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Blood Memory and the Arts: Indigenous Genealogies and Imagined Truths

Nancy Marie Mithlo

Literary theory may provide the discourse to compare and construe the apparent evolution of literature, but the traces, tricky turns and visionary reach of Native narratives forever haunt interpreters and translators.

—Gerald Vizenor, “American Indian Art and Literature Today”

For generations (and as some might argue, since contact), American Indian artists have grappled with the varied responses of a consumerist Western audience unversed in the interior logic of indigenous aesthetic impulses.¹ The public exchange of Native arts as goods for cash, trade, or opportunity has resulted in a largely object-based academic inquiry in the service of ethnography, voyeurism, and consumer class aspirations. The marked history of these objects and their circulation has to date effectively stood in for serious arts scholarship, obscuring and at times obstructing a more accurate reading of aesthetic expressions informed by the rich legacies of oral history, traditional exchange processes, religious uses, and even metaphysical interventions with the divine that are enacted in the private and often-interior settings of indigenous lifeways. Like Native literary theory, Native arts scholarship is “haunted” by the visionary complexity of indigenous arts practices. The inherent intellectualism of indigenous visual arts, design, performance, and media exceeds the means by which we have to describe them, even in our own contexts of Native arts teaching, learning, and enacting in national and global settings.

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The translation of indigenous aesthetic worlds to a broader audience—tribal communities as well as numerous variations of consumers (those labeled tourists, collectors, and academics)—is fraught with constraints. The legacy of colonialism, still enacted in fine arts and ethnographic settings; the pressures of economically distressed tribal communities dependent upon income from arts commerce; and the lack of requisite infrastructure, including American Indian art publications, professional training programs, and representative collections, inhibit the transference of knowledge among disciplines, institutions, constituents, and practitioners.² Indigenous source communities lack adequate motivation to enter the precarious dialogues that may illuminate the wealth of knowledge encoded in artistic practice with unversed consumers, given the many forms of exploitation that have and still may occur, including devaluation, appropriation, theft of culturally sensitive knowledge, and exile from fine-arts settings.³ Similarly, the constituents who encounter Native arts through museums, galleries, film festivals, and popular culture are often content with the exterior visual trappings of indigenous arts alone—the skin of the goods. Commodities or even performances marked by Native registers are surface renditions of the deeper logic at play, the intellectual underpinnings of indigenous worldviews.

Given these mutually reinforcing tendencies, indigenous arts operate in something of a vacuum. Contemporary Native arts are rarely included in global arts settings that highlight any number of other disenfranchised artists seeking to gain recognition and a voice in the form of critical exhibition practice or scholarship.⁴ This article argues that Native artists can benefit from an increased participation in these broader arts networks, given the resources and opportunities associated with institutions and organizations that give life and reason to the curation and reception of fine arts. Although I recognize the technical and logistical inhibitions for a rapprochement between indigenous arts and the places of its circulation (that is, books, exhibits, collections, and the Internet), in this article I focus my attention on the philosophical and emotional dimensions of audience reception and its impact on the Native arts world, implicating the gaze and problematizing key qualitative values that have largely remained unexplored in our field. Importantly, these values include emotional and imaginative saliences that may simultaneously attract and hold at bay the mutual exchanges implicated in the gaze.

My analysis highlights lens-based artistic practice, the power of biography, and the curatorial strategies of embodiment, including the senses, possession, and emotional connections. The iconic placeholder of “the blood” as an organizing principle is identified as a productive means of articulating the interior renderings of an indigenous aesthetic and recognizing the essential saliences of communal place-based logics and current political realities. Examples of

work featuring Chippewa filmmaker Marcella Ernest and Ho-Chunk photographer Tom Jones will be mobilized in an effort to illuminate these varied theoretical directions.

BEYOND IDENTITY TO BLOOD

Identity debates—meaning the delineation of self-identity in the highly charged political contexts of postmodernism—have largely defined the work of contemporary Native artists in the United States and Canada for more than two decades (the situation for indigenous artists in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are centrally related but will not be directly addressed here).⁵ Although some critics have charged that a continued interest with identity arts is outdated and unnecessary, notions of self and biography continue to concern indigenous artists.

