

Postindians and Reservation X: Individualism and Community Sovereignty in  
Contemporary North American First Nations Arts Discourse

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A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Art History) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2010

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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-67299-0  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-67299-0

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At Concordia the encouragement of my professors has meant more than they might know; I mention here only a select few: Dr. Catherine MacKenzie, who taught me as well as acted as co-supervisor and reader - she made it all seem possible; Dr. Brian Foss, no longer at Concordia but in whose classroom I learned so much about balance; Dr. Kristina Huneault, who seemed to always, well, more than most, understand what I *meant* to say in my assignments and push me towards better expression; and lastly Dr. Sherry Farrell Racette, my supervisor, who kept my perspective firmly rooted in reality, especially when my brain was getting carried away by my heart.

Fiscal support is also important! I have spent over two years working in the Fine Arts Deans Office, which, while keeping me in PB&J sandwiches also provided me with a regular and great group of people to share with. The Canadian Women Artists History Initiative has supported me, and I hope I supported them in kind - I wish continued and great success to this worthy project of Dr. Janice Anderson, Dr. Kristina Huneault and Melinda Reinhart. The teaching assistantships I held while studying were also irreplaceable in terms of learning experiences; thanks to Dr. Cynthia Hammond, who I was pleased to work with twice, Dr. Elizabeth Kalbfleisch and Cynthia Cooper.

To my parents: this passage crossed a rougher sea than I had imagined, both academically and personally, but you were always there to anchor the boat. Much love to you both.

And to Irene, for screwing my head back on straight.

## ABSTRACT

### Postindians and Reservation X: Individualism and Community Sovereignty in Contemporary North American First Nations Arts Discourse

Erica Howse

The goal of this project is to consider the works of Gerald McMaster (Cree), an artist, curator and catalogue essayist, and Gerald Vizenor (Anishnaabek), a fiction and non-fiction writer as well as literary theorist, as methods for understanding and responding to Aboriginal demands for sovereignty, especially as re-presented in artworks and arts discourse. Their perspectives have been influenced and contextualized by postmodernism, and reflect two dominant strands within that field of thought: one which retains its connection to modernism in its search for meaning, and the other which denies meaning or truth though connects with modernism's focus on individuality. Ultimately, however, my intent is to recognize McMaster and Vizenor as word warriors for First Nations communities, to consider their ideas as methods which relate postmodern theories to Aboriginal demands for sovereignty to artworks, and through my own engagement to contribute to the further dissemination of their work.

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## **PREFATORY REMARKS:**

The goal of this project is to consider the work of Gerald McMaster (Cree) and Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabek) as methods for understanding and responding to arguments for Aboriginal community sovereignty. These perspectives have been influenced and contextualized by postmodernism, and reflect two dominant strands within that field of thought. These threads critically engage with the idea of meaning or objective truth, as set out by modernism, that have proved so foundational but also problematic for the field as a whole.

In one strand thinkers seek to retain some connection to modernism arguing that there are markers via which individuals and groups can be identified and thus also respected. Importantly, though, for postmodernist thinkers those markers would be found in ways and places less accessible than traditional modernist means like race, religion, or cultural practices. There is within this perspective a recognition of real difference, and thus a group who shares those differences, which both acknowledges and legitimizes community-specific needs. McMaster's proposition Reservation X builds on ideas like these.

The other strand resists any means of identification arguing that modernist demands for knowledge have done more harm than good. These thinkers argue that there are always exceptions, i.e. those who are found outside the group, between groups, or who are marginalized by the group however it is conceptualized. Vizenor's postindian connects in many ways to this line of inquiry. However, this strand also links with modernism in that there is, simultaneously with this denial of meaning and thus real difference, a suggestion of universality. We are inherently levelled through an emphasis

on individual difference because we are thought to share the same basic needs, presumably respected by a one-size-fits-all emphasis on individual human rights. Western colonial emphasis on the individual can be challenged by those speaking from different epistemological perspectives.

While McMaster is an obvious choice for examination because of his prominence on the Canadian art scene over the past twenty years as artist, curator and catalogue essayist, Vizenor is a less obvious selection. Despite his importance in the United States as both a fiction and non-fiction writer and literary theorist, in Canada his influence has been less directly felt. Nonetheless, many curators in Canada have responded to, been influenced by and incorporated his ideas and terms postindian and survivance into their exhibitions and catalogue essays. As examples Marcia Crosby (Tsimshian) and Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche) can be cited for their work in *Nations in Urban Landscapes* (1997), first shown at the Contemporary Art Gallery of Vancouver. Also important is the recent exhibition *Remix: New Modernities in a Post Indian World* (2008), notably curated by McMaster, which uses Vizenor's postindian, but re-formulated with a space after the post prefix. The shifting meanings and appropriation of this term plays a central role in this thesis. Also, however, direct challenges to Vizenor's perspective can be seen in Robert Houle's (Salateaux) solo exhibition *Sovereignty Over Subjectivity* (1999), curated by Shirley Madill and first shown at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, through its privileging of community over individualism.

Requiring further explanation is my use of 'Canadian' and 'American' theorists. The looser boundaries that exist between Native peoples who live in 'Canada' and the 'United States,' as opposed to the stricter borders adhered to by non-Natives, support the



limit-transgressing broad strokes of my project. The consideration of the differences between McMaster and Vizenor as could potentially be explained by the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel will not be at issue in this paper. My intent is to recognize McMaster and Vizenor as word warriors for First Nations communities, to consider their ideas as a method to relate postmodern theories to Aboriginal demands for sovereignty, and through my own engagement to contribute to the further dissemination of their work from a non-Native perspective.

## **P A R T I : Introduction to the Word Warrior**

I would like to adopt Dale Turner's (Anishinaabek) notion of the word warrior as a frame through which to view Gerald McMaster and Gerald Vizenor's theories on Aboriginality in contemporary arts discourse. As Turner writes in *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards an Indigenous Critical Philosophy* (2006), Aboriginal peoples

must engage the normative discourses of the state. This means that their defences for their views, and their justifications for a place at the table, are articulated using the discourses of rights, sovereignty, and nationhood. Aboriginal peoples have become adept at using these discourses to defend their positions; even so, there remains a fundamental asymmetry in the legal and political relationship. ... The asymmetry arises because indigenous peoples must use the normative language of the dominant culture to ultimately defend world views that are embedded in completely different normative frameworks.<sup>1</sup>

A word warrior, then, "is an Indigenous person who engages the imposed legal and political discourses of the state guided by the belief that the knowledge and skills to be gained by engaging in such discourses are necessary for the survival of all Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Turner, *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards an Indigenous Critical Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 81.

peoples.”<sup>2</sup> McMaster and Vizenor are two such theorists who suggest in distinct though related ways how the dominant culture’s discourse can be made to serve Aboriginal ends, including sovereignty, whether that be over representation, individual and community rights, or land. Mostly, however, these thinkers are succeeding at changing non-Native minds when it comes to understanding Aboriginal perspectives, through fiction and critical writing, artworks and art exhibitions. The challenges faced in this endeavour include dominant conceptualizations of Aboriginal communities, including how those communities should be defined and understanding the links and breakages between Aboriginal communities and non-Native Canada.

Turner also writes that while “Indigenous peoples need some of their own people to engage the European history of ideas; in just the same way, the dominant culture needs some of its own people to listen and learn from indigenous philosophies.”<sup>3</sup> This, I believe, outlines my role as a receiver of and engager with Aboriginal mediators. I am non-Native, descended from Irish and British settlers, raised in Newfoundland and Ontario by my parents as well as with a sister and a brother. My undergraduate history thesis on the break up of Czechoslovakia was my initiation into the ideas of nation, representation and marginalization. After traveling and living abroad, my interest in the idea of difference and how to account for it grew. I consider the work of McMaster and Vizenor, as well as the work of many artists in light of their ideas, in an effort to increase my understanding of historical and contemporary Canada, but also to develop and contribute to the discussion on competing individual and community identities.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 120.

## PART II: Modernism, Postmodernism & Politics

Modernism is an important theme in postcolonial discourse. Modernism is at its heart a search for truth or objectivity, and critiques of art and art history as truth-seeking endeavours are valuable components of both Native and non-Native postmodern perspectives. Confronting the centrality of modernism is unavoidable in most, if not all, theoretical or artistic endeavours; indeed, the prevalence of postmodern perspectives can in some way be seen to mimic the power of its predecessor. McMaster and Vizenor have engaged differently with modernism through their writing; their perspectives shift, for one more than the other, but both are interested in investigating the complexity and fullness both of modernist influence and in the task of countering it.

McMaster and Vizenor adopt critical postmodern perspectives, which Hal Foster broadly describes in the introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1998) as follows:

As the importance of a Foucault, a Jacques Derrida, or a Roland Barthes attests, postmodernism is hard to conceive without continental theory, structuralism and poststructuralism in particular. Both have led us to reflect upon culture as a corpus of codes or myths (Barthes), as a set of imaginary resolutions to real contradictions (Claude Lévi-Strauss). In this light, a poem or picture is not necessarily privileged, and the artefact is likely to be treated less as a *work* in modernist terms – unique, symbolic, visionary – than as a *text* in a postmodernist sense – “already written,” allegorical, contingent. With this textual model, one postmodernist strategy becomes clear: to deconstruct modernism not in order to seal it in its own image but in order to open it, to rewrite it; to open its closed systems (like the museum) to the “heterogeneity of texts” (Crimp), to rewrite its universal techniques in terms of “synthetic contradictions” (Frampton) – in short, to challenge its master narratives with the “discourse of others” (Owens).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hal Foster, “Introduction,” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: New Press, 1998), xi.

Postmodernism contains within its critique a preoccupation with language and meaning, a focus on context and an interest in difference. My approach is to understand the thread which runs through the arguably dissonant positions which support the “heterogeneity,” the “synthetic contradictions,” and the “discourse of others.”

It is thus a mistake to think that postmodernists are cohesive rather than in some aspects deeply divided; however, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests in “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” (1991) that something does, indeed, connect them;

‘postmodernism’ is a name for the rejection of that claim to exclusivity, a rejection that is almost always more playful, though not necessarily less serious, than the practice it aims to replace ... [In] each domain this rejection of exclusivity assumes a particular shape, one that reflects the specificities of its setting. To understand the various postmodernisms this way is to leave open the question of how their theories of contemporary social, cultural, and economic life relate to the actual practices that constitute that life – to leave open, then, the relations between *postmodernism* and *postmodernity*.<sup>5</sup>

The attention to domain is important, as is the recognition that postmodernism plays out in different ways in different places. Here I investigate the postcolonial in North America where the two strands whose “rejection of exclusivity” have been prominent are comprised of those theorists who seek to deny any form of ‘truth making,’ and argue that meaning has disappeared or has become too oppressive to be useful, and those who still look for ‘truth,’ but seek to locate it in new ways and places. I do find, however, that the goal is the same, and that McMaster’s and Vizenor’s approaches are representative of two different means of working towards what Appiah calls a “space-clearing gesture.” He writes that “the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the

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<sup>5</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry*, 17.2 (Winter, 1991): 342.

space-clearing gesture.”<sup>6</sup> McMaster and Vizenor are both working towards creating a new space, whether literally or theoretically, where Aboriginal peoples can counter the dominant modernist, exclusivist and ahistorical tropes.

Vizenor draws heavily on Jean Baudrillard’s theories of simulation, a liberating but nihilistic position; he is seeking to discard frameworks of identity altogether as a false premise given that structuralism is fundamentally flawed, corrupting any experience of identity through the desire for definition and understanding. McMaster, on the other hand, begins with a poststructuralist approach, using Michel Foucault, in an effort to show the purpose, usefulness and historical importance of meaning as well as how it can be accounted for. Later, in an essay titled “Post-Reservation Perspectives” (2006), McMaster moves towards an approach more in line with Vizenor, and yet more recently, in *Remix: New Modernities in a Post Indian World* (2008), McMaster has shifted to an a Vizenor-ian postindian perspective. He writes in his catalogue essay for *Remix* that “For many Native artists today, cultural identity is not a concern.”<sup>7</sup> How does McMaster make this shift, and has he indeed drawn closer to Vizenor’s original intent with postindian, or has the term’s meaning shifted through its use in different domains and appropriation by the wider Aboriginal community? This postcolonial postmodernism might seem like one domain but in McMaster and Vizenor there is divergence. While this is not the place to go into why those variations might exist, I will be exploring their theories in detail in Parts V and VI in an effort to untangle the many different issues at play.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 348.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald McMaster, “Introductions: Mixing it Up,” *Remix* (Washington, D.C. & New York: National Museum of the American Indian and Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 57.

