

CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ART: TRAVERSING TEMPORALITIES AND PLURAL POINTS OF RESISTANCE

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*"The future is built on the past."*¹

The year 1992, or the quincentennial anniversary of the arrival of Columbus to the Americas, caused both celebration and tension depending on which side of the Native or Non-native parallel histories one belonged. The INDIGENA project, an exhibition and publication of contemporary Native art perspectives sought to address issues such as discovery, colonization and Indigenous cultural tenacity through the representation of unfiltered Indigenous voices. The project was born in 1992 as a counterpoint to the celebration of Columbus's quincentennial, and as the exhibition curators Gerald McMaster and Lee-ann Martin poignantly describe, out of a "concern that Indigenous peoples would be the recipient of a five-hundred year hangover without ever having attended Western civilization's party."² INDIGENA aimed to represent a contemporary Native voice where nineteen visual artists and eight writers responded in a multiplicity of voices but with a unanimous purpose to the question "what do the five hundred years of colonization in the Americas mean to you?"³ The INDIGENA project and the year 1992 represents an interesting intersection of temporality and resistance, by combining traditional techniques and materials with

contemporary forms of multi-media installations the artistic responses generated a pluralistic, post-modern narrative that intersects past, present and the future revealing new truths or counter-narratives. This paper will explore how resistance - played out in plural points across a range of temporal scales with rhizomatic movements between past, present and future - can give rise to a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant, Euro-North American master narrative.⁴ The focus will be on one essay and one mixed media contribution from the INDIGENA project that both demonstrate Indigenous resistance to the Canadian government and colonial powers of violence and assimilation. This paper will explore the essay *From Colonization to Repatriation* by Gloria Cranmer Webster as well as apply the art history methodology of a visual analysis to the mixed media triptych *Shaman Never Die V: Indigena 1990* by Jane Ash Poitras.

INDIGENA has been recognized as a foundational and ground breaking contemporary Indigenous art exhibition activated by strong social and political beliefs. It signaled a fracturing of the ethnocentrically entrenched art establishments in Canada that had silenced Native voices and culture for centuries.⁵ One of the first of its kind initiated and curated entirely by people of Indigenous heritage, INDIGENA provided space for contemporary indigenous identities and conditions. The exhibition's co-curator Gerald McMaster states, "INDIGENA... should not be viewed as only battling the past, for we are equally interested in seizing the future. As we have repeatedly

suggested to all the participants, the arguments leveled against colonization are only as good as one's determination to maintain one's own cultural autonomy with tenacity."⁶ Previously, most museums and art galleries exhibited native art as frozen relics of the past, ahistorical, non-technological and tribal where the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries are rarely connected.^{7,8} It wasn't until the early 1970s when Native artists started publicly rejecting a narrow anthropological view of their art, shifting from more tribal expressions toward a political and individual subjectivity.⁹ By the eighties, it was evident that native activism had begun to politicize Indigenous artists and in 1986, the National Gallery of Canada finally made their first purchase of contemporary First Nations art, *The North American Iceberg* by Anishinaabe artist Carl Beam. Many audiences were so unfamiliar with contemporary Indigenous art that the curators of INDIGENA created a gallery guide as too often many viewers misinterpreted or didn't attempt to listen to the Indigenous artists' intentions.¹⁰ It is in this context that the artist Poitras and writer Webster examine the past, making uncomfortable connections visible to viewers of the Canadian government's attempt to cut-off Native culture and access to land while also revealing to viewers the web-like network of anachronistic resistance contributing to the preservation of Indigenous cultural prosperity and tenacity. To quote Mohawk artist Joe David, Native artists must "use the tools of our trade to challenge the government's sanctioned version of the truth ... to bring before the non-native Canadian public (which may, for the first time, be listening) the history of

expropriation, broken treaties, and bureaucratic and legal wrangling that amounts to a form of cultural apartheid.”¹¹ Joe David’s quote is an empowering call to Indigenous artists and curators to bring forward previously silenced Indigenous voices into public view through art; a call to represent the destructive effects that the intrusion of colonialism has had on Indigenous people.

