Necessary Essentialism and Contemporary Aboriginal Art

[*Indigenous?:* Contemporary Native Arts Symposium; National Museum of the American Indian (Smithsonian), New York. 2011.]

"Landscape #2" (2007) by Terrance Houle. Image courtesy of the artist.

This photograph, "Landscape #2" by Terrance Houle, shows six people standing in full regalia on a hill of semi-arid short grass on a beautiful summer day. Saying 'regalia' rather than 'Indian costume', indicates a minimum level of cultural sensitivity, but not as much awareness as if I deduced their tribal affiliation from the beading designs. To do so would to be to read the picture as intended.

To most viewers these folks are Indians. Some may know that they are from the Plains, but few would recognize them as Blackfoot from Southern Alberta. This composition is a display. These people are showing us who they are. They want to be read, and 'Indian' doesn't quite cut it.

Before contact, the Blackfoot knew they were not Cree. While they might have conceded that they and Cree were both humans, they would not agree that they were one people. It took a century of dealing with Settlers before members of individual bands began to conceive themselves as "having something in common together as opposed to the Europeans." [i] The same

thing happened in Australia. In her delightfully titled, "'All One but Different': Aboriginality: National Identity versus Local Diversification in Australia," Barbara Glowczewski explains that Australian "Aboriginality as a notional identity is a construction of post-contact history in relation to non-Aborigines."[ii]

Seeing Indians rather than Blackfoot is a function of colonization. Empire prefers its constituents to recognize the folks in the photograph as members of a race rather than a Nation. Nations are political entities with competing rights and interests that demand Nation-to-Nation recognition and engagement.

It is hard to come to appropriate terms. 'Indian,' 'Aboriginal,' 'Native,' these are all colonialisms originally designed to herd the diverse many into a manageable one. And here *we* are, at the National Museum of the American *Indian*, not because we are Métis, Haida, Mohawk, Sarcee, and what all else, alone. *Here*, we are Indigenous. However, we gather; we are not gathered. This is an essential difference. We are here to come to terms, to appropriate terms (to *appropriate* terms) with agency and irony. 'Indigenous' (with a capital 'I') will do but we need to see how this concept shapes us before we can reform it.

We are different beings here than we are at home. *Here*, we are constituted as 'Indigenous'—as all one. *Here*, we are meta-people, agents who self-reflexively gather as an inter-Nation-al political body. This is exciting. The long gestation of the Indigenous as meta-discursive beings means, for example, the end of traditional anthropology—in the sense of abstract Peoples in need of dominant others to read them into being. We read, write *and critique* ourselves into contemporaneity. This is self-determination. Figuring out what is and who are essentially Indigenous is no longer a Settler issue; it is an Indigenous problem.

Here we are, picking through empire. What is salvageable? What should be left in the rubbish heap of history? Are essentialist theories oppressive artifacts, or can they be shaped into strategies that express our lived experience and future aspirations? With Terrance Houle's "Landscape #2" I hope to articulate necessary essentialism as a tool that respects traditional Indigenous epistemologies, that leaves room for the complexity of contemporary experience and implies a future direction for Indigenous arts, curation and criticism.

Elders say that you need to know who you are and where you are from before deciding where you ought to go. Apart from being First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Maori, from Six Nations, of the Ngemba people, and so on, we, here, right now, in this place, today, constitute ourselves as 'Indigenous.' Once we get over the irony that colonization has united the Nations, we need to see that this force cannot be left to write our future. First, we must recognize the dual nature of Indigeneity. On one hand, formation as 'Indigenous' is political, strategic; a collective act of will driven by necessity. On the other hand, this globalizing name also acts as a blanket that covers real analogous histories and ways-of-being that Aboriginal peoples recognize in each other when they meet and share stories; elements that are different from the Settler imaginary. They are a combination of the legacy of colonial oppression combined with what Gerald McMaster, Clifford E. Trafzer and the National Museum of the American Indian call the "Native Universe."[iii] This shared perspective or uni-verse, one song, is our *essential* collective condition.

How we conduct ourselves following this common source is strategic, a *necessary* condition of our solidarity.

Two exhibitions of contemporary international Indigenous art opened this winter. *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* (Winnipeg, Canada) features 33 artists working in a range of media and *Mind the Gap*, part one (Adelaide, Australia), is a new media exhibition. And there are several similar big shows in the works. The National Gallery of Canada promises to produce exhibitions of contemporary international Indigenous art every five years beginning in 2013. By the way, all these projects are curated by Indigenous curatorial teams.