## PART III: Sovereignty

Given that word warriors must be engaged in the normative discourses of the state, most importantly in discussions concerning “rights, sovereignty, and nationhood,” it is important to come to some understanding of how the word sovereignty is used by the dominant culture and by Native peoples who have had to adopt it. It is also significant to mention here that I consider rights and nationhood to be included under the rubric of sovereignty, in the sense that self-determination implies rights as well as boundaries to those rights, extant with the boundaries of the nation.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) defines sovereignty as:

The quality or condition of being sovereign. 1. Supremacy or pre-eminence in respect of excellence or efficacy. 2. Supremacy in respect of power, domination, or rank; supreme dominion, authority, or rule. 3. a) The position, rank, or power of a supreme ruler or monarch; royal authority or dominion. b) The supreme controlling power in communities not under monarchical government; absolute and independent authority. 4. A territory under the rule of a sovereign, or existing as an independent state.<sup>9</sup>

It is apparent from these definitions that Indigenous peoples have to work within a discourse whose frame of reference is monarchies and supreme powers, which certainly connotes the patriarchy and Christianity of Western history. It is not until the fourth definition where the perspective(s) of the citizen(s) makes an appearance: “a territory under the rule of a sovereign, or existing as an independent state.” That is to say, independence from a sovereign is also sovereign, and this is how contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> Bonita Lawrence, in *“Real” Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), suggests in the introduction that the different historical and contemporary policies of the Canadian and American governments have led to the divergent Native responses. I do find the difference, and possible alignment with colonial national discourse, compelling.

<sup>9</sup> “Sovereignty,” *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online: Oxford University Press, 2009). [http://0-dictionary.oed.com/mercury.concordia.ca/cgi/entry/50231796?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=sovereignty&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://0-dictionary.oed.com/mercury.concordia.ca/cgi/entry/50231796?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=sovereignty&first=1&max_to_show=10) [accessed 8 February 2010].

discussions of sovereignty are widely understood. Sovereignty means a group of people claiming and/or achieving self-determination that has heretofore been denied by a ruling power.

Building on that definition I return to Turner, who suggests that sovereignty is the very process of engaging with the dominant discourse to make clear how Aboriginal views and rights have been marginalized. Turner, again: “I believe that defending the sovereignty and nationhood of tribal life requires us to aim our intellectual energies towards the dominant culture’s peculiar ways of characterizing who we are as human beings, and especially as political entities.”<sup>10</sup> The word warrior is to exercise a sovereignty that already exists, to show and exert Aboriginal perspectives that have been marginalized by the dominant culture, to re-present more accurate records of colonization’s history, as well as to insist now on an equitable political relationship.

Louis Karoniaktajeh Hall (Kahnawake Mohawk) wrote and published the *Warrior’s Handbook* in 1980. While the word ‘warrior’ has aggressive implications for non-Native society, Hall reminds the reader that it is an English word imposed on Natives, which Hall has adopted for good reasons. He writes, “The term ‘Warrior Society’ was supplied by the white man. The Great Law says ‘The War Chief and his men.’ As the term Warrior Society seems to apply very well and as we are using the English language in the confabulation, we shall use the term.”<sup>11</sup> Hall is very much a word warrior expressing Native rights to sovereignty using the dominant discourse’s language. Hall speaks further on the predominance of individualism in Western discourse in the glossary at book’s end. He states that ‘unique’ is “an overworked word

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<sup>10</sup> Turner, *Peace Pipe*, 106

<sup>11</sup> Louis Karoniaktajeh Hall, *Warrior’s Handbook* (Ontario: L.K. Hall, 1980), 5.

in connection with Native Americans. It's white man's way of telling the Indians 'You're alone, baby, you're alone.'"<sup>12</sup> Individualism trumps community rights in the discourse of the West; hopes of solidarity are superseded by the rights of the individual, community is flattened via 'equality' into powerlessness through a divisive individualism in line with the colonial policy of divide and conquer.

While Hall does not use the word sovereignty, the issue of nationhood and self-determination is clearly elaborated at the beginning of his publication:

Man also has another life. His national life. His nation also has the right to exist. The members of the nation are duty bound to protect and defend their nation. The world has nations of people. Everyone has the right to a nationality. Man is a social person and has the right to belong to his own society. (The Onkwehonwe is denied this right. The man from Europe wants him to join the white man's society. Calls it assimilation.) It is hard to imagine anyone not belonging to a nation. A man's national life is as important as his physical life.

Besides having the right to exist, the nation also has the right to an area of land for its territory where it may exercise its government, law, customs and society. No nation shall be so deprived it has to exist on a reservation. At this moment, July 24, 1979, only Ganieneh, which is part of the traditional Mohawk Nation, practices its right to live in a territory. All other Indian nations exist on reservations.<sup>13</sup>

Respecting the right to exist requires territory, here elaborated as a fundamental, foundational element of sovereignty. One or a community cannot *live* a culture if there is no space in which to live it. This exertion of political sovereignty engages the idea of territory as a space in which identity is formed. Over the next thirty years identity, in some instances, takes precedence over land in debates over sovereignty, or self-determination, understood as both an individual and community right. The engagement with the dominant discourse sought to explicate why sovereignty over land is required, in terms that an individualistic society can understand - that of individual self-determination

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 1.



– ultimately, though, there will be a return to territory as foundation for both sovereignty and identity. How is this historical discussion of sovereignty represented or understood in contemporary Aboriginal arts discourse?

McMaster and his co-curator Lee-Ann Martin write in the introduction to *Indigena* (1992), first shown at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, that “Self-determination and sovereignty include human, political, land, religious, artistic and moral rights. Taking ownership of these stories involves a claim to Aboriginal title over images, culture and stories.”<sup>14</sup> An intermediary exhibition, *Reservation X* (1998) does not deal so much with sovereignty as with ‘new’ Native identities. But while *Reservation X* is a place between the reserve and urban areas, the reserve is described as a place that

has kept Indians apart, allowing aboriginal people to live differently from outsiders. It is this difference that is now becoming attractive and permeable. Territoriality is fundamentally important to Indian people, and the Indian reserve is a territorial space that signifies ‘home,’ a place that enables and promotes a varied and ever-changing perspective. It is a frontier of difference and a place to which one can always return.<sup>15</sup>

The intertwining of territory and identity proves powerful because it links self-determination over identity with self-determination in a territory, while simultaneously promoting change as an integral element of identity. Identity theory connects with the material nature of land and historic land rights.

Later McMaster references Menno Boldt’s book *Surviving as Indians: The Challenges of Self-Government* (1993) for the definition of sovereignty McMaster uses in “Post-Reservation Perspectives” (2006):

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<sup>14</sup> Gerald McMaster & Lee-Ann Martin, “Introduction,” *Indigena* (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald McMaster, “Living on Reservation X,” *Reservation X* (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998), 22.

‘Aboriginal rights’ refer to rights deemed to be held by the indigenous peoples of Canada by virtue of their ancestors’ original and long-standing nationhood and their use and occupancy of the land. As popularly used by Indian leaders, the term ‘Aboriginal rights’ means band/tribal sovereignty, proprietary title to their ancestral lands, and the practice of their traditional cultures.<sup>16</sup>

The intertwining of land and identity makes clear the need for territory, or perhaps more accurately, identity has justified the need for territory to the dominant discourse.

The broad trajectory, then, is one which traces a-way from originary territorial concerns, to identity issues, and back to one which is more clearly land-based. It is as if, in the imperative to exert control over land, identity issues, which run parallel to the dominant discourse’s individualism, must be engaged. While the land is concrete, a material proof of the merits of self-determination arguments, at least to the dominant discourse, rights over land also challenges the Canadian nation with an issue that, for it, requires a special recognition of a community’s rights. Markers like language, art and culture are definable, mutable and debatable by modernity and postmodernity alike, on the basis of individual rights, in a way that land and land claims are not.

McMaster acknowledges that reservations are limiting but argues that they also provide “a land base [that] is fundamental to the self-government movement and vital to Aboriginal identity.”<sup>17</sup> Difficulty in identifying a reserve as a sovereign territory arises because historically Canada’s colonial government severely restricted freedoms on reservations. The Department of Indian Affairs outlawed cultural practices, imposed alcohol prohibitions, denied the franchise – or bartered sovereignty for it – and attempted to force the adoption of European values through residential schools and created living

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<sup>16</sup> Menno Boldt, *Surviving as Indians: The Challenge of Self-Government* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 25.

<sup>17</sup> McMaster, “Post-Reservation,” 49.

environments. The contemporary rapid and often illegal encroachment onto Native lands by the Canadian government and corporate interests additionally complicates conceptualizing reservations as sovereign territories. This connection between individual rights as requiring community rights challenges the dominant discourse to recognize the limitations of its own philosophical underpinnings. When McMaster writes in the catalogue for *Remix* that “cultural identity is not a concern” it becomes clear that Aboriginal identity, in McMaster’s opinion, has not been satisfactorily recognized, not that identity has ceased to be a concern; indeed it may be time for a post-identity world, a time to put an end to explanations.<sup>18</sup>

Vizenor describes Native senses of sovereignty in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1994):

Tribal sovereignty is inherent, and that sense of independence and territorial power has been the defense of sovereignty on tribal land and reservations. Federal courts and congressional legislation have limited the absolute practices of sovereignty, such as certain criminal and civil responsibilities on reservations, but that sense of inherent sovereignty prevails in the many interpretations of the treaties with the federal government.<sup>19</sup>

Vizenor is here clearly relying on historical presence as the foundation of Native territorial claims. The issue of identity is not at issue, except where it is important to deny erroneous Western conceptualizations; understanding identity, what or who is *indian*, is not only irrelevant but impossible and dangerous. In *Postindian Conversations* (1999) Vizenor elaborates: “... we should include everyone as an *indian* who so desires and, once and for all time, get past the racial accusations and separations over a colonial simulation. Natives have everything to gain and nothing to lose by this concession, by

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<sup>18</sup> Gerald McMaster, *Remix* (New York & Washington: National Museum of the American Indian & Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 57.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 146.

embracing others in a linguistic slave name.”<sup>20</sup> Vizenor returns to fundamental territorial demands, arguing that any conceptualization of *indian-ness* is invalid.

Also significant is the F.H. Hinsley definition of sovereignty Vizenor quotes in *Manifest Manners* (1994):

The concept of sovereignty originated in the closer association of the developing state and the developing community which became inevitable when it was discovered that power had to be shared between them... The function of the concept was to provide the only formula which could ensure the effective exercise of power once this division of power or collaboration of forces had become inescapable.<sup>21</sup>

Vizenor’s choice here recognizes the balancing that is an inherent part of any form of sovereignty when there are other sovereign people, groups and territories around, which returns us to Turner’s notion that the process of engaging is enacting sovereignty. Further, by using a British historian as a conduit Vizenor is demonstrating that colonial philosophy recognizes demands of territorial sovereignty; Western discourses are here being used to Aboriginal advantage. It is important to note that Vizenor’s perspective does not change through the works I am considering, roughly the period from 1993-2008; his different writings and interviews instead represent the development of his ideas. His understanding and defence of Native sovereignty remains territorial and community based.

#### **P A R T I V : Essentialism and Hybridity**

Closely related to the question of identity are the co-mingled issues of essentialism and hybridity. Because identity is often linked to others, i.e. based in a

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<sup>20</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Postindian Conversations*, (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 153.