Art historian Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbegie correctly delineates the major problem inherent in the use of identity as a theoretical paradigm by referencing the multiple meanings of the term. Rather than referencing only a call for inclusion (concurrent with a romanticized depiction of authentic cultures in opposition to the West), Ogbegie demonstrates how identity debates can effectively present “a comprehensive demand for the radical overhaul of contemporary structures of power and privilege, rather than a call for tokenist inclusion of ‘non-Western.’”⁶ This spirit of a politically mobilized radical restructuring of the field accurately reflects the work discussed here and is more exemplary of the current practices of contemporary Native arts production and reception than the concessionary implications of inclusion alone. The fact that both strategies—simple acceptance into a mainstream institution and the absolute rejection of the same structural mode of knowledge circulation—may be described under the same term of *identity debates* renders the descriptive of identity inherently unstable and insufficient as a means of describing the variables at play.

Identity as a category of arts analysis is too broad to offer any productive implications for theory building and, consequently, for the advancement of Native art criticism. This problematic appraisal does not mean that all interest with identity is mistaken but rather that our thinking regarding identity requires nuance. A consideration of the physical nature of people, their bodies, and their familial linkages to their ancestors through blood and their land—when taken as a totality—provides the means to craft meaningful appraisals of indigenous arts. This work is something that a purely cognitive consideration of identity alone cannot accomplish.⁷

The articulation and advancement of a qualitative (and some might charge imaginative) approach to contemporary Native arts criticism—characterized by its attention to the body, the experience of belonging, and the implications of these attributes for collective memory and place by way of blood reckoning—has merit due to its centrality in the scope of indigenous collective thought and political realities. Writing in the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, scholars Pauline Turner Strong and Barrik Van Winkle assert that, although scholarship on identity as debated in tribal recognition cases and museum collections is well documented, “the need to objectify identity in the idiom of blood courses through Native American life.”⁸ Similarly, literary theorist and scholar Sean Teuton, citing Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday, declares, “The very pulse of Native literature seems to rely on blood. On this ‘blood memory,’ Momaday writes: “The land, *this* land, is secure in the Native American’s racial memory.”⁹

The concept of blood memory is ageless, but the term gained currency with its use by Momaday in his Pulitzer Prize–winning first novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968).¹⁰ Developed further in his subsequent works and hotly debated by academics, primarily literary critics, blood memory has developed into a controversial premise for the most central issues in American Indian, First Nations, and Aboriginal studies. From the use of federal recognition regulations by blood quantum to consideration of the ultimate audience and purpose for indigenous arts (internal needs or external communication), the concept of blood has proven to be a central theme for exploring Native identity, but to date, the powerful concept of blood has not been significantly explored in contemporary indigenous artistic or curatorial practice.

The trope “blood memory,” Chadwick Allen states, “blurs distinctions between racial identity and narrative.”¹¹ I argue that the concept has the potential not only to “blur” but also to clarify key categories of indigenous wisdoms as expressed in the verbal and visual arts. Tribal museums, tribal colleges, and language-preservation offices are sites where indigenous peoples are encouraged to draw from their ancestral memories.¹² These spaces of remembrance are commonly characterized by efforts to heal the multigenerational impacts of genocide and historic trauma.

Blood relationships reference not only the common understanding of what is considered biological heritage or race but also, in an expanded sense, the internalized memories of communal history, knowledge, and wisdom. Blood memories are powerful political tropes mobilized to call attention to the legacies of colonialism in contexts as diverse as battlefields, boarding schools, and sacred sites. This common tribal value of multigenerational remembrance runs directly counter to prevailing Western traits of individual achievement, lack of transgenerational memory, and transcendence of one’s genealogical fate and place of origin.

Theorizing race in the academy has proven to be even more demanding than advocating for the recognition of oppression in the political scene. In an age in which hybridity is celebrated, any sense of biological determinism is automatically charged as essentialist, regressive rhetoric. Heritage thus becomes either solely decorative or dangerously close to racially determined logic. Calls to blood relationships, either in a corporeal or abstracted sense, are negated in contemporary academic discourse, thus prohibiting the exploration and legitimization of indigenous knowledge systems.¹³ If we cut loose the reactive exclusion of calls to blood memory, then the imaginative and affective qualities of indigenous arts practice today may be productively wrought in new and meaningful ways.

