

Decolonizing Colonial Violence

The Subversive Practices of Aboriginal Film and Video

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L'auteure assure que les films et vidéos alternatifs produits par les femmes autochtones du Canada instaurent de multiples pratiques dérangeantes dans la représentation, les structures et les réactions du spectateur, quand il s'agit de remettre en question les conditions et les conséquences du colonialisme et du génocide culturel. Par contre, Dana Claxton dans sa vidéo «Buffalo Bone China,» a réalisé un projet particulièrement stimulant sur la décolonisation.

Aboriginal women produce alternative film and video in Canada as subversive cultural practice: as sites for the recodification of relations of power and “the recovery of alternative, oppositional histories of domination and struggle” (Mohanty 195). “Alternative” film and video refers to work produced outside of dominant institutions, engaged critically with questions about social and cultural relations, and mobilized as cultural politics. In terms of Aboriginal cultural production in Canada, Alanis Obomsawin, Shelley Niro, and Dana Claxton are well known for their critical and political film and video works. Obomsawin is recognized for her documentary films, including *My Name is Kahentiiosta* (1995) and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), which represent the resistance of Mohawk peoples to forms of Canadian state violence, particularly as they are enacted through military

force. In Obomsawin's films, women are central to the interrogation of the white, nation-state and its violences. Shelley Niro has produced a number of films and videos, including *The Shirt* (2004), *Honey Moccasin* (1998), and *It Starts With a Whisper* (1993), which explore the formation of First Nations identities within historical and contemporary colonial conditions and contexts. Dana Claxton focuses on First Nations women in a number of her video works, including *The Hill* (2004), *Tree of Consumption* (1993), and *I Want to Know Why* (1994). In all of her videos, she decolonizes forms of violence including environmental violence, racist violence, and cultural genocide.

Re-historicizing

Writing about American Indian women who have been leaders in mobilizing against the violences of global capitalism, Sandy Grande suggests that Indigenous women “have retained decolonization as their central struggle” and have always been “at the forefront of indigenous struggles” (152). Through media production that embeds a political imperative, particularly in terms of an interrogation of historical and ongoing practices and effects of colonization,¹ Obomsawin, Niro, and Claxton are also at the forefront of Indigenous struggles. Working out-

side of mainstream, commercial production and distribution, these women provide a decolonization of both normative media practices and the violences of imperialism and capitalism. In the contemporary climate of “war” against independent media production where “speaking from any racialized, sexualized, ethnicized, and engendered location [risks] endangerment and annihilation” (Zimmerman 3), the films and videos of these Aboriginal women function as radical practice and cultural activism. The works re-territorialize against the deterritorialization of liberal capitalist democracy and media trans-nationals: They examine “sites where the conflicts between the global and the local are enacted, as the cases of indigenous people's land claims against nation-states and the fight for environmental rights in the face of transnational pollution demonstrate” (Zimmerman 4). While cultural production shaped by transnational interests tends to ahistorical mythologization, Aboriginal film and video practitioners such as Obomsawin, Niro, and Claxton “ground their vision in conceptions of sovereignty that presume a profound connection to place and land” (Grande 117). The films and videos engage with particular Aboriginal conditions and contexts, and in their historical and cultural specificity about relations of domination and resistance, they provide complicated problema-

tization of race and Indigeneity and sovereignty and self-determination. The works are theoretical and activist in the sense of Chandra Mohanty's argument that "theory is a deepening of the political, not a moving away from it" (191).

Zuzanna Pick argues that Obomsawin's strategic use of the interview in her films is a political practice that rewrites colonial experi-

insistence on moving beyond comprehension to responsibility and accountability; and in the call "to radically reorient what is required to face history anew" (Simon 97-98).

The Strategic Construction of Buffalo Bone China

In what follows, I discuss an exemplary alternative media work, Dana

imagery and sequence, shifts between black and white and colour, superimposed images, and a resonant association of sound and silence. Consequently, the video does not invite normative identificatory spectatorship, and it does not generate easy access to meaning making. *Buffalo Bone China* provides an intricate visual grammar, offers interpretive richness, engages affective and politicized response, demands viewer effort and exertion, and summons obligation. The unruly, interrogative construction and the "labour" of viewing are fitting for the complexity of a subversive project of decolonizing colonial violence.

