

**Dana Claxton's The Patient Storm (2006)**

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Reprinted: "Dana Claxton's Patient Storm." *Dana Claxton: Fringing the Cube*. Grant Arnold, editor. Vancouver Art Gallery. 2018. 71-79.

Indigenous presence in the popular media is usually a cue to stories of crime, abuse, poverty, loss, fluff and feathers pride, or government sponsored success. And Aboriginal self-representations, when they don't mirror mainstream narratives, are often self-reflexive tortured recitations on: 'what does it mean to be Native in contemporary times?' and 'how will we ever get over the damage?' Meta-discourse is instructive but not very inspiring. So, I took a small pleasure in seeing two beautiful, confident Aboriginal women talking with each other in Dana Claxton's new online video, "The Patient Storm."<sup>1</sup>



While mainstream representations of Aboriginal people grow with our population, Aboriginal knowledge has not received proportional airtime. There is talk in these circles about Aboriginal knowledge—a lot of preteritive gesturing toward and around—but the public is rarely served more than a glimpse of the content. Resistance to engage may be because this knowledge is not just information, it is embedded in committed practices and requires more than reading and thinking. Engagement may also be difficult because the traditional Aboriginal worldview contradicts the currently dominant one. It is metaphysical, deeply ecological and communitarian.



Elders at pipe ceremonies have told us many times that Aboriginally generated knowledge is not just for First Nations people but should be shared with everyone. Real knowledge transcends the particular, the nation, even history. However, because Aboriginal ways of knowing are experiential, bound up with communities and rituals, only those willing to repeatedly pass the social and conceptual barriers between peoples have access. Art works can serve as this threshold. They can be non-threatening portals between worldviews.

The initial gentle pleasure I have with Dana Claxton's "The Patient Storm" comes simply from seeing Aboriginal people not ruminating on colonialism or contemporary Aboriginality. They just get on with Being (post-colonial, contemporary Aboriginals). This is not as easy as it sounds. We are colonized by an imaginary that has us read Aboriginal bodies into specific landscapes and stories.<sup>2</sup> However, the work of decolonization need not only be about deconstructing power and reminding us who we were, it is about performing who we are. Perhaps we are ready to trade tropes and exchange irony for allegory.



Dana Claxton's "The Patient Storm" is an allegory of the competing impulses in human beings and societies: conservancy and change. Through the figures of Storm and Lightning, Claxton's legend suggests a system—inspired by Lakota teachings and practices (the Sundance)<sup>3</sup>—in which these seeming opposites become complementary. Tradition, on one

side, and the desire for action and novelty, on the other, are usually represented as binaries and often as a generational divide. “The Patient Storm” mimics this convention, only to melt the distinctions and show that traditional ways and modern society are not incompatible.

Such lofty ambitions require an elevated site and grand characters. In order to show her women as themselves and not as colonial subjects, and to have us see the knowledge they figure as exceeding specific cultures, Claxton sets them in a space apart. They are demi-goddesses suspended above the world, beyond stereotype and historicity in a timeless continuity. However, they are not detached. Storm and Lightning only achieve their full being when they descend and meet the land and join its people in Sundance.



The scene couldn't be simpler. The set consists only of a white La Chaise chair.<sup>4</sup> The background is a changing projection of clouds: in post production, Claxton keyed in images of clouds from mid-day to sunset, from accumulation to forming storm. In the middle are images of stars and celestial spirals. The characters are two women who personify natural forces. Claxton describes the older woman, Storm, as “an elegant, knowledgeable patient woman;”<sup>5</sup> and Lightning as “a trickster type, crazysexycool girlish woman.” Their brown outfits suggest a timeless, earthy style; but the cuts reflect different generations and temperaments: Storm wears a smart, knee-length business dress; Lightning is dressed in more casual culottes, a T-shirt and hoodie. What links them, besides the brown cloth, are wrist and ankle bands, which Claxton explains, “are worn by Sundancers, along with a crown around the head. They are [traditionally] made from sacred red cloth and sage....” The costumes signal the traditional and enduring alongside the contemporary and fashionable. They are differences, but not opposites. This theme is echoed in the soundtrack which features a gently throbbing synthesized music accompanied by what sounds like a traditional rattle.

