Indigenous Criticism: On Not Walking with Our Sisters

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Last November 24th, in Saskatoon, celebrated artist Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) declined to enter the *Walking with Our Sisters* exhibition of beaded moccasin vamps memorializing murdered and missing Indigenous women. Two days earlier, in Calgary, curator and critical art writer Richard W. Hill (Cree) challenged the use of clichéd and dubious signifiers of Indigenity such as "dream catchers; four sacred colour designs, and some of the teachings around that; and phrases such as 'Turtle Island', 'Mother Earth', 'Great Spirit'; and the use of sweat lodges and tipis by people and in places not historically associated with those things." Of the many engaging and moving things said, shown, and performed at the *Stronger than Stone: (re)inventing the Indigenous Monument* conference (held in Calgary at ACAD, Nov. 21-22, and at Wanuskewin Park in Saskatoon, Nov. 23-24), these refusals were perhaps the most surprising and significant. They reveal perplexing issues in Indigenous cultural politics, issues rarely discussed in public: the challenge of the secular Native, and Indigenous criticism of Aboriginal traditionalism.

Belmore and Hill's rebuff of contemporary traditionalism was shocking and elating. The pair rejected what most people—Indigenous and not—take as iconic signs and essential qualities of Indigeneity. And each gave principled reasons for doing so. In his talk, Hill asked that people reconsider displays that are either dubious in terms of their exclusively First Nations origins, or that reinforce the notion and practice of Indigenous identity as fixed, as bound to "blind imitation or mechanical ritual," and instead focus on building on those traditions critically. Belmore said that she was not keen to experience *Walking with Our Sisters* because it meant having to pass through a protocol gauntlet that requires women to put on a skirt and to smudge—or refuse to do so—before entering the exhibition. She explained that she did not participate in ceremony and did not appreciate the gendering of the exhibition space.

I knew that Belmore, like many other Indigenous artists and thinkers, is not a traditionalist. But this fact is usually muffled. In public, secular First Nations, Inuit, and Métis folks tend to be polite and reticent about their difference so as not to offend the faithful, or, perhaps, disturb Settler projected expectations. Belmore's open refusal and Hill's public criticism was met with surprise and anxious excitement by many at the two venues.

As a Métis artist, curator, and critical writer, I too was shocked and elated, as much by the depth of feeling and thoughtfulness in these challenges, and their reception, as by the fact that they occurred in public. It is not common for internal Indigenous cultural dissent to be aired to a mixed audience. This marks a positive but anxious shift in Indigenous public intellection. The risk is that by talking openly about internal differences we fracture our fragile solidarity. The gain is that these debates will serve to pull down what Hill characterizes as the false "monument" of Indigenity: the inauthentic "signs of Indianness" that have been piled up and made into seeming "visible strengths that cover for serious cultural loses." Hill recognizes that Indigenous people and worldviews do have something to offer the world, but that these contributions should be evaluated on their merits as sound concepts and ways of being rather than have their shadow forms be exoticized, protected, and mummified as mere displays.

At the base of every contemporary society is a tension between materialism and metaphysics; between those who believe that matter is all that exists and those who believe in a reality immanent in, and exceeding, the physical. Of course, few of us are so exclusive. Believers of both sorts have doubts. The faithful puzzle over the enormous range of competing accounts offered by other religious traditions. And they struggle with the place of personal revelation when it contradicts dogma, and the fact of the confident infidel, and successful secular societies. Materialists are disturbed by how the founding axioms of their deepest knowledge are as fragile and indefensible as religious beliefs. They are also surprised at how language is haunted by metaphysics, how it has them ascribe intentions to entities and forces such as history, the public, the self, the market, works of art, and so on; and how the irresistible habit of metaphor resembles magical thinking. Indigenous people are no different.

There are, as Hill is quick to point out, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people who know their language, histories, and ceremonies, and were raised in their territories. But they are few. And, thanks to generations of aggressive assimilation, even these ways of knowing and being are not innocent of colonial influence. Most Aboriginal people live in cities, many are Christians; some are even Buddhists. Many are not only non-spiritual but also non-traditional. What does it mean to be secular, urban, without your language and traditional culture, and still be Aboriginal? Are we merely the effect of racism? These are the sorts of questions Hill wants us to answer through authentic recovery and innovative performance rather than recourse to generic spectacles of Indianness.

For the most part, the dominant contemporary art world is secular. Participating artists are generally required to either repress their metaphysical beliefs or be materialists if they want to signify in that realm. Until recently, the opposite was true of Indigenous art worlds. In these satellite spheres the assumption was that everything was also spiritual. The Modernists (Fauves, Surrealists, Freud, Jung, Picasso, Pollock…) derived pleasure and meaning from Indigenous art by consuming it as if it were unadulterated messages from civilizations' unconscious. They read Indigenous art and people as exotic shadow repositories of Western cultural lack, loss, and repression: animism, naturalism, collectivism (tribalism), etc.