<sup>21</sup> F.H. Hinsley in Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 146.

community or shared identity, measuring the ‘purity’ of someone’s race or culture has been a tool to evaluate the legitimacy of a given group’s claims to sovereignty. Some of the most compelling writing on essentialism theorizes essence itself as a social construction and cultural norms as static. The implication is that an essential identity, as traditionally understood, can be re-imagined to allow not only for shifting, but also for evading definition. In some cases this has meant, though controversial, for change or contradiction to be a part of essence. Nonetheless, the reappraisal of terms rooted in modernism has proven productive.

One feminist theorist, Diana Fuss, writes in “The ‘Risk’ of Essence” that

There is no compelling reason to assume that the natural is, in essence, essentialist and that the social is, in essence, constructionist. ... it might be necessary to begin questioning the constructionist assumption that nature and fixity go together (naturally) just as sociality and change go together (naturally). In other words, it may be time to ask whether essences can change and whether constructions can be normative.<sup>22</sup>

The perceived risk of essence has precluded any real investigation into what essence means, or what it could mean, or do, politically, as well as theoretically. The perceived “threat” of essence as essentialist, therefore truth, has drawn hasty and arguably reactionary anti-essentialist sentiments. If modernist propositions of truth can be re-imagined, what effect might this have on postmodern positions that have countered traditional interpretations of modernism without sufficiently critiquing them first? Fuss argues that postmodernists have historically insufficiently interrogated the concept of essentialism for suggestions or possibilities of difference.

In feminist terms this has, according to Fuss, oftentimes resulted in a lack of essence becoming the essence of woman. She writes that Derrida, “does not so much

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<sup>22</sup> Diana Fuss, “The ‘Risk’ of Essence,” *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 6.

challenge that woman has an essence as insist that we can never ‘rigorously’ or ‘properly’ identify it. Woman’s essence is simply ‘undecidable,’ a position which frequently inverts itself in deconstruction to the suggestion that it is the essence of woman to be the undecidable.” This simultaneous connection and disconnection between the modern and the postmodern has implications for both McMaster and Vizenor’s engagement with modernism and meaning. It is the current risk of essentializing the undecidable that appears in Vizenor’s theory, particularly when he uses the trickster to perform rather than set out a Native identity.<sup>23</sup>

The exhibition *No Reservations* (2006), first shown at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut, shows affiliation with Vizenor’s postindian perspective, specifically critiquing the notion of essentialism. The exhibit included five Native and five non-Native artists all engaged with issues of Aboriginal identity. That artists from a variety of backgrounds were included responds directly to Vizenor’s criticism concerning who is *indian* and who is not, which is not to say that any one of the non-Native artists is claiming an *indian* identity, but that the related issue of native identity, especially traditionally essentializing identities, implicates and impacts all. Richard Klein, the exhibition director, writes,

The non-Native artists who are included in the project primarily focus on the history of the European colonization of America and the resultant dislocation and genocide as subject matter. They utilize this history as a means to investigate broader issues regarding the nature of the American character, and the ways that cultural and historical assumptions cloud our view of both past and present.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Vizenor’s use of the trickster will be discussed in depth in Part IV.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Klein, *No Reservations* (Ridgefield, Connecticut: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006), 21.

This is, in Turner's terms, a non-Native response to the messages and criticisms coming from the Native community. It is an engagement from both sides, so to speak, of the issue. Klein goes on to write:

The 'tradition vs. change' debate is centred on two critical factors: the way in which values and spiritual beliefs of traditional societies are diametrically opposed to the dominant ethics of rationalist, capitalist, consumer culture and the accelerated rate of change that Western culture demands.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, in an exhibition that explores hybridity and attempts to avoid setting Native and non-Native peoples in a binary relationship, Klein, in this bit of writing, seems to perpetuate the divide through the suggestion that it is real instead of imagined. Are Aboriginal communities more in touch with their traditions? Is Western culture any less in touch with traditions because of consumer culture's 'accelerated rate of change?' I would argue that these are both myths, that while embracing tradition Native communities also change and that while changing Western culture clings too to the past – ironically in this case to Klein's ability to know something about both of these groups. Perhaps the exhibition artworks can be viewed as a response to this 'traditional' modernist and essentialist divide even as it is set up by Klein.

As an Israeli-born artist who also grew up playing cowboy and *indian* games, Yoram Wolberger's work reflects the widespread nature of the *indian* stereotype. His oversized plastic figurines play with essentialist ideologies in a simultaneously direct yet subtle critique. The super-sized nature of *Red Indian Chief* (2005) [Figure 1] draws attention to every aspect of the original eponymous toy *indians* through the primary colour, the material, the caricature and the pose. The size makes the figurine useless and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 22.

ridiculous; in the same way that miniatures make one marvel at the detail, the enlargement here is meant to make one wonder at the lack of specificity.

There is no more pointed criticism than in the plastic material; manmade, malleable according to wishes of its user, and practically indestructible once formed, the allusion to stereotypes is clear. Further, that this plastic has been moulded is made apparent by the remnants around the edges that have not been removed. I remember as a girl attempting to tear this excess material off of my Barbies – those dolls where it could be torn off most perfectly were the best, the ones I and my friends wanted to play with, whereas the imperfect ones, with rough edges, obviously and problematically fake, were used only when necessary and often foisted off onto younger brothers and less favoured acquaintances. The edges of the figurine, both toy and oversized, represents a threshold for the imagination; whatever the ambiguities inside, it is desirable that the edges be clear. If we understand these edges as the frame, the thing that holds the artwork or stereotype together, that sets it up or tears it down, the excess material here acts as the parergon, giving us access to the inner workings of the figurine and the historical conditions which created it.

The dress and weaponry themselves are stereotypical – the feathered headdress, the feathered bow, the cutlass, the loincloth, the long hair, the leather pants and the bare feet – all signifiers of an essential *indian*-ness for those receptive to such ideas. The expression on the Chief's face seems an obvious war cry, a preparation for and incitement to death. But, simultaneously, in the oversized version the lack of detail and the monochromatic red in these characteristics seems problematic. The feathers do not look like feathers, the feet definitely do not look like feet, and the war cry is anything but



scary, indeed half-hearted or comic might be a better description. In childhood games the imagination already steeped in *indian* imagery and stereotypes will fill in the blanks, adjust for the colour scheme, detail the feathers and hear the yell. In Wolberger's version the viewer's attention is drawn to this lack of specificity specifically, as well as the weakness in execution, and is encouraged to ask questions. Might this be Vizenor's postindian, a supersized *indian* whose shadows now loom large? With essentialism having been reduced to such problematic stereotyping, how can newly imagined essentialist notions be made to work *for* Native peoples claims to sovereignty?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's solution to this quandary is the subaltern, a group, or groups that as yet remain unknown but must always be kept in mind as a possibility. While 'known' groups may be identified, to some extent, one must acknowledge that Other groups or the intricacies of identity lie beyond the known; silent or quieted, and unrepresented.

When I was speaking of building for difference, I was thinking of the fact that an audience can be constituted by people I cannot even imagine, affected by this little unimportant trivial piece of work which is not just direct teaching and writing. That business displaces the question of audience as essence or fragmented or exclusivist or anything. Derrida calls this a responsibility to the trace of the other. ... It's something that one must remind oneself of all the time. That is why what I cannot imagine stands guard over everything that I must/can do, think, live, etcetera.<sup>26</sup>

Spivak does not, in the same way at least, deny that there are 'centres' of meaning, only that it is impossible to 'know' them all. She argues that when Derrida 'de-centered' the subject, he was not suggesting that subjects are de-centered but only that the centers cannot be known; they are unavailable. That, however, does not make meaning any less

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<sup>26</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "In a Word. *Interview*," *The Essential Difference*, Naomi Schor & Elizabeth Weed, eds. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 181.

a part of any individual or community's life, and does not require continual interruption or an essence of contradiction, just respect.

Spivak strategizes this line of inquiry when she writes

I believe that the way to counter the authority of either objective, disinterested positioning or the attitude of there being no author (and these two opposed positions legitimize each other) is by thinking of oneself as an example of certain kinds of historical, psycho-sexual narratives that one must in fact use, however micrologically, in order to do deontological work in the humanities.<sup>27</sup>

The connection between modernism and postmodernism makes an appearance there. The objective position alludes to the modernist perspective which is able to 'know' whereas the postmodernist 'no author' critique, while making the author unknown, is yet oppressive in its denial of agency and some kind of concrete identity which bestows power. The idea of 'use' indicates that Spivak acknowledges that identity is necessary, even in some concrete form, so as to "do deontological work."

Spivak further critiques the normative discourse set up around essentialism by describing it as

a kind of blind spot that won't go away. It hasn't, by and large, been historicized or related to the history of high philosophical essentialism, but has been invoked to distance and disallow certain kinds of discourses. Why hasn't the response to that been a kind of philosophical essentialism that fights back, that resists this abuse, and the ahistorical and in some ways not very informed use of the word essentialism?<sup>28</sup>

This challenge to discourses of essentialism relates to Fuss's critique quoted earlier. The word itself, Spivak argues, has not been sufficiently interrogated in order to develop the idea itself. The superficial use of the term has in large part been responsible for essentialist notions of essentialism, when the word has a lot more critical potential to

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 157-58.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 159.

account for the entanglement of both group and individual subjectivities. Spivak relates this problem to having to frame marginalized populations' political claims in the language of the colonizer:

Political claims are not to ethnicity, that's ministries of culture ... the political claims over which battles are being fought as to nationhood, sovereignty, citizenship, secularism, all that kind of stuff. Those claims are catachrestic claims in the sense that everybody knows that the so-called adequate narratives of the emergence of those things were not written in the spaces that have decolonized themselves, but rather in the spaces of the colonizers. ... People are having to negotiate questions like national language, nationhood, citizenship, etcetera. The question of essence really doesn't come in there because it is catachrestic.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly this speaks to Turner's ideas about word warriors' obligation to engage and develop the dominant discourse's interpretation of terms being applied to and used by Aboriginal communities. How problematic terms and ideas can be shown, via Western discourse, to be superficial and over-simplified is the task at hand.

Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetuk's (Inuit) sculptural work engages with the push and pull between essentialism and individualism through an approach formally accessible to those outside First Nations and Inuit communities. *People (Inuit)* (1991) [Figure 2], shown in the *Indigena* exhibition curated by McMaster and Martin, speaks to this entanglement of individuality and community, as do many other works in Tasseor's oeuvre. Made of limestone, the central mass is inscribed with individual faces up and down its corners. The comparatively smoother faces of the piece remain loosely shaped, rough and chipped rather than smooth. The piece recognizes quite literally how a person can be both an individual and part of a larger entity. Faces give access to individuality because of expressions which manifest physically subjective interior spaces and highly individual

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 167; catachrestic is to use the wrong word for the context. Merriam Webster Online <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catachrestic> (Accessed 28 March 2010).

experience. The facial expressions that Tasseor is representing are individual features, not replicable on any other face, but here, without a name, and in the plural, these become a bunch of faces, a bunch of individuals, less specific and more powerful in their anonymity and group context respectively. Interestingly, on the Cybermuse website, this piece is titled *Inuit, Itqiliit, Unaliit amma Qablunaat* (Inuit, First Nations, Cree, and White), intimating that there is also something which unites different communities; in the same way that groups are made up of individuals, here Canada, and perhaps implied is humanity, is composed of different groups. In Tasseor's work, the figures' and groups' interconnectedness is emphasized even whilst individuality and difference are maintained.

If there is indeed something essential, something shared, if not in the biology then in the culture or experience of Indigenous peoples, what or where does Tasseor's carving suggest that might be? In this piece and in many other works comparable to this one, there are individual faces but there are links between them. Where can the links be located? Perhaps in what lies behind the faces – minds - wherein culture and cumulative and shared experiences are found, as well as individuality. In Derridian terms there is indeed a center, where individual and group identity might be united, but exactly what it might contain is inaccessible.

