated the practice of embodiment by Indigenous contemporary artists.<sup>55</sup> As this project does, her essay considers how Indigenous artists use embodiment as a form of self-representation, denying the fantasy and misunderstanding that comes with experiencing the world through an Indigenous body.<sup>56</sup> Jones argues that through embodied performances, artists make Native bodies contemporary in stark contrast to how they have been taken out of time.<sup>57</sup> The major mechanism for their chronological displacement is fetishization, particularly the collecting of Native human remains for display as objects in museums.<sup>58</sup> Echoing Jennifer A. González's work from a decade earlier and Fabian's concept of coequality, Jones identifies an essential part of the power of embodiment as the ability to be both subject and object and, through subjecthood, demonstrate one's agency as artists and humans.<sup>59</sup>

Jones's broad argument that Native North American artists must contend with stereotypes and inaccurate notions of authenticity, though legitimate, does not give sufficient weight to the existing liminality of these bodily performances. A major impact of Lord's and Monkman's performances flows from the manner in which their bodies both do and do not fit stereotypes of their respective Indigenous peoples, stereotypes which come from both within and outside their communities. Just as significantly, Jones does not acknowledge the distinction between Native artists working since the passages of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (1991) and post-Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990). Initiated before Jones's publication and completed after, this study supports her identification of embodiment as an important Indigenous artistic practice

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<sup>55</sup> Amelia Jones, "Indigenous Bodies: Native Performance and Temporalities of Being," in *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now*, ed. Mindy N. Besaw, Candice Hopkins, and Manuela Well-Off-Man (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2018), 74–89.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 77–78.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–79.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.



but contends that the artists of this study embody complex forms of Indigeneity in distinct ways. These embodiments act as reflections on history, personal experience, and culture, acknowledging that people with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage are in fact the majority. Embodying Indigeneity does not aim at singular closure but instead opens up a world of possibilities.

Methodologically, this project reflects multiple disciplines, drawing mainly from art history, anthropology, and cultural studies. From the 1990s on, there has been a growing emphasis on concepts of ethnography, subjectivity, and objectivity in art history, an integration of issues highly relevant to this study. In his 1996 essay, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” Hal Foster described the artist’s practice of utilizing ethnography, the writing of culture, as a method of artmaking and exploring their own subjectivities.<sup>60</sup> According to Foster, this ethnographic impulse functioned to “disrupt dominant culture by questioning strict stereotypes.”<sup>61</sup> This initial framing has led many art historians to theorize that artists’ presentation of culture in art is always a kind of ethnography. In the book, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, González explores the role of installation art in understanding race and subject formation. González addresses perhaps the most famous Native American example of the ethnographic turn, James Luna’s *The Artifact Piece* from 1986.<sup>62</sup> González does not deny the importance of the history of display or Indian stereotype in this work, but suggests that it is best understood as a critique of racial discourse.<sup>63</sup> She argues that Luna uses his body as a “flexible sign, pliable enough to accommodate a broad spectrum of projected myths.”<sup>64</sup> The term “flexible sign” is seductive, yet

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<sup>60</sup> Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 177–203.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>62</sup> Jennifer González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

there are limits to how much the body can change. Some features of the body, such as skin color, can change, while others such as bone structure or body type cannot do so without dramatic surgical interventions. The scholarship of Foster and González has been foundational for this study, but I aim to push their concepts toward embodiment, which is crucial to considerations of ethnography and installation and performance art practices.

Horton has moved beyond the racial discourse when considering Luna's work in *Art for an Undivided Earth*, providing a model for writing Indigenous art history. Horton uses the novel approach of spatial politics to trace the trajectories of artists in the American Indian Movement of the 1970s as demonstrative of a connected world.<sup>65</sup> She places this generation of artists—including Jimmie Durham, James Luna, Fred Kabotie, Kay Walking Stick, and Robert Houle—in the category of modern art, reinforcing that Indigenous modernity developed alongside that of Europe.<sup>66</sup> She positions James Luna's work as emblemizing the inseparable nature of Native and non-Native culture since the time of contact and colonization. Horton's historical argument is that the activism of the American Indian Movement was important for the artistic formation of Native artists who were directly involved or active in arts at the time. She seamlessly moves from one artist's biography to the next and analyzes their artworks through spatial politics, recognizing the importance of the artist's background but not overemphasizing it as the final and ultimate explanatory reference.

The art historian Cherise Smith, like Horton and González, considers identity formation and performance through artistic case studies in *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor*

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<sup>65</sup> Jessica Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 17.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

*Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deveare Smith.*<sup>67</sup> Smith aims to answer the question, “What happens when iconographies or stereotypes of identity are given physical form and enacted in, on, and by the bodies of artists?”<sup>68</sup> She connects these artists by focusing on a politics of identity—not identity politics—that treats identity as a formative and central, but not all-consuming, element of the artists’ work.<sup>69</sup> She highlights intersectionality through various identifications of the artists she studies as women and as ethnic or other types of minorities. The boundaries and negotiations are crucial for her overall argument: that these artists enact others and operate in the “liminal space of being self and other simultaneously.”<sup>70</sup> I also concentrate on these questions in this study. Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord, like the artists in Smith’s study, do not comfortably fit into established categories and use their bodies to illuminate this liminality. A major departure of this project, however, is the idea that liminality can exist within the already established category of Indigenous: that artists can identify as Indigenous and non-Indigenous in their heritage, but remain steadfast that their work and they themselves are Indigenous, not part-Indigenous, or in any way less than.

Beyond these many sources in art history, Native and Indigenous Studies texts are a basis for the methodology of this study. Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Devon Abbott Mihesuah have contributed to Indigenous studies of decolonizing and indigenizing research methods. Despite their skepticism toward anthropological methods, Smith and Mihesuah believe representing Indigenous peoples’ own words through interviews is crucial. For three chapters, interviews that I have conducted are used extensively, while in all four chapters, published

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<sup>67</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper and Anna Deveare Smith* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

interviews are also utilized. Language and text within artworks are considered in relation to meaning and Indigeneity.

In each chapter, embodiment is examined as a tool of articulating Indigeneity, taking a social-historical approach to consider the specific backgrounds of each artist. In Australia, Canada, and the United States, access to and ownership of traditional lands is a central aspect of Indigeneity. These countries and their policies, historical and contemporary, are of great importance in relation to embodying Indigeneity. In Australia, twentieth- and twenty-first-century legislation on Aboriginal rights, such as the 1967 Referendum, is hugely important to comprehending Aboriginality. Also considered are the ways that, in the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1991 has impacted Native understanding of the body. In Canada, the distinctions between Status and Non-Status Indians, those who do and do not receive recognition and benefits from the state, has important implications on how Indigenous communities view themselves.<sup>71</sup>

## **1.5 Chapter Overview**

This dissertation presents the connections between embodiment and Indigeneity as replete with myriad possibilities. Each chapter develops the concept of embodiment of Indigeneity in relation to a particular artist based on their artwork, their Indigenous heritage, and their national belonging. Each artist is connected to the broader notions of Indigeneity in their respective countries: for example, Aboriginality in Australia, and stereotypes of being Native or Indian that

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<sup>71</sup> See Bonita Lawrence, *“Real” Indians and Others: Mixed Blood Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004).

exist in both Canada and the United States. The chapters are structured in loose chronological and geographical order, starting with Fiona Foley and Christian Thompson in Australia, and moving to Kent Monkman in Canada and across North America to Erica Lord in the United States. Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord were selected for this study because of their continued and sustained engagement with making art related to their bodies and the concept of Indigeneity in local manifestations. They represent, however, particular identities, as Indigenous women and Indigenous queer men, that can create challenging lived experiences in distinct ways.

### **1.5.1 Chapter on Fiona Foley**

Over the course of her decades-long career, Fiona Foley has created work that elevates Aboriginal womanhood and reflects the importance of Aboriginal women in her life. Her work is positioned as woman-centered, but not expressly feminist as she does not identify with that term. Moreover, she has created bodies of work that highlight lesser-known histories and has consistently aligned herself with those who experience racism and stereotyping, even if they are neither Aboriginal nor women. She employs embodiment to these ends. She confronts racism against Aboriginal people and minorities in Australia using photography, installation, and other varied contemporary artistic practices. She uses bodily objects, including breastplates, and industrially fabricated signs, as well as orchestrated photograph series, to take distinct approaches to art-making that embody Indigeneity as a lived experience and reflect her deep research into her own history. While her earlier work centered on images of her own body, she has recently stepped back from the camera, acting as orchestrator rather than subject.

Foley is the first artist examined because, without the achievements of her generation, artists such as Christian Thompson would have entered a very different art world if they entered it at all. Foley's career trajectory reflects a refusal to work within the assigned confines of one's Indigenous culture, yet also pursues an enduring focus on the often-untold histories of Aboriginal peoples. Foley has frequently dealt with the themes of sexuality and Aboriginality through text and bodily subjects. Her recent practice has intentionally moved away from these early works, although Foley continues to make photographic series which include her as a concealed or background figure. Historically and physically grounded, she creates work with knowledge of the trauma done to her ancestors and to her throughout her career, based on the prejudices that still exist in Australia. Her practice reflects difficult, sometimes painful, histories and speaks to the experiences of Aboriginal womanhood.

### **1.5.2 Chapter on Christian Thompson**

Working since the early 2000s, Christian Bumburra Thompson has repeatedly used his own image to embody Aboriginality as a concept best articulated by his relative Marcia Langton.<sup>72</sup> Thompson came into an Australian and then international art world in where artists such as Fiona Foley and Tracey Moffatt had worked for decades. His work has received some scholarly attention and enjoys great popularity in exhibitions and galleries, although it has not been considered through the perspective of his use of Aboriginal embodiment. His articulation of spiritual

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<sup>72</sup> Here I draw from my discussion of Aboriginality as articulated by Langton and considered in relation to Langton in Chapter 3 of this dissertation from pages 83-85.

repatriation, a practice of his own invention to give life back to objects, opens a possibility for return, for the essence of belonging to country when the rule of (white, or settler) law precludes these actions. Spiritual repatriation in Thompson's practice often takes the form of creating a new work in indirect response to historic Aboriginal objects or images. In this way his practice aligns with that of Kent Monkman, who often incorporates structures of modern art remixed into an Indigenous practice.

Although he has created mixed media, sculpture and films, Thompson's best known and repeated practice is photographic self-portraiture. Across many photo series, he engages with deeply symbolic objects, from plants conceptualized as Australian graffiti, to candles and embedded images of particular places. Thompson's self-portraiture is distinctive for his use of props, lighting, and makeup to style himself. Always self-conscious, he looks out at a viewer looking back at him, well aware of his position as a fair-skinned man with legibly Aboriginal features. These works often display the bust of a coiffed and costumed Thompson, always recognizable as himself in the work. His incorporates a mix of references from those to established Aboriginal women artists such as Tracey Moffatt to acknowledge the generations that preceded him in the art world, to nineteenth-century anthropologists and Oxford's required attire, related to his years spent at Trinity College completing his PhD. Ultimately, his oeuvre demonstrates the complex identity formation that is Aboriginality, which can include new songs written in an officially dead language.

### 1.5.3 Chapter on Kent Monkman

The Swampy Cree artist Kent Monkman's practice has important parallels with Thompson's way of working. Turning himself into a Two-Spirit diva, as Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle, Monkman battles misconceptions of Native Americans and educates audiences by invoking the paradoxes of stereotype.<sup>73</sup> His invented alter ego takes her name from the words "mischief" and "egotistical," and from Cher, the pop icon.<sup>74</sup> He has stated in interviews that Miss Chief is a tragi-comical figure; her ability to teach is, as I will show, nonetheless quite considerable. In his performance, film, and photography works, Monkman can be seen as a teaching trickster, using the gloss of Miss Chief to underscore important issues about Native identity.

Monkman is the best-known artist considered in this study. His acclaim to date has culminated in his 2019 installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which was a not only a major achievement but also a source of backlash in terms of how racial and ethnic minorities were portrayed. The opening night performance related to this installation begins the chapter on his work. Monkman's practice addresses stereotypical, popular culture images of Plains Indians with an emphasis on storytelling and a theatrical approach that reflects his professional training in technical arts.<sup>75</sup> The educational aspect of his practice might be overlooked due to its uncanniness and drag-queen aesthetics. No studies to date have considered Monkman's photography, film, or installation works through the lens of embodiment, nor have they focused

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<sup>73</sup> David Liss, "Kent Monkman: The Wild West Lives Again!" in David Liss, Shirley Madill, Gerald McMaster, Catherine Mattes, David McIntosh, and Kent Monkman, *Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Mischief* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2008), 103.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.



on his tendency to teach. Significantly, this chapter traces his capacity to imagine a new nation by engaging with two works made in 1996 and 2012. Like Thompson, he repeatedly engages with museums as a major stage for his work and a space ripe for critique, employing modes of display, such as the diorama, to challenge the museums' inaccuracy and capacity to spread stereotypes and misinformation.

#### 1.5.4 Chapter on Erica Lord

The final body of work explored is Erica Lord's presentation through her body of an Indigenous identity that is multiple and overlapping, related to her Tanana Athabascan and Inuit heritage, education, and experiences of the world. Much of her work reflects her childhood living between rural Michigan and the interior of Alaska, where she was understood alternatively as Native or white, dark, or fair.<sup>76</sup> She uses her multiethnic appearance in her practice to challenge the concept of identity expressed through the body. To be Erica Lord, to be Indigenous and multiethnic, is also to claim distinct perspectives and troubling histories.

No comprehensive study exists on these works by Lord, nor have previous studies drawn from sources on Athabascan history and on the epidemic of violence against Native women in the United States. In *The Tanning Project*, the earliest series examined in this text, Lord considered how Indigeneity can be thought of as expressly bodily. Through her installation *Artifact Piece, Revisited*, she explored how objects given or made—her moose-hide dress and Chief's necklace—could be deeply embodied symbols, more appropriate for display than performance due to their

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<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*, 32–36.

meaning. Like Fiona Foley, she has tried on different identities. Yet, unlike Foley and more aligned with Thompson, Lord defined these explorations of others specifically as self-portraits in *Un/Defined Self-Portraits*. Recently, she has taken up the baby belt as a symbol of inheritance of disease, taking an explicitly Indigenous feminist perspective.

## 1.6 Looking Ahead

The artists of this study are engaged in the practice of embodiment in distinctive ways. By examining deeply how Indigeneity can be embodied and presented to an external audience, one can also begin to comprehend the ways that Indigeneity as a concept moves beyond the bodily. The body is the primary site for both recognizing similarity and difference, yet with a concept as broad as Indigeneity, focusing exclusively on physical characteristics can be highly misleading. This project takes seriously the implications of experiencing a world through a racialized body, but emphasizes the ways that people can shift, change, and present their bodies otherwise. Utilizing makeup, tanning, and costuming, the artists of this study embody a spectrum of ethnic, sexual, and gender identities. Rather than attribute these practices to a particular historical moment, or to postmodern identity politics, the embodiments discussed in this dissertation present real possibilities to imagine oneself in and engage with an increasingly complex world.

Indigenous categorizations and identifications do not only flow in one direction, from the dominant white ethnic group, but also come from within Indigenous communities and move between community members. By recognizing that such categorization is imposed upon Indigenous people, but that they possess their own self-conceptions and relationality to their communities, this project aims to demonstrate that the relationship between embodiment and

Indigeneity is expressed as a range of possibilities. For example, Erica Lord has remarked that her Athabaskan family commented on how white she looked, but her grandmother, an important hereditary chief of Tanana Athabascans, passed down her Chief necklace to Lord. The recognition of her mixed heritage did not diminish her role of future leader in the community.

As people who identify to varying degrees with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, the artists examined do not experience these categories as contradictions but as a part of living and being in the world. Their fluidity is both a challenge to traditional racial hierarchies and imposed authenticity and a great source of potential to speak simultaneously to multiple communities. More importantly, they might have access to greater opportunities precisely because they are mixed. More might be expected of them to fit easily into predominantly white structures because of white heritage, but they also experience great pressure, as many people of color do, to excel beyond their white peers, while representing their Indigenous communities. This dissertation shows the creativity and the commitment that underlies their effectiveness in articulating the highly specific yet multiplicitous character of Indigeneity through their artistic practices.

## 2.0 “Bits and Pieces of History”: Indigeneity and Embodiment in the Art of Fiona Foley

*Like a bowerbird, I've collected bits and pieces of history, quotes and imagery, and assembled them as seen through a Badtjala lens.*<sup>77</sup> —Fiona Foley

The bowerbird is a deeply symbolic and an Indigenous metaphor. Bowerbirds are native to Australia and Papua New Guinea with several species living in Badtjala country of K'gari (Fraser Island) in Australia.<sup>78</sup> Male bowerbirds are famous for constructing bowers or alleys of found materials to draw in potential mates.<sup>79</sup> The Badtjala artist Fiona Foley (Badtjala, Australian, born 1964) has a diverse practice which is classified in this text as Indigenous for her repeated uses of a Badtjala lens across media and subject matter. The aspect of bits and pieces of history demonstrates her sprawling—but connected—interests mainly in the history of Aboriginal<sup>80</sup> peoples in Queensland and beyond.<sup>81</sup> In this chapter, photographic series are examined, in addition to sculpture and installation media works, conceptually overlapping despite aesthetic divergence. In the works discussed in this chapter, Foley is consistently concerned with what it means to be Badtjala, to be an Aboriginal woman in a complex, diverse settler colonial country.

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<sup>77</sup> Louise Martin-Chew, “Fiona Foley discusses Her New Series *Horror Has a Face*,” *Art Guide Australia*, December 6, 2017, accessed September 1, 2018, <https://artguide.com.au/fiona-foley-discusses-her-new-series-horror-has-a-face>.

<sup>78</sup> Bush Heritage Australia, “Bowerbirds,” accessed November 15, 2018, updated 2018. <https://www.bushheritage.org.au/species/bowerbirds>.

<sup>79</sup> Bush Heritage Australia, “Bowerbirds.”

<sup>80</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will use the term Aboriginal to refer to the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Though a Latin-rooted English word, it references the collective engagement and action of Indigenous peoples of Australia. Perhaps most importantly, Aboriginal is the chosen general term many Indigenous Australians use to refer to themselves, including Foley.

<sup>81</sup> Martin-Chew, “Fiona Foley Discusses Her New Series *Horror Has a Face*.”

Being Indigenous in the twenty-first century is a multi-issue identity that encapsulates issues of gender and sexuality, socioeconomic status, land rights, and education.<sup>82</sup> In her career, Foley has been extremely successful; she clearly discusses and forcefully highlights her own story and the histories that she researches.<sup>83</sup> In a time when scholars of Indigenous topics aim for ethical research, this work is approached with the artist as a guide, using her written and spoken words as a major source. Also considered are several series of which she is not particularly fond, namely, *Badtjala Woman* and *Native Blood* (both 1994).<sup>84</sup> Because of Foley's prominence, there are a number of published sources on her practice, but much of the critical work on her art was done in the early 2000s. Thus, I rely heavily upon visual analysis, interviews with the artist, and examination of critical Indigenous studies texts significant to Foley. Much like traditional Aboriginal artwork, there are layers to Foley's pieces, understanding based as it is on one's existing knowledge.

In the extant critical scholarship on her work, Foley is often categorized as feminist artist because much of her work has focused on her subject position as a woman.<sup>85</sup> In a presentation at the 2007 *Global Feminisms* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, Foley stated that, prior to the exhibition, she "did not know how to spell feminism" and that her position as a woman came second to her position as an Australian Aboriginal person.<sup>86</sup> Her presentation included images of women, but highlighted the topic of racism against all Aboriginal peoples, not issues particular to

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<sup>82</sup> Here I draw from Audre Lorde's statement: "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." See Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 1960s," in *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), 42.

<sup>83</sup> Fiona Foley, "I Speak to Cover the Mouth of Silence," *Art Australia Monthly* 250 (2012): 55.

<sup>84</sup> Fiona Foley, interview with the author, Lismore, New South Wales, Australia, June 18, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Here I use the term "subject position," based on Aileen Moreton-Robinson's use of the term in *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

<sup>86</sup> Brooklyn Museum, "Global Feminisms: Fiona Foley," filmed March 2007, YouTube video, 9:33 minutes, posted April 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sg7CiLhzwQY>.

Aboriginal women, such as the dramatically high rates of abuse and violence that they suffer.<sup>87</sup> In her statement, Foley used the phrase “spell feminism” as a means of dismissing feminism as inapplicable to her work and life. Her statement in Brooklyn was an attempt to strategically distance herself from white Australian feminism, which she views as having a problematic and paternalistic history with respect to Aboriginal women.<sup>88</sup> Throughout this chapter, womanhood is argued as central to Foley’s sense of being Aboriginal, based on her deep ties to other Aboriginal women. In considering Foley’s work, the concept of intersectionality, as coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, is broadly drawn upon in order to understand why the artist would want to distance herself from feminism even while making art about women.<sup>89</sup> Space between her work and feminism allows Foley to centralize Aboriginal women’s experiences and conceptualize them as distinct from those of white women. Her complicated views of feminism are notably contextualized by the Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson in her important book, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000).<sup>90</sup>

Foregrounding Aboriginal women and their experiences, Foley’s practice is generally Indigenous and specifically Badtjala. Through these works examined here, Foley’s work is suggested to be inherently about seeing the world as a Badtjala woman and experiencing the world through different forms of identification. She has stated that her art is open to interpretation, but her thoughtful personal and research-based practice leads the viewer in a particularly Indigenous

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<sup>87</sup> Marcia Langton, “For Her We Must: No Excuses, Time to Act,” *Griffith Review* 60 (2018), <https://griffithreview.com/articles/for-her-we-must-no-excuses-naidoc-marcia-langton>.

<sup>88</sup> Fiona Foley, “Biting the Clouds: The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897” (PhD confirmation paper, Griffith University, 2016), 12.

<sup>89</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

<sup>90</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

direction.<sup>91</sup> Foley uses her body in her art in distinct ways, sometimes in its barest state and other times concealed within other identities. Indigeneity can be bodily, in the sense of feeling as well as through the artistic practice of embodiment. The crux of Foley's practice is in works in which she adorns, abstracts, and utilizes the body, imparting the sense of experienced Indigeneity and connection to women who came before and after her. Foley's personal background and her history in spaces of art and academia has led to a greater sense of identification with her own people and to other groups who experience racism in Australia and in the world at large. Foley's work is not only an expression of self but *a fashioning of self as and through others*. She imagines herself as Native American or Muslim in order to deepen her connection to what it means to be Badtjala, a member of a minority in a land that her people have convened with since time immemorial.

Fiona Foley is a member of the Wondunna clan of the Badtjala people.<sup>92</sup> Many of the main creation stories of the Badtjala were first published the year that Foley was born, 1964, in *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*, written by Foley's great uncle Wilf Reeves. "Moonie Jarl" loosely translates to storyteller.<sup>93</sup> Reeves begins the book of short stories by explaining that prior to colonization, the Badtjala were custodians of a large territory and were organized into small groups run by a head man.<sup>94</sup> Much can be gleaned from *Moonie Jarl* about the Badtjala. The legends detail connections between humans and the natural world and emphasize respect for others and learning and following community rules to ensure a harmonious community.

Olga Miller, Foley's aunt, who also illustrated the book, detailed the main creation story of K'gari in a different volume. According to Miller, Yidingie, messenger of the Rainbow god

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<sup>91</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>92</sup> Fiona Foley, "Horror Has a Face" exhibition text (Brisbane: Andrew Baker Art Dealer, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> Wilf Reeves, *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* (Ultimo: Indigenous Literacy Foundation, 2014), 3.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

Beerl created the coastal region with the help of K’gari, a beautiful white spirit.<sup>95</sup> K’gari loved Yidingie’s creation so much that she begged Yidingie to remain there, so he changed her into part of the island and covered her with amazing varied vegetation and animals and eventually people.<sup>96</sup> Miller, Reeves, and Foley’s clan, the Wondunna, are one of the six Badtjala clans from the island, the clan of the Clever Man from which the Caboonya, or Keeper of Records, for the Badtjala must come.<sup>97</sup> Miller lists three basic rules that Yidingie gave the Badtjala: what is good for the land comes first, do not take what is not yours, and if you have extra, share.<sup>98</sup> These rules support and are exemplified by specific tales in *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*. Unlike her mother’s generation, Foley grew up with her people’s stories available to her in written form. Foley’s mother, Shirley, continued the family practice of writing by crafting the first Badtjala-to-English dictionary, which is now out of print.<sup>99</sup> Fiona Foley credits her mother for giving her an early pride in her heritage, supported most likely by tales from *Moonie Jarl*.<sup>100</sup>

Fiona Foley’s traditional country of K’gari is officially called Fraser Island, named for Eliza Fraser, a colonial white woman shipwrecked there in the nineteenth century.<sup>101</sup> Most of K’gari is the Great Sandy National Park, which extends down from the park to mainland Australia on Cooloola.<sup>102</sup> Although this means the land is protected from harmful development, it is also largely off-limits to the Badtjala population; many live in nearby Hervey Bay, only allowed access

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<sup>95</sup> Olga Miller, “‘K’gari, Mrs. Fraser, and Butchulla Oral Tradition,” *Constructions of Colonialism: Perspectives on Eliza Fraser’s Shipwreck*, ed. Ian J. McNiven, Lynette Russell, and Kay Schaffer (Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 1999), 30.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire* (Annandale: Piper Press, 2001), 60.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Eliza Fraser, see McNiven, Russell, and Schaffer, *Constructions of Colonialism*.

<sup>102</sup> Queensland Government, Parks and Forests, “K’gari (Fraser Island), Great Sandy National Park,” accessed November 1, 2018, updated October 26, 2018, <https://www.npsr.qld.gov.au/parks/fraser/about.html>.



to their traditional homelands as tourists.<sup>103</sup> K'gari is an 123-kilometers-long island, part of the Great Sandy Region and home to a great diversity of plant and animal life.<sup>104</sup> The area is massive tourist attraction as the world's largest single sand mass, which supports many ecosystems, with about two-thirds of the island designated national parks.<sup>105</sup> Growing up in nearby Hervey Bay, Foley knew she was from the island, but had no special rights to this land and was not permitted to live there.<sup>106</sup> She remembers in particular being able to see, but not go to, K'Gari as a child and being unsatisfied with her grandmother's explanation as to why.<sup>107</sup> Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after failed attempts at Aboriginal settlements, Badtjala peoples were pushed off the island to make room for white Australians, first for the timber industry and then for tourism and further natural resource extraction. Foley's personal memories exemplify the larger history of keeping Aboriginal people away from their valuable and beautiful country.

In November of 2014, the Badtjala people won a decades-long struggle for native title to the island.<sup>108</sup> For the Badtjala, this victory means that they have the right to request expanded rights to the island, particularly for ceremony as well as subsistence.<sup>109</sup> Foley played a part in this fight as her mother, Shirley, was a very active elder and cultural teacher.<sup>110</sup> Importantly, native title recognition is not the same as land ownership or land rights.<sup>111</sup> The 2014 ruling was a victory, but when I talked to Foley in 2017 about what it actually meant, she was quite ambivalent. Despite the

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<sup>103</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>104</sup> John Sinclair, *Fraser Island and Cooloola* (Sydney: Ure Smith Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> MCA Australia, "Fiona Foley Artist Talk during 'Fiona Foley: Forbidden' exhibition," YouTube video, 36:02, minutes, posted [November 2016], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3mFz3CnAiw>.

<sup>107</sup> MCA Australia, "Fiona Foley Artist Talk."

<sup>108</sup> Kallee Buchanan, Ross Kay, and Elaine Ford, "Fraser Island: Native Title Rights Granted to Indigenous People by Federal Court," *ABC News*, November 6, 2014, accessed September 10, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-24/federal-court-rules-on-fraser-island-native-title/5839474>.

<sup>109</sup> Buchanan, Kay, and Ford, "Fraser Island."

<sup>110</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>111</sup> See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

granting of native title, younger Badtjala people do not have a greater degree of access to the island. Foley told me that only a few jobs had been created for Badtjala people and that those individuals had been discriminated against by other employees.<sup>112</sup> She further explained that the extended rights to the island remain quite limited, enough to say they have nominally been expanded but not more.<sup>113</sup> Although lack of access to land and dispossession are exceedingly common features of colonialism, Foley's ties to K'gari are interesting for her particular ambivalence toward legal processes and recognition of the limitations of legal change. Rampant racism is as much a problem of society as law and the connection between law, society, and attitudes is a frequent focus Foley's work, especially those that present distinct historical moments.

Foley has written about the history and colonial legacy of K'gari as a contributor to *Constructions of Colonialism: Perspectives on Eliza Fraser's Shipwreck* (1999), a book edited by Ian McNiven and Lynette Russell, that quite deliberately considers Eliza Fraser's impact on the colonial landscape.<sup>114</sup> Eliza Fraser was shipwrecked on K'gari for several weeks in 1836 and regaled the public upon return with stories of her ill treatment, now understood as fulfilling the role of a Badtjala woman. Foley's article titled, "A Blast from the Past," is brief, but cutting.<sup>115</sup> As the title suggests, reckoning with the past is a violent, damaging enterprise as is blasting into the present, or perhaps, always remaining through prejudices and racism. Foley challenges the premise of the book as she is forced to contend with the mendacious figure of Fraser instead of an Aboriginal heroine. Even in this short essay, Foley's practice of research is apparent from her discussion of Amalie Dietrich, a botanist who studied Aboriginal remains, and the theories of

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<sup>112</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Elaine Brown, "Eliza Fraser: A Historical Record," in McNiven, Russell, and Schaffer, *Constructions of Colonialism*, 20–21.

<sup>115</sup> Fiona Foley, "A Blast from the Past," in McNiven, Russell, and Schaffer, *Constructions of Colonialism*, 163–73.

Franz Fanon and of bell hooks. Her reference to Amalie Dietrich demonstrates Europeans' lack of concern for Aboriginal remains and connects to postcolonial struggles and anti-Black racism globally. Foley argues that, "What has tended to take place through the writings of Australian historians and academics is a gross romanticizing of life in the colony based on British ignorance of the complex systems of Aboriginal languages, kinship, religion, art, and science."<sup>116</sup> She laments the colonial legacy of Australia, while suggesting a somewhat healing action of constructing Aboriginal monuments, which could serve as a means to remember and understand.<sup>117</sup> Though her monumental work is not explored in detail in this text, Foley's desire to pay homage and highlight Aboriginal people is a through line of her work.

In addition to familial knowledge, Foley possesses an extensive formal education as well; she studied sculpture and printmaking at the Sydney College of the Arts from 1984–86. She recently received her PhD from Griffith University in Brisbane for a project on the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, demonstrating her emphasis on history, especially the turn of the twentieth century in Queensland.<sup>118</sup> Foley is a member of the first generation of city-based Aboriginal artists to achieve national and international fame.<sup>119</sup> Although not widely known in the United States, Fiona Foley is a prominent artist who has exhibited nationally at Australia's major museums and globally in Austria, China, Ireland, Japan, and the United States.<sup>120</sup> She was a member of the Boomalli 9, so named for their founding of the Boomalli Cooperative gallery, the first gallery founded by and dedicated to the exhibition of art

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 171–72.

<sup>118</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>119</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 13.

<sup>120</sup> The biographical information comes from a wide number of sources but can also be found in Fiona Foley's unpaginated CV in Foley, "Horror Has a Face."

by nontraditional or city-based Aboriginal artists.<sup>121</sup> Many of these individuals are extremely prominent today as artists, curators, and other arts professionals. After the expansion of Aboriginal rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s was a time of activism in the cultural sphere.<sup>122</sup> Aboriginal art, and Indigenous art more broadly, has grown in recognition, but at the time of Boomalli's founding there were no spaces in Australia to specifically display art like Foley's, which references her Badtjala background but is not traditional Badtjala art.<sup>123</sup> Although her time at the gallery was somewhat brief in the context of its thirty-year history, her interest in activism and institutions has remained strong. Foley's practice as an artist and curator has been in part fueled by her desire to challenge the status quo of acceptable art, history, and ideas.

The work discussed in this chapter evinces persistent and continuing themes in Foley's practice, attempting to conceptualize how her work comments on history and society through a Badtjala lens. The works highlighted foreground the practice that Foley implements to represent herself and Aboriginal women. Larger-scale public works, such as her installations in the State Library of Queensland, have explored historical moments and the role of opium in Aboriginal Queensland communities.<sup>124</sup> Though this work is inevitably related to the practice discussed here, there is a clear distinction between the type of art Foley makes for broad public consumption and works meant for art-centered venues. In short, the works examined are more intimate, those into which the artist figures heavily. Foley's public art, visible on the streets and in public institutions of Australia's major cities, is purposefully less figurative and less personal than the smaller works, focused upon to be immediately impactful.

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<sup>121</sup> Jonathon Jones, "Boomalli: 20 Years On," exhibition text (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007).

<sup>122</sup> There are several useful sources on the history of Aboriginal rights movements and the transition from activism to art including Ian McLean, *White Aborigines* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>123</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 13.

<sup>124</sup> Foley, "I Speak to Cover the Mouth of Silence," 56–57.

Along with themes of history and law, in particular biases and limitations, repetition is a major facet of Foley's work. Her course of study at Sydney College of the Arts was focused on sculpture and printmaking, both of which rely heavily on replication and repetition.<sup>125</sup> As Foley has always worked in sculptural forms periodically, this training is readily apparent. More difficult to see is her knowledge of printmaking. However, the character of printmaking, working in series format, means her related two-dimensional works are evoked by the photographic series as well as her more recent series of breastplate works. Rather than create a piece and move to another idea, Foley returns repeatedly to reconsider objects, themes, and terms. The work does not appear derivative of past incarnations; rather the reworking of themes in different visual forms and mediums is a strength of her practice.

Her repetition suggests that the core concerns of her research-driven, historically informed creations are as yet unresolved.<sup>126</sup> Until these histories are more readily understood and remembered, the work cannot be complete. The series discussed below are *Badtjala Woman* (1994), *Native Blood* (1994), *Black Velvet* (1996), *Wild Times Call* (2001), *Black Velvet* (2002), *Nulla 4 Eva* (2009), and *Horror Has a Face* (2017). The first two series, which can both be classified as restaging of ethnographic photography, are still Foley's most famous and indicative of Foley perpetual association with bodily practice. The *Black Velvet* works appear depart aesthetically but are not due to their subject matter of Aboriginal women and sexual violence. *Wild Times Call* and *Nulla 4 Eva* are separated by seven years and thousands of miles, but in each one Foley takes on an identity that is not hers, first as a Native American (*Wild Times Call*) and then as a Muslim (*Nulla 4 Eva*). Finally, her most recent *Horror Has a Face* (2017) exemplifies Foley's

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 55.

practice of creating bodily adornments and exploring historical photographic series with the notable difference of not including her own bodies.

By focusing on early, mid-career, and recent works, repetition of themes of embodiment and identification are examined in her works. Between these series, Foley has curated, taught, written articles, completed a PhD, shown her work, and worked on many public-art commissions. The selected works, mostly photographic series, are pieces which tie deeply to Foley's personal forms of identification, her emphasis on colonial history and research, and her use of her own body. Rather than offer a comprehensive survey of Foley's career, this chapter demonstrates her use of her body in her work, which has in part defined the career of an artist who has subsequently moved away from this practice.

## 2.1 Reusing and Recreating Ethnographic Photography

Since the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, Indigenous and non-European peoples were often photographed often by white Europeans.<sup>127</sup> Many of these extant photographs are understood as broadly ethnographic, meant to document an individual as an ethnic type.<sup>128</sup> Photographs of Indigenous peoples were often taken in studios and, in addition to fulfilling stereotypes or tropes of wild Natives, many were composed studio portraits. Taken for a variety of distinct purposes, these images represent exchanges between individuals, lost in time,

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<sup>127</sup> For detailed discussion of these histories see Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), or Jane Lydon, ed., *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2014). Both books provide detailed and nuanced discussions of the role of photography in colonial contexts.

<sup>128</sup> Jane Lydon, ed., *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2014).

particularly on the side of the Indigenous individual posing. Some Indigenous scholars, such as Michael Aird, have published extensively on how photography was valued and prized within Indigenous communities.<sup>129</sup> Aird's work demonstrates that in contemporaneous to ethnographic-type photography, Aboriginal peoples were commissioning and using these images for commemoration much as white Australians did.<sup>130</sup>

Indigenous communities can sometimes identify formerly unknown individuals, yet bodies in these photographs remain a real and conceptual problem.<sup>131</sup> Who owns the ethnographic photograph? Who has access to them, the specific or the general community? More to the point of this chapter, what does one do with them? Several artists, including Foley, have provided the same answer to this latter question: to embody these images, give them life through the act of re-creation, recasting them with the contemporary artist. Foley's practice both reuses ethnographic photography and restages or re-creates it through her own body. The series discussed below, *Badtjala Woman* and *Native Blood* (both 1994) are works for which Foley is the best known, attention that, in part, has led to a shift in her relationship to ethnographic photography and including herself in images. She was reluctant to talk about these works and referred to them as "embarrassing" when I interviewed her.<sup>132</sup> Despite her reticence in discussing these works, they are powerful images and have paved the way for her more ambitious projects involving set and costume designers and hired actors.

In his 1996 essay, "The Artist as Ethnographer," Hal Foster described artists' practice of utilizing ethnography—the writing of culture—as a method of art-making and exploring their own

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<sup>129</sup> See Michael Aird, *Portraits of Our Elders* (Brisbane: Queensland Museum, 1993).

<sup>130</sup> Michael Aird, interview with the author, Brisbane, Australia, July 10, 2015.

<sup>131</sup> Several articles in Lydon, *Calling the Shots*, demonstrate this possibility.

<sup>132</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

subjectivities.<sup>133</sup> According to Foster, this impulse, “the ethnographic turn,” functioned to “disrupt dominant culture by questioning strict stereotypes.”<sup>134</sup> Colonial encounters through the ethnographic practice of photographing individuals as types representative of their respective groups served as a basis of *Badtjala Woman*, which includes *Badtjala Woman (two sets of beads)*, *Badtjala Woman (crossed string)*, and *Badtjala Woman (with collecting bag)* (Figs. 2.1–2.3).<sup>135</sup> This and the *Native Blood* series of the same year are the result of several years of thinking and research surrounding Aboriginal peoples in ethnographic photographs. Significantly, in the years prior to Foster’s famous essay, her ethnographic turn was less a sudden decision so much as the product of years of research and consideration of how to make art that related to her particular sense of Indigeneity.

During her second year at East Sydney Technical College, Foley began to use general Aboriginal symbols, mostly from Arnhem Land, to create work that reflected her Aboriginal heritage.<sup>136</sup> According to Foley, these early works were not indicative of her individual experience, but they helped pave the way for her to move into exploring her own history.<sup>137</sup> One approach Foley took was to seek out actual images of her people, as seen in her early series *Survival, I-X* (1988, Fig. 2.4). In *Survival*, Foley creates a collection of photographs of Badtjala people found in the John Oxley State Library of the State Library of Queensland.<sup>138</sup> The images reproduced in this series include the bust-length photograph of a Badtjala woman that inspired her later self-portraits. *Survival I-II* includes a very dark image of a Badtjala woman from 1899 examined below. Though

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<sup>133</sup> Foster, “Artist as Ethnographer.”

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>135</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 68.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Access to this library is relatively open so it is possible she made several trips into their photographic collections in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Across sources, she has suggested the encounter with the photograph took place in the 1990s, though the *Survival* series demonstrates it must have been earlier.



it was purchased by the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGoMA) in 1989, *Survival* has not received much scholarly attention, particularly because Foley's later re-creations of ethnographic photographs with her own body are more compelling.<sup>139</sup> The two photographic prints look like photograph albums, including a Badtjala person at the top and an image of Fraser Island at bottom. It is worth noting that *Survival* was created only a year after James Luna's famed 1987 *Artifact Piece* and less than a decade after Carl Beam's photographs that incorporate ethnographic Mi'kmaq peoples, suggesting a common approach despite disparate locations.<sup>140</sup> As Foley is quite intentional with her titling, the series title *Survival* is worth considering. Does this woman represent Foley's hope for survival, or does Foley herself show that their survival has been assured? Or is the connection of person to landscape instead a comment on country in the Indigenous sense as a pathway to survival of future generations?

Foley used another ethnographic photograph in *Giviid Woman and Mrs. Fraser* (1992), an installation that also included dilly bags, woven bags used for collecting food by Aboriginal women in Australia, rattraps, and identical framed black-and-white portraits of a Badtjala woman (Fig. 2.5).<sup>141</sup> This installation is significant not only as it foreshadows Foley's later imagining of a Badtjala woman, particularly in the dilly bag, but also her typical combination of ethnography and installation; two- and three- dimensional work are repeated and juxtaposed in many of her most recent works and in *Black Velvet* (1996), discussed in depth later. *Giviid Woman and Mrs. Fraser* reverses the ethnographic gaze by simplifying, repeating, and framing the Badtjala woman's photograph like a Warholian piece of Pop art. "Giviid" is word that Badtjala people use to refer to

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<sup>139</sup> QAGoMA Learning, "Fiona Foley: Survival I, II, 1988," Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, <https://learning.qagoma.qld.gov.au/artworks/survival-i-ii/>.

<sup>140</sup> See Carl Beam's images in *The Trickster Shift*, ed. Allan J. Ryan (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).

<sup>141</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 53.

themselves; her individual identity still unknown, yet she is claimed by Foley as one of her people.<sup>142</sup> This giviid woman is given an image, while Eliza Fraser is represented by the rattrops.<sup>143</sup> As in other works, the dilly bags indicate womanhood, particularly specialized women's labor, which Fraser probably required to do as part of living with the Badtjala.<sup>144</sup> Though deemed necessary for women of the community to perform and part of the generous act of endeavoring to include Fraser among the people, Eliza Fraser believed that physical tasks such as gathering food were a form of torture and below her station as an upper-class woman.<sup>145</sup> Though Foley is related to immigrant white Australians through her father, Fraser is a figure that Foley is often asked about simply for Fraser's connection to Badtjala country.<sup>146</sup> Foley's reuse of the images of this particular Aboriginal woman demonstrates the complex relationship between contemporary Indigenous people and nineteenth-century photography. Not simply disgusted by racism inherent in the ethnographic photograph, Foley has seemed to engage with the image repeatedly to elevate the figure, finally taking on this role herself.

In the early 1990s, Foley encountered a 1899 photograph titled *Fraser Island Woman* while researching at the John Oxley Library (Fig. 2.6).<sup>147</sup> According to Foley, she instantly recognized this woman as one of her own people by the shape of the woman's breasts.<sup>148</sup> In the *Badtjala Woman* series, which was photographed by Greg Weight, Foley posed her topless body, looking out into the distance, in three heavily shadowed, bust-length photographs.<sup>149</sup> In the first two photographs, she wears Badtjala necklaces, and her hair blows gently back, imparting a sense of

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 53–56.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> "Introduction," in McNiven, Russell, and Schaffer, *Constructions of Colonialism*.

<sup>146</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 52.

<sup>147</sup> Fiona Foley, "A Blast from the Past," 165.

<sup>148</sup> Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 43.

<sup>149</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 67.

movement to the image.<sup>150</sup> The third photograph is distinct from the others as it shows her face in profile.<sup>151</sup> Taken when Foley was thirty, the photographs display a confident young woman with long, flowing hair. They are staged incorporating trappings of Aboriginal material culture, including shell necklaces and, in one photograph, a dilly bag—an Aboriginal woven bag for gathering food that Foley later reinterpreted in *Black Velvet* (1996). The series is striking for its composition, which draws the eye to the artist’s features and Badtjala ornaments, as well as its message—Foley proudly claiming her Badtjala heritage.

The series bears striking resemblance to the ethnographic photograph *Fraser Island Woman*, which features a young woman adorned with necklaces but no blouse. Speaking broadly of Foley’s practice, the anthropologist Diane Losche argues: “Foley reinvents the nude, moving it from the realm of patriarchal domination and colonization to the zone of the maternal breast, recovering in herself, in her own body, her lost ancestors.”<sup>152</sup> Nudity is used here to connect Foley and her work with the nude in Western art and its idealized female form. These photographs straddle the line between being a nude, with a perfect body, and a naked person, with a marked, imperfect body.<sup>153</sup> The nineteenth-century photograph represents an ethnic type marked by beaded necklaces, dark skin, and bare breasts; Foley’s series echoes this typology, accessorized so as to be recognizably Badtjala, but as the artist she possesses an authorship that the original sitter did not have.

This work ties to the global practice of artists replicating the display of Indigenous or ‘othered’ bodies with their own. Dating to the 1980s, this strategy was implemented by artists such

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Diane Losche, “Reinventing the Nude: Fiona Foley’s Museology,” in *Past Present: The National Women’s Art Anthology*, ed. Joan Kerr and Jo Holder (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1999), 102.

<sup>153</sup> McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 7.

as Rebecca Belmore, Coco Fusco, and James Luna.<sup>154</sup> The series is deeply personal as Foley was inspired by specific archival photographs of her own people. Growing up surrounded by Badtjala language and stories, Foley has said, “My culture comes from my mother,” the Badtjala leader Shirley Foley.<sup>155</sup> Foley also has spoken about the influence of her mother’s mother, strong Aboriginal women serving as her earliest role models.<sup>156</sup> She initially thought she would use her mother in the series, but decided instead to use herself, understanding that “I can use my body to speak to that history.”<sup>157</sup> By “that history,” she means the period in the late nineteenth century when many studio images of Aboriginal people circulated for the enjoyment of a mostly white audience.

Continuing the theme of restaging an ethnographic photograph, Foley created *Native Blood* also in 1994, a series of three photographs of the artist, partially clothed and set against a wave backdrop (Figs. 2.7–2.9).<sup>158</sup> The art historian Helen McDonald explores this work through a feminist perspective in *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. Foley told McDonald that the series was not created with feminist intent, but McDonald felt strongly that this was the correct lens with which to understand the piece.<sup>159</sup> Focusing on Foley’s photograph in which she lounges on the floor, McDonald interpreted the series as Foley presenting the ideal woman as Aboriginal, thus contributing to the broader effort among woman artists to reconstitute the ideal female

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<sup>154</sup> For a broader discussion of the self as other, see Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*.

<sup>155</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>156</sup> Alison Kubler, “Fiona Foley in Conversation,” in Michelle Helmrich, Franca Tamisari, Fiona Nicoli, Rachel Kent, Louise Martin-Chew, and Gary Lee, with Maurice O’Riordan, eds., *Fiona Foley: Forbidden* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary; Brisbane: University of Queensland Art Museum, 2009), 14–32.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> As with the *Badtjala Woman* series, I have chosen not to illustrate *Native Blood* in this publication out of respect for the artist, who prefers not to have these images shown. However, they have been printed in books and are held in public collections. To view these images, see Shepparton Art Museum, “Fiona Foley,” <http://sheppartonartmuseum.com.au/paradise-again-gallery-item/!/312/item/28>; and Museum of Contemporary Art, “Fiona Foley: *Badtjala Woman (Crossed String)*, 1994,” <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/1995.101B>.

<sup>159</sup> McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 45.

form.<sup>160</sup> McDonald acknowledges the photograph's relationship to ethnographic photography but ultimately characterizes the piece as an appropriation of the female nude, significant for its relation to idealization.<sup>161</sup> Though the image merits comparison to other art historical nudes, McDonald's discussion of idealization detracts from the manner in which Foley exposes the staged nature of the ethnographic photographs. In her source material, idealization was not the original intent, nor is it Foley's. There are examples of non-European women posed in ways that evoke classical Western imagery, but this was by no means the norm.<sup>162</sup> Ethnographic photographs were largely meant to be taxonomic, so rather than showing an ideal beauty, an Indigenous or otherwise non-white woman would be understood as representative of her specific race.<sup>163</sup> Foley uses her body to recreate and honor the original Badtjala sitter by refusing the anonymity of the title, *Fraser Island Woman*, when she obviously had a name (Fig. 2.10). Foley thus criticizes the intent of ethnographic photography, while also demonstrating its continued utility in providing people with images, which would not have otherwise been taken or survived over the years, of their families or ancestors, to whom they are not just anonymous types.<sup>164</sup> The series title, *Native Blood*, refers to the artist herself, as a possessor of Badtjala heritage. By using the term "native blood," Foley relates herself to global Indigeneity. In Australia, the right to claim Aboriginality is generally understood to be personal, yet proof of Aboriginality, often in the form of a letter, can be required

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Freda Freiberg, "White Light," in *Difficult to Light: The White Woman Variation # 2* (Melbourne: Linda Sproul, 1996), 1–2.

<sup>163</sup> Shauna Bostock-Smith, "Connecting with the Cowans," in Lydon, *Calling the Shots*, 69–70.

<sup>164</sup> Since the early 1990s, independent researcher Michael Aird, himself of Aboriginal descent, has been a pioneer of research into photographs of Aboriginal peoples. His work has shifted the conversation around ethnographic photographs to focus on their function as records of individuals and of people's families. See Aird, *Portraits of Our Elders*.

to be eligible for particular opportunities.<sup>165</sup> According to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, there are three criteria to obtain such proof: “being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, being accepted as such by the community in which you live or formerly lived.”<sup>166</sup> These touchstones are largely informal and based on self and community identification, unlike in other countries. As many scholars have pointed out, blood is used to categorize and label many animals, such as dogs, but only Native peoples among humans.<sup>167</sup> In the United States and Canada, membership in Native tribes and/or nations is often at least partially determined by blood quantum, the amount of Native blood one possesses as determined by historic rolls of tribal members.<sup>168</sup>

In *Badtjala Woman* and *Native Blood*, Foley repeats the same gesture of restaging: moving from the particular, her people, to the general, an Indigenous or “Native” woman. Like *Badtjala Woman*, the likely source of *Native Blood*, as identified by McDonald, is also an ethnographic photograph from the John Oxley Library (Fig. 2.10).<sup>169</sup> This sitter appears to be the same woman from the *Fraser Island Woman* photograph (Fig. 2.6); both of these images were taken in 1899.<sup>170</sup> In *Native Blood*, Foley’s platform shoes purposefully mirror the black, yellow, and red colors of the Aboriginal flag, a contrast to the black-and-white 1899 photograph in which the Badtjala woman is barefoot (Fig. 2.7). This flag is a pan-Aboriginal symbol of strength, unity, and the

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<sup>165</sup> Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), “Proof of Aboriginality,” reviewed November 27, 2018, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family/before-you-start/proof-aboriginality>.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> This conversation about blood and identity is a major topic in Native Studies. For more information, see Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–48.

<sup>169</sup> McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 51–53.

<sup>170</sup> Fred Williams, *Written in the Sand: A History of Fraser Island* (Milton, Australia: Jacaranda Press, 1982), 7.

continued resilience of Aboriginal peoples.<sup>171</sup> *Native Blood* is thus meant to be a tongue-in-cheek simplification of the artist as a Native stereotype, the lounging topless Native, wearing her political beliefs on her feet via the Aboriginal flag. The original photograph also evinces a kind of role-playing. Several missions were established near K’Gari at the time the photograph was taken so women’s typical attire would have been much more Westernized and covered up.<sup>172</sup> It was also quite common to stage Aboriginal people who were living in or near cities as Native types for commercial gain.<sup>173</sup> This nineteenth-century Badtjala woman is calm and dignified, not entirely naked nor accessible to the viewer. Foley writes of her: “Yet I live in hope that my heroine could be your heroine, as she defies all odds with an unspoken eloquence of spunk.”<sup>174</sup> Foley thus positions herself as a contemporary heroine, reclaiming some agency, to be named and known.<sup>175</sup>

Multiple sources have used the term “brave” to describe Foley’s decision to use her own body in *Native Blood* and *Badtjala Woman*, potentially related to her use of the term “heroine.”<sup>176</sup> This term is particularly troubling and perhaps why Foley now prefers not to discuss and finds these works embarrassing.<sup>177</sup> By labeling use of the body as “brave,” scholars are suggesting nudity is somehow extraordinary and the act of baring one’s body is unique. Based on the existence of several texts on artists’ use of their bodies, it is clearly not singular.<sup>178</sup> The unique aspect of this work is Foley’s sourcing, her desire to reclaim and make positive something she viewed as

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<sup>171</sup> Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), “Aboriginal Flag,” reviewed March 29, 2019, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aboriginal-flag>.

<sup>172</sup> F. Williams, *Written in the Sand*, 53–66.

<sup>173</sup> For more detailed discussions of ethnographic and anthropological photographs, see Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology*; and Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology, and Museums* (New York: Berg, 2001).

<sup>174</sup> Foley, “A Blast from the Past,” 167.

<sup>175</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 53; McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 45.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>178</sup> See Sally O’Reilly, *The Body in Contemporary Art*, World of Art (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009), and Nicholas Thomas, *Body Art*, World of Art (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

coerced, which is part of a larger trajectory of the importance of highlighting history in her works. Rather than brave, it is useful to conceptualize these pieces as *erotic* in the sense of the scholar Audre Lorde. Lorde writes that, “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.”<sup>179</sup> By referencing the shape of the woman’s breasts as her own, Foley is suggesting a deep connection between them, familial and erotic, though not sexual. Rather than dismissing the two nineteenth-century photographs outright because of their racist motivations, Foley used them as inspiration and considered the unnamed Badtjala woman a heroine.<sup>180</sup> Foley is then putting herself into the space of her supposed ancestor while attempting to understand how she feels, enacting the gestures and choosing Greg Weight, a white Australian photographer, to take her pictures.<sup>181</sup> There is a visible and conceptual distinction between *Native Blood* and *Badtjala Woman*, the latter a more staid re-creation and the former a playful interpretive take. In both instances, Foley is visualizing the erotic as a sense of feeling; her nudity in these works serves as a sense of strength much as Lorde describes.<sup>182</sup> As viewers, we see the erotica aspect of it, but the more internal sense of the erotic is clearer by considering Foley’s description of the work.