THE CORPOREAL AS AN INDIGENOUS AESTHETIC

My interest in embodied knowledge is influenced by the work of documentary filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall, and in particular his text *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*. In this work, MacDougall helpfully identifies three variables of experiencing film: the bodies of the spectator, filmmaker, and film.¹⁴ This complicated layering of moving image, sound, space, and time is deeply personal, highly charged, and intensely challenging to conceptualize, even to document in written form. These physical saliences overwhelm, overtax, and have historically prohibited viewers of Native arts from fully appreciating the absolute power of the work and the maker's intent. Consequently, I believe that the audience withdraws, for few viewers wish to engage in this embodied space, this intimate arena. However, it is exactly this physical closeness that artists often produce and that audiences, particularly audiences of Native arts, those who are satisfied with what I termed earlier in this essay as “the skin of the goods,” seem unable to meet. My proposition in evoking the body as an inhibitor of a mutual engagement in the gaze is that this body knowledge exceeds the abilities of the audience.

In his classic “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception,” theorist Pierre Bourdieu classifies the ability or inability to engage in fine-arts appreciation as a matter of understanding key codes of artistic expression and interpretation. These codes are viewed as ultimately exclusionary, marking his project as one of class-consciousness. Bourdieu's platform asserts, “The disorientation and cultural blindness of the less-educated beholders are an objective reminder of the objective truth that art perception is a mediate deciphering operation. Since the information presented by the works exhibited exceeds the deciphering capabilities of the beholder, he perceives them as devoid of signification—or, to be more precise, of structuration and organization—because he

cannot 'decode' them, i.e. reduce them to an intelligible form."¹⁵ This structural and cognitive theorizing seeks to make art appreciation a matter of legibility, a set of terms and concepts that may be articulated, learned, and enacted. In contrast, the "decoding" of the unique visual worlds of indigenous arts requires an engagement with the body, communal ideologies, the land, and motion. These qualifiers are necessary precursors to a deeper engagement in indigenous arts practice and a central point of engagement when one considers the importance of the viewer to the production of the work. Do indigenous artists, for example, make art in reaction to the limitations of the non-Native audience? Are concessions made in which communal and land/body-oriented concerns are ignored for the sake of translation, exhibition, and commodification?

MacDougall describes film as containing "traces of experience" that can sometimes overwhelm the filmmaker in "an intense engagement with the world that sometimes borders on the painful":

In sharing the worlds of others so intimately, it is possible to lose sight of your own boundaries. It is not uncommon to discover yourself inhabited by your subjects. Long after making a film, you sometimes feel in yourself a gesture or hear in your mind an intonation of [a] voice that is not your own. Filmmakers and filmviewers have this in common, that things seen and heard are capable of reaching out and possessing us. This possession is not so much a matter of spirit as of material being.¹⁶

The intriguing suggestion here in reference to the gaze is that the relationship between the artist and his or her subject is as fraught as the relationship between the artist and the audience.¹⁷ The introduction of the subject, especially in lens-based arts, complicates the standard theorization of the gaze, enhancing the discussions of spectatorship and objects in potentially productive and meaningful ways. The absence of Bourdieu's cognitive categories and competencies is evident in MacDougall's summarizing: "This is corporeal knowledge, only lightly mediated by thought."¹⁸ I suggest that an engagement in this reciprocity among the audience, subject, and maker in Native arts analysis is required in order to craft an effective interpretative paradigm. But to be successful in this telling—in what MacDougall calls a type of "possession"—the work needs to be accessible on the level of experience; it must contain the depth of generations of relationships and engage the senses of memory.¹⁹

THE WORK

To apply these variables directly to the work of Bad River Chippewa filmmaker Marcella Ernest, for example, we need to consider the individuals, often family members, who populate her films with evidence of Ernest's artistic choices

as a filmmaker—the visual and the audio—and the impact of these variables on the audience: their histories, memories, and physical responses. Ernest’s four-minute experimental film *Blood Memory* (2010) evidences corporeal attributes in a subtle and highly personal telling. Ernest opens her dream-like sequence with a shot of young men on motorbikes, joyfully riding across a rural landscape. The emphasis on raw movement, on youth, seems to parallel the essence of a young America—male, unbridled, like a Western, but without cowboys and horses—more of an *Easy Rider*. The subsequent image of a young woman in a white dress, shot modestly from behind, could not contrast more. Obvious connotations of purity, serenity, and innocence are associated with this image—a constellation of traditionally Western attributes of femininity. She lacks motion, she is caught in one place, and her only movement is an odd stamping of one foot as if a rope tethers her and she waits to be released. As viewers, we are even allowed to play with this female figure, much like we might play with a Barbie doll, turning her sideways, upside down, and over as the camera explores her from a variety of perspectives. This experimental camera technique reeks of a 1970s counternorm, a type of Andy Warhol manipulation of found objects.

