

**Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures**

## Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease in Four Scenes

*There's a battle for and around history going on at this very moment . . . the intention is to programme, to stifle what I've called "popular memory"; and also to propose and impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present.*

–Michel Foucault

*Inventing traditions . . . is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition. The actual process of creating such ritual and symbolic complexes has not been adequately studied by historians . . . There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned which has not seen the "invention" of tradition . . .*

–Eric Hobsbawm

### Scene One: Release from Captured Images

Roland Barthes shows that the striptease is a contradiction; at the final moment of nakedness a "woman is desexualized." He writes in his book *Mythologies* (1972) that the spectacle is based on the "pretence of fear, as if eroticism here went no further than a sort of delicious terror, whose ritual signs have only to be announced to evoke at once the idea of sex and its conjuration."

Tribal cultures are colonized in a reversal of the striptease. Familiar tribal images are patches on the "pretence of fear," and there is a sense of "delicious terror" in the structural opposition of savagism and civilization found in the cinema and in the literature of romantic captivities. Plains tepees, and the signs of moccasins, canoes, feathers, leathers, arrowheads, numerous museum artifacts, conjure the cultural rituals of the traditional tribal past, but the pleasures of the tribal striptease are denied, data-bound, stopped in emulsion, colonized in print to resolve the insecurities and inhibitions of the dominant culture.

The striptease is a familiar expression of theatrical independence and social titillation.

In the scenes and voices here that delicious dance is a metaphor and in the metaphor are mythic strategies for survival. The striptease is the prime form of socioacupuncture, a therapeutic tease and technique, which is accomplished through tribal trickeries and mythic satire, eternal contradictions that release the ritual terror in captured images.

Ishi, for example, lived alone with one name, loose change, and a business suit, in a corner of an institution, the perfect tribal ornament. The anthropologists at the museumscape declared his private time a public venture; the survivor was collared for a place in an academic diorama until he danced in a striptease.

The inventions and historical plunders of tribal cultures by colonists, corporations, academic culture cultists, with their missions, reservations, deceptions, museum durance, have inhibited the sovereign striptease; racism and linear methods of perception have denied a theater for tribal events in mythic time.

### Scene Two: Euphemisms for Linguistic Colonization

Edward Curtis possessed romantic and inhibited images of tribal people in his photographs. Posed and decorated in traditional vestments and costumes, his pictorial tribes are secular reversals of a ritual striptease, frozen faces on a calendar of arrogant discoveries, a solemn ethnocentric appeal for recognition of his own insecurities; his retouched emulsion images are based on the "pretence of fear."

Curtis could have vanished in his own culture, which he strove to understand through tribal civilizations, if tribal people had appeared in his soft focus photographs as assimilated: perched at pianos, dressed in machine stitched clothes, or writing letters to corrupt government agents.

Tribal cultures have been transformed in photographic images from mythic time into museum commodities. "Photography evades us," writes Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981). "Photography transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object. . ."

Photography is a social rite which turns the past into a "consumable object," argues Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography* (1977), "a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power." One cannot possess realities, but one can possess images, and "photographs are a way of imprisoning reality. . . The primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that images possess the qualities of real things, but our inclination is to attribute to real things the qualities of image."

Curtis retouched tribal images; he, or his darkroom assistants, removed hats, labels, suspenders, parasols, from photographic prints. In one photograph, entitled "In a Piegan Lodge," the image of an alarm clock was removed. Christopher Lyman in his recent book *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions* (1982) reveals that the image of a clock, which on the negative appeared in a box between two tribal men, was removed from the gravure print published in the multivolume *The North American Indian* (1907-30) by Edward Curtis.

Lyman writes that the "removal of unwanted detail was certainly not the only end



toward which Curtis employed retouching. When it came to pictorialist aesthetics, he was dedicated in his pursuit of dramatic effect."

Curtis invented and then possessed tribal images, while at the same time he denied the tribal people in one photograph the simple instrument of chronological time. The photographer and the clock, at last, appear more interesting now than do the two tribal men posed with their ubiquitous peacepipes. Curtis paid some tribal people to pose for photographs; he sold their images and lectured on their culture to raise cash to continue his travels to tribal communities. He traveled with his camera to capture the noble tribes, to preserve metaverses in the ethnographic present as consumable objects of the past.