In her essay, *From Colonization to Repatriation*, Gloria Cranmer Webster exemplifies a form of Native resistance that occurs across temporalities gradually rather than as a single locus rupture. Webster begins by calling attention to different perceptions of time, to quote the writer, about how white people making such a celebratory hoopla of a mere five hundred years “says a lot about their sense of history,”¹² while her ancestors have countless millennia worth of linguistic, cultural, social, philosophical, political and economic achievements on the North American continent.¹³ Reframing the temporal scale of human civilization in Canada from several centuries to millennia vastly changes the narrative of the country’s history. With a long-term outlook that inserts Indigenous thriving into both history and forward to the future, Webster refers to the past quincentenary as simply the ‘bad times.’ In her essay, Webster focuses on the Potlatch ban and the injustices committed to the Kwakwaka’waku people of Alert Bay, where the local provincial Indian Affairs officials tried for over 75 years to wipe out the potlatch tradition. The Potlatch is at the centre of the Kwakwaka’waku language, teachings and community ceremonies; examples of

these meaningful ceremonies include mourning the deceased, naming children, celebrating marriage and transferring title, the banning of the Potlatch attempted to break down the cultural core of the Kwakwaka'waku people. French philosopher Michel Foucault writes that, "different types of resistance counter corresponding types of power," despite concerted effort by the Canadian government and legislation in 1884 that banned "every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indigenous festival known as the 'Potlatch,'" the Kwakwaka'wu people resisted by carrying on portions of the Potlatch traditions by inventively travelling to more remote locations during inclement weather or even covertly travelling from home to home delivering potlatch gifts.¹⁴ Webster cites letters written by local provincial Indian Affairs officials in the late 1800's that describe the "influence of [how the] 'potlatch' has been so strong and has been assisted by other influences that their (the missionaries) efforts have to a large extent been nullified."¹⁵ We see evidence of resistance not in the form of a rupture or revolution but "embraced as points or knots that are spread over time and space" imperceptibly repeated until 1951 when the Indian Act was revised and the anti-potlatch law was covertly deleted without any formal process or acknowledgement by the Canadian government.^{16,17} Borrowing from Foucault, it can also be argued that the Kwakwaka'wu people showed remarkable resistance by being true to oneself and retaining cultural autonomy, repeatedly done over time, the Potlatch ceremony and resistance transcends temporalities connecting the past to the present as well as the

future.¹⁸ With a shortage of masks and paraphernalia as a result of extensive museum collecting and enforcement of the Potlatch ban, carvers in Alert Bay relied on photos of historical pieces when creating new masks, again illustrating a resistance that connects the present to the past, testimony to the cultural tenacity of aboriginal culture being carried into the future.

Further exploring rhizomatic-like resistance that traverses temporalities and constructs counter-narratives within contemporary Indigenous art, Cree artist Jane Ash Poitras' triptych entitled *Shaman Never Die V: Indigena 1990* (Figure 1) constructively interrogates the spiritual roots and contemporary realities of Indigenous life in a way that art historian and curator Aleta Ringlero describes as a "bitter indictment of the federal government's scheme 'to deal with the Indian.'"¹⁹ Poitras' three mixed media panels (106.5cm x 76.2cm, each panel) are visceral, her primary colour choices of red and black have a dark intensity and the smear-like brushstrokes invoke blood. The chaotically layered collages of newspaper clippings and photographs overlapped with stenciled text and transparent drawings engage with pressing social and political issues. The multimedia collages speak to multiplicities within life, discourse, and spirituality.

The first panel tackles themes of language, communication, and the colonial hierarchical segregation of native and non-native languages. Prominent in the left corner is a photograph of an eagle's head, a sacred symbol of power within Cree beliefs. Eagle feathers were believed to facilitate communication between spirits and

humans and feathers were collected as a badge of honour. The panel is divided in half vertically, the top half contains the script of the Cree alphabet and below it is a letter easily comprehended in the dominant ethnographic English language. The bottom script is a scathing implication of the Spanish imperialists for the 'colonial ethnocide oppression and destruction of the native way of life...prior to contact and colonization the aboriginal people's way of life included a strong system of spirituality and judicial and education systems that held total respect for the environment.' The Cree written language was originally introduced by missionaries in the early 1800's in order to spread Christian hymns. The juxtaposition of the languages on the panel speaks to a tangled and complex history, a bias against oral knowledge and the notion that Indigenous people were lesser and uncivilized versus the ethnocentric language of dominance and conquest that attempted to suppress aboriginal languages and confiscate aboriginal sovereignty.²⁰ Poitras pastes two newspaper clippings related to the Oka crisis explored in more detail in the other two panels, a petroglyphic rock art figure with an inverted triangular body and circular head on top in red ochre colour, a figure holding a rifle, and a drawing of a figure riding a horse, perhaps inviting the viewer to come along for a journey through many crossroads of history and resistance.

