

REAPPROPRIATING REDSKINS

PELLEROSSASOGNA (RED SKIN DREAM)

SHELLEY NIRO AT THE 50TH LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

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The planning and exhibition of contemporary native film at the Venice Biennale 2003 serves as the forum for discussing the reappropriation of derogatory stereotypes as a means of sovereign self-empowerment. The author argues that the power to name, classify and imagine cultural others cannot be eliminated solely by the subject population's call for eradication of damaging stereotypes, such as mascots. Specifically, mascots are interpreted as examples of unmarked, or covert, racism (ahistorical, unnamed, and often indirect and confusing in their implications), while documentary images such as Chief Bigfoot lying in the snow evidence a historically situated, named and direct racist reference. A proactive repositioning of reductive racial stereotypes can be accomplished by an open engagement with disparaging terms and images using indigenous strategies of humor, parody and camp. [Keywords: Native American arts, cultural appropriation, indigenous knowledge systems, racist markers, unmarked racism]

The use of the term "Redskins" is passionately contested. Few other referents draw the amount of heated debate generated by the name, especially in the context of the Native American mascot issue. Native American curator, Paul Apodaca, is quoted in the *Washington Post* as stating: "'Redskins'" is the absolute, unquestionably worst term...There is no context in which the term, 'Redskins', is not offensive" (Moreno 1998: D1).¹ Similarly, the National Congress of American Indians resolved:

The term REDSKINS is not and has never been one of honor or respect, but instead, it has always been and continues to be a pejorative, derogatory, denigrating, offensive, scandalous, contemptuous, disreputable, disparaging and racist designation for Native Americans. [National Congress of American Indians 1993]

The adoption of the title *Pellerossasogna* [Red Skin Dream] for the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance's (IA3) 2003 Venice Biennale exhibit thus occupied a potent space in national and international understandings of Native authenticity and identity. Participating artist, Shelley Niro (Bay of Quinte Mohawk, Six Nations Reserve), based her film project, *The Shirt*, on this narrative, interrogating the practice of commodification by skillfully appropriating the touristic gaze in her critique of colonialism.² The conceptual underpinnings of this artistic development will be explored in this article as contemporary manifestations of indigenous curation methods. Notions of marked and unmarked racial classifications and internal and external use of stereotyping will be discussed as a means of discerning the ways the reappropriation of derogatory stereotypes may reify, productively critique, or even reposition reductive racial labeling.

The Venice Biennale, an international arts platform, is based largely on categories of nationalism. Niro's project represented an indigenous statement of political sovereignty sponsored under the initiative of a pan-tribal art collective, the IA3.³ This action of claiming space in a nationalistic venue was part of a larger effort to escape narrowly defined representational options. The ability to engage in self-referencing, apart from the desires of an ignorant public, is a common dilemma for Native artists. While artists of any ethnic background may struggle to simultaneously make authentic statements and stay economically viable, the situation for Native Americans is unique in that the expectations, desires and, ultimately, the control of imaging are heavily laden with additional layers of meaning infused with modernist and consumerist sensibilities. The names, classifications, and reference points for Native Americans are limited and biased to stereotypical norms, many of which, like Redskins, are derogatory in character. To explain the use of the term Redskin in the exhibit Niro states, "It's about using some kind of ... I don't know what the word is, but it's a power over a group of people ... saying we can call you anything we want. We have that power. You don't have that power" (interview with author, June 15, 2003). The ability to break representational impasses by self-empowerment was the mission of the arts collective IA3. The Venice Biennale symbolized an alternative venue that would potentially have less investment in, and control over, the works produced than cultural institutions in the United States.

A central premise in this counterimaging was privileging the internal processual goals of the collective as a central point of reference, rather than the reactions of the audience. Our collective exhibition work (planning, conceptualizing, presenting) was an exercise in understanding how our own conceptions of identity formation held greater significance than the reception of the work by an exhibit-going audience.⁴ It is essential to track

this internal dialogue as an indicator of an indigenous approach to understanding Native American expressive arts and, by extension, a Native worldview. This theoretical shift mirrors the Indigenous Knowledge Systems paradigms that have come to dominate discourses on alternative ways of constructing knowledge in Native communities.⁵

Moreover, the non-object driven curatorial process does not require the artwork to carry an argument or analysis but, instead, recognizes that the final presentation of the work represents only one component of an involved interpretative process. The exhibition of art signifies a complex of relationships, circumstances, negotiations and selective decision-making that the particular works exhibited can only suggest. Of course, this contextual interpretation is not unique. Central to the collective's aims was the self-conscious embracement of our critical positioning combined with non-fetishization of objects or audience. Both audience expectations and the privileging of the artwork itself were bypassed in favor of creating internal meanings and dialogues that perhaps only the organizers themselves recognized. Some may describe this approach as narcissist; others critique the use of an elite international biennale as a conduit for internal discussions of Native realities. The collective described the process as self-legitimization: an opportunity to make culturally-meaningful art statements outside regional market constraints.