It is worth revisiting the larger crux of Foley’s article, in which she was asked once again to contend with the famous colonial-era Australia woman Eliza Fraser for whom Fraser Island is named. In her text, Foley laments that it is impossible to imagine an Aboriginal woman having that kind of legacy, such power in the cultural imagination. She says, “So to recast the heroine a perverse reenactment takes place: the Black heroine of yore. The heroine in this instance is

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<sup>179</sup> Lorde, *Master’s Tools*, 6.

<sup>180</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 53, and McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 45.

<sup>181</sup> Gregg Weight Photography, “Portraits,” Artist website, <http://www.gregweightphoto.com.au/portraitsMixed.html>.

<sup>182</sup> Lorde, *Master’s Tools*, 13.



Badtjala. The only way I could come close to her was to recast her in my image.”<sup>183</sup> The reenactment is perverse because it is impossible for Foley to imagine a world that equally values the lives and legacies of white and Aboriginal women. Foley is very much concerned with women, particularly the place and role of Aboriginal women in society. She writes, “Women have effected difference through sharing secret/sacred knowledge and objects.”<sup>184</sup> The sharing is between and among the women, though Foley brings these insights to the outside world through her art practice. She shares the experience of being photographed with her “Black heroine,” and imagines a future in which these images belong not in the library, but the art museum. Could the “secret/sacred knowledge” she discusses be the erotic? This is very different from the hypersexual stereotype of Aboriginal women but is instead an intrinsic value understood in the way they see their own bodies and selves through the secret/sacred.

## **2.2 *Wild Times Call* (2001): Embodying Native America**

Fiona Foley’s photographic series *Wild Times Call* (2001), photographed by Peter Foe, evokes the global nature of Indigeneity (Figs. 2.11–2.17).<sup>185</sup> These works are part of a larger project that includes weaving and an installation, which was shown in its entirety in Florida and Australia in 2001–2.<sup>186</sup> The title of the series indicates her perception of the wildness of the United States. It is also influenced by popular culture at the time: movies such as *Legends of the Fall*,

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<sup>183</sup> Foley, “A Blast from the Past,” 167.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Michele Helmrich, “Looking at You Looking at Me: Performance and Ethnography in Fiona Foley’s Photographs,” in Helmrich et al., *Forbidden*, 20.

<sup>186</sup> Roslyn Oxley 9, “Fiona Foley—Wild Times Call,” press release, March 2002, <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/2002/03/13/22/>.

which glamorized nineteenth-century American frontier life without attention paid to what a devastating period it was for Native Americans and other people of color.<sup>187</sup> *Wild Times Call* was shot in one afternoon with men from the Brighton Reservation of the Seminole Tribe of Florida as models.<sup>188</sup> The Seminole Tribe of Florida is composed of mostly Muskogee-speaking peoples who avoided forced removal in the nineteenth century by creating autonomous communities far from colonial settlements.<sup>189</sup> According to the anthropologist Irvin M. Peithmann, “Seminole . . . means wild, non-domesticated in either Mikasuki or Muskogee language.”<sup>190</sup> This translation is likely an oversimplification of the term “simano-li” (separatist), gesturing to the Seminole Tribe’s survival by refusing to be removed from their land.<sup>191</sup> This definition was unknown to Foley, despite how fitting it is for the series. She intended to connect with local Indigenous peoples, part of the Australian customary practice of acknowledging the traditional owners of the land which one visits.<sup>192</sup>

Given this information, the romantic aesthetic of the series is all the more surprising. Across most of the seven photographs, Foley is pictured alone against a fairly idyllic landscape of fields and lake, exemplified by *Wild Times Call 1* (2001, Fig. 2.11). Foley took the opportunity to acknowledge and collaborate with the Seminole nation, but did not really understand the commercial success and daily lives of these Indigenous peoples so far from her own country.<sup>193</sup> Much coordination was done with the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum so

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<sup>187</sup> Djon Mundine, interview with the author, Charlottesville, Virginia, February 23, 2019.

<sup>188</sup> Helmrich, “Looking at You Looking at Me,” 34.

<sup>189</sup> Mikaela M. Adams, “Race, Kinship, and Belonging among the Florida Seminoles,” in *The Native South: New Histories and Enduring Legacies*, ed. Garrison Tim Alan and Greg O’Brien (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 145.

<sup>190</sup> Irvin M. Peithmann, *The unconquered Seminole Indians; pictorial history of the Seminole Indians*, (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Association, 1957), 14.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

that Foley could borrow an authentic nineteenth-century Seminole dress that she wore in the photograph series.<sup>194</sup> However, no consultation was suggested or provided to help her truly look the part.<sup>195</sup> The dress itself would have been complimented by an updo, typically a bun with bangs, which Foley learned only after the series was shot.<sup>196</sup> According to the tribe's website, "Until the 1950s, a Seminole woman's hair was only publicly let down in times of personal mourning, a customary practice by a woman and her kinswomen."<sup>197</sup> Thus, Foley unwittingly played the part of woman in mourning. The result is embodiment without enactment, a partial understanding and role-playing of a Seminole woman. The sepia tone which suffuses these early 2000s images also creates a sense of drama and an air of authenticity, which is immediately dispelled by viewing the series as a whole or reading the date it was made.

Foley, who is so very connected to Badtjala language and customs, was not aware that the Seminole nation of Florida is an extremely enterprising affiliated group of tribes.<sup>198</sup> Instead of welcoming her as a distant relative, the men included in Foley's series gave her a quick tour of their businesses, including a wildlife park and a casino, and their apartments.<sup>199</sup> She left with striking photographs, an odd encounter, and a question, "Where are the women?"<sup>200</sup> Perhaps because Foley's visit was facilitated by a non-Native institution, the university museum, she was given limited access to that which would cast the Seminole nation in a positive light, but she was not given the opportunity to connect with other Indigenous women. As a good guest, Foley did not question the access she received.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Helmrich, "Looking at You Looking at Me," 41.

<sup>199</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

This entanglement of misunderstanding comes through in the lovely, slightly uncomfortable- photographs. In *Wild Times Call 2*, six solemn-looking Seminole men surround Foley—with her correct clothing but incorrect hairstyle—wearing ribbon shirts and legibly Native-patterned clothing (Fig. 2.12). Foley is about five feet tall and for all the photographs with them had to stand on a box, the difference between her and these men becoming all the more apparent. The close cropping displays only a small amount of the natural landscape, so it appears as a group portrait. In the other group photograph, *Wild Times Call 4*, these same men pose with Foley around a large SUV; a thatched-roof building is in the back along with part of a big rig and, in the distance, a tall light post is visible (Fig. 2.14). Unlike the other photographs, this piece is unquestionably contemporary due to the vehicles. It is reminiscent of the work of the twentieth-century photographer Horace Poolaw, who documented contemporary Kiowa life including events such as American Indian Expositions and weddings.<sup>202</sup> The other photographs seem to be Foley's take on photography of Native Americans: she wears a traditional dress, surrounding nearly empty landscapes, upon which she gazes somberly. According to Foley, her encounter with the men of Seminole nation was not particularly negative or positive. From the resulting images, it seems instead rather uncanny and begs the question: what type of images Foley would have produced if she had been given the opportunity to learn about the lifeways of the tribe in a more expansive manner and to interact with women as well as men? Foley's earlier *Native Blood* (1994) series also visualized being Native in a part-ethnographic, part-camp photographic style. What distinguishes *Wild Times Call* is the interaction between Foley and the people from the tribes of the Seminole

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<sup>202</sup> See Nancy Marie Mithlo, ed., *For a Love of His People: The Photography of Horace Poolaw*, The Henry Roe Cloud Series on American Indians and Modernity (Washington D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2014).

nation reserve. The men were willing to be part of the photographic series and were posed in the same space as the artist, so they were Native subjects together.

In our interview, Foley primarily discussed her surprise at the reservation's many business enterprises and her lack of interaction with women.<sup>203</sup> Instead of suggesting that Foley simply misunderstood Seminole culture willingly or that she was not given proper access, it is more useful to conceptualize this series as a rare moment of productive confusion. In Australia, Foley often works with actors to stage her photographs in consultation with the local community.<sup>204</sup> The title of the series was part of her perception of the wildness of the United States, though the physical landscape of the areas she visited in Florida were manicured. I did not specifically ask Foley about the photographer Edward S. Curtis as a source, but she and Michele Helmrich have suggested that a spread in *O Magazine* was a major source.<sup>205</sup> Pointing to Oprah, the suggestion is that not only white people, but also people of color, can romanticize Native life. Moreover, there is an abundance, or perhaps overabundance, of this imagery of solemn looking Native people that references to specific nineteenth-century sources are easily lost or overlooked.

Turning to the final image, *Wild Times 7*, Foley presents herself alone in a field with a forested area in the background (Fig. 2.17). So ingrained is the trope of Native Americans looking serious, that Foley mentioned no specific nineteenth-century sources when I interviewed her, but instead discussed early-2000s views of the late nineteenth century as genteel. While Foley romanticizes Native American life, she simultaneously comments on its romanticism. She presents herself as a "wild" Native woman, replicating her practice in Australia of embodying Indigenous stereotypes, but not getting it right despite attempting to connect with a community and be accurate

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<sup>203</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Helmrich, "Looking at You Looking at Me," 34.

as possible. Foley asks viewers to consider how much these stereotypes continue to be projected onto Native Americans and thus spotlights the highly composed nature of nineteenth-century ethnographic photography. She visually romanticizes and simultaneously comments on the romanticism of Native American life. As an Indigenous person, she feels immediately connected to this community. She takes on a role she was never meant to fill, calling viewers' attention to views they may hold about the wildness of Native Americans.

### **2.3 Abstracting Aboriginal Womanhood: Foley's Black Velvet Works**

Throughout her career, Fiona Foley has created many works with the title *Black Velvet*, two words which invokes stereotypes of Aboriginal womanhood.<sup>206</sup> The first *Black Velvet* piece from 1996 uses a simple abstracted shape to represent this concept (Fig. 2.18). *Black Velvet's* shopping bag material, assemblage technique, and simple abstracted appliques make the work appear drastically different from *Native Blood* and *Badtjala Woman*. However, taken together, these photographic works from 1994 and the *Black Velvet* pieces from 1996 convey Foley's sense of Aboriginal womanhood as informed by the history and policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a tumultuous period in the artist's home state of Queensland, especially for the region's Aboriginal peoples, who were often displaced from their homelands as a result of newly established settlements as well as land and resource grabs.<sup>207</sup> For Foley, being an

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<sup>206</sup> I published a version of this section in 2019. See Marina Tyquiengco, "Black Velvet: Aboriginal Womanhood in the Art of Fiona Foley," *Feminist Studies* 45, nos. 2–3 (2019): 467–500.

<sup>207</sup> Kubler, "Fiona Foley in Conversation," 16.

Aboriginal woman today necessitates an understanding of an earlier historical moment in which biases against Aboriginal women were set, stereotyping them both as natural victims of their Aboriginal husbands and as sexually deviant. According to the scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “All Indigenous women share the common experience of living in a society that deprecates us.”<sup>208</sup> The *Black Velvet* works concern the deprecation of Aboriginal women through their hypersexualization and are literal objects Foley creates from an objectifying concept.

The term “black velvet” is not widely used in Australia today, perhaps because it dates to the late nineteenth-century Australian frontier.<sup>209</sup> The historian Anne McGrath is one of few scholars focused attention on these words. In an article on relationships between white men and Aboriginal women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, McGrath writes, “‘Black Velvet’ was the term used to describe Aboriginal women with whom white men had sexual intercourse.”<sup>210</sup> McGrath further explains that the term could mean either the women themselves or the act of having sex with them.<sup>211</sup> Black Velvet was also the name of a popular alcoholic drink at the time, “velvet” connoting the smoothness of women’s skin. McGrath challenges the notion that these relations were akin to prostitution, which seemed to be the dominant view at the time.<sup>212</sup> She explains that with so few white women on the frontier, Aboriginal women were seen not only as sexual objects but also as potential partners.<sup>213</sup> However, laws discouraged long-term legal partnerships and did nothing to protect Aboriginal women from abuse, including rape. These same

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<sup>208</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*, xvi.

<sup>209</sup> Anne McGrath, “‘Black Velvet’: Aboriginal women and Their Relations with White Men in the Northern Territory, 1910–1940,” in *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, ed. Kay Daniels (Sydney: Fontana Books, 1984), 233.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

laws punished Aboriginal women—not men—for prostitution.<sup>214</sup> Although the law and historical record demonstrate the prevalence of abuse and lack of protection of women, there were also many types of mutually beneficial relationships, evidence of Aboriginal women’s agency amid deep inequality.<sup>215</sup> Other historians have focused on this period because of its importance in the growth of progressive and feminist movements in Australia, many of which had a particular concern for Aboriginal women. The historian Marilyn Lake writes that, to white Australian feminists and many other reformers in the early twentieth century, “‘Native women’ were the key to the position of Aboriginal people because of their use and abuse as ‘sex slaves’—by both Aboriginal and white men.”<sup>216</sup> Lake goes on to argue that the dominant society’s attitudes toward Aboriginal women were based on a belief in the brutality of Aboriginal men; hence the abuses of white men were seen as less egregious.<sup>217</sup> The social scientist Amy Humphreys’s analysis of how Aboriginal women were positioned echoes the examination of representations of Aboriginal women from the nineteenth through the twenty-first century in her thesis. Humphreys argues that, across sources and time, Aboriginal women have been portrayed as hypersexualized victims, exculpating men who have or would do them harm.<sup>218</sup> More bluntly, the Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that “sexual intercourse between Indigenous women and white men is a social practice which reinscribes white racial superiority into identities of white masculinity, because for over 200 years the Indigenous woman’s body has been positioned within white society as being accessible, available, deviant, and expendable.”<sup>219</sup> Through this statement, Moreton-Robinson

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 247–52.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>216</sup> Marilyn Lake, “Colonised and Colonising: The White Australian Feminist Subject,” *Women’s History Review* 2, no. 3 (1993): 381.

<sup>217</sup> Lake, “Colonised and Colonising,” 381–83.

<sup>218</sup> Amy Humphreys, “Representations of Aboriginal Women and their Sexuality,” (honor’s thesis, University of Queensland, 2008), 17.

<sup>219</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*, 168.



connects the historical with the present, much as Foley does. Both are concerned with how these ideas rooted in the past about Aboriginal women affect their present.

The term “black velvet” thus points to a variety of attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal women. Echoing the scholarship surrounding the term, Foley identifies black velvet as “a euphemism used by white men to go out and get Aboriginal women. Instead of saying we’re going to get Aboriginal women, [they would say] we’re [going to] get black velvet. So that’s all about men taking Aboriginal women for themselves and doing whatever they want to do to them.”<sup>220</sup> Foley explains that the phrase “black velvet” was used by men about women. Her use of the term thus shifts society’s perspective away from Aboriginal women as objects to instead foreground their roles as subjects and authors. Through her repetition of this theme, Foley encourages viewers of her works to explore the term and evaluate how their perceptions of Aboriginal women might be based on the attitudes of white men.

Considering the artist’s attitude toward her subject matter and feminism generally, it is worth highlighting the growing body of scholarship on Indigenous feminism. In her own work, Foley has cited Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s recent book *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty* (2015).<sup>221</sup> Moreton-Robinson’s work has influenced many scholars by emphasizing the nature of feminism in settler colonial countries as a global and pressing concern. The edited volume, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (2007), likewise provides several examples of scholars taking up the idea of what Indigenous feminism could look like, mostly within the North American context. Generally, these approaches to feminism are based in Indigenous conceptions about the roles and value of women, the feminine as a source of societal

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<sup>220</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>221</sup> Foley, “Biting the Clouds,” 5–14.

power and knowledge that predates Western feminist thought. These approaches also imagine work by women can change society based on community initiatives that operate from the bottom up, rather than top down. Feminist politics and practices that center Indigenous women's issues are growing but are by no means the global norm. Thus, when Foley criticizes feminism, or questions its utility for her and her work, she is not referring to Indigenous iterations of feminism, such as those articulated by Moreton-Robinson. Like Marcia Langton, Foley is commenting specifically on pervasive negative cultural attitudes about Aboriginal women.<sup>222</sup>

Utilizing the form of a mass-produced cotton bag, the aesthetics of *Black Velvet* (1996) reinforce the commonly held nineteenth-century view that Aboriginal women were easily taken and virtually valueless (Fig. 2.18). The piece is composed of nine cotton dilly bags that hang on the wall, each sewn with a simple pattern of pointed oval shapes, red with a black outline.<sup>223</sup> The effect is to make these bags appear quotidian with a mass-produced aesthetic, though in fact, they were each stitched by Foley. The label "dilly bags" suggests an explicitly Aboriginal reading of the piece, since the dilly bag was used widely by women across Indigenous Australia to hold and transport collected food by tying it around their heads, with the bag at the wearer's back like a ponytail.<sup>224</sup> The shape does not automatically register as a dilly bag given the rectangular shape of the canvas, as opposed to the flat-topped, oval shape and woven material of traditional dilly bags.<sup>225</sup> Instead, on these rectangular bags, the pointed oval is the only part somewhat reminiscent of the original. The red and black shape is meant to symbolize Aboriginal women as genitalia, the black representing the outer labia's dark skin and the red standing in for the vulva. These

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<sup>222</sup> Langton, "For Her We Must."

<sup>223</sup> Fiona Foley, *Black Velvet*, 1996.

<sup>224</sup> Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, 51–53.

<sup>225</sup> Western Australian Museum, "Dilly Bags," updated 2014, <http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/intertwined/basket-types/dilly-bags>.

abstracted, but recognizable, female sexual organs reduce Aboriginal women to their sexualities by representing them on easily obtained, everyday objects. As mentioned above, black velvet was also the name of a popular drink, so Foley's decision to place this symbol on an object made for consumer use further emphasizes the term's history of commodification.<sup>226</sup> The sensorial nature of this term extends beyond the look and feel of skin or genitalia into a consumable, a beverage, which was once as popular and widely available as these canvas bags.<sup>227</sup>

The consumable nature of "black velvet" manifests in a more physical, tactile way in Foley's *Black Velvet II*. In 2002, *Black Velvet* was installed in the *Your Place or Mine?* exhibition at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Brisbane, along with a companion ground sculpture, *Black Velvet II* (Fig. 2.19).<sup>228</sup> The IMA's chosen title was purposefully provocative, hinting at a sexual encounter that continues the evening after a date or even a chance meeting. The ground sculpture was re-created in 2009 for *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, Foley's major mid-career solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.<sup>229</sup> *Black Velvet II* repeats the simple pointed oval shape of the original work in a three-dimensional sculpture that sits directly on the ground. The band of black in this piece is much wider next to the red so that, despite the scale, the construction more closely mirrors female genitalia. Composed of charcoal and chilies, the pointed oval becomes organic, textured, and tactile. Charcoal is meant to represent dark complexion, reducing Aboriginality to blackness with a substance that makes marks, a potential tool for drawing. The mark-making capacity also is a nod to ethnography—the writing of culture—a method once used to study Aboriginal peoples. Dried, red chilies take the place of the vulva in *Black Velvet II*,

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>228</sup> Helmrich et al., *Forbidden*, 143.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 85.

forming a mass of small, red, ironically phallic shapes—harmless looking but spicy beneath the skin. Both chilies and charcoal also relate materially to heat through cooking and eating, bodily experiences that are as common as sex. Charcoal also has the capacity to hold heat. Upon entering the gallery, the smell of dried chilies overwhelms a visitor’s nose, making the normally scentless gallery air pungent.<sup>230</sup> The organic and sensory qualities of *Black Velvet II* present a stark contrast to the reproducible quality of the original *Black Velvet* wall installation. These chilies and charcoal bits could even be imagined as the contents of the *Black Velvet* bags, ingredients for an inedible meal. The piece is inherently unstable and time-based, like any organic sculpture. Unlike a clean shopping bag, the charcoal creates marks and residue; the chilies rot and decompose with time. *Black Velvet II* is thus a more embodied take on the concept of “black velvet,” occupying physical space and leaving evidence on anyone who might try to take these objects.

In 2014, Foley once again took up this phrase, rendering it in large metal lettering for her three-dimensional text sculpture, *Black Velvet* (Fig. 2.20). The industrially fabricated steel piece evokes *Dispersed*, a work Foley made of wood and bullets in 2008.<sup>231</sup> The term “dispersed” was used as a euphemism for the displacement or violent removal of Aboriginal peoples by the government and white settlers in order to obtain their land.<sup>232</sup> Like *Black Velvet*, *Dispersed* points to violent colonial encounters, though not explicitly sexual in nature. The text of *Black Velvet* (2014) is presented in two rows, with the letter “B” in black, the letter “V” in red, and the other letters in silver (Fig. 2.20). At around four feet tall, this easily readable, all-capitalized serif-font sculpture is large enough to walk and move around. When displayed on a museum floor, this piece

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<sup>230</sup> As I have not seen the piece installed, the smell of the chilies did not initially occur to me. This information was provided by Fiona Foley, email with the author, February 2, 2019.

<sup>231</sup> Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art Learning, “Fiona Foley, *Dispersed*, 2008,” <https://learning.qagoma.qld.gov.au/artworks/dispersed>.

<sup>232</sup> Foley, “Biting the Clouds,” 7–8.

presents a puzzle to visitors—a little-used but importantly scaled phrase, impossible to ignore because of the space it takes up.

The most recent *Black Velvet* (2017) piece is on a much smaller scale than previous iterations of the theme (Fig. 2.21). It is a breastplate, with dark brown, bold, capitalized text set against rose gold. The piece refers to nameplate necklaces, a fashionable accessory, and to colonial breastplates.<sup>233</sup> From 1816 to 1930, the British colonial government in Australia gifted breastplates to small numbers of Aboriginal people for helping the colonial government or in recognition of their powerful positions in their communities.<sup>234</sup> Breastplates were important cultural objects for individuals and demonstrate a colonial attempt to place a Western social system, that of kings and queens and other colonial labels, on Aboriginal peoples.<sup>235</sup> Unlike the breastplate by Foley, they were meant as personalized objects, prized and kept in families, yet also served as complicated, painful reminders of the colonial state.<sup>236</sup> By using the phrase “black velvet,” Foley feminizes this object originally given to both men and women. She repeats the usage of original breastplates by using a term for Aboriginal peoples coined by non-Aboriginal peoples, alluding to the fact that breastplates were often given with the expectation of taking land, or in this case, perhaps the wearer if she happened to be an Aboriginal woman.

The *Black Velvet* breastplate is part of a larger series of sixteen which were part of *Horror Has a Face*, a body of work including a photographic series that responds to the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (Figs. 2.21–2.36).<sup>237</sup> This legislation is

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<sup>233</sup> Elina Spilia, “Relics and Ghosts,” in *Sanctuary: Brook Andrew* (Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2015), 71.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid..

<sup>237</sup> Martin-Chew, “Fiona Foley Discusses Her New Series *Horror Has a Face*.”

understood as some of the most infamous in Australian history for oppressing and severely limiting the mobility of Aboriginal peoples and resulting in similar laws in other states.<sup>238</sup> Thus it is not only important to the artist, but to all Australians. The piece was also inspired in part by the recent history of the seventy unmarked Aboriginal graves that were discovered on Fraser Island in 2014.<sup>239</sup> According to Foley, “I chose two media to tell the story. A series of breastplates have historic terminology inscribed onto them.”<sup>240</sup> Historic terminology is an interesting way to categorize the sixteen phrases and descriptions which include slang and language taken directly out of historical correspondence.<sup>241</sup> The accompanying nineteen photographs of the series, which do not include any images of Foley, do include a few photographs of people wearing breastplates. Like Foley’s earlier *Nulla 4 Eva* series, the artist imagines history in the photographs through a combination of masquerade and caricature. Many seem to name or suggest women: *A Colonial Tramp*, *A Forbidden Pleasure*, *Black Velvet*, *Native Girls*, and *White Woman*. *Marauding White Males*, like *Native Girls*, speaks to the concepts of black velvet and sexual encounters (Figs. 2.22–2.26). “Charcoals,” a derogatory word for Aboriginal people, is used twice—*Charcoals of Fraser Island* and *Charcoal Opium*—while opium figures in two—*Charcoal Opium* and *Opium Slave* (Figs. 2.27–2.29).<sup>242</sup> The series again refers back to *Black Velvet II* and Foley’s use of bits of charcoal to represent Aboriginal peoples.

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<sup>238</sup> Queensland Government, “Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897,” accessed December 1, 2018, updated 2018. <https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-sdid-54.html>.

<sup>239</sup> Martin-Chew, “Fiona Foley Discusses Her New Series *Horror Has a Face*.”

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> The reference of charcoal similar to the hunts referenced below is based on my general knowledge of Australian Aboriginal and frontier history.

The highly disturbing text, *Nigger Hunts*,<sup>243</sup> most likely refers to the murder of Aboriginal people in order to take their land by force, as was done on Fraser Island (Fig. 2.30).<sup>244</sup> The most ornate shape is, *Horror Has a Face*, a quote from the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, which the artist appropriates as a way to describe the very personal horrors done to Badtjala peoples by their white “protectors” (Fig. 2.31).<sup>245</sup> Foley uses a simple shape to emphasize the multicultural nature of Queensland in *Chinese Scapegoats* (Fig. 2.32). The piece alludes to the tendency to blame Chinese people living in Australia in the nineteenth century for Aboriginal addiction to opium when in fact white Australian employers often got their employees hooked.<sup>246</sup> Finally *Protector of Aborigines*, a post always held by a white man, and *Draconian Legislation* refer to the 1897 Act itself (Figs. 2.33, 2.34).<sup>247</sup> Two plates reference Badtjala peoples in a positive sense, *Badtjala Warrior* and *Badtjala Warrior II* (Figs. 2.35, 2.36). The former has a pristine rose gold–hued surface that matches the other plates, while the latter is speckled to look worn and weather-beaten. The number of plates, nineteen, does not seem to hold any special significance, but the choice of plates as a way to embody position in a colonial context is fascinating.

Foley is not the only Aboriginal artist to turn to breastplates as an artistic medium. The internationally recognized Wiradjuri artist Brook Andrew uses them prominently in his installation works, often as stand-ins for a corpse in coffin and display case–like structures.<sup>248</sup> Andrew, unlike Foley, tends to use historical plates in his sculptures rather than create new ones. Most of the plates

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<sup>243</sup> Rather than redacting the offensive word in this title, I use the full title of the piece to honor the artist’s intention for accuracy. I recognize the first word of this title as a highly charged and offensive word that I would not say or read out loud.

<sup>244</sup> Foley, “Biting the Clouds,” 10.

<sup>245</sup> Martin-Chew, “Fiona Foley Discusses Her New Series *Horror Has a Face*.”

<sup>246</sup> Foley, “Biting the Clouds,” 9–12.

<sup>247</sup> Martin-Chew, “Fiona Foley Discusses Her New Series *Horror Has a Face*.”

<sup>248</sup> See The Ian Potter Museum of Art, *Sanctuary: Brook Andrew* (Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2015).

refer to people; art takes on the form of an accessory, wearable art. Yet, aside from “Badtjala Warrior,” the most important text for its doubling, none of Foley’s plates portray the white, Aboriginal, or Chinese individuals affected by the legislation in a particularly positive light. The artist demonstrates her tendency to play with language, to use it cunningly and cuttingly to implicate everyone in a complex history of overlapping interests. The pieces evoke the reality of subjugation and the continued strength of warriors, either men or women. The *Badtjala Warrior* pieces evoke the original honorific purpose of breast plates yet for toward the goal of resisting rather than cooperating with the forces of colonialism. Badtjala Warriors can be men or women and importantly do not need to wear such symbols to embody this role. The text in this series demonstrates that laws are never neutral and emphasizes Foley’s particular Badtjala lens in representing Australian history.

#### **2.4 Beach Bodies? *Nulla 4 Eva* (2008)**

Foley’s photographic series *Nulla 4 Eva* (2008) operates at the intersection of current events and history as Foley reimagines the 2005 Cronulla Beach Riots as partially taking place in multicultural nineteenth-century Queensland. The December 2005 Cronulla Beach Riots were a complex recent event involving racially motivated clashes between white Australians and Lebanese Muslim youths on the shores of the Sydney suburb Cronulla Beach in New South Wales.<sup>249</sup> The altercation fueled a violent series of riots with thousands of people coming to

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<sup>249</sup> For a deeper discussion of the history of the riots themselves see Greg Noble, ed., *Lines in the Sand: The Cronulla Riots, Multiculturalism and National Belonging* (Sydney: Sydney Institute of Criminology Press, 2009).



demonstrate their identification as white Australians on the beach.<sup>250</sup> The events were a stark reminder of the still-rampant racism and anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia.<sup>251</sup> There has been much scholarship and analysis of the riots, particularly focusing on the manner in which extreme racism became externalized and violent over a seemingly insignificant incident: a fight at the beach.<sup>252</sup> To Foley and perhaps many other Aboriginal people, the blatant racism was not shocking.<sup>253</sup> As with other series, in *Nulla 4 Eva*, Foley plays with temporality and uncertainty.

*Nulla 4 Eva* was created three years after the actual event. Foley incorporates history she knows into the riots- imagining a less-violent confrontation and incorporating Aboriginal and Chinese Australians into the events. The seven-photograph series includes two interior and five exterior shots (Figs. 2.37–2.43). Foley was not present at the riots so conceptualized the events without firsthand knowledge. All of the beach scenes appear to be at Cronulla Beach itself, which was apparent from the layout of the beach and yellow buildings visible in most of the images.<sup>254</sup> The first image and interior shots were taken in the landlocked suburb of Lismore in NSW, closer to Brisbane than Sydney.<sup>255</sup> Sydney was Foley’s home for many years, while Lismore is her current home, perhaps another reason why she would choose to orchestrate this series, unique in her oeuvre for its recentness of the history. Several of the actors in reappear each set of photographs as does the burqa-clad Foley herself, a diminutive figure less than five feet tall, in three photographs of the series. The beach images make up the latter half of the series.

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<sup>250</sup> Amelia Johns, Greg Noble, Anita Harris, “After Cronulla: ‘Where the Bloody Hell Are We Now?’” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38, no. 3 (2017): 249.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 249–254.

<sup>253</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>254</sup> I make this assertion based on my study of the series images compared with photographs available of Cronulla Beach online.

<sup>255</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

Australia has long been home to many ethnicities of people beyond the original peoples and white Anglo-Europeans. Rather than being disconnected from Aboriginal rights issues, this type of racism, whiteness opposing all difference, is a part of the long colonial enterprise.<sup>256</sup> Cronulla Beach is in the state of New South Wales and is traditional Tharawal or Darawal land. One impetus for the riots was complaints by local white Australian women that Middle Eastern men were verbally harassing them at the beach.<sup>257</sup> These complaints from individuals toward other individuals were then redirected as violence against an entire group of people. At the height of the riots, five thousand people, mostly white Australian men, organized at the beach and brutally attacked anyone of “Middle Eastern appearance” with whom they came into contact, including young women and girls who were not harassing anyone.<sup>258</sup> Significantly, the riots took place on a public beach, highlighting questions of who does and does not get to enjoy the beach. Not lost on Foley are the facts that white people have been in Australia for nearly two hundred and fifty years, rather than time immemorial, and have traveled a great distance to a land they to which they are not autochthonous, just as Lebanese immigrants have done in the past several decades. Many Aboriginal artists considered where Aboriginal people belonged on the beach, or anywhere else, after these riots.<sup>259</sup> The title of the series, *Nulla 4 Eva*, is a shortening of the slang phrase “Cronulla forever,” emphasizing the white youths’ claim to the beach; “forever” in an Indigenous context is much longer.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Johns, Noble, and Harris, “After Cronulla,” 249–54.

<sup>257</sup> Judy Lattas, “‘Bikini v. Burqa’ In Contemporary Australia: A Feminist Response to the Cronulla Riots,” in Noble, *Lines in the Sand*, 200.

<sup>258</sup> Johns, Noble, and Harris, “After Cronulla,” 249.

<sup>259</sup> See Wendy S. Shaw, “After Nulla: Through the Lens of Aboriginal Art,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38, no. 3 (2017): 301–14.

<sup>260</sup> Greg Noble, “‘We Grew Here, You Flew Here’: Nation Ethnicities and Belonging,” in Noble, *Lines in the Sand*, 72–75.

Foley let the events gestate for three years before creating this work, so as such it holds a variety of functions. The series is part creative restaging, part history painting, together serving as imagined landscape of the artist's own design. The events centered on Cronulla Beach, yet Foley includes a multifamily home and two restaurant/business interiors in her series. Foley's series demonstrates the many specific ethnic groups that have been in Queensland, Australia, for one hundred years, including Chinese people.<sup>261</sup> The setting in Lismore gave Foley further creative license to transport the riots through time and space, since cross-cultural encounters have long been a part of Australian culture. Foley as an almost fully covered individual, meant to be read as a Muslim woman, is almost imperceptible in *Nulla 4 Eva III*, yet is highly visible in *Nulla 4 Eva IV* and *Nulla 4 Eva V* (Figs. 2.39–2.41). Foley dons a black burqa not as an expression of faith—she is not Muslim—but to give tangible form to a shared sense of racism, perhaps an acknowledgement of being seen as an outsider in Australia though her people have called K'gari home since time immemorial.

Across the series, Foley conceptualizes the Cronulla Beach riots as occurring in Queensland rather than New South Wales and involving Chinese, white, and Aboriginal people.<sup>262</sup> Islamophobia, particularly Australian Islamophobia, demonstrated by the Cronulla Riots is based on the assumption that white Australians belong and own Australia. Foley's series disrupts this misconception by including Aboriginal peoples who can actually claim the landmass "forever." In *Nulla 4 Eva I*, thirteen people stand principally along an outdoor staircase. They are mostly Chinese and white women, but with one perceptibly Aboriginal man who seems to flirt with a Chinese woman, alluding to the history of Chinese and Aboriginal marriages to Chinese people

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<sup>261</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

and mixed families that are prevalent in Queensland (Fig. 2.37). Two men, meant to be read as Chinese from their hats, casually work the land, which suggests the importance of Chinese labor in Australia.<sup>263</sup> As the scholar Wendy Shaw has noted, many of Foley's photographs from the series make caricatures of all participants, except the Aboriginal people, who mostly bear witness.<sup>264</sup> Starting here, rather than at the beach, Foley lays bare that contemporary racial tensions in Australia have deep roots and that current Islamophobia masks a more complex racial history in Australia.

*Nula 4 Eva II* is equally imaginative and even less subtle. Foley reimagines the opium den as an Australian Indian restaurant, based on the specials board in the center of the image (Fig. 2.38). The kitchen is dark suggesting that the games and opium smoking are after-hours activities. Chinese women play mahjong while white women play cards, and an older white man writes as he smokes opium. As Shaw has noted, the image looks like a caricature because it employs stereotypical depictions of white and Chinese individuals, the possible exception a lone Aboriginal couple.<sup>265</sup> The couple, a man in a white shirt and woman in black and red, look out toward the viewer, the only two figures aware of the scene in which they take part. Instead of being evocative of the riots themselves, this tableau seems to suggest that the policies in Australia, namely the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium, is still deeply connected to the present moment.<sup>266</sup> The racism experienced by Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia's history has a new target, Muslims, through Islamophobia.

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<sup>263</sup> Most information on the race of the men is based on my conversation with Foley who did a casting call for Aboriginal, Chinese and white actors in order to create a nuanced and diverse photographic series.

<sup>264</sup> Shaw, "After Nulla," 307.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> I see the connection here primarily in the opium den aesthetic and that the Aboriginal peoples in this image do not partake in the opium.

The most evocative piece in the series, *Nula 4 Eva III*, is the first to visualize direct conflict and to include Foley (Fig. 2.39). In a brightly lit diner, a table of Aboriginal men look casually toward a table of white Australian men and women who wear Australian flag clothing and appear to be cursing and taunting them. The Aboriginal men are slightly outnumbered and seem more bored by the taunting than aggressive in return. Foley wears a black burqa and sits at a nearby but separate table, almost disappearing into the background. She reads a book about Aboriginal history, indicating that she—and by extension other immigrants—are interested in Indigenous issues and the history of the place they now reside.<sup>267</sup> Foley casts herself as witness to violence and seems to suggest that the real target of racism is Aboriginal people, as she—here coding herself as a Muslim woman—is ignored due to the presence of Aboriginal people.

The next four photographs interpret the riots themselves, taking place on the beach and including Aboriginal and Australia flags. In *Nulla 4 Eva IV*, two relatively young-looking white Australian men confront Foley, in a burqa, and a number of Aboriginal youths (Fig. 2.40.). Foley places herself between these groups, closer to the Aboriginal men who seem to be protecting her. The next scene imagines that these white youths have been subdued; Foley is here again, but part of a group of women in headscarves and smiling Aboriginal men on the beach. *Null 4 Eva VI*, similarly, is a posed photograph of men and youths, looking much like a picture any group of friends or family might take on the beach (Fig. 2.41). Behind them the beach looks relatively empty, as if these Aboriginal men, rather than members of the white community around Cronulla, now own the beach. Taken together, these images suggest a relatively positive ending to the riots, with Aboriginal and Muslim peoples claiming the beach. In the final photograph, *Nulla 4 Eva VII*,

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<sup>267</sup> Foley could not remember what book she was reading, but she confirmed it was a book about Aboriginal history. Foley, interview with the author.

a single Aboriginal man, looks out to his right, across the water and offshore. The somewhat joyful mood of the previous two photographs is subdued in this final image, the subject looking out as if signaling trouble to come (Fig. 2.43). In the bright sun, his tan skin glows, but the pleasure and calm of the previous two photographs is not ensured as he looks out on the future in the distance. His exposed torso is also counter to Foley's entirely covered body, both representations of ethnicities outside the majority white Australian culture and both threatening to the dominant group.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Foley's art is driven by her desire to highlight overlooked histories using abstract or figural forms.<sup>268</sup> In her early series, *Badtjala Woman* and *Native Blood*, she used her own body to confront to ethnographic photography, taking on the role of unnamed Badtjala woman, as a personal heroine. Meanwhile, her role-playing as a Native American woman and Muslim Woman, in *Wild Times Call* and *Nulla 4 Eva*, demonstrate a capacity to align herself with others and physically embody them through costuming. The *Black Velvet* pieces thus speak to her conceptualization of contemporary attitudes as being informed by the past. By reducing Aboriginal women to the term "black velvet," Foley forces viewers to confront their level of comfort with this reductive stereotype and the objectification and commodification of women, and to question how the trajectory of frontier encounters has led to the current moment. Seduced by the simple tactility of

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<sup>268</sup> MCA Australia, "Fiona Foley Artist Talk."

her “Black Velvet” pieces, we might consider our own complicity in the traffic of corrosive stereotypes, which are on their surfaces appear benign, soft even.

The evolution represented when these series are considered together is not the linear Western evolution of progress, but a more esoteric kind of forward motion, vacillating between revealing and concealing. The chapter began with Foley exposed and ends with her entirely covered but for her eyes, thereby becoming anonymous and slipping into a minority role within a reimagined recent historical event. What could be farther and simultaneously nearer to taking on the role of the Badtjala woman? Much like traditional Aboriginal art, Foley’s practice involves embodiment in order to fit the world into a Badtjala universe. To commune with the Seminole nation and to be in solidarity with Muslim Australians, Foley physically takes on these roles. Meanwhile, her other series question the objectification of Aboriginal women and people more broadly. Through her breastplates, Foley comments on the objectification of Aboriginal peoples by making objects bodily and people props. Her works reflects her skills as a researcher and her understanding of English (the colonial language) in forming and informing attitudes toward Aboriginal people. Foley can and does communicate through her Badtjala language, but her work speaks to a wider audience through visual images and English-language text, bringing outsiders into Badtjala ways of seeing and knowing.

Through her use of her Indigenous language, her art is tied to that of Christian Thompson, who is a member a generation of Aboriginal contemporary artists that emerge later than of Foley. Thompson shares many of Foley’s concerns in terms of Aboriginal representation and portrayal in history and historical images. However, Thompson more consistently uses his own image in a bust-length version to relate to many different issues of Aboriginality. He also displays a willingness to incarnate historical individuals who are white or Euro-Australian, so that while he

may primarily identify with minority groups, he acknowledges the legacy and continued importance of dominant cultural figures. Exploring Foley's practice allows a fuller picture of Thompson's, particularly in how he relates to the concept of Aboriginality, which has continued to develop contemporaneously through both artists' work.



### 3.0 Guises on the Body and Bidjara on the Tongue: Christian Thompson's Aboriginal Embodiment

*Aboriginal people like myself form a new generation with totally different cultural and historical references, borders and boundaries. We come from our own place and are not just the niece and nephew of that generation before.*<sup>269</sup> —Christian Thompson

Artist Christian Bumburra Thompson AO, born in 1978, is a Bidjara man who identifies as Aboriginal, Jewish, and Welsh, and thus mixed.<sup>270</sup> He is the first Aboriginal Australian person to earn a PhD at the University of Oxford: in Fine Arts, from Trinity College in 2015. In 2018, he was awarded the Order of Australia (AO) for his contributions to the art world as an internationally recognized Australian artist.<sup>271</sup> At the outset of his career, he was often compared to city-based Aboriginal artists, such as members of the Boomalli Collective including Fiona Foley and Tracey Moffatt, who achieved success and fame while Thompson was still a child.<sup>272</sup> Thompson does not reject their influence, but, as demonstrated in his statement above, he insists that his work is not simply an extension of this earlier generation's objectives. His recent forays into virtual-reality work show a deep interest in the most advanced technology of artmaking, combined with a deep respect for land, lifeways, and traditional practices.<sup>273</sup> Thompson developed as an artist in Melbourne in an urban Aboriginal community, but since has lived in London, Oxford, and

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<sup>269</sup> Marianne Riphagen, "Re-framing Indigenous Australian Photography: Meaning and Materiality of Christian Thompson's 'In Search of the International Look,'" *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 8, no. 4 (2007): 338.

<sup>270</sup> Christian Thompson, interview with the author, Melbourne, Australia, June 22, 2019.

<sup>271</sup> Charlotte Hamlyn, "Queen's Birthday Honours 2018: Women Outnumber Men for Top Gongs on the List for the First Time." *ABC News*, June 10, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-11/queens-birthday-honours-2018-women-outnumber-men-for-first-time/9851732>.

<sup>272</sup> Riphagen, "Re-framing Indigenous Australian Photography," 337–38.

<sup>273</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

Amsterdam. Through these experiences, he has seen the world and solidified his place within it. His many travels and homes have greatly impacted his approach to art, reflecting his both current location and ancestral home. His oeuvre is deeply personal, consisting mainly of photographs of himself, but also includes films, performances, and sculpture. He refuses the designation of self-portraiture for his series, which utilize his own face.<sup>274</sup> Instead, he sees his body as his medium, a canvas for ideas.<sup>275</sup> Overall, his practice explores the concept of Aboriginality as articulated by the scholar Marcia Langton and, more broadly, demonstrates the ability of the act of embodiment as an artistic practice to express Indigeneity.

Embodiment is thus a fitting framework to explore Thompson's practice, tied as it is to his expansive sense of his Aboriginality, his queerness, and his use of his body as a medium of art. Langton argues that Aboriginality "arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a whiter person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book."<sup>276</sup> Langton's definition is relational and social, relying on interactions between people and media. Through its emphasis on intercultural dialogue and exchange, Aboriginality relates strongly to the theorist Mary Louise Pratt's concept of a contact zone, which she conceptualizes as the contact zone "the space of imperial encounters."<sup>277</sup> Like colonization, Aboriginality is not an event, but according to Langton, "'Aboriginality' is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation, and

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Marcia Langton, *"Well I Heard It on the Radio and Saw It on the Television": An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things* (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993), 31.

<sup>277</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, second edition, first published in 1992 (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.

reinterpretation.”<sup>278</sup> By exploring several works by Thompson that reinscribe his body into different guises, this chapter examines how embodiment, like Aboriginality, is a process and ongoing practice. Based on research and interviews, the core of Thompson’s embodied perspective is proposed to be located in his sense of Aboriginality, coinciding with his geographic and cultural mobility.

This chapter explores works from the last two decades of his career, when Thompson first gained prominence in Australia and transitioned to more international recognition. Four photo series are discussed in depth: *The Gates of Tambo*, *Australian Graffiti*, *We Bury Our Own*, and *Museum of Others*, and two filmic works, *Dead Tongue* and *Berceuse*. The first series, *The Gates of Tambo* (2004) is Thompson’s exploration of self and other, imagining himself as various artists. The five-photograph series makes many references, but its title means home for Thompson: specifically, two trees near his family’s property in Tambo. *Australian Graffiti* (2007–8) similarly uses the artist as a backdrop, for Australian native plants as well as thrift-shop sweaters. At first glance, the titular graffiti is probably the plants, but it could just as easily be the “Aboriginal” patterned clothing with which Thompson adorns himself. *We Bury Our Own* (2012) is a decidedly more solemn work, exploring death and ritual through different forms of spirituality. The title is from a remark by Thompson’s uncle made at a family funeral.<sup>279</sup> Through props and limited color, the series conceptualizes how one might take ownership of and indigenize the experience of death. *Museum of Others* (2016) takes on museology in that the artist uses masks of historic British men’s faces, men whose legacies have impacted Thompson’s present, to look through their eyes. His films *Dead Tongue* (2015) and *Berceuse* (2017) conclude the chapter. These works employ

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<sup>278</sup> Langton, “Well I Heard It on the Radio and Saw It on the Television,” 80.

<sup>279</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

embodiment through sound, particularly via Thompson singing in Bidjara. They demonstrate Thompson's attempt to invigorate his Aboriginal language, which has been declared officially dead, and to present thoughtful works that are only fully grasped by other Bidjara speakers. Before discussing specific artworks, background will be provided on Thompson and some major concepts of the chapter will be introduced: the importance of women as mentors, the situation of his practice in relation to queerness and camp, and his concept of spiritual repatriation.

Thompson's career has been marked by exceptionalism, including early art-world recognition, an apprenticeship with Marina Abramović, and success in completing his PhD at Oxford. This exceptionalism also characterizes his family's history.<sup>280</sup> Thompson's great-great-great grandfather Charlie Thompson was able to secure an exception to the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897 for himself and his extended family to be able to manage his own affairs at a time when Aboriginal peoples were officially wards of the state.<sup>281</sup> The Act of 1897 was a devastating law for Aboriginal peoples in the state of Queensland, cementing control over their movement, education, and jobs, as well as determining whom they could marry.<sup>282</sup> The official exception allowed Thompson's family to be relatively self-sufficient, opening up more opportunities for successive generations. Prior to colonization, Aboriginal peoples lived for tens of thousands of years off the ecosystems they consider to be part of themselves, making removal from their homelands and forced dependence on the state all the more devastating. Understanding their custodianship of the landmass now called Australia since time

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Benjamin Richard Smith, "Still under the Act? Subjectivity and the State in Aboriginal North Queensland." *Oceania* 78, no. 2 (2008): 200.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

immemorial underscores just how traumatizing the colonial project has been since Captain James Cook landed at Ka-may, now known as Botany Bay, in 1770.<sup>283</sup>

The Thompson family continues to own land near Tambo, just two hours north of traditional Bidjara country.<sup>284</sup> Thompson's father was in the military, a career which meant frequent moves for the family, taking them far from Bidjara country and Tambo. Thompson's nomadic lifestyle, or at least comfort with roving, comes in part from the experience of frequent moves as a child.<sup>285</sup> It also had an impact on the way that he made art. The middle child of three boys, Thompson always wanted to make art, but was often limited in his available supplies. As a young child, he would orchestrate photo shoots and use himself and his brothers as the medium for his ideas. For Thompson, it is natural to use himself as a medium and to perform for viewers. Fading into different backgrounds, yet still somehow in the center, Thompson's series point to a particular practice developed around a material that is always available, that is, oneself. Despite frequent moves, Barcaldine and Tambo in Queensland grounded Thompson's childhood, as places of return and of deep familial connection.<sup>286</sup> Although these cities are located one hundred miles apart, he talks about them together as they represent home.<sup>287</sup> His family home is in Barcaldine, where the Australian Labour party was formed.<sup>288</sup> Tambo is acts more as a spiritual center for Thompson, because of his childhood memories of visiting and the connection his family has to the country.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Australian Museum, "Place Names Chart," accessed June 25, 2021, <https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/atsi-collection/sydney/place-names-chart/>.

<sup>284</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

Women, as teachers and mentors, are also central to Thompson's practice. Thompson's great-aunt Carrie on his father's side was the major holder of Bidjara knowledge for his family and he learned about his culture mostly from her.<sup>290</sup> Thompson's early education, learning from a woman, particularly owing his cultural knowledge to a woman, impacted his later artistic trajectory. He expressed the key role women artists have played in his work in many interviews, from earlier generations of Aboriginal women artists such as Fiona Foley and Tracey Moffatt, to Marina Abramović, who chose Thompson as an artist to work with during her 2015 residency at Kaldor Public Art Projects.<sup>291</sup> His connection to Marina Abramović has led him to his work in VR, which, although not a focus of this chapter—as the author did not experience the work in situ—has been an entirely new way of conceptualizing his work as new media and allowing it to circulate to a filmic audience. *Dead Tongue*, which is discussed later in this chapter, was completed during his time working with Abramović.<sup>292</sup>

As a queer Aboriginal man, Thompson and his practice are intersectional. In his PhD thesis, he focused on Fred Wilson, an American conceptual artist who Thompson described as an artist engaged in institutional critique from his position as a queer, Black man.<sup>293</sup> Through his reading of Wilson, it is possible then to situate Thompson's practice as queer Aboriginal embodiment. As the scholar Amelia Jones has called for a queer, feminist art history, so too does Thompson's

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<sup>290</sup> Christian Thompson and Hetti Perkins, "In Conversation," in *Christian Thompson: Ritual Intimacy*, ed. Helen Hughes (Caulfield East: Monash University Museum of Art, 2017), 108.

<sup>291</sup> Monica Tan, "Australian Artist Christian Thompson on Being Mentored by Marina Abramović," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/30/australian-artist-christian-thompson-on-being-mentored-by-marina-abramovic>.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Christian Thompson, "Creative responses to Australian material culture in the Pitt Rivers collection: parallels between *We Bury Our Own* and *Mining the Museum*," unpublished thesis, (Trinity College, Oxford University, Oxford, 2017), 91.

positionality allow for the Indigenous and queer to overlap and intersect.<sup>294</sup> Thompson’s central argument for his PhD thesis was to articulate his idea of spiritual repatriation, explored in the next section. What would a queering of repatriation look like? Perhaps like his concept of spiritual repatriation, resigning to return the aura but not the thing itself. Likewise, the artist sits comfortably with his artistic peers, moving around the globe in spheres where being queer and Indigenous are perceived mainly positively.

Like the artist Kent Monkman—who is the focus of the fourth chapter—Thompson sometimes uses makeup to feminize and beautify his face, but unlike Monkman, these forays are often quite subtle and not drag adjacent. Instead, Thompson often becomes—or impersonates—specific women. He deftly plays with and upon notions of camp, but it is not quite right to define his work as camp. According to the scholar Mark Booth, “To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits.”<sup>295</sup> Although Thompson evokes and identifies with marginal groups of society, he also is a part of multiple marginal communities: Aboriginal people, queer folks, and people who identify as multiethnic or mixed.<sup>296</sup> His series that demonstrate camp sensibilities—*The Gates of Tambo* and *Museum of Others*—incorporate a certain level of anti-aesthetic tendencies into their presentations. Particularly in *The Gates of Tambo*, Thompson makes little effort to completely disguise himself while playing these other roles. For example, he allows his fair arm skin, which is covered with dark hair, to be exposed in *Woman from Peppimenarti*. The playfulness of Thompson’s work is

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<sup>294</sup> “Introduction,” in *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, ed. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>295</sup> Mark Booth, “Campe-toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp ’69,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

<sup>296</sup> The extent to which a mixed person is marginalized depends on his/her/their particular situation. Mixed or multiethnic people will soon be in the majority, yet they continue to face stigmas of older stereotypes

closer to camp than humor or parody due to the sincerity of his depictions and his approach to presentation and representation. Using an image of a well-known historical figure's face with the eyes crudely poked out to make place for one's own, as Thompson does in *Museum of Others*, is a plainly campy gesture. This reading is complicated, however, considering that Thompson uses his own body as a canvas and does not deem most of his photo series self-portraits.<sup>297</sup> Just as the series examined in-depth demonstrates, embodiment serves as unifying concept for its ability to incorporate ideas of camp, queerness, and Indigeneity. Even the campiest images from his photo series—Thompson as himself on his laptop or behind a printed image of a nineteenth-century colonizer—require a nuanced consideration of his Bidjara lens, his tie to country and land, to self and community. His concept of spiritual repatriation attests to the deeper concept behind his campy aesthetics, imagining a return home of important things taken from Australia and other countries globally, through the artist as canvas. Men can be made femininely beautiful to emulate specific women, just as Indigenous artists can embody and thus objectify historical figures. Thompson presents his new ideas through his longest enduring tool of art—himself—and creates room for imagining Indigenous contemporary art as a practice of embodiment that is respectful of ancestors and the land yet also queer and campy.