The material of Tasseor's carvings directly references the land, as both a material component of Inuit culture but also as an intertwining of body and stone, as an interdependent relationship. Soapstone, which can be found locally, might make this relationship clearer, but Tasseor's work is commonly in a harder stone, like the basalt of this piece. Cultural change and continuity are reflected in the use of this relatively newly

accessible material. In a 1998 interview with Simeonie Kunnuk, Tasseor offered these closing remarks:

My carvings are very much in demand because I made the extra effort and portray the old way of life, the period of change and the new way of life for the Inuit people. I carve facial expressions of gatherings of people. Back in the old days we didn't congregate like that in the springtime. ... My carvings have the theme of changing times. I know that carving was a pastime of our ancestors, to stave off loneliness. I reflect on that. You know, now that people have jobs in town, it is *carving* that is a lonely activity.<sup>30</sup>

Tasseor references the intertwined and transitional themes. From gatherings she creates carvings of facial expressions, she moves easily from the community to the individual. Tasseor acknowledges that the influence of individualism has changed carving; historically it was an activity for when loneliness had to be endured, a means of survival until one could return to the community, but now carving requires loneliness, and represents a break from community. As McMaster and Martin write in the introduction, Tasseor's works attests "to the cultural tenacity and celebration of life on the land for Inuit, and by extension, all indigenous peoples of the Americas."<sup>31</sup> Recalling the definition of sovereignty from this exhibition quoted earlier, Tasseor is very clearly taking 'ownership' of her story, thus expressing her individuality and community. These are big shifts but also evidence of continuity, all of which are available, both tangibly and intangibly in Tasseor's sculptural work.

Philip Deloria (Dakota Sioux) considers the specific social and political contexts that have affected notions of Indian identity. In his chapter "Counterculture Indians and the New Age" from *Playing Indian* (1998), Deloria applies arguments related to Fuss's

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<sup>30</sup> Lucy Tutsweetuk & Simeonie Kunnuk, "Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetuk, vol. 13, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 22.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, *Indigena* (Hull, QC, Vancouver & Toronto: Canadian Museum of Civilization, Douglas & McIntyre, 1992), 20.

and Spivak's feminist and postcolonial critiques to the Native context in the United States. He comments that even while appropriation has run rampant in the era of the New Age, Indian identity has remained powerful and authentic but on bases more social and political than culturally essential in the traditional sense.

Indianness retained a certain degree of power, however, and that power suggests that markers of Indian difference necessarily remained in place. Ironically, the social realities that New Age devotees tended to avoid helped fuel the sense of Indian-white difference that made Indianness meaningful. Indians lived poverty-stricken lives on faraway reservations. Their poverty and geographical and social distance marked them as different – and thereby authentic. Incorporative multiculturalism, on the other hand, has tended to focus on distinctive cultural contributions – food, music, language – and to attenuate cultural differences within a larger human whole. The asymmetrical relations of power that both undergird and undermine the system linger, however, in the uneasy collective unconscious. Mexican food, for example, is a more palatable ethnic gift than Mexican agricultural stoop labor, although in its concrete expression of social inequality and physical distance, it is the latter that defines whatever authenticity one might find in tortillas and frijoles.<sup>32</sup>

But what dangers are inherent in this approach? Is equating the political and social essence of a marginalized people, their authenticity, with the oppressive realities of marginalization problematic? How to resist the pull to essentialize, in the traditional way, social and political realities remains a difficulty. What is at stake seems to be the separation of culture from social and political realities. The example of stoop labour perhaps provides a key – it is the connection to the land that both precedes and denies any colonial claim. Is it necessarily the low paid hard manual labour that makes the differences, or might it be that it represents a unique engagement with the land? While identity has been and remains distinct, the intangible and unknowable is here accessible through the land, can be represented by the land. What seems key, and is present in the

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<sup>32</sup> Philip Deloria, "Counterculture Indians and the New Age," *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 177.

constructivist perspective that Fuss challenges, is that social and political contexts, including land rights, must yet be seen as changing and changeable, as well as linked to cultural expression. Further, the very notion of essentialism has not been sufficiently challenged or imagined in ways that account for contemporary acknowledgments of social and political realities.

As these theorists posit, communities are fluid, temporal, and permeable; any definition based solely on cultural signposts risks making a community seem static, ahistorical, and closed, not to mention discoverable and appropriable, at least in an individualistic society that overvalues personal exploration and undervalues tradition, particularly those of Others.<sup>33</sup> Deloria argues that colonizers, and later white activists from all causes, appropriated Aboriginal symbols, among others, as a means to create an identity distinct from their original countries.

I have suggested that whenever white Americans have confronted crises of identity, some of them have inevitably turned to Indians. What might it mean to be not-British? The revolutionaries found a compelling array of ideas in Indianness. What did it mean to be American? What did it mean to be modern? To be authentic?<sup>34</sup>

That Canadians can adopt the Inukshuk as an Olympic symbol [Figure 3] dilutes, in Deloria's terms, the weight that symbol carries in its generative social and political contexts. Symbols of rebellion also often became representative of general critiques of society from a variety of perspectives and thus undermined their original political power.

[Whites] devalued words like *Indian* and *nigger* and deemphasized the social realities that came with those words. Such attempts to create political solidarity worked to the benefit of whites, but they could have negative political consequences for Indians and African Americans. After all, those social realities underpinned civil rights protests. And if whites claimed and

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<sup>33</sup> The idea of communities as fluid, temporal and permeable is central to McMaster's proposition Reservation X, discussed in Part V.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 156.

then diluted the very words that described those social worlds, they could offer in return only a power more linguistic than actual.<sup>35</sup>

This naming and subsequent appropriation lends significant weight to the interrogation of labels – if Othering is some form of projecting onto groups that which is lacking or problematic in one's own, the re-appropriation of that label once given shows a desire to confront that which is denied through the act of naming. This leads to Vizenor's questioning of the word *indian* as well as his coining the term *postindian* as an act of resistance, additionally giving credence to Baudrillard's assertion that referents lose their 'sovereign difference' in a world of simulations.

The notion of change can be also related to hybridity. It is not just that culture changes through time, but that groups understood as distinct begin to mix. Can Spivak's subaltern be understood to apply to hybrid groups? Can this be viewed as a location of and respect for hybrid groups in addition to unknown or unrecognized groups, which are certainly too numerous to encapsulate or understand within the principle of plurality. Vizenor's conception of hybridity is termed 'crossblood;' he explains the purpose of the term as he responds to Lee's inquiries in *Postindian Conversations*. He says we

must resist any easy reference to crossbloods, as if that combined word and metaphor were a recognizable entity. The cross and the blood are unnamable. The tease of a crossblood presence in native histories is over the simulation of a seam, a double seam, as you suggest, of established poses, appearances, interpretations, and loose assertions of identity.<sup>36</sup>

In many ways this understanding of, this respectful 'hands off' approach, to identity is a step forward. But what Spivak allows for is a strategic use of identity where Vizenor seems to deny it, because of its harmful side effects. What of the implications this

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 164-65.

<sup>36</sup> Vizenor, *Postindian*, 82.



resistance to identity might have on sovereignty as related to territorial demands?

Vizenor elaborates in *Manifest Manners*,

The notions of crossbloodism, determinism, and racialism, maintain the sentiments of weakness, that crossbloods are a descent from pure racial simulations. ... The manifest manners of nationalism as sources of tribal identities are both means of association and resistance; some tribes are simulated as national cultural emblems, and certain individuals are honored by the nation and the tribe as *real* representations.<sup>37</sup>

Vizenor is suggesting that identities, as problematically conceptualized in modernist discourse, are always fabrications and are always harmful because some thus become more highly valued than others. As an example recall the Inukshuk and the Vancouver Olympic logo: certainly the Inuit have become a highly 'valued' indigenous group in Canada, proven by this choice to 'use' them to represent Canada, in no small part because of their perceived authenticity when compared to other groups. But have communities, or even the idea of community, been lost because of an emphasis on hybridity, plurality, specificity and individuality? Has resistance to modernity inadvertently resulted in the loss of something real and valuable, a kind of meaning? Or is this debate merely a distraction from the very real and vibrant Aboriginal communities and cultural practices which continue, not to mention the fact that the Native population in Canada now surpasses 1.3 million people?

McMaster dealt most recently with the issue of hybridity in the exhibition *Remix*, which opened at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York. A quote on the pamphlet reads:

These artists all share various degrees of Native ancestry, yet they see other sides to their humanity, as well, including humor, the impact of borders and boundaries, death and dying, commodity fetishism, history and memory, the relationship between words and images, and the possibility of

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<sup>37</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 59.

transformation. The gathering of these individuals signifies a new articulation of identity that we've come to call "post-Indian." Nationality, ethnicity, and cultural tradition are simply starting points. Beyond lie the discoveries of contemporary artists exploring self-knowledge and self-definition. For this brief moment, a community comes together.<sup>38</sup>

I like the temporality suggested in that last line, it indicates that communities are subject to time, as, indeed, they have always been. Where hybridity suggests a mixing of communities, our efforts to define community and hybridity are tasks, themselves exceptional, i.e. ahistorical. McMaster's use of the term post-Indian, here hyphenated and with a capital I, but in quotes, makes a link with Vizenor's arguments, while at the same time suggesting limits on them.

KC Adams' (Scottish and Cree) *Cyborg Hybrid Series* (1998-2010) speaks specifically to the experience of having mixed Aboriginal and European heritage in Canada today. Evoked in these photographs, and particularly in "*Former Land Owner*" *Cyborg Hybrid Adam* (2005) [Figure 4], are stereotypes, colonial photography, technology, representation, identity, tradition, postmodernity, individuality and community. My first impression is, really, one of whiteness, which contrasts with the subjects' brown skin. These photos rely predominantly on whiteness as a visual element, a reference to the European ancestry of each portrait's subject, and colonialism's overwhelming oppression historically; but also, in the context of cyborgs, robotics and technology, to sterility. The reference to Macintosh and their preference for white is surely no mistake.

The complicated nature of Adams' project becomes apparent. The juxtaposition of stereotypical signifiers, beaded in white across their chests, which here must be meant to signify the opposite, i.e. the inherent undefineability of individuals, coupled with the

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<sup>38</sup> McMaster, *REMIX*, p. ?

impression of sterility, suggests the lifelessness of science and classification. The artist writes of the project on her website:

Cyborg Hybrids is a digitally altered photo series that attempts to challenge our views towards mixed race classifications by using humorous text and imagery from two cultures. The subjects are Euro-Aboriginal artists who are forward thinkers and plugged in with technology. They follow the doctrine of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," which states that a cyborg is a creature in a technological, post-gender world, free of traditional western stereotypes towards race and gender.<sup>39</sup>

Is Adams' here advocating or critiquing the kind of sterility in a post-everything world? The term post-gender here evokes Vizenor's postindian. In a world of technological sterility are we without stereotypes, without the italicized or capitalized *indian*? More provocatively, in a world without some form of recognized community, are we necessarily sterile, in some senses this might suggest 'white-washed' of our histories, the negative but also, and more importantly, the positive? Or is KC Adams suggesting that the desire to whitewash our histories is impossible, through the faces, through the traces left on the shirts of oppression and as well the traditional jewellery the subjects of the portraits wear, thus supporting a Reservation X perspective which embraces hybridity? Is identity and community important only as long as there are those who would use it against an-Other? In a post-identity world hybridity is arguably irrelevant – but is it? Does hybridity draw attention to the issues post-identity politics have sought to deny, thereby reaffirming the importance of identity? Or has just the opposite occurred, have post-identity politics confirmed that identity was and is a non-issue, a contrived creation of the colonial imagination?

The issues of sovereignty, essentialism and hybridity have been intertwined and affect issues of identity and land in the critical theories of McMaster and Vizenor. The

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<sup>39</sup> KC Adams, "Become a Cyborg Hybrid," Online. [<http://www.kcadams.net/art/arttotal.html>]

next two sections of this project will look at each of their work in detail, one after the other, in an effort to understand the breadth of the postcolonial postmodern conversation as it relates to indigenous issues in Canada and the United States.