Given the recognition of restricted spheres of interaction in image production for traditional subjects, this shift away from a knee-jerk reactionary stance is pivotal. Film theorist, Bill Nichols, has stated that, "the Other... rarely functions as a participant in and creator of a system of meaning." He notes that, "hierarchy and control still fall on the side of the dominant culture that has fabricated the image of the Other in the first place" (Hansen et al. 1991:205). What is troubling is the conclusion that frequently follows: when traditional

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subjects do have access to media production, their primary aim is to address the misconceptions of the mainstream.⁶ I suggest that this assumption overlooks alternative strategies of representation that utilize humor, reappropriation, and self-conscious camp as expressive forms of self-identity.

OUR CAMERAS ARE NOT FAMILY CAMERAS

In January 2003, Shelley Niro filmed Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie and Veronica Passalacqua at the Crystal Cove Beach in Irvine California, a public beach. Niro exhibited this art project at the Venice Biennale in June of the same year. The previous exhibits sponsored by the IA3 organization at the Biennale in 1999 and 2001 exposed the collective to the challenges of making a sovereign arts statement in a field dominated by market constraints and excessive stereotypical expectations of imagery and positioning as Native American representatives.⁷ Niro's 2003 project presented similar obstacles. She summarized the events as follows:

We arrived around 5:00 p.m. on a Friday with cameras in tow. We proceed to take our photos. In one of the shots Hulleah has to remove her shirt and be photographed topless. This one was done quickly and discreetly, as we didn't want to attract any attention. But this shot was essential to complete the photo essay.

We finish our shots, and I am now taking shots of the sunset and the surroundings. Out of nowhere comes a State Park Ranger. He stays in his cruiser with a megaphone in hand. Using his megaphone, he says, "PUT YOUR CAMERAS DOWN, AND STEP AWAY". We didn't pay any attention to him, as we are just taking photos and not creating havoc. We didn't think he was talking to us. He repeats his message. We look at each other and can't comprehend this moment. Finally, we get it. He is talking to us. We put our cameras down. Now that we are disarmed he comes closer. He tells us he can confiscate our equipment and fine us five thousand dollars, but he will let us off this time. We don't have permits, and we are not taking family photos. Our cameras are not family cameras. We are stunned. What is a family camera?

With the State Park Ranger putting us in a defensive situation, we packed up and got out of the park immediately. But I had my photos. Just one last comment. The park ranger's final words to us were that we were like everybody else. Strange last comment to people who are trying to figure out what he was all about. [Letter to author, July 8, 2003]

In this example, not only the display or consumption, but even the creation of a cultural statement was inhibited. Niro's concluding remark, "trying to figure out what he was all about", illustrates the dilemma of Native communities struggling with the ignorance and fear of others. The park ranger's comments to Niro, that "we were like everybody else", reflect a denial of marked racial classification. This cross-cultural "contact point" exemplifies the arguments I wish to make in this article. A refusal to recognize (see, name, acknowledge) the potency of racial bias results in confusing attributions of ill intent. Were biased motivations at play in the park ranger's actions? Was he exercising power over Native women making art? There is no clear evidence available for one to judge with legal certainty. However, the event itself presents troubling questions concerning denial of individual freedom, voyeurism, and possibly misogyny. Stereotypes, mascots, and other forms of racist imagination are veiled by similar conceptual underpinnings.

Unless both the oppressor and the oppressed acknowledge that there is clear ill intent, elimination of racism in sports and the media is impossible, no matter how overtly damaging the image appears. Mascots, stereotypes, and derogatory images as products of racist imaginations cannot be proved deliberately demeaning or "disreputable, disparaging and racist designation for Native Americans" (National Congress of Native Americans 1993) because their logic lies in the realm of another's power to name, classify, and imagine. Therefore, any attempt to directly eradicate these designations by asserting that they are damaging are likely to fail. This is not because designators such as Redskins are innocuous, but because the power to identify them as harmful lies outside the subject population's control. For example, in 2003, a federal judge, Judge Kollar Kotelly, overturned a ruling revoking the Washington Redskins trademark, finding insufficient evidence to conclude that the name is disparaging to American Indians. He wrote:

There is no evidence in the record that addresses whether the use of the term "redskin(s)" in the context of a football team and related entertainment services would be viewed by a substantial composite of Native Americans, in the relevant time frame, as disparaging, [Hananel 2003. Electronic document, accessed December 1, 2004]

Likewise, in reference to the arts and to the Biennale specifically, IA3 2001 exhibition artist Gabriel Lopez Shaw (aka gwils), concluded,

Critics ...never understand as they apply only the same standards they were taught to seek and in that application become blind to the approach. Hence the result is not something they're able to meet halfway which is what I feel is a requirement of true dialogue—the true goal I sought at that time, in that space. [Letter to author, February 9, 2003]

For an analysis to be legitimately conceived, both parties—those who name and therefore classify, and the subjects of this exercise—must agree on terms. Here, "true dialogue" requires mutual agreement on terms and relevant worldviews.

