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No Word for Art in Our Language? Old Questions, New Paradigms

Nancy Marie Mithlo

Contemporary American Indian art, like other American Indian disciplinary fields, such as American Indian literature, law, or politics, has a unique historical trajectory. Yet unlike these more established scholarly subfields, American Indian art lacks a discernable infrastructure, a theoretical basis, or a comprehensive history.¹ Why is this so, when the arts occupy such an integral space in imagining American Indian identities—past and future? Curator Margaret Archuleta and law scholar Rennard Strickland attribute the failed policies of cultural genocide in America to the power of Native art, concluding that “the determined effort to destroy Indian culture and break Indian pride” failed due to the great legacies of Native American artists who enabled an understanding and preservation of unique cultural traditions.² Given the absolute saturation of images and icons surrounding American Indian life and the very real impact of the arts for Native survival, an accounting for the marginalization of Native arts is essential. The underdevelopment of a theoretical basis for American Indian arts both in the realm of public culture (museums and galleries) as well as in established scholarly institutions (universities, publishing industries, and granting institutions) needs to be addressed.³ Concurrent with this project of unearthing the nominal presence and overwhelming absences of American Indian arts scholarship, attention should be paid to the flux and variations of Native arts reception over time.

My essay examines what I consider three key strategies employed

in articulating the place of Indian arts in the broad theoretical landscape of Indigenous studies internationally: (1) the rejection of standard fine arts categories of reception ("No word for art in my language"); (2) the assimilation of these same fine arts categories ("I'm an artist first and an Indian second," now expressed as a "post-Indian" sensibility); and (3) the creation of new categories that reflect Indigenous values of cultural reclamation, sovereignty, and land-based philosophies (what I term "American Indian Curatorial Practice"). These strategies may independently occur in space (tribal land bases, urban regions) and time (across generations of practitioners). The rejection, incorporation, and creation of the platforms outlined above may be clearly defined by discussion of specific cultural events and places. While I will endeavor to illustrate each of these strategies with an exemplary case study, this narrative can only suggest the outlines of the applied and academic work that will hopefully take shape in the careers of our emerging curators and scholars. Only one theorist or school of thought cannot accomplish the crafting of a field of study. This is work that will take generations of events, contemplation, and establishment of patterning to discern.

My analytical approach to the development of contemporary Native arts from the 1960s onward is an effort to amend problematic theories while identifying new applications.⁴ Theories, like objects, are flexible, and can be mobilized to speak at will to the concerns of the maker (the artist), the viewer (the audience), or the subject (the individual or community represented within the artwork). This essay will first examine the orientation of producing artists and then will apply various art projects as evidence of theory.

NO WORD

The Indigenous rejection of fine arts as a descriptor for contemporary American Indian arts is best illustrated by the common refrain "There is no word for art in my language." Native artists and curators expressed this perspective most commonly in the multicultural era of the "new museology," dating roughly from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. The arts commentator and writer Jamake Highwater expressed the "no word" sentiment in his book *The Primal Mind*, in which he observes, "For primal peoples . . . the relationship between experience and expression has remained so direct and spontaneous that they usually do not possess a word for art." Highwater adds, "We cannot readily translate Indian iconography and visions into terms that make realistic sense to the Western mind."⁵ Highwater was later exposed as an alleged ethnic fraud for posing as an American Indian when his heritage is reported to have been Italian. Nonetheless, Highwater's manifesto gained credence over time.⁶ Throughout the 1980s and into the quincentennial era, the catchphrase was used to express the alienation Native artists expe-

rienced in fine arts contexts. In his article "No Word for Art in Tewa Language—Only Meaning," the San Ildefonso ceramicist Lorenzo Gonzales stated, "In non-Indian terms, I'm an artist. In the Tewa world, they say of me, 'He's a very skilled person. He knows many things.'"⁷ Likewise, the Navajo artist Leatrice Mikkelsen commented in 1992, "In the language of the Dineh, there is no word for art. When I learned this, I laughed. I was so relieved. This word, and all that it drags with it, was not necessary."⁸ The "no word" orientation was reified in the Oxford History of Art series, in which Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips observe, "When speaking of historical Native objects, the statement is often made that Native languages have no exact equivalent for the post-Renaissance Western term 'art,'" noting that "in Native traditions the purely material and visual features of an object are not necessarily the most important in establishing its relative value, as they have come to be in the West."⁹ Thus art historians and Native artists appear to agree that "no word for art in my language" is both accurate and significant. Yet is it possible for both groups to subscribe to this same philosophical standpoint but express differing interpretations of its meaning?