The plot is just as lean. Storm and Lightning prepare to descend to the earth but are held up by late members of their party. The scene opens with Storm (Samaya Jardey), a woman in her late thirties reclining on a large, cloud-like chair. Her head is tilted back; her long dark

hair drapes down. The camera jumps back to a mid-shot revealing Lightning (Marie Prince),<sup>6</sup> who is in her early twenties. They talk. Storm mostly stays seated; Lightning twirls an orbit around her. After seven minutes and 48 seconds, it's over. Not much happens, but a whole cosmos emerges.



While we only see Storm and Lightning, at least five other individuals or groups are mentioned. Storm oscillates between lounging languor and straight-spine alertness. She moves slowly and gracefully with fluid and confident gestures. She is stable, dignified, calm. Lightning describes her as sometimes “blue” and complains that she is slow to get going, but acknowledges that once in motion, “the whirl, the twirl brings life to you.”

Lightening is energetic. She sits only once. While her initial movements are relaxed, as the scene progresses, she becomes more animated, almost dancing. She describes herself as “a grrrrrrl,” and as “Exquisite Lady L, keeper of bolt—the rolling zig, zig, zag.” Her rhythmic speech is often poetic and strange. Storm finds her impatient and her hip hopish language hard to follow. Storm often makes faces and ignores Lightning when she is particularly obscure.

“Rattling Wings,” “the Lightning People,” and “the prince,” are the only other beings given proper names. Lightning is one of the Lightening People, though, as “keeper of the bolt,” she may have an elevated status. Because Storm is waiting for “the others,” and regularly restrains and corrects Lightning, we can infer that she is in charge, perhaps even personifies the whole system. “The prince, the tide,” is more of an allusion than a character, and even then, he is a confused reference. When Lightning mentions him, Storm is puzzled; suggesting that either she doesn’t know him or doesn’t understand the whole sentence.



Lightning's energy is sensual. Her speech is full of rhythm and rhyme: "Stormy Storm, let's twirl the swirl and swirl the twirl, zig the zag and zag the zig." Her words flow and jump as her body glides in near dance. She often seems silly; but just as often, wise. Her reference to the prince might be a silly moment. Storm seems to treat it that way. But Storm is clearly repressive and side-steps Lightning's many sexual innuendos. "Follow the fellow, the prince—the tide. Become wet, become untied." The building rhythm and force of the tide, here figured as masculine, wetness, and the play on tide and untied seems an obvious string of sexual metaphors. But Storm isn't biting. The building energy, the anticipation, frustration, and concluding off-screen release is the elemental force that drives the story's action.

Lightning speculates that "everyone else," or "the others," meaning Rattling Wings and the Lightning People, may be late because they are "caught up in the valley, the valley of lovvvvvvvvvvvve." Some sort of polymorphous sexuality seems to be roiling in this snug metaphor: "he and me, or him and you, her and he, or she and she, or him and he, or they and they, whichever way...." Storm looks disturbed and changes the subject. Is she puzzled that these possibilities exist, or that the Storm knows about them? Whatever the case, she has other things on her mind and wants other things on Lightning's mind. At the moment, the Lightning People run hot while Storm blows cool.

"The Patient Storm" is not the retelling of a traditional story; it is a creative, contemporary allegory. Apart from the weather, what do these figures represent? Storm is a slow moving but dynamic force, not an individual storm but the force behind individual phenomena. Similarly, Lightning is not an instance of lightning, she is "keeper of the bolts," an inexhaustible archetypal energy behind every specific occurrence of lightning. Storm has two aspects: Storm, the storm potential, the burgeoning energy that she tries to conserve, knowing full well that it must eventually erupt; and Stormy, her complementary, violent and generative aspect. We only see Storm in the video. Stormy only manifests when Storm leaves the scene at the end of the video. She explains that Stormy is her "fundamental nature," and that she is impelled by energies beyond herself to reveal her irrepressible force: "I have an obligation to appear and present my...my fundamental nature. Everybody must." This is not an embarrassment, but an acknowledgement of the fundamental rhythm of the universe.



Storm is driven by several forces. As Storm, she is conservative, a leader and regulator, keeper of protocol. She follows the rules and obligations that precede her. These “civil” principles are complemented by an equal force, the Stormy aspect, characterized by whirling and twirling, by dance and pleasure. They conceivably have the same energy—but the static state requires less of it so endures longer; the active state dispels its energy more quickly and subsides sooner. When Lightning describes their transformed character once they present their other aspect, she uses the word “turbulence,” which Storm violently rejects in her only burst of anger: “Turbulence! Is that what you call us? No darling, not turbulence...we are the glamorous clamour overhead.” The storm/dance is not a disruption, but a beautiful and joyous aspect of a continuum.