### **3.1 Spiritual Repatriation and Repatriation in Australia**

While at Oxford, Thompson developed a concept termed “spiritual repatriation,” which is deeply connected to his artistic practice.<sup>298</sup> Thompson defines the concept as “*the repatriation of*

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<sup>297</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*



*an essential quality that is evoked rather than clearly visible in objects*—what might be called the aura of such collections, rather than actual physical objects.”<sup>299</sup> Thompson bases spiritual repatriation on his reading of Walter Benjamin’s notion of the aura.<sup>300</sup> By using the term, “evoked” as opposed to “clearly visible,” he suggests that the quality is felt or embodied rather than seen. From this reading, his focus is on objects, especially photographs of Aboriginal people, rather than repatriation of human remains,<sup>301</sup> which are typically the main concern of Indigenous peoples who argue for repatriation. Emphasizing spiritual repatriation allows Thompson to indicate a higher purpose for his art, without falling into the trap of representing all Aboriginal people. At the same time, spiritual repatriation is also a practical approach to circumvent currently limited repatriation laws in Australia.

Repatriation, meaning a return to fatherland, has been an important issue for Indigenous peoples globally for decades. In an anthology on the issue of repatriation, scholars Jane Hubert and Cressida Fforde explain the spiritual and funerary necessity for the return of human remains. They argue, “The colonizers have not only taken over their lands but have often deliberately tried to destroy their cultures and religious beliefs, as well as physically removing the human remains of their dead.”<sup>302</sup> The removal of sacred objects and bodies relates to larger processes of colonization and the devaluing of Indigenous and non-European peoples through the disrupting, destructing, and/or profaning of their sacred sites. The scholar Paul Turnbull has argued that white Australians were very aware of the importance of burial places and graves to Aboriginal people,

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<sup>299</sup> C. Thompson, unpublished thesis, 5 (emphasis by the author, not in the original source).

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> Photographs of Aboriginal people inspired his work, particularly a set of images owned by the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford.

<sup>302</sup> Jane Hubert and Cressida Fforde, “Introduction: The Reburial Issue in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Dead and Their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert, and Paul Turnbull (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

but nonetheless disturbed and removed human remains.<sup>303</sup> In one article, Turnbull names specific nineteenth-century white Australian bureaucrats who allowed graves to be robbed and withheld their knowledge of the existence of burial grounds in order for lands to be colonized.<sup>304</sup> Many of these people and objects taken from Indigenous burial sites have ended up in museums in London, the imperial center, as well as in Australia's major cities. It remains a source of pain for Indigenous people to have their ancestors and sacred objects studied and housed in sterile museum spaces.

Currently, there is no national legislation in Australia that requires cultural institutions to return Aboriginal human remains.<sup>305</sup> This is markedly different from the United States where the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) requires that public institutions return remains and funerary objects. According to the scholar Nicole Watson, the Museums Australia organization's policy "Previous Possessions, New Obligations (PPNO)," provides guidelines for how Australian museums and Indigenous peoples can forge better relationships.<sup>306</sup> Among its principles is the statement that Aboriginal people's remains in museum collections should be dealt with according to their families' wishes.<sup>307</sup> This is the clearest statement in support for repatriation, yet it is a guiding museum tenet rather than a legal requirement. The lack of a national legal framework means that Aboriginal Australians are at the will of the institutions to first disclose their collections of human remains and then return them. Although some remains have been returned, repatriation is not a requirement or a political fact of life in

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<sup>303</sup> Paul Turnbull, "Indigenous Australian People: Their Defence of the Dead and Native Title," in Fforde, Jane Hubert, and Turnbull, *The Dead and Their Possessions*, 72–74.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–75.

<sup>305</sup> Nicole Watson, "The Repatriation of Indigenous Remains in the United States of America and Australia: A Comparative Analysis," *Australian Indigenous Law Reporter* 8, no. 1 (2003): 33.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Australia. Thus, artists like Thompson, wishing to honor the dead and their likenesses or objects, seek out other ways to give back some essence of the people to those from whom they descend.

### 3.2 Artist as Medium

The series *Emotional Striptease* was conceived rather early in Thompson's career and demonstrates a transition he has discussed in interviews: the move from using his friends, family, and colleagues as source and subject to entirely relying on his own body as medium (2003, Figs. 3.1–3.3).<sup>308</sup> The series includes ten photographs, portraits of Thompson's circle of friends in Melbourne. The series looks quite distinct from Thompson's more recognizable later works, which focus typically on a central figure in a close-cropped square format. Fitting with the themes of his practice, *Emotional Striptease* is the first series in which Thompson reconsiders nineteenth-century photographic and museological practices (Fig. 3.1).<sup>309</sup> Gary Jones has succinctly described, "*Emotional Striptease* strategically reframes a series of early twentieth-century southeast artifacts, by employing them provocatively as props . . . to challenge contemporary representations of Aboriginal people in urban settings, by asserting a strong, politically astute, and culturally respectful contemporary Aboriginal authenticity."<sup>310</sup> Jones's description of the objects accompanying the sitters as "southeast artifacts" relates to the location in where the series was shot, as Melbourne is also in the southeast. Thompson recontextualizes the objects and the settings as an asynchronous set of portraits, envisioning Aboriginal people as contemporary cultural

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<sup>308</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>309</sup> Garry Jones, "Artefacts of Authenticity," *Artlink: Contemporary Art of Australia and the Asia-Pacific* 32, no. 2 (June 2012): 54.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

workers and nineteenth-century high society; tame in their appearances, yet dangerous in their postures and in their very presence at the museum.

The three locations which serve as backdrops are major cultural institutions in Thompson's then-home of Melbourne: the Melbourne Museum, the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, and Federation Square, which now houses the Australian collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. His subjects are all young Aboriginal artists—Jirra Lulia Harvey, Genevieve Grieves, Reiko Rennie, Rena Rennie, and Jason Tamiru—like Thompson.<sup>311</sup> Their work might be on view at these institutions as art while their peoples' art and objects are displayed as artifacts. The backdrops are distractingly shiny rephotographed images of these museums, so it is apparent that these were shot in a studio rather than on location. The museums are often busy, so it would be difficult to photograph these compositions in person, yet the studio setting also serves to refer to nineteenth-century photographs of Aboriginal people taken in photo studios. The women in these photographs combine a mix of references—Victorian culture, i.e., that of the stuffy nineteenth-century period and also posed images of Aboriginal people with hoop skirts and ruffled neck pieces. In *Untitled*, a fair-skinned young Aboriginal woman, Genevieve Grieves,<sup>312</sup> wears a long full black skirt and lacy long collar and holds an elongated boomerang, with its end pointed up; she looks straight at the viewer in front of a backdrop of the Melbourne Museum (Fig. 3.2). This image is fairly typical of the series, as her gloves, skirt, and boomerang point to the nineteenth century, while her bare arms and the bright light and digital photograph background suggest this

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<sup>311</sup> The names of the artists are not consistently listed in different collections. The website of the National Gallery of Australia does list the sitters' names, but only includes two images from the series online, see [https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/search.cfm?creim=6549&order\\_select=1&view\\_select=4](https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/search.cfm?creim=6549&order_select=1&view_select=4).

<sup>312</sup> I have identified the individual figures by searching for their images and matching their photographs in this series with other photographs of them. I referenced this website image: <https://www.wheelercentre.com/people/genevieve-grieves>.

image is rooted firmly in the twenty-first century. The all-black clothing points to the uniform of art workers internationally; not wanting to distract from the stage or the gallery, an all-black outfit is common for theatre and museum employees. These outfits, however, are topped with stiff ruffled collars and hanging ruffled kerchiefs, and the use of props complicate these allusions. Holding shields, staffs, and large boomerangs, the portraits juxtapose stuffy upper-class symbols of a bygone era with Aboriginal weapons. The title then is easily read as ironic, the models are buttoned-up with the exception of their bare arms. Are these artists defending these institutions or combatting them? Or does this series foreshadow infiltration, an exercise in visualization of collective goals of artistic advancement?

To conceptualize how Thompson moved from this series to using himself most extensively as a medium, it is thus worth turning to Thompson's self-portrait (2003, Fig. 3.3). He stands holding a boomerang over his head, arms outstretched to perfectly frame his body under the two lines of the boomerang. Unlike in the other photographs, his feet are cropped out of the image, so he blends easily into the background, despite the ever-present shine of the printed backdrop. His ruffled pink collar sits around his neck, the only color added to his otherwise black attire. He looks posed for combat, posed being the operative word, harkening back to nineteenth-century studio images of Aboriginal people, acting at battle. His serious expression and defensive posture again contrast with the series title. Is Thompson embodying the strange assortment of stereotypes and hold of authenticity that he has encountered? Is he recreating the colonial encounter through one body? Perhaps, most evocatively, is he embodying Aboriginality as a set of references, as relational to his current home of Melbourne and artistic counterparts? These references include people, his artistic collaborators, objects—a shield and boomerang—and most pertinently, the cultural institutions themselves as storehouses of a kind of historic or academic Aboriginality. As

Aboriginal people in these institutions, these artists might be asked to lay themselves bare, to do a kind of emotional striptease to exist in these spaces designed to display their objects, but not to actually serve their communities, at least initially. Thompson's later series also consider Aboriginality as a set of references, shifting to fit his theme and setting.

Created only a year after *Emotional Striptease*, the five-photograph series *The Gates of Tambo* evokes Thompson's evolving practice of embodiment. As a young artist, he conceptualized the photographs soon after creating multiple series of his Melbourne artistic circle and dealing with the logistical difficulties of managing models.<sup>313</sup> The series reflects Thompson's understanding of the art world as well as the specific influences that he possesses as an Aboriginal Australian artist.<sup>314</sup> Included in the first *National Indigenous Art Triennial: Culture Warriors* in 2007, these photographs helped establish Thompson as an important artist in Australia and beyond. The *Culture Warriors* curator Brenda Croft—who is also a notable Aboriginal artist—writes, “All these artists are cultural bowerbirds, conversant in international trends and influences; seasoned overseas travelers, undertaking countless residencies and participating in highly significant global cultural events annually; and always on the move, yet always returning home—an amorphous place, particularly for Thompson.”<sup>315</sup> This statement is particularly fitting for *The Gates of Tambo*, which conceptualizes being an artist by embodying other artists and bears a title that means home for Thompson.

Like Thompson's later series discussed in this chapter, his embodiment in *The Gates of Tambo* is via camouflage in the form of costuming, makeup, and props. But throughout his oeuvre,

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<sup>313</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>314</sup> Marianne Riphagen, “Christian Bumburra Thompson,” in *Culture Warriors: Australian Indigenous Art Triennial*, edited by Brenda Croft (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2007), 162.

<sup>315</sup> Brenda Croft, “Cannot Buy My Soul,” in Croft, *Culture Warriors*, xxi.

Thompson enacts camouflage broadly in the sense used by the scholar Laura Levin. Levin argues that “camouflage should not be defined solely as a form of disguise or subterfuge. It can also be read more expansively as *the spatial processes by which we engage with and adapt to our material surroundings.*”<sup>316</sup> In *The Gates of Tambo*, the surroundings are an essential part of the image construction. All but one of the photographs, *The Gates of Tambo (Andy)*, is situated in a white-walled studio, with a blueish carpet (Fig. 3.4). Thompson becomes five artists, including himself, but as the title indicates, he situates this role-play within the context of his Bidjara family’s home of Tambo. The “Gates of Tambo” are two bottle trees, planted for after the passing of two of his uncles, of whom his family considers the trees to be representations.<sup>317</sup> The series allows Thompson to pay homage to great artists and to demonstrate his bravado as an artist among them. He embodies his artistic influences through self-styling: his face seems subtly made up, an inkling of his later forays deeper into feminized male beauty. The series is digital photography, a particularly accessible and nontraditional Aboriginal art medium. Thompson becomes four artists in *The Gates of Tambo*: the Kimberly artist Rusty Peters, a remote woman artist from Peppimenarti (which could be an allusion to artist Regina Pilawuk Wilson<sup>318</sup>), Tracey Moffatt (perhaps the most famous contemporary Aboriginal artist), and the American Pop artist Andy Warhol.

Tracey Moffatt and the woman from Peppimenarti are Thompson’s explorations of female impersonation, which he enacts in a decidedly non-drag fashion. In *The Gates of Tambo (Woman from Peppimenarti)*, Thompson wears a loose-fitting dress in a bright color, with a curly black wig

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<sup>316</sup> Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 97.

<sup>317</sup> Riphagen, “Christian Bumburra Thompson,” 162.

<sup>318</sup> Harold Wilson Junior and Leon Pungily, “Regina Pilawuk Wilson: Peppimenarti and Durmu Arts” [artist profile], *Artlink: Contemporary Art of Australia and the Asia-Pacific*, June 1, 2016, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4489/regina-pilawuk-wilson-peppimenarti-and-durmu-arts/>.

that covers most of his face, as he draws on a blank canvas on the ground (Fig. 3.5). Many Aboriginal artists paint with their canvases on the ground, allowing them to work on multiple sides of very large canvases and to properly express the often geographical and spatial nature of their depicted Dreaming places, important sites of creation linked to ancestral beings.<sup>319</sup> Thompson expressed that the image has a particularly commercial, and for him uncomfortable, root.<sup>320</sup> *The Gates of Tambo (Woman from Peppimenarti)* is based on marketing material for Aboriginal artists that includes images of artists accompanied by short, sometimes exoticizing, biographies. These documents are common in remote Aboriginal art centers in order to better sell artwork to white Australian audiences,<sup>321</sup> simultaneously selling the artwork and the story of the artist. Thompson found these bios, often laminated and attached to the art itself, to be extremely strange and lacking any parallel with the way non-Aboriginal artists' work is sold.<sup>322</sup> Rather than trying to convince several galleries that using images of Aboriginal artists to authenticate their art (and thus sell themselves), Thompson pokes fun at the concept, becoming his own version of this strange ephemera. The repetition of the studio and blank white canvas puts the *Woman from Peppimenarti* on equal footing with the other artists represented, a way of inserting her into the contemporary art world where Thompson sees her place to be.<sup>323</sup>

Similarly, *The Gates of Tambo (Rusty Peters)* pictures Thompson as Rusty Peters, a well-known Gija artist of Juwurru skin from the Kimberly region, with his trademark cowboy hat, dark

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<sup>319</sup> Dreaming, or Dreamtime, is often used to refer to the spiritual beliefs of Aboriginal people, indicating both the full range of beliefs and a spiritual temporality that merges with but exists outside experienced temporality. See Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 67-100.

<sup>320</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.



pants, and a button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled for working (Fig. 3.6).<sup>324</sup> In the Kimberly region, Aboriginal peoples worked on sheep and cattle ranches, often for very low wages, for much of the twentieth century.<sup>325</sup> Yet many have a certain nostalgia for this difficult work, particularly because it sometimes allowed them to use their knowledge of and also to remain on their traditional lands.<sup>326</sup> Peters began painting when other men of his region had taken up the practice, such as the very famous artist Rover Thomas.<sup>327</sup> Peters is a traditional knowledge holder, and his acrylic paintings mostly show his Ngarrangkarni (translated as Dreaming) places, ancestrally important stories of his country.<sup>328</sup> Paintings by artists such as Peters are quite popular with a contemporary art audience because his Ngarrangkami imagery is aesthetically similar to the high Modernist abstract visual language.<sup>329</sup> Taken together, these embodiments make a sharp commentary: the Aboriginal artists people are most comfortable with are remote artists. Thompson points this out to critique that perhaps less has changed since the first generation of art-school artists rose to prominence to his time when there were many examples of successful city-based Aboriginal artists. Although, by including Tracey Moffatt and himself, he shows that these remote artists are not valued higher or lower than city-based artists (Figs. 3.7, 3.8). They have the same tools of the blank white canvas and paint brush, while Thompson has a computer and Moffatt a camera.

*The Gates of Tambo* (Tracey Moffatt) allows Thompson to play the most famous city-based Aboriginal artist, Tracey Moffatt (Fig. 3.7). In this image, his face is again visible, made up with

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<sup>324</sup> The cowboy hat is a reference to Peters's prior career as stockman on a cattle station. See Franchesca Cubillo and Amanda Jane Reynolds, "Rusty Peters," in *Defying Empire: 3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial*, ed. Tina Baum (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2017), 102.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> There are several sources on the affinity between Aboriginal art and high modernist painting. See Elizabeth Burns Coleman, "Appreciating 'Traditional' Aboriginal Painting Aesthetically," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 3 (2004): 235–47.

smooth skin and red lips. Thompson as Moffatt sports a black turtleneck with the sleeves slightly rolled up and a film camera poised to shoot. Like Moffatt's 1999 *Self Portrait*, Thompson imagines her with her camera (Fig. 3.9). Thompson is most like her in this series, with his chosen tool to create art, the laptop. With his hair straightened, Thompson looks feminine and as lovely as Moffatt often does, but clearly positions himself as an artist, much like Moffatt does in her own work.

Thompson's later photograph, *In Search of the International Look* (2005), pays homage to Tracey Moffatt, specifically Moffatt's 1999 *Self-Portrait* (Figs. 3.9, 3.10). Thompson was commissioned to create this work for the journal *Photofile* in a special issue on "authenticity, originality, and the status of the copy with regard to photo media arts in contemporary society."<sup>330</sup> *In Search of the International Look* does indeed play upon all of these themes and more. Moffatt is perhaps one of the most famous contemporary artists from Australia, and famously rejected the label of Aboriginal artist in favor of contemporary artist.<sup>331</sup> Thompson, however, has always identified as both.

Thompson has stated repeatedly how he looks up to and admires women artists,<sup>332</sup> and, by his own account, Tracey Moffatt was a significant influence on his work.<sup>333</sup> He learned about her work as a teenager and found her very inspirational; as a young adult coming up in the art world he was often compared to her.<sup>334</sup> The aesthetic similarities between *Self-Portrait* by Tracey Moffatt and *In Search of the International Look* by Thompson are numerous, but there are important distinctions (Figs. 3.9, 3.10). In both images, the photographer/artist stands alone against a

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<sup>330</sup> Riphagen, "Re-framing Indigenous Australian Photography," 335.

<sup>331</sup> Daniel Browning, "Tracey Moffatt Defies Labels but Adds to the Story of Aboriginal Art in the Venice Biennale," *ABC News*, April 2, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-01/tracey-moffatt-to-feature-at-the-venice-biennale/8400048>.

<sup>332</sup> Christian Thompson and Hetti Perkins, "In Conversation," 112.

<sup>333</sup> Riphagen, "Re-framing Indigenous Australian Photography," 337.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 337–38.

landscape, camera in hand, but not clearly in the act of taking a photograph. Moffatt's *Self-Portrait* is listed as the only one in her oeuvre, though she frequently appears in her photography series, such as *Something More* (1989), and films, such as *Be Devil* (1999).<sup>335</sup> *Self-Portrait* (1999) presents Moffatt as confident and contemporary. The landscape behind her has been compared to the watercolor paintings of famous mid-twentieth Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira.<sup>336</sup> Moffatt wears sunglasses, jewelry, makeup, a headband, a fitted sweater, and loose pants. Her expression is calm, and her sunglasses give the impression is of a cool, current woman. Thompson's *In Search of the International Look* (2005) references Russell Smith's 2004 article, "Tracey Moffatt: the International Look,"<sup>337</sup> and highlights Moffatt's tendency to use locations in her photographs that are not incredibly specific, i.e., giving her photographs an international look.<sup>338</sup>

At the time of the photograph, Thompson was twenty-seven years old, much younger than Moffatt, a queer Aboriginal man impersonating the most famous Aboriginal woman artist. Moffatt's photograph is hand-colored, with soft warm and cool tones, while Thompson's is a digital image mostly comprised of shades of brown. Like Moffatt, he wears sunglasses, earrings, and a headband and carries his camera, which is angled toward the viewer, so he seems to be looking away from the object he would be shooting. It appears to be evening on a dark urban beach and was in reality shot in in Southbank, Brisbane: the artist's home at the time and an important traditional meeting place for the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples.<sup>339</sup> The location is thus meaningful for Indigenous people and for non-Indigenous people, as a recreational place, reflecting a

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<sup>335</sup> Kim Appleby, "A Self-Portrait in Focus," *Portrait* 5 (September–November 2002), <https://www.portrait.gov.au/magazines/5/a-self-portrait-in-focus>.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Riphagen, "Re-framing Indigenous Australian Photography," 336.

<sup>338</sup> Natalie King, "Fall into My Fiction," in *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*, ed. Natalie King (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017), 2.

<sup>339</sup> Riphagen, "Re-framing Indigenous Australian Photography," 339.

liminality also expressed in Thompson's presentation in the photograph. He wears red lipstick, and his smooth, stubble-free face might very well be that of a woman, but his flat hairy chest undeniably indicates maleness. Unlike *The Gates of Tambo*, which connects the artist to his home, *In Search of the International Look* considers how an Aboriginal artist might have to move to disparate geography and time zones to be international and contemporary. Instead of confident and assured, Thompson as Moffatt appears unsure, looking in one way and pointing the camera in another. Thompson had to go to Southbank dressed as a woman for the photograph and expressed his fear of harassment or violence in presenting this way in public.<sup>340</sup> The work stands out in Thompson's practice for this public portrayal of gender play and female impersonation. His later series experiment much more heavily with makeup but are created in the studio.<sup>341</sup> The role-playing of being Tracey Moffatt allowed Thompson to impersonate a woman, but a specific woman, rather than a feminized man.<sup>342</sup> Thompson more successfully emulates the individual that he is impersonating in *In Search of the International Look* than in *The Gates of Tambo* (Fig. 3.10). Thompson has since moved in more esoteric directions, expressing spirituality through his works and experimenting more deliberately with identities, not with the objective of passing as another person, but embodying and evoking other sensibilities and ways of being.

*The Gates of Tambo* and *In Search of the International Look*, at the beginning of Thompson's practice of using himself repeatedly as a medium, often compared to Cindy Sherman.<sup>343</sup> This connection is interesting given *The Gates of Tambo* presents a short list of artists

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>341</sup> Shaune Lakin, interview with the author, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, July 17, 2019.

<sup>342</sup> Riphagen, "Re-framing Indigenous Australian Photography," 341.

<sup>343</sup> For a recent consideration of Thompson and Cindy Sherman's practices in comparison, see Melanie Bakewell, "Costumes with Cindy Sherman and Christian Thompson," *Fine Print*, 11 (2017): <http://www.fineprintmagazine.com/costumes-sherman-thompson>.

with whom Thompson would like to be associated, which does not include Sherman. Again, turning to the scholar Laura Levin, the series demonstrates Thompson's portrayal of an artist through mainly aesthetic means, a strategy which Levin says characterizes him as an "ethnographer-chameleon, primarily embody[ing] the other through visual appearance, thereby reducing identity to a style one chooses to adopt."<sup>344</sup> At this earlier stage of the artist's career, his intention was to become a great, starting from his family's home in Tambo and the artistic influences that inspired him from there. Thompson places Andy Warhol outside in a natural setting, while Thompson as himself, as Rusty Peters, as Tracey Moffatt, and as the woman from Peppimenarti are all pictured in his indoor studio. Thompson uses the series to align himself more with the Aboriginal artists than white artists, despite incorporates a specific set of references to the latter into *The Gates of Tambo (Andy)* (Fig. 3.4).<sup>345</sup> Here Thompson becomes both Andy Warhol and Bruce Nauman, the acclaimed white American artists of the mid -twentieth century. In his all-black costuming and white-blond hair, Thompson evokes Warhol, but his gesture of spewing liquid from his mouth recalls Bruce Nauman's well-known *Self-Portrait as A Fountain, 1966-7* (1970), in which the artist photographed himself spitting water towards the camera.<sup>346</sup> Nauman's photograph series was itself a reference to and play on Marcel Duchamp's famous urinal ready-made, *Fountain* (1917).<sup>347</sup> Combining the gesture of expectorating water with the recognizable look of Andy Warhol, Thompson suggests that there is a lineage of artist provocateurs whose work inspired and built on each other. The spitting could also be a reference to a rumored

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<sup>344</sup> Levin, *Performing Ground*, 156.

<sup>345</sup> Lakin, interview with the author.

<sup>346</sup> Whitney Museum of American Art, "Bruce Nauman, *Self Portrait as a Fountain* 1966–1967, printed 1970," <https://whitney.org/collection/works/5714>.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

kink of Andy Warhol's: watching a beautiful man being peed on at sex club.<sup>348</sup> Here, as in Nauman's photograph, water spurts from the artist's mouth directly out to the viewer. By placing "Andy" in nature rather than the studio, he is separating this embodiment as a white artist further from his own work, as he has continued to do in his oeuvre over time.

Aside from enacting embodiment in figures that are both specific and general, Aboriginal and white, Thompson makes an expressly queer intervention, aligning himself with Aboriginal men and women and one expressly queer artist (Warhol). As Tracey Moffatt and as a woman from Peppimenarti Thompson plays with his titles and his move from urban centers in Australia and globally back to his Bidjara country. By traveling the world, he reaches for home, for Tambo as a centering place to call his own. The power of a place that remembers you is felt even inside the studio, even when one is working on a laptop. Going beyond the feminist artist practices that he admires, such as those of Cindy Sherman or Eleanor Antin, these adopted identities allow Thompson to become more himself. He shows Aboriginal artists the many ways they can be, that he can be; in this series, only the white artist is distinct in setting, but significantly not superior.

### **3.3 Flora, Fauna, and Jumpers: *Australian Graffiti* (2007–8)**

*Australian Graffiti* (2007–8) exemplifies Thompson's experimentation with femininity, texture, and sculptural forms, using himself as a canvas to envision what it means to be Australian

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<sup>348</sup> Lakin, interview with the author.

(Figs. 3.11–3.16).<sup>349</sup> *Australian Graffiti* includes thirteen photographic portraits as well as a film<sup>350</sup> owned by the National Gallery of Australia, which has not been shown recently.<sup>351</sup> In the photographic series, Thompson wears thrift-shop clothing and native Australian eucalyptus plants on his face and covering his eyes.<sup>352</sup> According to Thompson, “With Australian graffiti, I thought of the flowers as allies, these quintessential symbols of Australianness.”<sup>353</sup> Thompson thus means to capture what is quintessentially Australian, through a mix of plant and clothing choices.<sup>354</sup> The series is further divided into three *Black Gum* works and nine more feminized photographs in which he dons different sweaters with Australian flowers. The title is cheeky as Thompson, a city-based artist encountered graffiti on the streets of Melbourne, which has a popular street of graffiti, as well as in his adopted cities of Amsterdam and London. The backgrounds of the series appear faintly green, purple, and pink to compliment the reddish, green, and white plants that adorn him, adding to the bright aesthetic of the flowers themselves. While Thompson might have encountered graffiti in his actual life, the idea of Australian graffiti as Australian plants and an Aboriginal person lends to a political interpretation. Rather than being barren before the colonial powers arrived, Australia was dotted with many florae and fauna that shaped the landscape and were used by Aboriginal peoples since time immemorial. Graffiti is unsanctioned markings on an urban landscape, and similarly, these native plants might spring up unplanted. Aboriginal peoples survive

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<sup>349</sup> This work is listed as made in 2007 and 2008 on the artist’s website, 2008 in the National Gallery of Australia’s records, and 2007 in the catalogue for *Ritual Intimacy*. Therefore, the most accurate date seems to be 2007–8 to account for this discrepancy.

<sup>350</sup> I have not been able to view the film, so it is not a focus of this section. The images of the series are in wide circulation and thus are more representative of the series though not complete.

<sup>351</sup> Tina Baum, “Australian Graffiti,” in *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art: Collection Highlights from the National Gallery of Australia*, ed. Franchesca Cubillo and Wally Caruana (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2010); <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=188219>.

<sup>352</sup> Thompson and Perkins, “In Conversation,” Hughes, *Ritual Intimacy*, 118.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> In Thompson’s catalogue for *Ritual Intimacy* and from conversations with the artist, *Australian Graffiti* is conceptualized to include the three series works of *Black Gum* and function as an entire series.

and continue despite colonial attempts to eradicate them. Their survival and continuity are echoed by the often-used pro-Aboriginal rights slogan, “Always was, always will be.”<sup>355</sup>

In *Australian Graffiti*, Thompson festoons his head with plants on top of his short-cropped hair, a gesture which he later repeats with synthetic materials. He does not seem made up but does wear explicitly feminine clothing and stud earrings. *Black Gum 1-3* are a marked departure from other works of the series, as Thompson’s face is entirely obscured, and he wears only a simple black hoodie (Figs. 3.12–3.14). As Stephen Gilchrist notes, part of the power of these works is the fact that for much of the history of Australia, Aboriginal people were classified as flora and fauna—plants and animals—rather than as people.<sup>356</sup> This historical fact has been taken up by other contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Vernon Ah Kee in his wall vinyl wall installation, *not an animal or plant*, and 2017 exhibition of the same name.<sup>357</sup> Gilchrist argues that the black hoodie has come to symbolize dangerous Aboriginal men, as a garment capable of concealing one’s identity, possibly for nefarious purposes.<sup>358</sup> To an American audience, the hoodie is similarly rife with symbolism, instilled by the murder of the young Black American teenager Trayvon Martin, whose killer saw his hoodie and his Blackness as threats.

The black gum plants that adorn Thompson in *Black Gum 1-3* are lush and pinkish red with many yellow buds and green leaves (Figs. 3.12–3.14). The cool purple background and black hoodie greatly contrast with the flourishing black gum plants that cover his face. The three poses

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<sup>355</sup> This slogan is also the title of a book: Martha Ansara, *Always Was, Always Will Be: The Sacred Grounds of the Waugal, Kings Park, Perth W.A.; The Old Swan Brewery Dispute* (Balmain, Australia: M. Ansara, 1989), along with a corresponding documentary of directed by the author of the book. More recently, it was the theme for NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) 2020.

<sup>356</sup> Stephen Gilchrist, “Daguerreotypes, Stereotypes, and Prototypes: Reframing Indigeneity,” in *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Hanover: Dartmouth College, 2012), 60.

<sup>357</sup> Nakari Thorpe, ““Not an Animal or a Plant”: Putting a Human Face to the 1967 Referendum,” *SBS*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2017/01/19/not-animal-or-plant-putting-human-face-1967-referendum>.

<sup>358</sup> Gilchrist, “Daguerreotypes, Stereotypes, and Prototypes,” 60.



of the series place Thompson in left profile, straight on, and right profile, replicating the postures of police mug shots. Yet unlike in a mug shot, none of Thompson's face is visible. In the series, he alludes to the idea of Aboriginal criminality while also reinforcing the deep connection between Indigenous people and the natural world. However, he does this in a campy gesture: if Aboriginal people were thought of as plants and animals, why not become plants? Similarly, he reduces the idea of criminality to the hoodie itself, emptying the symbol of its significance. Any bias that might come in response to how Thompson looks is negated through the act of concealing his face. In *Black Gum 1-3*, the artist becomes an object through his disappearance into the black gum, while the plant and the concept of graffiti become embodied.

The dark, nondescript hoodies and plants of these three works starkly contrast with the vibrant sweaters and floral headpieces in the rest of *Australian Graffiti*. In his artist statement on the piece for the National Gallery of Australia, Thompson writes, "My body has become like a sculpture and armature to carry my creations and unique finds from trawling vintage fashion stores and trust me they are as unique as the flowers."<sup>359</sup> Aside from a flower listed simply as blossom, the plants are variants of native Australian plants: leaves and fronds of banksia, blue, grey, and black gums, and kangaroo paw flowers.<sup>360</sup> The assemblage of these flowers into sculptural forms shows Thompson's training in sculpture as well as his tendency to create via accumulation. He piles up references and objects via his collection of sparkly, kitschy vintage clothing.<sup>361</sup> Given the large number of works in this series, a limited number of the remaining nine images will be considered here. The series follows a few patterns with respect to the flora either thick crowns that

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<sup>359</sup> Christian Thompson, "Statement" (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2008) <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=188213>.

<sup>360</sup> This information is based on different sources on the series, which identify the images in the series based on their names.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

cover the artist's eyes or looser crowns that barely obscure his form—and to Thompson's tops—either high cut with a rounded neckline and embellishments or low cut to reveal chest hair. In *Untitled [Banksia Leaf]* Thompson poses with his arms folded across his chest, in a regal, very upright posture (Fig. 3.15). The shining sequin jacket, covered with black, gold, and silver patterns that Thompson's arms partially obscure, contrasts with the organic, structured banksia-leaf headpiece he wears. The headpiece is shaped like a crown, with several shorter pieces positioned above a band of green leaves across his eyes. The femininity of the sparkly sweater offsets Thompson's visible body hair, on his chest and arms, while the yellowish beige background warms his skin tone. The image seems both playful and serious as Thompson's slightly raised chin makes his eyes visible through his headdress and he looks out at the viewer calmly.

Thompson's piece *Untitled [Grey Gum]*, does not show Thompson's arms at all and the top of his head is only visible at the top of the image (Fig. 3.16). The plant crown is muted green with blueish-white bulbs and Thompson's head is slightly inclined to the left, his shoulders rounded as if his hands are on his hips. The semicircular neckline covers his chest hair, and his Adam's apple is concealed by the shadow formed from his chin. The effect is an androgynous image, between masculine and feminine, not appearing obviously as either. These photographs appear to imitate fashion poses. Thompson's plant sculptures are all slightly asymmetrical, fitting him to cover his eyes or droop in certain spots. This adds to their mix of aesthetics: recent secondhand sweaters which Thompson's considers as unique as the flowers, albeit created in a very different way.<sup>362</sup>

*Australian Graffiti* was created at a time when Thompson was negotiating his own relationship to country, while studying at the University of Amsterdam's DasArts program in the

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<sup>362</sup> C. Thompson, "Statement."

Netherlands.<sup>363</sup> European opinions or ideas of Australia/Australians certainly influenced this work. Thompson notably embraces both natural (beautiful plants) and unnatural (gaudy ornamental sweaters) symbols of Australia. Significantly, the DasArts program is a program of theater arts, so this series was created at a time when Thompson was immersed in performance.<sup>364</sup> Thompson evinces his understanding of the body's performative potential, seen in this work's subtle and slight shifts of posture and expression. Uniformity in expression is not the goal, unlike in series such as *We Bury Our Own* (2012), which is explored below. Instead, Thompson shifts his shoulders in some images, puckers his lips, raises and lowers and turns his chin. He performs options of the imagery Australian graffiti could potentially depict; the actual nature of country combined with the kitsch of white Australian senses of Aboriginality. Thompson adorns himself with native plants and faux-Aboriginal print clothing, highlighting the ways each can be used as shorthand for Australianness, which then shapes what is perceived as Aboriginality, a form of relationality here shown through an accumulation of the most natural and most unnatural symbols of Australia.

### **3.4 Enacting Spiritual Repatriation: *We Bury Our Own* (2012)**

The eight-photograph series *We Bury Our Own* was conceptualized while Thompson was completing his PhD at Oxford and working with the Pitt Rivers Museum (Figs. 3.17–3.24).<sup>365</sup> The series marks a shift in his practice toward spiritual repatriation, a focus on mourning, spirituality, and objecthood. The title comes from Thompson's experience at a family funeral: his uncle

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<sup>363</sup> Christian Thompson, CV, <https://www.christianthompson.net/cv>.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Charlotte Day, "Introduction," 8.

grabbed a shovel and began to bury the deceased, stating definitively, “We bury our own.”<sup>366</sup> This poetic phrase suggests a level of responsibility and custodianship for family, enacted even after they are dead. *We Bury Our Own* explores concepts of grief, ritual, and colonial experience. Thompson’s website includes an image of him looking at photographs of an unidentified South Australian Aboriginal man, found in the Pitt Rivers Museum collection, in the page for this series, centralizing the work of archival research in its creation.<sup>367</sup> Photographs of this man anchored Thompson’s time performing research, providing him with a ritual of return and respect, honoring the many images of this man in the museum’s collection as an archival practice.<sup>368</sup> The individual titles of the suite point to particular experiences and rites, as well as invoking common objects imbued with spirituality: flowers, candles, crystals, and water. Completed in a studio far from home, Thompson articulates and reaffirms his connection to place and history through embodying spiritual beliefs. Like *Australian Graffiti*, this series is comprised of photographs of Thompson, stylized backgrounds, and improvised sculptural pieces used as head coverings, the images digitally manipulated for effect.

In every photograph in the series, Thompson’s face, most frequently his eyes, is somehow obscured. In *Desert Melon*, *Down Under World*, *Lamenting the Flowers*, and *Forgiveness of the Land*, the artist places objects over his eyes, shooting the photograph frontally. In three of these images—*Desert Melon*, *Down Under World*, and *Lamenting the Flowers*—Thompson is almost devoid of expression, his lips together or slightly parted, a blank expression as if asleep or dead. Like *Australian Graffiti*, these works demonstrate the artist’s proficiency with sculpture-making,

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<sup>366</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>367</sup> Marina Warner, “Magical Aesthetics,” in Hughes, *Ritual Intimacy*, 67.

<sup>368</sup> I have not included images of the unidentified Aboriginal man as these photographs served as inspiration not direct source for the images.

constructing crowns and headdresses, elevating cheap artificial materials into objects of lamentation. Similarly, the use of color is evocative: bursts of red, blue, and purple on a mostly placid black-and-white background. Red is commonly associated with blood in the Western art historical context; this hue is also a common in Aboriginal art, especially in the use of red ochre. Blue symbolizes purity, seen in garments worn by Virgin Mary in Christian paintings, while purple is associated with magic and witchcraft through common colloquial and religious associations.

In its title, *Desert Melon* points to the desert as a potential giver of life via fruits such as the desert melon (Fig. 3.17). Perfectly shaped white flowers cover the artists' eyes in this photograph, a stark contrast to the white tie and black suit with a sash he wears. His sculptural headpiece provides a window onto another landscape, the studio backdrop becoming part of the artist, festooned to his head with a wide band of gray paper, shining and faceted. The tree on the headpiece is one of the two bottle trees from *The Gates of Tambo*, again connecting Thompson with this place important to his family.<sup>369</sup> Thompson's outfit is a reference to Oxford's required "sub fusc," or full academic outfit, which is defined as a "dark suit with dark socks, dark skirt with black tights or stockings, or dark trousers with dark socks, a dark coat if required, black shoes, plain white-collared shirt or blouse, white bow tie, black bow tie, black full-length tie, or black ribbon."<sup>370</sup> *Down Under World* replicates this attire and gray background (Fig. 3.18). The headpiece is now made of multicolored crystals and clear crystals cover the artist's eyes, suggesting spiritual beliefs, particularly healing through crystals placed on the body. Thompson's hair in this image is flatter as if it has been straightened. The title combines a colloquialism for

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<sup>369</sup> Australian Centre of the Moving Image, "Christian Thompson Talk," YouTube Video. 1:01hours. May 20, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8zUIRc4\\_KU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8zUIRc4_KU).

<sup>370</sup> Damien Gayle, "Oxford University students vote to keep 'archaic' subfusc academic dress," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/may/23/oxford-university-subfusc-mortarboards-student-vote>.

Australia, as the “land down under” with a name for hell, the underworld, yielding a particularly Australian image. These photographs combine references to Australia through their titles and use of crystals and trees with a potent symbol of Oxford, the sub fusc.<sup>371</sup> According to Thompson, the attire was an especially surreal part of the experience of attending Oxford, especially as the first Aboriginal student in its long history.<sup>372</sup>

*Down Under World* leads particularly well into the next photograph in the series, *Invaded Dreams*, which also can be alternatively interpreted as dreams or visions of invasion (Fig. 3.19). The artist covers his face in black—perhaps as a gesture of solemnity for his fellow colonized peoples—echoing the black hood worn by people soon to be put to death by hanging, and there is a model of a ship he holds up in front of him. Marina Warner has argued that Thompson is influenced in his costuming by Franz Fanon; the symbol of a boat as a means of invasion and colonization is particularly universal.<sup>373</sup> This is, in reality, a very specific ship related to the English colonial legacy. The model ship boasts a tiny Union Jack flag at the top of its central mast and a metal name plate at the bottom that reads Mary Rose. Mary Rose was the name of sixteenth-century King Henry VIII’s famed warship, which was in use for most of his reign, until it finally sank in 1545.<sup>374</sup> The early English naval prowess led to the country’s eventual imperial expansion over oceans globally. The English war ship is therefore a symbol of future colonization; Australia Day, the commemoration of Cook’s first landing in Australia on January 26, 1788, has been reinterpreted as Invasion Day for Aboriginal peoples and their allies. The anchor that hangs

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Australian Centre of the Moving Image, “Christian Thompson Talk,” YouTube Video. 1:01hours. May 20, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8zUIRc4\\_KU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8zUIRc4_KU).

<sup>373</sup> Marina Warner, “Christian Thompson: Magical Aesthetics,” in *Forms of Enchantment: Writings on Art and Artists* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 185.

<sup>374</sup> The Mary Rose Organization, “History of the Mary Rose- 1510–1545,” <https://maryrose.org/the-history-of-the-mary-rose/>.

gracefully in front of Thompson's finger gestures to the precarity of the British colonial enterprise, based on unequal relationships of power. The use of the ship also demonstrates to the influence of the artist Fred Wilson on Thompson's practice,<sup>375</sup> as Thompson uses a found object, the model ship, in his photograph series rather than in an installation to create a new meaning, connecting naval prowess with colonization. Access to spiritual and burial practices have been greatly impacted by colonialization, a set of processes so earth shattering for Indigenous peoples as to reach all the way to contemporary Indigenous people's subconscious.<sup>376</sup>

*Lamenting the Flowers* employs the same stark white background of *Invaded Dream* and a stripped down, but still buttoned-up version of Thompson, without a tie, coat, or sash (Fig. 3.20). Thompson's head and neck seem to float into the background his skin blending with the stark whiteness. The flower crown here is red, and Thompson's long hair is not visible; black netting covers Thompson's face to his chin and two white butterflies have been placed over his eyes. Flowers are often given as a sign of lamentation, a well-known phenomenon that is reversed in the title of the work. The flowers in the headdress are artificial, a logical choice for constructing the object, but also an indication of how far society has moved from the land.<sup>377</sup> Nature is replicated and perfected, made out of plastic and sold in stores. Thompson thus can access flowers from anywhere, but they are entirely devoid of their organic nature, hence they must be mourned.

*Three Sisters* is perhaps the most striking image in the series, the only one in which Thompson's eyes are visible, though just barely as they in shadow (Fig. 3.21). "Three Sisters" could refer to a grand rock formation in the Blue Mountains outside of Sydney, an area whose

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<sup>375</sup> Warner, "Christian Thompson: Magical Aesthetics," 186.

<sup>376</sup> See Paul Turnbull, "Scientific Theft of Remains in Colonial Australia," *Australian Indigenous Law Review*. 11.1 (2007): 92–102.

<sup>377</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

traditional owners are the Gundungarra and Darug people.<sup>378</sup> The Three Sisters site consists of irregular rock formations, which, according to Dreaming stories, are three beautiful sisters, Meehni, Wimlah, and Gunnedoo, who a witchdoctor turned to stone to protect them from war. The witchdoctor then died and left them as stone forever.<sup>379</sup> As with other images in the series, color is used sparingly for dramatic effect. Here the color comes only from the red candles in the foreground which have been burnt down enough to unevenly drip white wax all around their edges. Once again Thompson's lips are closed. His clothing is impossible to ascertain as only a bit of his neck shows, with a dark area near it that could be his hair or fabric. The roses on the headdress are attached to a black fabric, so they seem to float against the black background. The candles number three, perhaps one for each of the mythical sisters. Thompson strongly identifying with women as mentors and being one of three brothers, thus connecting this story to his own life. Though there is more to the Three Sisters rock formation story, the core is that women were protected to the point of no longer existing, indeed a lamentable tale. The context of Australia in Oxford, life and death, makes *Three Sisters* resonant with multiple meanings. Rather than picking one meaning it is more productive to consider this work as another part of a family-centered set of ritual practices. Looking out, Thompson, draped with flowers and near burning candles, invites viewers into his transfixing rituals so they may appreciate but not fully understand the image.

The title *Danger Will Come* offers a warning. Set again against a stark black background, Thompson's hands and white-painted fingernails hold up a frame in front of where his face would be. Initially the square seems to be a kind of mirror reflecting the stars but are instead reflections

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<sup>378</sup> Blue Mountains Aboriginal Culture and Resource Center, "Who We Are," 2018, <https://www.acrc.org.au/who-are-we/>.

<sup>379</sup> Blue Mountains Australia, "The Three Sisters," 2020, <https://www.bluemts.com.au/info/thingstodo/threesisters/>.



of light on water (Fig. 3.22).<sup>380</sup> Starlike aesthetics give the piece a multidimensional look, as if it could be a portal into another world, either leading us toward or away from this danger. The spiritual overtone of the piece suggests tea leaf reading, and other forms of divination that interpret seemingly innocuous imagery to glean spiritual answers. Similarly, in *Energy Matter* Thompson's hands—marked with a pattern of black dots, similar but not identical, on each—are dominant in the piece (Fig. 3.23). The forms could represent cellular activity, or stars, although the title suggests that they are energy manifest. These forms cover Thompson's eyes, seemingly looking back out at us. His crisp white shirt has returned but is wrinkled and bunched due to his body's stiff posture.

*Forgiveness of the Land* presents viewers with a view of Thompson's face, his eyes hidden by a row of suspended crystals (Fig. 3.24). Like that of *Lamenting the Flowers*, its title grants higher status to the natural world, suggesting new relationships between the artist and environment. The buttoned white shirt is visible again, while Thompson's hair is not, covered with a scarf that recalls Aboriginal desert painting. This textile could be a tourist object made to appear Aboriginal or may actually come from a specific Aboriginal community.<sup>381</sup> If they were fully visible, the colors and shapes might be recognizable enough to tie the scarf to a specific place or story. Instead, in this case, the textiles suggest a prim Western aesthetic combined with a generalized reference to Aboriginality, since an Aboriginal woman might cover her hair in church or when she is in mourning. In some Aboriginal communities, women often cut off their hair during mourning, so a head covering could be used to disguise this lack of hair.<sup>382</sup> The title has two implied meanings, best expressed as a question: do we forgive the land or does the land forgive us? Along with these

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<sup>380</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Bianca Beetson, interview with the author, Brisbane, Australia, June 21, 2017.

clues, Thompson composed a poem, included as wall text when the series was installed at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection.<sup>383</sup>

I lamented the passing of the flowers  
at the meadow,  
I lit candles and offered blood  
to the ancestral beings,  
looked into the black sparking sea  
donned the Oxford garb  
visited the water by fire light  
and bowed at the knees  
of the old father ghost gum.<sup>384</sup>

The poem provides insight into the larger concepts of the series, particularly the imagery that Thompson was attempting to conjure. Living in Oxford, he was thinking of home, particularly those rituals of burial performed by his family.<sup>385</sup> Thompson's poem combines many concepts of spirituality that are visualized in the series. His language of lamenting the flowers gestures to flowers placed at graves and also his use of artificial flowers in the series, which do not pass for organic. Candles are often part of rituals, be they pagan, Christian, or Jewish: for example, when dedicating a prayer to someone at a Catholic church or symbolically lit during Hanukkah. The offering of blood relates more likely to Bidjara rituals, which Thompson has previously visualized through the sharing of sweat with his father in the video work *The Sixth Mile* (2006).<sup>386</sup> The "black sparkling sea" suggests the waterways around Oxford and the journey from the United Kingdom to Australia over the expansive ocean. Being "bowed at the knees" again reads as a gesture of prayer but bowing before an ancient tree—"old father ghost gum"—indicates spirituality that is

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<sup>383</sup> Text written was by Thompson and included at the exhibition of this series at Kluge-Ruhe Museum, January 22–May 19, 2013. Also available on the artist's website: <https://www.christianthompson.net/we-bury-our-own-2012?lightbox=image5ee>.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Thompson and Perkins, "In Conversation," 118.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 106.

entirely non-Christian. This poem reinforces Aboriginal spirituality as both plants and animals are part of their cosmology as ancestral beings and as world-makers that created the environment and exist in a circular sense of time.

Combining this context with the visual analysis of these images, the series *We Bury Our Own* series becomes central in considering Thompson's use of embodiment. He both visualizes and embodies rituals of mourning, using digital coloration to highlight the significant hues of red and blue. He enacts Bidjara rituals of mourning while in Oxford, combining contexts and places, becoming the rituals his family enacts. *Danger Will Come* relates to classical art and shows marked attention to details such as hands, prefiguring Thompson's later works that relate to water as imagery (Fig. 3.22). At first glance, inside the frame almost appears to be a night sky, but instead the reflection of water is extremely powerful. A natural and original mirror, water and its reflection are included in Thompson's later series, *Museum of Others*. Ultimately, *Danger Will Come* comments on the history of colonization and Thompson's personal journey to and from the former center of the British Empire. As he has said in interviews, the trips home grounded him, as they did when he was a child living far from Bidjara country.<sup>387</sup> The response to this title in a European context would perhaps be that they (non-Indigenous people) do not bury their own, instead putting a great deal of distance between the living and the dead, the past and the present. By incorporating colonial imagery and warnings about the destructive future, Thompson spiritually repatriates himself, fixing his own image as a traveler between geographical locations and systems of mourning.

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 105.

### 3.5 Othering Historic Learned Men: *Museum of Others* (2016)

In his 2016 *Museum of Others* photographic series, Thompson utilizes embodiment as a strategy to position himself as various prominent men in anthropology, art, and museology, all of whom have a connection either to Oxford specifically or England generally. Thompson places black-and-white images of Captain James Cook, the anthropologist Walter Baldwin Spencer, the art critic John Ruskin, and the ethnologist Augustus Pitt Rivers in front of his face (Figures 3.35–3.29). He uses their portraits and an image of the constellations as masks, covering his face entirely except for his eyes. The photographic series is bust length so Thompson’s white-shirt-clad body and his hands holding up each image are visible. Through the title and this gesture, Thompson acts to “other” these figures, making them objects and subjects of study and fascination, recognizing that their work effectively othered Indigenous peoples.<sup>388</sup> Nevertheless, by carefully selecting these figures and using their names in his titles, Thompson also acknowledges their continued legacies and relevance to his own practice.

The series centers connections between Australia and Oxford through the colonial figures of Cook, Spencer, Ruskin, and Pitt Rivers. Ruskin and Pitt Rivers are connected to the late nineteenth-century Oxford; the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford is where Spencer first encountered Aboriginal Australian objects in the early twentieth century.<sup>389</sup> Using these figures as a jumping-off point, Thompson considers how Aboriginal Australian objects have been amassed in European and Australian museums.<sup>390</sup> Like Monkman, Thompson reverses the colonial gaze through his

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<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>389</sup> Henrika Kuklick, “‘Humanity in the Chrysalis Stage’: Indigenous Australians in the Anthropological Imagination, 1899–1926,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 39, no. 4 (2006): 536.

<sup>390</sup> Thompson and Perkins, “In Conversation,” 122.

works, literally placing his eyes behind the masklike visages. Each historically renowned British man has impacted Thompson's trajectory, generally in the case of Cook's relation to Australia and Ruskin's importance in art, and more specifically through the anthropological research of Spencer and Thompson's at Pitt Rivers Museum. By treating them each as individual subjects, providing each one a frame for his portrait, Thompson engages with anthropological practice, particularly that of Baldwin Spencer, studying and envisioning culture from its perspective.<sup>391</sup> Through these haunting depictions, these famous figures are recontextualized as specters of colonization who enforced the inevitability of progress and settlement at the expense of colonial peoples.<sup>392</sup> The act of creating masks of their faces points to a famous passage of Franz Fanon: "seeing yourself and seeing yourself through white eyes."<sup>393</sup> By taking comical and adept aim at these deceased figures, Thompson takes the power of their gaze back, both becoming and othering them through his gesture. The inclusion of a globe image implies that, at one point their ideas made the world, but they are not the only world-makers.