From one perspective, the "no word for art" descriptor indicates an Indigenous rejection of how Native arts are perceived in non-Native contexts such as museums, cultural centers, galleries, and scholarly texts—contexts that imbue fine arts with the Western values of individualism, commercialism, objectivism, and competition, as framed by an elitist point of reference. A rejection of the term "art" is then a rejection of Western culture as capitalist, patriarchal, and, ultimately, shallow, one that does not value the central principles of Indigenous identity, such as land, language, family, and spirituality. A refusal to be co-opted into a more narrow definition of what is an intrinsically more holistic enterprise is also a refusal to be named. It is an effort toward self-determination. This is certainly the orientation of the two Native artists quoted above, Mikkelsen and Gonzales.

This distinction between the naming and the named is of course a distinction of power—who controls the avenues of expression and communication. In the context of the arts industry, museums and galleries are essential components of nationalistic and colonial projects that define and disseminate subjective versions of history and reality. The very real legacy of viewing Indigenous peoples as property, whose bodies and ceremonial items could be collected and curated as archaeological resources, defines this power dynamic. Legislation protecting American Indian bodies and resources was enacted in 1978 with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, as well as the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, but it was not until the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) that a more humanistic approach to the museum enterprise was fully in place. NAGPRA provided a means for Native peoples to dispute the

ownership of human remains, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. American Indians became central players in the massive shift from older museum models of exclusion to the “new museology,” where subject voices—those known collectively as cultural others—were the central agents of change, including feminists, and ethnic, religious, racial, and other minority groups.¹⁰ Scholar Julia Harrison argues that the new museum was “driven by the local community: social subjects and concerns replaced objects as its focus.”¹¹

For politicians like Senator Daniel Inouye, who introduced NAGPRA to Congress, it was not a matter of access or power that was at stake in the new museology, but rather “a basic issue of human rights.” Inouye, cochairman of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, observed, “When human remains are displayed in museums or historical societies, it is never the bones of white soldiers or the first European settlers that came to this continent that are lying in glass cases. It is Indian remains. The message that this sends to the rest of the world is that Indians are culturally and physically different from and inferior to non-Indians. This is racism. . . . The bill [NAGPRA] is not about the validity of museums or the value of scientific inquiry. Rather, it is about human rights.”¹²

The movement toward inclusion in museums nationally and globally found a particular resonance in debates concerning American Indian arts. Native arts could no longer be considered purely for their formal or decorative attributes, but rather served more accurately as expressions of cultural patrimony. The ownership of American Indian material culture shifted from the connoisseurship model to a more dynamic, present, and immediate matter of cultural survival, dignity, and sovereignty. In these scenarios, “no word for art in my language” is a political call to action, or as some might claim, a separatist agenda in which the primary frame of reference is not a Western concept but one that originates from an Indigenous cosmology and worldview.

The “no word” rejection can also be interpreted as a hesitation for Indian artists and their supporters to expose their participation in Western art institutions. In the market-saturated era of the 1980s, some Native artists were quick to distance themselves from the Western attributes of upper-class consumption. Crass commercialism signaled an inauthenticity that could actually negate sales by threatening to invalidate the presentation of Native art as spiritually oriented and free of Western influences.¹³ The mixed-heritage Inupiak artist Erica Lord defines this type of cultural reappropriation as an orientaling discourse: “Reappropriation of the culture—You do see that so much in Native art where Indians seem to orientalize their own culture and make it exotic themselves. And you see it all over the place. You see it in Santa Fe *definitely* because that’s what sells. And I think there needs to be a competent questioning of who and why and your intent

of using these images or these parts of your culture and what you are doing with them."¹⁴

An artist's denial of economic motivation in Native fine arts settings in an effort to conform to audience expectations becomes another form of playing Indian. While appearing to be politically progressive on the surface, this stance is actually deeply conformist. Rather than conveying the complexities of contemporary Native life, in which sacred and secular interests actively push against each other, this masking of economic complicity maintains a status quo idealization of Indianness at odds with a globalized, mechanized economy.