So far, this piece may be interpreted as fairly formulaic with its obvious juxtapositions of female/male and motion/stationary. But then Ernest introduces us to the extended family, and this is where her experiential memory narrative begins (see fig. 1). Of her grandfathers, Ernest comments in a 2010 interview with the author,

My dad’s dad is the first grandparent you see in the beginning. He punches the camera. He’s awesome! The SWEETEST man alive. I think he’s mid-80s now. Anyway, he was abandoned at the age of 4 and grew up in and out of foster homes and orphanages. He’s real dark but we don’t know what he is. He found out that his mother was in the circus!!! And left him with his father, Oscar, and then Oscar went for milk and never came back. The circus?!! So we have [been] told that he might be Gypsy given that he has dark skin and his mom was in the damn circus. But we don’t know. And my last name, Ernest, which comes from him is not even his last name. I think when he joined the war he had to get a last name so he picked the first name of his favorite foster parent.²⁰



FIGURE 1. Film still from *Blood Memory* by Marcella Ernest (US, 2010, 4 min.). Image courtesy of Marcella Ernest.

The estrangement from home, the longing that often accompanies an indigenuous search for identity is supplanted with the fascination of the unexpected. Ernest's biography is complicated by loss, but her visual narrative is not restrained by this lack; it is informed by the presence of her ancestors and their dynamic and unpredictable lives. The playful, self-deprecating, and open-ended exploration of the older men's bodies brings us, the viewer, back into Ernest's vivid imagination. These men even appear more powerful than the young dudes on dirt bikes. They laugh, impose themselves into the camera's lens, punch us, and then ride their bicycle backward without a shirt and sporting tattoos. In these sequences, Ernest seems to say "Ha! And you thought you were tough!" She obviously adores these older men; the camera toys with their features, lingers on their absurdity. We become a child, placed beside Ernest as a child, left in their wonder and their power. Significantly, these powerful and comedic men are from her non-Native father's side of the family. Ernest states,

I have found, and read, and listened to people of mixed race talk about who they are or where they come from. And many times we tend to emphasize heavily more upon the side "of color." For instance, if they are black and white, it would be more of a black identity.

I try in this piece to include both my Ojibwe mother and my white father. My blood is through my mother, and thus I repeat that my mother is Ojibwe more than my father is white. Grandparents, and great grandparents, on both sides however are included in the piece as well. My great grandfather on my father's side is riding the bike backwards. And both maternal and paternal grandpa and grandma are included in the film, as are my mom's sister, and other relatives. Predominately though, we see my mom and my dad and my grandparents.²¹

This extended visual foray into the family archives places us among the family members lingering over a photo album on the living room couch, but this is a film and there are other means of crafting the quality of "possession." The sound of a heartbeat opens the film segment with a lulling cantor, something like a drum or even the hum of a motorcycle engine. Then we hear Ernest's voice almost mumbling as if she is shy or withholding, "Yes, yes, no, no." She is not celebratory, but pained, obviously pinned to the wall with some unseen interviewer questioning her. Of this encounter Ernest states,

I always tend to be asked the same questions by people. Mostly non-Native people. I have always had this, "what are you question" from Native and non. And then when it comes to talking about being Native American they are always so very curious. And comment on my eyes. Sometimes rudely. HAHA! So I keep having to repeat Ojibwe to non-Native people all the time too because we are not one of those tribes that everyone knows. So they are like, "Who? Say that again? How do

you say it? Where are THEY from? Who? Tell me one more time? Hmmmm, no I never heard of them and I know Native Americans!" And then I say Chippewa and most people are like, "Ohhhh Okay I have heard of that." And then people always feel so comfortable asking me all about shit that is none of their business in terms of Native Americans. So I find myself doing a lot of "Yes, yes, yes, yes, no, no, no, no, maybe, I don't think so."²²

This interrogation leads us to Ernest's recounting of her parents' divorce, which she corresponds visually to a series of hopelessly romantic wedding-film sequences. Her mother, absolutely layered in white—is stunning in her Native beauty and her presence. The father has shades of his grandparents—proud and a bit nonconformist. Shots of Ernest as a baby follow. She is dressed in white tights and layers of calico, bald, innocent, drooling, sassing at a birthday party, being held, and obviously loved.