*Museum of Others* also allows Thompson to objectify, or make objects out of, these historical figures. The effect is campy and otherworldly, echoing the visuals of Thompson's earlier series, such as *We Bury Our Own. Museum of Others, Othering the Art Critic (John Ruskin)* is the first in Thompson's series and has an eerie aesthetic (2016, Fig. 3.25). Thompson literally holds the art critic before him with a photograph of Ruskin on a stick in front of his face. This framing of the face recalls the phrase "to put his head on a stick," meaning to kill and make an example of someone. Thompson's hands and white shirt are visible against what appears to be a wall of

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<sup>391</sup> Kuklick, "Humanity in the Chrysalis Stage," 536,

<sup>392</sup> For more on the concept of the specter in colonialism, see T. J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism* (Boston: MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>393</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 2008), 84.

shrubbery with flowers or a floral backdrop. Thompson's eyes appear in the sockets where Ruskin's have been cut out, the whites of Thompson's eyes where Ruskin's pupils should be. The mask is a close-cropped photograph of this eminent white man in a black coat and white collar, but the actual photograph of Ruskin includes more of his shirt and his eyes, which appear light in color, blue or green.<sup>394</sup> Ruskin was a famously confrontational figure, infamous for his extended legal battle with the artist John McNeil Whistler.<sup>395</sup> Thompson here acknowledges the role of the art critic from the past to the present as Ruskin set the standard of what constituted art and good taste, particularly through a white Anglo-European lens.<sup>396</sup>

*Museum of Others, Othering the Explorer (James Cook)*, takes on the well-known Captain Cook, who landed in Australia and many other places in the Pacific (2016, Fig. 3.26). Cook is a figure that contemporary Aboriginal artists have especially taken aim, along with Daniel Boyd, vilified for his role in leading the 1770 First Fleet Landing at Botany Bay.<sup>397</sup> Cook also went to New Zealand, Hawaii, and the Cook Islands, named for him.<sup>398</sup> This image of the captain has been highly circulated, based on a 1776 painting by Nathaniel Dance in the National Maritime Museum.<sup>399</sup> Versions of this image are prevalent throughout Australia and New Zealand in popular culture, trotted out for Captain Cook-themed shops, restaurants, and inns. The format—square image of great man on a stick—recurs, but the background for Cook is marked by wood grain with long raised veins. The motif evokes wood that constitutes a ship and the lines of a map. This

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<sup>394</sup> Nicholas Shrimpton, "John Ruskin: English Writer and Artist," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Ruskin>.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> See Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, "Daniel Boyd, *We Call them Pirates Out Here*, 2006," <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2006.25/>.

<sup>398</sup> William Frame and Laura Walker, "Eighteenth-Century Britain: The World of James Cook and Joseph Banks," In *James Cook: The Voyages* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 14–16.

<sup>399</sup> For an image of the work and a good description see, Royal Museums Greenwich, "Captain James Cook, 1728–79)," <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/14102.html>.

background, like others in the series, is sourced from Thompson's family home of Barcaldine, effectively bringing these men to him, just as their collecting brought bits of Aboriginal Australia to Europe.<sup>400</sup> To fully focus on the background and mask, Thompson's hands and shirt are the same as is the previous image. The artist's choice to label Cook an explorer rather than a colonist is interesting as Cook set out for new knowledge and new territory to eventually colonize. Cook was known to collect many objects from his travels, so making an object out of him is only fitting.<sup>401</sup> Exploration, like colonization, assumes that the world is ripe for discovery scientific or other purposes one only explores places no one has been before. Unknown lands are unknown only to visitors but are very much known to their Indigenous inhabitants.

The fourth photograph in the series, *Museum of Others, Othering the Ethnologist (Augustus Pitt Rivers)*, reflects Thompson's time at Trinity College, Oxford, particularly his work at the Pitt Rivers Museum (2016, Fig. 3.27). The collection of Augustus Pitt Rivers is the basis of this Oxford museum, founded to preserve cultures which Pitt Rivers believed were nearing their ends, a practice referred to as salvage ethnography, or the accumulation of all forms of information on a culture on the assumption that it and its people are destined for extinction.<sup>402</sup> A local Barcaldine plant serves as the background for this image, so that, rather than seeing the ethnologist in the museum, he is placed in nature.<sup>403</sup> Pitt-Rivers did archaeological fieldwork in Southern England, but most of his international collection was bought in markets rather than found during fieldwork, and he was interested in showing typologies of objects to educate a general public.<sup>404</sup> Pitt-Rivers

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<sup>400</sup> Thompson and Perkins, "In Conversation," 122.

<sup>401</sup> See Frame and L. Walker, *James Cook*.

<sup>402</sup> David K. Van Keuren, "Museums and Ideology: Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Anthropological Museums, and Social Change in Later Victorian Britain," *Victorian Studies* 28, no. 1 (1984): 181–83.

<sup>403</sup> Thompson and Perkins, "In Conversation," 122.

<sup>404</sup> Van Keuren, "Museums and Ideology," 183–85.

is displayed against a spiraling plant background and atop a simply clad Thompson, so that the ethnologist is decontextualized. Without the title, the viewer would have no understanding of who he is or why he is displayed in this manner. Thompson repeats the Pitt-Rivers's gesture by creating this series as a collection of types, types of Euro-Australian colonial men who had major roles in shaping attitudes toward art, Aboriginal people, Australia, and museology.

In *Museum of Others, Othering the Anthropologist (Walter Baldwin Spencer)*, Thompson addresses the figure credited as the first anthropologist to study Aboriginal peoples (2016, Fig. 3.28). Thompson looks through Baldwin Spencer's eyes, set against a background of broken twigs and sticks. In this piece, Thompson presents the most direct critique of colonial relations. Baldwin Spencer attempted to record and understand aspects of Aboriginal culture in the Northern Territory, taken by some as an example of earlier evolutionary states of humans.<sup>405</sup> The anthropologist set a new standard for amassing a great wealth of data about people, which he extensively documented in his *Native Tribes of Australia*.<sup>406</sup> Despite the impressive and thoughtful approach, the anthropologist demonstrated how Aboriginal peoples could be objects of study. Significantly, by collecting the bark drawings and other creations of Aboriginal people, he also began an industry of Aboriginal art for sale to white Australians.<sup>407</sup> As noted in *The Gates of Tambo (Woman from Peppimenarti)*, Thompson is quite critical of the way remote Aboriginal art is marketed to a primarily non-Aboriginal audience. The market for traditional Aboriginal art has economic benefits for its communities, but its attendant promotional materials can reinforce mythic stereotypes and widen the divide between remote and city-based Aboriginal people. Anthropologists like Spencer attempted to understand the world through Aboriginal people's

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<sup>405</sup> Kuklick, "Humanity in the Chrysalis Stage," 536.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 15–19.



perspective. However, Thompson uses these figures to point out that along with knowledge gained, these research endeavors were connected with colonization and displacement for Aboriginal peoples, which museum displays often do not represent.

Thompson imagines each of his “others” in the context of their own distinct backgrounds, mirroring museum displays and dioramas which attempt to present subjects in their natural habitats. He also standardizes the way they are portrayed, a close-cropped black-and-white image—derived from a photograph or painting, depending on the figure’s era—in a square white frame attached to a stick. The effect is campy and haunting with Thompson’s eyes peering through the masks. Metaphorically, the gesture repeats the superficiality of looking through and into another’s experiences with preconceived notions, such as those an Aboriginal artist would already have of these figures. Embodiment here plays out as a simple, straightforward gesture, the artist looking through the great white man, akin to the manner in which Aboriginal culture and experience was often mediated through an outside expert, a white intermediary. There is also an element of Thompson’s concept of spiritual repatriation at play as the focus of the museum shifts from white field expert to Aboriginal artist.

Considering this context, it is worth turning to the only image in the series that does not enact embodiment as clearly. *Equilibrium* elides Thompson’s head entirely, replaced by a rounded frame holding an image of water reflecting, a motif also apparent in *Danger Will Come from We Bury Our Own*, 2012 (Figs. 3.22, 3.29). Thompson’s hands gently hold, rather than gripping, the circular frame and, unlike in the other images in the series, the interior image in the circular frame repeats the background. Though the surface is water, its white flecks against a dark gray background recall the night sky and certain traditional Aboriginal paintings, which at times appear

almost like an atmospheric night sky.<sup>408</sup> In this later version, the act of highlighting the land, the water, and the star image of it provides balance to the series, as the focus on water did in *Danger Will Come*. The circular image points to multiple meanings: the concept that a focus on the natural world is needed to restore balance and the idea that Indigenous knowledge and relationship with the land is restorative. Unlike *Danger Will Come*, the title *Equilibrium* strikes a hopeful tone. Thompson puts more of himself into *Equilibrium*, his body and shirt, so that he highlights and thus becomes part of the background. The circular frame of *Equilibrium* is significant, as a marked shift from the squares around the other images. In what could be deemed an Aboriginal concept of time, time is not linear, but circular, and cosmic events and ancestral stories are conceptualized as simultaneously taking place in the past, present, and future. According to Thompson, “*Equilibrium* is based around the idea that the vessel is the equalizer.”<sup>409</sup> His use of the term “vessel” for the object he holds connects to Thompson’s interest in ritual, but in a way that is typically not fully explained for viewers. Thompson uses this circular shape to demonstrate that a different frame is needed to move beyond Western context and that there is still need for more balance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Thompson’s *Museum of Others* is a response to ethnological museums more generally in its presentation of each “subject” individually, with space around him, and its deliberate lack of ethnological objects. Salvage ethnography is appropriated as resistance to the historical weight and expert knowledge of these great white men.

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<sup>408</sup> There are several sources on the affinity between Aboriginal art and high Modernist painting. See Elizabeth Burns Coleman, “Appreciating ‘Traditional’ Aboriginal Painting Aesthetically,” 236.

<sup>409</sup> Thompson and Perkins, “In Conversation,” 122.

### 3.6 Embodying Language: Bringing Bidjara to the Gallery

Beyond his photographic practice, Christian Thompson has created multimedia works, most often short films. His artistic practice moves beyond the visual, as he often incorporates short bits of writing or longer song lyrics into his work. Thompson's lyricism is sometimes purposefully lost on viewers as a result of his use of Bidjara, left untranslated in his films *Refuge* (2014), *Dead Tongue* (2015), and *Berceuse* (2017) (Figs. 3.30–3.32). Because of its limited number of speakers—which includes members of Thompson's family—Bidjara is considered a “dead language,” an official distinction indicating that very few fluent speakers remain.<sup>410</sup> Thompson learned Bidjara from his father and from his great-aunt Carrie, who was one of the few fluent speakers.<sup>411</sup> His decision not to translate Bidjara in his films enacts Glissant's concept of opacity, articulated in *Poetics of Relation* as a characteristic that cannot be reduced, particularly evoking Glissant's notion that the opaque can also be the obscure.<sup>412</sup> By not translating his songs, Thompson consciously withholds information, specifically the meaning of his compositions in Bidjara. Again, relating to Glissant, withholding information limits the transparency of the text and the ability to be understood completely. It also relates to an Indigenous notion, common across many Aboriginal communities, that not all knowledge is for everyone. Instead of being available for accumulation, knowledge in that context is restricted to particular groups and people. Sung softly in a whisper, at a pop, or operatic register, Thompson's Bidjara compositions are another means of embodiment, of putting the sounds of his ancestors into his own voice. The works discussed in this section function as visual and sound art at the same time.

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<sup>410</sup> “Bidjara Language,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bidjara\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bidjara_language).

<sup>411</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>412</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.

According to the scholar Alan Licht, “Voice is an obvious tool in grounding a sound piece in the sociopolitical.”<sup>413</sup> In *Refuge* (2014), *Dead Tongue* (2015), and *Berceuse* (2017), Thompson employs his voice socio-politically, by using Bidjara and leaving the text untranslated. His choice of Bidjara in these works also relates to his concept of spiritual repatriation. Marina Warner describes Thompson’s three key ways of achieving spiritual repatriation “for traces and objects from the legacy of damage: verbal evocation for ekphrasis; cultic adornment; and reclamation of vanishing languages.”<sup>414</sup> These works were created in the years during and after Thompson’s articulation of spiritual repatriation in his thesis, thus the connection of these works to the concept is quite direct. “The language isn’t really dead if it’s being spoken,” Thompson states, “even if one word of it is being spoken.”<sup>415</sup> Thompson’s works exploring sung Bidjara concludes this chapter as they exemplify Thompson’s growing confidence with his language and decision to keep knowledge of the Bidjara’s meaning from viewers.

Thompson was a member of many bands as when he was younger as a singer and so music, particularly popular music, greatly influences his practice.<sup>416</sup> The move to include singing in his heritage language of Bidjara has happened slowly over the artist’s career.<sup>417</sup> His Katzen Center performance of *Gamu Mambu* is the first recorded piece he performed in Bidjara.<sup>418</sup> In 2010, Thompson created the film work *Gamu Mambu (Blood Song)*, a two-and-one-half-minute video that features a Dutch female opera singer performing a traditional Bidjara song, with translations

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<sup>413</sup> Alan Licht, *Sound Art Revisited* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 141.

<sup>414</sup> Warner, “Magical Aesthetics,” 67.

<sup>415</sup> Tan, “Australian Artist Christian Thompson on Being Mentored by Marina Abramović.”

<sup>416</sup> C. Thompson, interview with the author.

<sup>417</sup> I have not confirmed with Thompson if singing in Bidjara was part of his family’s cultural practice, but this is an important distinction in whether he is taking up a familial tradition or becoming more comfortable with singing in his practice.

<sup>418</sup> Gandumardi channel, “Christian Thompson— ‘Gamu Mambu,’ Live Katzen Center, Washington DC, USA,” YouTube video, September 19, 2009, 2:40 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVz19O8rhBc>.

included.<sup>419</sup> Soon after, he created *Dhagunyilangu (Brother)* in 2011, which repeats this concept with a white male British opera singer, with translation of the text at the bottom of the video.<sup>420</sup> The operatic sound and sound of the Bidjara language vary greatly in these two works. The singers appear topless, performing against relatively blank backgrounds. These works were interesting in concept and allowed Thompson to step away from the camera; nonetheless, his more recent works, in which he sings the lyrics himself with no subtitles, are much more compelling than these earlier works.

*Refuge* (2014) is the first film made by Thompson in which he sings in Bidjara (Fig. 3.30).<sup>421</sup> *Refuge* demonstrates a departure for Thompson as it presents the artist singing his own composition in the medium of film, made to be watched, rather than as part of a performance mostly meant for a live audience. Unmoving in a dark shirt against a light blue background, Thompson in *Refuge* presents a kind of moving version of his two-dimensional self-imaginings. His Bidjara composition sounds like a pop song set to piano music. Without captions, the artist seems to be suggesting that one can take refuge in one's own culture and that the exploration and repetition of language can act as a retreat, as a kind of home. The work is stripped down in comparison to *Dead Tongue* (2015), which juxtaposes Thompson's voice with a single-channel film that shows Thompson with miniature Union Jack flags hanging out of his mouth.

*Dead Tongue* (2015) was created only a year after *Refuge*; the works share many similarities: Thompson singing, a single camera angle, and a short length (Fig. 3.31). *Dead Tongue*

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<sup>419</sup> MCA Australia, "Christian Thompson, *Gamu Mambu* (Blood Song), 2010," <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2011.16/>.

<sup>420</sup> Michael Reid, "Christian Thompson—Dhagunyilangu," <https://michaelreid.com.au/communication/art-tube/christian-thompson-dhagunyilangu/?v=322b26af01d5>.

<sup>421</sup> Rebecca Gallo, "Christian Thompson: Ritual Intimacy," *Art Guide Australia*, May 15, 2019, <https://artguide.com.au/christian-thompson-ritual-intimacy>.

is less aesthetically stripped down than *Refuge*; the film starts black, like his later work *Berceuse*. Thompson wears a crisp white shirt, his clothing of choice for the photo series such as *We Bury Our Own* and *Museum of Others*. The unmoving frame of Thompson in this posture references his other works as well as his time studying at Oxford. Rather than face the camera as he does in many photographic series, Thompson turns slightly away from it. His face is shown in three-quarter profile with two miniature Union Jack flags in his mouth, as a fan blows on him, subtly moving his hair and the flags. The use of these mini flags is again a somewhat campy gesture, while his visible feminine makeup demonstrates a comfort with gender fluidity. The Australian flag includes the Union Jack as well as the Southern Cross constellation, a well-known constellation visible in the Southern hemisphere. Thompson's choice to close his mouth around Union Jacks rather than Australian flags places the blame of colonization squarely on the imperial center. Australia is a now a commonwealth, no longer a colony, but still recognizes Queen Elizabeth II as monarch. The blue-gradient background and bright lighting resemble a sunny day, evoking a picnic aesthetic, such as Australia Day, wherein patriotic citizens wave small flags at parades and picnics. Thompson himself is made up subtly with foundation and highlighter, and his hair has blonde highlights atop his naturally dark curls. Through his crisp white shirt, his purposefully lightened complexion, and the lighting and highlights of the scene, Thompson presents himself as respectable. The Thompson's makeup is made more apparent and feminized through his use of props, creating a much more political piece. The juxtaposition of the title and the Union Jack flag, symbols of the British Empire, indicate that the colonization is responsible for the status of Bidjara as a dead tongue. Thompson's singing voice plays in the background of *Dead Tongue*, though viewers cannot see him vocalizing, so that he gives life to the Bidjara without it visibly coming from him.

*Dead Tongue* was a work in progress when Thompson began his mentorship with Marina Abramović at the Kaldor Public Arts Project.<sup>422</sup> Abramović told Thompson to remove the background music that was originally part of the piece and use only his own voice.<sup>423</sup> Controversially, Abramović compared Aboriginal people to dinosaurs in her 1979 diary, which was originally meant to be part of a 2016 book project.<sup>424</sup> She later said that these comments do not reflect her more recent attitudes and traces her use of stillness in her practice to her time with the Pitjantjara and Pintupi.<sup>425</sup> Thompson was a staunch defender of his mentor, writing, “I have only ever heard Marina express a great warmth and a deep respect for our culture and people.”<sup>426</sup> Controversy aside, Thompson took Abramovic’s suggestion to strip down the sound in *Dead Tongue* to only his voice, which is very impactful.

In *Dead Tongue*, the Bidjara song that plays has repeating verses, a bridge, and a chorus. It begins with Thompson’s lone voice, and then, a minute into the film, the sound of audible deep, quick breaths is layered with his singing, which acts as the background instrumentation. Thompson layers multiple recordings of his own voice over each other, as the breathing continues, then he transitions back to acapella singing. The song ends with seconds left in the video, which fades to black, and Thompson slowly disappears from the frame. The piece serves as a strikingly political work in an oeuvre that is typically less direct and oriented toward broad concepts such as lack of repatriation, anthropology as a field, or the way Aboriginal artists are sold to the art world.

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<sup>422</sup> Tan, “Australian Artist Christian Thompson on Being Mentored by Marina Abramović.”

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Steph Harmon, “Marina Abramovic Responds to Allegations of Racism over Comments about Indigenous Australians,” *The Guardian*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/17/marina-abramovic-responds-to-allegations-of-racism-over-comments-about-indigenous-australians>.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Daily Review Staff. “‘The Racist Is Present’: Marina Abramovic Slammed for Aboriginal Comments,” *Daily Review*, August 17, 2016, <https://dailyreview.com.au/racist-present-marina-abramovic-slammed-aboriginal-comments/>.

Thompson defiantly uses his capacity to sing in his language, also taking issue with the concept of a language as dead, an official designation meant to indicate the existence of only a few native speakers. If the world can hear Bidjara through Thompson's voice, is it really dead? From Thompson's perspective, the answer is a resounding no.

Combining a bust-length Thompson with film and video, *Dead Tongue* acts as a crucial bridge between embodiment as a presentation of the physical body and embodiment as bodily acts, such as speaking one's language. Installed at eye level and shown on a home-sized television monitor in his exhibition *Ritual Intimacy*, this film lost its power, and its very lovely song was almost unintelligible. Yet returning to the work after thinking through his career more broadly, *Dead Tongue* allows us to see Thompson as presenting both an Indigenous person and his language as very much alive. Created after his articulation of the concept of spiritual repatriation, the film serves to repatriate his Bidjara language. Thompson presents the language in a very Aboriginal way, restricting access and knowledge of the lyrics to a Bidjara audience. The language is dead based on official numbers, but that does not mean it is incapable of revival, through art and the act of speaking or singing.

*Berceuse* (2017) demonstrates Thompson's evolving practice, incorporating his training in performance with private training in singing and his study of Bidjara (Fig. 3.32). *Berceuse* translates to "lullaby" in French and the piece does indeed have a tremendous sense of melody. The five-minute three-channel video was created for Thompson's first museum retrospective, *Ritual Intimacy*, a traveling exhibition first installed at Monash University Art Gallery in 2017. Thompson sings a Bidjara composition of his own creation, again bringing his language into the gallery. The three-channel format allows Thompson to amplify and multiply a simple concept—a



man singing a song in his language that he wrote.<sup>427</sup> Alone in a low-lit white room, Thompson wears a simple black shirt. In overlapping frames, he appears as a silhouette, as bits of his face, lips, eyes, and as bits of hair. These sartorial and design choices contrast with *Dead Tongue*, which is much livelier in color. Similarly, the shifting camera angles of *Berceuse* contrast the slight, slowed-down movements of *Dead Tongue*. Whereas *Dead Tongue* is a stilted colonial picnic, *Berceuse* is a dark and active Bidjara lullaby.

In five short minutes, *Berceuse* haunts and mesmerizes (Fig. 3.32). The three screens are initially black, as haunting digeridoo music begins, adding further Indigeneity into the work. Thompson, in black and white with a black t-shirt and ear-length curly hair, slowly comes into focus on the central screen and begins singing. The other two screens are close-ups of his face, in color but still muted, and then these close-ups become silhouettes. Thompson's voice is sweet and confident as he sings his own composition in Bidjara. The silhouettes fade again into close-ups of the artist's face, his eyes in one screen and chin in the other. The first bit of the song repeats, then shifts as Thompson again harmonizes above the music. And then the three screens focus on the same section of his face, from above his top lip to his forehead. A phrase or word repeats a few times and then the screen goes black again. In the central screen, Thompson's mouth is closed while the flanking screen show his mouth open as he holds a long note. These close-ups fade to silhouettes back to close-ups of Thompson, who seems almost to growl and snarl his lips as the long note continues. Next all three screens show Thompson in black and white, with his head pointed to the right, silent on the center and singing on the side screens, then the shot fades back to close-ups of the artist's eyes and face in color and next to silhouettes but on a scale larger than the center image of Thompson so that they seem to spring out of the central screen. Thompson

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<sup>427</sup> Charlotte Day, "Introduction," in Hughes, *Ritual Intimacy*, 9.

sings the initial verse again with a chorus of voices, as the flanking screens repeat previous images, close-ups, and silhouettes. As he sings a longer bridge, the central screen zooms in on Thompson's lips, moving dramatically to form the long sounds. The first verse repeats again, as does the imagery of close-ups and the second verse of the same phrase or word from before with close-up of the artist's lips, which are pursed to make the sounds. Thompson then holds a long note, sings without music, and the image fades again to black with the final screen the last to fade.

The most striking aspect of *Berceuse* is the care with which it was constructed to be enjoyed by a public who overwhelmingly cannot fully understand it. Thompson, as seen in *Gamu Mambu (Blood Song)*, is capable of translating Bidjara for his audiences. Instead, he chooses to only share the language in spoken (or sung form). Most Aboriginal languages were primarily spoken, not written, at the time of colonization so his choice not to write Bidjara could honor this legacy of it as a spoken language. However, taken together with *Dead Tongue*, the reason is more to keep audiences out while concurrently allowing them in. The few remaining Bidjara speakers with normal sight and hearing can take in all aspects of the works. Other viewers are capable of only partial understanding, fitting with an Aboriginal concept of knowledge as restricted to certain audiences. The works also speaks to museology and collecting practices as amateur anthropologists and collectors often amassed things with only partial understanding of their meaning. Thompson is rewriting the relationship of Indigenous maker to the museum, offering these films for sale and consumption, but limiting their ability to be understood.

### 3.7 Conclusion

This chapter started by positioning Thompson as a contemporary Indigenous artist. For Thompson, this indicates his fluidity and comfort with moving, in the world and metaphorically, through disparate categories of identity and belonging. He is firmly rooted in his Bidjara identity and in his family's home of Tambo. He has also lived in major metropolitan centers of the world, studying performance art in the Netherlands and completing a PhD, including a major case study on the Black American artist Fred Wilson, at Oxford. At Oxford, Thompson gained a deeper familiarity with key nineteenth-century thinkers who significantly shaped attitudes toward Aboriginal Australian people and the art world. In exploring his oeuvre, we can see how the practice of embodiment and Thompson's own concept of spiritual repatriation seeks representation, perhaps even balance, related to historical and contemporary racist understandings of Aboriginal Australian peoples.

By organizing this chapter into two uneven areas—two-dimensional and filmic works—Thompson's moves between modes of representation, performance, and sound artmaking have been examined. Using himself as a canvas, Thompson manages to uncannily distance himself from his work, understanding his body as his most readily available medium. Although Thompson thus does not conceptualize most of these series as self-portraits, they are portraits nonetheless, portraits of the artist as an idea or as different ideas. Riffing off his mentor, Marina Abramovic, the artist is present in all these works. Via the act of making oneself present, of creating repeated works in which an Aboriginal person becomes a recognizable figure, Thompson engages in a powerful indigenizing gesture. In connecting his body to the natural world (*Australian Graffiti*), to ritual practices (*We Bury Our Own*), to contemporary artists and historical figures (*Gates of Tambo* and *Museum of Others*), and to the Bidjara language (*Dead Tongue* and *Berceuse*), Thompson broadens

the field of embodiment through enactment of many selves and connection of these selves to Indigenous approaches to belonging and relationality.

Additionally, using sound, costuming, and performance, Kent Monkman's practice has many parallels with Christian Thompson's oeuvre. Both artists play with makeup and male beauty and explore history through individual encounters with historical figures. Both artists may describe encounters with nineteenth-century white men who have had major impacts on how their respective contemporary Indigenous peoples are viewed and understood. Their practices are theatrical, relating directly to drama and other forms of performance and pop culture, such as music videos and courtroom television shows. Nonetheless, while Thompson embodies many figures in a primarily portrait-based practice, Monkman performs as and paints himself as his alter ego, an emphatically Native non-heterosexual, nonbinary Two-Spirit diva, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. While the practices of both artists present lessons in history and their respective cultures, the educational aspects of Monkman's art can be overwhelmed by their aesthetics. Meanwhile, Thompson's interest in ritual makes clear the seriousness of his practice, even if rituals are indicated but not fully described. Christian Thompson articulates spiritual repatriation as a process through which something new can be created in the absence of actual repatriation, while Kent Monkman, for whom repatriation remains significant, teaches audiences through his alter ego and imagines new ways of relating between people beyond the settler and Indigenous binary.

#### 4.0 Kent Monkman as Miss Chief, a Teaching Trickster

On the evening of December 19, 2019, Miss Share Chief Eagle Testickle<sup>428</sup> performed for a packed auditorium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Figs. 4.1, 4.2). She sported a feathered headdress and an architectural white-and-pink dress that resembled a tipi. Miss Chief read from a soon-to-be-released book, a tale of sexuality and Indigenous creation that blends critique of settler colonialism with optimism and inclusion. Her short performance was peppered with spurts of laughter from the audience, particularly at her bawdier storylines. Images of paintings Kent Monkman (Fisher River Cree Nation, Anglo-Irish, Canadian born 1965) previously created and the two commissioned works for the Metropolitan Museum's Great Hall flashed behind Miss Chief as she sashayed across the large stage. The audience was diverse, including many gallerists, curators, and critics as well as Native artists, in addition to many older individuals who frequent Metropolitan events. The performance was filmed, and the evening began with a promotional video about artist Kent Monkman and his alter ego Miss Chief, who pranced around the museum in her aforementioned dress. The reviews for the commission were mostly positive, but little was said about Miss Chief's performance, which was an essential part of the show. After her performance, Miss Chief was gone, and Kent Monkman, makeup-free and smartly dressed in black, had a brief conversation with the Metropolitan curator Randall Griffey.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> When discussing Kent Monkman's Two-Spirit alter ego, I use feminine pronouns, respecting the feminine title "miss." As Monkman is cisgender, I use masculine pronouns to refer to the artist outside of this character.

<sup>429</sup> Kent Monkman, "An Evening with Kent Monkman," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, December 19, 2019. <https://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/met-speaks/free-lectures/an-evening-with-artist-kent-monkman>.

Although the Great Hall installation program has only existed for a few years, a commission from the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a major achievement for any artist. Miss Chief, who is central to both the performance and the commissioned paintings is a persona that Monkman took up in 2002.<sup>430</sup> Their rise to prominence reflects the much longer-term growth in public awareness of Indigenous people's issues. Indigenous resistance, or perhaps more accurately Indigenous insistence on rights and resources, has attracted the attention of mainstream press and has a vigorous presence through social media, where Native peoples are very active, sharing stories and spreading community digitally. Globally solidarity among Indigenous peoples has been growing since the 1970s and the United Nations has increasingly sought to address the concerns of Indigenous peoples. The 2007 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provided a potential framing that is expansive, articulating both rights and identities.

Monkman's adoption of the Miss Chief persona coincides with a mainstream drag renaissance, exemplified by RuPaul's reality television and competition show *Drag Race*. Several television shows about drag performers emerged in 2020, most likely based on the popularity of the *Drag Race* franchise, which has made the careers of several drag performers called queens. The fabulous Miss Chief, visibly male sporting high heels and makeup, is highly evocative of drag. Like the queens on *Drag Race*, Miss Chief is as aesthetically appealing as Kent Monkman is conventionally attractive. Miss Chief's performances are more digestible—though no less subversive—than other Native artists who similarly play with gendered characters. Monkman/Miss Chief's comeliness has contributed to, but is by no means the sole reason for, their rise in the art world.

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<sup>430</sup> Kate Morris, "The Embodied Landscape," in *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 128.

The works discussed in this chapter primarily focus on Monkman's use of his own body in performance, film, and photography, which are argued here as also constituting performances. Ultimately, Miss Chief serves as an educational figure, subverting a main purpose of drag, to entertain. She educates a broad audience, using meticulous research to rupture common misunderstandings of Native peoples and histories. She consistently deconstructs masculine art heroes, objectifying and defiling the most powerful group, white Euro-American men, while reconstructing their paintings.

Throughout this chapter, the distinction is made between Miss Chief, a mythical, fictional persona who traffics in stereotypical imagery, and Kent Monkman, the artist who is very connected to his Swampy Cree identity. It is important to always separate the artist from his alter ego, while acknowledging their core similarities, as "half-breeds," or mixed Native people; as Swampy Cree, a First Nations people who reside in Manitoba; and as Two-Spirits. "Two-Spirit" is a term coined at a First Nations/Native American lesbian and gay conference in 1990 to articulate the identity of queer Native people as both non-heterosexual and anticolonial.<sup>431</sup> In most of his oeuvre, Monkman does not attempt to be a cultural broker for his specific community. Rather, he uses the site of stereotype formation and a seat of colonial power, the museum, to dismantle misunderstandings about Native peoples. Using many foundational myths, Monkman as Miss Chief highlights the constructed and at times false identities of Native presentation. Miss Chief follows a long lineage of Native performers who traffic in stereotypes in order to challenge them, often reaping material benefits. In her oeuvre, Miss Chief slays the ethnographer artist, figures such as George Catlin and Edward Sheriff Curtis from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pointing out the

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<sup>431</sup> Cameron Greensmith and Giwa Sulaimon, "Challenging Settler Colonialism in Contemporary Queer Politics: Settler Homonationalism, Pride Toronto, and Two-Spirit Subjectivities," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (June 2013): 131.

ridiculousness of quests to fully understand another people in the context of a belief in one's own superiority. Most crucially for this chapter, Monkman as Miss Chief presents an expansive sense of what it could mean to be Indigenous, most explicitly through *Miss Chief Justice of the Piece* (2012). She embodies a broader and amorphous Indigeneity, sometimes a specifically Cree formulation, which uses stereotype and the popularity of drag to inform. However, fitting with the broad and specific nature of Indigeneity itself, Cree-specific knowledge and stories inform this sense of Indigeneity.

Unlike most artists in this project, Monkman's work has been extensively discussed, both in academic contexts and in the popular press. Although most scholars contend that his work is informed by his sense of Indigeneity, very few points to his specific practice of embodiment and fewer still consider his Swampy Cree background. Most work published on Monkman has centered around his painting practice. The focus of this chapter is rather a limited number of works, none of which are paintings. In light of the existing scholarship, its strengths and its limitations, it is edifying to begin by situating Monkman in his Swampy Cree community. The Métis scholar June Scudeler has, to date, most clearly argued for Monkman's art in relation to Cree cosmology and history. Much of the literature has focused on explaining Monkman's use of art historical references and the unsettling, pointedly effective way that he plays with temporality. Pushing against the previous scholarship on Monkman, it is argued here that Miss Chief has become a strongly didactic figure: luring viewers with titillating visuals only to present information, to provide a glimpse of what it is actually like to be Native, and most recently at the Met, presenting a specifically Cree version of creation.



## 4.1 Situating Monkman as Swampy Cree

Kent Monkman is a Swampy Cree man, a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation in Manitoba, who is also Irish and English on his mother's side. The Fisher River Cree Nation, Ochekwi-Sipi in Cree, has two reserves north of Manitoba in Canada and had just over four thousand enrolled members as of January 2021.<sup>432</sup> The scholar Winona Wheeler, who is also a member of the Ochekwi-Sipi, has produced one of the few articles that is exclusively about this community and Treaty 5, the 1875 agreement which created their reserves.<sup>433</sup> According to Wheeler, Monkman's nation was not given their choice of land for their reserve, and its families were given 100 acres per family rather than the standard 160 acres."<sup>434</sup> Swampy Cree people have a long history, sometimes referenced in Monkman's paintings, of coexisting with Europeans, often through dealings with the Hudson Bay Company, which relied upon their skill as hunters and trappers.<sup>435</sup> As Wheeler explains, Norway House, a larger community of Muskego-winniwak (Swampy Cree people) to the north, was overpopulated, so a group of families became open to the idea of treaty-making with the newly formed Canadian government as a way to ensure farming land to support their community.<sup>436</sup> They had originally requested an area called Grassy Narrows in Manitoba through their primary negotiator, James Settee, a Swampy Cree missionary.<sup>437</sup> The government gave the community's requested land to Icelandic immigrants, thus leaving the

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<sup>432</sup> Fisher River Cree Nation, "Community Profile," updated January 2021, <http://fisherriver.ca/community-profile/>.

<sup>433</sup> Winona Wheeler, "The Fur Trade, Treaty No. 5 and the Fisher River First Nation," in *Papers of the Rupert's Land Colloquium 2008 in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta*, ed. Margaret Anne Lindsay and Malory Allyson Richards (Winnipeg: Centre for Rupert's Land Studies, 2010), 209–22.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, 210–11.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

community with much less-suitable land for farming near Fisher River.<sup>438</sup> Wheeler convincingly argues that the Fisher River Band understood treaty-making as a means to livelihood, a way to support their community through adapting to farming, but this was extremely difficult given the poor quality of the land they received.<sup>439</sup> Wheeler's explanation of the history of Monkman's specific community aligns well with the artist's own understanding of treaty-making with the Canadian government. He recently stated that, in contrast, Cree people viewed treaty-making as a form of becoming relations, of ensuring a mutual relationship.<sup>440</sup> As is the case with many Indigenous communities, the good faith effort to be self-sustaining was met with terms that made self-reliance nearly impossible.

Like many First Nations people, Monkman's family has a history that has been shaped by Canadian government policies.<sup>441</sup> In fact, his family has lived off the reserve for a few generations.<sup>442</sup> Rather than understand his family's movement as the source of his disconnection from his community, Monkman blames the Canadian government for his lack of ties to his reserve lands.<sup>443</sup> His great-grandmother Caroline Everett was forced to move as a child from her birthplace of St. Peter's, Manitoba,<sup>444</sup> only to be later forced to move away from her new home of Red River, Manitoba, in 1997.<sup>445</sup> Her story overlaps with the narrative of the broader Ochekwi-Sipi community, who were forced to move south to better support themselves. Monkman has lived

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>440</sup> Stephane Aquin and Kent Monkman, "Artist Talk with Kent Monkman," Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, virtual artist talk, 58 minutes, May 13, 2020.

<sup>441</sup> For more on Canadian history from a First Nations perspective, see Olive Patricia Dickason, *A Concise History of Canada's First Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>442</sup> June Scudeler, "'Indians on Top': Kent Monkman's Sovereign Erotics," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 39, no. 4 (2015): 23.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Kate Morris, "Crash: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Indigenous Art," in "Special Issue on Contemporary Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 75.

mostly in cities and, similar to nearly half of First Nations people in Canada, resided in urban environments mainly for more opportunities.<sup>446</sup> Indeed, as a child, the family's move to Manitoba was principally to provide Monkman and his brother better educational opportunities.<sup>447</sup> After attending school in Manitoba, Monkman attended Sheridan College of Applied Arts in Ontario, studying illustration.<sup>448</sup> Based in the city, he had many artistic opportunities to connect with larger First Nations communities, such as by working as a set designer for the Woods Cree playwright Tomson Highway's Native Earth theater company.<sup>449</sup> Themes of removal, remembrance, and complex relationships with place in Monkman's work tie back to his personal and community history.

Monkman has never been entirely removed from his culture, staying especially connected through the presence of his female Cree relatives. The repeated references to religious figures in Monkman's work gestures to his familial background, as both of his parents were evangelical missionaries, and his father even preached in Cree to mainly Cree-speaking communities.<sup>450</sup> Monkman was exposed to the Cree language as a child in a Christian context, through hymns and prayers, as well as through his great-grandmother Caroline Everett, who spoke mainly Swampy Cree.<sup>451</sup> His grandmother Elizabeth Monkman was also a very strong influence on Monkman, as is demonstrated by his dedication of his major traveling exhibition, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, to her, the title referencing her experience in the Brandon Residential School in

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<sup>446</sup> Morris, "The Embodied Landscape," 125.

<sup>447</sup> Scudeler, "Indians on Top," 23.

<sup>448</sup> Kent Monkman, "CV 26.02.2020," 2020,

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5489c5f0e4b0cf16a8c043fd/t/5ef639740ba9554bdc3c2fb0/1593194869198/MONKMAN+4+Page+CV+26-06-2020.pdf>.

<sup>449</sup> Scudeler, "Indians on Top," 24.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

Manitoba.<sup>452</sup> One of the major themes of *Shame and Prejudice* is the contemporary cultural genocide caused by residential schools, where young Native students lived apart from their families in an effort to forcibly assimilate them, recently brought to light through Canada's 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).<sup>453</sup> The TRC collected testimony from thousands of residential-school survivors, providing small amounts of funds to those harmed by these schools, as well as an opportunity to detail the often-horrific conditions under which they lived.<sup>454</sup> Residential schools, where Native children were forbidden to speak their languages and were often abused, proliferated in the United States from nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Despite this tragedy and lack of a vocabulary for trauma, Monkman's art has become a vehicle to explore these difficult histories.<sup>455</sup> As he details in the foreword to *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, families did not talk about residential school experiences out of shame, yet in his estimation, surviving these experiences—much like the many forced removals of Monkman's community and his family—are a testament to their resilience.<sup>456</sup>

Histories of treaty-making (and treaty-breaking), damaging assimilation, and the move from reserves to cities for more opportunities provide one kind of origin story for Monkman. However, as Monkman is Swampy Cree, there is another origin story for his people, which Monkman interpreted during his Met performance.<sup>457</sup> The origin story of the Swampy Cree people

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<sup>452</sup> Kent Monkman, "Foreword," in *Kent Monkman: Shame and Prejudice, a Story of Resilience* (McCord Museum: Montreal, 2019), 53.

<sup>453</sup> Canadian Government, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," <http://www.trc.ca/>.

<sup>454</sup> Connie Walker, "Missing & Murdered: Finding Cleo" podcast, *Canadian Broadcast Company*, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/findingcleo>.

<sup>455</sup> Kent Monkman and Andrew Drevor, "Kent Monkman MTHF 18 Keynote, Moving Trans History Forward," *Transgender Archive Annual Conference*, May 8, 2018, 1:09 hours, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqPelM1osHk>.

<sup>456</sup> Monkman, "Foreword," 56–57.

<sup>457</sup> Monkman, "An Evening with Kent Monkman."

details how people came to the land, evincing overarching themes of relationality and resilience.<sup>458</sup> At the beginning, there was a land below and a land above; a man and woman from the land above wanted to go to the land below, which they saw through a hole. A spider allowed them to travel down in a basket on his web, promising them that a being would teach them everything they needed to know once they arrived in the land below and warning them that only one of them should look out on the way down, otherwise they would get stuck in an eagle's nest. Though the eagle does not make an appearance in the story, the eagle's nest features prominently as an obstacle. The couple did not heed the spider's warning, so they were trapped in an eagle's nest, still looking down at the land below from above. They asked multiple animals to help them and most refused, but then a bear and wolverine agreed to help them down to the ground. The bear then teaches them everything they need to know. The couple is thus punished for breaking the rules, but only temporarily, learning from the bear—which would seem most likely to cause them harm—to live in harmony with the animals. According to elders, the next chapter of this tale was when white men came to the land, at which point the relationship between people and environment changed again.<sup>459</sup> This creation story demonstrates a strong connection to the natural world, namely needing ancestral beings in the form of animals in order to know how to exist on earth. The animals and plants are the first stewards of the land then humans came, basing their relationships on those of animals. This is a markedly different kind of creation story from the Judeo-Christian belief that the world was made specifically for people.

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<sup>458</sup> I provide a summary of the story from a well-cited book of Cree legends. See Simeon Scott and Xavier Sutherland, "Legends and Narratives: Swampy Cree," in *Cree Legends and Narratives from the West Coast of James Bay*, by C. Douglas Ellis, Algonquin Text Society, and Simeon Scott (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1995), 3–13.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*

In Monkman's 2019 Met performance, Miss Chief articulated her mythic origin story, a sexier version of the Swampy Cree creation myth.<sup>460</sup> She delivered it as a monologue written in a book, with some sound effects and a large screen behind her to aid in the telling. This screen first went black and then atmospheric, afterward displaying close-ups of Monkman paintings which fit the text. Miss Chief takes the place of the humans in the Cree creation story, but also precedes humanity as a spiritual being. She combines science with Cree belief, describing herself as initially formless then molecular, stating, "you would think of my form as hydrogen, but I was so much more."<sup>461</sup> Her monologue makes reference to Cree figures, particularly Kisemanitou, as Cree call the Great Spirit who formed all of creation.<sup>462</sup> Miss Chief acknowledges the creation of powerful originary beings, such as Wesakechak, often considered an essential Cree ancestor and trickster. Miss Chief reinscribes herself as another legendary being, following the path of humans. She is hurled from the land above to the land below, becoming embodied, taking human form on the path down. Rather than being trapped in an eagle's nest, Miss Chief is caught by an Eagle, Kihew, with whom Miss Chief then has a sexual encounter.

Like the couple in the Cree creation story, Miss Chief is also given instructions by a higher power, in her case to spread love and to guide humans. Miss Chief becoming or originating as a cosmological being could be considered disrespectful to the actual Swampy Cree origin story. According to the scholar Winona Wheeler, lying in a story is typically unacceptable, but, "If the

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<sup>460</sup> Here I discuss Monkman's untitled performance based on my own notes, photographs, and transcription of the performance.

<sup>461</sup> All quotes come from my own transcription of a video I recorded during the performance. Monkman, "An Evening with Kent Monkman."

<sup>462</sup> Willie Ermine, "Cree Cosmology," in *Indigenous Saskatchewan Encyclopedia* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), [https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/cree\\_cosmology.php](https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/cree_cosmology.php).

storyteller made good, transformed the intent to deceive into a good story, the lie was erased.”<sup>463</sup> Wheeler explains that the spoken word is sacred to the Cree and can be propped up through the use of other visual aids.<sup>464</sup> Although Miss Chief reads from a book, Miss Chief is actually modeling several core aspects of good Cree storytelling, such as using the screen to share images, including the actual names of Cree cosmological beings, and speaking the performance.<sup>465</sup> As a legend of community origin, there is no one owner of this story, no singular authority on its validity. Yet, there was no public response to this performance came from Swampy River Cree members who could have responded, such as Winona Wheeler. The lack of public outcry does not mean that no one in the community took issue with this retelling, but it does suggest that this telling was likely tacitly accepted by the community at large. This recent performance should be considered the current evolution of Miss Chief, situating herself as particularly Swampy Cree instead of broadly Indigenous.

#### **4.2 It Started with a Painting and Cher: Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle**

In order to evolve, Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle had to first be conceived of by the artist. At her core, Miss Chief is Monkman’s alter ego, related to other artistic alter egos, such as “Rose Sélavy” (Eros c’est la vie [Lust, it’s life]) for Marcel Duchamp.<sup>466</sup> However, in the case of

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<sup>463</sup> Winona Wheeler, “Cree Intellectual Traditions in History,” in *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined Region*, ed. Alvin Finkle, Sarah Carter, and Peter Fortna (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 57.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>466</sup> Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy,” <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/56973.html>.

Monkman, Miss Chief is specifically rooted in Native sexuality and American pop culture. Monkman has presented several origin stories for Miss Chief, many of which will be detailed in sections about specific works of art. Miss Chief has evolved over the years as has her role in Monkman's art, ultimately embodied in film and performance as a teaching trickster.

The art historian Kate Morris has carefully tracked Miss Chief's appearance in Monkman's art and the main sources of inspiration for her creation. Monkman's 2002 painting, *Portrait of the Artist as Hunter*, is the first to feature Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle (Fig. 4.3).<sup>467</sup> The painting presents Miss Chief as a buffalo hunter on a white horse, with later-characteristic long headdress and pink heels. Monkman's 2003 painting *Study for Artist and Model* presents a more evocative and predictive image of Miss Chief (Fig. 4.4). This acrylic-on-canvas painting is set in a majestic landscape, a grassy area surrounded by woods with mountains in the distance. Miss Chief is near the center of the canvas, painting her model, a white cowboy, who is naked except for his boots and whose body is full of arrows, presumably shot by Miss Chief. There is a strong reference to Saint Sebastian, often depicted as a handsomely built young man with arrows in his naked torso, a favorite queer topic for centuries. At his left is a large camera (providing a narrative for the work) with which he attempted to document Miss Chief and instead became her prey and model. In this early instantiation, Miss Chief is a powerful artist, besting the white cowboy toting his camera with her arrows and canvas. Miss Chief's pink high heels and long feathered headdress is a direct reference to the pop star Cher and her hit song "Half Breed" from the early 1970s.<sup>468</sup> The antiquated camera and contemporary outfit are a mishmash of symbols and temporalities that exemplify Miss Chief in Monkman's work.

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<sup>467</sup> Morris, "The Embodied Landscape, 128.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.



Miss Chief is identified through female pronouns, but her genitals are visible, even in these early paintings, and are clearly male. Like Monkman, Miss Chief is “Two-Spirit,” a term used to denote a spectrum of gender identity and sexual preference beyond Western binaries of man versus woman, straight versus gay.<sup>469</sup> To identify as Two-Spirit is also claim an explicitly intersectional identity based on traditional Native concepts of gender variance.<sup>470</sup> The term is sometimes used as shorthand for a queer Native person, but it is meant to suggest variety both in how one identifies and who one loves. According to Monkman, “I got a lot of empowerment learning more about Two-Spirit culture.”<sup>471</sup> Thus Miss Chief embodies a lack of shame in expressing nonbinary sexuality and gender, a feminine figure meant to celebrate the feminine and the potential for the feminine to exist in a masculine body.<sup>472</sup> Miss Chief is also a “half-breed,” or mixed Native and European person.<sup>473</sup> Monkman also identifies as mixed as his father is Swampy Cree, and his mother is white. By suggesting that Miss Chief is also mixed, Monkman is nodding to her roots in the musician Cher and refusing any sense that she is meant to represent an “authentic” mythic Native person. Monkman and Miss Chief might make themselves seem “less” Swampy Cree/Native because they are mixed, but the reality of colonization is that most Native peoples are mixed. To consider only a full-blooded Native person Native is to accept colonial logic and fractional thinking about identity; this view also disregards Indigenous forms of identity and

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<sup>469</sup> Harlan Pruden and Se-ah-dom Edmo, “Two-Spirit People: Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Historic and Contemporary Native America,” unpublished presentation, 2014, [http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/initiatives/Pruden-Edmo\\_TwoSpiritPeople.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/initiatives/Pruden-Edmo_TwoSpiritPeople.pdf).

<sup>470</sup> Qwo-li Driskill, “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no. 2 (2004): 52.

<sup>471</sup> Monkman and Drevor, “Kent Monkman MTHF 18 Keynote,”

<sup>472</sup> Aquin and Monkman, “Artist Talk with Kent Monkman.”

<sup>473</sup> Miss Chief explicitly refers to her also mixed blood in many works. See Catherine Mattes and Kent Monkman, “An Interview with Miss Chief,” in *Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Mischief*, ed. David Liss, Shirley Madill, Gerald McMaster, Catherine Mattes, David McIntosh, and Kent Monkman (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2008), 107–8.

belonging that have existed since time immemorial and are generally more inclusive than contemporary mainstream versions of these ideas. By the rules of membership of his Fisher River Cree Nation, Monkman is a fully enrolled band member, one whose prominence is celebrated by the community, as exemplified by an article on his Met installation on their community news page.<sup>474</sup>

Beyond expressing her identity, Miss Chief is active, a time-traveler and performer. Describing Monkman's paintings, Gerald McMaster writes that, "Monkman's Miss Chief is a time traveler, moving in and out of history as a self-inserting corrective, defying the written and painted narratives espoused by the so-called victors, which have become naturalized with each succeeding generation."<sup>475</sup> McMaster's statement sums up the manner in which Miss Chief moves through nineteenth-century landscapes with twentieth-century Modern artists in tow. The traversing of time serves as a visual metaphor for other traversals of Miss Chief, namely between cultures and genders. Her fluid chronological relationship aligns with a queer temporality that scholars such as Mark Rifkin have noted is a subversion of settler time.<sup>476</sup> As Miss Chief is a figure between genders, Monkman used the pop star Cher's "Half-Breed" phase as a starting point to envision a fabulous pan-Indian and Two-Spirit triple-threat using feathered headdresses of Plains cultures with loincloths, tipis, and other symbols of general Indian identity.<sup>477</sup> Cree people are considered to be a Plains Indian people, yet they do not have any tradition of long headdresses.<sup>478</sup> The costume

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<sup>474</sup> Fisher River Cree Nation, "Fisher River Member Art Exhibition Launched at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Community News*, December 19, 2019, <https://fisherriver.ca/fisher-river-member-art-exhibition-launched-at-new-yorks-metropolitan-museum-of-art/>.

<sup>475</sup> Gerald McMaster, "The Geography of Hope," in Liss et al., *Triumph of Mischief*, 100.

<sup>476</sup> See Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>477</sup> Morris, "The Embodied Landscape," 128.

<sup>478</sup> Reilley Bishop-Stall, "Re-imaging and Re-imagining the Colonial Legend: Photographic Manipulation and Queer Performance in the Work of Kent Monkman and Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle," *Gnovis: Communication*,

for Cher's hit song "Half-Breed" combined male and female objects, as headdresses and loincloths are typically male items, while her bikini-style top was 1970s feminine Americana.<sup>479</sup>

Many scholars have made strong contributions to understanding Miss Chief, but few have established the explicit capacity of Miss Chief to teach and inform as central to her role. Instead, they have mostly focused on Miss Chief's capacity for liminality and gender expression. Jonathan D. Katz argues that, through the character of Miss Chief, Monkman demonstrates that contact changed both Native and European peoples forever.<sup>480</sup> "Miss Chief Eagle Testickle," he writes, "is Monkman's avatar in this multiplicity, for she is the very figure of a contradictory, failed, or incomplete hybridity."<sup>481</sup> By this argument, Miss Chief exemplifies multiplicity in sexuality, gender identity, and along the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary. In any case, across several canvases, films, and performances, Miss Chief is often an empowered, active figure, only occasionally mournful of the tragic process of colonization and its effects for Indigenous peoples. In a 2018 interview, Monkman stated, "Over the years, I use Miss Chief to decolonize art history."<sup>482</sup> Although she may have started as a comical figure and Kent Monkman as Cher when she claimed a Native identity, Miss Chief has evolved toward her thoughtful, informative purpose. Miss Chief allows Monkman to teach without being pedantic, titillating first to inform later.

The rise of Miss Chief via Monkman has occurred simultaneously with the acceptance of drag in the mainstream, though Miss Chief predates the most mainstream iteration of drag, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, by nearly a decade. Miss Chief Share Eagle Testicle is Monkman's version

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*Culture, and Technology* 12, no. 1 (Fall 2011): <http://www.gnovisjournal.org/2011/11/21/reilley-bishop-stall-journal/>.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Jonathon D. Katz, "Miss Chief is Always Interested in the Latest European Fashions," in *Interpellations: Three Essays on Kent Monkman*, ed. Richard W. Hill, Jonathon D. Katz, Todd Porterfield, and Michèle Thériault (Montreal: Galerie Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2012), 19.

<sup>481</sup> Katz, "Miss Chief Is Always Interested in the Latest European Fashions," 19.