Photographs are ambiguous, according to the novelist and art critic John Berger. "A photograph arrests the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed," he writes in *Another Way of Telling* (1982). "All photographs are of the past, yet in them an instant of the past is arrested so that, unlike a lived past, it can never lead to the present. Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity." Photographs of tribal people, therefore, are not connections to the traditional past; these images are discontinuous artifacts in a colonial road show.

The inventions of the tribes, and denials of the striptease, however, are not limited to emulsion images. Jingoists, historians, anthropologists, mythologists, and various culture cultists, have hatched and possessed distorted images of tribal cultures. Conference programs and the rich gossip at dinner parties continue to focus on the most recent adventures in tribal commodities. This obsession with the tribal past is not an innocent collection of arrowheads, not a crude map of public camp sites in sacred places, but rather a statement of academic power and control over tribal images, an excess of facts, data, narrative interviews, template discoveries. Academic evidence is a euphemism for linguistic colonization of oral traditions and popular memories.

### Scene Three: Metaverses in Perfect Opposition

*Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1980) has sponsored the creation of a dozen tribal manikins, dressed in traditional vestments, for promotional exhibition at various shopping centers.

The sculpted figures, named for Black Hawk, Pontiac, Cochise, Massasoit, and other tribal leaders from the footnotes of dominant cultural histories, stand like specters from the tribal past in a secular reversal of the striptease. What is most unusual about this exhibition of anatomical artifacts is not that tribal leaders are invented and possessed as objects in a diorama to promote the sale of books, but that few of the tribal names celebrated in plastic casts are entered in the reference books published by the sponsor of the manikins.

"The Indian leaders whose likenesses appear in this exhibition represent every major region of the country and span more than four centuries of history," the editors write in the illustrated catalog, which is sold to promote their reference books. "Some were

great military leaders who fought valiantly to defend their lands. Others were statesmen, diplomats, scholars, and spiritual leaders." Nine manikins, however, are feathered and the same number are praised as warriors. Black Hawk, the catalog reveals, "established his reputation as a warrior early in life. He wounded an enemy of his tribe at the age of fifteen and took his first scalp the same year." Three invented tribal images bear rifles; but only Massasoit, the manikin who associated with the colonists, is dressed in a breechcloth and holds a short bow. In addition to those mentioned, the other plastic manikins are named Joseph, Cornplanter, Powhatan, Red Cloud, Sequoyah, Tecumseh, Wovoka, and Sacagawea, the one female tribal figure in the collection.

The editors of the catalog and the sculptors of the manikins consulted with "scholars in the fields of Indian history, anthropology, and ethnology," and point out that the tribal biographies in the catalog are the "product of hundreds of hours of research involving scores of sources of information." Such claims seem ironic, even deceptive, because the sponsors were not able to consult entries in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for most of the tribal names in the promotion catalog.

The manikin of Wovoka, spiritual founder of the Ghost Dance religion, was created from photographs, while the other manikins, for the most part, were invented as neobles and metasavages from historical descriptions and from portraits painted by Charles Bird King. "It seems odd," the editors of the catalog write, "that Wovoka is shown dressed in white man's clothes, but this is the costume he typically wore as did many other Indians." The other manikins in this cultural contradiction, however, are dressed in what appear to be romantic variations of tribal vestments, evidence of the denials of the striptease.

The sources of visual information, portraits, and historical descriptions, which the sculptors used to cast the manikins, are colonial inventions, museum-bound. Portrait painters, photographers, explorers, traders, and politicians have, with a few exceptions, created a metasavage in perfect racist opposition to the theologies of the dominant culture. The editors and research consultants, even the witnesses at the shopping centers, might vanish if these manikins were embodied in mythic time and participated in a striptease: the structural distances captured in plastic would dissolve in a delicious dance.

#### **Scene Four: Evelybody is Hoppy in Mythic Time**

Tune Browne, mixed-blood tribal trickster from a woodland reservation, and the inspiration behind socioacupuncture, never wore beads or feathers or a wristwatch; he never paid much attention to time or to his image until he became an independent candidate for alderman.

Tune captured his own electronic and emulsion image when he first saw his outsized face and eruptive nostrils on television and in newspaper photographs. He improved his pose from week to week, one image to the next: he cocked his cheeks high at a traditional angle to mimic the old photographs, bought a watch, and dressed in leathers and beads, bits and pieces at first, and then in six months' time he appeared on election eve