A mandate, such as Apodaca's suggesting that the term *Redskins* never be used, places the name and its power to classify entirely in the hands of the perpetrators. A good/bad, Native/non-Native binary struggle oversimplifies issues of representation and does not meaningfully dissect the impasse at hand. I argue that a rejection of the term *Redskin* actually reifies binary negative classifications. A reactive positioning denies a subjective reading of the naming phenomenon and simultaneously locates the discussion in ignorance, not knowledge. Native communities, in their eagerness to address the harmful ramifications of stereotypes, often engage in oppositional behavior—what I term the "Red Man's Burden" (Mithlo in press)—to address the ignorance of non-Native referents.⁸ This re-active stance, while meaningful and just in its cause, does not allow for alternative proactive strategies of naming and self-expression. As a result, the terms and conditions of use are largely directed by external impulses and drives. The *Pellerossasogna* exhibit exemplifies new possibilities for political statements in the arts that reclaim the power to name oneself. Niro's playful use of humor, her sense

of camp and tease, opens up a space for self-examination and repositioning of reductive racial classifications. Importantly, this reclamation necessitates the interrogation and, ultimately, the embracing of disparaging terms and images as a tool of self-empowerment.

Fatimah Tobing Rony describes the strategy of reappropriation as one of "winking at the viewer" (1996:203). Examining Zora Neale Hurston's works on film, Rony concludes that Hurston was not only interested in creating a historical record but also actively participating in and transmitting to others the world of Black culture that she experienced as an insider. Hurston's films demonstrated a "certain knowing playfulness" (204) that indicated an acknowledgement of the film and research conventions of the time period, 1928–29. Her subjects (African Americans from the South) smile and make eye contact with the camera. Rony recognizes these actions as "active transformation(s)" that record and simultaneously assert the continuity of living cultures. Importantly, Rony uses the term "process" to indicate the manner of representational methodology advocated: "These films record transition and *process*..." (207, emphasis added). I argue that the privileging of process also signals recognition of the film's internal audience: the subjects and their own personal or collective ownership of the images. These internal modes of interpretation are not readily accessible to viewers, leading to the false conclusion that subjects are engaged only in re-active political processes or salvage efforts.⁹ A similar privileging of process was sought in the Venice IA3 collective exhibition.

THE LANGUAGE OF IMAGINATION "SORRY IF I'M NOT BEING VERY NICE"

The use of language proved to be a central issue in the 2003 exhibition platform. Both the exhibition text and t-shirt narrative Niro utilized are driven by words (in English and Italian) as indicators of meaning. This component was recognized in the early development of the exhibit statement. IA3 Chair and *Pellerossasogna* co-exhibitor, Sherwin Bitsui, a Diné poet, acknowledged, "the Italian... of Native Americans, which translated to *Redskin* ...made me think of ... perspectives and how they are shaped by language" (letter to author, February 18, 2003). Internet dialogue within the IA3 collective prior to the exhibit questioned the public perception of the term *Redskin*. These web conversations proved to

be a useful tool of analysis and dialogue.
IA3 Board Member Erica Lord (Athabaskan) argued,

The name with the general tone of the statement feel like they feed into the perception of us as mythical—shamans and beads and feathers... Which we can be, and there is nothing wrong with it. However, it is what the larger world usually expects from us" (letter to author, February 27, 2003).

Miles Miller (Yakama/Nez Perce) surmised, "So what if they don't get it, why do we always have to explain ourselves? Going or not is the most important question!" (Letter to author, February 16, 2003). Lord replied,

We do not need to explain ourselves all the time, which is what we get tired of doing, constantly explaining and clarifying. However, if our statements are abstract and difficult to understand, then does it take away from what we are trying to say? Or do we know what we are trying to say? And is it "I" or "We?" that are saying it?" [Letter to author, February 27, 2003]

Bitsui countered,

Just exactly what does "Redskin" imply in contemporary discourse? And should Native people own that parcel of identity just as African Americans somehow "own" the "N" word? It is as if the redness were a metaphor for the antiquated visions of "savagery" which later became a new metaphor for shame and anger. [Letter to the author, February 18, 2003]

The internal discussions of meaning, audience, identity, and race are telling examples of the complexity and layering of the process of reappropriation. The question of whether the use of the term *Redskin* reified or critiqued racist dialogue played a central role in the dialogue.