Storm is calm and patient before the dance. She is conservative—literally, holding back, cautious, waiting for the right moment. However, when that moment comes, she lets loose, literally loses herself, becomes Stormy. Storm is the figure of tradition. Traditional peoples have a conservative aspect, the teachings and rituals that hold them together. At the same time, traditional societies also set aside a time and place for ecstasy, for rituals, dances, visions, fasts and feasts that attract and release spiritual and physical energy.

Lightning is an apprentice to this duality. While she is drawn to impulsive youthful action, she allows herself to be checked by the older being. She is positioned between the revellers in the valley—a group and activities she seems to know all about and may even have just come from—and the more adult Storm. She signals her willingness to pass from youth to adulthood by being the first of her group to take her place alongside Storm. Symbolically, she even slips into Storm’s chair/throne for a moment, as if to try it out. As the elder, Storm is often irritated with Lightning’s impatience and imperfect understanding, but does appreciate her timely arrival and playful, revitalizing energy.





Against her foil, Lightning, Storm is less energetic and more of a grown up. And yet, in her shifting from proper posture sitting to draping herself over the chair, she displays sensual possibilities. Her movements hint that she loves to dance, but that there is a proper time for everything. Lightning's body is less regulated. She tries to contain her energy, but it is constantly spilling into dance. She tries to control her language, but it is continuously falling into poetry.

The last figures are "the people," the humans upon which the storm will be visited. In her first speech, Storm says: "If we don't appear—something is wrong. The Cosmos gone crazy—the people will say." She is not a free agent; she is regulated by the force of tradition and unconscious necessity of her nature. The Cosmos is both how things are but also what things mean. Without these recurring events, both natural and social (the storm and the dance) "something is wrong."

The most ambiguous term in the video is "the others." Sometimes it means the late (possibly) orgiastic Lightning and Wind folks; other times it means "the people." The "others," in the sense of "the people," is subdivided into two groups: those mortals who participate in the dance/storm and those who resist. Also, according to Claxton, "the others" are "those who don't believe and those who are anti Indian in general." But "the others have been opposed to us for so long" also include "those Indians who are so Christianized that they fear their own traditional spiritual practices." Lightning explains: "sacred little scaredy cats. Their knowledge did not fare well to wisdom just. Imagine that. Their opposite stance makes them tall ...even for little little scared fur balls. BUT..ah!!! ..not tall enough to see... certainty. Perhaps they are blind....eyes gone missing, eyes shut, shut!" In this cosmology, ideally, everyone, human and nature and divine will be swept up in the dance, "this moment of connectivity," where all "fundamental natures" are expressed and are one without division. This is the ecstatic experience; "the glamorous clamour"!

Storm and Lightning are given full, complementary natures: physical and metaphysical; responsible, yet sensual; traditional and ecstatic. The oppositional others have knowledge but not wisdom. Lightning further proposes that their status derives from negation. It seems what is rejected may be ecstatic pleasure, losing oneself in a group ritual, in metaphysical belief. While the others' materialism might raise them in one aspect, it makes them not quite tall enough to see into this richer realm. Lightning sees the denial of spirituality as either a tragic or a willful blindness.

Storm and Lightning participate in another sort of knowledge (Aboriginal ways of knowing) that permits you to join the ecstatic moment, dissolve into the dance. Storm says, “Those who know will join us and the others are going to have to wait until they are ready.” Lightning repeats, “Join us, those who know, start getting ready....until the others are ready, they will have to wait.” This knowledge may be as simple as accepting metaphysical possibilities and being open to community. The lack of this knowledge of how things are is figured as ignorance. Storm and Lightning face the camera and invite us to the dance, but they do not coerce. This is not an evangelical faith looking to win converts. Infidels are not killed; they are recognized as afraid, pitied and left to themselves. The others must simply “wait until they are ready” (to end their otherness).

The video concludes with Lightning saying, “...we dance across the sky—without defeat.” Despite the opposition and disbelieving others, they and all who believe and participate, and live with their dualities and in the connectedness of all things, will persist.