As I noted above, *Buffalo Bone China* mixes found and original footage. Claxton imbricates historical visuals with contemporary imagery, thereby suggesting how legacies of colonial violence inflect the present and future of Indigenous peoples and how the violence is neither separated into, nor contained within, particular temporalities. The violence is continuous and continuing.

In addition, *Buffalo Bone China* critiques the erasure of Indigenous cultures from history through the violent belief systems of western thought, including tropes of progress, universality, reason, and separation from nature. Linda Alcoff notes that, "indigenous cultures and peoples are commodified, fetishized, and fossilized as standing outside of history and social evolution" (271). The film juxtaposes the footage of running buffalo herds and images of delicate chinaware made from buffalo bone. The buffalo are in constant movement, while the objects of western politesse, including ornamented plates and cups and saucers, are static. The stark opposition of these representations, with land and thundering herds on one hand and the ornamented tools of western social graces on the other hand, signals a potent construction in Claxton's video. The slaughter of the buffalo is conjoined to the genocide of Indigenous peoples, such that

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ences. She discusses the interview as testimonial narrative (78). Shelley Niro and Dana Claxton's films and videos also function as forms of testimony. In Pick's analysis, a testimonial narrative "shapes point of view" and links the filmmaker with the represented subjects and the audiences viewing the representations. (78-79). Linda Tuhiwai Smith also underlines the significance of communication to an audience and suggests that "a testimony is a form through which the voice of a 'witness' is accorded space and protection" (144). The re-historicizing and re-membering offered in the work of these Aboriginal film and video makers develop "a re-articulation of past events suffused with demands of remembrance and learning across generations, across boundaries of time, space, and identifications" (Simon 88). The practice of decolonizing through the testimonial recodification of colonial relations of power is an urgent one, and certainly, there is urgency to the decolonization projects of Obomsawin, Niro, and Claxton. This urgency is registered in their film and video practice of interrelating experience, practice, and theory; in the summons to the viewer to encounter "painful struggle and persistent survival" (Smith 19); in the

Claxton's video, *Buffalo Bone China* (1997), as a specific example of how colonial violences against Aboriginal peoples may be decolonized. Dana Claxton works in performance, photography, and film as well as video, and these other forms of cultural production are evident in the artistry of *Buffalo Bone China*. She contributes to the development of Aboriginal culture through other practices, including contributions to Indigenous media organizations. In her biography for V-Tape, the Toronto-based, artist-run organization that distributes Claxton's video art, Claxton indicates that her work interrogates the relationship of Lakota knowledge making to contemporary art practice and investigates systems of cultural imperialism.

Buffalo Bone China is a particularly interesting and compelling work of alternative media produced by Aboriginal women because of its non-linear structure, unruly strategies, and "experimental" approach. *Buffalo Bone China* is not shaped around a "story" or "characters." There is neither a trajectory from a beginning to an end nor an order-disorder-reorder structure typical to western norms in media narratives. *Buffalo Bone China* assembles a mix of found and original footage, multiple repetitions in

the repetition of this imagery of the buffalo throughout the film can be viewed as underlining the suffering of Indigenous peoples in colonial violences. Yet, with Indigenous movement (buffalo) positioned against western stillness (china), the video suggests that Indigenous peoples have responded to western imperialism through multiple strategies of movement and mobilization, that is, through practices of resistance and survival.

The images of the buffalo are always shown in black and white, while the fine china is represented in colour. With this opposition, the buffalo would appear to be constructed as image rather than the “real,” as absence rather than presence. However, Claxton complicates and subverts a singular interpretation about colonial relations of power. A resistance to violence is emphasized during the two segments in which parts of a body touch the china. The only human body that we see in the film is that of a young Aboriginal man with long hair. In one close-up sequence, his hand touches the china, and in the other, his long hair glides across it. In his touch, repossession occurs. The buffalo is recalled to and overcomes what was developed from its bones; its sacred significance is restored. The china becomes reconstituted to its Indigenous origins. The man not only recalls, through touch, a history prior to the chinaware, he repossesses it. The touching of the objects of western food consumption and everyday ritual and ceremony also references the violent destruction of Aboriginal ceremonial life. The touch disrupts the socio-political and economic hegemony of western imperialism.