## **P A R T V : Postindian Warriors of Survivance**

Vizenor's perspective has been accessed for this thesis mainly through two lengthy texts: *Manifest Manners* (1994) and *Postindian Conversations* (1999), a transcribed interview conducted by Robert A. Lee.<sup>40</sup> In 1928-29 René Magritte painted *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* [Figure 5] as part of his series *The Treachery of Images*; in 1976 Andy Warhol created his *American Indian Series* and included several silkscreen portraits of Russell Means (Lakota), Means having achieved the kind of celebrity Warhol considered as leader of the American Indian Movement during the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee. And in 1994 Vizenor put Warhol's portrait of Means on the cover of his text *Manifest Manners* [Figure 6] and wrote of the image, "This portrait is not an Indian."<sup>41</sup> Vizenor declares this image a sign, and as such a signifier of something known, nameable and therefore static. In the case of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* the point was that the pipe was only an image, and not the thing itself, to make the viewer explicitly aware of the difference and the implied power of images. Through Baudrillard the conclusion drawn is that there is only an absence behind such a sign; ironically, however, the contradiction between the statement and the image raises possibilities through the very pronouncement:

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<sup>40</sup> While Vizenor is a renowned fiction writer I do not have the space here to delve into that aspect. *Postindian Conversations* does discuss some of his better known works at great length.

<sup>41</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 18.

Russell Means ... is not a portrait of an Indian. The portrait of an Indian, the silkscreen acrylic image of the *American Indian* by Andy Warhol, is denied by the assertion, 'This is not an Indian.' The portraiture is the absence; the assertion is an ambiguous discourse on simulations and the sources of tribal identities.<sup>42</sup>

The ambiguity of the phrase is important. When Vizenor writes that 'This is not an *indian*,' he means also that behind the image is a postindian: "Postindian simulations are the absence not the presence of the real, and neither simulations of survivance nor dominance resemble the pleasurable vagueness of consciousness."<sup>43</sup>

The use of the words presence and absence is significant. A presence is impossible in an image; the image is a re-presentation, but Vizenor does offer in its stead the trace of the shadow and shadow survivance, which are that 'pleasurable vagueness of consciousness.' He writes:

The theories of structuralism, the myths of the universal and unexpected harmonies, and objective dissociations of natural tribal reason are dubious tropes to power in the literature of dominance. The simulations of manifest manners, causal evidence, objectivism, and transitive action have no referent, no sense of postindian play in language and experience, no shadows in silence, and no coherence of natural reason. The tribal referent is in the shadows of heard stories; shadows are their own referent, and shadows are the silence and simulations of survivance.<sup>44</sup>

As I understand Vizenor in these passages, he is arguing for Appiah's space-clearing gesture, the shadow of the real in a simulation of survivance. Survivance is another neologism of Vizenor's which means "a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance. Survivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and sense of survivance outwits

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 52-53.

<sup>44</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 98.

dominance and victimry.”<sup>45</sup> Since all representations are simulations, and can never hope to re-present the real, a better simulation would be one which seeks to simulate the shadow, that space where identity is found, where survivance lives, but which can never be identified.

Vizenor coined the term ‘postindian’ because *indian* is an invention which signifies nothing more than the colonial construction; it is “an occidental misnomer.”<sup>46</sup> He writes that “the *indian* is a simulation, the absence of natives; the *indian* transposes the real, and the simulation of the real has no referent, memory, or native stories. The *postindian* must waver over the aesthetic ruins of *indian* simulations.”<sup>47</sup> This critique of the term *indian*<sup>48</sup> uses Baudrillard’s theories of simulation towards its deconstruction. A simulation is a representation of the real without connections to the real, the hyperreal in Baudrillard’s terms: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it – [there is now the] *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory.”<sup>49</sup> There is no longer anything behind the signifier, there is no referent, and the word connotes only an absence behind the hyperreal. Baudrillard describes the era of simulation as

inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring

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<sup>45</sup> Vizenor, *Postindian*, 93.

<sup>46</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, vii.

<sup>47</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>48</sup> The use of *indian* in italicized lowercase is a convention of Vizenor’s intended to keep the simulated character of that signifier front and center. I will be following his lead.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly Vizenor, through Baudrillard, objects to the closed-definition of *indian* created by colonialism, the displacement of natives by a sign of colonial invention, and further, Vizenor argues, that the “*indian* is the absence, natives the presence, and an absence because the name is discoverable, and a historical simulation of distinct native cultures.”<sup>51</sup> The word ‘discoverable’ is important here as it relates to a search for a static meaning or truth about *indians*. The artificial referentials suggested by simulations of the real are manipulable by those who create and determine their meanings. The colonial era coincided with the rise of science and faith in empiricism to make comfortable the unknown, providing a rationale for the colonial mindset that sought not only to discover but to conquer and acquire.

While for Vizenor the *indian* is known, the postindian, in contrast, is “long past the colonial invention of the *indian* ... we are the postindians. That says more about who we are not; which is significant in identity politics, and nothing about who we are or might become as postindian.”<sup>52</sup> Appiah argues that there is some similarity betwixt those ‘post’s, and I suggest that the similarity is shared by Vizenor’s postindian. The ‘space-clearing gesture’ is achieved here by re-placing the colonial construction *indian* and thus creating the opportunity for postindians to re-present themselves, and I think implied here is that there will not be a re-definition, at least in a modern or colonial sense but instead an evasion of definition. The argument is against definition, opposed to a scientific

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 2. The double, and doubling, is an idea I hope to return to, as it keeps reappearing, though it seems with different motivations in different contexts.

<sup>51</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Postindian Conversations* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 84.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

discovery and a necessarily static identification of *indians*. Change and also, importantly, contradiction are possibilities.

Postindian contains within it both the *indian* and the postindian. I previously interpreted Vizenor's argument as one which advocated against people and behaviours that served to support colonial stereotypes of *indian*. It seems to me now, however, that Vizenor's ideas are more complicated than that. Lee writes at the end of his review essay, "The Only Good Indian is a Postindian?" (2000) as follows:

Seeing, unseeing. Single vision, double vision. Vizenor has throughout negotiated a discursive style in kind with the massive contradance which he believes has been the story of Native America since Columbus first registered his 'gentle' Arawak/Guanahani in 1492. His own writings, accordingly, and one can concede sometimes elusively, have indeed not hesitated to mix metaphors, tease boundaries, assume contrary voices, or avail themselves of an authorial – a literary crossblood – irony both gentle and fierce, general and local. Controversy was rarely so adept.<sup>53</sup>

Lee's own writing is almost as sensitive and elusive as Vizenor's; Lee nonetheless suggests that Vizenor argues both sides in order to make the shadows advance. Vizenor may judge or support contradictory positions but in doing so highlights the inaccessibility of truth and/or the impossibility of judgement. Lee writes of Vizenor's "Shadow Survivance" chapter from *Manifest Manners* that "If, indeed, the call is for a new 'ghost dance literature,' a new 'shadow literature of liberation', the essay offers no less in and of itself; a call to remedy and, at the same time, the very embodiment of remedy."<sup>54</sup>

When asked by Neal Bowers in an interview if Vizenor saw himself as "an Indian voice, as a mediator, [or] a balancer" Vizenor replied: "I did for a time, but I don't think so now. I think I'm an upsetter. ... In organizations I was an upsetter, an institutional

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<sup>53</sup> Robert A. Lee, "The Only Good Indian is a Postindian?" *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* (Bowling Green Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000), 277.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 274.



upsetter but at the same time seeking a balance.”<sup>55</sup> I am prompted to think of Vizenor’s use of the trickster as a strategy, if you will, though not the strategic essentialism of Spivak, to counter essentializing notions of the *indian*. Vizenor has spoken about the trickster at many times and in a variety of ways. In chapter one of *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse On Native American Indian Literatures* (1993) he elaborates in a way which embodies the trickster as much as defines that character’s role.

The trickster, then is a comic and communal sign, a discourse in a narrative with no hope or tragic promises. The trickster is neither the “whole truth” nor an isolated *hypotragic* transvaluation of primitivism. [page] The trickster is as aggressive as those who imagine the narrative, but the trickster bears no evil or malice in narrative voices. Malice and evil would silence the comic *holotropes*; there would be no concordance in the discourse. Neither the narrator, the characters, nor the audience would share the narrative event. ... The trickster as a semiotic sign is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious, which is comic liberation; however, the trickster is outside comic structure, “making it” comic rather than inside comedy, “being it.” The trickster is agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation, a “doing” in narrative points of view and outside the imposed structures.<sup>56</sup>

But, can Vizenor’s trickster and therefore also postindian be understood as merely a postmodern manner of essentialism?

*Manifest Manners* argues that the contemporary symptoms of manifest destiny are manifest manners: “the course of dominance, the racialist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as ‘authentic’ representations of *indian* cultures. Manifest manners court the destinies of monotheism, cultural determinism, objectivism, and the structural conceits of savagism and civilization.”<sup>57</sup> If plurality proposes that, while endless, groups of Others might yet be catalogued, defined and represented, and the

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<sup>55</sup> Neal Bowers, “An Interview with Gerald Vizenor,” *MELUS*, 8.1 (Spring, 1981): 45.

<sup>56</sup> Vizenor, Gerald, ed. “A Postmodern Introduction.” *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*. Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, 3-16.

<sup>57</sup> Vizenor, *Manners*, vii.

postindian position suggests that any and all definitions be interrupted, or upset in Vizenor's terms, has Vizenor re-essentialized the postindian as interruption and contradiction via the trickster? If this is indeed a strategy the denial of identity becomes the means to insist on self-determination.

Baudrillard also writes of simulation that "Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction."<sup>58</sup> I would like to make something of Baudrillard's use of the word 'sovereign.' Although in translation, Baudrillard's early arguments in his text *Simulacra and Simulation* provide a heavy critique of anthropology and science in general, leading me to believe that his choice of 'sovereign' to illustrate the difference between a signifier that references the real and a simulation that has no referent describes the loss of connection between a referent and sign and therefore hints at the loss of power a referent experiences to influence the use of a simulation (now not a signifier) and its re-inscription over time. The simulation is conflated with the referent and is more powerful through its dissemination while the referent is relegated to an absence without a voice, to a lack of real representation, perhaps inevitably considering the power of signs. Simulation's denial by Vizenor is the battle cry of the word warrior.

Speaking of ethnology as a science whose fact-finding mission supersedes all else Baudrillard asserts that "In order for ethnology to live, its object must die; by dying, the object takes its revenge for being 'discovered' and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it."<sup>59</sup> When Baudrillard writes "dying" is that what he means? This supports the idea that at some point the simulation was a signifier – is it just inevitable

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<sup>58</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

change that forces the disconnection or is there something fundamentally inadequate in the world of signs. Or are those two ideas compatible? The word “discovered” is synonymous in this context with known or definable; as soon as something appears, is ‘discovered,’ or acknowledged, and named, it changes, as it has always done, and thus the aims of knowledge and discovery are in every sense unattainable.

The connection between modernism and postmodernism also exists between *indian* and postindian. Although the second term negates the first term in some ways, it is also dependent on it. Vizenor, in his definition, seems to be suggesting that postindian may be whatever *indian* is not: “(Postindian) says more about who we are not ... and nothing about who we are or might become as postindian.”<sup>60</sup> But does Vizenor mean to say that postindians have nothing in common with *indians*, or does he suggest that generalizations cannot be made now, or could not be made after contact or conquest, but perhaps might have been possible before? Vizenor’s position is both more and less radical than that might seem. In light of the new ways essentialism is being considered, Vizenor can be read as interrupting the traditional notions of essentialism and suggesting new ones based on social and political realities, like territory. The dependence on a modernist term in his neologism retains the connection to the past Vizenor wants to leave behind. However, a denial of historical context through the use of another term would be just as critique-worthy by not recognizing the roots of contemporary realities. This tactic also allows Vizenor to avoid defining his term, making its meaning merely the negation of the included term. In this way, though, Vizenor treads on dangerous ground. The denial of meaning is just as oppressive as the certainty in one meaning. While a generous interpretation of the term postindian would infer that Vizenor objects to generalizations,

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<sup>60</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Postindian Conversations* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999): 84.

in the book *Postindian Conversations* he takes issue with several well-known Natives and their choices. When Vizenor appears to support the work of certain Native artists, writers, actors and so on, but not the work of others, it suggests that he has attached a meaning, and therefore also a preferred value, to postindian.