<sup>482</sup> Monkman and Drevor, "Kent Monkman MTHF 18 Keynote."

of drag as “theatrical gender bending,” rather than the more colloquial understanding of drag as female impersonation.<sup>483</sup> The scholar Meredith Heller contends that “in plays, club performances, and pride parades as well as on TV, film, and social media, gender-bending—both as a stage performance and a conceptual discourse about gender flexibility—is part mainstream consciousness.”<sup>484</sup> Heller’s text is extremely recent, responding to the recent mainstream comfort with drag. Miss Chief is often referred to as a drag queen, though Monkman often clarifies that Miss Chief has specifically Native nonbinary gender roots that are outside the long subculture of drag. In performances and portrayals, there is a strong overlap between Miss Chief and drag queens, particularly in the affiliation with Cher.<sup>485</sup> The popularity of *Drag Race* as a competition show and way to for those who do not participate in it to access drag subculture has been met with both negative and positive reactions in the media.<sup>486</sup> Monkman has continued to expand upon the persona of Miss Chief since 2002, so the popularity of drag and rise of Miss Chief/Monkman as a global art star is not unconnected.

Miss Chief is legible as drag due to her similar gender-bending and societally challenging ends. Monkman’s popularity in part stems from Miss Chief’s resemblance to incarnations of glamorous, aesthetically appealing drag. Monkman is slim and attractive, so Miss Chief presents a svelte, attractive figure to viewers. The drag of Miss Chief is not typically as exaggerated as the makeup of queens on RuPaul’s *Drag Race*, instead looking more natural and subtle, though her

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<sup>483</sup> Meredith Heller, “What’s In a Name?: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending,” in *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Fiona Moore, “One of the Gals Who’s One of the Guys: Men, Masculinity and Drag Performances in North America,” unpublished BA honors thesis, University of Toronto, 1997, 208.

<sup>486</sup> See E. Alex. Jung, “Drag Race Inc.: What’s Lost When a Subculture Goes Pop?” *Vulture*, June 11, 2019. <https://www.vulture.com/2019/06/drag-race-inc-whats-lost-when-a-subculture-goes-pop.html> and Isaac Oliver, “Is This the Golden Age of Drag? Yes. And No.,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/arts/drag-queens-rupaul-drag-race.html?auth=link-dismiss-google1tap>.

showgirl-style outfits and long black wigs are appropriate attire for a queen. Monkman's use of sexual dominance over another as a form of power have disquieted some Native folks, especially younger scholars, who have taken issue with as they reinforce the patriarchal trope of sexual violence as dominance.<sup>487</sup> When Miss Chief sexually dominates a white man in a canvas, the subtext is that Native women have throughout time seemed to white men that easily conquered and sexually available. The hypersexualization that Miss Chief expresses is safer because her body is male, thus she is less susceptible to the very real pandemic of sexual violence against Native women. The men Miss Chief pursues, her objects of desire and derision, are always conventionally attractive like her. They are typically of similar athletic build to Miss Chief herself so that neither seem to be significantly disadvantaged in their tussles. The problematic issues of sexual violence and dominance can be easily overshadowed by the rich, playful, and humorous tableaux of Miss Chief.

### **4.3 Making White Men Objects: *Taxonomy of The European Male* (2005)**

On the evening of June 25, 2005, Kent Monkman as Miss Chief performed *Taxonomy of the European Male* at Compton Verney, a manor house turned art museum in Warwickshire, England.<sup>488</sup> The performance was filmed and later made available for purchase.<sup>489</sup> The sixteen-minute film presents Miss Chief as an anthropological hero in pursuit of understanding the

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<sup>487</sup> See Regan De Loggans, "Mistikôsiwak: Monkman at the Met," *Canadian Art*, April 29, 2020, <https://canadianart.ca/essays/mistikosiwak-kent-monkman-at-the-met/>.

<sup>488</sup> *The American West*, Compton Verney, June 25–August 29, 2005, <https://www.comptonverney.org.uk/thing-to-do/the-american-west/>.

<sup>489</sup> For the visual analysis of this film—Kent Monkman, *Taxonomy of the European Male*, 16 minutes, 2005—I rely primarily on my own viewing available through Brown University libraries' film viewing service Panopto.

European male, exploring her encounter with two legendary Englishmen, Robin Hood and Friar Tuck. The film is mostly a single camera shot that moves with Miss Chief, first holding an archery contest and then adjourning to her gallery to paint the European male specimens she encounters. As both a performance and a film, *Taxonomy of the European Male* treats one of Monkman's most persistent themes: flipping the script to objectify white men, by reperforming the type of research performed by the nineteenth-century American artist and amateur anthropologist George Catlin.<sup>490</sup> However, the remix of Catlin's gaze turned toward white men, the ultimate colonial subjects, incorporates homosexual desire and, through enactment, demonstrates the uncanniness of salvage ethnography, that is, the desire to record cultures and traditions believed to be on the verge of extinction.

Exploring the performance as film aligns with the scholar Diana Taylor's assertion that performance is about both "doing" the actual temporal event of performance and is "done" through the object made, in this case film of the performance.<sup>491</sup> Taylor argues that "in this sense, then, performance is about past, present, and future."<sup>492</sup> This contemporary nature of performance, its ability to exist between and among times, is appropriate to describe *Taxonomy of the European Male*, which occurs in one form in 2005, but also draws viewers to the nineteenth century and further back to late Medieval England, the time and place of Robin Hood.<sup>493</sup> The film is explored and deemed central to the larger artistic intention of Monkman, who states, "I have made videos whenever I get to do a live performance. I see it as an opportunity to make a film or a video—to

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<sup>490</sup> Shirley Madill, "Intelligent Mischief in the Paintings of Kent Monkman," in Liss et al., *Triumph of Mischief*, 25.

<sup>491</sup> Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 7–9.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>493</sup> Dr. Mike Ibeji, "Robin Hood and His Historical Context," *BBC*, February 17, 2017, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle\\_ages/robin\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/robin_01.shtml).

document it and then complete it as something in and of itself.”<sup>494</sup> In this same interview, Monkman later references *Taxonomy of the European Male* as an instance of a location at which filming would be prohibitively expensive, thus philosophically and logistically necessitating the recording of the performance.<sup>495</sup>

*Taxonomy of the European Male* was the second physical embodiment of Miss Chief, the first being *Group of Seven Inches* (2004), a performance at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in 2004.<sup>496</sup> This performance similarly examined the European male as subject, but with more obvious sexual connotations as Miss Chief “discovers” two white men then plies them with alcohol and caresses them.<sup>497</sup> *Group of Seven Inches* and *Taxonomy of the European Male* both take aim at art history and objectify white men. Still, *Taxonomy of the European Male* is a more layered work, due to its accompanying text and backdrop. The specific location of Compton Verney and outcome of this encounter is more evocative of the grand ambitions and later narratives of Miss Chief; hence it must be explored in greater detail.

*Taxonomy of the European Male* begins without Miss Chief and with an omniscient narrator who speaks in a clipped (perhaps fake) British accent.<sup>498</sup> The camera shows a crowd that has gathered to witness the performance, attendees of the opening for the 2005 exhibition *The American West*, curated by Jimmie Durham and Richard William Hill, which included a few Kent

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<sup>494</sup> Julie Nagam, Kerry Swanson, Cheryl L’Hirondelle, and Kent Monkman, “Decolonial Interventions in Performance and New Media Art: In Conversation with Cheryl L’Hirondelle, and Kent Monkman,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 159 (2014): 31.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>496</sup> Penny Cousineau-Levine, “Cher’s ‘Half-Breed’ and the Hybrid Masquerades of Kent Monkman’s Miss Chief Testickle,” *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2017), <http://americanajournal.hu/vol13no1mixed/cousineau-levine>.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>498</sup> I believe the narrator to be Monkman himself, but I have not yet been able to interview Monkman in order to confirm this.

Monkman paintings.<sup>499</sup> The narrator sets the scene as “live on the beautiful grounds of Compton Verney,” and makes reference to an art game in which Miss Chief competes with George Catlin and the French artist Eugène Delacroix. Catlin and Delacroix painted contemporaneously, albeit under vastly different economic and social circumstances, though they briefly overlapped in Paris around Catlin’s Indian gallery.<sup>500</sup> The narrator’s tone evokes a nature video, extensively describing in a hushed voice places that Miss Chief has visited and Compton Verney itself.<sup>501</sup> The narrator remains unseen, moving with the camera, adding to the sense of narrator as both nature-observer and sports commentator, and describing this footage as live, or currently occurring. After about thirty seconds, Miss Chief enters in what the narrator calls, “her sporting attire,” on a horse and wearing high heels, a feathered headdress, a long loincloth, and a short, tied top (Fig. 4.5). Her entrance on a brown horse directly recalls the horse on which Cher enters in the “Half-Breed” music video from 1973.<sup>502</sup> Two white men enter from the opposite direction, crossing the large field behind the museum. Both appear quite young, one dressed as Robin Hood in tights, a hat, and a tunic, the other in long robes to indicate he is Friar Tuck. They are beardless, of medium build, and much shorter than Miss Chief in her heels. The narration is interrupted by the start of Miss Chief’s monologue, detailing her quest to document European males, that is spoken throughout the performance. The text, expressed in stanzas like a poem, was included in Monkman’s first major traveling exhibition, *The Triumph of Mischief*, and its accompanying catalogue, as “Wanderings of an Artist.”<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Compton Verney, *The American West*.

<sup>500</sup> See Jessica Horton, “Ojibwa *Tableaux Vivants*: George Catlin, Robert Houle, and Transcultural Materialism,” *Art History* 39, no. 1 (February 2016): 124–51.

<sup>501</sup> It is unclear from the video whether the narration occurred at the performance or was added later.

<sup>502</sup> Whitney Kimball, “Cher Will Not Apologize for ‘Half-Breed,’” *Jezebel*, December 31, 2017, <https://jezebel.com/cher-will-not-apologize-for-half-breed-1821681055>.

<sup>503</sup> Liss et al., *Triumph of Mischief*, front cover.



Miss Chief's monologue, and later published texts, riffs on the writings of George Catlin.<sup>504</sup> "Upon my arrival here from the continent of North America where I have already passed considerable time in studying the customs and manners of the European Male," it begins, "I have determined to devote whatever talents and proficiency I possess to the painting of a series of pictures illustrative of the European Male in his native habitat."<sup>505</sup> Miss Chief's description of her endeavor is punctuated by action, first an archery competition against Robin Hood and Friar Tuck (Fig. 4.6). The camera appears to be near the manor's pebbled courtyard while Miss Chief and her competitors are in the grassy fields nearby, where a large target has been set up. The narrator warns that Miss Chief "does not have the home-turf advantage here. Needless to say, Robin Hood is not and has never been a fair player. Despite his boyish charm, he is quite dangerous."<sup>506</sup> This warning comes after the point in the poem in which Miss Chief says that she will "travel far and wide to find [the European male]." The use of the colloquialism "home-turf advantage" references sports like football and basketball, but here means knowledge of this part of England. After the competition that does not seem to have a clear winner, Miss Chief—flanked by Robin Hood and Friar Tuck—heads inside the museum to continue the performance.

The crowd around the paved courtyard moves to accommodate the performers, and the camera remains static, filming guests and the three performers as they move inside (Fig. 4.7). Miss Chief's monologue suggests the theme of documentation, so the move inside is presumably to document these European men. The narrator serves as an interlocutor between the presumed

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<sup>504</sup> David McIntosh, "Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Postindian Diva Warrior, in the Shadowy Hall of Mirrors," in Liss et al., *Triumph of Mischief*, 32.

<sup>505</sup> The monologue is available in Kent Monkman, "Taxonomy of the European Male," in Jean Elizabeth O'Hara, Muriel Miguel, Kent Monkman, and Waawaate Fobister, *Two-Spirit Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2014), 42–44.

<sup>506</sup> The narrator's text is from my own transcription of the film performance. It is not available in the book listed above.

control and superiority of Miss Chief and her subjects. Miss Chief is the only participant who speaks and initially appears to guide the actions of her European subjects. The limitation of the single digital camera is apparent as, likely some moments later, the film cuts to grand hall. The hall is furnished with two white screens, a canvas on an easel, a piano, and several garments hanging at one side of the room (Fig. 4.8). The room is meant to evoke George Catlin's Indian gallery, described by David McIntosh as "the historical representational touchstone for Monkman's retrospective . . . , first staged in New York in 1837, then in London in 1839, and finally in the Salle de Séance of the Louvre in 1846, at the pleasure of King Louie Philippe."<sup>507</sup> The international nature of Catlin's gallery is repeated by Miss Chief through her speech as she recounts her observations of different European, particularly French and English, men. The movement between North America (the United States and Canada), France, and England is also reinforced by the narrator who mentions Miss Chief's time in France with Delacroix and with Catlin in London. The narration confirms this connection stating, "Now she's managed to lead them inside where she has installed a portion of her European Male Gallery, which is comprised of many thousands of European Male costumes." Miss Chief instructs Robin Hood to sit at the piano, where he begins to play immediately. In the intervening time between moving inside and outside, Robin Hood has removed his shirt so Miss Chief and the audience can better see his body. The piano is set up on the left side of the room, near where the camera is stationed. Miss Chief moves around the chamber, but has her canvas set up at the center. Friar Tuck on the far right of the room. Miss Chief continues her monologue, discussing her subjects as if they were not there and also beginning to undress Friar Tuck and take his clothing to her gallery.

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<sup>507</sup> McIntosh, "Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Postindian Diva Warrior, in the Shadowy Hall of Mirrors," 32.

The narrator informs the audience that Miss Chief will be doing figure studies of the men, “but Miss Chief is clearly in control of her game here today.” As she speaks, describing her subjects’ physical attributes, and moves between her canvas and models, they begin to act up. First, Friar Tuck begins to examine the contents of Miss Chief’s purse, conveniently laid on the piano. Miss Chief then begins to measure Friar Tuck, now only in his underclothing. Friar Tuck and Robin Hood continue to exchange sneaky glances, seeming to hatch some kind of plot. At this point, any semblance of control Miss Chief had has turned on its head. She moves behind the screen on the left, so only her silhouette is visible. Then Robin Hood and Friar Tuck rush behind the screen at her. Miss Chief continues her monologue, while making guttural moaning noises and appearing to struggle with the men (Fig. 4.9). Their struggle seems violent, but also erotically charged. As she pants and rumbles with the men, Miss Chief states, “And I trust that the audience who looks at my work with care will join me in my belief that the European male is [an] honest, hospitable, brave, warlike, cruel, revengeful, honorable, yet faithful and religious being.”<sup>508</sup> These adjectives demonstrate mixed feelings toward the European male, voiced at a moment when they are roughing up Miss Chief. After a few moments of struggle, Robin Hood and Friar Tuck hoot and run out of the gallery in possession of Miss Chief’s headdress and purse. The audience realizes the disjuncture between Miss Chief’s speech, in which she professes to have total control and the scene they have just witnessed, in which she has been outwitted by her subjects.

The narrator begins again, stating, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is indeed an upset!” He explains how Robin Hood and Friar Tuck have taken Miss Chief’s horse, but that “she will continue her pursuit after them on foot, in high heels!” The towering heels that she wears slow her down as she emerges from behind the screen and starts after them. Again, the film cuts to Miss

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<sup>508</sup> This is again from my own transcript.

Chief outside, running after the two men (Fig. 4.10). The narrator speculates that with the “Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham,” Miss Chief will likely “get the better of their competitors.” As Miss Chief runs after her subjects, Durham, closer to the manor, beckons the camera to follow him along the grassy path from which Miss Chief initially merged. The sports commentator–style narration continues into the final lines of the film: “It looks as though this match will be continued down the road and when it does, we will give you more live coverage of the art game. Until then, ladies and gentlemen, goodnight.” The repeated use of the phrase “art game” points to the competitive and commodified nature of contemporary art, particularly art as a big business and the popularity of artist gimmicks, such as the antics of the artists Banksy or Damien Hirst. The addition of the nature-video tone fits the project of Miss Chief in her quest to record data and capture the likeness of the European male.

Throughout the film, the narrator provides subtle hints of the future unraveling, suggesting that Miss Chief lacks “homefield advantage,” and that Robin Hood was “dangerous.” The turn of the film demonstrates the folly of Miss Chief and thus the ambitions of nineteenth-century ethnographer-artists’ to document Native people before they disappeared, based on the assumption that they possessed no independent agency. Miss Chief, much like these other artists, assumes a control that she does not actually possess. Her objectified subjects are talented in archery and piano-playing, and cunning enough to overpower her. Before she can take their clothing for her gallery, they take hers. In this way, Monkman as Miss Chief redefines the relationship of artist to subject, demonstrating that the people depicted in these ethnographic projects were individuals, often talented ones. Her choice to undress the friar suggests a lack of respect for the church, echoing a colonial disrespect and ignorance of Native belief systems. She attempts merely to collect rather than understand these men. Miss Chief’s mix of a Catlin-style gallery and the figure

of Robin Hood in an eighteenth-century noble estate reverberates within Monkman's larger oeuvre in its combining of temporalities in paintings. As Todd Porterfield argues, "In the most celebrated vein of his work, Kent Monkman parodies the European and North American artistic practice of the ethno-picturesque."<sup>509</sup> He further opines that these parodies reverse power relations,<sup>510</sup> particularly when Monkman as Miss Chief challenges the presumptive authority of white men.

Miss Chief ultimately proves no more capable of creating a faithful taxonomy of European males than George Catlin was of creating an authentic taxonomy of Native Americans. In constructing this piece, however, Monkman embodies Miss Chief in all her irony and contradiction. It is important to consider how the *Taxonomy of the European* mocks George Catlin's gallery, but is a wholly new creation, showing that Native peoples might fall into the same trap of documenting others. According to Monkman, "The attempts of George Catlin to freeze Aboriginal people into a time capsule is counter to the philosophy I was taught by my Cree family, which was to move toward the future and not to be afraid of taking something and making it your own."<sup>511</sup> In *Taxonomy of the European Male*, Monkman as Miss Chief makes the ethnographic gallery part of a larger contest, which the narrator refers to as the "art game." Similarly, by identifying the men as Robin Hood and Friar Tuck, Monkman incorporates a very English legend of two men who take from the rich and give to the poor, further complicating the narrative. Miss Chief's subjects are not just any white men, they are complicated heroes who are at once altruistic and thieving from even further back in time than Delacroix or Catlin. Miss Chief here is not perfect; she attempts to impose her will on foreign people in their land and is ultimately unsuccessful.

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<sup>509</sup> Todd Porterfield, "History Painting and the Intractable Question of Sovereignty," in Hill et al, *Interpellations*, 86.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Mike Hoolboom and Kent Monkman, "Kent Monkman: Miss Chief," in *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists*, ed. Mike Hoolboom (New York: Coach House Books, 2004), 80.

Taken this way, it is a metaphor for the larger colonial project, rewritten here so that the encounter favors the home team. Through Miss Chief, Monkman reimagines Catlin's gallery as a folly-filled attempt to objectify individuals notwithstanding their distinct drives and personality. Viewers ultimately sympathize with Miss Chief but are led to recognize the problems inherent to her endeavor. Using Miss Chief in a strange mix of temporalities, Monkman looks to a future where the salvage ethnographic is properly contextualized. This early instantiation of Miss Chief situates her as a comical figure, talented and fabulous, yet misguided in her pursuits and not yet acting as a teacher to her audience.

#### **4.4 The Many Births of Miss Chief: *The Emergence of a Legend* (2006)**

Kent Monkman's five-photograph series *The Emergence of A Legend* (2006–7)<sup>512</sup> was included in the 2010 exhibition *Vantage Point* at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C.<sup>513</sup> Intimately scaled with embellished frames, the series convincingly resembles daguerreotypes, and only upon closely inspecting the images is this sense of temporality challenged. The entire suite of *The Emergence of A Legend* was on display for *Vantage Point*. The exhibition further incorporated several standout examples of contemporary Native American and First Nations art, such as James Luna's *Chapel for Pablo Tac* (2005), a large installation made in the memory of the seventeenth century Luiseño priest known as Pablo Tac

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<sup>512</sup> The artist's website says the series is from 2006, while the National Museum of the American Indian's website lists 2007 as its date. I have elected to use both dates as the works could have been printed between these dates.

<sup>513</sup> National Museum of the American Indian, "Vantage Point: The Contemporary Native Art Collection 9.25.10—8.7.11," <https://americanindian.si.edu/vp/>.

(Fig. 4.11).<sup>514</sup> Monkman's imaginative, modestly scaled photographs were the most intriguing and still have the power to draw one in, over a decade later.

*The Emergence of a Legend* presents five potential origin stories for Miss Chief, imagined by Monkman but inspired by actual people. As the references to Miss Chief's Met performance demonstrate, Monkman has gradually positioned Miss Chief as a mythic figure. But since she is a time traveler, multiple origin stories are fitting. After the cacophony of *Taxonomy of the European Male*, Monkman turns to Miss Chief providing five potential models for Native women in the public eye in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Like *Taxonomy*, *The Emergence of a Legend* has a variety of references, but they are communicated visually, allowing Monkman to display his knowledge of talented Native women performers of the past and embody and become his foremothers. Across these photographs, Monkman experiments with different tropes of performing Indian women, referring to historical women and imagining new relationships. In form, *The Emergence of a Legend* takes on the small scale of a nineteenth-century daguerreotype, an early photographic technology.<sup>515</sup> The photographs are elaborately double framed with a large, black mat around the first frame, which is surrounded by a larger matching frame. To add to the faux-aged feel of the image, most of the prints were intentionally damaged with dark spots or fading to support the idea that these are mid-nineteenth century rather than early twenty-first-century objects.

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<sup>514</sup> National Museum of the American Indian, "Vantage Point: The Contemporary Native Art Collection, Chapel for Pablo Tac," <https://americanindian.si.edu/vp/16/>.

<sup>515</sup> Cousineau-Levine, "Cher's 'Half-Breed' and the Hybrid Masquerades of Kent Monkman's Miss Chief Testickle."

The first image of the series is *Miss Chief as a Performer in George Catlin's Gallery That Toured Europe in the 1850s* (Fig. 4.12).<sup>516</sup> Miss Chief is presented as a participant in an ethnographic display, performing for her livelihood. Like *Taxonomy of the European Male*, this piece is directly rooted in the world of George Catlin. Relating to Monkman's statement that Catlin attempted to freeze Aboriginal people in time rather than reflect their capacity to make things their own, Monkman makes Miss Chief a scandalously costumed performer.<sup>517</sup> This image is the most faded with large areas of black at the top and side, with little tonal difference between Miss Chief in her elaborate costume and the background. She wears a fringed miniskirt with fringed leggings, platform high heels, and a feathered headdress. She stands ready to shoot an arrow with a bow from her Louis Vuitton quiver. Her body is painted with a lined pattern that resembles plaid, perhaps a reference to the British designer Burberry's iconic plaid. She is topless and with a small handprint painted on her back, just below the striped belt that hangs from her headdress. Through the act of bow-and-arrow display, Miss Chief performs as an Indian from Catlin's gallery.<sup>518</sup> The uniqueness and gender-bending of Miss Chief are communicated through her choices of clothing and activity. Her heels, skirt, and leggings are meant to be read as feminine, but her bare chest, headdress, and her skillful act of archery all suggest she is a male. These choices relate to a statement from Miss Chief: "The thing that the European didn't understand about our culture is how adaptable and innovative we are."<sup>519</sup> Miss Chief is willing to perform Indian identity for a

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<sup>516</sup> I have used close-up images to discuss each work in depth, these images provide a better sense of how the works are experienced.

<sup>517</sup> Cousineau-Levine, "Cher's 'Half-Breed' and the Hybrid Masquerades of Kent Monkman's Miss Chief Testickle."

<sup>518</sup> Karen Kramer Russell, "Raising the Bar," in *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*, ed. Karen Kramer Russell, with Janet Catherine Berlo, Bruce Bernstein, Joe D. Horse Capture, Jessica L. Horton, and Paul Chaat Smith (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2012), 17.

<sup>519</sup> Mattes and Monkman, "An Interview with Miss Chief Eagle Testickle," 107.



presumably non-Native public, all the while taking license to be fabulous in her heels, quiver, and designer body paint.

The first piece in the series serves as an interesting precursor to more explicit film references in three of the later works of the series: *Miss Chief as a Vaudeville Performer*, *Miss Chief as Cindy Silverscreen*, and *Miss Chief as a Movie Director*. The first of these points to vaudeville, an immensely popular performing-troupe variety show which trafficked in stereotype, but according to Monkman's website, the specific source is Molly Spotted Elk, who was also a film actor.<sup>520</sup> The tendency for film to proliferate and perpetuate often negative stereotypes of Native people is well-known and -theorized.<sup>521</sup> Scholars, such as Michelle Raheja and Joanna Hearne, have done important work in demonstrating that there were prominent Native actors and directors in early Hollywood, especially in the silent-film era. According to Raheja, "Native American performers and directors (as well as spectators) have had an active, important, visible, and often-vexed role in the production and dissemination of Indigenous images throughout the history of North American cinema, especially during the first three decades of commercial film history."<sup>522</sup> Rather than purely imaginative, this series relates to specific histories of Native American and First Nations people in the early twentieth century who worked in film. Thus, though there is a strong degree of creative license in these portrayals, Monkman as Miss Chief uses this series to inform viewers of the existence and importance of Native American people in early film.

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<sup>520</sup> Kent Monkman, *Emergence of a Legend* (2/5), <https://www.kentmonkman.com/photo/1r103764530vzl0au4milf3kmbnok8>.

<sup>521</sup> See Denise K. Cummings, LeAnne Howe, and Harvey Markowitz, eds, *Seeing Red—Hollywood's Pixeled Skins: American Indians and Film* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

<sup>522</sup> Michelle H. Raheja, "Toward a Genealogy of Indigenous Film Theory: Reading Hollywood Indians," in *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 23.

The image of *Miss Chief as a Vaudeville Performer* looks less damaged, as it is meant to be from the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century (Fig. 4.13). Miss Chief here is costumed in a sparkly top, a floor-length feather headdress, a long loincloth, and high heels. The image is meant to resemble a famous photograph of Penobscot performer Mary Nelson Archambaud—whose stage name was Molly Spotted Elk—posed with her leg up and arm forming a right angle and wearing a bra top, briefs, and long headdress (Fig. 4.14).<sup>523</sup> The inspiration of Molly Spotted Elk links to a real Native woman, who, like Miss Chief in this and her other iterations, utilized her Native identity as a means of livelihood as a performer. Archambaud has been referred to as the “Grandmother of Native Theatre and Performance.”<sup>524</sup> She was a multitalented woman who studied journalism and wrote throughout her life, in addition to acting, first in vaudeville and then in movies.<sup>525</sup> Monkman embodies the role of Archambaud and early Native women and emphasizes their conscious self-fashioning, which is apparent in Archambaud’s name. “She took the stage name ‘Molly Spotted Elk’ as a marketing tool to more clearly identify herself to potential employees and audiences as Native American.”<sup>526</sup> As has been noted, Monkman was inspired by Cher, and *Miss Chief as a Vaudeville Performer* formally combines the figures of Cher with Molly Spotted Elk, repeating the early twentieth century performer’s pose while incorporating the sparkle of Cher. Vaudeville was a distinctive form of traveling performances that often trafficked in racial stereotypes, serving as a precursor to many later tropes in film. Mary Spotted Elk and Miss Chief

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<sup>523</sup> Monkman, *Emergence of a Legend* (2/5).

<sup>524</sup> Jaye T. Darby, Courtney Elkin Mohler, and Christy Stanlake, “Culture Bearers: The Grandmothers of Native Theatre and Performance,” in *Critical Companion to Native American and First Nations Theatre and Performance: Indigenous Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 41.

<sup>525</sup> Raheja, “Toward a Genealogy of Indigenous Film Theory,” 57.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

make use of the form that can exacerbate stereotype in order to challenge it. Miss Chief in particular uses her heels, makeup, and male chest to demonstrate her particular Two-Spirit nature.

*Miss Chief as Cindy Silverscreen* is meant to look like a film still of a Native performer in a movie (Fig. 4.15). “Silverscreen” is a reference to classic-Hollywood film screens, and Monkman’s website points the name as a reference to fake names for Native actors.<sup>527</sup> The use of the name Cindy in this role-playing series could be an allusion to the influential American artist Cindy Sherman, who famously made film stills early in her career and continues to explore different roles through disguise in her work. In Sherman’s case, her camouflage and personas are a feminist gesture. *Miss Chief as Cindy Silverscreen* stands out as the demurest version of Miss Chief, wearing a long white coat with a fur collar and a headband with two white feathers. The photograph itself looks damaged and the faded background make it less clear that Miss Chief is now in a studio rather than in a forest, as the backdrop would suggest. Through this image, Monkman points to the large part that Native people played in silent films.<sup>528</sup> Though she is elegantly posed and dressed, here Miss Chief is not actively performing, despite looking directly out at the viewer. The sartorial choice of long white coat is especially interesting as Miss Chief is usually rather exposed; here she is a rather prim, poised figure. Her solemnity shows this embodiment is a kind of homage to the Native women of the silent film era, who might still be unknown or forgotten. With her feather and dark hair, Miss Chief points to an exoticism, as well as obvious beauty, that would have appealed to viewers at the time.

*Miss Chief as a Movie Director* connects to other works by Monkman as Miss Chief, particularly *Group of Seven Inches*, and to an important theme of Monkman’s work: imagining

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<sup>527</sup> Kent Monkman, *The Emergence of a Legend* (3/5), <https://www.kentmonkman.com/photo/c13ts83zyjyb2zq7k34f6edpsm6v8s>.

<sup>528</sup> See Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*.

how Native peoples can represent themselves (Fig. 4.16). Monkman has made films since 1996, so give Miss Chief the post of filmmaker visualizes one of Monkman's key artistic practices. In this piece, Miss Chief wears a bone breastplate with draped beads as sleeves, a long, striped loincloth, white high heels, and a headband with a feather at the back. She poses by a movie camera and holds a megaphone, tools of her trade. In the silent-film era, there were two very prominent Native American directors, Edwin Carewe and James Young Deer.<sup>529</sup> Miss Chief as a movie director reflects the reality that Native people played prominent roles in early Hollywood, especially in Western films.<sup>530</sup> The background, recognizable as Monument Valley, Utah, is a prominent setting of many Western films, including the notoriously racist film *The Searchers*.<sup>531</sup> Again, Miss Chief looks directly out at the viewer, her flat, visibly male chest apparent. The early directors were notably male, not female or known Two-Spirit people as Miss Chief and Monkman are. By specifically referencing *The Searchers*, Monkman as Miss Chief invites the reimagining of Western films that more accurately reflected Native peoples and their perspectives. Far from performing for audiences or filling a duty of Native women, *Miss Chief as Movie Director* suggests she can take a powerful, directorial role. This post could serve the culmination of her journey through time and different entertainment mediums.

*Miss Chief as Movie Director*, however, is not the final image of the series. *Miss Chief as the Trapper's Bride* alludes to the first image of the series, imagining Miss Chief again as a performer in a Wild West show and as the Native wife of a European man (Fig. 4.17).<sup>532</sup> "Trapper"

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<sup>529</sup> Raheja, "Toward a Genealogy of Indigenous Film Theory," 17.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Kent Monkman, *Emergence of a Legend* (4/5), <https://www.kentmonkman.com/photo/jnqac6tv1z6neysik2qh5qapv6z4gz>.

<sup>532</sup> Kent Monkman, *Emergence of a Legend* (5/5), <https://www.kentmonkman.com/photo/jwjqf1ul7fd0lr8mp1wz3wwczdfu3p>.

here refers to a fur trapper, often a European man who relied on cooperation with Native people in order to acquire furs, an alliance that often came in the form of marriage.<sup>533</sup> Trapping was a crucial trade in the early to mid-eighteenth century, well before the time of movies. Through the series, Miss Chief moves forward in time to expand her agency, only to have it somewhat rolled back in this final image. In this piece, Miss Chief wears an elaborate bun hairstyle, topped with feathers; her nipples are visible just above her long skirt. The interior space she occupies seems like a home, complete with wooden chair piled with cloth. Here, Miss Chief is keeper of a stylish home, a subject of early photography because of her association with whiteness and high socioeconomic status. By brandishing her male nipples, the Two-Spirit nature of Miss Chief remains on display, as does the suggestion that she is not a typical wife. Her face is made up with what might be red face paint, which, like the feathers in her hair, gestures to her Indigeneity and warrior status. By calling herself a “trapper’s bride,” Miss Chief defines herself in relation to a man, whose name is incongruently unknown to viewers. The unspoken element that the trapper is European, and that Miss Chief is Native, points to a racial mixing that was and is a historical fact for many Native communities and specifically for Kent Monkman as a Cree, Irish, and English man. Again, Miss Chief looks out at the viewer, aware of our gaze, even in this more domestic scene where she performs a role.

Exploring the series in order demonstrates Miss Chief’s own play with temporality, moving back and forth between times. Though she inhabits five distinct roles, there is some overlap in the way that Miss Chief emerges through the series. Primarily, there is the emphasis on performing for an audience and on entertainment as a source of income. Much like contemporary drag queens, Monkman presents Miss Chief as an attraction, one who in every instance engages in self-

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

fashioning. Acknowledging Miss Chief's nature as a Two-Spirit, her male body is sometimes covered, but never disguised as female. The use of makeup throughout the series contributes to Miss Chief as an embodiment of an earlier generation of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Native women performers who used their Native identities as a draw for audiences. Though Miss Chief specifically refers to these predecessors, she makes each embodiment her own by playing with temporality and Cher aesthetics. Monkman reminds viewers that Native people were both behind the camera and in front of it, though they have been largely missing from film histories. Through its many references, *The Emergence of A Legend* demonstrates that Miss Chief follows the legacy and performative tradition of a line of talented Native women.

#### **4.5 All Are Welcome in the Nation of Mischief: *Miss Chief Justice of the Piece* (2012)**

Kent Monkman as Miss Chief orchestrated *Miss Chief Justice of the Piece* (2012) on February 4, 2012 at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C.<sup>534</sup> *Miss Chief Justice of the Piece* is a thirty-minute performance and film that imagines a new nation, the Nation of Mischief, of which Miss Chief initially is the sole citizen (Fig. 4.18).<sup>535</sup> The unadorned brown auditorium of NMAI is a fitting place for what is essentially a legal immigration court with Miss Chief presiding as the judge and deciding who will be admitted to her nation. The makeshift court includes a judge's desk and a bailiff who announces each potential new citizen. This piece presents Miss Chief as an "all around boss lady for the Nation of Mischief," in her own

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<sup>534</sup> O'Hara et al., *Two-Spirit Acts*, 59.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

words. She judges prospective citizens, while noting the complexity of Native American and First Nations enrollment and commenting on the romanticism that comes with Indian identity. Before exploring this piece in depth and the sources on which Miss Chief's performance relies, it is worth turning to Kent Monkman's first film, *A Nation is Coming* (1996). This early film provides a sense of Monkman's understanding of Euro-American nation-building as invasion and the cultural collision of different nations through dance. The only character in this film can be interpreted as embodying contemporary Native people.

Like most artists who gain prominence, Monkman was creating art far before he achieved fame. His first piece to receive critical attention was *A Nation is Coming*, a twenty-four-minute film from 1996 made in collaboration with the Plains Cree dancer and actor Michael Greyeyes (Muskeg Lake First Nation, born 1967) and with the support of the Banff Center of the Arts.<sup>536</sup> The film centers on Greyeyes, who combines different styles of dance as the film cuts between a dance studio with a moving background and snow-covered woods, thus looping between temporalities (Figs. 4.19, 4.20, 4.21, 4.22).<sup>537</sup> The title of the film comes from an Arapaho Ghost Dance song.<sup>538</sup> The Ghost Dance was a late nineteenth-century Native American religious and social movement, first started in the 1870s by Wodziwob and later expanded in the 1890s by Wovoka, a Paiute man who was the son of one of Wodziwob's followers.<sup>539</sup> Monkman was inspired by the Ghost Dance's prophet, Wovoka, and his late nineteenth-century quest to heal Native communities through dance and his prophecies, which mixed Christianity and Native

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<sup>536</sup> Hoolboom and Monkman, "Kent Monkman: Miss Chief," 78.

<sup>537</sup> Kent Monkman and Michael Greyeyes, *A Nation is Coming* (1996), Encore +, YouTube video, 24:13 minutes, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO\\_xp8Tbh5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO_xp8Tbh5E).

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> L. G. Moses, "The Father Tells Me So!": Wovoka, the Ghost Dance Prophet," in *American Indian Medicine Ways: Spiritual Power, Prophets, and Healing*, ed. Clifford E. Trafzer (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), 202–3.

religions.<sup>540</sup> Monkman's own background combines Cree language and beliefs with Christianity so he felt a strong affinity with this history.<sup>541</sup> There were other religious movements that combined Christianity and Native spiritual beliefs, but the Ghost Dance was particularly popular and powerful as it predicted an end to colonization and establishment of a peaceful Native world.<sup>542</sup> According to the scholar L. G. Moses, the massacre of Sioux people at Wounded Knee brought an end to the movement, though Wovoka continued to be revered by Native people for decades after.<sup>543</sup> The Ghost Dance has also been a powerful touch point for Native Americans as a tremendously popular Indigenous movement, with its own visual forms and the sense of empowerment spread by Wovoka.

Through its title *A Nation is Coming* is meant to signify a renewed connection to the land and growth of Native nations, rather than the expansion of the United States into their distinct nations. The central action of Michael Greyeyes dancing includes ballet and modern dance movements with powwow dancing, which incorporates many cultures of dance. Greyeyes's solo dancing is cut with scenes of him waking up outside in the snow, his dances can be read as visions, reenacting those of Wovoka (Fig. 4.19). During the twenty-four minutes of the film, Greyeyes seems to gradually connect more with his Native heritage, eventually donning full powwow regalia, with quotes from Ghost Dance figures periodically breaking up his exciting, varied dancing (Figs. 4.20, 4.21). The most resonant quote is credited to Drinks Water as quoted by Black Elk, "You shall live in square, grey houses in a barren land and beside those grey houses you shall starve."<sup>544</sup> The quote is followed by images of small gray houses, concrete structures common

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<sup>540</sup> Hoolboom and Monkman, "Kent Monkman: Miss Chief," 79–80.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>542</sup> Moses, "The Father Tells Me So!" 207–11.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 211–12.

<sup>544</sup> Monkman and Greyeyes, *A Nation is Coming*.



across North America. This quote has been reinterpreted as a prediction for the Native reservations (or reserves in Canada) which often provide inadequate housing and limited access to food due to limited federal support of communities. The film also includes more hopeful quotes from Wovoka that promise a better life.<sup>545</sup> *A Nation is Coming* affirms the endurance of Native society, as the modern dancer is able to connect with his culture through powwow dancing, however, an end-credit scene brings that reading into question. After the film “ends,” Greyeyes, still in dramatic white makeup, sits on a couch, watching a television program about buffalo (Fig. 4.22), suggesting that in reality a return to precolonial existence is impossible. Instead, one can enact Native identity through an expansive framework, including following specific traditional beliefs and engaging with pan-Native powwow culture.

*A Nation is Coming* presents an ambivalent sense of nationhood, examining a movement that began in the United States and spread as a metaphor for contemporary Native identity but ultimately did not result in a new Native nation. *Miss Chief Justice of the Piece* presents a lighter sense of nationhood, embodied by the artist himself as well as Native and non-Native people who apply for citizenship. Nation-building here is a process of agreement between people, based on desire to connect, not a desire to conquer. The move to create a new nation, the Nation of Mischief, rather than ameliorate the current nation, which does not serve Indigenous peoples, is particularly resonant for the current moment. While Wovoka imagined that the colonial American nations would fall away, the Nation of Mischief exists concurrent with Canada and the United States. Though fiction, the Nation of Mischief is meant to be an Indigenous nation, introduced through the performance of *Justice of the Piece*. As a live performance, it is no less embodied than *A Nation*

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

*is Coming*, but *Justice of the Piece* presents Kent Monkman's ideas about Native identity and tribal membership expressed via Miss Chief's dialogue.

*Miss Chief Justice of the Piece* aesthetically resembles a reality-television courtroom program. There are highly graphic and cheeky opening credits, echoing the humor seen in much of Monkman's practice. The first shot layers the U.S. Capitol Building tinted pink with an overscale Statue of Liberty and an even more enlarged American flag (Fig. 4.18). The dome of the Capitol then tips over, revealing Miss Chief dancing in red, a clip borrowed from Monkman's 2008 film *Dance of the Berdache*. The text "Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece" then appears at her feet, taking up the majority of the scene. The title fades into a yellow-and-pink flag exhibiting Miss Chief's seal: a black, white, and pink eagle with a feminine face at the center, with two testicles hanging from her chin that also make up the tail feathers of the bird. Two heeled legs also sprout from this face, intertwined with a white banner proclaiming "Mischief Nation." The seal is a visual description of Miss Chief's full name: Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle. It resembles form-line design, a particular aesthetic of art-making common among tribes in the Northwest coast of North America characterized by heavy use of line and shapes like the ovoid. The image is also on a seal for the Department of Mischief superimposed over a what looks like a court office, with a gavel and a scale that indicates the weighing of justice, in front of large old books, perhaps legal codes (Fig. 4.23). The screen then cuts to the full auditorium and focuses on an empty judge's bench. Then the bailiff, who introduces himself as Bailiff St. Germaine and is portrayed by a black male actor, begins the proceedings and tells the audience to rise for Miss Chief.

Miss Chief enters the room to cheers, wearing a pair of bikini-cut fur bottoms, knee-high black pleather boots, a massive black feathered headdress, and a sheer open dress, as well as noticeable feminine makeup (Fig. 4.24). After introducing herself through her many accolades,

Miss Chief explains the reason for the proceeding: “And so I have decided, contrary to the colonial policies and laws of discrimination, racism, and genocide perpetuated by the governments of the United States and Canada—which are designed to shrink the numbers of First Nation, Native American, and Aboriginal people—that I will begin to build a great nation, unbounded by geopolitical borders and blood-quantum laws.”<sup>546</sup> This long statement provides considerable insight into Miss Chief/Kent Monkman’s beliefs about Native nations. As a corrective act—creating the Nation of Mischief—Miss Chief attempts to integrate and grow an Aboriginal nation rather than shrink the existing ones. The pronouncement adds gravity to a performance in which actual laws are referenced in relation to the creation of a fake nation. The stakes are set against the colonial and discriminatory policies of Monkman’s country, Canada, and the country in which the performance takes place, the United States.

So, who wants to join the Nation of Mischief? The published script of the piece identifies six characters: the hobbyist, the cutout, the artist, the hunter, the grandchild, Blue Eyes, and the dreamer.<sup>547</sup> These characters are portrayed in *Justice of the Piece* by actors and NMAI employees, sometimes cued in the script with descriptions, such as for the hobbyist that, “A German man, Caucasian, in his late thirties or early fifties steps forward.”<sup>548</sup> This cast of types represent people who have claim to Native nations and those who do not but still feel or believe in their kinship to Native identity. Each person presents his or her case to Miss Chief, and in every case, she grants them citizenship, providing reasons for her decision. Miss Chief is very expressive as each potential citizen speaks, showing discomfort or disbelief, and eventually challenging any racist or problematic statements. Rather than discuss them entirely in order, it is worth considering them

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<sup>546</sup> Kent Monkman, “Justice of the Piece,” in O’Hara et al., *Two-Spirit Acts*, 60.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*,” 62–75.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

instead in groups of those with claim to Native/First Nations membership and those who desire such affiliation but possess no inherent ties to Native nations. As the nation is imaginary, this type of universal citizenship is possible; Miss Chief makes a distinction between people who feel kinship to Natives and “real Native peoples” for whom being Native is a fact not a wish or a question, whether or not they are formal members of a Native nation.

First up is the hobbyist,<sup>549</sup> a slight man with glasses, a brown suit, and a German accent, who claims to be at a “Cheyenne warrior” at heart (Fig. 4.25). His monologue describes his extensive study of North American cultures and weekend performances. It is met with periodic laughter from the crowd, particular when he lists the many tribes and nations that he has previously tried to join. Prior to admitting him, Miss Chief chides him that, “It is true that you live far, far away from the land of the North American Indian, probably too far to have a clue about real Native peoples and the realities of their everyday lives (Fig. 4.26).”<sup>550</sup> Miss Chief acknowledges the romanticism of the hobbyist, but perhaps more importantly the continued existence of Native peoples. Her expression “the North American Indian,” points to many nineteenth-century attempts to document Native peoples and fictionalized portrayals of Native people in popular culture noble, vanishing Indians.<sup>551</sup> The characters of hunter and the dreamer also do not have any ties to Native nationhood and desire to be part of the Nation of Mischief for very different reasons. The hunter explains his financial hardships and his desire to be able to hunt based on “Native hunting and fishing rights,” which are often a longer season or allow greater amounts of animals to be caught.

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<sup>549</sup> I have elected not to capitalize the names of these types except when referring to the text version of the performance, which capitalizes them. By leaving them lower cased, I consider them as unique if fictionalized individuals who represent groups of people, not singular types.

<sup>550</sup> Monkman, “Justice of the Piece,” 63.

<sup>551</sup> See Phillip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and *Americans*, a 2018 exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, curated by Paul Chaat Smith.

Miss Chief tells his that his position is likely still better than most Native peoples, even those with hunting and fishing rights. Since the hunter, a built white man, is good looking and Miss Chief is “endlessly generous and sympathetic,” he is granted citizenship. This short exchange acknowledges that some treaty rights to lands are honored, and that this fact is very upsetting to non-Indigenous people is a major issue. This hunter demonstrates Monkman’s awareness of the clash between Native and non-Native subsistence lifestyles.

The final potential citizen of the performance is listed in the script as ‘The Dreamer.’<sup>552</sup> She is portrayed by an older white woman with glasses and reddish hair in flowing clothing. As she approaches the microphone, she exclaims that they have met before and gushes over Miss Chief. Her reason for wanting to join is that she has recovered memories of being Native; she is a male Native warrior in her dreams. Through her appearance and time travel through dreams, this woman is supposed to represent a New Age quasi hippie who romanticizes the spirituality of Native people and thus imagines a positive, noble precontact idea of being Native. Miss Chief again chides her as a “wannabe,” but still admits because her “heart is in the right place.”<sup>553</sup> Though the script does not always specify whiteness, in the performance, the first and last potential citizens of the Nation of Mischief are white. Through this choice, Monkman demonstrates how popular conceptions of Native identity are determined by the dominant culture, with either little or no interaction with Native people. Yet, Miss Chief does not intend to re-create colonial bounds, instead welcoming these various “wannabes.”

More informative, especially for a non-Indigenous audience, are the potential citizens who have valid claims to Native membership. The format plays out the same, with people presenting

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<sup>552</sup> Monkman, “Justice of the Piece,” 74–75.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid.

their cases in Miss Chief’s court, yet her responses are much more thoughtful and personal. The first Native character is “the Cut Out,” a man who has been recently removed from his tribe as a new casino has prompted his tribal council to set a higher blood quantum—percentage of tribal blood one can prove—that he does not meet (Fig. 4.27). He talks about his skill in fancy dancing, a style of powwow dancing, and explains how his life is organized around his community, which just expelled him. This man has long dark hair and is soft-spoken, until he passionately describes the colonial mentality of his expulsion. Miss Chief responds by saying that, “Indeed, your application has raised an issue that makes my—also mixed—blood boil.”<sup>554</sup> Miss Chief, assuming a teaching role, explains the process of issuing Certificate Degree of Indian Blood through the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States and the similar, but less explicitly racial process in Canada. She cites Article 8 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples that, “no Indigenous peoples shall be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of culture.”<sup>555</sup> Through using this clause, Monkman demonstrates that restrictive laws about membership constitute a new form of forced assimilation, because his community expelled him, this man who has to start a new life entirely in the bounds of the dominant culture. Miss Chief proudly declares that, “The good news here today is that the Nation of Mischief holds no such blood quantum requirements.”<sup>556</sup> As scholar Richard William Hill states in relation to this work, “In short, there are many economic forces working against Indigenous nations imagining membership—and therefore Indigenous identity—in an expansive way.”<sup>557</sup> Hill suggests that communities will often limit membership when economic gain is possible in order to maximize profit for the still-enrolled.

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

<sup>557</sup> Richard William Hill, “Art by Indigenous Artist, or Art about Indigenous Issues?” *Canadian Art*, December 20, 2016. <https://canadianart.ca/essays/art-by-indigenous-artists-or-art-about-indigenous-issues/>.

The audience at the performance appeared mostly non-Native and thus Monkman as Miss Chief took the opportunity to educate them on blood quantum and how rules of enrollment for tribes change.

The next potential citizen is a bead artist who cannot sell her art in the United States as Native art. She wears beadwork and is white passing with light hair and skin (Fig. 4.28). She describes how her art has been “passed down through generations of Ojibwe,” and how her band is still not recognized. She references the US Arts and Crafts Act as the impediment to selling her work in the United States. Distinct from the non-Indigenous potential citizens, she is very aware of who her people are and where they come from, but because of colonization beadwork is all they have left. Again, Miss Chief responds first with sympathy and then with information, stating, “The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-644) is law that prohibits the misrepresentation in marketing of American Indian or Alaska Native arts and craft products within the United States.”<sup>558</sup> The law is meant to prevent non-Indigenous people from selling art as Native art which would undercut actual Native artists. Native artists have created work with the fake Native art that continues to circulate, such as *I Think It Goes Like This* (2016), Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit, born 1978), an installation of “totem poles” made in Indonesia and sold throughout Alaska (Fig. 4.29).<sup>559</sup> As the example of the beader and these totem poles demonstrates, in practice, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act does little to stop mass production and exploitation Native designs, yet is extremely prohibitive for individuals who are Native but do not possess tribal membership.

The next potential citizen is another Native woman with long dark hair pulled back, she is not an actor, but rather staff at the NMAI (Fig. 4.30). She is listed in the script as “The Grandchild.”

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<sup>558</sup> Monkman, “Justice of the Piece,” 67.

<sup>559</sup> *Nicholas Galanin | I Think It Goes Like This*, Gerald Peters Contemporary, July 7–September 2, 2017, <http://www.petersprojects.com/nicholas-galanin-i-think-it-goes-like-this>.

She details her family's changing enrollment status: how they were disenrolled and then reenrolled in 1985 with C-31, a Canadian law that amended the earlier Indian Act which prevented descendants of Native women and white men from being enrolled.<sup>560</sup> She laments that her children will not be enrolled unless her husband is Native. In her list of qualifications, she mentions "straight," which incites laughter from the audience and an apologetic shrug from Miss Chief. As the woman's issue is mainly about her ability to reproduce and pass on her status Miss Chief states that, "Our nations did not survive for thousands of years on reproduction alone."<sup>561</sup> Miss Chief then explains the concept of "aggressive immigration," or how historically some tribes kidnapped people outside the tribe, taking them in as full members in order to increase their populations.<sup>562</sup> The grandchild is, of course, extended citizenship.

Related to incorporating new members and sexuality is the appearance of the next potential citizen, called Blue Eyes, a well-dressed middle-aged white man. He responds to Miss Chief's call for citizens to be voluntarily "aggressively immigrated." His monologue is meant to be spontaneous rather than planned. The performance occurred in 2012, prior to the 2014 Supreme Court decision that legalized gay marriage in United States, which had previously only been legal in certain states. Blue Eyes is the non-Native partner of a Cherokee man, and gay marriage was not recognized by the Cherokee Nation in 2012.<sup>563</sup> He points out the disparity between straight and gay couples in their recognition and inclusion within Native nations. Blue Eyes concludes his statement, "We want to belong to Mischief Nation, a nation that will embrace us for who we

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<sup>560</sup> Monkman, "Justice of the Piece," 70.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma has recognized same-sex marriage since 2016. See Noel Gutierrez-Morfin, "Cherokee Nation Begins Recognizing Same-Sex Marriages," NBC News, December 13, 2016, <http://nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/chokeee-nation-begins-recognizing-same-sex-marriage-n695026>.



are!”<sup>564</sup> Miss Chief responds sympathetically, “You have come to the right place. It is sad that our own nations, who once embraced and revered Two-Spirited people, have become so conservative.”<sup>565</sup> As this exchange is meant to be spontaneous, Miss Chief shows that she is always ready to talk about the traditional importance of queer Native people. Presenting the piece in this way does not provide a great sense of the flow of the performance, yet it reflects the great care that Miss Chief provides in responding to major issues of Native identity raised by Native peoples themselves. As the title of this section suggests, ultimately everyone is allowed into Mischief Nation. Miss Chief finishes the performance by stating, “In fact, I am going to extend membership to everybody here tonight whose heart is in the right place.”<sup>566</sup>

But what does it mean to be part of Mischief Nation? The props and physical setting of the performance and film are extremely important, relating again to the United States, Canada, and pan-Indian identity. Throughout the performance, Miss Chief makes reference to papers, proof of citizenship. After granting the first new citizenship, she lists the contents of the membership package, which include “a hand-signed and numbered certificate of membership, . . . \$5 of Miss Chief treaty money,”<sup>567</sup> objects included in the collection of the NMAI. The *Certificate of Mischief* appropriates the language of official treaties, including references to a Citizenship Act and “rights, powers and privileges.”<sup>568</sup> The certificate is printed on fine paper, with a pink border, Miss Chief’s seal at the top and a pink floral design at the bottom (Fig. 4.31). Based on the example at the NMAI, the certificates were presented signed but not filled in. The certificate also entitles citizens

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>568</sup> Kent Monkman, “Certificate of Mischief,”

[https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?max=800&id=https://americanindian.si.edu/webmultimedia/10216/152/268837\\_000\\_001\\_20130108\\_ps.700x700.jpg](https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?max=800&id=https://americanindian.si.edu/webmultimedia/10216/152/268837_000_001_20130108_ps.700x700.jpg).

to discounts at high-class retailers, reinforcing a tie between Miss Chief and luxury consumption.<sup>569</sup> The certificate, like the *Bank of Miss Chief \$5 bill in Treaty Money*, is not visible during the performance, yet Monkman takes the time to design and create over a hundred of these vibrantly colored and highly figurative objects.<sup>570</sup> The low value of the money is likely a reference to how treaties generally have not financially benefited Native Americans and First Nations peoples, as in the case of Monkman's own Swampy Cree community. On the one side of the bill is Miss Chief's depiction is, with face paint and layers of necklaces, and two depictions of her seal, while the back side has three tipis at center with an eagle seal on top of them and a depiction of a generic Indian maiden in color on the left side (Figs. 4.32, 4.33). This depiction of an Indian maiden includes the words "treaty money," "free land," clearly, and less clearly, the words "BINGO," and "cigarettes." Like the performance itself, the treaty money connects to general symbols of, as well as actual history alluding to, colonialism through free land and casinos through "BINGO." These objects reflect the art historian Elizabeth Kalbfleisch's statement that "Monkman's performance props have become art objects in their own right."<sup>571</sup> Kalbfleisch argues that Monkman uses props politically and performatively, enacting contact zones between people through objects.<sup>572</sup> This assessment is certainly fitting for the treaty money and certificate of mischief, created deliberately for a performance then not displayed.