The second panel is dark and broody, most of the panel is painted black with a few small, semi-circular smears of loose brush stroke blood-like red and white emanating

from the lower left corner. The artist may be mimicking the dark interior of a sweat lodge, a practice that made a life changing impact on her own spirituality.²¹ The viewer's eye is drawn to a pasted, reappropriated image of Chief Poundmaker a politicized Indigenous figure that intersects many temporalities. Pihokahanapiwiin, or Chief Poundmaker, was a gifted spirit helper who gained notoriety for his ability to attract buffalos into corrals or pounds by singing and drumming. During the 1885 Metis Rebellion, Poundmaker was involved in a battle after his band was attacked by government troops. He was convicted of treason and later died in jail. Poundmaker's resistance to colonial domination took the form of a radical rupture in a face-to face battle with the military. However, this struggle also took the form of a slow-moving resistance with a time lag that resulted in the construction of a new narrative or a reversed discourse.²² In a temporal leap, twenty-seven years after the exhibition of Poitras' painting, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau exonerated the chief and made an official apology to the Poundmaker Cree Nation in 2019. Charlotte Townsend-Gault describes how the "representation of the heroic red man – wounded, compromised, but enduring – retains potency even when deconstructed and, through the artist's intervention, acquires new meaning."²³ Townsend-Gault's quote speaks to the rhizomatic movement of Indigenous resistance, although Chief Poundmaker may have died for his cause while jailed by the Canadian government, Poundmaker's exoneration 134 years later inserts a potent truth into the revision of Canada's colonial history. Poitras' use of the photo acts to awaken the public to the issues of how Indigenous

populations were treated by the Canadian government. Spaced out across the canvas are newspaper clippings of another rupture-like example of resistance pertaining to the Oka crisis when a violent conflict erupted between Canadian troops and the Mohawk nation after a golf course developer attempted to expand into Mohawk traditional territory. Poitras' examination of the past makes uncomfortable connections to the treatment of Indigenous populations that bring up themes of dispossession, trauma, and survival.²⁴ In contrast to the photographic mimesis of the human figure in the Chief Poundmaker photo, Poitras includes four flat alternating red and white inverted triangular rock art figures in a horizontal line across the center of the panel and the repeated phrase 'Shaman Never Die' below. McMaster argues that petroglyphs are profound images that mediate between two worlds and signify the importance of not only aboriginal consciousness but an aboriginal art history.²⁵ Poitras' juxtaposing of the rock art with nineteenth and twentieth century news clippings, presents an interesting and active interaction of the past with the present. Deborah Doxtater argues that Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to time are often in conflict.²⁶ Western societies with a focus on the concept of progress often judge the past as completely distinct from the present and deem the past inferior.²⁷ According to western ideas of history grounded in rational and scientific units of time such as: centuries, decades, years, months, days and hours, it is not possible for the past to interact with the present.²⁸ Indigenous writers and artists, however, may be more likely to connect the

past with the present, as from their perspective it is not the divisions that are important but the connections.²⁹ The theme of grounding the present and the future in the past is also echoed in Poitras repeated phrase “Shaman Never Die.” Historical records often marginalize or exclude Canadian history prior to the arrival of the first explorers, with the attitude that “prehistoric times were viewed only as a static prelude to real history.”³⁰ The omission of the knowledge of Shamans as part of the sweeping omission of Indigenous history, positions Indigenous people as ‘objects of study’, the ‘mythic image of a natural man’ who lived before history and civilization.³¹ Poitras’ nimble temporal navigation interrogates the Canadian master narrative of history while speaking to the timelessness of Aboriginal spiritual values, a tenacious spirituality that relied on oral language and resisted programs of forced assimilation.³²

The third panel within the triptych is the most chaotic and textured, the panel is almost completely layered in yellowed newspaper articles with a variety of white drawings on top that prevent the viewers eye from finding one focal point while creating a depth of materiality. A repeating theme within the news clippings is based on the Meech Lake Accord, a series of proposed changes to the Canadian constitution introduced in 1987 that would recognize the province of Quebec as a distinct society while failing to include equal recognition for Indigenous people. Elija Harper, an Oji-Cree member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, famously stood in the Manitoba legislature holding an eagle feather and quietly but defiantly said “no” to the Meech Lake

Accord, creating a filibuster that ultimately led to the demise of the proposed legislation. The repetition of the symbol of the eagle feather as a facilitator of communication from the first panel, creates a powerful connection to the resilience of traditions and beliefs that have been guarded by Indigenous communities. Resistance can involve rhizomatic movements between the past, present and future, Gerald McMaster alludes to this temporal zigzag writing; “Native people have the history and vision to move effectively in the world events that so profoundly affect their lives, and especially their drive for self-determination.”³³ Layered overtop of the newspaper articles are simple outline drawings painted in transparent white that cover most of the vertical and horizontal areas of the panel. The drawings include three boats, possibly Columbus’ three ships the Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria, a horse drawn carriage, and a bold white cross. These symbols of colonial intervention mingle with an inverted triangular rock art figure and a large-eyed pointy eared creature resembling a wolf, fox or coyote, part of the continuation of the record of Indigenous survivance in North America.