Deliberation and Deceleration

In the opening section of the film, there are four sequences of historical footage representing the buffalo. In the first, a herd of buffalo runs directly toward the camera, and the viewer is immediately confronted by,

and implicated in, the space/time of the animals. With the image of individual buffalo in the second sequence, the viewer is more closely knit into the landscape and more connected to what might happen to the buffalo. In these first two sequences, although violence is implied, it is still detached to some extent from the viewer. However, in the third sequence, the buffalo herd

visualities and throwaway consumption; it requires a viewer who will “stay the course” and make an effort to develop understanding. Meaning does not come easy through such strategies, and the video is obviously mobilizing and demanding un-ease. As Roger Simon observes, “testimonial witness does have the potential to break through one’s spectatorial notions regarding what constitutes

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is viewed from the side in such a way that the camera appears to be moving beside the buffalo, as if the eye of the camera/the I of the viewer are also running from violent destruction. Violence now seems to be imminent. The final sequence depicts a close-up of one buffalo head and with an emphasis on the profile, such that one eye is highlighted. Consequently, the viewer is drawn closer to the subject of violence. The eye of this animal gazes back at the viewer and summons a witnessing to the violent practices of cultural genocide. The video does not deploy this historical footage as documentation, information, explanation, or transparent evidence. Rather, the visual technique produces a fissure in straightforward practices of representation and reception. The video activates radical interrogation, remembrance, and disturbance.

The four sequences are repeated three times in the same progression noted above, and all of them are constructed in slow motion. Subsequent sections of the video also use repetition, slow motion, and multiple edits. This constellation of strategies asks for nuanced, cautious, and patient spectatorship. In this sense, the video interrupts normative media practices that insist on speedy

comprehensible narratives of suffering, survival, and resistance” (98).

Destabilizing the Tyranny of Colonial Space and Time

The visual of the buffalo charging across the land and the time/space of slow motion and repetition combine to interrogate western conceptions of space and time. Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes that western ideas about space emphasize parameters, measurement, dimensions, and compartmentalization and that these conceptions contribute to the colonization of Indigenous space (50-51). A static and highly defined notion of space connotes depoliticization and shapes the idea of land as “something to be tamed and brought under control” (51-52). Smith also indicates that the colonial discourse of time is attached to ideas about what counts as progress, history, and non-history, with Indigenous knowledges and experiences positioned as before time or prehistoric (Smith 54-55). Through the space/time strategies, *Buffalo Bone China* undermines western disciplinary, discursive regimes over time and space and decolonizes a western narrative of progress, with its spatial, social, economic, spiritual, and cultural domi-

nations and violences. The video produces a disruption of normative temporality and past/present, historic/contemporary, animal/human, and self/other oppositions. In the destabilization of space/time, the video calls for viewer presence, attention, and ethical engagement in the moment. These practices “claim you to a memorial kinship,” where witnessing “is an event of two disjunctive temporalities, an event in which the others’ time disrupts mine. Thus, it is a new time, an extraordinary disjuncture of other and I” and “a moral time . . . of non-indifference of one person to another” (Simon 93).

Claxton’s video begins and ends with print text on the screen: an opening statement, “Dedicated to the Buffalo People,” and a final invocation, “. . . and as you walk back from the mountain. Where all is lush and green. My great friend, Buffalo, I walk with you forever.” These notations, with their enriched description of land and their intersection of past, present, and future, further underline the decolonizing of imperial constructions of space and time. They also re-signify space as belonging, community, and survival and re-constitute western history as Aboriginal ancestral memory (Beaucage). The statements also bookend the video to honour the symbolic and spiritual significance of the buffalo and the circular relationship of buffalo to “Buffalo People.” Bringing the buffalo to the brink of extinction means that Aboriginal peoples who depend on the herds for food and everyday materials will also be brought to this brink.