An opportunistic version of the "no word for art in my language" orientation is decidedly not politically progressive in that it embraces false notions of American Indians as "pure product"—unchanging and dissociated from mainstream realities, such as technology or popular culture.¹⁵ A sense of fragility is suggested in the idea that associations with outside norms can cause traditional values to disintegrate. The Seneca curator Tom Hill states, "We native peoples have idealized ourselves. We tend to think that our worldview is pristine, untouched, uninfluenced by European culture. And that's not true. In any kind of living culture, that culture is constantly changing and evolving."¹⁶

Another construct is provided by Sally Price, who observes that the category "art" is a convenient and exclusively Western construct, for it gives westerners complete control over the aesthetic judgment of the world's art. Westerners are then freed from the "laborious task" of determining and acknowledging individual ownership or the need to take Native aesthetic frameworks seriously.¹⁷ The liberty westerners take in speaking for Native artists, justified in the belief that Native languages do not have a word for art, is exemplified even in sympathetic appraisals of Native arts, such as Christian Feest's *Native Arts of North America*: "None of the native languages of North America seem to contain a word that can be regarded as synonymous with the Western concept of art, which is usually seen as something separable from the rest of daily life." Feest outlines four kinds of Native art: tribal, ethnic, pan-Indian, and Indian mainstream.¹⁸

This dispensing with Indigenous categories of reception goes both ways, however, especially when Native artists not only reject Western categories, but also fail to provide alternative references or ideological frameworks. A reluctance to articulate an alternative arts theory in the English language (as Highwater claims above, "We cannot readily translate Indian iconography and visions into terms that make realistic sense to the Western mind") ultimately leads to confusion. It also fosters a dangerous and inaccurate belief that Native artists are unreflective about their own art production or that they lack clear aesthetic criteria.¹⁹ This anti-intellectual agenda imposed on Native arts is a pervasive and as yet undocumented occurrence in Indigenous contexts. As a

student and later a faculty member at the Institute of American Indian Arts tribal college, I met students who claimed that arts instruction was unnecessary, that all they really needed were the tools to make art. This “Indians are naturally good artists” stance smacks of internalized racism, similar to the belief that African Americans naturally dance well or that Asians are naturally good at math.

A rejection of art as an established category found favor in the 1980s, but for very different reasons. First, as a separatist claim to Indigeneity, the politically charged era of Indian rights legislation supported “no word for art” perspectives. Second, in the gluttonous decorative Indian arts market in regional settings such as Santa Fe, “no word for art” enabled the crafting of a sellable authentic Indian artist and artwork, untainted by modernist desires. Third, in the “new museology” era of cultural institutions serving unique constituents, “no word for art” signaled an embrace of multiculturalism and difference. And fourth, according to Price, “no word for art” released scholars from the obligation to take Native knowledge systems into consideration, an assumption that even Native scholars and artists adopted. Ward Churchill, another alleged ethnic Indian fraud writer, has claimed, “‘Art,’ like ‘philosophy’ and ‘religion,’ is not an American Indian concept. It is a notion and a category of activity imported from Europe right along with the horse, firearms, trade beads and smallpox. In this sense, contemporary efforts to define what is traditional American Indian art and who are legitimate Americans are more than passingly absurd.”²⁰ While each of these manifestations of the “no word” phenomenon proved remarkably flexible in meeting varying constituents’ needs, none propelled the development of scholarship, offering as they did confusing and conflicted meanings for both the buying public and the academic community.