So, what is a contemporary Indigenous artist to do? If you make art that evokes or embodies the numinous you seem to accept and perform dominant cultural projections and expectations. But avoiding the spiritual may mean turning your back on your cultural traditions and people to pass into the secular. There seems to be no tenable position beyond playing the exotic Other or assimilation.

This paradox is played out most dramatically in Australia. The wildly popular art made by rural, non-degreed Aboriginal artists there—Papunya artists being the most internationally celebrated—is a separate enterprise than what the mostly urban, MFAed Indigenous artists engage in. Perhaps the most important distinction is that the first group (by far the most numerous) makes lots and lots of art but does not participate in public critical discourse—they don't write about or curate it. While both groups are almost exclusively managed by Settler folks and markets, there are notable recent exceptions in terms of curation (Tess Allas, Brenda Croft, Jonathan Jones, Bruce McLean, Djon Mundine, Hetti Perkins, etc.). Urban artists participate not only in the Indigenous art world but also in the larger international art world and its discourses.

The divide is most pronounced, however, in terms of content. So-called desert painting made a sudden migration from millennia of wall, sand, bark, and body painting traditions to acrylic on canvas in the 1970s (due to non-Indigenous governmental, educational, anthropological, and art market interventions). Most of the content of these paintings evokes the artist's relation to country, and what is depicted is usually proprietary. There are some recent diversions from this practice, artists working non-objectively, but in most cases, the art is a form of metaphysical and literal mapping, an inseparable fusion of custom-country-relationships-spirit.

Most of the art I want to call contemporary—but really mean urban, schooled, and critical—has the consequences of colonization as its subject. The majority is about racism, showing its effects; challenging stereotypes by taking on colonial imagery and history; and (in only a few cases) by presenting positive counter-examples (Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Brook Andrew, Richard Bell, Gordon Bennett, Mervyn Bishop, Daniel Boyd, Brenda Croft, Destiny Deacon, Fiona Foley, Genevieve Grieves, Tracey Moffatt, Christopher Pease, R E A, Michael Riley, Christian Thompson, and many others). When about country, which is rare, most offer a political sense of territory.

The strategies resemble contemporary First Nations, Inuit, and Métis art, only more so. Unlike here, however, I know of no prominent contemporary Indigenous Australian artists (artists of the second group) who routinely make work about spirituality. In fact, many are adamant that to do so would be proof of assimilation. Richard Bell notoriously rails against what he calls "Ooga Booga art;" by which he means those abstractions of country prized by non-Indigenous consumers for its seemingly authentic, fuzzy spirituality. He complains that this work is not Indigenous at all but a construction of colonial markets. A sentiment he expressed most famously as "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing." Vernon Ah Kee deepens the argument: "the only authentic Aboriginal people in this country are the urban Aboriginal people. They're the only ones that behave autonomously. We're the only ones whose lives aren't wholly and solely determined by white construction… Now what happens in the deserts and remote communities is that people create art and they try to live their lives in a way that correlates to this romanticized idea, and it's a white construction."

Richard W. Hill echoes this position but with a significant difference; he accepts that there is deep Indigenous knowledge and powerful worldviews, the serious consideration of which would improve human and environmental conditions. He does not reject Indigenous spirituality. However, he does challenge the seemingly mandatory nature of its display as a qualification of Indigenity. Further, he questions the authenticity of many of these practices. The "signs of Indianness, often in the form of Indian spirituality and ceremony that are circulating widely and publicly in all of our communities…especially in social services agencies," are "often less a heroic recovery than an invention….What has been passing for signs of Indianness for some time now…is really…New Age bullshit that was created since the 1970s. It's our bad luck that our cultural revival coincided with neo-Rousseauian, hippy Romanticism." Many Aboriginal people "attempt to confirm the authenticity of our identity through forms that are at best a pre-critical, Pan-Indian melange, or simply invention."
[Hello, editor. I can't find the source of this quotation!]

Echoing Marx, Hill explains that these non-critical, celebratory displays of the 'traditional' absorbs a great deal of energy and distracts from the real, material and social inequities Indigenous peoples face. He is concerned that so much creative energy is spent on the preservation of the dubiously traditional and supporting the "illusion of stasis." The tautology "we do it because that's what we do" does not leaving room for growth and change. Hill evocatively has us picture our ancestors not as museum specimens, but as vital problem-solvers engaged with the world and each other. He argues that the preservationist ideology assumes that "our pre-contact ancestors had some perfection that we lack, an agency, a power of creation of ideas that we do not." He asks that we "treat our intellectual heritage as a set of active tools and be afraid to manipulate and use them." Hill's arguments make intellectual sense. However, I worry that the consequence of his purge could be the sort of exaggerated Indigenous divide seen in Australia.

In the late 1930s to 50s, Clement Greenberg led the intellectual arm of the American Modernist cultural movement. He sought to purify art by eliminating imagery and celebrating non-narrative form. Like the Protestant Reformation that cleansed the temple of idolatrous Catholic decoration before him, Greenberg established an ontological hierarchy that placed non-objective art at the top of the aesthetic heap and dismissed lesser forms as "rear-guard" and popular. In his famous essay, "Avant Guarde and Kitsch," he describes kitsch as a commercialization and cheapening of earlier, finer, expressions and objects: "the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture."