C. Richard King's (2003) work on the word "squaw" is relevant here. He identifies what he terms "key oppositional strategies" in asserting rhetorical sovereignty—erasure, inversion, and reclamation—to address this similarly demeaning term. Those who advocate erasure of the "lingering and hurtful presence of squaw" demand to change place names such as Squaw Valley, California, and expose the inherent violence and hate in racist

epithets (such as "dirty fucking squaw!"). This "erasure strategy" would appear to echo Apodaca's sentiments quoted earlier, that there is no context in which derogatory terms are not offensive. According to King, the inversion strategy disrupts "the conditions that make it possible for...sexism and racism to masquerade as acceptable, even honorable practices" (2003:9). Citing an editorial, "Reflections on the Word Squaw" by Debra Glidden, King notes that an example of this type of reversal would be the fictive place name "Cunt Creek" (8).

Bitsui's reference to the "N" word above makes a similar point, aligning Native American concerns with those of similarly oppressed groups and voicing a concern for the perpetuation of racist ideology. King's essay advocates the "re-recognition" of historic naming practices by tracing the term *squaw* to an abbreviation of the Narraganset word, *eskwa* [woman]. He cites Marge Bruchac's essay, "Reclaiming the Word 'Squaw' in the Name of the Ancestors" as an example of this decolonizing strategy.

These agendas certainly speak to the strategies employed in the *Pellerossasogna* project, with a key pivotal difference. King characterizes erasure, inversion, and reclamation as strategies that are *oppositional* in nature. I suggest that oppositional or re-active approaches to derogatory naming *do* have the potential to reify reductive categories because the point of departure is ignorance, not knowledge. The ability to create new images subverts this tendency, positioning Native artists as key spokespeople in articulating new representational images that may engage with the ignorance of others without reacting to it. Certainly, this was the aim of the Venice Biennale as a productive site of cultural demonstration that did not seem to offer the same types of restrictions.

In conversations following the opening in Venice, exhibiting artists Shelley Niro and Sherwin Bitsui discussed the impact of the *Redskins* term in the internal assessment of the project. The strategy to "throw it back at them" was identified as a means of "taking your power." Bitsui stated, "We have.... the power to say we can call whatever and whoever we want *Redskins*" perceptively noting "with us using that power there are certain points of abusing that power also" (interview with author, June 15, 2003). The awareness that the term continues to be used not only in the realm of mascot controversies, but also in racist, segregated, and often violent encounters, heightened the artists' responsibil-

ity to use Redskins in a reflective, deliberate manner. Bitsui contended,

As far as the sort of power that this word evokes, I think it's sort of lessening. But, tell that to the person who is living in their hick town in the middle of the state and it's a very, very harsh term. And it's probably something your mother and your father have been called right in front of you as a child. I mean, we're certainly free from those kind of constraints maybe if we live in a more urban kind of setting where there is more multiculturalism, multi-ethnicity, but then if you're living in an area where racism is a constant frequent violent sort of reality, then it's very, very different. [Interview with author, June 15, 2003]

Niro's justification of Redskin also took a generational approach. As the older member of the group, she had experienced the racist use of the term differently than had the members of the group in their 20s. She explained her position in the following manner:

I think every generation probably experiences lots of that real direct racism or hatred. I use my parents quite a bit as an example. They'll tell stories and it was just the way they existed on a day-to-day basis...having to work for farmers and be janitors and fruit pickers and all that sort of thing. And how they had to live, more or less, hand-to-mouth, and they...basically kept us in a section where they were the slaves...they were the workers. And because of that they had to really take a lot of abuse. And in a way, it's sort of been a reminder to my thought that this came from a time that Indian people weren't treated that well. It is like a little burr on my skin or something to say...I know where it's coming from and I know what it's supposed to mean but it doesn't hurt me. For some reason, you just have to keep those things alive in a way. [Interview with author, June 15, 2003]

The choice to "keep alive" the unveiled racist connotation of Redskin is thus situated in a political narrative charged with direct historical and personal references. It is this marked racial classification that I will argue is essential for interpreting and addressing racial bias.

Our final exhibition text (quoted below) is a compilation of the IA3 internet dialogues that were

eventually scripted by Bitsui into a poem format. The act of both accepting and questioning the language of others is intersected in the narrative by Erica Lord's response, "Sorry if I'm not being very nice." These discussions embody the internal tensions of collective representation and, in a broader sense, the location of identity formation.

Red Skin Dreams

Knowledge, deep and old, is carried with us. It is the language of imagination, where censorship has no place. We invent ways of knowing.

In this communication with the universe, we are given an opportunity to express desire, dreams and not fear repercussion.

It is a conversation with the cosmos—the mysteries of the world. Outside of our tangible worlds, we are given freedom.

Not isolated, it is a shared experience.