ARTIST FIRST

Incorporation of fine arts signifiers (“I’m an artist first and an Indian second”) similarly serves varying needs and communities. This Native arts slogan gained currency in the same 1980s era as “no word for art,” yet its life span was extended by postmodern sensibilities that rejected rigid identity concepts as oppressive. The idea of hybridity—a happy melding of cultures or even a transcendence of culture—is currently reflected in the associated term “post-Indian.”²¹

The examples I have selected to illustrate the “artist first” ideology are the 2008 exhibitions featuring the work of the late Luiseno painter Fritz Scholder, held concurrently at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., and New York (curated by Truman Lowe and Paul Chaat Smith), and a parallel exhibition at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum (*Fritz Scholder: An Intimate Look*, curated by Joseph Sanchez). An abstract expressionist

painter, Scholder is famous for simultaneously embracing and rejecting his Native identity, stating, "I'm very proud of being a quarter Luiseño, but you can't be anything if you are a quarter."²² Government-enacted blood quantum policies are mocked in his denial of Native influence altogether. In essence, Scholder actively justifies government recognition of Native populations by collapsing his artistic cultural influences and interests with state policies that reward or punish American Indians based on their incorporation into clearly recognized political entities.

Scholder's work is commercially successful. In the context of the cumulative one-man show at the Smithsonian, he is described as "the most influential, prolific, and controversial figure in the history of native art."²³ His statements on identity are clear, such as in this excerpt from a 1981 interview: "I know almost every prominent Indian in this country and there is one great difference between me and them. Their whole life is lived in a dichotomy, a tug between their tradition and having to live in a non-Indian dominated society. A lot play it very cool, but let me tell you, they HATE it. I don't have any of those feelings. I didn't grow up Indian."²⁴ According to the exhibit curator Smith, Scholder's legacy is "a life lived in opposition to the prevailing sentiments that offered easy answers to complicated issues. It would have been so easy for Scholder to declare himself, finally, an Indian, to become Luiseño or Hopi or Sioux, and he never did."²⁵ Scholder's work evidences a conceptual framework in which explicitly Native American arts (often described by the artist's ethnic bylines or labels) are viewed as "ghettoizing,"²⁶ "imposing,"²⁷ or "romanticized."²⁸ The artistic role advocated by Scholder is one of the culturally isolated individual who is free from societal constraints.

Two Native art shows held concurrent with the Scholder exhibits similarly dealt with Native identity. One, titled *Post-Identity* at the Nicole Fiacco Gallery in Hudson, New York, attacked the "false boundaries of culture, market and law that are irrelevant to (Native Artist's) work and their person. . . . For artists, the difference between 'Native American Artist' and an artist who happens to be Native American . . . can mean the difference between having to recapitulate an imposed 'identity' versus the type of self-actualization that artists are especially entitled to."²⁹ All artists, in this sense, should exercise not only the rights of the individual, but also the super-organic rights of an artist. The other related exhibit, titled *Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World*, organized by the Heard Museum and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, similarly epitomized the post-Indian movement. As the Native cocurator Gerald McMaster states, "For many Native artists today, cultural identity is not a concern."³⁰

Native artists' assertions of oppression and desired liberation are built on the premise that "serious artists of Native American descent" must either "respond against the notion that 'identity' is singular and

that their artwork must comply with stereotypical and legal definitions of 'Native American Art,'³¹ or refuse to engage the concept of identity at all. It is this concept of freedom that I wish to interrogate: Freedom from what? Are we to be freed from our own heritage? A post-Indian platform may sound liberatory, but this stance actually reifies the power of a colonial mind-set. It allows the audience to maintain a narrow interpretative field of cultural belonging in which one's spiritual, familial, and cultural influences are equated with state-imposed recognition policies. Post-Indian ideologies in an extremist sense easily connote the effect of assimilation. The luxury of rejecting one's affiliation to a tribal nation in this frame of reference in fact constitutes the act of self-colonization—something to which Native artists seem particularly susceptible.

Post-identity claims evidence a lack of engagement in the concrete realities of racism. A denial of race, either as a biological or social construct, conveniently and effectively silences the realities under which most Native American populations live. Native Americans are among the poorest ethnic groups in the United States (28.4 percent live in poverty—almost twice the rate for the nation as a whole, 15.3 percent).³² In addition to being vulnerable to poverty, American Indians experience higher rates of violence than the rest of the population; the incidence of aggravated assault is twice the national average. Native women are particularly at risk in this regard: one out of three American Indian women are raped during their lifetime. Native women are sexually assaulted three times more than their counterparts. Seventy percent of these crimes are committed by someone of a different race, indicating troubling connections between racism, violence, and sexism.³³ We do not live in a race-blind society, despite the claims post-identity advocates. In fact, these undeniable divides, gender inequalities, ageism, homophobia, and disabilities critiques unique to the Native American social landscape are largely unavailable in such projects that deny or minimize race.