Vizenor seems to skirt the question of who is Native or not by instead asking who is postindian or not. It is a potentially problematic solution even whilst he switches milieus from perhaps more dangerous and inflammatory biological characteristics to culture. Vizenor is afraid to take Baudrillard's theory as far as it goes, which is towards the permanent breaking down of meaning. Vizenor clings, unknowingly and haphazardly, to definitions. Baudrillard himself recognizes this perhaps inevitable attachment to meaning as a weakness of theory, even a theory that tends towards nihilism like his own. He writes,

Analysis is itself perhaps the decisive element of the immense process of the freezing over of meaning. The surplus of meaning that theories bring, their competition at the level of meaning is completely secondary in relation to their coalition in the glacial and four-tiered operation of dissection and transparency. One must be conscious that, no matter how the analysis proceeds, it proceeds toward the freezing over of meaning, it assists in the precession of simulacra and of indifferent forms.<sup>61</sup>

Vizenor here is failing to recognize the irony of his own position in exactly the same way the authors he cites fail to recognize the irony that Vizenor sees in their work. In this way words, no matter what they attempt to say, are in some way closed. Vizenor's approach reminds me of the utopianism of modernism – it is an ideal, another linear and teleological approach – the desired end known. He is trying to make words, in theoretical form, do something they cannot, which is to become the shadow. In this way some

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<sup>61</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Faria Glaser, trans. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994): 161.

aspects of McMaster's work are more mindful of the possibility of oppression in terms and theories so rooted in denial, fundamentally contradicting the intended purpose of the words that make up those theories.

Interestingly, McMaster engaged with the idea of naming and simulations in a solo exhibition titled *The cowboy / Indian Show* (1990). In the work *cowboy,n., Yee-hah! Indian,n., Ugh!* [Figure 7] McMaster juxtaposes definitions of each term from the *Random House Dictionary* to point out the 'binary oppositions' and the implications of 'substituting the signs of the real for the real.' In his own text discussing the work McMaster writes

This is just one definition ... the informal sense ... a different level of definition. ... people say: 'He's acting like a cowboy.' It's lighthearted, it's whimsical, it's accepted behaviour if you're acting like a cowboy ... you can go to bars ... But to act like an Indian, well, it becomes something different.<sup>62</sup>

McMaster is here also using semiotics as methodology and presenting visually the very real implications of stereotypes; when dictionaries are seen to support negative discourses about Others, the problems become concrete rather than abstract. In this way McMaster can be seen attempting to connect the arguably abstract ideas of theory to very real issues affecting the lives of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and the United States.

## **P A R T V I : *Reservation X* to "Post-Reservation" to *Remix***

Whether or not absence as a characteristic of images can be challenged or to some degree remedied is the work of Gerald McMaster, among other artists and theorists. Where Baudrillard's, and therefore Vizenor's, theory of simulation is nihilistic (with

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<sup>62</sup> Ryan, Allan & Gerald McMaster, *The cowboy / Indian Show: Recent Work by Gerald McMaster* (Kleinburg, Ontario: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1990), 23.

caveats) McMaster first engaged with art history and modernism on their terms.<sup>63</sup> This reveals an early commitment to meaning, however damaged or even hollow it may be, making McMaster also, in Turner's terms, a word warrior. The usefulness of truth becomes important, as in Spivak's strategic essentialism; whether or not it actually exists does acting 'as if' there is truth help people move forward and achieve change, or does it do more harm than good by merely creating more vacant identities? Aligning himself with theories like those of Fuss and Spivak, McMaster's theoretical space for alternate realities and perspectives is called Reservation X. He poses questions like where and how can community and identity be located, rather than defined.

In the catalogue for the exhibition of the same name McMaster outlines his conceptualization of Reservation X. He touches on pluralism but also, and similarly to Vizenor, describes the term's literary importance and is engaged with the idea of meaning as it relates to signs. Broadly,

[B]etween two or more communities – reserve and urban – there exists a socially ambiguous zone, a site of articulation for the aboriginal contemporary artist that is frequently crossed, experienced, interrogated, and negotiated. This idea argues for a space of radical openness and "hybridity," or spaces of resistance being opened at the margins. I, however, see this space as in between two centers, which is a politically charged, though highly permeable, site.<sup>64</sup>

The idea of permeability is critical. Binary notions of both reservations and urban centres are historically rooted, if incorrect. Acknowledging that transference is possible from one to the other, creating a space in between where further communication can occur, allows definitions to shift; the poles become the margins in a radical about-face. The

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<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 160.

<sup>64</sup> Gerald McMaster, "Living on Reservation X," *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art* (Gerald McMaster, ed. (Fredericton, New Brunswick & Hull, Quebec: Goose Land Editions & Contemporary Museum of Civilization, 1998), 28.

permeability of the spaces in contemporary society allows for the movement of people and ideas in and out, and which will cause change across the entirety of the spectrum. More specifically, definitions are being acknowledged as imperfect, in need of new information, yet simultaneously with this openness comes a renewed appreciation for culture's offerings coupled with a desire both to maintain it and to build on the past. Working out elements of culture in even more loose and open ways than in the past yet requires some understanding not only of what culture is in the larger sense, but what specific characteristics or qualities it has in different groups of people.

The term permeability implies the simultaneous receptivity and integrity of culture.

McMaster says that in Reservation X

Artists are attempting to merge the legacy of individualism with the dynamic and affirming bond of community. They no longer see the appeal of being marginalized iconoclasts but prefer to become active participants, where community and individual growth are not incompatible but complementary goals.<sup>65</sup>

Individual and community values are set up in opposition, and in Canada often take the respective parts of 'the rest of Canada' and Aboriginal reservations. The realization that these polemical stands are not functional gave rise to a desire for re-conceptualization.

The complicated history of the reservation in Canada, as a *de facto* prison, a place of resistance, a place of survival and of change is denoted in the ambiguous 'X'.

McMaster writes:

In the first place, the mystery of X is a historical moment. In late-nineteenth-century treaty signings, Indian chiefs had their hands held in order to sign an X as a mark of their consent and understanding of the political process: X Poundmaker, his mark; X Red Pheasant, his mark, and so on. X signified articulation; it left a trace, even for those unable to speak. Despite the uniformity of their signatures, marking an X belied their

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 23.

intelligence. The *X* was contradictory; it indicated inarticulation. These *Xs* created the reserves.<sup>66</sup>

The 'X' is both an index and a trace of sovereignty. In spite of the beleaguered history of the reservation, agency, while oppressively limited, was exercised. Attempting to understand history as more complex than a tale of conquest is one aspect of identity politics and a necessary part of actively re-imagining relationships. Where Vizenor is uninterested in 'discovering' who postindians are, as opposed to exposing what they are not, i.e. *indian*, McMaster is interested in pluralism. While convinced of the possible infinite number of lived realities and perspectives, McMaster still seeks to know something, at least, about them. The contradiction inherent in a desire to name or to know is part of the postmodern condition; how to coalesce thinking and ideas which may seem to be in opposition is critical, not only to resist modernism's pull, but also to emphasize process and communication as the constant companions to existence so as to subvert the allure of teleological trajectories.

McMaster's vision or version of plurality falls in line with Foucault's heterotopias as outlined in his Master's thesis titled *Beaded Radicals and Born-Again Pagans: Situating Native Artists Within the Field of Art* (1994). As the title indicates, the thesis is very much about making space for Native artists within an existing and hegemonic modernist discourse as well as acknowledging historic contributions. McMaster writes that tributaries

may in fact be the reproduction of the master narrative, only on a smaller scale. The tributaries become smaller histories feeding into the mainstream. In these terms, the relation of the mainstream to the tributaries suggests the notion of subjectivity, a power relation which situates one within the discursive practices of the other. The tributaries of the Other that flow into the mainstream suggest a subordinate relation. ... The mainstream cannot be

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 21.



an everlasting phenomenon, it too must either come to an end ... or spill out into an ocean. ... This ocean signifies the global, not as in the 'universal' but in a sea where we are all spatialized in a post-modern moment.<sup>67</sup>

McMaster envisions a more equalizing future, through the "spill out into the ocean" of all the varying communities and perspectives where dominance becomes, theoretically at least, impossible. Also important to remember and note here is that McMaster imagines a kind of integrous community which survives though is changed by this flow into the ocean. And while that end in the ocean seems to have a teleological thrust, it is the idea of permeability that retains an integrous sense, which calls for, even demands, a continual ebb and flow – i.e. the process of communication even whilst in the ocean.

This ocean is a metaphor for Foucault's heterotopia. In the text of a lecture entitled *Des espaces autres* (1967), later published in translation as "Of Other Spaces" (1986), Foucault outlines his theory of heterotopias. He begins by describing our era thusly:

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. ... Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.<sup>68</sup>

Foucault is speaking about a changing awareness of how people and cultures are intra and interacting. Foucault sees the linear and progressive view of modernism as outdated; we might connect his view with globalism discourse. But more specifically Foucault calls this re-imagining of society and culture, with the emphasis on space (as opposed to time which had been emphasized previously), heterotopia, "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture,

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<sup>67</sup> Gerald McMaster, *Beaded Radicals and Born Again Pagans: Situating Native Artists Within the Field of Art*, Masters Thesis (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1994), 18-19.

<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics*. Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22, 23.

are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”<sup>69</sup> Yet, and exceptionally, in his interpretation McMaster notes the process; there is a hint of agency, of the influence of the tributaries on the mainstream, rather than what seems to be inevitable or just ‘matter of fact’ for Foucault. Where Foucault states ‘We are in an epoch of juxtaposition’ which implies staticization, McMaster writes of ‘the spill into the ocean’ indicating movement. Foucault is defining our era, describing it, telling us what it is and how it has shifted and while significant it remains in some ways, for me, structural, objective, a closed explanation and thus a claim to truth, rather than, as in McMaster, more poststructural or postmodern in its efforts to open up to different experiences.

Mary Longman’s (Saulteaux) work *Reservations* (1993) [Figure 8] was included in the *Reservation X* exhibition. McMaster discusses the work in his catalogue essay, “Mary Longman: Strata and Routes: There is No Fixed Address for Reservation X,”

The piece called *Reservations*, for example, pertains to the tenacity of cultural memory. Atop the decorative base of a column sits a birdcage; in it stands a solitary “tree of life.” The rusty and decaying cage constructs a confined space for its inhabitant. It symbolizes a once strong “system,” now falling apart, unable to assert its authority in containing Aboriginal cultures. The birdcage is solemn-looking, yet it is able to maintain a tree. The sturdy column refers to the government controls of Canada and the United States over aboriginal peoples as subjectivity. It is an externally imposed system that denied the consensual pattern that most Aboriginal tribes had before European contact. ... Reservations hold significant stories. Anyone raised on one often experiences a profound sense of ambivalence: love and hate, attraction and repulsion, freedom and confinement, liberty and subjection. The reservation is a life in constant transformation.<sup>70</sup>

Clearly here contained is the binary between the urban, or Canadian government, and reservation culture. There is the column and cage in opposition to the tree caged within. For Aboriginal peoples the reservation represents home and community, and yet at the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>70</sup> McMaster, “Mary Longman: Strata and Routes: There is No Fixed Address for Reservation X,” *Reservation X*, 67-68.

same time is a symbol of oppression. The dominant western government as well as culture have controlled the source of life and cultural memory for Aboriginal peoples – the Greek-style column attests to that.