More visible is Miss Chief's tomahawk, which replaces the gavel on her bench. She bangs it after each new member is allowed to join, making little noise, but producing a dramatic effect.

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<sup>569</sup> Monkman, "Justice of the Piece," 64.

<sup>570</sup> Kent Monkman, "Bank of Miss Chief \$5 bill in Treaty Money," [https://collections.si.edu/search/detail/edanmdm:NMAI\\_402336?q=kent+monkman&record=9&hlterm=kent%2Bmonkman](https://collections.si.edu/search/detail/edanmdm:NMAI_402336?q=kent+monkman&record=9&hlterm=kent%2Bmonkman).

<sup>571</sup> Elizabeth Kalbfleisch, "From Maria Martinez to Kent Monkman: Performing Sloppy Craft in Native America," in *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts*, ed. Cheasley Paterson, Elaine, and Surette, Susan (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015). 127.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 131–38.

Through this addition and the seal of Mischief Nation which appears on the bench, Monkman materially supports the argument of the piece, namely that there are several problems with the way Native membership is formalized into a legal process. Though white members can and do join the Nation of Mischief, the most important exchanges are between disenfranchised Native people whose Native identities are not about paper documents, but rather actual connections to land, people, and lifeways. The artist enacts her Ojibwe heritage through her beading, while the cut-out man is a fancy dancer. These additional details about creating and enacting demonstrate Monkman's own sense of Indigeneity, which is tied to bodily experiences, relationships, and place. The people who are Native and want to be part of Mischief Nation have very specific senses of where they come from; they are not limited because their claims are fake. Instead, like colonized peoples more broadly, they are affected by a situation wholly different from their lived realities in which colonial ideology continues to frame Native belonging. Rather than fixing a broken system or multiple broken nations, Miss Chief instead imagines a future nation where lovingly, radically, all are welcome.

#### **4.6 Embodying the Diorama: *Bête Noire* (2014–15)**

Monkman's installation *Bête Noire* (2014–15) most directly addresses the natural history museum diorama and provides insight into issues of Indigeneity, sexuality, and representation of the body. *Bête Noire* was mounted twice in the United States in 2014 and 2015, initially as part of Monkman's first solo U.S. exhibition *Urban Res* at Sargent's Daughters Gallery in New York City (Fig. 4.34). In 2015, it was installed in *Unsettled Landscapes*, a biennale of art of the Americas from the SITE Santa Fe museum (Fig. 4.35). *Bête Noire* is a faux-diorama installation

composed of a life-sized mannequin sitting on a motorcycle set against a bed of dirt and grass and a painted backdrop. As the mannequin in *Bête Noire* is based on Monkman's body, the artist is embodied in his work, using Miss Chief to perform the natural history display. A reporter from *The Dallas Morning News* described the piece as "a campy diorama with an androgynous American Indian on a motorcycle."<sup>573</sup> Although this description identifies the format and the gendered sexuality central to the piece, *Bête Noire* is complex, as well as campy, despite its obvious—and intentional—playfulness. The term androgynous misses the complexity of the Miss Chief's Two-Spirit presentation as intentionally feminine and unmistakably male, not embodying an unclear gender, but a nonbinary one. Miss Chief is displayed wearing a full headdress à la Cher, a bejeweled necklace and bracelet, high-heeled boots, a small Native-inspired outfit, and noticeable makeup. Through the use of the diorama format and costuming in *Bête Noire*, Monkman comments on the presentation of Indigenous bodies in museums. Furthering the teaching role of Miss Chief, the artist disassembles aspects of modern art, while making a larger argument against the assumed authority and objectivity of museums.

The title, *Bête Noire*, is a French idiom literally translated as "black beast." but in usage means "a person or thing that is the bane of a person or his life; an insufferable person or thing; an object of aversion."<sup>574</sup> *Bête Noire* is similar to the English expression "pet peeve," but it is much stronger in degree, insufferable rather than very annoying. *Bête Noire* is situated in Monkman's practice as the most direct evocation of the diorama format, taken up by the artist every year since

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<sup>573</sup> Scott Cantrell, "Hand-Wringing at SITE in Santa Fe," *The Dallas Morning News*, August 9, 2014, <http://www.dallasnews.com/lifestyles/arts/columnists/scott-cantrell/20140809-art-review-hand-wringing-at-site-santa-fe.ece>.

<sup>574</sup> "Bête Noire," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/18285?redirectedFrom=bete+noire#eid>.

2011.<sup>575</sup> Dioramas tend to present lessons in natural history, so *Bête Noire* incorporates bits of the history of modern art. The art historian Jessica Horton, who has theorized Monkman's practice of allusions to art history, argues, "These appropriations of appropriations shift the register of past imagery from distaste to desire and reform to renewal."<sup>576</sup> Horton reflects on how the artist attempts to shift the meaning of his source images and artists by visualizing a number of Kent his bête noires. First through his allusions, he takes aim at Euro-American male artists as masculine heroes. He uses the diorama format ironically to challenge its utility as a tool for teaching non-Native audiences about Indigenous cultures.

Monkman makes visible Miss Chief, who would not be so prominently displayed in a real museum diorama, even though multiple genders existed across the Americas in Indigenous cultures. According to the scholar Jean-Philippe Uzel, *Bête Noire* is based on a specific diorama at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg that Monkman viewed as a child (Fig. 4.36).<sup>577</sup> This existing presentation has a simple format that includes a mannequin of a Native man "hunting" buffalo with a gun in a dusty rock- and dry grass-covered landscape. The inclusion of the gun sets this up as a post-contact scene. Based on a photograph of the diorama, it is difficult to distinguish his particular facial features, but this man is clearly meant to be Native due to his coloring and styling and masculine with his horse and gun, strong and capable. Monkman noted to Uzel that this depiction of Native people was at odds with his own experience in 1970s Winnipeg, where Monkman saw many homeless and destitute First Nations people.<sup>578</sup> Given this very specific

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<sup>575</sup> From Monkman's website, since 2011, he has created works which create a physical setting either indoors or outdoors with props and people.

<sup>576</sup> Jessica Horton, "Of Mimicry and Drag: Homi Bhabha and Kent Monkman," in *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing through the Discipline*, ed. James Elkins, Kristi McGuire, Maureen Burns, Alicia Chester, and Joel Kuennen (New York: Routledge, 2013), 169–71.

<sup>577</sup> Jean-Philippe Uzel, "*Bête Noire* de Kent Monkman: La revanche par le diorama / *Bête Noire* by Kent Monkman: Revenge by Diorama," *Espace* 109 (2015): 32.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*

example image, *Bête Noire* also gives Monkman a chance to play with this representation, making the Native person neither noble, nor savage, nor hypermasculine.

*Bête Noire* uses Monkman's knowledge of art history and his technical artistic training to create an uncanny scene of a Two-Spirit figure overseeing the wreckage of modern art, combining references separated by many decades into a single installation. The German American artist Albert Bierstadt's oil painting, *The Last of the Buffalo* from 1888, is a major source for the diorama (Fig. 4.37). The backdrop of *Bête Noire* closely resembles Bierstadt's composition. Bierstadt's, *Last of the Buffalo*, combined with the hunter being a Native man in the piece, ties the rapidly decreasing numbers of buffalo with the extinction of Native Americans. Native Americans from the Plains regions of North America had a long history of sustainably hunting buffalo and indeed relied heavily on the animals that white Americans were shooting for sport. Bierstadt's painting is an allegory for the concept of the vanishing race, as Native people were thought to be, the last of the buffalo analogous to the last of the Native Americans.<sup>579</sup> Monkman counters this interpretation with Miss Chief, who is the continuity of Native people embodied. In the Bierstadt painting, one Native man on his horse charges the buffalo at the center of the canvas, while to on the right side more Native men on horseback ride toward the action. The work presents a beautiful nature scene and graceful ideal Native hunters. In *Bête Noire*, Indigenous man, buffalo, and "horse" are presented by three-dimensional objects, as though they have jumped off the canvas and into 2014. The horse is notably replaced with a motorcycle, a modern mode of transportation coopted into the natural setting.

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<sup>579</sup> For more on the concept of the vanishing race which has been tied to Edward S. Curtis, see Mick Gidly, ed., *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian Project in the Field*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

Monkman additional references Euro-American Modern artists by using wild animals, specifically the coyote and the bull, in the piece. The buffalo of Bierstadt's composition is reduced to a single bull, a flattened cutout at the feet of the Indian astride the motorcycle. The bull is lifted directly from a lithograph by Pablo Picasso, the essential Modern artist evoked in his extremely masculine, recognizable Spanish trope (1945, Fig. 4.38).<sup>580</sup> Miss Chief shoots the animal with pink arrows, meaning Monkman re-created then shot down Picasso's bull. The bull is tied to Picasso's identity as a Spaniard, bullfighting being the essential masculine Spanish sport. The pink arrows can be read as symbols of feminine pan-Indian identity—made hyperfeminine to evoke Miss Chief's drag aesthetic through material culture—and are used to destroy a masculine European symbol, the bull. Similarly, the coyote is painted directly onto the backdrop, an allusion to the noted German artist Joseph Beuys's 1974 performance piece *I Like America and America Likes*. Beuys was invited to do a work in the Renee Block Gallery in New York City (Fig. 4.39).<sup>581</sup> Beuys took the invitation as an opportunity to relive a spiritual, and perhaps embellished, experience he had during the war: his plane crashing and then being saved by Native people who wrapped him in fur and felt.<sup>582</sup> In his piece, Beuys wrapped himself in felt and lived in the gallery with a live coyote, acting as a sort of shaman who could coexist peacefully with this wild animal.<sup>583</sup> Monkman's coyote stands with its mouth open, barking at Miss Chief, while in this eponymous photo, Beuys's coyote sniffs him curiously (Fig. 4.35, 4.39). This small gesture demonstrates that Miss Chief is better able to commune with the coyote. In both cases, Monkman presents Miss

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<sup>580</sup> Edward B. Henning, "A 'Memento Mori' by Picasso," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 75, no. 8 (1988): 321.

<sup>581</sup> Jon Mann, "When Joseph Beuys Locked Himself in a Room with a Live Coyote," *Artsy*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-joseph-beuys-locked-room-live-coyote>.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*

Chief as having power or dominion over the animals, who, based on the backdrop, are actually in nature.

Given these allusions, the simplest explanation for this piece is an institutional critique of the natural history museum. Institutional critique of museums is a longstanding practice employed by contemporary artists, dating back to the mid-twentieth century. Indigenous North American artists, such as Luiseño artist James Luna, addressed the institution and questioned its representation of Indigenous bodies in through their own bodies. Luna's career-making work *Artifact Piece* was first mounted in 1987 at the San Diego Museum of Man (now the Museum of Us).<sup>584</sup> The scholar Jennifer A. González argues that, aside from critiquing museum display of Native remains and Native bodies in dioramas, *Artifact Piece* allows Luna to use his body to stand in for all Native people, who seem to exist more frequently in museums than in society.<sup>585</sup> The use of the diorama as an institutional critique is quite particular to a younger generation of artists that includes Erica Lord, Wendy Red Star, and Nick Galanin, though Monkman furthered this practice the most of all of them.<sup>586</sup>

In the Manitoba Museum diorama, *Bête Noire* has a specifically Canadian reference that is very personal to Monkman, but the artist also points to an American source for his decision to make models of his own body: the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York.<sup>587</sup> On a visit to the AMNH, Monkman was unsettled by the androgyny of the Native American mannequins and the awkwardness of using the same face for male and female figures

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<sup>584</sup> Jennifer González, "James Luna: Artifacts and Fictions," in *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 38.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> Uzel, "*Bête Noire* de Kent Monkman," 32.

<sup>587</sup> James Adams, "Natural selection: How Kent Monkman's latest installation blends art history with colonial critique," *The Globe and the Mail*, July 16, 2014, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/natural-selection-how-kent-monkmans-latest-installation-blends-art-history-with-colonial-critique/article19641547/>.



(Fig. 4.40).<sup>588</sup> Monkman decided to use his own likeness to remedy this situation, or as he stated, “I thought I’d just standardize everybody with my own face.”<sup>589</sup> In *Bête Noire*, of course, Monkman depicts his face as Miss Chief, riffing on the “egotistical” in his alter ego’s full name. The scholar Donna Harraway has theorized the AMNH diorama, arguing that the diorama “presents itself as a side altar, a stage, an unspoiled garden in nature, a hearth for home and family.”<sup>590</sup> To Harraway, the display tells a story, but also functions as “a window into knowledge.”<sup>591</sup> The diorama transforms collected knowledge into a three-dimensional scene, simultaneously dynamic and static, the three-dimensionality providing great detail and visual information, but with figures frozen in a moment.<sup>592</sup>

*Bête Noire* acts on the idea of diorama as stage and presents an overwrought image embedded with many layers of meaning (Figs. 4.34, 4.35). The work possesses many characteristic elements of a diorama in its painted backdrop, human mannequin, grass, and dirt. Instead of being part of a group like the Indigenous man in Bierstadt’s piece, Miss Chief is alone on a motorcycle with no road, only dirt in front of her. Coupled with Monkman’s critique that Native people in dioramas all look the same, his intervention demonstrates the constructed nature of this form of display and the natural history museum more broadly. Embodiment here serves to break down the largely unchallenged importance of Euro-American artists who drew on Indigenous cultures, landscapes, and people to further their own artistic ambitions. As a static figure, Miss Chief does

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid.

<sup>590</sup> Donna Harraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936,” in *Private Visions: Gender, Race and Native in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 29.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

<sup>592</sup> Conversations around museum display often include references to repatriation, a topic covered more thoroughly in chapters 2 and 5. For more on repatriation on Canada, see Elizabeth M. Koehler, “Repatriation of Cultural Objects to Indigenous Peoples: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Canadian Law.” *The International Lawyer*. 41, no. 1 (2007): 103–26.

not teach as directly as she has in film works or performances, but rather uses this accumulation of sources to question accepted knowledge.

Aligning with Harraway's discussion of the diorama, *Bête Noire* presents a window into challenging knowledge. The history of modern art parallels the expansion of colonization and formation of settler colonial countries, which of course predates modern art by hundreds of years. Through references to the late nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth centuries, Monkman situates Modern artists in the context of benefiting from settler and extractive colonialism. Art history has historically focused on Western Europe and the United States and has liberated itself as a field from anthropology through the distinction between art, made by Europeans, and objects or curiosities, created by non-Western peoples. In *Bête Noire*, Monkman embodies the diorama, but objectifies Western art history. His references to art history are incomplete, set in a different format and taken out of context, much as objects made by Indigenous peoples globally were and continue to be. Similarly, his references to Modern art are unattributed in the work, echoing the way objects made by Indigenous people were credited loosely to their communities or listed as created by an unknown person. Because they are art historically important, these references can be studied and explored. However, the work demonstrates how easy it was for modern artists to decontextualize the art that inspired their own work.<sup>593</sup> Making these connections, *Bête Noire* demonstrates Monkman's own summation of his practice in which, "Using humor, parody, and camp, [he has] confronted the devastation of colonialism while celebrating the plural sexualities present in precontact Indigenous North America."<sup>594</sup> By centering Miss Chief, Monkman refuses the

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<sup>593</sup> For an exploration of how non-Western artists were seen as having affinities with Western artists rather serving as direct source material for their work, see the catalogue for William Rubin's the now-notorious "*Primitivism*" in *20th-Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

<sup>594</sup> Monkman, "Foreword," 52.

assumed truth of the diorama and presumed artistic genius of Euro-American artists, instead imagining a world where Indians dismantle symbols of modern art.

#### 4.7 Becoming Biblical Bad Girls: *Fate is a Cruel Mistress* (2017)

In 2017, Kent Monkman mounted his most ambitious exhibition to date, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, first shown at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto in January, subsequently traveling to eight other venues around Canada.<sup>595</sup> The impetus for the exhibition was the 150th anniversary of the 1867 Confederation, which established the Dominion of Canada by the joining together Canada, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia.<sup>596</sup> As many scholars have pointed out, the union is typically seen as belonging to the British and the French, as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples were excluded from any decision-making.<sup>597</sup> The executive director of the Art Museum at University of Toronto Barbara Fisher invited Monkman to create the exhibition in response to this anniversary, with an emphasis on this history's impact on Canada's Aboriginal peoples.<sup>598</sup> Monkman incorporated historical artifacts and art works into the exhibition as well as creating a book and several works to go along with the presentation.<sup>599</sup> Much of the exhibition takes the point of view of Miss Chief and her art historical, time-bending experience of Canada. The final series discussed in this chapter was created for that exhibition and

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<sup>595</sup> *Shame and Prejudice, a Story of Resilience: A Project by Kent Monkman*, Art Museum at the University of Toronto, January 26–March 5, 2017, <https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/shame-prejudice-story-resilience/>.

<sup>596</sup> Tracey Lindeman, "Fun Facts about Canada's Founding Fathers," *CBC News*, July 1, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-150-founding-fathers-1.3654893>.

<sup>597</sup> Serge Joyal and Phil Fontaine, "Setting the Record Straight on the Origin Story of Canada," in *Reflecting on Our Past and Embracing Our Future: A Senate Initiative for Canada*, ed. Serge Joyal and Judith Seidman (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 25–27.

<sup>598</sup> Monkman, "Foreword," 52.

<sup>599</sup> *Shame and Prejudice, a Story of Resilience: A Project by Kent Monkman*, Art Museum at University of Toronto.

evokes Monkman's notion of queer sexuality as well as relating back his work *Emergence of A Legend. Fate is a Cruel Mistress* was included in *Kent Monkman: The Rendezvous* at Peters Projects (now Gerald Peters Gallery) in Santa Fe, New Mexico (Fig. 4.41).

*Fate is a Cruel Mistress* is a suite of five photographs, shot by photographer Chris Chapman (Fig. 4.41).<sup>600</sup> The discussion of Monkman concludes with this series as it evokes several themes of his practice: trickery, a wide mix of references, allusion to belief and religion, and finally, the interplay between white Euro-Canadian male settlers and Miss Chief. Through this series, Monkman as Miss Chief reimagines the Bible as relating specifically to late nineteenth-century Canada. As the piece was made for an exhibition about Canada's founding, there has been speculation that the men in the pieces are meant to represent Canada's founding fathers,<sup>601</sup> but none of the men obviously resemble particular founding fathers.<sup>602</sup> The five pieces in the series take their names from so-called villainous women of the Bible: *Delilah, Jezebel, Judith, Potiphar's Wife, and Salome*.<sup>603</sup> In each piece, the story plays out with Miss Chief in the role of the biblical woman and white men of varying ages in the place of biblical heroes. The backdrops of these photographs appear to be nineteenth-century interiors, some very specific, while others are a bit more general. Small in scale, like the *Emergence of a Legend, Fate is a Cruel Mistress* resembles hand-colored illustrations in an old book, invoked by its light brown look and wide band around the image itself. The colors appear almost too bright, adding to this aesthetic of being painted on rather than found in nature. These works do not have as clear a message as other series by the

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<sup>600</sup> Kent Monkman, *Salome*, <https://www.kentmonkman.com/photo/yowdfwuzl6k3f5gzt2d0obergipag5>.

<sup>601</sup> Kay Johnson, "Unsettling Exhibition Pedagogies: Troubling Stories of the Nation with Miss Chief," unpublished PhD diss., Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Victoria, 2019, 133.

<sup>602</sup> I compared their images to known portraits of Canada's founding fathers and asked Canadian colleagues, who have grown up with images of these men to do the same. Collectively, we only saw vague resemblances that do not clearly indicate portraits of individuals.

<sup>603</sup> Jordan Eddy, "Review: Kent Monkman: The Rendezvous," *Southwest Contemporary*, August 1, 2017, <https://southwestcontemporary.com/kent-monkman-the-rendezvous/>.

artist, curious considering Monkman's typical teaching role for Miss Chief. Through their title, a cliché, the series indicates that these women are cruel mistresses, while Monkman acts cruelly to white men. However, colonial powers and the successive settler colonial state have, in comparison, been far harsher to Canada's Aboriginal peoples. As in other series, Miss Chief acts against these colonial forces, incarnated by white men, and against the patriarchal power structure of the church, which Monkman has argued had extremely negative impacts, as seen in the infamous residential schools, on Native peoples.<sup>604</sup> Also, of note is the license Miss Chief takes in taking on a different appearance. For the first time in the fifteen years since her first appearance in Monkman's paintings, Miss Chief here is depicted without her trademark headdress and multiple light-colored wigs.

In *Delilah*, the first image of the series, Miss Chief and a sleeping white man recline on a fine chaise, inside a tipi with pictographic walls and a small central hearth (Fig. 4.42). Miss Chief wears large silver bracelets and a green velvet ensemble with fur piping, looking out at the viewer as she prepares to cut the man's hair. Delilah is the love interest and eventual betrayer of Samson, a hero whose strength comes from his hair. The number at the top of the piece, XXI, refers to the verse of Bible, Judges 16:4–21, in which Delilah appears.<sup>605</sup> She has often been interpreted as a hypersexual woman and sex worker, but nothing in the text specifies this fact.<sup>606</sup> The biblical scholar Wil Gafney argues that Delilah represents a strong, independent figure who is allowed to collect her ransom without being punished for her betrayal.<sup>607</sup> Monkman's parents were

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<sup>604</sup> Monkman, "Foreword," 52.

<sup>605</sup> Biblical Gateway, "Judges 16:4–21," <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges+16%3A4-21&version=NIV>.

<sup>606</sup> Wil Gafney, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game," *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, edited by Byron Gay L. and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta, GA, USA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 62.

<sup>607</sup> Gafney, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game," 66–69.

missionaries and the Bible played a large role in his young life, including his understanding of Cree which he learned through his grandmother's Cree hymnbook.<sup>608</sup> Thus the story of Delilah, as those of all the Biblical women who Miss Chief embodies, are very familiar to Monkman. The bare chest of Samson relates to Miss Chief's earlier forays into documenting the European male. Similarly, the pictographs on the tipi are sexually graphic stick-figure depictions that Monkman has since used as stand-alone works, such as *Sacred 69* (2019).<sup>609</sup> The use of the tipi as background reinforces Miss Chief as a Native person though she lacks typical sartorial indications of this identity. Miss Chief looks out at viewers daringly, firmly in control of the scene. The male figure, whose face is only partial visible, is not identifiable as any of the particular Fathers of Confederacy, the thirty-six men who are largely responsible for laying the foundations of Canada as a country.<sup>610</sup> Despite this lack of specificity, the top hat behind Miss Chief and choice of furniture situate the work in the nineteenth century, even if Miss Chief's revealing clothing is something of an outlier. Hair and its strength relate to Indigenous identity in that Native men were often forced to cut their hair as part of the process of assimilation. Miss Chief here cuts Samson's already short hair, demonstrating her control over this encounter.

*Jezebel*, the next piece in the series, takes place in a church where Miss Chief seems to have convinced a cleric to worship her instead of God (Fig. 4.43). Her outfit—a corset with exposed nipples, thigh-high tights, and a transparent pink robe—make Miss Chief as *Delilah* look modest in comparison. This boudoir outfit is made seemingly even more out of place as she and her male companion are located in a church. As in the *Delilah*, the number at the top of the page

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<sup>608</sup> Monkman and Drevor, "Kent Monkman MTHF 18 Keynote."

<sup>609</sup> Kent Monkman, *Sacred 69*, <https://www.kentmonkman.com/limited-editions/sacred-69>.

<sup>610</sup> Lindeman, "Fun Facts about Canada's Founding Fathers."

refers to the Bible verses that feature Delilah, 9:30–37 in the King James Bible.<sup>611</sup> The biblical Jezebel was a Phoenician princess, the wife of King Ahab and a worshipper of Baal, who was ultimately betrayed by her servants, meeting a terrible death by being thrown out of a window, trampled, and eaten by dogs.<sup>612</sup> This grim saga has assured that Jezebel has had tremendous staying power culturally, particularly because of her association with overt sexuality and temptation.<sup>613</sup> Monkman’s depiction of Miss Chief incarnating Jezebel as a barely clothed redhead fits this hypersexualized notion. The clergyman who kneels before Miss Chief extends his hand toward her, Jezebel in the position that a cleric would typically occupy, on the sanctuary with the main altar behind her with a small structure between the two figures that holds prayer candles. The male figure in the piece is meant to represent one of the many men that Jezebel has led astray to worship her false God Baal. The brazenness of Miss Chief as Jezebel in convincing a cleric to abandon God in a house of worship is quite astounding. The green velvety fabric worn by Delilah in the previous piece is repeated here in red on the altar, and the swathes of pink fabric all around Miss Chief reinforce her femininity. The church structure itself points to the late nineteenth-century Neo-Gothic revival as do the prominent sideburns of the male figure in the piece. Monkman chooses to depict Miss Chief as Jezebel in a moment of power and conniving rather than at her gruesome end. The scholar Janet Everhart contends that eunuchs, or castrated men who served the royal power structure, are essential to Jezebel’s story.<sup>614</sup> Everhart argues that eunuchs function as an “alternate gender,” while Jezebel, as an extremely powerful woman, also “transgresses gender

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<sup>611</sup> Bible Gateway, “2 Kings 9:30–37,” <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Kings+9%3A30-37&version=NKJV>.

<sup>612</sup> Jo Ann Hackett, “Jezebel,” *The Oxford Guide to People and Places of the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195146417.001.0001/acref-9780195146417-e-164>.

<sup>613</sup> Janet S. Everhart, “Jezebel: Framed by Eunuchs?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2010): 688–9.

<sup>614</sup> Everhart, “Jezebel: Framed by Eunuchs?” 692.

boundaries.”<sup>615</sup> The gender-bending that Everhart details in the biblical story of Jezebel parallels the story of Miss Chief and this particular depiction of her, in which her male anatomy is almost completely concealed: Miss Chief’s choker hides her Adam’s apple, her corset is so tight it pushes upper pectorals to make them look more like breasts, and finally, despite her tight briefs, there is no indication of a penis. Noteworthy as well is that Miss Chief does not don any symbols of Native or Indian identity—even her hair here is lightened—though, based on Miss Chief’s long history in Monkman’s work, viewers might already know she is Native. Situating Miss Chief as the sexual head of her own church, Monkman rewrites the church’s role in Native communities, imagining that rather than being the protagonists of forcible assimilation, Christian clergy could be led to follow other spiritual beliefs.

Miss Chief presents herself in more recognizable attire for *Judith* (Fig. 4.44), sporting thigh-high red boots, an open top, and her trademark feathered headdress with accents of red. The scene takes place in a tent that harkens back to the plain fabric tents of early colonial battles, set in the woods with muskets outside, leaning on a wooden box. Again, the biblical story is not fully shown, but alluded to, as Miss Chief as Judith is poised with a knife in her hand, ready to cut off the head of a pallid white man. The book aesthetic is repeated, as is the number at the top of the page, XVII, which points to the Bible verse that tells the story of Judith, 8:1–17.<sup>616</sup> Judith is a complex figure as she considered a saint to the Jewish people, a beautiful and wealthy widow who was presented to the Assyrian general Holofernes in his tent, where she decapitated him to save her people.<sup>617</sup> Again, the male figure is unrecognizable, unconnected to a specific Father of

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<sup>615</sup> Everhart, 697.

<sup>616</sup> Bible Study Tools, “Judith 8:1–17,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/nrsa/judith/passage/?q=judith+8:1-17>

<sup>617</sup> Carey A. Moore, “Judith.” In *The Oxford Guide to People and Places of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195146417.001.0001/acref-9780195146417-e-180>.



Confederation, but his role in the colonial regime is clear in his placement within the tent. The treacherous woman in a tent has been used as a device by Monkman via Miss Chief before, such as in the diptych etching *Montcalm's Haircut/Wolfe's Haircut* (Figs. 4.45, 4.46). In this image, Miss Chief is naked and fully exposed, which relates more to the Sampson/Delilah story as she cuts the hair; the artist's hopes to diminish the power of the important historical figures mentioned in the title, who fought in the Seven-Years War, called the French and the Indian War in the United States.<sup>618</sup> Marquis de Montcalm and General James Wolfe both died at the Battle of Quebec, a victory for the British which effectively set in motion expulsion of the French from New France in 1760.<sup>619</sup> These earlier etchings suggest a referential nature of the piece as well as demonstrate the role of Miss Chief as Judith as fighting for her people against European powers, here understood to be the forces of Confederation. Relating to the didactic nature of Miss Chief's presence, her appearance as performatively Indian reinforces the lack of consultation of First Nations and Inuit peoples during the process of Canadian Confederation. Miss Chief as Judith looks away, toward the entrance to the tent, checking her surroundings before committing her violent act. This gesture, as it is also shown her earlier diptych, reverses the actual colonial relationship, placing Miss Chief, and thus Aboriginal Canadians, in a position of power relative to their formation of a new nation on their land.

In *Potiphar's Wife*, Miss Chief is naked and blond (Fig. 4.47). This piece again references *Montcalm's Haircut*, in the bed, a naked Miss Chief, and the male figure. The number at the top, XIV, may refer to the line in Genesis 39 in which Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of attempting to

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<sup>618</sup> Tabitha Marshall, "Battle of the Plains of Abraham," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. February 7, 2006, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/battle-of-the-plains-of-abraham>.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid.

rape her.<sup>620</sup> Miss Chief as Potiphar's wife, following the biblical story, should be unsuccessful in her seduction, although that is not clear from the image, in which Miss Chief as Potiphar's wife grabs at Joseph's jacket while lying on an elegant four-poster nineteenth-century bed. There is again a strong presence of the color red in Miss Chief's platform heels and the long, red curtain in the background. *Potiphar's Wife*, like *Delilah*, presents an interior space that seems to be the domain of Miss Chief. This power is amplified since, per to Miss Chief, "naked, I am at my strongest."<sup>621</sup> There is a sumptuousness to both interiors, yet the bedroom in *Potiphar's Wife* looks to be in a well-appointed house, as opposed to a tipi. Miss Chief's bright red heels lay on a bear rug—a perhaps more subtle symbol of her Native identity since bears are very important to the Cree—however, this is a polar not a brown bear. Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph and when he refuses, she accuses him of abusing her so that he is sent to prison.<sup>622</sup> She is the only woman not given her own name in the biblical tale, instead only named through her husband. In this piece, Miss Chief as Potiphar's wife is a failed temptress who causes harm to the male hero. Returning to the link between Jezebel and eunuchs, some scholars have argued that Potiphar was a eunuch, and his wife was motivated to have sex with Joseph with the objective of procreation.<sup>623</sup> In this reading, Miss Chief assumes the role of Potiphar's wife, a Two-Spirit who is anatomically male and unable to procreate with another man. This nineteenth-century man who acts as a stand in for Joseph, again has a top hat, long coat, and suit indicative of the time period. He moves away from Miss Chief as Potiphar's wife to deny her advances, but both figures staid expressions do not make it seem like a very dramatic moment. In this instance of unmet desire, Miss Chief as

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<sup>620</sup> Bible Gateway, "Genesis 39," <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+39&version=NIV>.

<sup>621</sup> Gisele Gordon and Kent Monkman, "Excerpts from the Memoir of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle," 61.

<sup>622</sup> Johanna Stiebert, "Potiphar's Wife and the Sexual Harassment of Joseph," *The Shiloh Project*. April 20, 2018. <https://shiloh-project.group.shef.ac.uk/potiphars-wife-and-the-sexual-harassment-of-joseph/>.

<sup>623</sup> Everhart, "Jezebel: Framed by Eunuchs?" 694.

Potiphar's wife surprisingly does not possess any great power while naked, but she does embody an instance of female power over a man in the Bible.

The fifth piece in the series, *Salome*, is perhaps the most triumphant and in line with other depictions of Miss Chief (Fig. 4.48). In this piece, Miss Chief as Salome sits at the center of the piece, on an elaborate wooden chair beneath a pointed arch with stairs leading up to her and a man's head on a platter between her legs. In the Bible, Salome is the granddaughter of Herod, married to her uncle Phillip, and performs a dance for which she is rewarded with the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter.<sup>624</sup> As in *Judith*, Miss Chief is presented as expressly Indigenous, in her long dress with jingles or conical-shaped silver bells.<sup>625</sup> Though it is more revealing in the neck and shoulders, this dress is likely meant to be read as a jingle dress, an important women's garment for Native pride and in powwow culture. Miss Chief as Salome dons an ornate headpiece with a feather, again reinforcing her Native identity. As in *Jezebel*, Miss Chief's pectoral muscles look more like breasts, and the setting resembles an official Neogothic, perhaps a government, building. John the Baptist is usually portrayed as young and handsome, his stand-in here is an older man with a white beard and mustache. The Salome story relates to Miss Chief's larger narrative of performance and, with the curtain behind her, also to the earlier series *Emergence of A Legend*. While in other pieces in *Fate is a Cruel Mistress* the violence is alluded to or suggested, Miss Chief as Salome daringly looks out at viewers while holding a man's severed head on a platter. As with *Judith* in this series, Miss Chief as Salome asserts her power by imposing her dominance over a white man, standing in for a white colonial man. In *Salome*, she is undoubtably triumphant and

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<sup>624</sup> Michael D. Coogan, "Salome," *The Oxford Guide to People and Places of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195146417.001.0001/acref-9780195146417-e-284>.

<sup>625</sup> Johnson, "Unsettling Exhibition Pedagogies," 133.

unquestioningly Native, though her jingle dress is much more revealing than what one might see in a powwow. Through her association with temptresses, royalty, and dancers, Miss Chief in *Fate is A Cruel Mistress* strikes back against the white colonial structure through acts meant to deliberately challenge the power of men who represent the Fathers of the Confederation. Too historically incongruous to be true a rewriting of the story of Confederation, Miss Chief instead imagines how biblical narratives could be reimagined as struggles for sovereignty and against patriarchy.

#### 4.8 Conclusion

While visually and performatively appealing to camp and drag sensibilities, Miss Chief's didacticism has grown over time, becoming an essential part of her role and allowing Monkman to teach audiences difficult lessons in colonial history. Miss Chief, as an attractive and slim Two-Spirit figure, appeals to viewers through her conventional beauty, making Monkman's anticolonial message more palatable. Through the works explored in this chapter, it has been demonstrated that Monkman has a complex relationship with settler colonialism and art history. Starting with his specific local context of his Cree community, his community origin story and history have been highlighted. Like many other Indigenous people, his family history includes forced removals and state-sponsored assimilation, along with a deep connection to, and a simultaneous sense of disconnection from, place. His commentary that the tropes of Native people are limiting, especially for the current realities of Native life and expansive gender conceptions, is made more appealing through the figure of Miss Chief, who seems to lean into the misconceptions, at least aesthetically. Through this gender-bending creation, Monkman has been able to explore Cree creation stories,

Native women's performance, and salvage ethnographic efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to document a "vanishing" race. Similarly, his fluency in and ability to recreate landscape painting of the nineteenth century presents his alterations of history in already familiar settings. Drawing on his religious background and knowledge, Monkman reimagines figures as explicitly Indigenous, not as a standard of authenticity, but as a means of connecting to place and freedom to explore gender and sexuality. Whether she wields pink arrows or a tomahawk gavel, Miss Chief embodies the teaching trickster.

While Monkman entices to inform, Erica Lord, the artist discussed in the next chapter, explores how her multiethnic Indigenous body is interpreted differently based on the ways she styles and adorns herself. Like Monkman, she identifies as mixed and references the trope of Native women as sexy or sexually available. Aligning herself with feminist practices of the past, she considers the role of Native women in society through future generations and historically how women have been equated with the land as a commodity. This study is concluded with her work because it resonates with the other artists explored here, emphasizing Indigenous women and their experiences as Fiona Foley's does, utilizing sound and costuming as Christian Thompson does, and considering the North American Native stereotypes with which Monkman's practice also engages. The last series of her work that is discussed is baby belts made entirely of beads, so that they cannot fulfill their function of holding children, point to a potential expansion of the project, considering embodiment as bodily objects rooted in Indigenous traditions that are made to reflect scientific research and contemporary feminist concerns.

## 5.0 Weaving Strands Together: Erica Lord's Embodied Artistic Practice

*My culture and idea of home began in Alaska, moved and adopted Michigan, and ever since, has existed somewhere in between, amongst, and within a mixed cultural legacy.*<sup>626</sup>  
—Erica Lord

The artist Erica Lord (born 1978) has explored her background and her heritage since she began practicing art professionally in the mid-2000s. To describe her practice, the Comanche scholar Paul Chaat Smith employs the metaphor of “walking in two worlds,” stating that, “As far as [Erica Lord]’s concerned, walking in two worlds is a rusting, broken contraption held together by stubbornness, colonized thinking, and baling wire.”<sup>627</sup> Lord is not an evenly divided person but a unique individual, a multimedia and performance artist, curator, and teacher. Between 2004 and 2010, Erica Lord participated in many group and solo exhibitions, producing a provocative body of work, which garnered the attention of many prominent thinkers in the field of contemporary Indigenous art. Erica Lord is a central figure of this project for her thoughtful approach to embodiment and eloquent writings about her own work and positionality. Her photographic series are so poignant that they have led to a broader conception of the topic of this project. Lord’s work has been exhibited in the National Museum of the American Indian and collected by Alaska’s major cultural institutions, and her work will likely only grow in its importance. Lord repeatedly uses her own body and emphasizes her physical form as entry point to consider her individual identity as Erica Lord and the collective identity of being Alaska Native and more broadly Native

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<sup>626</sup> Erica Lord, “Artist Statement,” accessed December 14, 2016, <http://ericalord.com/home.html>.

<sup>627</sup> Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 34–35.

American. In film, photography, and performance art, her work demonstrates the powerful connection between Indigeneity and embodiment.

Erica Lord identifies as Athabascan, Inupiaq, Japanese, and Finnish, this list suggesting that perhaps rather than straddling two or even many worlds, her identities overlap into one.<sup>628</sup> In choosing to self-identify as a multiethnic person, Lord is consciously repeating the tendency of the recently passed artist James Luna (1952–2018), who consistently identified as Luiseño and Mexican, perhaps to push back in the 1980s era of identity politics.<sup>629</sup> Luna was a mentor of Lord's starting in around 2007, when Lord began to consider redoing Luna's most famous work, *Artifact Piece* (1987–90).<sup>630</sup> Lord's list of ethnicities points to the fact that Native artists are identified by their tribal affiliations (and sometimes European heritages), yet white Americans of mixed European heritage are seldom expected to do the same.

Lord's self-identification seems to push back against Paul Chaat Smith's metaphorical understanding of her practice, particularly his use of the phrase "walking in two worlds," which is a cliché expression applied to bicultural and/or mixed peoples.<sup>631</sup> The "two worlds" are the Native and the white worlds, which overlap, intersect and, as Chaat Smith explains, never exist wholly separate from the others.<sup>632</sup> The metaphor also seems to privilege the dominant white culture as one is white and the alternative other, when in reality, the many worlds connect and intersect. So, are these two worlds really different? Perhaps in worldview, but not in experience of all that

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<sup>628</sup> Mique'l Icesis Askren, "Erica Lord," in *Manifestations New Native Art Criticism*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Santa Fe: Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2012), 132–33.

<sup>629</sup> Jennifer A. González, "James Luna: Artifacts and Fictions," in *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 22–63.

<sup>630</sup> Erica Lord, interview with the author (via FaceTime), February 17, 2020.

<sup>631</sup> Paul Chaat Smith does not provide an exact reference for this term, but it has been used widely for much of the second half of the twentieth century. See Rosemary C. Henze and Lauren Vanett, "To Walk in Two Worlds—Or More? Challenging a Common Metaphor of Native Education," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (June 1993): 116–34.

<sup>632</sup> Smith, 34–35.

surrounds us. Because Lord has Japanese heritage, she was chosen to participate in Kip Fullbeck's 2006 *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* publication. Her statement (in part) reads: "I am circumpolar. I am many little bridges joined."<sup>633</sup> The photograph of Lord reproduced in the book was taken in 2006. In this image she wears pigtails and makeup, but no jewelry, her chin is slightly raised, and her expression is placid. The difference is striking between this likeness, taken by another photographer, and Lord's own forays into self-portraiture from around the same time. Her description of herself includes many nods to her Alaskan heritage, yet her participation in the project acts as a claim to her Japanese heritage, her Japanese great-great grandfather who married an Inupiaq woman.<sup>634</sup>

Along with her Inupiaq roots, Lord is registered as a member of the Tanana Athabascan tribe, whose traditional and current territory include her hometown of Nenana, Alaska.<sup>635</sup> There is a long history of Athabascan activism in Nenana against colonial encroachment.<sup>636</sup> The Upper Peninsula of Michigan is the home of her mother, which on the surface factors less prominently in her work, but it was the site of Lord's 2009 major retrospective at the DeVos Museum.<sup>637</sup> Lord's father, Victor Lord, is a well-known Native rights activist in the interior of Alaska and the alternate director of the Nenana branch of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, a nonprofit organization created for the benefit of Athabascans in the interior.<sup>638</sup> Both Lord and her father are descendants of the last great chief of Nenana and Wood River, Chief Thomas, who was a vocal advocate for his

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<sup>633</sup> Kip Fullbeck, *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 58.

<sup>634</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>635</sup> William Schneider, *The Tanana Chiefs: Native Rights and Western Law* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2018), xiii–xxx.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>637</sup> Erica Lord, "Artist Talk," single-channel film, 78 minutes (Marquette: DeVos Museum at Northern Michigan University, 2010), <http://mediasite.nmu.edu/NMUMediasite/Play/f516b02f556b400f9d3e047fff8035fb>.

<sup>638</sup> Angela Demma, interview with the author, Anchorage, Alaska, June 8, 2018.



people.<sup>639</sup> Lord's grandmother was highly respected and also served as chief during her lifetime.<sup>640</sup> According to the artist, her grandmother recognized Lord's potential importance and deep connection to the community.<sup>641</sup> Since Lord is the only child of her grandmother's oldest son, she was given Chief Thomas's necklace, a dentalium-shell chief's necklace that has been passed down through five generations of chiefs' families.<sup>642</sup> This gesture of showed faith in her to carry on the family legacy, but presented Lord with responsibility to live up to this legacy.

The Lord family is well known in their small town of Nenana. Nenana sits fifty-five miles southwest of the town of Fairbanks, the second largest in Alaska. There commerce and lifestyles tie together white and Athabascan communities, many of whom are further connected through familial relationships. For many reasons, Alaska—the first noncontiguous territory of the United States, the forty-ninth state, and the so-called Last Frontier—seems to be an outlier of the United States, possessing 10% Native population and no reservations by design.<sup>643</sup> The specificity of Alaska has shaped many individuals, but the particularity of being Alaska Native influences Erica Lord's work.

Between 2004 and 2009, Lord experienced a great deal of success and artistic productivity, living between Chicago, Santa Fe, Fairbanks, and Olympia, Oregon. Her achievements at this time include an exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York—*Artifact Piece Revisited* from April 2008, which Chaat Smith curated—a solo exhibition at the DeVos Museum in Northern Michigan University, inclusion in several important group exhibitions of

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<sup>639</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

<sup>643</sup> Maria Shaa Tláa Williams, "Alaska and its People: An Introduction." *The Alaska Native Reader*, ed. Maria Shaa Tláa Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1–12.

Native American art, and purchases of her work by major art museums. It was in these years that the artwork that is the focus of this chapter was created: the photographic series *The Tanning Project* (2005–7), *Un/Defined Self-Portraits* (2005–7), *Untitled (Tattooed Arms)* (2007),<sup>644</sup> the film *Binary Selves* (2007), the performance and installation *Artifact Piece, Revisited* (2008), and finally Lord's forays into traditional Athabascan arts: *My First Baby Belt* (2007) and *Diabetes Burden Strap DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008). For these works, the product of her prolific years in the mid-2000s, she is well-known in the Native American art world, though the themes of her practice move beyond this context, as indeed all the artists' work does in this project. She has recently reentered the art world after a long hiatus. Taken together, Lord's work provides key examples of Indigenous contemporary creation, tied to specific locations and peoples as well as to global Indigeneity. Her exploration of her body as a site of contested Indigeneity—including her self-identification as a multiethnic Native woman—suggests new possibilities for Indigenous feminism as an art practice.

The thoughtful works from 2005–8 reflect her exploration of self and her educational background. Lord received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, studying photography, film, and video.<sup>645</sup> In 2001, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Carleton College in Minnesota. While at Carleton, she took opportunities to study Native art with Native artists, first at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, which has a well-developed Native arts program, and the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), the premier arts institution for Native American artists in the United States, located in Santa Fe.<sup>646</sup> Her education was thus divided, though not evenly, between predominantly white institutions and programs and institutions geared

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<sup>644</sup> As I will detail below, this work is known by different names.

<sup>645</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>646</sup> Maya Salganek, interview with the author, Fairbanks, Alaska, June 16, 2018.

specifically for Native Americans/Alaska Natives. Lord has spoken about feeling very disconnected from mostly white student populations, first at Carleton College and later in Chicago.<sup>647</sup> As her writing about her work attests, she uses her artistic practice to reflect on these personal experiences, empowered by art history and critical theory. Her time at IAIA was especially formative as she was able to expand her study of photography and connected with her mentor. Will Wilson (Diné, born 1969),<sup>648</sup> who is an artist, educator, and curator who was teaching at IAIA when Lord attended.<sup>649</sup> He is well-known in the field of contemporary Native American art, with his work represented in many collections.<sup>650</sup> His most ambitious project is his continuing series Contemporary Indigenous Photography Exchange (CIPX), which uses antiquated tintype material to photograph Indigenous people, gifting them the original tintype and keeping the digital copy himself.<sup>651</sup> Lord has credited Wilson with pushing her practice beyond photographs taken at Native events to those that are more personal or specific to her.<sup>652</sup>

Despite extensive travel, or because of it, Nenana for the artist provides a kind of spiritual and conceptual center around which her work turns. Chief Thomas was the last great chief of the extended area around the town so being his relative still commands great respect in the interior of Alaska.<sup>653</sup> As stated above, Lord's grandmother gave her Chief Thomas's necklace, an important dentalium necklace that had been passed down for over a hundred years through the family.<sup>654</sup> Such an valued and powerful object carries with it deep meaning, namely that, among her extended

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<sup>647</sup> Lord, "Artist Talk."

<sup>648</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid.

<sup>651</sup> Will Wilson, "CIPX."

<sup>652</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>653</sup> Mareca Guthrie, interview with the author, Fairbanks, Alaska: June 6, 2018.

<sup>654</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

Athabascan family, Lord was singled out for greatness.<sup>655</sup> It is quite a heavy burden to imagine giving to a teenager, yet Lord's exceptional artwork demonstrate that she carries this responsibility with her. Of the many topics we discussed when I interviewed her in February 2020, this necklace and the connection between her and her grandmother stands out as highly personal and powerful story. Fittingly, the chief's necklace is something she continues to wear for significant occasions and when she needs to feel more powerful, harnessing this wearable symbol of her Athabascan heritage. The sections that follow focus primarily on Lord's intensely bodily works, which have been staged far from Alaska with one major exception. Her work begins in Nenana, grounded in her family, and radiates out, demonstrating the tendency of Indigeneity to be linked to a very specific location and local history, which then connects to diverse peoples because of shared characteristics.

### **5.1 Looking Indian: *The Tanning Project* (2005–7)**

*The Tanning Project* (2005–7) is a four-photograph series, in which Erica Lord selectively tanned her body to reveal lighter phrases, is cropped and scaled to the size of a boudoir photograph. In her lecture at Northern Michigan University, Lord established that the piece, which took over two years to create, was Lord's experiments in graduate school in which she played with tanning to see if it increased her attractiveness to the opposite sex.<sup>656</sup> The theater historian Colleen Kim

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

<sup>656</sup> Lord, "Artist Talk."

Dahner has written the only in-depth study of *The Tanning Project* series.<sup>657</sup> The title of the series could perhaps be an allusion to the many ethnic projects of the Korean American artist Nikki Lee, with whose work Lord has been tangentially associated through the scholarship of Cherise Smith.<sup>658</sup> Lee has made several participant-based series that she titles the (type of people or location) project. Explaining *The Tanning Project* to a local Alaska newspaper, Lord stated, “I figured that since skin is the issue, I might as well make it the medium.”<sup>659</sup> By the phrase “skin is the issue,” Lord means that her skin and appearance, characterized by multicultural features, are mined to determine her ethnicity.<sup>660</sup> Skin matters for conceptualizing Native American identity according to the still-pervasive physical stereotype, which has never quite left the American consciousness, of a Native American woman who has long dark hair and warm-toned brown skin.<sup>661</sup>

In *The Tanning Project*, Lord uses her body and the practices of photography and tanning to explore issues relating to Native identity and skin.<sup>662</sup> To create the series, Lord used a tanning bed, sticking vinyl lettering to cover parts of her skin to reveal statements about her Indigenous heritage.<sup>663</sup> She then took photographs highlighting these phrases against her tanned or reddened skin. The contrast between her tanned and untanned skin demonstrates that her appearance can, and does, change. For much of the world, throughout time, tanned skin has been associated with

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<sup>657</sup> Colleen Kim Daniher, “The Pose as Interventionist Gesture: Erica Lord and Decolonizing the Proper Subject of Memory,” in “Decolonial Gesture Issue,” *E-MISFÉRICA* 11, no. 1 (2014), <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/emisferica-111-decolonial-gesture/daniher>.

<sup>658</sup> Cherise Smith, “Nikki S. Lee’s Projects and the Repackaging of the Politics of Identity,” in *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 189–232.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>660</sup> Mike Dunham, “Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity,” *Alaska Daily News*, August 1, 2009, <https://www.adn.com/our-alaska/article/nenana-artist-grapples-ethnic-identity/2009/08/02/>.

<sup>661</sup> See Kathleen Ash-Milby, *HIDE: Skin as Material and Metaphor* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2009).

<sup>662</sup> Erica Lord, *The Tanning Project*, <http://ericalord.com/section/22654-The-Tanning-Project.html>.

<sup>663</sup> Dunham, “Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity.”

hard manual labor and a lower station in life. Since the time of transatlantic slavery and colonialization, darker skin has been associated with a less-than-human status from the European perspective. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, various pseudoscience fields emerged to reinforce the connection between physical characteristics and mental capacity, reinforcing white supremacy as rational and scientific rather than arbitrary and pernicious. Only recently has tanning become a sought-after beauty ritual, though mostly in the Western world where one must have naturally fair skin in order to darken it. In Alaska, tanning salons also perform the necessary function of replenishing vitamin D lost during long winters. *The Tanning Project* relates to all of these associations with tanning.

As mentioned above, *The Tanning Project* has its roots in Lord's time in graduate school. In an artist talk for *Erica Lord: Simulacrum and Subversion* at the University of Northern Michigan Gallery, Lord detailed an unfinished piece she began while at the Art Institute of Chicago's MFA program.<sup>664</sup> The work—for which Lord does not provide a title—was an experimental physical performance that lasted weeks,<sup>665</sup> during which she altered her physical appearance in the hope that it would ameliorate her nonexistent dating prospects.<sup>666</sup> The physical alterations included tanning and getting extensions to lengthen her hair.<sup>667</sup> Her longer hair made her more feminine and attractive, but what began as a cheeky social experiment turned soon turned potentially dangerous. Men approached Lord, the darker she tanned her skin, with more graphic and aggressive comments,<sup>668</sup> harassment that kept her from ultimately finishing the piece.<sup>669</sup> It is worth

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<sup>664</sup> Lord, "Artist Talk."

<sup>665</sup> Ibid.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid.

<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

<sup>669</sup> Ibid.

pointing out that Lord is naturally fair, and this episode is a stark reminder that her flexibility in skin color, the ability to darken it, represents a privilege in a highly racialized society. Her subsequent performance photography works play out in the studio and gallery, not in the street. Rather than subject herself to further harassment and possibly violence, Lord has since experimented with bodily alterations in private—with the notable exception of her unnamed project—so that the works, not her physical body, are put on display.