I agree with post-Indian curators that conventional exhibit methodologies restrict accurate and sensitive interpretations of Native Americans. Specifically, the exhibition of human beings as sideshow objects, which often occurred in early world's fairs or even in the form of the collection and curation of human ancestors, still haunts us today. Perhaps it is this historically situated and contextually specific trauma that fuels the rejection of identity in contemporary post-Indian exhibition practices. This legacy of representational appropriations and abuse mirrors the multigenerational trauma of similar government-enacted policies, such as off-reservation boarding school policies, forced relocation, and environmental degradation. Public recognition of the horrific collection, curation, and exhibition of Indian peoples as objects would do much to sensitize contemporary Native arts audiences to the nega-

tive effects of typecasting, labeling, and classification. Documentation of these practices via film, print, poetry, and exhibitions continue to be important contributions to broadening these discussions.

What exactly does the "artist first, Indian second" perspective signify? I interpret this phrase as indicating a series of rejections. "Artist first" is a rejection of false and biased categorization. The clearest example of this practice I have documented is the Diné artist Mike McCabe, reporting about an instance when he approached a contemporary art gallery in person to inquire if they were taking new artists. McCabe was told, "We don't show Indian art." However when he sent in slides anonymously, the gallery responded enthusiastically, a response that implied that racism was a factor in their decision-making process.³⁴ Another rejection inherent in the "artist first" claim is that the artist was never Indian, or minimized his or her Indian identity. Fritz Scholder falls neatly into this category. Yet a third rejection of "artist first" is the critique of group Indian art exhibits that appear to present Native arts as the anonymous crafts genre of the past. This argument has merit, yet there are plenty of museums that consistently exhibit solo Indian art shows without rejecting the ethnic association (e.g., the Wheelwright Museum of Santa Fe).

The more difficult task is to ascertain what exactly is being advocated under the rubric "artist first." The lack of interpretative resources available to the average Native arts audience should not be a rationale to reject identity. An engagement with cultural values such as mentorship, reciprocity, and respect, which are often present in other contexts where Native arts circulate, may directly and effectively address this ignorance. Specifically, the conceptual infrastructure of Native arts education in its broadest sense, from language retention and cultural resource management to the establishment of graduate degree programs in Native American art history, can and should be funded and mobilized.

Native arts curatorial practices are hampered not only by the audience's ignorance (a surface interpretation—the effect), but also by a colonial, Western, and patriarchal curation methodology (the cause). Engagement with Native American intellectual traditions—what I term American Indian Curatorial Practice—can champion Native ideologies without falling victim to narrow interpretative strategies of "no word" and "artist first."

AMERICAN INDIAN CURATORIAL PRACTICE

How does one then go about defining an Indigenous framework? In academia there exists a parallel disagreement over how scholars theorize identity politics. Many argue that referencing collective ethnic or social values is an essentialist and outdated theoretical approach.

Theorizing about identity through this anti-identity-politics perspective in fact suggests a false starting point, since all identities are social constructions—fictions that often constrain rather than liberate. This critique of identity politics is closely aligned with current post-identity Native art claims.

Native artists and theorists may be unaware of the rich theoretical debates raging in the academy against identity-based social struggles by those on the left and right. As the post-positivist realism scholars Linda Alcoff and Satya Mohanty state, "For those on the Right, these [identity] movements appear to be threatening individual freedom, while for those on the Left, they are seen as threatening the progressive coalition and wallowing in victimization."³⁵ The Native arts critique against identity politics draws from both conservative and democratic values, championing individual freedom and seeking cross-cultural alliances.