These are very personal images that as viewers we are drawn to because of their rawness. The technology alone is evocative; we are transported to a time we think of as innocent, but we are not allowed to stay because the pain of the memory is too real, too raw. Although all the video segments are historic and "found" as a part of the artist's family archive, the audio is completely new. The juxtaposition of the heartbeat with the sound of Chippewa ceremonial singing was recorded by Ernest on an iPhone and downloaded onto the film tracks. The combination of historic images and recent audio adds a surreal quality to the piece, as if we are traveling the distance between time and place on the platform of new digital technologies.²³

In terms of spectatorship and the gaze, Ernest is highly involved in mining her family's archives—these are vintage family VHS tapes that she has strategically repurposed to her own demands. She stops the film, rewinds it at places, and talks over it. It is as if she, as an adult and no longer the child of the film, takes pleasure in being the one in control now. Yet her premise for the piece is not entirely self-referential. It is the persistence of the audience—those who question her authenticity—that she works to subdue in this piece. Her "yes, yes" and "no, no" are in answer to the prying questions posed to her by primarily non-Natives who question her being—how she looks, the color of her eyes, her place of belonging. As an urban Native who has lived in several parts of the country, this definitive answer of self-identity must be empowering, perhaps freeing even as it is enacted in a reactive fashion at heart. For Native viewers who experience the same questioning (this author included), it is reassuring that one's individual experience is the experience of many.

Whereas Ernest's film talks back to impositions of identity by evoking personal narrative, Ho-Chunk photographer Jones mobilizes a traditional social norm of self-effacement. Both artists choose to work in the media of

lens-based craft, what I argue to be a largely personalized and highly autobiographical format. The camera, unlike the brush, the welder's torch, or the mediums of performance and installation, is a familial tool, one that today is an inherent part of cell phone technology and ubiquitous surveillance cameras. Jones gravitates to the documentary impulses of the audience in order to capture personal and familial memories; however, his craft is deeply infused with the intimate details of his tribe's orientation as original peoples of the Great Lakes area. Born into the Ho-Chunk community, Tom Jones has worked closely with his tribe in order to portray it from the inside out. By showing some of the tribe's adaptations to the "white" culture of mainstream America, he hopes to give "a name and face to the individuals and their way of life in our own time" instead of simply depicting the "beads and feathers."²⁴

In his newest work, Jones addresses the idea of phenotype in which enrolled tribal members present as white and unenrolled members appear as stereotypically Native. These physical attributes are utilized as a means of questioning federal recognition policies based on the genealogies of blood, not culture. Many of the photographs in his portrait series could appropriately be termed self-portraiture for their completeness as an example of Ho-Chunk visual sensibilities. This formalistic aesthetic is defined by an admonishment not to talk of oneself; it is a modesty and privacy that is palpable in his complete engagement with line, form, and composition.

Jones's emphasis on the intricacies of how the world inside his camera lens appears in final form could be interpreted as an overriding concern with Western aesthetics rather than indigenous norms. He is fond of crediting abstract expressionists, for example, as influences for his stark, abstract landscape compositions; however, the patterns he replicates could easily be delineated as essential geometric grids for traditional Ho-Chunk basketry and ribbon work. This perceived tension is regularly explored in the scholarship on Native arts. For example, is modernism an appropriation of indigenous expression or vice versa? Jones is explicit about his Western influences—Mondrian and Rothko are primary muses. Yet Jones's aesthetic choices have everything to do with his community's norms, in this instance the norm of refusal. As he states, "Even though there's a lot of baggage, I'm only showing you what I want you to see. I want our people to have pride about themselves."²⁵ Form becomes a way to shield the viewer and the subject from exposing information that is too personal. Abstraction serves indigeneity.²⁶

To understand how these attributes of experiential, blood relationships function in Jones's work, I will consider two images to discuss from his formal portrait series titled *Honoring the Ho-Chunk Warrior*. Jones's choice of documenting tribal members who are active in the US military may signal to an unversed viewer an anomaly, given the fraught history of US imperialism and

expansion on American soil, yet this preconception is a false one. The legacy of American Indians active in the military is aptly documented and forms a major component of any accurate rendering of America. However, like many aspects of American Indian history, its salience is frequently overlooked or misunderstood. Jones's engagement with the veterans consequently signals a counternarrative to the unversed viewer who may react with surprise or even humor upon encountering these "unexpected" images.