*The Tanning Project* not only explored earlier ideas in Lord's work, but also links up with a direct legacy in art history of Native American artists returning or subverting the traditional photographic gaze. Historically, the power of non-Indigenous to document Indigenous peoples has made photography somewhat problematic for its role reinforcing stereotypes of “savage” or “uncivilized” groups of humans. Published between 1907 and 1930, the anthropologist Edward Sheriff Curtis's extensive folios of Native American images have driven perception of them as a group for over one hundred years.<sup>670</sup> Sheriff photographs from the nineteenth century, much like portraiture of the time, were often highly calculated, posed, and costumed, rather than the purely documentary anthropological visual catalogue they were purported to be.<sup>671</sup> These and other photographs of Native Americans in traditional (or faux-traditional) attire, looking particularly solemn to support popular opinion that they were dying out, continue to impact popular understanding of Indigenous peoples today.<sup>672</sup> Some Native American scholars, such as Chaat Smith, position Native people and photography quite differently, suggesting that Native Americans had much the same access to photography as other residents of the United States.<sup>673</sup> “ [Native

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<sup>670</sup> Elizabeth S. Hawley, “James Luna and the Paradoxically Vanishing Indian,” *Contemporaneity* 5, no. 1 (2016): 14–18.

<sup>671</sup> *ibid.*.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>673</sup> Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*, 4.

Americans] have been using photography for our own ends as long as we've been flying," he opines, "which is to say as long as there have been cameras and airplanes."<sup>674</sup> Given Chaat Smith's position, *The Tanning Project* can be understood as an artistic continuation of the legacy of Native American photography produced as a form of self-representation, exemplified by the work of twentieth-century artists such as Horace Poolaw, who documented his Kiowa people at all manner of events.<sup>675</sup> Chaat Smith notes that the photography's potential in the hands of Native peoples goes beyond mere documentation to self-representation, combating stereotype with self-fashioning. Lord explores her ability to conform to stereotypes, but also employs photography as a means of making her own statements about her identity. Through tanning, Lord displayed her naturally light skin and the possibility of becoming darker. The piece relates to Lord's choice to self-identify as all her ethnicities in a deliberately decolonial gesture, emphasizing her sense that she can embodying multiple ethnicities at once, not diminishing any of them in the process.

The scholar Bonita Lawrence has argued that mixed Native people are understood as Native or non-Native based on situation and may negotiate many different identities in a single day.<sup>676</sup> This negotiation could be considered as related to code switching, but Lawrence is considering more how individuals are understood at first glance, rather than through other cultural cues like speech. Lawrence argues this point from a social science perspective with conclusions that are mostly interview based.<sup>677</sup> However, many of points on mixed Native identity hold true for the practice of artmaking as a means of engaging with the world. As a child, Lord experienced

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<sup>674</sup> Ibid.

<sup>675</sup> See Nancy Marie Mithlo, ed., *For a Love of His People: The Photography of Horace Poolaw*, The Henry Roe Cloud Series on American Indians and Modernity (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2014).

<sup>676</sup> Bonita Lawrence, *"Real" Indians and Others: Mixed Blood Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004), 179.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid., 8.



growing up between Alaska, where she was considered white, and Michigan, where she was considered “Indian.”<sup>678</sup> Using her own body and distinctively multicultural features, she presents her Alaska Native identity as a dynamic, a spectrum perhaps, rather than a static characteristic.<sup>679</sup> Alaska Native as a designation refers to several different language groupings and many more individual tribes and nations so suggesting that there is one way of looking Alaska Native is not accurate. Outwardly, this identity is negotiated by how well she fits perceived notions of a Native person’s phenotype, which includes the characteristics of long, dark hair and brown skin. The particularly challenging nature of the words on Lord’s body, which are detailed below, necessitate a textual reading of these works. She uses text confrontationally, so that her words—not just her body—are presented to the viewer. This reinforces Lord’s role as the subject and agent of her photographs, as she controls her body’s presentation. *The Tanning Project* also comments, as Lord has similarly done in her writing, on the difficulty of being a contemporary Native person, living in the world as a person of Indigenous heritage, given the stereotypes and expectations therein.<sup>680</sup> The power of this series lies both in Lord’s use of text in and on her body, which are manipulated into positions of varying accessibility. Across four images, she offers only partial views of her form, presenting her body in piecemeal and using its immediacy while precluding the viewer’s ability to ever view her in her entirety. *The Tanning Project* is both series of photographs and a record of the tanning performance, the latter of which has just been discussed, leaving the former to be explored.<sup>681</sup>

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<sup>678</sup> Dunham, “Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity.”

<sup>679</sup> As Lord is Athabascan and Inupiaq, I refer to her as Alaska Native rather than Native American. Due to the different circumstances of colonization in Alaska, indigenous peoples in Alaska prefer this term over Native American, which is used in the rest of the United States. More on this can be found in Williams, “Alaska and Its People,” 1–12

<sup>680</sup> Erica Lord, “America’s Wretched,” in *The Alaska Native Reader*, ed. Maria Shaa Tláa Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 309–17.

<sup>681</sup> Daniher, “The Pose as Interventionist Gesture.”

When she created the series, Lord was in her late twenties, so the series displays a young, healthy, and desirable body. There is a potential to explore this piece in the context of earlier feminist photography, such as Hannah Wilke's 1970s photographs of her nubile and attractive body.<sup>682</sup> The scholar Elizabeth Kalbfleisch has commented on Lord's youth and beauty as an unsettling component of her practice.<sup>683</sup> Though feminist works may be a source, considering the work in relation to just these works would be too simplistic; *The Tanning Project* might be better situated in the emerging field of Indigenous feminism. According to the scholar Joyce Green, Indigenous feminism "brings together the two critiques, feminism and anticolonialism, to show how Aboriginal peoples, and in particular Aboriginal women, are affected by colonialism and by patriarchy."<sup>684</sup> In the art world, Lord's work is better situated as related to the artist James Luna's work and the Anishinaabekwe contemporary artist Rebecca Belmore's practice. Claire Raymond, considering works by Belmore and the Swinomish and Tulalip artist Matika Wilbur, states that "the sexual victimization rates of Indigenous North American women reflect a blend of misogyny and racism in the deep history of the formation of North American nation-states."<sup>685</sup> Native women and girls face much higher rates of violence in the United States and Canada relative to other demographic populations.<sup>686</sup> In Canada particularly, the general perception is that the institutions meant to protect citizens from this type of violence do not care about Native women.<sup>687</sup> Objectifying her own body, Lord demonstrates the spectrum of beliefs about Native women that

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<sup>682</sup> Anna Chave, "I 'Object': Hannah Wilke's Feminism," *Art in America*, 97, no. 3 (2009): 104–9.

<sup>683</sup> Elizabeth Kalbfleisch, "Women, House, and Home in Contemporary Canadian Art: Hannah Claus, Rebecca Belmore, and Rosalie Favell," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 33, no. 13 (2012): 15.

<sup>684</sup> Joyce Green, "Taking Account of Aboriginal Feminism," in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, ed. Joyce Green (New York: Zed Books, 2007), 23.

<sup>685</sup> Claire Raymond, *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 201.

<sup>686</sup> Camila Domonoske, "Police in Police in Many U.S. Cities Fail to Track Murdered, Missing Indigenous Women," November 15, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/15/667335392/police-in-many-u-s-cities-fail-to-track-murdered-missing-indigenous-women>.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*

underpin the continuing violence. Through the safety of photographs, Lord shows what many already think, that Native women are available for the taking. In so doing, she contextualizes both the sexism and continued colonialism they face, subverting through stereotype. Through a detailed analysis of each piece, the series relates to embodiment and Indigenous feminism.

The second piece in the series, *Untitled (I Tan to Look More Native)*, 2005, has been on periodic view, touring since 2006 as part of the exhibition *Our People, Our Land, Our Images* (Fig. 5.1).<sup>688</sup> The presentation highlights Native American artists reclaiming or using photography for their own ends to reassert agency and define contemporary identity.<sup>689</sup> Liminality is one way to characterize *The Tanning Project*, as well as Lord's practice more generally. Liminal spaces are marginal locations which can be expressed physically, the concept of which has been articulated in the writings of Homi K. Bhabha.<sup>690</sup> This negotiation of liminality and performing of her own othering further relate to the art historian Hal Foster's influential essay, "The Artist as Ethnographer."<sup>691</sup> Writing in the 1990s, after James Luna's had staged his famous *Artifact Piece*, Foster described the practice of artists using ethnography, or the writing of culture, in their works.<sup>692</sup> He urged artists to be reflexive and avoid reduction of identities to simple stereotype.<sup>693</sup> Cherise Smith builds on this ethnographic turn using the term *enactment* to characterize the active processes of being other and self.<sup>694</sup> Lord's liminality is not simply expressed through how much she can make herself look Native, but also how she exists in and is perceived by the world. Rather

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<sup>688</sup> Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie and Veronica Passalacqua, eds., *Our People, Our Land, Our Images* (Davis: CN Gorman Museum and University of California, 2006), 64–65.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>690</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 149–50. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, second edition, first published in 1994 (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>691</sup> Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>692</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>693</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>694</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 19.

than reduce the piece to its references, it is important to note that *the Tanning Project* has many potential interpretations, not least of all those promoted by Lord.

In her essay “America’s Wretched,” Lord argues against the notion of purity of Native peoples because, “in reality, most Natives are mixed blood of some sort.”<sup>695</sup> Most stereotypes of Native Americans come from a the specifically Plains Indian aesthetic, the previously discussed deep brown skin and long, dark hair, high cheekbones, feathers and hide clothing.<sup>696</sup> As a mixed Alaska Native woman, Lord does not fit this stereotype, except for in her dark straight hair. Per her quote, Lord understands her mixed heritage, not as an outlier, but as demonstrative of contemporary Native identity. Contemplating her artistic practice, Lord has stated, “This is what Native looks like now.”<sup>697</sup> This simple evocative phrase, from the title of this dissertation is drawn, is a call to reconsider stereotypes of Native people and give agency to Indigenous peoples to detail their own relationships to Indigeneity and its embodied presentation.

In the first photograph of the series, *Untitled (Indian Looking)* from 2005, Erica Lord crosses her arms higher than one typically would to conceal one’s breasts (Fig. 1.1). Her right arm reveals the phrase “Indian Looking” in a font that is meant to look handwritten, with upper- and lower-case letters.<sup>698</sup> The placement on her arm hints at the cliché to *wear your heart on sleeve*, to be open in your affections, leading to the cliché *wear something on one’s sleeve*, which means in other words to make something visible for all.<sup>699</sup> Through the act of tanning, her Native heritage or potential Native heritage is visualized; the phrase “Indian Looking” acts as a play on words as

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<sup>695</sup> Lord, “America’s Wretched,” 314.

<sup>696</sup> Ash-Milby, *HIDE*, 18.

<sup>697</sup> Dunham, “Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity.”

<sup>698</sup> Indian is an outdated term for Native American, still in use in institutions like the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. I do not use “Indian” to refer to people, but rather use it here as it is the language that Lord has used in the series.

<sup>699</sup> Emily Spivack, “The Origins of Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 14, 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-origins-of-wearing-your-heart-on-your-sleeve-17471279/>.

viewers look at Lord, the Indian, while she characterizes herself as Indian looking. Her cascade of dark hair could be read as such, though the soft, pale flesh of her abdomen relate more to classic representations of European female nudes. Without knowing Lord's background, viewers—particularly non-Native viewers who have internalized stereotypes about Native looks—might wonder whether Lord is Indian or simply Indian-looking.

In the next piece, *(Untitled) Half Breed*, Lord presents the most complete view of her tanned face and chest, reddened to the point of sunburn (Fig. 5.2). She takes care in her appearance, wearing lipstick on her lips and makeup around her blue eyes, with her hair is arranged to fall mostly behind her back. The text “HALF BREED” is revealed in white-flesh block letters on the browner canvas of her chest. “Half breed” is the name of a popular 1973 song by the pop star Cher, who then claimed Native American ancestry, which inspired many Native artists including artist Kent Monkman, as noted in the previous chapter.<sup>700</sup> “Half breed” is defined as “the offspring of parents of different races / *especially*: the offspring of an American Indian and a white person,” and was first coined in 1760, coinciding with the expansion of European colonial settlements in the Americas.<sup>701</sup> “Half breed” should mainly be understood as a derogatory term for a person of two different racial or ethnic backgrounds, as the word “breed” is mainly used for animals. By placing the term on her chest, Lord is using it to describe herself, referencing many possible mixtures in her heritage. She looks feminine in this very conventional photograph, the clothed version of which might appear on a dating site or social media site such as Myspace in the mid-

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<sup>700</sup> Richard V. Francaviglia, *Go East, Young Man Book: Imagining the American West as the Orient* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado; Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 240–41.

<sup>701</sup> “Half Breed,” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/half-breed>.

2000s.<sup>702</sup> The text spelled out in all-capital letters in an awkward half circle and the redness of her flesh suggests alterity, a challenge to her humanity.

The third piece, (*Untitled*) *Colonize Me*, was last to be completed, in 2007, and the only photograph in which Lord's face is entirely absent (Fig. 5.3). Lord challenges the viewer to "Colonize Me." This piece is the most self-othering as Lord presents herself as a physical body capable of being colonized. The choice of script appears based on European fonts from the fifteenth century, a time period roughly contemporaneous with the beginning of global colonization by Western Europe. Native women were used as a metaphor for Native land, both taken violently and without permission, mostly by white European males.<sup>703</sup> Lord's kneeling, sexualized position reinforces this association between women, land, and a lack of agency.<sup>704</sup> Violence against Native women is both a historical fact and a pressing current issue in both the United States and Canada.<sup>705</sup> In Canada, there is more awareness of the startling demographics of missing and murdered Native women, crimes which remain unsolved, triggering artist responses such as the activist Jamie Black's collaborative work the *Red Dress Project*<sup>706</sup> and podcasts such as *Finding Cleo*.<sup>707</sup> In the United States, the researchers Annita Lucchesi (Southern Cheyenne) and Abigail Echo-Hawk (Pawnee) released a report in 2018 demonstrating the lack of information on missing and murdered Native women in many major U.S. cities.<sup>708</sup> Violence against Alaska Native women is so pervasive that the 2013 National Congress of American Indians proposed and passed a resolution titled

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<sup>702</sup> Myspace was a social media site in the early 2000s, basically an information page where you could connect with others. Photographs of oneself taken at a strange close angle were common on the site.

<sup>703</sup> John Haworth, "Under My Skin, Deep in the Heart of Me," in Ash-Milby, *HIDE*, 8–10.

<sup>704</sup> Ash Milby, *HIDE*, 21.

<sup>705</sup> Domonoske, "Police in Police In Many U.S. Cities Fail To Track Murdered, Missing Indigenous Women."

<sup>706</sup> Jaime Black, *The Red Dress Project*, 2014–, <http://www.thereddressproject.org/>.

<sup>707</sup> C. Walker, "Missing and Murdered."

<sup>708</sup> Annita Lucchesi and Abigail Echo-Hawk, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, Urban Indian Health Institute, Seattle Indian Health Board, 2018, <http://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf>.

*Protect Alaska Native Women*, detailing and condemning how state and local authorities had failed to do just that.<sup>709</sup> This heightened awareness and public acknowledgment of violence has largely occurred after the creation of Lord's work. However, the 2013 resolution should be understood as exemplifying and describing a concern in Alaska during Lord's lifetime. "Colonize Me" is a command, the only one in the series. Lord controls her image, while using this piece to cede control over her body. Within the context of 2021, "Colonize Me" might be better understood as recognition of a cultural landscape that continues to colonize Native land through resource extraction and Native women by not properly protecting them. The piece also alludes to the trope of alluring Native women inviting domination, which is used in advertising and promoting pop stars, as well as more overtly in pornography. Recently, these racialized and sexualized depictions of Native women have fallen out of favor and been pulled from products such as Land O' Lakes brand butter.<sup>710</sup> Despite public sentiment surrounding changes to depictions of Native women, the real and pervasive threat of violence faced by Native women is unfortunately consistent.<sup>711</sup>

The plain all-capitalized text of the 2006 piece *Untitled (I Tan to Look More Native)*, addresses the core issue of the series, namely that tanned or brown flesh is associated with Native American identity while fairer skin is not (Fig. 5.1). The text seems confessional in nature: Lord admits to altering her body to fit Native stereotypes. Yet, it is also the most ironic statement in the series. The text returns to the concept of the first piece, by repeating the verb "look." As a fair-

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<sup>709</sup> Juana Majel, "Protect Alaska Native Women: National Congress of American Indians Resolution # REN-13-006" (Reno: National Congress of American Indians, 2013), [http://www.ncai.org/attachments/Resolution\\_LsQWhRkpfSPwaSvVVGQpwuzTfyrLjInwrheCXEnFUcaAaDurKxg\\_REN-13-006%20final.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/attachments/Resolution_LsQWhRkpfSPwaSvVVGQpwuzTfyrLjInwrheCXEnFUcaAaDurKxg_REN-13-006%20final.pdf).

<sup>710</sup> Katherine J. Wu, "Land O' Lakes Drops the Iconic Logo of an Indigenous Woman From Its Branding," Smithsonian Magazine, April 28, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/mia-land-olakes-iconic-indigenous-woman-departs-packaging-mixed-reactions-180974760/>.

<sup>711</sup> Sarah Deer, "Sovereignty of the Soul: Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Native America," virtual lecture, Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative Presidential Lecture, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, February 18, 2021.

skinned, multiethnic Alaska Native woman, describing or explaining her ethnicity is a part of Lord's life. Importantly, she does not tan to become more Native, just to *look* more Native. The joke is on us all, as Lord attempts to look more Native for white people who might question her Indigeneity and for Native people who might hold her to the same colonized stereotypes.<sup>712</sup> Basing identity on stereotype is not only problematic but misleading, as one could also tan to look Native while not being Native. The body does not define Native identity, because the issue is larger and more complex than skin or blood. Considering possible allusions to sexual violence in *(Untitled) Colonize Me*, there is an added layer of what it means to be able to control the impression of Native heritage. Darker-skinned Native women do not have the option of looking "less Native," but their phenotypes do not determine actual connection to place or people, that is, to what extent they are Native. Ultimately, there are numerous ways to "look Native" given the tremendous diversity of Native nations.

## **5.2 Identity in Disguise and by Numbers: *Un/Defined Self-Portrait Series (2005–7)* and *Untitled (Tattoo Arms) (2007)***

The *Tanning Project* presents Lord as bits of her body, while in other series the artist presents herself in through the figureative in disguise(s) and in parts of her arm, and abstracted in the presence of identifying numbers on her body. In this section, Lord's *Un/Defined Self Portrait Series (2005–7)* and *Untitled (Tattoo Arms) (2007)* are discussed for they function as self-portraits, albeit in different ways. Like the *Tanning Project*, these works critically comment on Native

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<sup>712</sup> This is my own interpellation in part based on several statements from Lawrence, "*Real*" *Indians and Others*.



identity through the artist's body, but they move beyond skin and tanning to consider hair, costuming, and numerical indicators of identity. Instead of presenting a twisting, sometimes faceless body of the artist as nude flesh and tanned skin, *Un/Defined Self Portraits* uses costume as the medium that allows Erica Lord to play with different identities. In *Untitled (Tattoo Arms)*, her arms become avatars for the numerical representations of the artist as a Native person. The artist can change her skin, her hair, but she cannot change her Bureau of Indian Affairs number, or her blood quantum.<sup>713</sup> By mining these works after a deep consideration of *The Tanning Project*, one might imagine that these pieces represent identity as particularly conflicted for Lord, evincing her grappling with the face she presents to the world and the number she is known by to the government. These works instead demonstrate Lord's larger Native feminist art projects. She demonstrates the many ways that identity can be pictured, thus destabilizing both physical and numerical indicators of identity. She returns over and over to her body because it is the indicator she can reframe and control, a signifier that is in some ways flexible and in other ways unchanging.

Erica Lord's *Un/Defined Self-Portrait Series* from 2005–7 is perhaps the most recognizable as a feminist experiment of self-fashioning (Fig. 5.4). An aesthetic comparison could be made to feminist art generally and to Cindy Sherman's self-portraits and film stills specifically, in Sherman disguises herself within the context of various B movie actress tropes.<sup>714</sup> Sherman has been experimenting with photography and role playing since the 1970s<sup>715</sup> and would likely be familiar to Lord given her art education. Considering this series to be a Native artist's play on Cindy Sherman is nonetheless reductive, especially according Lord's own insistence that these are

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<sup>713</sup> Native Americans who meet the requirements of enrollment in federally recognized tribes are given Bureau of Indian Affairs or BIA numbers, unique fourteen-digit number sequences that come on a card, which proves or codifies one's Native heritage.

<sup>714</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 240.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid.*

versions of herself, self-portraits, rather than the artist as types or characters. The art historian Cherise Smith discusses this series as an example of liminality in artwork, alluding to a more complex future of the self-other dichotomy in contemporary art.<sup>716</sup> The series is comprised of twenty numbered photographs of the artist in different personas taken over two years, which are then arranged out of numerical order, to shift between characters.<sup>717</sup> According to Smith, Lord enacts otherness through her body in this series.<sup>718</sup> Smith points to these images as a way in which Lord creates “photographic portraits of herself while temporarily taking on identities of others.”<sup>719</sup> This is a crucial distinction between *Un/Defined Self-Portrait Series* and *The Tanning Project*. In *Un/Defined Self-Portrait Series*, Lord builds herself up with distinct layers of clothing and costuming to become different selves, while in *The Tanning Project* Lord strips herself down for the viewer to see her in parts, using text to highlight her own bodily vulnerability. In *Un/Defined*, each photograph—whether seductive, beautiful, or awkward—is one version of the whole artist. In both series, Lord presents herself through parts of her body, demonstrating that her full self can never be shown fully through her physical body.

*Un/Defined Self-Portrait Series* makes identity indefinite, mutable as an individual’s appearance can shift and change through sartorial choices and makeup (Fig. 5.4). Cherise Smith does not note that Lord uses some of the same items to make different versions of herself, which is apparent upon close viewing of all the photographs. Props repeat, such as the short, blond wig, the above-the-shoulders black wig, and hoop earrings. Lord uses bronzer, foundations of different

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<sup>716</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 239.

<sup>717</sup> Erica Lord, “Un/Defined Self-Portrait Series,” <https://ericalord.com/section/22658-Un-Defined-Self-Portrait-series.html>.

<sup>718</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

shades, red lipstick, dark lipstick, and brow powders to change her looks.<sup>720</sup> In each portrait, the artist is presented frontally in a close-cropped image, with her head and shoulders visible. In the twenty photographs, there are sixteen different characters, two of whom appear twice. However, this role playing characterizes only this series rather than her entire oeuvre, perhaps recognizing the limitations of this practice. The title *Un/Defined* suggests that these characters are located on a spectrum of identity, though it is unclear where many of these selves sit between the extremities of undefined and defined.

These self-portraits invoke particularly Alaskan notions of women who are often not all overtly feminine or heavily made-up. Class is a major factor in this series, creating a spectrum of sexuality that varies from hyperfeminine to androgynous to masculine. By the word “class,” it is meant that through her expressions, clothing, makeup, and hair, Lord invites assumptions about the kind of work her characters might do. Her selves overlap not just because they are all her, but because in mass culture, people take the same items and style them to fit their personas. Some seem intentionally unattractive by mainstream standards. One example is *Self-Portrait 012*, in which a masculine Lord, with exaggerated dark circles and baseball cap on her head with short hairs peeking out, wears the confident smile of a man saying hi, perhaps when this greeting is unwanted. Attire like caps and hoodies could indicate working-class womanhood. In Alaska, this could entail heavy machinery work, which could lead to a quite comfortable standard of living. In the interior of Alaska, wide varieties of labor are common for women, including in construction and industry, and choosing clothing for function over style is a necessity in the state’s harsh climate. In addition to these considerations, Lord’s age is also worth considering. She made this series in her late twenties, but with makeup and styling appears anywhere between 20 and 40.

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<sup>720</sup> Dunham, “Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity.”

Rather than analyze each portrait, three trends of the series can usefully be traced: darkening, whitening, and indigenizing. In two photographs, Lord darkens her skin and wears hoops and a short, dark wig. In one of these photos, *Self-Portrait 014*, she holds her chin up, looking directly out at the viewer (Fig. 5.5). In the other, *Self-Portrait 015*, she turns her face forward, as if looking back, responding to a comment with an expression that conveys a certain toughness. Erica Lord was accused of using blackface, or darkening her skin to an exaggerated degree, in two of these photographs<sup>721</sup> connecting to the infamous and long tradition of white people “playing” Black to reinforce racist stereotypes of African Americans.<sup>722</sup> Cindy Sherman infamously used blackface in a few early photographs in the 1970s, applying thick dark makeup and directly referencing incredibly racist images.<sup>723</sup> Lord’s use of highly darkening her skin is more complex since she does not darken her skin to an obviously unnatural racist tone, but instead emulates the deep unnatural color of a spray tan that might be sported by an ethnically white pop star or a Kardashian.<sup>724</sup> Lord was sensitive to this criticism and no longer prints these two photographs, though she does acknowledge and display them on her website.<sup>725</sup> Rather than an attempt to be offensive, this play on Blackness was a reference to a specific historical Black woman, Josephine Baker. According to Lord, “I had trouble finding mixed-race women in history who embodied this ambiguity between race and between gender and between sexuality and looking at Josephine Baker and really latching on to those images.”<sup>726</sup> Although her overly darkened

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<sup>721</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>722</sup> See Tanya Sheehan, *Study in Black and White: Photography, Race Humor* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018).

<sup>723</sup> Seph Rodney, “Cindy Sherman in Blackface,” *Hyperallergic*, October 29, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/246851/cindy-sherman-in-blackface/>.

<sup>724</sup> This is not to support this excessive skin darkening, but rather point out that extreme tanning has been largely accepted by the public when done by white women. In the last few years, there has been much greater critique of such tanning choices, mainly in popular culture.

<sup>725</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.*

images do not bear any resemblance to Baker, this desire for ambiguity and playing with race evokes a genuine desire for connection to a problematic image.

In this series, Lord also experiments with looking more Native, exemplified by the photograph in the series in which she wears long dentalium and bead earrings and two braids. In this photograph, *Self-Portrait 008*, she also holds her chin up, but her expression seems blank, almost fearful (Fig. 5.6). This Lord-as-a-Native-woman photograph is interesting, because it demonstrates the series' employment of racial role-playing, perhaps more successfully and less problematically than her darkened images. Lord discussed how this image with earrings and braids allows people to see her as Native, simply by donning these common attributes of Native identity. The darker figures could be read as black, just as the blondes could be white, and the braided-hair Erica is Native. Lord lightens herself with the use of the blond wig as well as with makeup, embodying three distinct blonde identities; the first is freckled and fresh-faced, *Self-Portrait 007*. The second, *Self-Portrait 019*, appears more mature also with short blonde hair, red lipstick, a face that looks straight ahead, and hoops at her ears, which Lord often wears and considers a part of her look (Fig. 5.7).<sup>727</sup> Lastly, in *Self-Portrait 017* she appears as the bombshell: sans visible blouse with a fake mole, red lips, and blue eyeshadow.<sup>728</sup> Between these hyperfeminine, butch, nerdy, and intimidating versions of Erica Lord, her unadorned, unexpressive photographs hide in plain sight. The series as a whole serves as twenty mini-performances, the artist incarnating each self, only to be stripped down and built up again. Lord uses expressions such as scowling and grimacing and postures including slouching and standing with a straight back to lend her changed looks different personas. But by reducing the space of definition or un-definition to tightly cropped

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<sup>727</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>728</sup> I have included only *Self-Portrait 019* in a detail as this piece demonstrates her blonde persona and this wig is included in a later work by Lord.

portraits, she challenges how much visual information this standard portrait framework can offer. By being so many Ericas of various configurations, the viewer searches for the most “authentic” Erica Lord.

Cherise Smith argues that the real Erica seems to be in two photographs<sup>729</sup> that stand out in the series for their stripped-down aesthetic.<sup>730</sup> In these two images, she wears in a black tank top with her hair pulled back. She appears makeup-free, thus removing one of the major tools she used to construct most the other portraits. The only distinction between these two photographs is her eyes, in one photograph they are her natural blue, *Self-Portrait 009* (Fig. 5.8), and brown in the other, *Self-Portrait 010*. As an Indigenous multiethnic artist, Lord’s ice-blue eyes play an interesting role in her work, popping out as a sharp contrast to her dark hair. At first glance, the brown eyes could seem “real,” casting the blue eyes as “fake.” Instead, Lord uses these bare photographs to image herself without her defining blue eyes, instead with brown which more easily read as Native. However, Lord typically wears makeup and earrings daily, so these works do not represent how she looks on most days.<sup>731</sup> The mid-2000s coincided with the *Top Model* television program and the choice of a black tank top evokes the wardrobe of the show’s models on casting call day.<sup>732</sup> Women on the program were often instructed to wear as little makeup as possible and tight, fitted clothing to display their shapes.<sup>733</sup> The effect of this stripped-down self is to allow oneself to then become a blank canvas for clothing, but in Lord’s case, it allows for building up into different selves. There is no specifically Athabascan/Inupiaq Erica, or perhaps put more

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<sup>729</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 240–41.

<sup>730</sup> Again, I included only one of the two images just to demonstrate the image.

<sup>731</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>732</sup> This suggestion of a plan outfit for model casting was discussed often on the show. It is still suggested by many blogs and websites about modeling and fashion, see Carrie, “Fashion & Beauty Lessons We Can Learn from Model Casting Calls,” *College Fashion*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.collegefashion.net/beauty-and-hair/models-101-fashion-beauty-lessons-from-a-casting-call/>.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid.

accurately the Native Erica with long dentalium earrings and braids could be from any number of communities. Through this character, Lord plays with the fact that Native identity has only a narrow window of visibility. Using wigs and makeup, Lord demonstrates different varieties of whiteness and far fewer seemingly Native images, but she is the sum of all these images.

Unlike any other racial or ethnic group in the United States, the ability of one to claim Native American identity is legally determined by both the federal government and specific tribal laws. Many tribes base membership on blood quantum, or the amount of Native American blood one can claim, often through roll calls or historic lists of Native peoples.<sup>734</sup> The scholar Kim TallBear has explored issues of the science of DNA in her book, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. She argues that “since its conception, ‘Indian blood’ has enjoyed a unique place in the American racial imagination, and tribal communities are managed (by others or by us) according to the precise and elaborate symbolics of blood.”<sup>735</sup> Rather than dismissing blood quantum outright, TallBear instead explores the complex ways blood quantum, genome science, and tribal identity have overlapped and affected each other. In two works from 2007, Erica Lord explores these issues directly through embodiment. The works are part of a two-work series, *Untitled (Tattoo Arms)*, titled *Blood Quantum (1/4 x 1/16= 5/16)*, and *Enrollment Number 11-337-07463-04-01* (both from 2007).<sup>736</sup> The Anchorage Museum owns these works and, since this is a two-part series, the pieces can be discussed separately since their individual titles are more reflective of their contents than the series name. The pieces are large

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<sup>734</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs, “Genealogy,” <https://www.bia.gov/bia/ois/tgs/genealogy>.

<sup>735</sup> Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 46.

<sup>736</sup> Demma, interview with the author. See Erica Lord, *Untitled (Tattoo Arms)*, <https://ericalord.com/section/43672-Untitled-Tattooed-Arms.html>.

composite digital photographs with fake tattoos on Lord's arms of her Bureau of Indian Affairs number and blood quantum equation.

*Blood Quantum* ( $1/4 \times 1/16 = 5/16$ ) is a representation of Lord's Alaska Native heritage in fractions:  $1/4$  Athabascan and  $1/16$  Inupiaq, all from her father's side (Fig. 5.9).<sup>737</sup> The Tanana Athabascan requires  $1/4$  Athabascan blood to be admitted to their tribe, so Lord is Tanana Athabascan, but her children are not guaranteed tribal membership.<sup>738</sup> Lord's arm, a composite of four photographs, visualizes of the fractional and fractious nature of blood-quantum logic. These fractions do not equal one as Lord possesses other heritages. The remainder,  $11/16$ , is most of her, and yet goes unrepresented in this image. What is left out of this equation fits with a statement by Kim TallBear about the racialized thinking at play in blood quantum: "Blood is a metaphor for heredity not heredity itself."<sup>739</sup> Inscribed using fractions, the metaphorical nature of blood quantum could not be clearer, nor could the point that these fractions do not constitute heredity. Lord's connection to her father, language, and village are arguably much more important to being Native than these fractions. Such important markers, like her knowledge of her language, could not be so easily encapsulated. The piece demonstrates that blood quantum taken alone serves to oversimplify Indian identity, which is not simply numerical. As a mixed person, Lord is used to hearing about herself in terms of parts, such as the comment that her Japanese heritage was such a small part of her, that it was "like your toes."<sup>740</sup> *Blood Quantum* ( $1/4 \times 1/16 = 5/16$ ) is Lord's experiment with these fractional understandings of self and the piecemeal aesthetics completely fit the reductive sense of being that she views as blood quantum.<sup>741</sup>

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<sup>737</sup> Lord, "Artist Talk."

<sup>738</sup> Ibid.

<sup>739</sup> TallBear, *Native American DNA*, 48.

<sup>740</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>741</sup> Ibid.



*Enrollment Number 11-337-07463-04-01* (2007) presents a similar argument, with greater nuance, to understand Native identity (Fig. 5.10). The piece alludes to tattoos on Holocaust survivors and victims, numbers used to signify identity, because one is not part of the dominant group. As with the other piece, four separate photographs are combined to create Lord's shoulder and arm, with her number visible on one portion of her forearm. The number is from Lord's actual Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) card issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>742</sup> The government issued CDIB number symbolizes her identity as a Native American, specifically a Tanana Athabascan person. The cropping of these photographs makes them both intimate and anonymous. Lord's dark hair grazes her shoulder, and her skin takes on slightly different shades of light beige, based on the angle of her body. Her open, outstretched arm could be gesture of greeting, but also is an uncomfortable position to hold for long periods. Through her CDIB number, her identity is clear in one way, but with no ability to see the artist and only her arm exposed, the identification again seems piecemeal. Subtly, Lord demonstrates that fractions and numbers have a limited capacity to identify of individuals. Such numbering systems are explicitly colonial, as tribal membership is important in Alaska for receiving federal benefits and corporation remittances. This potential medical and financial support from the government comes at the cost of scrutiny and dehumanization.

*Un/Defined Self-Portrait Series* (2005–7), *Enrollment Number 11-337-07463-04-01* (2007), and *Blood Quantum* ( $1/4 \times 1/16 = 5/16$ ) (2007) are all self-portraits of the artist that do not adhere to the typical format of portraiture. In *Un/Defined Self-Portrait*, Lord is many versions of herself, all at once a racialized and indigenized self-portrait and a take on a Cindy-Sherman

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<sup>742</sup> Demma, interview with the author.

practice.<sup>743</sup> The artist becomes different versions of herself, existing along a spectrum of whiteness and brownness, thus the “real Erica Lord” is found in a liminal space, between and among these categories, in no one photographic incarnation. She plays different versions of herself using postures and facial expressions, performing for a still camera as if it was an audience. In contrast, *Enrollment Number* and *Blood Quantum* both present the artist as numbers located on a digitally composed arm. The two pieces are each other’s companions, showing the interior of her bare arms, crudely connected so they appear fragmented, digitized. These pieces show the artist without a face, without the opportunity to look back at the viewer. They operate based on a circular logic: Because of her blood quantum, Lord has a CDIB number, which requires she must have sufficient blood quantum. Ultimately, what these distinct actions suggest that an alternative approach to determining Native identity is needed, whether through language or cultural practice, which would be more humane and more reflective of how Native people understand themselves.

### 5.3 “My Frozen Home”: Traveling through Lord’s *Binary Selves* (2007)

Erica Lord created the two-channel film *Binary Selves* for the 2007 exhibition *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination*, presented at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian (Figs. 5.11–5.14).<sup>744</sup> *Off the Map* prompted selected artists to explore landscape outside of its typical Western context.<sup>745</sup> The five participating artists—James Lavadour,

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<sup>743</sup> For more on the work of Cindy Sherman, see Jennifer Dalton, “Look at Me: Self-Portrait Photography After Cindy Sherman,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 3: (2000): 47–49.

<sup>744</sup> Erica Lord, 2007 *Binary Selves*, YouTube, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN\\_PjKrHFS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN_PjKrHFS0).

<sup>745</sup> *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination*, National Museum of the American Indian, New York, March 3–September 3, 2007, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=918>.

Emmi Whitehorse, Carlos Jacanamijoy, Jeffrey Gibson, and Lord—each approached this call differently, though they overlapped in their complicated approaches to landscape and Native Americans, for whom the land has both been essential to selfhood yet always out of reach, often stolen from them. As the curator Kathleen Ash-Milby explains, “Land is home, culture, and identity, but it also represents violence, isolation, and loss.”<sup>746</sup> The open call to consider land in all its imaginative dimensions led Lord to create a work that takes viewers through her hometown and her sense of home, at once welcoming and foreboding. Paul Chaat Smith, who later wrote about Lord in his book *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (2009), was introduced to this piece through the exhibition. There is great overlap between this essay and his later passages about Lord, primarily in the concept of “walking in two worlds.”<sup>747</sup> Lord doubles herself: two Erica Lords sing, dance, and play in Athabascan, English, and Inupiaq, taking viewers on a ride through her dynamic, unstable sense of home. *Binary Selves* presents the themes of intergenerational trauma, alcoholism, and feelings of both homesickness and homelessness.

The film was originally installed on two screens opposing each other so the viewer could stand at an angle between the two screens but was unable to view both fully at the same time.<sup>748</sup> The version available on YouTube presents the two screens beside each other, allowing a complete view so that rather than competing, each channel seems to contribute to the other so that Erica Lord is the whole of two sides that are never really separate.<sup>749</sup> The original configuration meant that one had to view the piece at least twice to see it in its entirety, a perhaps poignant metaphor

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<sup>746</sup> Kathleen Ash-Milby, “The Imaginary Landscape,” in *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian and Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 17.

<sup>747</sup> Paul Chaat Smith, “After the Gold Rush,” in Ash-Milby, *Off the Map*, 71.

<sup>748</sup> Ash-Milby, “Imaginary Landscape,” 17.

<sup>749</sup> The following visual analysis is based on the YouTube version where both channels are seen simultaneously.

for the inability to truly understand something in its entirety. A sketch in the *Off the Map* exhibition catalogue shows yet another potential iteration, a long hallway with multiple screens on either side.<sup>750</sup> Based on her experience of being a mixed Alaska Native person, Lord's *Binary Selves* reflect and relate, overlap and conjoin. They remain mostly apart, despite their overlapping sound and the repetitious figure of Lord.

The film begins with a black screen, then two definitions appear simultaneously in a white, sans-serif font.

Binary Star: in Astronomy, binary stars or system: two stars or suns, one of which revolves round the other, or both of which revolve round a common centre.

Binary system: one by which each group and sub-group is perpetually divided into two, the one with a positive and the other with a negative, till individuals are reached.<sup>751</sup>

These definitions fade after approximately twenty-five seconds into two mirrored videos of two women on a snow-covered mound with a dog between and water behind them. The background noise is loud, blustery wind and rushing water. The two figures hold each other's shoulders, laughing and talking inaudibly. Then the screen cuts to two separate images, two women in different outfits, and "Piaramit Inaqutik," an Inuit throat song by Alacie Tullauq and Lucy Amarualik,<sup>752</sup> plays, seemingly sung by its composers. The two women, both Erica Lord, are dressed differently: one in a fur collared coat with a dark hat, looking somber and the other smiling, in a pink hat, scarf, and white pea coat (Fig. 5.11). "One version of Lord wears cues to her Native identity—face tattoos, shell beads," Ash-Milby describes, "while the other assumes a more urbane appearance."<sup>753</sup> The face tattoos are difficult to make out in reproductions of the film, but the

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<sup>750</sup> Ash-Milby, "Imaginary Landscape," 44–45.

<sup>751</sup> Lord, *2007 Binary Selves*.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid.

<sup>753</sup> Ash-Milby, "Imaginary Landscape," 45.

distinct outfits are noticeable when the screens then flash as each woman sings her parts, rubbing and grasping shoulders. The throat song is guttural and breathy, with a changing rhythm reflected in the increasing speed with which the screens flash. After the song ends, the figures smile, having exchanged breaths.

The screen again goes black with that background static of the camera and wind audibly loud. At this point the film diverges, as Lord reads a text that she wrote in response to the exhibition prompt. A home video plays on the left screen, a pleasant scene of a young girl, Erica Lord as a child, surrounded by the sunny outdoors. Through its vegetation and the nearby body of water the location could be Lord's village in the interior of Alaska or her mother's town in Michigan (Fig. 5.12). The home footage is grainy and light-suffused, pointing to what might seem a happy childhood with Lord smiling in several frames. The brightness of these clips is contrasted with the blueish-white expanse of snowy Nenana in others. Its main street appears again as we ride with Lord through town, with local landmarks reappearing, first the old train station that sits at the end of the street and later a two-lane steel bridge, the only way in or out of Nenana. Lord begins narrating as the home videos play on the left screen, while the right screen pans slowly through Nenana, from an elevated viewpoint that might be the inside of truck or SUV, as it moves deliberately through the snow. The channels soon converge, both showing slightly different views of Nenana in winter.

Lord's monologue describes her feeling of separation from all her homes, and her many geographies.<sup>754</sup> Like the screens, she is "split in an endless search for a land that remembers me," coming together only to separate again. She describes life in Alaska as requiring either strength or numbness. She does not explain her Athabascan ties to Nenana or her Inupiaq heritage, which have

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<sup>754</sup> All quotes come from my own transcription of Lord, *2007 Binary Selves*.

endurance games long played to strengthen one for the harshness of winter and thus numb one from its pain. Instead, viewers see the land she has long called home, a small town where subsistence hunting is still a way of life. Her monologue gives the journey through Nenana purpose as Lord explains trips to the airport an hour away in Fairbanks to fly to Chicago or Santa Fe. There is static on the video taken in the car as she seems to hold the camera outside a pickup truck in which she later rides. Lord describes her general movement to and from Nenana, going on to she details a specific memory: battling with her father for his keys when he drank too much to drive her to the airport, having to rely on her cousins when she realizes he cannot drive her. The prevalent struggles of many in Alaska, including people from many Native communities, with alcoholism is highlighted through this personal anecdote. She nonetheless does not judge her father, only fearing for his safety should he drive drunk in the snow. Suggesting it might not be a just a coping mechanism, but an attempt at survival or resistance, she “wonder[s] if [her] father drinks himself stronger.” In the piece, the place she grew up is beautiful and nostalgic, but situated in Alaska as Lord’s “frozen home.” Her narration concludes with the statement, “So aching and smiling, I say goodbye to my frozen home again, back to my city, back to my fiction.” Viewers are left with the notion of fiction, as if life outside of Alaska is a not real, as Lord cannot and never will fully leave Nenana. The constant background noise throughout the film, except when music is playing, gives the viewer a sense of potential chaos in the idea of home, imagining the cold rippling winds in a snowy town.

Lord’s film continues with a drive out of Nenana on the Alaska highway, in early-morning light or sunset, in each screen, with the sound of the wind rustling against the camera. Then Lord drives again, into or away from Nenana again. The bridge reappears then cuts to Lord on the airplane, having successfully departed. Rather than end at this seeming conclusion, the film

continues for two minutes more as Lord sings “Tanacross,” identified as a traditional Athabascan melody sung at gatherings as a means of welcome.<sup>755</sup> As she sings, a slew of clips come together of Lord in many locations, the beach, a grassy field, some mountains, and the repeated shots of Lord persist, closely framed as she rides in the back of a pickup truck through a slightly thawed Nenana (Fig. 5.13). The clips document her practice of taking this song with her as she goes, welcoming all these new surroundings to her former home. The screen goes black again.

The film ends as it began, with two women now playing a hand game as they throat sing, with a dog looking out at the water and whining (Fig. 5.14). They spin and hug, successfully completing the game, while a clip of another throat song, “Ammaaq” by Annie Alaku and Sarah Sivuarapik,<sup>756</sup> plays in the background. *Binary Selves* thus takes viewers on an endless loop through Nenana, always leaving thus always returning. The pain of her narration is contrasted in the joyous expressions of her Athabascan and Inupiaq culture, throat-singing, and her performance of “Tanacross” in many locations. Lord’s emphasis on teaching Native theater could have some impact on the format of her art practice, particularly her film *Binary Selves*. Lord delivers the script of the film like a monologue and begins and ends it with throat singing by her “double.” Perhaps based on the limitations of available technology, the shots of the film look more stage-like than realistic. If Chaat Smith is correct in suggesting this film constitutes her deconstruction of the “walking in two worlds” cliché, then Lord takes it as an opportunity to literally split herself and put herself back together. Home becomes an event, leaving or returning from it, experiencing it. The articulation of her text, poignant and heartfelt, questions how far from oneself one can ever really be. The loud background noise gives us a soundtrack of home beyond the songs, suggesting

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<sup>755</sup> Lord, 2007 *Binary Selves*.

<sup>756</sup> Ibid.

that landscapes are staid, but land is never static or quiet. Shot so the viewer becomes part of the scene, Lord embodies her move toward and away from home, singing and riding over frozen ground.

#### **5.4 Looking Native in the Museum: *Artifact Piece, Revisited* (2008)**

Lord has conceptualized how she fits in and moves through her home and the world in the works discussed up to this point. As Christian Thompson and Kent Monkman's practices demonstrate, the museum is also an incredibly fraught space for Indigenous peoples. In the nineteenth into the twentieth century, there was a wide acceptance for the display of Native peoples as curiosities and of their bones as scientific specimens. In the second half of the twentieth century, non-Western peoples globally have grappled with the museum as tool of colonialism and purveyor of specific limited notions of taste and civilization. Lord's practice relates to preceding generations of Native American artists who incorporate their physical bodies in performance art, film, and photography to critique the museum as institution and comment on Indigeneity through the body in thoughtful, nuanced ways.<sup>757</sup> The best-known example in Native American art is the artist James Luna's *The Artifact Piece*. Although the work was first performed in 1987 at the San Diego Museum of Man, its most widely circulated documentary images are from the 1990 performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art as part of the *Decades* exhibition.<sup>758</sup> The piece exists now through photographs, but it was conceptualized and orchestrated as an installation and

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<sup>757</sup> Laura M. Evans, "The Artifact Piece and Artifact Piece, Revisited," in *Action and Agency: Advancing the Dialogue on Native Performance Art*, ed. Nancy Blomberg (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2010), 63–65.

<sup>758</sup> González, "James Luna: Artifacts and Fictions," 38.



performance.<sup>759</sup> Luna's work serves as a touchstone for later bodily focused works, such as Erica Lord's *The Tanning Project* and even more explicitly her *Artifact Piece, Revisited* (2008).

In *The Artifact Piece*, James Luna laid down in a specially made museum vitrine, with accompanying text that described him as a tragically beat-up Native man (Figs. 5.15, 5.16).<sup>760</sup> He was surrounded by three cases of his possessions, including books and cassette tapes that showed a conspicuously modern life (Fig. 5.16).<sup>761</sup> *The Artifact Piece* is often interpreted as institutional critique, addressing anthropology and museums' historical tendency to treat Native peoples as specimens.<sup>762</sup> Luna *becomes* the artifact through his self-display (Fig. 5.15). As discussed in the introduction to this project, the scholar Jennifer González contends that Luna used his body as a “flexible sign” to evoke his Native American identity by serving as a body on display with his possessions nearby that indicated a much more modern life than his loincloth, unadorned/pierced skin, and long dark hair would suggest.<sup>763</sup> Luna, who passed away in 2018, was an inspiration for generations of artists, including Lord. Even with his successes, Luna still was based near his La Jolla Reservation, forty-five minutes outside of San Diego, and worked for most of his adult life as a community college counselor to support his artistic practice.<sup>764</sup> After creating a work as important as *Artifact Piece*, Luna went back to his day job for decades, demonstrating the difficulty in creating works which cannot be easily monetized or sold. Importantly, he also served as a mentor for Lord, a relationship that began with her interest in restaging his piece and continued the next

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<sup>759</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>760</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>761</sup> Ibid.

<sup>762</sup> Ibid.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid., 22–63.

<sup>764</sup> James Luna, “Four Ways: A Performance Script and the Process of Creating A Performance,” in Blomberg, *Action and Agency*, 99.

ten years until Luna's passing in 2018.<sup>765</sup> *Artifact Piece, Revisited* was created with his permission as well as his support.<sup>766</sup>

In 2008, a little more than two decades after the original piece, Erica Lord restaged the piece in New York City at the Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian (Figs. 5.17–5.19).<sup>767</sup> The scholar Lara Evans, in her analysis of the piece, posed a series of questions about *Artifact Piece, Revisited*, expressing surprise that the main question she received in her research was why someone would even restage it.<sup>768</sup> Answering that question requires recollection of the context of the original *Artifact Piece*. In the 1987, Luna's work was presented just two years after the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*, which argued for Euro-American genius creating the modern aesthetic inspired or informed by non-Western forms.<sup>769</sup> In the MoMA show, non-Western cultural material—including Native American objects—was presented on a different, lesser register than the great Modern art.<sup>770</sup> Contemporaneous to major successes of living Native American artists, Native material culture was still viewed within the context of anthropology and the natural history museum or displayed in the art museum as vague inspiration for real art. Luna was one of many artists of color who took opportunities such as the *Decades Show* to expound critical museology.<sup>771</sup> As Jennifer Gonzalez has eloquently discussed, Luna's *Artifact Piece* was remarkable for its believability: most viewers did not even realize that he was a living person.<sup>772</sup> Luna thus used his body to demonstrate how unremarkable it was that a Native life would be on display for public consumption.

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<sup>765</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid.

<sup>767</sup> Evans, "The Artifact Piece and Artifact Piece, Revisited," 63–65.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>769</sup> James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 73 (1985), 164–77.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid.

<sup>771</sup> Gonzalez, "James Luna: Artifacts and Fictions," 40.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid.

In 1990, the same year as the second staging of *Artifact Piece*, the United States passed the National Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).<sup>773</sup> This statute requires public museums to disclose if they have human remains or other funerary goods in their collections and creates a pathway for Native communities to get these, and other objects of cultural patrimony, returned.<sup>774</sup> Prior to 1990, it was legal to display human remains and other burial goods of Native peoples. In 1990, the law had just been passed and, though it must have shifted the perception of *Artifact Piece*, the effect it would have on the display of Native American remains was not yet clear. When Lord staged *Artifact Piece, Revisited*, NAGPRA had been in effect for nearly eighteen years and had greatly shifted, though not entirely ameliorated, the relationship between Native Americans and museums. Lord's piece should be understood as relating to display of human remains. It is no longer legal for public institutions to hold human remains, yet such institutions have great freedom in how they disclose what is in their collections; private institutions do not face the same kind of scrutiny. Repatriations happen at a much greater rate nowadays, but as boundaries have shifted and not all tribes are federally recognized, the issue of human remains in collections is by no means resolved.<sup>775</sup>

Conceptualized in a post-NAGPRA era, Erica Lord's *Artifact Piece, Revisited* follows the form of Luna's original with the artist laying in one large display case alongside two other cases that display her possessions.<sup>776</sup> Each case is surrounded by text, which includes a description of the artist with her age and ethnicity, and an explanation of traditional Athabascan lifeways.<sup>777</sup> Lord

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<sup>773</sup> National Park Service, "The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act," <https://www.nps.gov/archeology/tools/laws/nagpra.htm>.

<sup>774</sup> Ash-Milby, *HIDE*, 18.

<sup>775</sup> The edited volume *Repatriation Reader* provides many distinct perspectives on repatriation ten years after NAGPRA. See Devon A. Mihesuah, ed., *Repatriation Reader: Who Owns Indian Remains?* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

<sup>776</sup> Evans, "Artifact Piece and Artifact Piece, Revisited," 74.

<sup>777</sup> *Ibid.*, 77–78.

wrote the texts with assistance from anthropologists at the School of Advanced Research in Santa Fe, where she had a residency in the months leading up to the performance.<sup>778</sup> Through photographs, the performance comes alive, albeit in a static fashion. Like Luna, Lord lay still with her eyes closed (Fig. 5.17), wearing jewelry and light makeup, with hair that looks neat and brushed. The costume for the performance is little more than two strips of animal hide called the “Eskimo Bikini-Female,” which reference an item in a museum collection that bears little resemblance to traditional Athabascan attire.<sup>779</sup> Ceremonial Athabascan clothing consists of an multiple covering pieces, a dress or tunic-and-pants combination, embroidered with beads or quills.<sup>780</sup> The case showing her regalia includes beaded mittens, family photographs, a tunic with floral beading and fur, and two dentalium necklaces (Fig. 5.18). These possessions demonstrate Lord’s connection to her Athabascan roots, scrunched into a case as they might be crowded into a closet in her home. The shorter dentalium necklace has a storied past as the chief’s necklace of the Tanana Athabascan tribe, which Lord proudly displays as a power object above her regalia.<sup>781</sup> Her moose-skin dress is similarly significant, though of more recent origin. Lord requested this moose-skin dress to wear for her college graduation as she is the first on her Athabascan side to have a college degree, though moose-skin dresses are not commonly made anymore.<sup>782</sup> The two pieces of moose hide that make the front and back were purchased by her father and mother, her aunts in Alaska then did all the embroidery by hand, and then her mother in Michigan sewed the pieces together with beaver fur accents.<sup>783</sup> Conceived of broadly, the moose-skin dress demonstrates the

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<sup>778</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>780</sup> Kate Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art: A Beadwork Tradition* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 144–49.