Greenberg saw kitsch as the result of industrialization. A good Marxist, he was upset that machine-made things were displaced local, handmade craft. Clearly, the made in Taiwan, or China, or where-ever-else-than-here cheap (mis)representations of Indianness are a pernicious effect of colonialism and capitalism, and do exploit, diminish, and displace Indigenous culture. Aboriginal people have a very difficult time creating cultural goods that must compete with mass-produced replicas. But Hill's target is higher up the heap. He is not referring to mass-produced fakes, but to cultural objects and activities produced and prized by Indigenous folks.

Almost immediately Greenberg was criticized for being elitist and dismissive of the uses of these objects and practices by the disenfranchised, by those who cannot afford fine art and have no mind to join the avant-garde—especially in its revolutionary, militaristic imaginary. It's a thought we should still mind. While these things and actions may be a bulwark against oppression, as Hill suggests, by what criteria do we determine which parts should be shunned because they are inauthentic, and which should be praised as creative adaptations?

I am fascinated by the *Walking with Our Sisters* phenomena. It is by most measures the most popular Indigenous produced exhibition of contemporary art in Canada. The display consists of 1,700 pairs of vamps (moccasin tops) beaded by novice and experienced beaders and fine artists to commemorate the "missing and murdered Indigenous women of Canada and the USA." Assembled in 2013, it has so far toured six cities and is booked for nineteen more. (Full disclosure: I have vamps in the show and have seen the exhibition in three locations. I have been uniquely moved each time.)

While the official website calls the work an "art installation," it occupies hovers between the art world and the contemporary traditional world. *Walking with Our Sisters* has been shown in art galleries as well as community spaces. When in art spaces, the exhibition is curator-free and abides by protocols distinct from the gallery's rules. The exhibition makes the space of its temporary residence Indigenous. While initiated by artist Christi Belcourt (Métis), who continues to over-see the project, each venue is managed by a team of local women who adapt protocols and arrange the vamps according to local meanings, needs, and preferences.

Walking with Our Sisters is fascinating because while produced by an artist it has taken on a life of its own under the stewardship of non-elite Indigenous communities. The exhibition is also an anomaly among the Indigenous host communities. Because the show is novel, and the sites are usually non-Indigenous, there are no pre-existing protocols that cover it. Gatherings occur long in advance of the installation to discuss the right way to do things. Folks do their best to make something suitable and respectable for each space and community.

And then there are the works themselves. The vamps were gathered without a curatorial filter. They range from beautifully crafted fine art objects to aesthetically weak but affective expressions of sadness, rage, and solidarity. There are lots of dream catchers and four direction imagery, and plenty of non-critical sentiment, and other dubious Indigenous displays. But it is as a whole work, as a collection of objects within communal engagements, that it exceeds kitsch and performs what I think Hill is calling for. *Walking with Our Sisters* is an example of something authentic emerging not from a ritualistic adherence to tradition (real or invented) but a creative response that builds on and adapts tradition to express and critique a real issue faced by living Indigenous people. However, this does not make it immune from criticism.

From *Vigil* (2003) forward, Rebecca Belmore has produced some of the most affective art about murdered and missing Indigenous women. There is no question that she walks with our sisters. That she didn't enter *Walking with Our Sisters* is, as I read it, not a breach of solidarity as much a questioning of the form. Is the request that female participants wear skirts truly Indigenous or a revival/imposition of an old-fashioned, Christianized style and gender binary? Is Belmore's rejection of the skirt a rejection of the colonial and patriarchal codes it implies, attitudes and behaviours that are in large part responsible for the tragedy memorialized? Does the memorializing and sacralising—even the anesthetizing—of missing and murdered women distract from more direct forms of political action?

In any case, Rebecca Belmore's embodied refusal and public explanation is a form of Indigenous criticism of Indigenous art and culture as surely as is Richard W. Hill's paper. In fact, both are calls for further like actions. So, what is an Indigenous artist to do? Why, everything, of course! We need more fine art, low art, kitsch, expressions of the contemporary traditional, Indigenous hip-hop, and so on. But mostly, we need Indigenous curation and critical writing to sort, reflect, contextualize, explain, and argue with it. We need to articulate Indigenous critical methodologies that have room for the spiritual, that are non-hierarchical—or, if that proves untenable, we need to be cautious about installing a preference for intellection at the top of the pile. We need Indigenous critical thinking that emerges from non-Modernist modes but without the reactionary binarism that posits the Indigenous as simply the opposite of 'Western' thinking and making. And we need more positions for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis curators. Canada is awash in

Indigenous art exhibitions, but there are only two full-time Indigenous curators in the whole country. We need all this if Indigenous art is to be contemporary and a critical part of our future.

[Editors note: The intervening ten years has seen a dramatic increase in Indigenous curators in fulltime positions!]