In the art world, anyway, Indigeneity is a concept beginning to look like a fact. Before exploring the positive aspects of this project, we should take a moment to see how it remains in-formed by empire. While there are many Aboriginal peoples around the world, 'international' in these exhibitions almost exclusively means Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. These are early days for the Indigeneity project and only the most alike and empowered are enabled to run the show. The exhibition curators and are from rich countries and are well-educated in the mainstream art world. They can afford to be international, to travel and mount expensive shows—afford to be Indigenous. And because we all come from former British colonies, we share analogous histories and speak the dominant language of power, English. This is not an accident but an effect.

It is not always easy to tell if it is essential 'Indigenous' qualities or our shared colonial heritage that unite us. (By the way, it's easier to have incredulity toward meta-narratives if you haven't been on the oppressed side of one.) 'Indigenous' is in part a political construction, a reaction to empire, so we should use the word wittingly, always knowing that it is a term of convenience. What it describes is fluid and will change as our relationships, projects and consciousness mature. Right now, it is exclusive; tomorrow it will be inclusive. Similarly, 'Indigenous' subjects, us, are also always coming into being. We rise to the occasion; we emerge out of emergency. However—and this *is* essential—we are not free-floating signifiers, postmodern selves. We come from somewhere; we are rooted; we have essential being-with our people-stories-land.

We must be cautious not to fall into a Western philosophical mode, one that may seduce us into thinking that the conceptual space, 'Indigenous', is fully real, essential. We must not become completely Indigenous. Indigeneity should always be a space of dual identity of one *and* the other, a perpetual oscillation of how we are here (as Indigenous) *and* our being-with the folks back home. It is always Indigenous *and* Métis, Indigenous *and* Apache, strategic necessity *and* essential identity. This weaving is warp and weft of necessary essentialism.

The several smiles in Terence Houle's photograph breach the picture plane, hinting that these folks are participants rather than subjects. The slight softening of the genre suggests that they are in a temporary display, that they have lives beyond the frame. It is difficult to know why these specific people are here. They may be related, but the curious pairings and separations suggest a mixed group gathered for reasons other than familial. Everyone faces the camera and shows their regalia rather than their relationship to each other. The image is designed to display these people as indisputably Indian and specifically as Blackfoot, identities that over-shadow other aspects. It

is a carefully crafted presentation that is self-conscious about the touristic pictures it knowingly re-presents; reconsiders but does not really disturb.

The association of Native people with nature might be read as stereotypical. But because this picture is composed by Blackfoot/Saulteaux artist Terrance Houle in collaboration with his subjects[iv] can we not suppose that it expresses a genuine connection to the land? They place themselves here because this is where they are from, where they identify themselves, and how they want others to recognize them. It is an identity display and a land claim.

To the observer who sees 'Indians', the regalia reinforce a timeless, or at least archaic, Indianess that threatens to musiefy these people. But take a closer look. There are good quality prints, ribbon work and appliqué. Everything is clean, ironed and well cared for—picture perfect. These investments display wealth, care, pride and knowledge. However, the regalia are not 'pure' Blackfoot. While there is some traditional beading and a few possibly older items, the majority is contemporary, looks recently made and collected from several sources. Are these Blackfoot becoming 'Indigenous'?

The background not only excludes signs of contemporary mainstream culture, but also signifiers of Blackfoot culture: none of the teepees or camp gear found in ethnographic images; but also no rez housing, pickups, slurpees, and guys in gangsta gear that you would find mixed into a powwow photograph. It is a hot day, and these folks are not sweating. They look fresh, rested and scrubbed. How did they get here? Either they are not in the middle of nowhere and behind the camera are the houses they recently emerged from, or they are in the hills and got there by in air-conditioned vehicles. In any case, the photograph elides context to produce a particular kind of image, one that gives those with a conventional imaginary most but not all of what they want, and winks at the knowing Aboriginal viewer and perhaps begins to puzzle him or her.

Artists of the first wave of contemporary Aboriginal[v] art did the heavy lifting. They had to prove that they existed and had a living culture that while informed by tradition was not set in amber. The second wave[vi] continued this project but went beyond survival to shake the dominant culture *and* Aboriginal people from their amnesia. Part of that effort was a recovery of history. Another was an attack on false images. This stressful work required the ironic evocation of negative representations in order to combat them—racism has to be shown to be effaced. There is still viable work in the irony mine, but it is depressing labour. This strategy means playing the Settler's game in their signifying field instead of refreshing one's own cultural forms. Many of these artists also made positive, Indigenous-affirming work on the side. The problem is that in the wrong context, seen from an uninformed attitude, this work might seem to reinforce mainstream stereotypes.