What is not considered is how minority-based identity curatorial strategies, specifically, American Indian Curatorial Practices, may be better equipped to analyze the complexity of identity constructs than this movement toward the wholesale rejection of identity. Paula Moya proposes a "realist" theory in which "people are neither wholly determined by the social categories through which we are recognized, nor can we ever be free of them."³⁶ Moya concludes, "seeing identities as things we would be better off without is not the most productive or accurate way to understand them."³⁷

The intellectual platform of American Indian Curatorial Practices can assist in understanding the sovereign curatorial strategies employed by many Native curators today who choose to forward collective cultural values. Here I qualify American Indian Curatorial Practice as work that is long-term, mutually meaningful, reciprocal, and with mentorship—all collective constructs. Yet this hopeful analysis must also avoid the divisive polarities of individual versus collective to reach a more nuanced and accurate representation of Indigeneity. As Erica Lord observes, "Considering the history of 'identity art,' I want to explore the next wave of cultural examination, an evolution of new ways to demonstrate cultural identity beyond the polar ideas that exist in a solely black/white diaspora. I want to challenge ideas of cultural purity as well as discuss ideas of attraction, repulsion, exoticism, and gender or feminist notions. Through art and media, the cultural shapers of this generation, it is time for us to self-determine, to control our representation, and to address modernity, the merging of blood, and the myth of an authentic culture."³⁸

This "next wave" of expressions is certain to trouble the evident impasses of Native arts scholarship of the past. The exposure of narrowly restrictive strategies of debate—including the rejection of stan-

dard fine arts categories of reception ("no word for art in my language") and the assimilation of these same fine arts concepts ("I'm an artist first and an Indian second," or post-Indianness) is critical for the advancement of more accurate terms of engagement. While emerging points of reference that encompass the complex and at times contradictory references of political recognition, social realities, and structural oppressions are emerging, the general public (including the producers and consumers of Native arts) rarely distinguish these developments from the older, more problematic approaches that rely on divisive and simplistic catchphrases. A disconcerting tendency that requires our attention is the likely split between the still ill-conceived popular notions of Nativeness in popular arts circulation (commercial outlets, Indian fairs and markets, etc.) and the more selective (and some may claim elitist) circles of information exchange that push back to interrogate these concepts in the academy and the institution of the museum. This type of class-based divide will surely be cause for concern as the field of Native arts matures.

The primary emerging platform for developing a more accurate portrayal of the field is the institution of the symposium—a narrowly based yet far more productive social networking tool for advancing conversations around Indigeneity and identity in the arts. Significantly, these gatherings are characterized as multi-institutional partnerships that vary from the typical academic proceedings due to their active inclusion of artists, curators, and scholars. In 2009 the School for Advanced Research Indian Arts Research Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, hosted the seminar "Essential Aesthetics: An Exploration of Contemporary Indigenous Art and Identity," with participation from the Canadian curator Gerald McMaster, the Santa Clara artist Nora Naranjo-Morse, Robert Jahnke of the School of Maori Studies at Massey University in New Zealand, and the Ainu performance artist Mina Sakai, among others. The Diné curator Kathleen Ash-Milby of Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian served as a co-convenor with Mario Caro of the John W. Draper Interdisciplinary Program in Humanities and Social Thought at New York University.

The "Essential Aesthetics" seminar description provided an impetus for discussion of "current individual and communal formulations of Native identity":

Since the early 1990s, art production that addresses issues of racial, ethnic, sexual, and class identity have been placed under the rubric of "identity politics." More recently, however, there have been attempts by artists, curators, and arts institutions to move beyond these concerns by avoiding groupings along these categories. . . .