Margaret Garvin (see fig. 2), a self-possessed veteran in a brilliant blue Indian shirt, cradles her newborn child. Garvin is positioned against a distressed tin building that echoes the blue of her shirt, making her appear larger and more powerful than her physical presence alone. The baby, also wrapped in blue, is held securely by her mother's flexed hand. Garvin's protective stance, her squinted eye, challenges the viewer to dare and threaten this precious child. A jagged tear in the blue tin backdrop exaggerates this powerful stance, as if she herself was responsible for mutilating it. She is proud, just as Jones has intended, but she is also to be feared. In terms of a visceral experience, the viewer feels her strength. The pale color of her skin and hair subvert the expectedness of the Native warrior icon, inserting a counternarrative of Native resiliency and strength grounded in the matriarchal values of leadership and power.

The second image from the same series shows two sisters (Sergeant Jessika Greendeer and Corporal Kristen Greendeer) in army uniforms, fully decorated (see fig. 3). The women are so physically similar that they appear as one. They are turned toward each other in a fashion that suggests one body.



FIGURE 2. Margaret Garvin from *Honoring the Ho-Chunk Warrior*, 2001. Digital archival print courtesy of Tom Jones.



FIGURE 3. Sergeant Jessika Greendeer and Corporal Kristen Greendeer from *Honoring the Ho-Chunk Warrior*, 2006. Digital archival print courtesy of Tom Jones.

Again, their presence is enlarged just as Garvin's was by the staging of a similarly colored background. The Greendeer photo is set in a wooded area, forming a backdrop that almost implicates the two sisters as creatures of the natural environment. They present as deer, their heads turned in union to meet the viewer. It is as if we had accidentally come across these two women in the forest, but instead of startling and running, they turn and face us, fully present in the moment. Their eyes engaging ours creates a bond; they implicate us in their recognition that we stand in their territory, we have interrupted their moment—we are the interloper on Ho-Chunk land. Jones's intent—to convey self-possession—is accomplished.

These somewhat contemplative images reflect Jones's desire to examine issues that affect American Indian communities, in particular his Ho-Chunk community. His concern with how traditional standards of family and blood are changing was heightened by tribal legislation that required all new members to have DNA testing in order to prove their Ho-Chunk ancestry.²⁷ Jones dubs this new policy "identity genocide," describing the implications of this legislation as self-imposed tribal eradication:

Traditionally, the Ho-Chunk have adopted non-Ho-Chunks (whether they were Native or white) into the tribe. Before contact with whites, there was constant intermarriage among the tribes. This did not change who you were culturally, if you were raised within that specific community.

Today, we have children whose parents [may be] a one-quarter Chippewa, one-quarter Potawatomi, one-quarter Mesquakie, and one-quarter Ho-Chunk. All of these children are full-blooded Indians, but according to new tribal enrollment policies, the children will no longer be considered a member of any federally recognized tribe, because they are only one-eighth of each individual tribe.

Through DNA testing, the tribe is terminating or self-colonizing its people with federally-imposed ideas of what an American Indian is. This new form of eradication did not arise from wanting biological purity, but instead from the desire to keep people from jumping ship from one tribe to another, in order to receive per capita checks from casino revenues.²⁸

For this new series, *Identity Genocide*, Jones plans to photograph enrolled Ho-Chunk tribal members who are one-quarter Ho-Chunk and are not distinguishably "Indian looking" alongside nonenrolled individuals of Ho-Chunk descent who are distinguishably "Indian looking."²⁹ This contested history regarding the complexities of regulating race is a potent analysis of the ways in which blood unites as well as divides. Jones's approach finds congruence with scholars such as Kimberly TallBear who assert that "tribal ideas of kinship and community belonging are not synonymous with biology. If tribal political practice is not meaningfully informed by cultural practice and philosophy, it

seems that tribes are abdicating self-determination.”³⁰ This fraught territory of tribal recognition using genealogy is not imaginary and is not informed by postmodern aesthetic theory or identity politics, but is a matter of tribal legislation. Jones’s concern with these issues cannot be synonymous with the misnomer “identity politics,” for his realities are informed by self-segregations, federal legislations, and the sovereign relationship of Native nations. The content is a grounded political reality as salient as US aggressions abroad, the trauma of AIDS, or the crisis of feminist representations, which are typical fodder for consideration as serious fine-arts endeavors, but somehow dismissed when the art is cast as Native and labeled “identity art.”