Meaning is contextual. A claim like 'Aboriginal people have an essential relationship with the land' is so obvious a performative fact when experienced in one's ancestral homeland that it is a being-with that goes without saying. In another setting—like talking at a non-Aboriginal conference of materialist art historians—such a statement rankles because it is burdened by the history of mainstream projections that threaten to blind the viewer with images seen rather than experiences lived. And that's just the beginning of the problems. It is a sentence that implies a hierarchical ontology in which Natives closer to nature are more Indian than those urban

Aboriginals who hate camping. Worse still, it follows that if 'close to nature' is essential to Indianess, then non-Indigenous people who camp, a lot, also participate in Indianess.

One form of essentialism is the belief that individuals have intrinsic properties. That is, everyone has qualities that, whether their source is genetic or metaphysical, are fundamental to their being. They could not be otherwise and still be who they are. Essential to human being is having a body, absorbing nutrition, but also laughing, joking and play, and medicine, moral ideas, a sense of justice, storytelling, and so on.[vii] We have these drives independent of culture—it comes as basic equipment. *How* they are expressed—what we eat, how we eat and with whom; what makes us laugh; which medicines we use; what codes of conduct we practice, and what stories we tell—that's culture.

There is another type of essentialism, where some thing is essential in the sense of a logical necessity. Logical necessities are conventional requirements of sets. Things could be otherwise, but within the logic of a particular system, they are not. In order for something to be considered part of a set, clear conditions of membership have to be established. For example, in order for an item to belong to the set 'red', to be called 'red', that thing has to have red qualities. Now, there are going to be all kinds of things that are orangy-red or purply red, never mind all those reddish browns, and it may be hard to draw the borders of some sets with firmness—and that's what makes life interesting, and identity especially interesting. A lake without water may still be called a lake through many drought years—in the hopes that this once-was-a-lake might be one again—but, eventually, in the absence of water, no one calls it a lake in all seriousness.

A logically necessary condition for being called 'Cree' could be 'having Cree ancestry'. How much Cree ancestry counts is a subject for discussion and decision—among Cree. Even so, this looks like a good starting place for establishing the set—an agreed property and ongoing discussion.

And here is where the problems begin. Just try expanding the list. If you do, the taxonomy is going to construct a host of paradoxes, unintentional meanings and exclusions. Must everyone who is called 'Cree' have only Cree parents and grandparents; be Cree-speaking; love nature; participate in ceremony and powwow? What about the children of inter-tribal unions, and the adoption of genetically non-Cree people?

Any list of qualities is going to exclude members that common sense and commoner practice accept, and few people will have all the qualities on such a list. If there were communities of 'pure' members they would be artifacts unsustainable in the contemporary world. Most disturbing, such a schema continues the colonial project: Prior to contact, Indians are pure and have an authentic relationship to the land. Contact = contamination. Indians are less Indian (genetically and especially culturally) with increasing contact. Contact reduces the number and degree of authentic Indians over time to zero. No authentic Indians means no legitimate land rights. The land becomes property administered by Settlers.

This theory of diminishing authenticity creates divisions. If taken seriously, those with the most elements perpetually worry about diffusion and eventual assimilation. As well they should, if they retain this mindset. Thinking that way will make you very disappointed in most people

most of the time. It also requires you to turn a blind eye to Aboriginal histories that feature mixing of all sorts.

The problem is not with the people but with the theory. A better model comes from Wittgenstein[viii] who recognized that not all members gathered under a common name share *all* the qualities of that set: having enough 'family resemblances' constitute viable membership. Individual Métis people, for example, are Métis even if they don't speak Mitchef, as long as they have enough other Métis qualities. Member-managers of the set determine through precedence and discourse what counts as enough 'family resemblances'.

While there is movement and variety in the set and so it appears fluid and contingent, the individual members still participate in an essential set. Every culture has traditionalists, people who conserve its essence. They remind folks of their essential qualities as members of that group through story, ritual and location. Not everyone performs their culture perfectly, but they all have a good idea of what it should look like.

Wittgenstein is useful, but I learned a deeper sense of this practice from a gathering of Elders. A few years ago, the province of Saskatchewan wanted to build better policy for the delivery of culture. Translation: they saw Aboriginal culture as an assent they could exploit for tourism. But they were having trouble coming to terms with the axiomatic idea 'culture'. They had a sense that what First Nations and Métis people meant by it was different from their idea of culture as a 'deliverable.' So, they gathered more than fifty cultural leaders. The Elders sat in the center circle and the rest of us ringed them and listened. After many hours of storytelling they came to the consensus that "culture is what we do, here. What they do there, that's their culture. What we do here, that's our culture."