Sorry if I'm not being very nice

The myth of identity is twisted into knots on both ends.

Memory is a community born from separation.

Survival is cultivated through the farming of progress.

We have grown further and further from our innate, telepathic modes of learning and teaching.

Colonizers of our own memory, we are no longer as sensitive to the spirit world.

Otherness is still there.

[Indigenous Arts Action Alliance 2003:642–643]

This text explores the potency of identity construction, both in relationship to culture, seen here as a timeless, genetic link to the ancestors, and to the Western world represented by notions of progress and separation. Interestingly, it was generally the younger board members of the collective who voiced the most opposition to the use

of Redskin as an exhibit title. Their concern is grounded in the second half of the exhibit essay, *Colonizers of Our Own Memory*. Niro located her dialogue, not in the West as a site of reference, but in the “conversation with the cosmos—the mysteries of the world.” This is an area where critical analysis could fruitfully explore the ramifications of racist ideology in both generational and spatial terms. Do older generations of Native Americans, say those past 70 years of age, who have directly experienced political and social injustice, interpret the use of derogatory terms in the same manner as their grandchildren? Does Shelley Niro, as a member of the generational bridge, understand the potency of keeping racist labels in open dialogue differently because she was witness to those times? Or, as Sherwin Bitsui suggests above, does the use and meaning of racist terms depend more on geographical location—urban or rural, large reservation or small?



Fig. 1. “Just Because You Have Feathers in Your Hair Don’t Make You an Indian”. Laura Fragua, 1990, 19”x 16”, mixed media. Photo courtesy of Institute of American Indian Arts Museum.

It is important to note, given our emphasis on internal dialogue, that this exhibition manifesto (which was featured both in the exhibit brochure and the Biennale catalogue) was not discussed or analyzed by art critics, sponsors, artists, collaborators or the Biennale offices. Its meaning is relatively obtuse to those outside the IA3 collaborative, but in essence this text represents a cumulative political statement and a substantial contribution to Native American intellectual traditions. The text was our flag, our banner, even if the symbolism was lost on the viewer

MARKED AND UNMARKED RACIAL CLASSIFICATIONS—“I IS FOR INDIAN”

The use of marking and naming as an act of sovereignty is articulated by many Native American artists as a means of empowered expression. Nora Naranjo-Morse’s installation, *Our Symbols* (2002), utilizes the metaphor of language as a means of “forming a new message.” Naranjo-Morse states,

It is a message of who I am, who we are as Natives now—not then, now. *Our Symbols* is meant to express my determination not to be frozen in time, or categorized solely by other’s standards, but to be allowed the freedom to speak with my own voice. [98]

I wish to explore the social and political consequences of cultural categories that are unmarked, the ramifications inherent in the inability to name for oneself. In doing so, I place mascots, including the Washington Redskins, within the category of unmarked racial designations. Drawing from Faye Harrison’s (2002) discussions on race in the edited volume, *Exotic No More*, I argue that when race is unmarked in a seemingly celebratory (or even as claimed by mascot supporters, innocuous) manner, structural inequalities are naturalized, resulting in institutional racism and prejudice. Harrison writes that when race is denied as a dimension of lived experience and social identity, “injuries are disguised and displaced into more socially acknowledged and politically charged axes of difference such as class, religion or ethnicity” (146). This naturalization of race, cloaked as harmless child’s play, is easily seen in folksongs (“One little, two little..”) and instruction (“I is for Indian.”) The register that I will



"Chief Big Foot". Photo by C. G. Morledge.
 Courtesy of The Denver Public Library, Western History's Collection.

discuss is illustrated by two images (Please see VAR's website for the first; the second is shown on p. 29).

The first image is a frequently cited work by Jemez artist, Laura Fragua, titled *Just Because You Wear Feathers in Your Hair, Don't Make You an Indian* (acquired in 1991 by the Institute of American Indian Arts for their permanent collection). The second image is from the Smithsonian Institution's collection (National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History) and depicts Chief Big Foot lying dead and frozen in the snow after the tragedy of the Massacre of Wounded Knee, December 29, 1890.

I have chosen these two images because I consider them to have potent significance to Native American communities. Alternative representations of mascots, such as the University of Illinois' Chief Illiniwek, could have feasibly been substituted for Fragua's depiction of "playing Indian". I favor Fragua's piece, however, because it is a statement created by a Native woman who recognizes and critiques the wannabe phenom-

enon.¹⁰ The photograph of Chief Big Foot signals what I'm terming an internal reference, while Fragua's *Just Because You Wear Feathers...* signals an external reference. Big Foot is historically situated, named and direct in its implications. Mascots lack this engagement with history, are unnamed and offer indirect and confusing implications.