. . . How can claims of post-Indianness be considered from community perspectives that may have an essentialist understanding of identity? In other words, is the easy dismissal of a Native identity—an anti-essentialist move that relies on a formulation of identity as constructed—possible for members whose communities believe in identity as inherent?³⁹

These timely conversations enacted in the smaller setting of an invited seminar were ultimately expanded by the two organizers, Caro and Ash-Milby, as a public symposium with an open call for papers. Titled “Essentially Indigenous? Contemporary Native Arts Symposium,” the conference was held in early May 2011 in New York City at the Diker Pavilion of the George Gustav Heye Center at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). The symposium narrative read, “In the past, many discussions about Native art have focused mostly on the identity of the artist. While Indian identity has a place in the ongoing dialogue about Native art, our intention for this symposium is to break new ground by focusing on the art. What is it about a work of art by a Native artist that makes it Native? Iconography, subject matter, or aesthetic sensibility? Is it a relationship to land or ties to traditional art forms? Is there something essential we can or should define?”⁴⁰

This larger convening of over a hundred people was made possible by sponsorship provided by the NMAI, the Ford Foundation, the Native Peoples Forum (an organization founded at New York University), and the School for Advanced Research. These institutional supports are important to note because while they indicate a certain interiority to these debates, the location of dialogue and discussion in settings that had only a decade or two been seen as alien or even hostile in their reception of calls to Indigeneity are currently enabling progressive debate.⁴¹ The ultimate and broader implications for these types of collaborations must be further assessed for their impact and importance in establishing centers of advancement for intellectual and political Native causes.

While it is too early yet to assess the outcomes of these convenings, it is significant to observe both the broad participation in conversation by emerging and established scholars, writers, and artists and the general tenor of the dialogues engaged in. For example, David Garneau of the University of Regina presented “Necessary Essentialism and Contemporary Aboriginal Art,” in which he argues, “Materialist critiques of essentialism are based on a disbelief in metaphysics (Derrida) and meta-narratives (Lyotard). This is in conflict with Aboriginal world-views and historical experience which usually includes metaphysical beliefs, an essential belonging to place and a history of being caught

up in multiple master-narratives. It is time to rethink the essentialism/materialist binary in order to construct new critical tools that combine contemporary critical thinking and Indigenous epistemology in order to understand contemporary Aboriginal art and its future possibilities."⁴² A proactive stance, engagement with established theoretical modes of interrogation and an assertion of the uniqueness of an Indigenous appraisal from within the setting of theory building, is a noteworthy qualification that distinguishes these conversations from earlier, "he said, she said" types of conversations, which lacked the substantial intervention into both the sites and the ideologies of what might loosely be termed more mainstream settings.

Similarly, the artist, academic, and activist Dylan A. T. Miner states, "I directly confront *hybridity* as an empty signifier and hegemonic colonial category, one artists and critics must write against," arguing instead for an Indigenous perspective: "Although post-colonial thinkers have attempted to liberate hybridity from its racialist origins and relationship to botanical crossbreeding, I remain unconvinced about hybridity's efficacy for Indigenous intellectual labor."⁴³ These examples make plain to me that there is an active engagement in existing premises, and an equally active assertion of alternative ideologies. This intellectual rigor to my mind is evidence of a sea change from previous outright rejections of existing categories to a construction and articulation of counter-narratives, drawn from thought traditions that originate in pre-contact settings. This form of owning and naming parallels other developments in museum theory and holds exciting potential as a bridge for the establishment and codification of Indigenous aesthetic norms.

What makes American Indian Curatorial Practices unique? Why are these approaches that insist on an accounting of history, exposure of injustice, and recognition of cultural values better suited to an analysis of Indigenous arts than the incorporation of Western discursive practices of form, content, and meaning? These questions must be clearly defined, and the answers honestly sought if the new paradigms are to serve as more than reworked forms of older arguments. It is clear now that the dynamism and vibrancy of American Indian arts cannot be expressed in the fine arts vocabulary currently available. In fact, the field of current Native art production exceeds our capacity to engage its intellectual parameters productively. Identifying and critiquing patterns of previous discourse is a prerequisite to the development of any intellectual inquiry. Contemporary American Indian arts, as a central component of American Indian arts scholarship, has the potential to substantially inform our understanding of the contemporary lived realities of Native peoples and communities, reflecting our complexity and resilience.