Necessary essentialism is an argument apart from genetic and metaphysical essentialisms but is not shy about embracing them. Necessary essentialism, however, focuses on the bonds that constitute a group, performed qualities that are so foundational that to pull any one from the weave threatens to dismantle the fabric. Culture has no generic or universal meaning, only an inhabited one, and for Aboriginal people, location and embodiment are essential. Culture is what we do, here. It is an agreed upon set of conventions, discourses and practices that specific people do in particular places.

The Saskatchewan government was also interested in textualizing First Nations knowledge; making books of it so everyone can learn from this rich storehouse. This put the elders in a difficult position. All believed, were told, that the teachings were for everyone. They agreed that some things could go in books but that most should not. They saw that a teaching is a physical relationship between the knowledge keeper and those listening and learning in a particular setting. Knowledge sharing as an embodied relationship is an essential Aboriginal difference.

I have been avoiding the seventh figure in the photograph. Lying prone in the middle distance on the right is a man in regalia, the artist. He appears in the same position in several other photographs: in a manicured park near some picnickers; at a baseball diamond; and on the street. As in his "Metro-Indian" series, Terrence Houle places his over-determined Aboriginal body in

spaces thought cleansed of such presence. He is the return of the repressed reminding viewers that they are on First Nations land. What they make of that, what it means to them is up to them; but the Aboriginal fact is without dispute—we are, Settler and Aboriginal alike, in that territory, all treaty people.

The regalia Terrance wears at the grocery store and on the New York, subway resemble what we see in the foreground of "Landscape #2". What he wears in the background is simpler, closer to pre-contact attire than the later fancy dress. I asked him about this. He explained that the people in the photograph are urban Indians who teach their fellow Aboriginal Calgarians how to dance powwow. "I am placed in the landscape face-down in a subdued 'almost Sleeping' pose, I wanted to blend into the landscape and not be noticed. The work was based on my ideas of the land holding knowledge that is sleeping or unnoticed or possibly forgotten even by Native people."[ix] The dancers are on Nose Hill, a huge, largely undeveloped urban park. It is also a site sacred to Blackfoot and Treaty 7 people that the city grew around.

> I wanted to show that the dancers are ignoring or don't notice this Native person lying face down behind them. I wanted to comment not so much in a negative way that sometimes our own people forget about certain things that make Native people who they are, but yet we have progressed, hence their position being forward and colorful. I thought this image could possibly hang on some oil executive's wall or some city person fine art collection of landscapes never noticing the Native.[x]

The 19th century African American slave narratives were addressed to white readers. These texts asserted their authors' humanity and sought agreement of that proposition from those who held 'human' status and the power to confer it. However, as the literature matured during the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans began producing texts that constructed a Black readership over whose shoulders white folks read. It is an astonishing evolution of consciousness and narrative strategy.

"Landscape #2" is similarly astonishing because it plays with the tropes of 'Indian' pictures, but it is full of ambivalence. Settlers are unsettled by a picture whose codes are twisted, and seems to make fun of their expectations, and may be legible to someone, not themselves. And Aboriginal viewers might wonder if the artist is making fun at the expense of the earnest urban Indians. The touristic gaze is ruined by the figure that does not correspond to the usual schema; a possibly more 'authentic' Indian who underlines how the participants in the foreground, despite their knowingness, comply with the touristic construction and miss something essential. But, as he says, Houle is not asking them to change their ways. It's not so much a critique as a revelation of the complexity that all the participants already know but would have trouble articulating outside of a picture.

Aboriginal teachings come through showing not telling. Houle is not illustrating an idea but embodying it. He puts himself out there, a spectacle. He faces the land to be-with it directly, rather than concentrating on the flash of exhibiting 'Indianess'. He is not critiquing urban Blackfoot who reconnects with their culture. But he is showing that the essence of being, and place is right there, literally beneath our feet—authentic being-toward the earth rather than the

lens. Perhaps he is also performing his own anxious status as an Indigenous artist—neither only this or that; here or/and there.