The continued existence and popularity of Native American sports mascots provides evidence of the confinement of languages and images used as reference markers of reality. Mascots constrain the ability of both Native Americans and non-Natives to operate under alternative ideologies. Native Americans are thus hampered in their ability to construct new images of identity; non-Natives are inhibited in their ability to relate to Indians as "contemporary significant real human actors" (King and Springwood 2001:8). In their edited volume, *Team Spirits...*, Richard C. King and Charles Fruehling Springwood (2001) contend that mascots indicate the complex and layered longing of



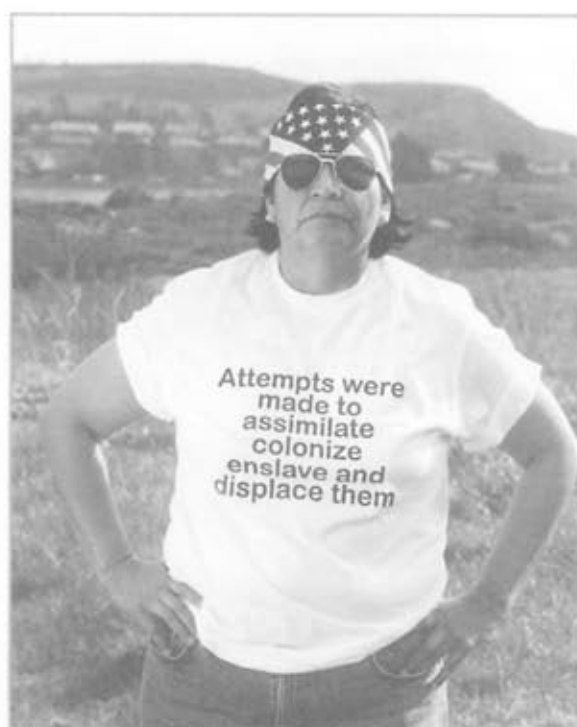
Euro-Americans for the Native American cultures they themselves destroyed by conquest. American identity depends on subjugated Indians. Writing in the same volume, Cornel D. Pewewardy declares, "Racism is a mental illness because it requires that the individual function with the falsification of the human record, distortion of cultural identity and delusions of grandeur about white supremacy" (2001:262). Significantly, Pewewardy also notes that indigenous peoples tend to internalize this illusion, participating in their own subjugation. One would conclude that the unreflexive acceptance of mascots may fall within this self-colonizing descriptive.

In contrast to the external appraisal of indigenous peoples signaled by Fragua's tomahawk wielding boy, the horrific image of Chief Big Foot murdered and lying in the snow signals an alternative imaging. The culmination of racism and hatred carried to the degree of genocidal tactics perpetrated against Native people, is mirrored in this visual representation. It is an image that a majority of native people may recognize and relate to in the same manner that a profile of Martin Luther King Jr. may be recognized and embraced as symbolic of the Civil Rights struggle.¹¹ It is sign of the dehumanized treatment of Natives by non-Natives

in our most public era of survival at the turn of the last century. It is historic rather than metaphorical. It is an example of marked racism, unlike the often unmarked racism of stereotypes and mascots. The image of Chief Big Foot in the snow symbolizes overt oppression—the extermination of Native Americans as dictated by government policies of conquest.

As a historical and racially marked referent, Bigfoot denies the capacity of unmarked racial categories, such as mascots, to divorce cultural imaging from the reality of historical events. Authenticity is thus not debatable or totally subjective but grounded in political and historic realities. What is at play, then, is not the content of the images or the circumstances of their use, but the power to name and define classifications as overt and marked or covert and unmarked.

I wish to distinguish the proactive reading of Native representation advocated in this article from the comparable use of a postmodern idiom. Metis filmmaker Loretta Todd finds a similar problematic in the 1992 *Indigena* catalogue. She states, "In the modernist period, it was the land and resources they sought. In the postmodern, it is the experiences, the sensations they want. Nothing is authentic, therefore everything is fair game" (1992:74). Todd rejects a postmodern sensibil-



ity, yet complains that the ability of Indian artists and educators to embrace a native aesthetic or proactively pursue issues of appropriation are constrained by charges of essentialism or nationalism. This theoretical gulf demonstrates the difficulty in constructing an alternative ideology in concert with other knowledge paradigms of the day. Nationalism has proven to be a useful tool in Native American sovereignty struggles, particularly in legitimating direct nation-to-nation relationships of tribes to the United States. It is precisely the stance of nationalism or sovereignty that most accurately represents the control of imaging and naming in Native cultural productions. This strategy of direct political engagement in the arts references the link to historical imaging of a documentary nature, as advocated in the Big Foot example. It is in this nationalistic, sovereign sense then that the incorporation of the referent Redskin by the IA3 may be interpreted.

**INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL USES OF STEREOTYPING
"TRYING TO EXPERIENCE THE WORLD
LIKE THE FIRST TIME"**

In pursuing an internal reading of indigenous curatorial dynamics, I have chosen to not concern myself

with the history and motivations of non-Native populations largely responsible for the production of Native American stereotypes. These expressions have been documented and analyzed elsewhere (for examples, see Deloria 1998 and Bird 1996). The direction I choose is a concerted shift away from the psychology of the oppressors to the experience of the oppressed. In an earlier manifestation of this approach, I am quoted in a 2001 *New York Times* article titled "The Buckskin Ceiling And Its Discontents" as stating,

Of course stereotypes affect us. But native people have ways to deal with that, to take control of our own destiny. If we are still complaining about stereotypes, that means we are a disempowered people. And I just don't buy that. (Shulman 2000:37)

An active space, a discourse informed by the language, concepts, and political realities of its practitioners requires not only a negation of false classifications by others but a construction of alternative ideologies framed in positive non-comparative terms. This type of analysis is necessarily informed by a structural inquiry that places itself beyond or even entirely apart from actions that correct or critique the ignorance of others. The IA3's



embracement of an apparent derogatory stereotype on an international stage claims this alternate space. The reappropriation of cultural appropriation inherent in the IA3 use of Redskin challenges the viewer to engage in the primary text (here referenced by Big Foot) that is marked and historically situated rather than accept or even react to the secondary text of mascots that is unmarked and disconnected from historical realities.

The Shirt, Shelley Niro's 2003 film submission to the Pellerossasogna exhibit, engages in this type of direct analysis. In both *The Shirt* and *Honey Moccasin* (1998), Niro utilized her characteristic sense of playful commentary to directly critique the genocidal legacy of colonialism. Central themes include the use of language (both in the written text on the shirt and the Italian translation in subtitles), the importance of landscape and movement (especially the use of water), the free appropriation of western signifiers (the American flag, sunglasses and t-shirt) as well as the use of the body as a site of meaning, both in terms of vulnerability and defiance. This hybrid mixture of Western and indigenous signifiers resists a clear Native/non-Native interpretation. The Native has become the West, or perhaps more accurately, the West has become Native. This interpretative choice aligns itself with the practice

of other Native American artists, such as beadworker Marcus Amerman (Choctaw) who states that when he beads a photographic rendition of say, Janet Jackson, she then becomes Native (interview with author, March 21, 1991). Some might conclude that this is a type of indigenous "counting coup" with the West, but I believe this approach is much more nuanced than a traditional touching of the enemy. This artistic strategy uses the tools of the Western consumer world, such as t-shirts and flags, to advance an alternative reading of history. Rather than a direct re-active stance, it is a pro-active playful reappropriation of cultural appropriation. It is thus a symbolic inversion of the "Red Man's Burden". Niro's text on Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie's body reads:

The Shirt
My Ancestors
were
annihilated
exterminated
murdered and
massacred

They were
lied to
cheated
tricked and
deceived

Attempts were
made to
assimilate
colonize
enslave and
displace them

And
all's
I get
is this
shirt

The camera pans gently between the shirt wearers and landscape shots of Niagara Falls (Niro's birthplace) and California. Following the punch line "and all's I get is this shirt," Tsinhnahjinnie is seen shirtless, directly facing the camera both proud and intimidated in her posture. A slowly raised eyebrow alerts the viewer to the fact



that she is “in” on the narrative, a complicit participant similar to Hurston’s subjects in their “certain knowing playfulness.” The concluding scene features Veronica Passalacqua wearing the end narrative shirt “And all’s I get is this shirt” jauntily facing the camera with one hand on her hip. The American flag that adorned Tsinhnahjinnie’s forehead is now a sporty scarf around Passalacqua’s neck, and the imposing sunglasses are perched atop her head. The lulling soundtrack of Elizabeth Hill (Music Masters) creates a serene backdrop to these figurative essays. Her gentle humming is reminiscent of the work of filmmaker Pipilotti Rist (1997 Venice Biennale “Back to Future Present Past”) for its disconcerting juxtaposition of a calming soundtrack with jarring violence. In Niro’s work, this violence is evident only in the wording of the t-shirt text, making the Italian translations even more essential for the Venice showing.¹²

Niro’s assessment of the way her arts strategy is generally interpreted is indicative of her overall philosophy in relationship to cultural imaging. Answering a question posed concerning the controversial photographs of Edward S. Curtis, Niro states,

The white people haven’t caught up with that yet. They still think we’re going to have some angry

response to the Curtis photographs; they’re like ten years behind now. They expect us to react in such a way. It’s amusing to me because they want you to be a certain way...we’re past it. It’s gone and got beyond that. I think we are just trying to experience the world like the first time. I like to think that there is something about myself that has been passed down since the beginning of time. And I might not know what it is but I have to keep looking for it. It’s all about using my brain, what there is of it. And it’s about being an individual and really making those decisions on my own. And maybe that’s part of the indigenous knowledge; you use the survival mode all the time. [Interview with author, June 15, 2003]