In conclusion, resistance in the form of ruptures or slow-moving incrementally repeated actions that traverse temporalities in the INDIGENA project and specifically in Webster and Poitras works, perforate or interrupt the hegemonic truths pushed in the master narratives, inserting new truths and counter narratives while also promoting new forms of subjectivity. Webster and Poitras’ contributions represent an aboriginal consciousness and an aboriginal art history that illustrate that it is the connections to

ancestral knowledge and the past not divisions that are important for not only retaining but mediating cultural autonomy in the future. The INDIGENA project grew out of a response to the denial of Aboriginal identity and sovereignty, these responses speak to the conjoining of the multiplicity of narratives and histories, where no one history is more central or valuable than the other.



Figure 1: *Shaman Never Die V: Indigena 1990*, Three panels, mixed media on canvas, 106.5cm x 76.2cm, each panel, Collection of Canadian Museum of Civilization.

NOTES

¹ McMaster, Gerald, "INDIGENA: A Native Curator's Perspective," *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (Autumn, 1992): 73.

² McMaster, Gerald and Lee-ann Martin, "Introduction," in *INDIGENA: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, ed. Gerald McMaster and Lee-ann Martin (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), 15.

³ McMaster, Gerald, "INDIGENA: A Native Curator's Perspective," 70.

⁴⁴ Lilja, Mona, "The politics of time and temporality in Foucault's theorisation of resistance: ruptures, time-lags and decelerations," *Journal of Political Power* 11, no.3 (April, 2018): 430.

⁵ Nemiroff, Diana, Robert Houle, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Modernism, Nationalism and Beyond," in *Land, spirit, power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* (Ottawa: The Gallery, 1992), 35-36.

⁶ McMaster, Gerald, "INDIGENA: A Native Curator's Perspective," 73.

⁷ Doxtater, Deborah, "Reconnecting the Past: An Indian Idea of History," in *Revisions*, ed. Helga Pakasaar (Banff, AB: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1992), 25,27.

⁸ Gray, Viviane, "Persistence and Resistance: The Indigenous Art Collection," in *Indigenous Art Collection: Selected Works 1967-2017*, ed. Lee-Ann Martin and Viviane Gray (Gatineau: Indigenous Art Centre, 2018), 43.

⁹Hill, Tom and Karen Duffek, *Beyond History: May 31 to July, 1989, Vancouver Art Gallery* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989), 7.

¹⁰ McMaster, Gerald, "INDIGENA: A Native Curator's Perspective," 72.

¹¹ Townsend-Gault, Charlotte, "Impurity as Danger," *Current Anthropology* 34, no.1 (February, 1993): 97.

¹²Cranmer Webster, Gloria, "From Colonization to Repatriation," in *INDIGENA: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, ed. Gerald McMaster and Lee-ann Martin (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), 25.

¹³ McMaster, Gerald and Lee-ann Martin, "Introduction," 18.

¹⁴ Cranmer Webster, Gloria, "From Colonization to Repatriation," 33.

¹⁵ Ibid, 31.

¹⁶ Lilja, Mona, "The politics of time and temporality," 424-425.

¹⁷ Cranmer Webster, Gloria, "From Colonization to Repatriation," 34.

¹⁸ Lilja, Mona, "The politics of time and temporality," 420.

¹⁹ Ringlero, Aleta M, "True Colors: Artist as Advocate," *American Indian* (Spring, 2006): 32.

²⁰ McMaster, Gerald and Lee-ann Martin, "Introduction," 16.

²¹ Gee, Gary, "Poitras' spiritual odyssey," *Windspeaker*. May 26, 1989.

²² Lilja, Mona, "The politics of time and temporality," 425,430.

- ²³ Townsend-Gault, Charlotte, "Impurity as Danger," 96.
- ²⁴ McCallum, Pamela, *Cultural Memories and Imagined Futures: The Art of Jane Ash Poitras* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2009): 13.
- ²⁵ McMaster, Gerald, "Towards an Aboriginal Art History," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (London: Routledge, 1999): 88.
- ²⁶ Doxtater, Deborah, "Reconnecting the Past: An Indian Idea of History," 26.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 27.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 26.
- ²⁹ Ibid, 27.
- ³⁰ Trigger, Bruce, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered*, (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 67.
- ³¹ McMaster, Gerald. "Towards an Aboriginal Art History," 12.
- ³² McMaster, Gerald and Lee-ann Martin, "Introduction," 15.
- ³³ McMaster, Gerald, "INDIGENA: A Native Curator's Perspective," 73.

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