IMAGINARY TRUTHS

Jones and Ernest utilize genealogical mapping to define their statements on identity and belonging, making varied uses of the concept of addressing blood memories. Although non-Native artists may be concerned with family or community, this engagement lacks the extreme relationality that exists within indigenous contexts and an embracement of the metaphysical. Sean Teuton summarizes this divide by stating “to Western eyes, tribal forms of experience such as dreams, visions, and ceremonial, athletic—and certainly narcotic revelations—can’t possibly produce reliable knowledge. And yet these have been fundamental to Indigenous lives.”³¹ The defining quality of indigenous life and identities as a continued engagement with the colonial experience and as a means of defining sovereignty—who belongs and how we belong—is central to the interpretation of indigenous arts. It is the power of blood, linkage to the land, and memory of painful histories of genocide that form the absolute space of what MacDougall terms “possession.”

I began this article with MacDougall’s call for a holistic syncretism between filmmaker, subject, and spectator as a means of understanding imagery as a corporeal experience. Although audience reception may present as a reactive form of scholarship, I forward the premise that the audience may be, and frequently is, the artist’s originating source community. Clearly this is the case for both artists featured in this article, given Jones’s documentary impulse with Ho-Chunk veterans and Ernest’s less obvious off-screen mentorship of Native youth in a variety of settings.³² The field’s collective understanding of spectatorship and the gaze must then allow for the challenge of multiple interpretations between and within communities.

MacDougall states that the spectator typically experiences a convergence with the objects and faces on film: “Films exceed normal observation and yet throw up huge barriers to it. They give us the privileged view point of the

close-up of the enclosing frame . . . yet at the same time they confine us to limited frames, give us limited time to inspect them and in other ways deprive us of our will. This becomes a gap on a larger scale, of a different order.”³³ I suggest that this “gap” is more than the distance between the concerns of indigenous communities—including land, survivance, and identities as embodied in genealogy and blood—and non-Native communities. These concerns are multivalent, enduring, ever-present, and essential to crafting a theoretical approach to indigenous aesthetic expressions.

Vizenor states that “Native literary artists create the tropes of oral stories in the silence of narratives, and in the imagist scenes of eternal motion, totemic transmutation, pronoun waves, gender inversion, the presence of creatures, visionary voice and in a sense of survivance.”³⁴ The active imaginations of Native artists embodied in multiple exchanges with their subjects and audiences allow for a more nuanced and telling delineation of indigenous aesthetics than identity and counternorms alone.

NOTES

This article was first presented at the Native American Indigenous Studies Association Meeting, May 20, 2010, as part of the session titled “ART SPEAKS: Translating and Interpreting Indigenous Art through Curatorial Practice, Exhibition and Theory,” which was organized by Ryan Rice, chief curator, Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, a center of the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. The author is grateful for the financial support to travel provided by the University of Wisconsin’s Vilas Fellowship. The associated exhibition—tentatively titled “Blood Memory: Indigenous Genealogies and Imagined Truths,” featuring the work of Greg Staats (Canada), Anna Tsouhlarakis (US), Tom Jones (US), and Brenda Croft (Australia)—will open in January 2013 at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts.

1. Gerald Vizenor, “American Indian Art and Literature Today: Survivance and Tragic Wisdom,” *Museum International* 62, no. 3 (2010): 50.

2. An assessment of these infrastructure challenges was completed at the 2008 American Indian Curatorial Practice: State of the Field conference hosted at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and funded by the Ford Foundation. A PDF catalogue of the proceedings may be found at http://www.nancymariemithlo.com/aicp_menu.htm (accessed July 21, 2011).

3. Peter Kulchyski, “From Appropriation to Subversion: Aboriginal Cultural Production in the Age of Postmodernism,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 605–20.

4. Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2006).