Sound in Silence

Buffalo Bone China mobilizes repetition in other sequences. I will discuss one further sequence that troubles representation and reception and complicates the decolonization project. In this sequence, the profile image of a white man sighting down a rifle precedes a close-up of a buffalo, and this edit is repeated three

times. The image of the rifle references the significance of new weapons technologies in practices of cultural genocide, and, consequently, evokes a link to developments in contemporary technologies, in military, economic, social, and cultural manifestations, that concentrate the predatory power of imperialist regimes. The rifle is an iconic, racialized, and masculinized signifier of the conquest of Indigenous territories. With the repetition of the image of the white man and rifle, the video evokes a particular rifle, the repeating rifle, which could fire one bullet after another. The repeating rifle, such as the Winchester rifle, is attached to the obliteration of the buffalo. This rifle is depicted in a number of films, particularly Hollywood westerns, and the repeating rifle was used in U.S.-based performances and exhibitions of the nineteenth century that mythologized the “Old West” and recreated the violent colonization of Aboriginal lands. *Buffalo Bone China* calls up these racialized histories. It surfaces and remaps the legacy of representational and performative violences that mythologized white masculinity as colonizing force and that recycled and sedimented the racialized justification of cultural genocide.

No sound accompanies the rifle shot, although it is clear that the rifle has been fired since the image of the buffalo depicts the beginning of its fall to the ground. The slaughter of the buffalo and the Buffalo People is emphasized rather than diminished by the absence of either sound of gunfire or impact on flesh. The drumming which constitutes the soundtrack of the video becomes particularly loud at this point, and the sequence is followed by the perturbing close-up image, with no sound, of an Aboriginal man screaming open-mouthed. The silent human cry is embedded in the animal’s muteness.

At first, it might seem that the “subjects” of cultural genocide are silenced such that oppression is incarnated in the silence. While this

may be one productive reading of the video, I would argue that there are entangled strategies at work in *Buffalo Bone China* that trouble and complicate notions of speech and silence within racialized relations of power. First, both silences are spoken through another form of cultural “voice,” that of the Aboriginal talking drums of the soundtrack. Second, the silence with the accompanying stillness of the male figure suggests that the positioning is one of refusal: as a native informant, a truth-speaking subject, or an authentic Other. The representation “exposes the excesses practiced in colonial discourse in its efforts to fix the racial ‘other’ in a recognition and disavowal of difference” (Smyth 73). Third, the silence of the man may be understood as subversive practice in relation to another form of racialized violence, that is, the othering and re-marginalization that can occur when people of colour and Aboriginal people speak about racialized violences. Sherene Razack observes, “in white society, racism is a story that cannot be told without consequences” (282), and Alison Jones remarks that “from the point of view of the silent other, the decision not to speak . . . may be . . . rather more eloquent than it appears; it may be a pragmatic rejoinder to a set of conditions” (60). Finally, the silence of the yell, accompanied by its image on the man’s face, suggests not silence but, rather, the unspeakability of what must be spoken. There is unresolved complication regarding, on one hand, the necessity and urgency to speak and, on the other, inexpressibility in relation to the horrors of cultural genocide.

Conclusion

As many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal theorists have pointed out, “colonialist wants are still unsatiated” (Stevenson 49). Aboriginal, alternative media makers, such as Dana Claxton, bring innovative methods, connotative richness, and complex theorization to an engagement with

First Nations histories, experiences, and knowledges. Claxton's enriched and intricate attention to insatiable colonialism is particularly important in the context of neo-liberal and transnational pressures. *Buffalo Bone China* considers how to imagine, embody, and enact a decolonization of imperial violences that continue to be enabled under contemporary globalization agendas. The subversive media practice of decolonization can also be understood as contributing to a disruption of the dangerous normalization of "Canadianness" that is endlessly produced through white, foundational discourses of "land" and "nature" (Francis; Rukszto). The subversive practice in *Buffalo Bone China* is not about simple or abstract resistance. It is suffused with entangled and contested interrogations. A detailed and potent visual grammar vitalizes historic specificity and contextualization. The video produces complexity in its videographic methods, representational politic, viewer address and demand, and theorization of cultural genocide. Through multiple strategies of disruption, such as the use of found and original footage; repetition, including the reiteration of the buffalo; the tension of the buffalo/china relationship; and the silent/speaking complication, *Buffalo Bone China* activates a crucial project of decolonization.

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¹Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that the terms "imperialism" and "colonialism" are complicated and contested. She suggests that there are "new challenges" to Indigenous understandings of these conceptions in terms of discourses of "globalization" and "postcolonialism."

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