It is at this intersection of competing ideologies that Niro’s quote, “Trying to experience the world like the first time,” finds its most accurate reading. When external readings of stereotypes pass as internal referents, when unmarked categories of race are collapsed with marked referents, and when proactive measures are restricted or even censored by notions of nationalism, essentialism or internal stereotyping, the imagination is inhibited. It then becomes impossible to experience

the world anew, as it was before colonization. This repositioning of reductive racial classifications requires an engagement with harmful, negative designations, not mobilized action against them. In contrast to oppositional strategies of representation, reappropriation shifts the locus of power from the oppressors to the subjects. Reappropriation thus simultaneously denies the pleasures associated with naming—in the power to control subjects and the experience of being the center of the subject's displeasure. Niro's "survival mode" claims an unencumbered space for dialogue and exploration. Indigenous knowledge (and by association indigenous curation) is therefore characterized as an active space of imagination, free from the burdens of educating and enforcing. This corrective and oppositional work is necessary and justified, but ultimately diverts the agenda of self-representation away from internal articulations of identity.

Thus, the possible parameters of interpreting contemporary Native American arts within an indigenous knowledge systems approach may seek: a) grounding in tagged, primary narrative documentary (Big Foot); b) critical incorporation of areas deemed unsuitable by their nature to be utilized productively (Redskins); and c) embracing nationalistic, sovereign sensibilities as a means to avoid postmodern ambiguous readings (IA3). Each of these approaches should also recognize the dangers inherent in an unreflective approach to these weighty considerations. Addressing the challenge of representation within an organizational structure, whether it be a tribal or pan-tribal sovereign, family grouping or collaborative of Natives and non-Natives, may ensure that the perpetuation of negative classifications are avoided in ways that privilege the communal response as primary. Niro's words summarize this approach: "It is important to acknowledge the foundations of positive forward action. I created *The Shirt* thinking of ancestors, comrades and the future generations" (letter to the author, July 8, 2003).

NOTES

¹ The author would like to acknowledge David Anthony Tyeme Clark (Assistant Professor, American Studies Program, The University of Kansas) for his scholarship on this topic. She found the website <http://people.ku.edu/~tyeme/mascots.html> especially useful in preparing this article. The full Apodaca quote cited by Clark reads:

"Redskins" is the absolute, unquestionably worst term... There is no context in which the term 'Redskins' is not offensive. There is no context in which it is not insulting, pejorative or racist... [The word is similar to] the 'N word' for African Americans and all kinds of pejoratives that exist for Jews, for Hispanics, for women—none of which would ever be accepted or tolerated in relation to sports or anything else. Why would it be acceptable for American Indians? Is it because we're one of the absolute smallest minorities? Because we don't have political or economic clout? That is not justification. [Accessed]

² Diné poet Sherwin Bitsui was also included as an exhibiting artist. Bitsui was the Chair of IA3 in 2003.

³ Participating sponsors included: Meridians: Feminism, Race and Transnationalism, The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Smith College, Woodland Cultural Centre, The University of Venice Department of Post-Colonial Literature, and Women Make Movies.

⁴ The author participated in the establishment and curation of three La Biennale Di Venezia exhibitions: *Ceremonial* (1999), *Umbilicus* (2001), and *Pellerossasogna* (2003). The sponsoring organization was previously titled the Native American Arts Alliance (NA3).

⁵ I have been particularly influenced by the work of Wade Chambers and Dave Warren, key theorists to the "Native Eyes" project of the Institute of American Indian Arts.

⁶ For examples see Ruby (2000) and Prins (1997).

⁷ See Mithlo (2004).

⁸ For more on the repositioning of an external critique see Mithlo (in press).

⁹ Prins (1997) identifies a genre he calls "cultural survival films" which could conceivably be examined for this type of "certain knowing playfulness."

¹⁰ The phenomenon of emulating Native Americans signified by the term wannabe is a prevalent descriptive that, in this article, is considered comparable to the issue of Native sports mascots. Both terms describe ethnic fraud.

¹¹ For additional examples see Tsinghahjinnie (2003).

¹² Although the internal process of collective curatorial choices was prominent, there still existed a desire for an audience that would comprehend the work. We especially wanted our hosts, a Venetian audience, to understand the

work. Notions of reciprocity and social mores played into the concerted efforts to have the words available, especially to Italian viewers. While the use of Italian subtitling in the PAL version of the film was slightly disconcerting due to the prominence of the text across the bottom of the screen, Niro felt that this component was essential to visitors accessing the meaning of her piece. Likewise, the brochure and the poetry featured in *Pellesossasogna* were translated into Italian.

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