5. For a helpful overview of the field see Mario Caro, “Owning the Image: Indigenous Arts since 1990,” in *Manifestations: New Native Art Criticism*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Santa Fe: Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2011), 56–71.

6. Although I recognize the exciting development of “the senses” in the literature (e.g., Constance Classen and David Howes, “The Sensescape of the Museum: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts,” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards,

Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips [Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006], 199–222), I choose to focus my energies in this article on the affective qualities of audience and gaze.

7. Pauline Turner Strong and Barrick Van Winkle, “Indian Blood: Reflections on the Reckoning and Refiguring of Native North American Identity,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 4 (November 1996): 552.

8. Sean Kicummah Teuton, “Native Literature, Native Art, and How There Might Be ‘Memory in the Blood.’” Paper presented at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian Essentially Indigenous? Symposium, New York, May 6, 2011 (Smithsonian Press, forthcoming).

9. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (1968; repr., New York: Perennial Library, 1989).

10. Chadwick Allen, “Blood (and) Memory,” *American Literature* 71, no. 1 (March 1999): 93–94.

11. The Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe’s Ziibiwing Center offers a powerful demonstration of the concept of blood memory in an interpretative exhibit. See <http://www.sagchip.org/ziibiwing/> (accessed July 21, 2011). See an informative review of the exhibits by scholar Amy Lonetree, “Diba Jimooyung: Telling Our Story,” Ziibiwing Center of Anishinaabe Culture and Lifeways, Mount Pleasant, MI,” *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (June 2008): 158–63.

12. See Future of Minority Studies for proactive means of addressing these ills: <http://www.fmsproject.cornell.edu/> (accessed July 21, 2011).

13. David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

14. Pierre Bordieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 4.

15. MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 137.

16. For more on multiple gazes, see James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

17. MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 137.

18. Sam Pack, “Reversing the Gaze: ‘The Whiteman’ as Other,” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 1, no. 3 (December 2010): 295.

19. Marcella Ernest, e-mail communications with author, April 27–28, 2010.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid. Ernest adds, “The most interesting thing to me about this film, in terms of the process of making it is that all of the footage—all of the visuals are from old S-8 film captured by my dad from about 1960–1981. I simply digitized the old footage and added the sound. I only added one transition! Which is rare in any film, especially experimental! I usually do the opposite and add multiple layers of video with a simple soundtrack. Interestingly again, is that ALL of the audio added was recorded from my iPhone. All of it, even the Ojibwe song and prayer which is playing in the background. And my own voice was also recorded by iPhone as well. The juxtaposition of the two (archival family films from my dad without computer manipulation and the audio of a very modern tool such as the iPhone). I don’t know, I find that interesting and it adds something to it.”

23. Tom Jones, artist’s statement, Museum of Contemporary Photography, http://www.mocp.org/collections/mpp/jones_tom.php (accessed July 21, 2011).

24. Tom Jones, presentation to the University of Wisconsin–Madison Tribal Libraries and Museums course, March 29, 2009.

25. Nancy Marie Mithlo, “On the Other Side of this Ocean’: The Limits of Knowledge as an Aesthetic Framework.” Paper presented at the 2011 College Art Association panel “Toward an Indigenous Artistic Sovereignty: Theory, Criticism, and Native Art,” Michigan State University.

26. Nancy Marie Mithlo, "On the Other Side of this Ocean': The Limits of Knowledge as an Aesthetic Framework." Paper presented at the College Art Association panel "Toward an Indigenous Artistic Sovereignty: Theory, Criticism, and Native Art," New York, February 9–12, 2011.
27. Ho-Chunk Nation Code, Title 2, Government Code Section 7, Tribal Enrollment and Membership Code Enacted by Legislature, October 16, 2007.
28. Tom Jones, *Identity Genocide* exhibition statement, 2009.
29. At press time, Jones stated that his intent in the new series may change: "I am currently photographing people who are no longer seen as Ho-Chunk by the tribe." Personal communication with author, May 19, 2011.
30. Kimberly TallBear, "DNA, Blood, and Racializing the Tribe," *Wicazo Sa Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 84.
31. Teuton, "Native Literature, Native Art, and How There Might Be 'Memory in the Blood.'"
32. For more on Ernest's impact with Native youth see http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/nafvf/filmmakers_ernest.aspx (accessed July 21, 2011).
33. MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 26.
34. Vizenor, "American Indian Art and Literature Today," 48–49.