I joked earlier that a consequence of rigid essentialism might mean that non-Aboriginal campers might have a claim on Indigeneity if 'close to nature' were an essential quality of Indianess. Well, I was only half-kidding. This land, here, and that land over there are already Delaware, or Blackfoot, or Haida, or Cree, and when you are awakened to these histories and their haunting consequences, and the presence of the "Native universe," and when you are in relation to living Aboriginal knowledge keepers—then the land is no longer a colonial space. Nor is it post-colonial or pre-colonial. It is essentially other than any of those discourses. As such, and as I say, with guidance from its keepers, it is available for participation for non-Indigenous people, too. Being in the circle doesn't make them Indigenous, but it might make guests out of colonizers.

In her book, *Interventions: Native American Art for Far-Flung Territories*,[xi] Judith Ostrowitz describes the difficulty of being an Indigenous-Haida, or Indigenous-Cree. Well, she doesn't quite figure it that way. She explains that when artists leave traditional practice and become Indigenous—that is, when they create things that mix traditional cultural forms and Western art—the results are illegible to traditionalists and the contemporary artworld without the guidance of the artist. Only artists composed like the bi-cultural creator—in other words, Indigenous—could ever hope to understand the work. And she doesn't like this, doesn't like not knowing with certainty.

Clearly, she prefers artists to stick with the old ways. She brings up the mixed Nations ancestry of Douglas Cardinal, Rebecca Bellmore and the other Indigenous artists she explores, as though this is the source of their cultural impurity and confusion. The problem, or rather the other problem, with this approach is its desire for artists to perform a recognized code—very handy for ethnology, bad for art—rather than seeing that this new work performs an altogether different function and requires a different sort of viewer. Indigenous art makes Indigenous viewers.

Indigenous art oscillates between traditional aesthetics, knowledge and being-in-that-place-with-one's-people, and the contemporary Indigenous art world. It challenges both Aboriginal traditionalists and the mainstream artworld. To be a competent reader of this work requires knowing something of the Native Universe, the local traditions, knowledge and forms that shaped the work, and also the contemporary art world. Ostrowitz is right. It's all too much! The best reader of the work *is* the artist, so why not talk to her? Such a conversation would unsettle the authority of the author; have the writer meet the artist halfway—in her half and in her way. A curator and critic of Indigenous work that does not occupy a position similar to the artist are not going to have enough tools to read the work well. Indigenous art troubles the Modernist innocent eye, the ethnologist's book of signs and symbols, the artist/viewer divide. It makes good reading an embodied exchange.

To conclude, we need not only more exhibitions but also more critical writing; deeper considerations of contemporary Indigenous practice primarily as a discourse among Indigenous people with non-Aboriginal collaborators reading over our shoulders. Also, the Native Universe is circular and troubles divisions. The future of Indigenous art will blur the boundaries between art objects, curation and critical writing and will see all of this as a single collaborative activity.

David Garneau May 2011

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[i] Bruyneel, Kevin. *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.—Indigenous Relations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2007. P. ix.

[ii] Glowczewski, Barbara. "'All One but Different': Aboriginality: National Identity versus Local Diversification in Australia." *Pacific Answers to Western Hegemony: Cultural Practices of Identity Construction*. Jürg Wassman, Ed. New York: Oxford International Publishers. 1998. p. 335.

[iii] McMaster, Gerald and Clifford E. Trafzer, eds. *Native Universe: Voices of Indian America*. Washington: National Museum of the American Indian and the National Geographic Society. 2004.

[iv] From an email with the artist: April 22, 2011.

[v] The idea of first and second 'waves' of Aboriginal art in Canada comes from Alex Janvier as cited by Joane Cardinal Schubert: Cardinal Schubert, Joane. "Flying With Louis." *Making a Noise!: Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community*. Lee-Ann Martin, ed. Banff: Banff Centre of Continuing Education. 2003. P. 42.
In Canada, artists cited by Cardinal Schubert include, but are not limited to, the "Indian Group of Seven" (Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray and Joseph Sanchez) and Bill Reid, Everett Soop, Gerald Tailfeathers, Doreen Jensen.

[vi] In Canada, these artists include, but are not limited to: Joane Cardinal Schubert, Jane Ash Poitras, Edward Poitras Bob Boyer, Carl Beam, Robert Houle, Gernald McMaster, Jim Logan, and many others.

[vii] Dutton, Denis. *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution*. New York: Bloomsbury Press. 2009. P. 29-46.

[viii] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd. 1958.

[ix] From an email with the artist: April 22, 2011.

[x] From an email with the artist: April 22, 2011.

[xi] Ostrowitz, Judith. *Interventions: Native American Art for Far-Flung Territories.* Olympia: University of Washington Press. 2009.