<sup>781</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>782</sup> Ibid.

<sup>783</sup> Ibid.

continuity of Athabascan embroidery and a physical connection to this identity. Through Lord's anecdote, it becomes symbolic of the move back and forth from Alaska and the distinct paths that lead to her.<sup>784</sup> Lord refused to embody her Athabascan heritage by wearing her moose-skin dress and dentalium chief's necklace, which become part of piece instead as display objects. Referring to Luna's original loincloth, she chose instead to wear her Eskimo bikini, so she is performing a more generic and exposed kind of Indianness. Her meaningful objects are part of the performance, but relate to her actual sense of being Athabascan, which is not the intent of the work, similar to how Luna did not expressly demonstrate his Luiseño heritage through *Artifact Piece*.

The other case includes a blond wig used in *Un/Defined Self-Portraits*, a Pixies shirt, an Atmosphere CD, sunglasses, books by Pablo Neruda and Barack Obama, dark-teal heels, and several photographs of her friends (Fig. 5.19).<sup>785</sup> Like in Luna's version of the work, these objects point to a contemporary existence, including an appreciation of alternative rock and hip hop, global literature through volumes by Pablo Neruda and the autobiography of Obama, another mixed-race person.<sup>786</sup> Lord's intent was not to simply re-create Luna's work, but push it forward, which she did by making reference to her specifically mixed identity.<sup>787</sup> As Lord explained, "I wanted to root myself in this mixed-race identity."<sup>788</sup> In April 2008, Barack Obama was running for office to be the first black and the first mixed-race president. As more background, Lord's Athabascan objects were also created in part by her mother, who is not Athabascan. the artist's display thus points in many directions rather than just two, i.e., a Native and non-Native case. In each vitrine, Lord includes clothing and accessories, but her use of photographs in each one contributes to this

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<sup>784</sup> Here my use of path references Lord's own description of herself in Fullbeck, *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*, 78.

<sup>785</sup> Evans, "Artifact Piece and Artifact Piece, Revisited," 79.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid.

<sup>787</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>788</sup> Ibid.

multiplicity and mixed identity. Relations, relating to others, has long been theorized as central to Native American identity.<sup>789</sup> Relationships between people and community are increasingly how Indigeneity is understood on a global level. This move of incorporating so many photos of family and friends suggests that rather than being all about Erica Lord, this piece is about situating the artist in time, space, and in community, including her city-based art community and her hometown of Nenana, Alaska. This interpretation is supported by Lord's decision to place herself between the two cases, which lends symmetry to the piece, indicating that Lord is the sum of all these things and more. The case objects, which can be ignored in favor of the more provocative physical body of Lord, are the core of her presentation of self, located in these cases which demonstrate her connections to different cultures and communities.

Lord has stated that her three major departures from the original were her gender, mixed identity, and the performance of the piece post-NAGPRA.<sup>790</sup> Evans has pointed out that Lord's major contribution to revisiting Luna's *Artifact Piece* is her gender,<sup>791</sup> arguing that the stereotypical Indian is male, a brown-skinned man with a strong, powerful body.<sup>792</sup> The scholar Elizabeth Kalbfleisch, as part of a larger argument on domesticity in contemporary Native women's art, describes Lord's installation in these terms: "Lord is a young, beautiful woman, and her performance works at unsettling the spectator's experience of looking at a female subject, an experience of looking evocative of Laura Mulvey's notorious cinematic trope of the gaze."<sup>793</sup> The work is as unsettling as the original, as in both instances, the artist is laid out as a museum object.

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<sup>789</sup> See Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1999). The concept has also inspired a recent "All My Relations" podcast by the Cherokee scholar Adrienne Keane and the Swinomish and Tulalip artist Matika Wilbur, <https://www.allmyrelationspodcast.com/>.

<sup>790</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>791</sup> Evans, "Artifact Piece and Artifact Piece, Revisited," 71.

<sup>792</sup> Ibid.

<sup>793</sup> Kalbfleisch, "Women, House, and Home in Contemporary Canadian Art," 15.

As a static figure lying in a case, Erica Lord did not return the gaze of viewers. Her performance was stillness, enrobed in only a few pieces of animal skin. Due to her gender, Evans has pointed out, Lord was as quickly sexualized as Luna was objectified.<sup>794</sup> Kalbfleisch's description of the work also follows this logic, reinforcing the spectatorship that the piece seems to invite.<sup>795</sup> It is likely that when viewed as part of the piece Lord would be both objectified and sexualized simultaneously. Evans describes the decisions Lord made when conceptualizing the piece such as how to do her hair and whether or not to wear makeup and/or jewelry,<sup>796</sup> questions Evans implies were not important to Luna.<sup>797</sup> For Lord, the act was an homage to a great work of art, which happened to be by an artist who, like her, identifies as multiethnic and Native. At the time of the piece, Lord was just under thirty, young and attractive. The part of the piece that was most surprising for Lord and Evans, was how often people attempted to touch her, so that she had to be moved into a larger and higher case.<sup>798</sup> The piece had a shorter duration in both days and hours compared to Luna's piece. It also required a lot of security, with a guard always present to prevent unauthorized images from being taken and to prevent unwanted groping.<sup>799</sup>

Laura Evans concludes that "Lord's interpretation truly turns the piece into a mourning and resurrection."<sup>800</sup> The analysis of the piece here does not lead to the same conclusion. The solemnity of a darkened gallery and a body in a raised case lends itself to the interpretation of mourning, yet Lord's possessions and text speak to a complicated, lived life. There is reason to surmise that Lord's figure was meant to be frozen in time and potentially dead. As a nod to NAGPRA, when

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<sup>794</sup> Gonzalez, "James Luna: Artifacts and Fictions," 38.

<sup>795</sup> Kalbfleisch, "Women, House, and Home in Contemporary Canadian Art," 15.

<sup>796</sup> Evans, "Artifact Piece and Artifact Piece, Revisited," 82.

<sup>797</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>798</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>799</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

Lord was present, there was a label placed in the center of the case that read, “This item has been temporarily removed for further research leading to possible repatriation.”<sup>801</sup> Part of the potential of repatriation is that objects and people can finally rest, moving beyond objecthood to be ancestors again. Lord refers to herself as an “item” and indicates a possibility for repatriation, but repatriation to where? Nenana is the obvious answer, but Lord has lived her adult life in several different cities including Fairbanks, Chicago, and Santa Fe. The use of the terms “further research” and “possible repatriation,” present a field of possibilities for interpreting *Artifact Piece, Revisited*.

As a Native woman, Lord’s gender and ethnicity cannot be separated, entangled as they are into her experience of and the way she presents her body to the world. Ultimately, Lord’s performance and installation is a specifically Native feminist intervention.<sup>802</sup> She positions herself as the sum of the many selves in these cases, more complex than the merely ethnographic and requiring “further research.” Being both Native and a woman, the liberties that visitors took or attempted to take with the artist is the most shocking, or perhaps telling, part of the performance. According to the artist, “I was a body that most people thought they had ownership over, or they felt the right to touch and invade, even though there were signs and guards all over me.”<sup>803</sup> Her memories of this experience were vivid despite the fact that our conversation took place over a decade after her performance. With this statement, Lord links her own experience performing her art to larger histories of invasion and the low value placed on Native women by settler colonial logic. Lord did not speak as she was performing as Indian body on display, so the signs and presence of guards were meant to control visitor behavior. Considering Lord’s statement, the invasion of her body might have occurred even if she spoke, demonstrating in staged form the

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<sup>801</sup> Ibid.

<sup>802</sup> See Green, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*.

<sup>803</sup> Lord, interview with the author.



epidemic of violence against Native women and girls that also relates to her other work, particularly *The Tanning Project*.<sup>804</sup> *Artifact Piece, Revisited* raises fraught issues of authenticity, Indigenous belonging, and perception of Native women through the simple display of an artist's body and her most prized possessions.

Unfortunately, this piece has yet to be staged in Fairbanks, though both Lord and the Museum of the North have expressed interest in this possibility.<sup>805</sup> The Alaska Native presence in and around Fairbanks is much greater so the unfamiliarity with Athabascans would not be a factor. Would visitors feel tempted to touch an Athabascan woman when they might know Athabascan women personally? Or is the unfamiliarity, ethics of strangers, and idea of strangeness more palpable in this case? Based on her choice of objects, incorporation of detailed text, and physical performance, Lord demonstrates that *Artifact Piece* is indeed ripe for revisiting and re-staging near her home, as Luna did originally, which would invite further interpretation.

### **5.5 The Things We Carry: *My First Baby Belt* (2007) and *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008)**

The sterile tan walls of the offices of the Alaska Convention Center in Anchorage, Alaska, are covered with high-quality Alaska Native art. These pieces have been purchased through the 1% for Art program in the city of Anchorage to adorn this and other public buildings.<sup>806</sup> These nonprofit/public partnership funds have created a micro market for Alaskan art with an emphasis

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<sup>804</sup> See Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report."

<sup>805</sup> Erica Lord, *Artifact Piece, Revisited*, <https://ericalord.com/section/39343-Artifact-Piece-Revisited.html>; Guthrie, interview with the author.

<sup>806</sup> Sharity Sommer, interview with the author, Anchorage, Alaska, June 5, 2018.

on Alaska Native art.<sup>807</sup> Due to their locations, many of these pieces have a limited audience and are displayed in public spaces with little explanation, though they can also be loaned to the Anchorage Museum.<sup>808</sup> For the purposes of this study, the walls of the Alaska Convention Center office are significant as Erica Lord's *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008) hangs on them, above a set of internal windows leading to the conference room, encased in glass and a few feet above eye level (Fig. 5.20). *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* was on display previously in the Anchorage Museum, but as of summer 2018, it was set to remain in these offices for a few more years.<sup>809</sup> Anyone can view it, but its placement in these offices means that rather than being viewed by people seeking out art, it is stumbled upon more often than not.

*Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008) is a shimmering all-beaded long rectangle, striking in its square beads of gray, black, light green, dark green, dark red, and light red. It is a marriage of science, art, and social commentary, an uncanny yet ultimately successful conglomeration of topics. Unmediated, shown with only an identification label, these important valences can be overlooked. The piece's purchase by the city of Anchorage means that it will be part of the collection indefinitely, preserved even if unseen in this government building, until it is displayed again in the nearby Anchorage Museum.<sup>810</sup> The long rectangular glass case is a strangely appropriate way to view the piece, a remix of a useful object made to be artistic and political without utility.

Native peoples were once stereotyped as being natural artists, or rather inherent makers of objects like baskets, pots, or beadwork. It is more appropriate and reasonable that within their

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<sup>807</sup> Ibid.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid.

<sup>809</sup> Demma, interview with the author.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid.

families, Native peoples have had traditions of making, and sharing knowledge of skilled production, honed like any skill, though often taught in indirect ways. The Athabascan culture broadly is known for its expert embroidery,<sup>811</sup> a practice most developed in the Gwitch'in Athabascan community,<sup>812</sup> near Lord's own Tanana community and related stylistically.<sup>813</sup> Beading, or making beadwork, is often learned by watching and copying rather than through formal training or apprenticeship.<sup>814</sup> Lord's Athabascan aunts knew how to bead and were skilled enough to create the intricate patterns on Lord's tunic from *Artifact Piece, Revisited*.<sup>815</sup> Her own training in beading she picked up at home, rather than at school or through any other formal training.<sup>816</sup> This background situates the skill as a particularly feminist practice, as does the choice of object Lord has orchestrated through her beadwork. Craft, including beading and sewing, has long been conceptualized as a particularly feminine activity, which early feminist artists turned toward as naturally feminist, a way of making an article that was looked down upon for its makers.

In the previous sections, the ways Lord has used her body in photography and performance to explore identity and embodiment has been elaborated. Embodiment is about more than simply the act of using the body; it is about the things we enact and the things we carry. *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis*, is exemplary of her exploration of embodiment through objects. There are many examples of Athabascan burden straps, also called baby belts, in museums around Alaska.<sup>817</sup> The burden strap is meant to be worn across the back to hold small children, slightly restricting the mobility of a mother's shoulders but freeing her arms for other activities.<sup>818</sup>

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<sup>811</sup> Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art*, 15.

<sup>812</sup> Angela Linn, interview with the author, Fairbanks, Alaska, June 10, 2018.

<sup>813</sup> Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art*, 97.

<sup>814</sup> Melissa Shaginoff, interview with the author, Anchorage, Alaska, June 8, 2018.

<sup>815</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>817</sup> Linn, interview with the author.

<sup>818</sup> Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art*, 97.

Wrapped with blankets and tightly secured by the strap, small children—those old enough to sit up—laid close to their mother’s bodies, facing her back.<sup>819</sup> Based on location, the strapped-down child resembles more a backpack than a belt, though the lower portion sometimes hits the woman’s waist. Traditionally, baby belts were beautifully adorned by the baby’s mother or another female relative,<sup>820</sup> and often had hollow bones or strings of beads that jingled for decoration and to soothe the baby.<sup>821</sup> Lord, who does not have any children, has explored this baby belt/burden strap medium since 2007,<sup>822</sup> most recently showing her *Breast Cancer Burden Strap DNA MicroArray Analysis* in 2020 at the Accola Griefen Gallery in New York City.<sup>823</sup> As Lord’s early years were spent in Alaska with her Athabascan family nearby, she was familiar with and understood the function of burden straps, which she sees as a kind of universal form, existing in different forms across cultures.<sup>824</sup> She began thinking about burden straps long before making one and before undertaking to her beading disease series, created a more traditional baby belt.<sup>825</sup>

Lord’s *My First Baby Belt* (2007) is made in the traditional hide medium, embroidered with red yarn and beaded with flowers (Fig. 5.21).<sup>826</sup> In beautiful cursive red script, the piece reads, “Has the Native been bred out of my child?,” across its length. In her artist talk, Lord spoke intently about not being able to pass her Tanana Athabascan tribal enrollment onto her children.<sup>827</sup> Employing the burden strap format is an obvious link to this concern— that her children will not

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<sup>819</sup> Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art*, 97.

<sup>820</sup> Ibid.

<sup>821</sup> Linn, interview the author.

<sup>822</sup> Erica Lord, *My First Baby Belt*, <https://ericalord.com/artwork/167190-My-First-Baby-Belt.html>.

<sup>823</sup> Accola Griefen Gallery, *Gina Adams | Maajigin wa’aw akiing miinawaa (Begin this World Again) | Merritt Johnson | Recent Work | + Erica Lord*, <http://accolagriefen.com/exhibitions/gina-adams-i-maajigin-waaw-akiing-miinawaa-begin-this-world-again-i-merritt-johnson-i-recent-work-i-work-by-erica-lord->.

<sup>824</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid.

<sup>826</sup> Lord, *My First Baby Belt*.

<sup>827</sup> Lord, “Artist Talk.”

be considered Athabascan, regardless of language fluency or cultural practices— expressed by Lord through this piece, and probably shared by any Native person with the minimum blood quantum to be part of his or her tribe. This knowledge is a burden to carry as well. The ends are loose with several strands of fabric, not including the typical strap and hook, but still capable of holding a small child. The dangling metal measuring spoons and cups suggest domesticity, specifically baking, a feminine-coded activity. Like the hollow bones of historic burden straps, these cutlery adornments jingle and bounce, making noises which are meant to soothe a baby.<sup>828</sup> These hanging objects reinforce the idea that native identity is measured through blood quantum, based on historical Native rolls, quantified and colonial. The knowledge of the measurement of identity is more disturbing than soothing, however. The use of the verb “bred” references the breeding of animals; humans are usually born rather than bred. It also links to Lord’s other works, some of which employ the word “half-breed,” suggesting that her child is less and thus has the Native bred-out of him or her. It is hard to imagine a more pointed metaphor for the burden of motherhood than literally carrying a child on one’s back. As an art form made for and by women, creating baby belts and positioning them as a high art practice seems intentionally feminist. This piece is perhaps most aptly a work of Indigenous feminism as Lord explicitly comments on how motherhood is shaped by logic of racial quantifying. Lord is not a mother, so this piece is speculative as well as political, commenting on the way colonial concepts of race have shaped rules about who is and who is not Native.

Unlike *My First Baby Belt* (2007), which could potentially carry a child, *Diabetes Burden Strap*, *DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008) was never meant to serve the object’s original purpose of holding one’s own baby. Lord made these works in her mid to late twenties, an age when

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<sup>828</sup> Linn, interview with the author.

motherhood is increasingly common in many social circles. Yet, Lord is not a mother. In conceptualizing the piece, Lord thought back to the original intent of burden straps, holding babies, but also carrying bundles of sticks.<sup>829</sup> She asked herself, “What’s a contemporary burden? Because I don’t carry babies. . . I will carry diabetes [a]s a burden.”<sup>830</sup> Thus Lord moved conceptually from trying to re-create an object with her own intention to creating a new form that considered how diseases are burdens that people carry. The particular diabetes genomic sequence came to Lord as a gift from a friend of hers who happens to be a microbiologist; he gave her print of the disease’s structure for their aesthetic qualities, which he thought she would enjoy.<sup>831</sup> This fortuitous gift led to the creation of *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* and subsequent burden straps, which visualize disease through beading in the form the DNA sequences of different diseases.

Like much of Lord’s work there is limited scholarship on *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008), but it has been examined critically by the scholar Kara Thompson, who explored the work as part of a short book on blankets. Thompson explained the piece succinctly: “By coding a genetic marker for disease on a traditional Athabaskan[sic] object used to carry babies, Lord grafts two different forms of inheritance and reproduction: one a matter of kinship and biological reproduction, the other a reproduction of disease that accompanies poverty and lack of access to health care and nourishing food, direct results of ongoing colonialism.”<sup>832</sup> Thompson’s use of “graft” to describe the work of piece, links to skin grafting, a medical procedure, and thus to leather, the traditional material of burden belts. She succinctly points out the scientific and societal implications of this piece. Diet and many other factors contribute to this

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<sup>829</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>830</sup> Ibid.

<sup>831</sup> Ibid.

<sup>832</sup> Kara Thompson, *Blanket* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 56.

high prevalence of diabetes in Alaska. Access to healthy fresh food, especially produce, is very limited. Tanana is close to Fairbanks and much more accessible than many other villages and towns in Alaska, some of which can only be reached by plane, but barriers to health care remain as the main health care center for Alaska Natives in Anchorage is only accessible by plane.<sup>833</sup> Presenting at Northern Michigan, Lord recalled learning later in life that “not everyone’s grandmother had diabetes,”<sup>834</sup> a realization that Alaska Natives experienced many diseases and conditions at a much higher rate than the general population.<sup>835</sup> The new relationship between kinship and disease, particularly the passing and carrying of diabetes, is the result of settler colonialism and the altered environment.

Lord chose to entirely remove the leather or animal skin from *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* (Fig. 5.20). The beads she uses, and the material in general, have a long history in communities, but they are not autochthonous to Alaska. Prior to colonization, patterning was done with porcupine quills, meticulously softened and dyed with natural pigments.<sup>836</sup> The most traditional materials to make a burden strap would thus be entirely organic and readily available. Lord removes the organic traces from the piece and situates it within the long history of Athabascan beading and the current diseases that plague her community. She also renders it far too fragile to be used: beads, even strong beads, cannot bear the weight of a child. The beaded ends reference the traditional burden straps, which also sometimes had loose ends, and the helix pattern of DNA, which can similarly be unspooled.<sup>837</sup> Instead of binding together mother and child

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<sup>833</sup> The Alaska Native Health Center is in Anchorage, Alaska, and provides free healthcare, including surgeries, to tribally enrolled Alaska Native peoples.

<sup>834</sup> Lord, “Artist Talk.”

<sup>835</sup> Ibid.

<sup>836</sup> Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art*, 33.

<sup>837</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

securely and beautifully, *Diabetes Burden Strap* demonstrates the precariousness of inheritance in its potential diseases and traumas.

Seemingly devoid of motherly purposes, *Diabetes Burden Strap*, *DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008) can be conceptualized as the piece which most furthers conceptions of embodiment and Indigeneity. Continuing the series, Lord has repeatedly explored what other diseases can be borne and imagined in this way. Beautifully, this series allows Lord to make physical a scientific rendering, to conceptualize a way of seeing DNA into a physical object for carrying humans. Lord's potential children cannot officially carry on her Athabascan heritage, yet they will inevitably carry genes which are more susceptible to diseases like diabetes. The weight of Indigenous womanhood cannot be held physically, it can only be experienced.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In Erica Lord's artist statement, she explains that "the qualities that tend to define my identity create an overlapping and blurring of borders; the multiplicity of selves becomes indivisible, not split or partial, not singular, but a flexible amalgamation of many."<sup>838</sup> The artist's practice creates opportunities to consider major issues of Native American and Indigenous identity. Her body is the site for and the basis for much of her work. Using this most intimate medium, her work highlights issues important in Native Art writ large. Embodiment is central as she enacts her own Indigenous heritage, broadly Native American and specifically Athabascan and Inupiaq. Despite their general emphasis on her body and use of conceptual embodiment, the works of this

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<sup>838</sup> Erica Lord, "Homepage," <https://ericalord.com/home.html>.



chapter demonstrate Lord's ability to expose and conceal, working along varying degrees of the personal. Lord presents herself in pieces and through words in the captivating series, *The Tanning Project* (2005–7), which visualizes and contests stereotypes of Native looks, so viewers ultimately question their own assumptions about brown skin and Native heritage. Her related self-portrait series *Un/Defined Self-Portraits* (2005–7) demonstrates Lord the performer, who dresses up and enacts different selves, creating a spectrum of masculine to feminine, beautiful to off-putting. Significantly, she plays with perceptions of race, opening the possibility to see her as white, Native, and even black, as less than definite, as capable of variations and combinations. Similarly, in *Untitled (Tattooed Arms)* (2007), Lord inscribes her body with the numbers that define her Native identity: her Bureau of Indian Affairs number and the blood quantum she has had to prove to be part of the tribe. The aesthetic strategy of these works, breaking her arms into disjointed pieces, presents a metaphor for the abstract inhumane/un-human terms of blood quantum and CDIB numbers. Meanwhile, *Binary Selves* takes viewers constantly in and out of Nenana as Lord reckons with the harshness of home and her need to both leave and return. Her performance piece *Artifact Piece, Revisited* (2008) also lays bare the artist's ethnicity, paying homage to James Luna, with the notable distinctions of her gender and her aesthetic choices. Finally, her burden-strap pieces, especially *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis* (2008), conceptualize Native identity as what is physically and genetically carried by and within in one's body. Like much of Lord's other work this piece relates to passing, although instead of passing in terms of appearance as a particular ethnicity, passing is central here in terms of genes and identity from grandparent to parent to child.

Lord's works demonstrate the ways in which the body can be abstracted, alluded to, or configured to imagine Indigeneity as far more than bodily. Her physical actions to look more

Native or perform her specific Athabascan heritage put her closer to mainstream ideas of these designations, but they never make her more Native. Through allusions to blood quantum, one can see how one's Native-ness can and is officially measured. With her ironic works and forceful words, the artist invites viewers to question the efficacy of these systems. Lord continues to travel in her practice, opening space to interrogate Indigenous identity.

## 6.0 Conclusion

For her installation in the 2016 exhibition *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward S. Curtis Legacy* at the Portland Museum of Art, the Apsáalooke (Crow) artist Wendy Red Star (born 1981) photocopied Edward Sheriff Curtis's photographs of Apsáalooke men and meticulously cut out their silhouettes (Fig. 6.1).<sup>839</sup> The finished work, *Let Them Have Their Voice* (2016), was composed of fifteen framed silhouettes made up of two layers of white paper cut in the shape of men's noses, hairstyles, and ornamentations, which appear highly individualized even in the absence of their indexical images.<sup>840</sup> The modernist grid of empty silhouettes was embodied by the sounds of these men singing, recorded by Curtis and now shown as part of Red Star's installation.<sup>841</sup> At the exhibition, Red Star told me that she believed that these men's images had been so overexposed in exhibitions that they had become stereotypes of a vanishing race. She wanted to free their images from this false narrative and instead share their actual voices.<sup>842</sup> This beautiful gesture of decontextualization and recontextualization points to one of the important starting points of this dissertation project, namely the belief, shared by all the artists considered here, that images of Native peoples, often heavily orchestrated by non-Native photographers and artists, have proliferated to the point of saturation. These historical images can often hold great value to individuals and community members, but when decontextualized and anonymized, they

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<sup>839</sup> *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy* Zig Jackson, Wendy Red Star, Will Wilson, Portland Museum of Art, February 6–May 8, 2016, <https://portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/contemporary-native-photographers/>.

<sup>840</sup> This explanation is based on notes that I took while viewing the exhibition in 2016.

<sup>841</sup> One of Curtis's main interlocutors was a Crow man; see Shamoan Zamir, "Native Agency and the Making of 'The North American Indian': Alexander B. Upshaw and Edward S. Curtis," *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2007): 613–53.

<sup>842</sup> Wendy Red Star, interview with the author, Portland, Oregon, February 7, 2016.

present a vision of Native people as historical and static rather than living and dynamic. Actions like that of Red Star are an important means through which Native peoples' images can be repossessed, revived, and made to live again in our complex and contested present.

Like the artists who have been the focus of this project, Wendy Red Star has explored historical images and used her own image in her practice. Her use of music, of men singing, echoes the use of sound in Christian Thompson's film works, while the seriality of her approach speaks to the practices of Thompson, Fiona Foley, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord. These artists have all confronted the continuous circulation of stereotypical images of their peoples by constructing independent, representative images of themselves. Yet, this consideration of past images is just one entry point to the broader topic posed by this project. Their varied practices represent four among myriad ways that contemporary Indigenous artists can image and imagine their role in the world as particularly contemporary, Indigenous, and embodied anew, rather than simply in contrast with historical images or stereotypes.

This dissertation has explored the practice of embodiment as an artistic strategy utilized by Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord. The chapters have examined specific works in their respective oeuvres that have centered on their physical bodies or bodily adornments and on the intersection of looking, being, and embodying Indigeneity. In taking this approach, Indigenous people, their creativity, and authorship have been centered. I have shown that embodiment is used by these artists as a way of making manifest through the body both the visibly evident and the conceptual or unseen sense of being Indigenous and that indigeneity is a complex global phenomenon with local instantiations. These artists, as has been argued here, articulate Indigeneity in distinct ways—utilizing language, stories, and most significantly their own bodies—to demonstrate the complexity of this multifaceted state of being.

In the period covered by this dissertation, 1992 to the present, visibility and knowledge of the continued presence of Indigenous peoples has grown globally and has taken many diverse forms. These range from the Water Protection movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline, the largest and most diverse Indigenous uprising in history, which has been followed by more protests against more pipelines elsewhere in North America, to the recognition of the great inequity in the provision of medical care for Native Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indigenous lands remain largely occupied. Violence against Native women and Two-Spirit people is an ongoing epidemic. In short, driven by an economy that continues to prioritize resource extraction, the colonial project persists.

The misconception that Native people are few in number, to the point of near extinction, remains widespread. Stereotypes of how they should look based on historical photographs and racist notions of ethnic and racial purity remain prevalent. In the face of these challenges, contemporary Indigenous artists have greatly contributed to the visibility of Indigenous peoples' concerns, from the specifically political, such as responding to racist riots, to the less overtly political, including the psychological effect of hearing that one's language is extinct. Significantly, they have spread awareness of the real conditions of being a Native or Indigenous person: for example, the persistence and after-effects of rules governing official identity and colonial histories. At the same time, within artworlds, they often experience stereotyping and pigeonholing of a kind against which previous generations of artists also fought. This project has also built on the work of many art historians who have considered how artists' bodies can be productive sites to consider individual and collective Indigenous identity, often using cultural theory in particular the concept of liminality to explore these artistic practices. I have proposed that liminality can and does exist within the category of Indigenous. Artists such as Foley, Thompson, Monkman and Lord can

identify their heritages as Indigenous and non-Indigenous, while remaining steadfast that their work and they themselves are Indigenous, full stop.

Drawing on all these many concerns, the central argument of this dissertation is that there is no one way to look or be Indigenous now, in the twenty-first century; instead, contemporary Indigenous artists have demonstrated the great variety, power, and potential of Indigeneity through their performative, embodied practices. As I stated at the outset, this line of inquiry was inspired by taking seriously Erica Lord's statement that, "This is what Native looks like now."<sup>843</sup> With that statement, Lord confronted the way her obviously multiethnic looks were interpreted as non-Native and simultaneously rejected such an assertion. Each artist has contributed uniquely to the related set of concerns of identity, Indigeneity, and embodiment.

Since the late 1980s, Fiona Foley has employed embodiment as a practice to center Aboriginal women and as a tool of solidarity with other discriminated-against and oppressed peoples. Foley insists that her sense of culture comes from her mother.<sup>844</sup> As her mother is her Badtjala parent, she emphasizes her Badtjala heritage and does not allow it to be overshadowed by her non-Indigenous heritage. In her country of Australia, the nineteenth century was a period of rapid colonial encroachment and immense change for her Badtjala people. Through her photographic practice and in her public monuments, which were not discussed in this study, she has focused on critical moments in nineteenth-century history to explain current attitudes toward Aboriginal people and the way some histories, such as those of slaughtering Aboriginal people, are purposefully forgotten.<sup>845</sup> Tracing Foley's practice from the 1980s to today coincides with

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<sup>843</sup> Mike Dunham, "Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity," *Alaska Daily News*, August 1, 2009, <https://www.adn.com/our-alaska/article/nenana-artist-grapples-ethnic-identity/2009/08/02/>.

<sup>844</sup> Erica Lord, interview with the author (via FaceTime), February 17, 2020.

<sup>845</sup> Louise Martin-Chew, "Fiona Foley discusses Her New Series *Horror Has a Face*," *Art Guide Australia*, December 6, 2017, accessed September 1, 2018, <https://artguide.com.au/fiona-foley-discusses-her-new-series-horror-has-a-face>.

broader contemporary art practices of this period, yet her care for and centering of Aboriginal women and their histories makes her oeuvre distinctive and explicitly Badtjala.

Starting his practice over a decade after Foley, Christian Thompson has repeatedly used his own image to embody Aboriginality as a complex identity formation. Across many series, Thompson's practice has been shown to articulate Aboriginality through embodiment; particularly resonant to his work is the relationship between Aboriginal people, their objects, and museums. He has taken different approaches to consider this broad topic, such as aligning himself with the colonizer to objectify them, and, in contrast, using Bidjara language to indigenize museum spaces. As his practice is moving toward experimentation in virtual reality, Thompson opens the possibility of creating embodied experiences for both artist and audience, a fully immersive version of the type of visual and auditory experiences that his film works have previously offered.

On both a surface and deeper level, Kent Monkman's practice has many intersections with Thompson's way of working. Monkman has repeatedly transformed himself into a Two-Spirit diva, while Thompson has become different women and men, utilizing makeup more subtly and sparingly over his practice than Monkman has. Monkman as Miss Chief acts as a teaching trickster, presenting looks based on Native stereotypes while informing mostly non-Native audiences about very real issues facing Native peoples. His 2019 performance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City was striking for its specific engagement with a Swampy Cree origin story, although he has previously incorporated lessons from that story—particularly allusions to animals as guides for human behavior—into his earlier paintings. Becoming an empowered Two-Spirit diva who rewrites historical encounters, Monkman challenges preconceptions and takes on art and

colonial history in a highly critical manner. Most radically, he created a Nation of Mischief, where all are welcome, including non-Natives with imagined connections to Native peoples and actual Native peoples who had come into conflict with the colonial systems, including the capitalism sometimes promoted in their communities. His embodied performances articulate potential Indigenous futures that remain aware of, but exist beyond, the settler colonial present.

Finally, Erica Lord has presented herself in her art as Indigenous and multiethnic, as an artist who is Tanana Athabascan and Inupiaq as well as Finnish and Japanese. Considering all her major works together, it has been argued that she uses her body to challenge the way Indianness, or Indianness, has been read on the body. In *Un/Defined Self-Portraits*, she positions herself as having many possibilities of both looking and being. Like her mentor James Luna, she has considered the ways that her body is flexible, in its interpretation, skin, and hair color, and the ways it is not, particularly as a woman and one who is frequently sexualized. Rather than a representing a departure from her portraiture and performance, her recent focus on making beaded baby belts continues her exploration of Native identity and its inheritance from an Indigenous feminist perspective. Though examinations of each artist's practice, several potential forms have been shown that the embodiment of Indianness can take, just few of a continuously growing range of possibilities.

Fiona Foley, Christian Thompson, Kent Monkman, and Erica Lord were selected for this study because of their continued and sustained engagement with embodiment and Indianness. However, they also represent particular identities, as Indigenous women and Indigenous queer men, whose lived experiences, due to these intersections, can be challenging in distinct ways. When Erica Lord writes on her own body, "Colonize Me," she offers both a provocation and a demand that the violence against Native women's bodies be acknowledged. When Fiona Foley



conceptualizes herself and other Badtjala women, she recognizes both the stereotype of women as disposable and as sexual objects via the term “black velvet” and the power of using her own image as potential heroine for future generations, claiming proudly the identity of Aboriginal woman. When Kent Monkman and Christian Thompson play with beauty and gender and sexuality, they confront binary notions of gender perpetuated by colonial regimes. Indigeneity, as a larger relational concept and identification, is not the only nor the primary identity for any of these artists.<sup>846</sup> All four artists possess mixed Indigenous heritages which, as Erica Lord has accurately pointed out, is extremely common for Indigenous people due to the history of colonization.<sup>847</sup> Lord, Monkman, and Thompson all identify as possessing several identities, including that of a specific Indigenous people. Their senses of being and belonging to their people all come from family relations, older generations of women who have passed down cultural knowledge to these artists. Their practices reflect deep embodied connections as well as their academic and artistic training. Their choice of identifying as women and queer men demonstrates the intersectionality of identity that is widely acknowledged in society. Intersectionality itself is not a simple matter.<sup>848</sup> Native women artists must deal with being both Native and women, while Indigenous queer male artists align themselves often with Two-Spirit or the overlapping of queer and Native identities. The degree to which these artists incorporate or perform these identities varies greatly. How they do so is unique to each of them but also resonates with the shared experience of countless others.

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<sup>846</sup> Here I am particularly taking about the concept of Indigeneity advanced in this project rather than the specific Indigenous peoples with which these artists identify, such as Badtjala people for Fiona Foley.

<sup>847</sup> Erica Lord, “America’s Wretched,” in *The Alaska Native Reader*, ed. Maria Shaa Tláa Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 314.

<sup>848</sup> See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

There are several issues raised by this inquiry that I have not been able to pursue but which are worthy of future study. Indigenous feminism as an ongoing and particular strand of feminism is a topic taken up by this project, but one which could be expanded in further studies. Fiona Foley does not identify as a feminist, though she highlights women's issues in her work in ways that accord with the feminist critique of patriarchal societies.<sup>849</sup> During Foley's formative years, she felt shut out from the explicitly white, middle-class critique of patriarchy of the contemporary feminist movement. More than a decade younger than Foley, Erica Lord identifies as a third-wave feminist, understanding the expanded space for her within feminism because of the pioneering work of thinkers such as Rebecca Walker.<sup>850</sup> Lacking mixed Native women with whom to identify, Lord found women such as Walker and Josephine Baker to be foremothers for their thoughts, in Baker's case her playful and sensual self-fashioning. As Thompson and Monkman both acknowledge the strong role of women in their families and in Thompson's case as artistic influences, further work could be done on how their practices relate to Native feminism.

Although it has been the subject of much recent scholarly attention, Blackness and its relation to Indigeneity is an understudied topic, especially in the field of art history. Black thinkers and scholars serve as significant influences on the artists of this study and the scholarship on which it builds. The early framework that this study describes of a Black/white binary and the lack of space of Indigenous peoples in this binary also neglects the constant present of people who identify as Black and Native. More could also be done with the connection between American Blackness and the Aboriginal usage of "Blak" as a means to reappropriate the word "black," which, like the word Aboriginal, has been used in abbreviated forms as a slur in Australia. Beyond the mere

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<sup>849</sup> Fiona Foley, interview with the author, June 18, 2017.

<sup>850</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

coincidence of terms, the Aboriginal rights movement in its 1970s instantiation was greatly inspired by the American Civil Rights movements and its work within urban centers by Black radical groups such as the Black Panthers.<sup>851</sup> Beyond an individual looking for foremothers, Erica Lord takes an interest in Josephine Baker as a liminal woman, signaling the long-term connections between Black and Native communities through history and time, which have recently received renewed scholarly attention.<sup>852</sup>

The artistic projects of four individuals have been the focus of this dissertation. In three of these cases, their work is the outcome of a collaborative process, led by the artist but also involving some other, sometimes many other, workers. In the case particularly of filmmaking and shooting photograph series with multiple actors, the artwork is never produced solely by one individual. The theme of artistic labor is one which could be explored with respect to each of these artists and further within the broader topic of embodiment in Indigenous art. On the matter of authorship, the artists discussed in this dissertation take quite different approaches, based at least in part in how elaborate their studio practices have become. In the case of Fiona Foley, she acknowledges that she has studio assistants and uses photographers who are sometimes credited, but she does not discuss her assistants as collaborators in her work and has more recently not credited the photographers with whom she works.<sup>853</sup> Christian Thompson is very open about his studio practice involving assistants, who help mostly with logistical work, but also does not credit them in his work.<sup>854</sup> He has discussed his use of makeup artists to help achieve certain looks for his

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<sup>851</sup> See Gary Foley and Andrew Schaap, ed., *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights, and the State* (London: Routledge: 2014).

<sup>852</sup> Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>853</sup> Foley, interview with the author.

<sup>854</sup> Christian Thompson, interview with the author, Melbourne, Australia, June 22, 2019.

photographs, but instead of these experts being part of his shoots, he re-creates the looks himself.<sup>855</sup> Similarly, Kent Monkman often does interviews in his studio, which has dozens of employees who assist with painting, logistics, and a variety of other tasks.<sup>856</sup> He has a studio manager as well and credits his ability to do large-scale works, such as the Met installation, to his studio staff. His practice resembles a Renaissance studio, particularly in its ability to realize major paintings. Finally, Erica Lord has not reached the level of establishment as the other artists of this dissertation. Thus her practice is much more of a solo operation.<sup>857</sup> She conscientiously credits her mentors, such as the Diné photographer Will Wilson, and friends who provide her with ideas for her work.<sup>858</sup>

Acknowledging these areas for further study highlights the hope that this project will be one of many that takes seriously the connections between contemporary Indigenous artists and their highly specific histories and approaches to artmaking, including embodiment. In recent years, deep research into the histories of particular Indigenous communities has been taken up by members of those communities, who bring both scholastic training and a personal understanding of story and myth to this work. For example, the Swampy Cree scholar Winona Wheeler's work was crucial to reach a better understanding of the context in which Monkman's family had lived and moved in Canada.<sup>859</sup> Wheeler's article is from the perspective not only of a historian, but also of a community member, bringing a needed mix of training and perspective to her work that is shared by several other scholars working on parallel issues and histories. Similarly, in the chapter on Fiona Foley, Wilf Reeves's *Legends of Moonie Jarl* was helpful as a source of Badtjala origin

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<sup>855</sup> Ibid.

<sup>856</sup> The Globe and the Mail, "Canadian Painter Kent Monkman's Process, from Inspiration to final Painting," YouTube video, December 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvQgGD5yO5k>.

<sup>857</sup> Lord, interview with the author.

<sup>858</sup> Ibid.

<sup>859</sup> Winona Wheeler, "The Fur Trade, Treaty No. 5 and the Fisher River First Nation," in *Papers of the Rupert's Land Colloquium 2008 in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta*, ed. Margaret Anne Lindsay and Malory Allyson Richards (Winnipeg: Centre for Rupert's Land Studies, 2010), 209–22.

stories.<sup>860</sup> This book was first published in 1964, the year in which Foley was born, so these kinds of stories would have been quite accessible to her and others of her generation.

Through this project, an issue has been explored that has a personal as well as a scholarly dimension: how can one's Indigeneity be embodied? Moving beyond the body, contemporary Indigenous artists have created work that necessitates both visceral response and deep scholarly engagement. The methodology brought to this project—including research into these specific histories and origin stories, engaging with contemporary art theory on performance and film, and interviews with the artists—has led to the pursuit of embodiment as an open and expansive approach to Indigeneity. As an Indigenous researcher, I have worked to thoroughly examine specific artworks and mine histories respectfully, considering the artworks the objects of this study rather than the artists themselves. These artists' practices present new potentialities for articulating Indigeneity through the body.

Personally, navigating how and when others perceive me as an Indigenous person, or not, has always been part of my life. Many Americans are largely unaware of Guam, Guåhan in CHamoru, and do not know what CHamoru people look like, but because of my non-CHamoru heritage I am often told that I do not look Pacific Islander. For many reasons, how CHamoru I am or that I even am CHamoru is something that others question and challenge. However, in my understanding, being CHamoru is about relationships to my family and connections to a very specific place and its culture and histories. Looking a certain way is far less important than embodied experiences. I have pursued this study in part to explore how others, particularly artists, experience a somewhat similar challenge of being told they are inauthentic or somehow less than they should be based on how they do or do not look. I have examined the practices of artists who

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<sup>860</sup> Wilf Reeves, *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* (Ultimo: Indigenous Literacy Foundation, 2014).

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Figure 4.2. Marina Tyquiengco, Photograph of Performance: *An Evening with Kent Monkman: December 19, 2019*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Figure 4.3. Kent Monkman, *Portrait of the Artist as Hunter*, 2002, Acrylic on canvas, 59.9 x 91.3 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.

Figure 4.4. Kent Monkman, *Study for Artist and Model*, 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 50.8 x 60.96 cm, Collection of the artist.

Figure 4.5. Kent Monkman, *Taxonomy of the European Male*, 2005, Live and filmed performance at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, UK, Color film, 16:36 min, Still image (4:12), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.6. Kent Monkman, *Taxonomy of the European Male*, 2005, Live and filmed performance at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, UK, Color film, 16:36 min, Still image (5:23), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.7. Kent Monkman, *Taxonomy of the European Male*, 2005, Live and filmed performance at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, UK, Color film, 16:36 min, Still image (5:58), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.8. Kent Monkman, *Taxonomy of the European Male*, 2005, Live and filmed performance at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, UK, Color film, 16:36 min, Still image (4:12), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.9. Kent Monkman, *Taxonomy of the European Male*, 2005, Live and filmed performance at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, UK, Color film, 16:36 min, Still image (7:04), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.10. Kent Monkman, *Taxonomy of the European Male*, 2005, Live and filmed performance at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, UK, Color film, 16:36 min, Still image (13:42), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.11. James Luna (Puyukitchum [Luiseño], 1950–2018). *Chapel for Pablo Tac*, 2005, Mixed media, Audio composition courtesy of Jorge Arévalo Mateus, Video composition by Eto Otitgbe, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4.12. Kent Monkman in collaboration with photographer Christopher Chapman & makeup artist Jackie Shawn, *Emergence of A Legend, Miss Chief as a Performer in George Catlin's Gallery That Toured Europe in the 1850's* (1/5), 2006–7, Digital prints on metallic paper, Edition of 25, 11.43 x 16.51 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC.

Figure 4.13. Kent Monkman in collaboration with photographer Christopher Chapman & makeup artist Jackie Shawn, *Emergence of A Legend, Miss Chief as a Vaudeville Performer* (2/5), 2006–7, Digital prints on metallic paper, Edition of 25, 11.43 x 16.51 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC.

Figure 4.14. Molly Spotted Elk, as she appeared in Texas Guinan's Clubs, 1928, Courtesy of *Critical Companion to Native American and First Nations Theatre and Performance: Indigenous Spaces*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2020.

Figure 4.15. Kent Monkman in collaboration with photographer Christopher Chapman & makeup artist Jackie Shawn, *Emergence of A Legend, Miss Chief as Cindy Silverscreen* (3/5), 2006–7,

2006–7, Digital prints on metallic paper, Edition of 25, 11.43 x 16.51 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC.

Figure 4.16. Kent Monkman in collaboration with photographer Christopher Chapman & makeup artist Jackie Shawn, *Emergence of A Legend, Miss Chief as a movie director* (4/5), 2006–7, Digital prints on metallic paper, Edition of 25, 11.43 x 16.51 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC.

Figure 4.17. Kent Monkman in collaboration with photographer Christopher Chapman & makeup artist Jackie Shawn, *The Emergence of A Legend, Miss Chief as the Trapper's Bride* (5/5), 2006–7, Digital prints on metallic paper, Edition of 25, 11.43 x 16.51 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC.

Figure 4.18. Kent Monkman, Documentation of Kent Monkman's performance *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Still image (00:18), National Museum of the American, Washington D.C.

Figure 4.19. Kent Monkman, *A Nation Is Coming*, 1996, Color film, English, 24:00 min, Still image (7:59 min), An Urban Nation Production, Encore +, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO\\_xp8Tbh5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO_xp8Tbh5E).

Figure 4.20. Kent Monkman, *A Nation Is Coming*, 1996, Color film, English, 24:00 min, Still image (16:41), An Urban Nation Production, Encore +, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO\\_xp8Tbh5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO_xp8Tbh5E).

Figure 4.21. Kent Monkman, *A Nation Is Coming*, 1996, Color film, English, 24:00 min, Still image (20:34), An Urban Nation Production, Encore +, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO\\_xp8Tbh5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO_xp8Tbh5E).

Figure 4.22. Kent Monkman, *A Nation Is Coming*, 1996, Color film, English, 24:00 min, Still image (23:02), An Urban Nation Production, Encore +, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO\\_xp8Tbh5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO_xp8Tbh5E).

Figure 4.23. Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Live and filmed performance at National Museum of the American, Washington D.C., Color film, 31:05 min, Still image (00:45), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.24. Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Live and filmed performance at National Museum of the American, Washington D.C., Color film, 31:05 min, Still image (1:24), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.25. Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Live and filmed performance at National Museum of the American, Washington D.C., Color film, 31:05 min, Still image (4:08), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.26. Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Live and filmed performance at National Museum of the American, Washington D.C., Color film, 31:05 min, Still image (5:17), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.27. Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Live and filmed performance at National Museum of the American, Washington D.C., Color film, 31:05 min, Still image (13:18), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.28. Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Live and filmed performance at National Museum of the American, Washington D.C., Color film, 31:05 min, Still image (9:57), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.29. Nicholas Galanin, *I Think It Goes Like This*, 2016, Wood and paint, Installation view, Peters Projects (Now Gerald Peters Gallery), Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Figure 4.30. Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, February 4, 2012, Live and filmed performance at National Museum of the American, Washington D.C., Color film, 31:05 min, Still image (19:57), V Tape, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 4.31. Kent Monkman, *Certificate of Mischief* (Performance Prop for Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece), 2012, Giclee print, 21.7 x 28 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington D.C.

Figure 4.32. Kent Monkman, *Bank of Mischief \$5 bill in Treaty Money [Front]* (Performance Prop for Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece), 2012, Giclee print, 21.7 x 28 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington D.C.

Figure 4.33. Kent Monkman, *Bank of Mischief \$5 bill in Treaty Money [Back]* (Performance Prop for Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece), 2012, Giclee print, 21.7 x 28 cm, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington D.C.

Figure 4.34. Kent Monkman, *Bête Noire*, 2014, Painted backdrop (acrylic on canvas) Sculptural installation (mixed media) with mannequin and motorcycle, 487.68 x 487.68 x 304.8 cm, *Urban Res* Installation at Sargent's Daughters Gallery, New York City, New York.

Figure 4.35. Kent Monkman, *Bête Noire*, 2015, Painted backdrop (acrylic on canvas) Sculptural installation (mixed media) with mannequin and motorcycle, 487.68 x 487.68 x 304.8 cm, Installed at *Unsettled Landscapes SITE Santa Fe*, SITE, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Figure 4.36. The Red River Buffalo Hunt, Orientation Gallery, 1970, The Manitoba Museum © The Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg, Canada.

Figure 4.39. Albert Bierstadt, *The Last of the Buffalo*, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 180.3 x 301.63 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4.37. Albert Bierstadt, *The Last of the Buffalo*, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 180.3 x 301.63 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4.38. Pablo Picasso, *Bull - plate 4*, 1945, Lithograph, 33.2 x 49.3 cm  
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Figure 4.39. Joseph Beuys, *I like America and America likes me*, 1974, Photograph of performance, Photo credit Caroline Tisdall ©DACS 200, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom.

Figure 4.40. Annika Johnson, Photograph of Plains Indian Diorama, 2015, Digital Photograph, Museum of Natural History, New York City, New York.

Figure 4.41. Kent Monkman in collaboration with Chris Chapman, *Fate is a Cruel Mistress*, 2017, Archival Giclee Print on Archival Paper, Edition of 25, Framed, Each 48.9 × 41.3 × 1.6 cm, Installation view at Peters Projects (Now Gerald Peters Gallery) in 2017, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Figure 4.42. Kent Monkman in collaboration with Chris Chapman, *Delilah, Fate is a Cruel Mistress*, 2017, Archival Giclee Print on Archival Paper, 1/25, edition of 25 with 5 APs  
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Figure 4.45 Kent Monkman, *Wolfe's Haircut*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 121.92 x 152.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Montreal, Montreal, Canada.

Figure 4.46. Kent Monkman, *Montcalm's Haircut*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 121.92 x 152.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Montreal, Montreal, Canada.

Figure 4.47. Kent Monkman in collaboration with Chris Chapman, *Potiphar's Wife, Fate is a Cruel Mistress*, 2017, Archival Giclee Print on Archival Paper, 1/25, edition of 25 with 5 Aps, Framed, 48.9 × 41.3 × 1.6 cm, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa.

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## **CHAPTER 5: Weaving Strands Together, Erica Lord's Embodied Practice**

Figure 5.1. Erica Lord, *Untitled (I Tan to Look More Native), The Tanning Project*, 2006, Digital Photograph, 10.16 x 12.7 cm, Collection of the artist.



Figure 5.2. Erica Lord, *Untitled (Half Breed)*, *The Tanning Project*, 2006, Digital Photograph, 10.16 x 12.7 cm, Collection of the artist.

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Figure 5.4. Erica Lord, *Un/Defined Self-Portrait*, 2005–7, C-Prints, Each photograph: 15.2 x 10.2 cm, Installation dimensions variable, Collection of the artist.

Figure 5.5. Erica Lord, *Self-Portrait 014*, *Un/Defined Self-Portrait*, 2007, C-Print, 15.2 x 10.2 cm, Collection of the artist.

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Figure 5.7. Erica Lord, *Self Portrait 019*, *Un/Defined Self-Portrait*, 2005, C-Print, 15.2 x 10.2 cm, Collection of the artist.

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Figure 5.9. Erica Lord, *Blood Quantum (1/4 x 1/16 = 5/16)*, *Untitled (Tattoo Arms)*, 2007, Digital photograph, 35.6 x 101.6 cm, Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Anchorage, Alaska.

Figure 5.10. Erica Lord, *Enrollment Number 11-337-07463-04-01*, *Untitled (Tattoo Arms)*, 2007, Digital photograph, 35.6 x 101.6 cm, Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Anchorage, Alaska.

Figure 5.11. Erica Lord, *Binary Selves*, 2007, Two-channel film, 10:35 min, Still image (0:51), YouTube, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN\\_PjKrHFS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN_PjKrHFS0).

Figure 5.12. Erica Lord, *Binary Selves*, 2007, Two-channel film, 10:35 min, Still image (3:12), YouTube, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN\\_PjKrHFS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN_PjKrHFS0).

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Figure 5.14. Erica Lord, *Binary Selves*, 2007, Two-channel film, 10:35 min, Still image (9:29), YouTube, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN\\_PjKrHFS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN_PjKrHFS0).

Figure 5.15. James Luna, *The Artifact Piece*, 1987–1990, Installation view of the artist from *The Decades Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Image courtesy of the Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona.

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Figure 5.18. Erica Lord, *Artifact Piece Revisited*, 2008, Performance and mixed media installation, Dimensions variable, Installation view with display case including dentalium necklace, moose skin dress, and beaded moccasins, The National Museum of the American Indian's George Gustav Heye Center, New York City, New York.

Figure 5.19. Erica Lord, *Artifact Piece Revisited*, 2008, Performance and mixed media installation, Installation view with display case including books, CDs, blonde wig, and heels, The National Museum of the American Indian's George Gustav Heye Center, New York City, New York.

Figure 5.20. Erica Lord, *Diabetes Burden Strap, DNA Microarray Analysis*, 2008, Glass Beads, 6" x 58", Installed in the Anchorage Convention Center, Anchorage, Alaska.

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## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusion**

Figure 6.1. Wendy Red Star, *Let Them Have Their Voice*, 2016, Mixed media installation, installation view at the Portland Museum of Art, Portland Oregon.

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