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- 12 Edward Halealoha Ayau, "Bishop Museum Doesn't Qualify as a

- Claimant to Artifacts," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, August 29, 2004.
- 13 Documentation of a Native American artist feigning naïveté to increase sales is difficult to come by, but this is a topic that deserves further inquiry. The sale of high-end Indian arts in key regional locations during the 1980s also remains largely undocumented. For a pertinent case study involving a prominent dealer, see Jori Finkel, "Is Everything Sacred? A Respected Art Dealer Is Busted for Selling a Cheyenne War Bonnet," *Legal Affairs*, July/August 2003.
 - 14 Erica Lord, online audio interview, Native American Indigenous Cinema and Art, 2006, http://thenaica.org/edition_three/index.html.
 - 15 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
 - 16 Tom Hill, "A Question of Survival" in *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture*, ed. Terrance Winch (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 191.
 - 17 Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 89.
 - 18 Christian F. Feest, *Native Arts of North America* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 9, 14.
 - 19 Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 9.
 - 20 Ward Churchill, "American Indian Art and Artists: In Search of a Definition," Newsletter of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, November/December 1992.
 - 21 The exhibit *Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World*, organized by the Heard Museum and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (curated by Gerald McMaster and Joe Baker), epitomized the post-Indian movement. The George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian in New York hosted the exhibit from June 7 to September 21, 2008. See <http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/remix>. A negative review by the *Globe and Mail* art critic Sarah Milroy prompted a discussion McMaster, Baker, Milroy, and the professor of African and African Diaspora art history and visual culture Salah Hassan at the Art Gallery of Ontario, on August 23, 2009. An audio recording of the event is available at <http://www.ago.net/are-wepast-the-age-of-an-aboriginal-art-show>.
 - 22 Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, "Indian/Not Indian," nd, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/scholder/introduction.html>.
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Paul Chaat Smith, "Monster Love," in *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian*, ed. Lowery Stokes Sims, Truman T. Lowe, and Paul Chaat Smith (New York: Prestel, 2008), 33. Original quote from Ed Montini, "Four Sides of Fritz," *Arizona Republic*, February 22, 1981.
 - 25 Ibid., 35.
 - 26 Richard Nilsen, "Artist First, Indian Second: Native Artists Embrace Multicultural World," *Arizona Republic*, September 27, 2007.
 - 27 Nicole Fiacco Gallery, Hudson, New York, *Post-Identity* exhibition press, 2007. Unfortunately, the gallery and its Web site are not active at the time of this printing in 2011.
 - 28 Eleanor Heartney, "Native Art in an Age of Hybridity," in *Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World*, ed. Joe Baker and Gerald McMaster

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- 30 Gerald McMaster, "Introductions: Mixing It Up," in Baker and McMaster, *Remix*, 57.
- 31 Fiacco Gallery.
- 32 U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey, nd, available at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- 33 Amnesty International, "United States of America: Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Violence in the USA," April 24, 2007, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/MazeOfInjustic.pdf>.
- 34 Nancy Marie Mitchell (Mithlo), "The Negotiated Role of Contemporary American Indian Artists: A Study in Marginality" (Stanford University, 1993).
- 35 Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty, "Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction," in *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.
- 36 Paula Moya, "What's Identity Got to Do with It? Mobilizing Identities in the Multicultural Classroom," in Alcoff et al., *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, 99.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 38 Lord, Native American Indigenous Cinema and Art.
- 39 "Essential Aesthetics: An Exploration of Contemporary Indigenous Art and Identity," November 16–20, 2009, http://sarweb.org/index.php?iarc_contemporary_native_art.
- 40 "Essentially Indigenous? Contemporary Native Arts Symposium," May 5–6, 2011, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/subpage.cfm?subpage=collaboration&second=seminars#>.
- 41 It is significant to note also the focus on the art object in the call for participation at the symposium's museum location, rather than the more theory-based, contextual seminar setting of School for Advanced Research.
- 42 David Garneau abstract, "Necessary Essentialism and Contemporary Aboriginal Art," provided by the conference organizers of "Essentially Indigenous? Contemporary Native Arts Symposium," May 5–6, 2011, George Gustav Heye Center, National Museum of the American Indian, New York.
- 43 Dylan A. T. Miner, "An Indigenist Provocation on/as Contemporary Art: A Migration Story in Seven Fragments," provided by the conference organizers of "Essentially Indigenous? Contemporary Native Arts Symposium," May 5–6, 2011, George Gustav Heye Center, National Museum of the American Indian, New York.