This construction of identity through the denial of the metaphysical and its social expressions, Lightning suggests, is based in fear. It could be that Claxton is characterizing this opposition as male (“fur balls!”), or at least as masculine. But that is not necessarily the case. When I asked her about it, she didn’t think so. She explained that the scaredy cats refer to people who are afraid of Aboriginal cosmologies and rituals.<sup>7</sup>

Toward the end, the coming storm, which Storm leads but is also subject to and overwhelmed by, is characterized by Lightning as “the moment of hope, this moment of promise, this moment of love, this moment of connectivity....” This, according to Claxton, is the Sundance where all the elements come together:

I have been a Sundancer for a while now and the thunder and lightning beings must attend the dance, a storm must make an appearance. Lightning and thunder confirms and rain cleanses. So, they make their appearance, the cosmos, as they did the night before our shoot—which doesn’t happen very often in Vancouver—a huge lightning/thunder and rain storm that woke Marie Prince. Lightning came into her room. Storm had an experience as well. Me, I slept thru the entire storm...as I had come home 2 days before from Sundancing and needed a good long rest.





With the Sundance, I maintain and enhance my own relationship with the cosmos and the divine. It gives me strength, spiritual strength and connectivity to that realm, as well as strengthens my family ties both in Saskatchewan and South Dakota.

“The Patient Storm” is designed to cross boundaries and encourages boundary crossing: between people, peoples, and from metaphysics to spirituality.<sup>8</sup> It is a modern legend that echoes the past to reveal the common dance behind all appearances.

When I watch “The Patient Storm,” I sense something in the wind: a warm, faint, sweet scent that prefigures a glamorous clamour. I feel in the calm; an after-battle exhaustion, longing for home. But nothing is as it was. Is it time to turn from the surging red energy of righteousness; from the tools of struggle to those of rebuilding? Dana Claxton offers hope and possibility.

David Garneau  
October, 2006  
Regina, Saskatchewan



Aboriginal New Media Art

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## The Patient Storm

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The Patient Storm

The Patient Storm  
Artist: Dana Claxton



Production Photo

[QuickTime](#) is required for multimedia elements.

"This short work is a conversation between Storm and Lightning. Storm is an elegant, knowledgeable patient woman. Lightning is a trickster type style, craxyweezycool girlish woman who talks somewhat in riddles and rhyme. At the beginning of their conversation they are waiting for Wind, Rattling Wings and the other Thunder People. Together, they need to make an appearance at the Sundance.

The elements are running late. The wait turns into waiting for justice in the abstract!"

— Dana Claxton

Visit the Exhibit at [StormSpirits.ca](http://StormSpirits.ca)  
Aboriginal New Media Art



Now Playing: Video Artist Talk with Dana Claxton

Filmed: October 27, 2006

Length: 2 minutes 45 seconds

Size: 2.44 megs

Description: Dana discusses her media project, The Patient Storm

Note: This video requires Adobe Flash Player for your browser.  
[Click here to download.](#)

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1 “The Patient Storm” is an online video project, created by Dana Claxton, and commissioned by Urban Shaman for the Storm Spirits - Aboriginal New Media Art project/gallery.

2 Many sources could be cited. By a good recent one is: Greg Young-ing, “The Indigenous tradition/New Technology Interface.” *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*. Walter Phillips Gallery Editions Melanie Townsend, Dana Claxton, Steve Loft eds. 2005. p. 179-187.

3 “The work does specifically address the Sundance, when Ahawsis invited me to participate, and I read the curatorial intent, the first image I had was of the Sundance and the storm and cloud formations that I have seen. The Lakota teaching, "everything you need to know is in the sky," also came to mind (from a correspondence with Dana Claxton).

4 The La Chaise is an organically shaped chair that invites sitting or reclining equally. Designed by Charles and Ray Eames (1948) for a Museum of Modern Art competition, it is inspired by "Floating Figure", a sculpture by Gaston Lachaise.

5 All the quotations from Dana Claxton are retrieved for email conversation I had with her

in preparing this essay.

6 “Storm is Salish from Capilano Reserve and Marie Prince is from up north Carrier country” (Dana Claxton).

7 “Certainly...the "others" are those who are anti-Indian and the furballs are scardee cats...both male and female...perhaps on a subtextual level more male...” (Dana Claxton).

8 “Claxton has described her two new works as an attempt to construct a ‘religious art approach,’ one that ‘hybridizes a cultural process of contemporary art-making and traditional knowledge by creating a site where two seemingly different ways of knowing or being interface.”

Dana Claxton’s “Artist statement,” ArtSpeak Gallery. May 2000, cited in Monika Kin Gagnon, “Worldviews in Collision: Dana Claxton’s Video Installations,” *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*. Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, Melanie Townsend, Dana Claxton, Steve Loft eds. 2005. p. 70.