Longman responds to McMaster's words in her PhD dissertation "Challenging the Ideology of Representation" (2006), "As destructive as the reservations have been to First Nations, they have had one positive impact in that they became a central hub for the community's cultural and linguistic connections. As artist and curator Gerald McMaster points out, the isolation of reservation communities, in a paradoxical twist, deviated from government intention and preserved cultural traditions without outside interference."<sup>71</sup> I think that the question of interference is important; there was indeed interference on reservations, whether that was actual physical intervention in reservation communities or whether it was a purposeful cutting off of reservation communities, these are both interventions which altered life. This, I argue, refers to the permeability of McMaster's Reservation X and conversely to the unsuccessful attempts by colonial communities to insulate themselves. The communities on either side of the reservation boundary both feed into and feed off of the Other's culture. As the pass system in place in Western Canada from 1885 to the 1950s shows, this enforced lack of exchange was tragically unequal in its actual occurrence and effects, but nonetheless each has altered the other.

What I would like to push further is the necessary intertwining of the 'tree of life' with the column through its roots, though here the connection between the two is denied. McMaster also considers the tree's roots; he writes, "Interestingly, the plant's roots –

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Longman, "Challenging the Ideology of Representation: Contemporary First Nations Art in Canada," PhD dissertation, University of Victoria, 2006, 138

tradition, ancestry, history – remain within the boundaries of the cage.”<sup>72</sup> But most of a tree is underneath the ground, not above, and it is here that much of its sustenance is acquired. If the tree did not adapt to and engage with its changing environment both above and below it would not survive. This is surely not the case here even though the tree is suffering. The outside, too, has been changed by its attempt to control the inside, here the reservation community. This implies a sharing, overwhelmingly violent, which at points worked to cut Native peoples completely off from their cultural history, and that worked and continues to work in both directions because of the permeability of both Native and non-Native communities. This is, for me, where the heart of Reservation X must lie. There are obvious markers that can denote change according to traditions, here symbolized by the failing tree, but as things shift change also happens on a deeper level, through time, and which then might manifest in a variety of either positive or negative ways. If younger generations of Aboriginal peoples are experiencing both urban and reservation culture, and are thus being affected by both, and taking advantage of both, then certainly any conceptualization of identity must become more complicated than previous notions might indicate.

This mid-1990s period of McMaster’s thought can be understood as somewhat of a counterpoint to Vizenor’s extreme and possibly nihilistic strand of postmodernism. What if some of what modernism had to offer remains useful, and if in concert with some of postmodernism’s ideas could be used to conceptualize a different kind of growing, a spiral which in places folds in on itself, or the continuation of the circle, perhaps one that went outward, inward, or at times remained static? This is, admittedly, idealistic. What McMaster is seeking at this stage is an answer, a way of theorizing that allows for a clear

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

way forward. What Vizenor argues, in contrast to this perspective of McMaster's, is for a particular approach to confront dominant ideologies, but he does not point a way forward. Is resistance enough if there is no clear goal ahead – even if erroneous? In this way Vizenor is also an idealist. McMaster writes that concrete goals and action are possible and positive.

From the artists' perspective, utopian communities are a thing of the past and can be signified only poetically. There was a time in the 1960s and 1970s when cultural identity was at its zenith and many young people longed for an alternative way of life reminiscent of some golden age. That era contributed to greater consciousness of community, of living with others, and of sharing ideas. What has survived from those days is a strong commitment to preserving fundamental philosophies and principles. Going back home, living on Reservation X, contributing to local culture, is now accessible for many.

McMaster argues through Reservation X that meaning has renewed importance, after the idealism of modernism which insisted on one monolithic meaning. The first sentence of this quote, which indicates that ideals “can be signified only poetically,” can be read as a direct response to ideas like Vizenor's postindian. McMaster is acknowledging, as Baudrillard also did, that when language is used to express or obtain knowledge directly, meaning is essential. A denial of meaning in writing of this sort is counterintuitive and is reflected in Vizenor's term postindian.

McMaster's more recent work is shifting, as previously indicated. In the 2006 essay “Post-Reservation Perspectives” McMaster argues that Aboriginal people have made significant advances, and suggests that perhaps the balance of power has shifted:

The idea of the post-reservation period brought to the foreground the politics of opposition and struggle, and made problematic the key relationship between center and periphery. The ‘post’ in post-reservation not only refers

to that time after the reservation period but also and more important, signals the end of total state control, with authority shifting to the bands/tribes.<sup>73</sup>

For the same reasons that the postmodern and the postcolonial can be criticized, so too can the idea of post-reservation; as I have suggested elsewhere, the modern lingers in the postmodern, the colonial in the postcolonial and the reservation in the post-reservation. McMaster writes in parentheses in the last paragraph of this essay that “Today, reserves are a continuing reality, as a land base is fundamental to the self-government movement and vital to Aboriginal identity.”<sup>74</sup> While the shift to a post-reservation period can be seen as simply recognition of a changing balance of power, it is interesting that the concern for identity issues then takes a back seat. What is it about this idea of ‘getting beyond’ modernity, or colonialism or reservations that leads McMaster to believe that the politics of identity are no longer as relevant? Has identity become synonymous with land base? McMaster’s ‘post’ too can be related to Appiah’s space-clearing gesture. While the continued existence of reservations is a fact, the post prefix signifies that the meaning of reservation has changed. In Baudrillard’s terms, the referent’s sovereignty to define the terms as are related to and defined by them is asserted through the insertion of ‘post.’

In *Remix* McMaster adopts a perspective that may seem to combine both the Reservation X and the post-reservation philosophies. The museum’s director W. Richard West, Jr. understands the title term as appropriated

from global hip-hop culture. There, it refers to the practice of using altered, but recognizable, pieces of earlier words to create new music, a technique that takes advantage of the astonishing tools of our digital age. Here, the curators offer remixing as a metaphor for contemporary concepts of identity,

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<sup>73</sup> Gerald McMaster, “Post-Reservation Perspectives,” *Essays on Native Modernism: Complexity and Contradiction in American Indian Art* (Washington, D.C. & New York: National Museum of the American Indian & Smithsonian Institution, 2006), 48.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

reflected in these artists' painting, sculpture, photography, video, and installation art.<sup>75</sup>

The hybridity of contemporary identity requires a bending of boundaries, a permeability of barriers that have previously been considered unbreachable. McMaster, for his part, references the idea of *communitas*, which he defines as “the bond formed within a group when its members endure something together as equals, outside the security of the village and its social rules and norms. ... [It is] the idea of solidarity arising from the experience of shared hardship.”<sup>76</sup> Earlier I asked whether identity is only an issue when people use it against an-Other, McMaster recognizes the power of oppression to consolidate identities but he is additionally recognizing its power to create new alliances and hybridities that are also temporal. He continues,

This kind of thematic exhibition brings together people whose personal and political experiences – by virtue of their differences, as well as their similarities – offer us insights we might not have gained otherwise. A thematic approach has come to characterize many exhibitions originating in artist-run spaces, where artists continually mix and remix. Accustomed to meeting on shared conceptual ground, many younger artists find that related issues, such as borders and boundaries, hybridity, and *métissage*, arise in their works.<sup>77</sup>

As an exhibit which includes artists from Canada, the United States and Mexico, *Remix* offers insights on issues which transcend geographic domains to discover, in Appiah's terms, what the ‘space-clearing gestures’ of various postcolonialisms have in common. Clearly the question of identity in a time of rigid geographic boundaries but cultural permeability raises many questions.

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<sup>75</sup> W. Richard West, Jr. “On the Edge,” *Remix* (Washington & New York: National Museum of the American Indian & Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 11.

<sup>76</sup> McMaster, *Remix*, 56.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

Nadia Myre's (Algonquin) *Portrait in Motion* (2002) [Figure 9], from *Remix*, is a compelling video work that embodies the seemingly contradictory ideas of continuity and change.<sup>78</sup> For just over two minutes the audience watches a woman paddling a canoe through the rising fog, accompanied by the chirps of birds and the splashes the paddle makes in the water. As she nears the camera the viewer can see that the canoe is made up of two halves, birch bark and aluminum. Representing the traditional materials for canoes, the birch bark demonstrates not only the continued usefulness of that material, but also, as Robert Houle has written, "Her object becomes more than cottage country, recreational equipment; it becomes something representing our contribution to society."<sup>79</sup> The aluminum expresses the translatability and usefulness of the canoe into other materials and other contexts for use by Other people through time. Again, in Baudrillard's terms, Myre is asserting her heritage and place into and onto an object that has come in many ways to signify Canadian-ness, without maintaining a connection to the canoe's Aboriginal beginnings. Yet this mixture is not just past and present, nor marginalized and mainstream; it also expresses the experience of mixed heritage - Myre is French and Algonquin. As Houle also wrote, "a life-sized canoe of two distinct halves ... makes us beautifully visible."<sup>80</sup> The canoe's connection to the land (indeed it has almost been formed by the imperatives of the people and the land, and has repeatedly traversed it) reasserts identity as intimately linked with land.

I have used Baudrillard's ideas through this section on McMaster because it seems to help clarify where Vizenor and McMaster meet and where they separate. The

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<sup>78</sup> It might be telling that in an exhibition which includes fifteen artists there are only two women artists. Maybe it's time for a post-feminist revolution?

<sup>79</sup> Robert Houle in Joe Baker, "Interventions: Making a New Space for Indigenous Art," *Remix*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*



notion of sovereignty seems to require some kind of meaning, whether that is based on land or identity, the two simultaneously, intermittently, or interchangeably. For McMaster, the word warrior's assertion of identity requires that there be something concrete to assert. Longman used the tree of life to assert that Native identity is discrete and requires a place for living. Myre, for another example, has chosen the powerful symbol of the canoe to show the Aboriginal roots of what has become 'Canadian' culture. Both artists, along with McMaster, seem to support more concrete conceptualizations of identity than Vizenor.

## **P A R T   V I I :   C o n c l u s i o n**

I have attempted to describe one conversation occurring now in contemporary Aboriginal arts discourse, as well as to contextualize the dialogue by referencing postmodern philosophical concerns and artists working today. The goal of this thesis has not been to come to any kind of conclusion about how to achieve sovereignty, nor to select a theorist who expresses the demand for sovereignty best, but instead to develop, to open up rather than shut down the exchange of ideas. From definitions of sovereignty, to the contributing issues of essentialism and hybridity, to the current ways in which McMaster and Vizenor approach the conversation and suggest perspectives that help to clarify the issues at play theoretically as well in artistic worlds, what I have found suggests that the attempt to describe Native identities in terms that Western individualistic political policies understand has undoubtedly contributed positively to claims for sovereignty, but has not been able to go far enough.

The return to land as a source of identity, its ability to resist literal definitions and to deny questions of identity does seem at first to mimic a modernism that supports the notion of essence. Nonetheless, using the land remains a postmodern strategy, in much the same way as essentialism is used as a political strategy. The connection to the land that precedes colonial control is as material to identity, perhaps even more so, than any other signifier. It is also a legitimate political claim that has successfully defended sovereignty claims to the dominant culture based on notions of a distinct Native identity running parallel to Western conceptualizations of individual identity. It is a postmodern strategy because 'land' is elusive; what it is that the land has the power to express changes and moves, is molded by climate, altered by newcomers, supports both urban and rural environments, and is hybrid by nature.

That the Native community has survived, and is in many instances thriving, puts claims for self-government in a new light; demands are not waning but in fact growing stronger, and are supported by factions of the community – and by word warriors in particular. Do McMaster and Vizenor support self-government for Aboriginal communities? Maybe. Does a postindian or post-reservation perspective deny the need for sovereignty? No. It seems to me that both theorists use these words, with 'post' in the front, not to indicate that the struggle is over, or to concede to the flattening individualism of North America, nor just to reassert their own autonomy as referents, but to recognize that the 'traditional' methods of resisting Western domination have changed. We might take Appiah's space-clearing gesture quite literally here.

While word warriors are charged with engaging the dominant discourse, the task is no longer to justify the claims, but to explain why justifications, like proving there is

some kind of essential and unchanging community bond, are no longer relevant. Distinct communities, as indicated by reservations, as well as significant contributions which can be identified as coming from a particular community, have proved the legitimacy of Native claims to the land. The community has been identified as much as it can be and still not overthrown dominant conceptualizations of *indian*. This kind of identity politics has indeed raised awareness about the issues and the community's cultural practices, but ultimately, for sovereignty, the dominant culture's conceptualizations have become irrelevant, and land claims and the ensuing self-determination have returned to center stage.

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## FIGURES

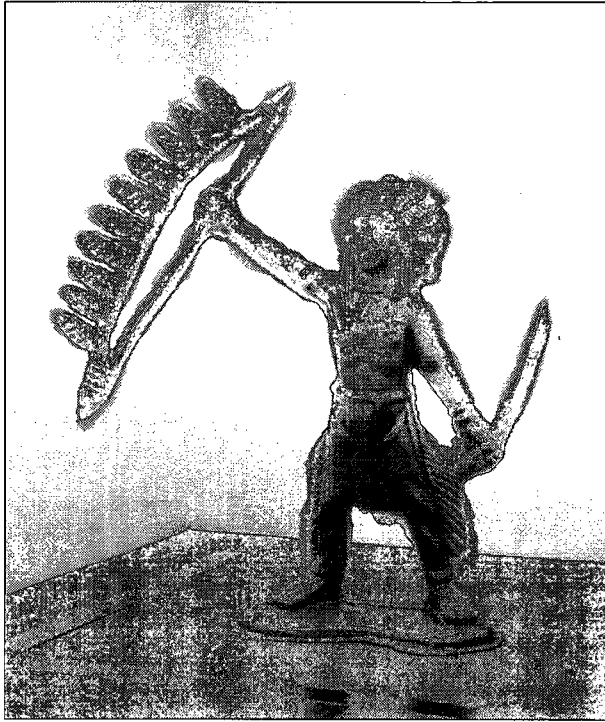


Figure 1: Yoram Wolberger, *Red Indian Chief* (2005) reinforced fibreglass composite, 91½ x 76¼ x 19¼", shown at Mark Moore Gallery, [http://www.markmooregallery.com/exhibitions/2004-09-10\\_yoram-wolberger/](http://www.markmooregallery.com/exhibitions/2004-09-10_yoram-wolberger/)

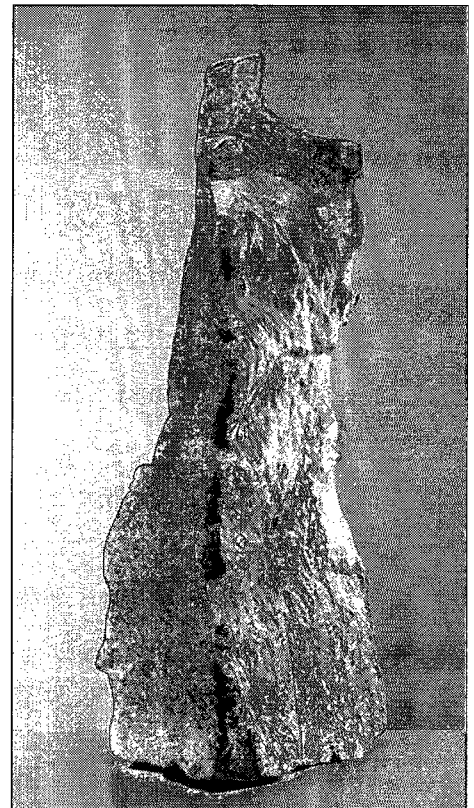
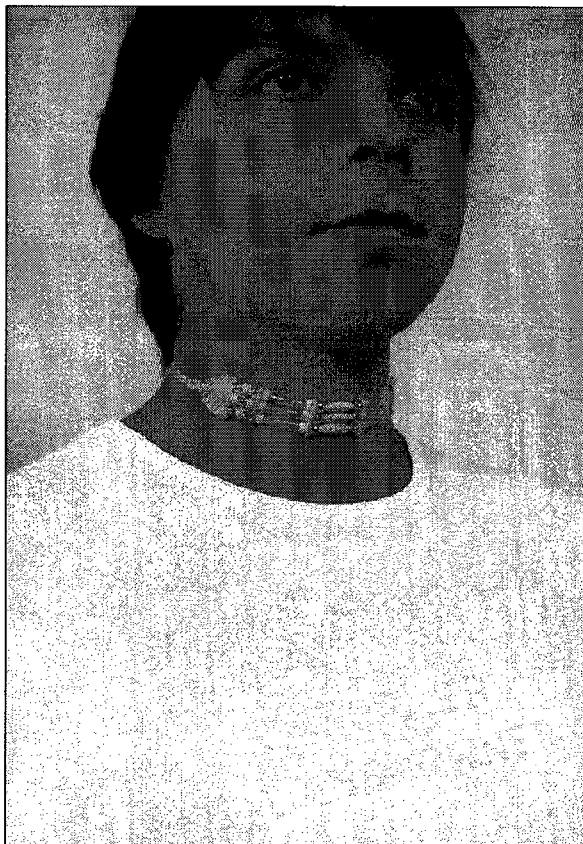


Figure 2: Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetuk, *Imasit* (1991) limestone, 91.7 x 43 x 36.6 cm, National Gallery of Canada, [http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork\\_e.jsp?mkey=41958](http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_e.jsp?mkey=41958)

**Figure 3: Rivera Group of Vancouver,  
Official Olympic Logo, (2010).**

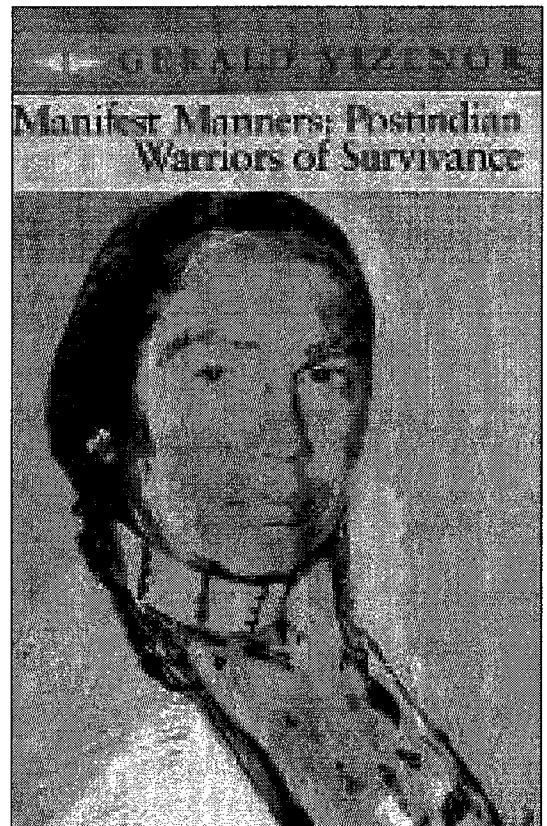


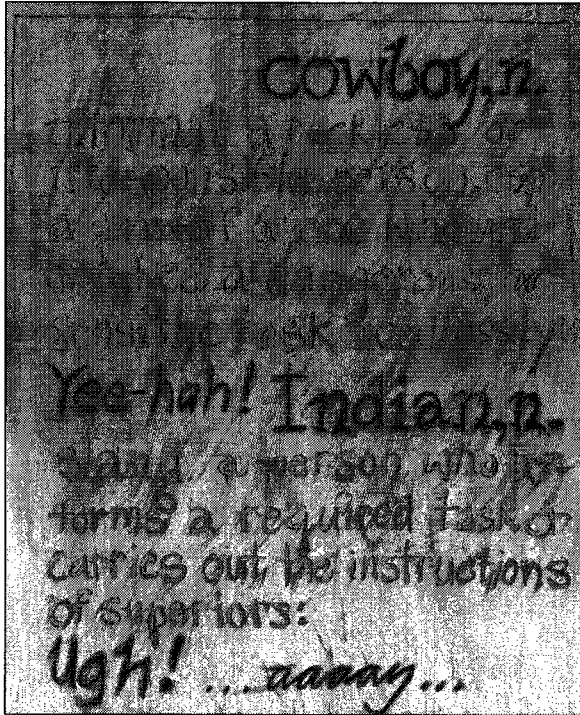
**Figure 4: KC Adams, “Former Land  
Owner” Cyborg Hybrid Adam (visual artist)  
(2005) digital print, 36 x 51 cm,  
<http://www.kcadams.net/art/arttotal.html>**



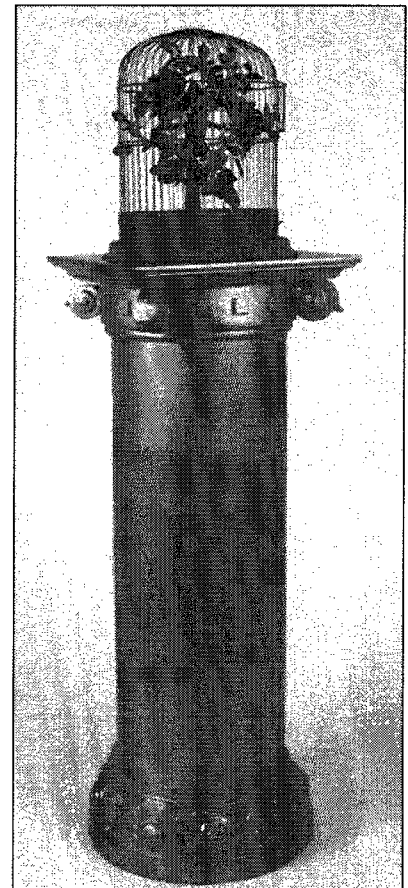
**Figure 5: René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images* (1928-29) oil on canvas, 25 x 37", Los Angeles County Museum of Art**

**Figure 6: Vizenor's *Manifest Manners* (1999) with Warhol's *Portrait of Russell Means* (ca. 1976) on the cover**





**Figure 7: Gerald McMaster, cowboy, n., Yee-hah! Indian, n., Ugh!, (1990) 114 x 94 cm, acrylic and oil pastel on matt board**



**Figure 8: Mary Longman, Reservations (1993) body filler, cage, wood, synthetic leaves, 41 x 43 cm, <http://www.maryloman.com/flashPortfolio/portfolio1.html>**

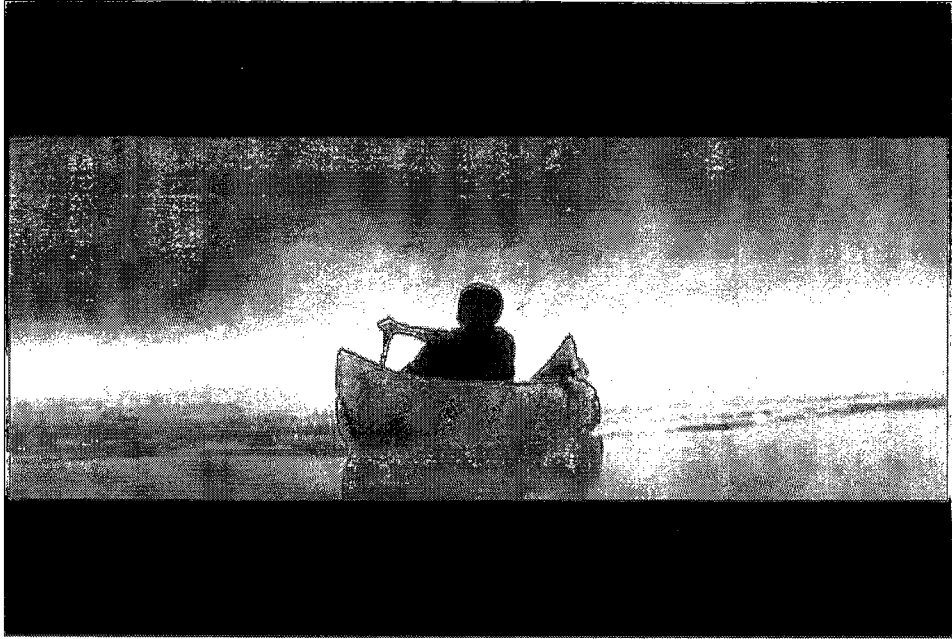


Figure 9: Nadia Myre, *Portrait in Motion* (2002) video still,  
[http://www.nadiamyre.com/Nadia\\_Myre/video/video.html](http://www.nadiamyre.com/Nadia_Myre/video/video.html)