

**I WON'T PLAY PRIMITIVE TO YOUR MODERN:  
THE ART OF DAVID NEEL (KWAGIUTL), 1985–2000**

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*I Won't Play Primitive to Your Modern: The Art of David Neel (Kwagiutl), 1985–2000* examines the production and reception of one artist's work as it crosses discursive arenas. This dissertation theorizes that, at times, Neel draws upon his schooling in photojournalism and his training as a carver to challenge Eurocentric assumptions tied to two ideals: that looking is disinterested, and that justice is blind. At other times, Neel uses the same skills to provoke an experience of viewing that yields political or spiritual transcendence. *I Won't Play Primitive to Your Modern*, then, investigates overlaps and gaps between different conventions and experiences of looking in a study connected to questions of epistemology, metaphysics, and phenomenology.

My research examines Neel's art in conjunction with his own mobility through Mexican, African-American, Asian and Euro-American communities, as well as indigenous North America. My interpretation is predicated on evidence derived from oral histories, fieldwork, and archival research. I also apply strategies of visual analysis informed by an interdisciplinary array of theories about looking forwarded by scholars such as Barbara Stafford, Susan Sontag, Christopher Pinney, James Clifford, Roland Barthes, W.J.T. Mitchell, Robert Davidson (Haida), Nancy Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache), and Charlotte Townsend-Gault. My analysis of Neel's artistic production and reception also draws upon theories of embodiment that include Transformation, the Kinship I, and The Four Sacred Directions as well as ideals of objectivity embedded in the disciplines of art history and law.

This study concludes that Neel's use of photography's reproductive capabilities, his references to the importance of copying in the aesthetic of carving, his knowledge of media outlets, and his life of

migration have enabled him to slip himself and his images into multiple discursive communities that espouse distinct aesthetic sensibilities and political agendas. The import of Neel's project lies in his capacity to engage his viewers with, and thus reveal, political and aesthetic differences that provoke debate about group identity, about his own identity and about the meaning of his art.

## PREFACE

I am deeply grateful to a number of wonderful people working in the fields of indigeneity, visuality, and modernity who have made valuable contributions to this project and helped bring it to close. My inquiries about David Neel's art began with a group of Northwest Coast scholars. Andie Palmer, a linguistic anthropologist with more than twenty years of field research in the Pacific Northwest and an intimate acquaintance with indigenous villages from Washington to Alaska, was most helpful in enabling me to make initial contact with Neel. Andie's knowledge of indigenous languages proved priceless as I made my way through theories of property, individuality, and contest, and her connections to the noble courts of the Northwest coast led to invitations into homes and potlatches. Concerning those invitations, I owe special thanks to Lushootseed Elder Vi Hilbert and her family, for inviting me into their family circle. Barbara Brotherton of the Seattle Art Gallery, Robin Wright of the University of Seattle, and Lindy-Lou Flynn of Keyano College also provided great help through their extensive knowledge of the Pacific Northwest and contemporary indigenous lifeways.

Part of my field research took place in David Neel's North Vancouver Studio. I owe a special thanks to David for allowing me access to his studio, slide collection and thoughts, as well as for his patience answering my many questions and the sense of humour that he maintained throughout the process. I would also like to acknowledge the time he spent reading and fact-checking earlier drafts of my dissertation, a process that enriched my understanding of his art and life. David also graciously introduced me to family members who have played important roles in bringing this project to fruition. I was particularly lucky to meet his aunt Pamela Creasy Neel while I was still in the early stages of this project, and I am most thankful for her generous gift of stories of the Neel family, as well as her insights about photography, identity, and the state of the contemporary indigenous world. David Neel's mother, Karen

Waterman, also most graciously answered my many questions about his early childhood years. Likewise, I am indebted to David Neel's aunt Cora Beddows and to Daisy Sewid-Smith for their help with respect to the post-production history of Neel's photograph, *Portrait of Agnes Alfred*.

I am long overdue in publicly expressing my thanks to members of the History of Art and Architecture Department at The University of Pittsburgh. Marina Warner's seminar on representations of the spirit and identity plays an instrumental role in my thoughts about indigenous photography in general, and specifically, about David Neel's photographic representations of the embodied family. Likewise, Kathy Linduff's class on twentieth-century art in China introduced me to sophisticated discussion of modernity outside the framework of Euro-American conventions. I am equally indebted to Barbara McCloskey, whose seminars on art of the Third Reich and the discourses of nationalism and oppression promoted the beginnings of my exploration of the connections between indigenous cultures and the Euro-American *avant-garde*.

Foremost, this project was enabled by the continuing support of my project co-advisors, Kirk Savage and Terry Smith. Terry Smith's keen insights about the mechanisms of human relations and his knowledge of indigenous art provided art historical counterpoint to the anthropological tempo set by a number of those listed above and below. Terry's extensive commentary upon all of my writing was of great significance to the project and my thought. Kirk Savage offered many alternative views, and copious advice with respect to obtaining the necessary funding for the research and writing of this dissertation. It was also a great honour to have Allan J. Ryan of Carleton University join Kathy, Kirk, and Terry for the thesis defence. Allan's compendious knowledge of contemporary Native American art, his helpful conversation at many stages of writing, and his many comments on the defended draft of the dissertation were greatly enriching to me, and to this final product.

Prior to completion of this project, portions of the dissertation were presented in various venues. Sections were written with the aid of funding that I received as scholar in residence at The Georgia O'Keeffe Research Center in Santa Fe. In addition to the Center's financial support, I greatly appreciate the feedback that I received from Barbara Buhler Lynes and Eumie Imm-Stroukof as well as from the

other scholars in residence: Bett Schumacher, Audrey Goodman, Mary Woods, Anne Wagner, and Cristina Cogdell. Earlier versions of several chapters were presented in various venues, including the Western Literature Association, the Native American Arts Studies Association, the College Art Association, and The Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art. I am especially grateful that these venues have afforded the opportunity for exchanges with an array of scholars including Bill Anthes, Nancy Mithlo, Gerald McMaster, Ronald Hawker, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, and Chadwick Allen. I also appreciate the help with my thought and writing provided by many of my friends and scholars in Pittsburgh and Meadville, including Jennifer Hellwarth, Sharon Wesoky, Ann Bomberger, Julie Albright, Cheryl Burkey, Soldedad Caballero, David Miller, Sherry Wellman, Deborah Barkun, Cindy Persinger, and last, but not least, my husband Eric Palmer.



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

I have chosen “I Won’t Play Primitive to Your Modern,” as the principal title of this dissertation, because I think the phrase registers a challenge to the oversimplified dualisms that inhere in Eurocentric constructions of modernity that specifically inform the discourses of art. Such dualisms often fail to take into account the political concept of “indigeneity,” expressed in efforts by self-identified indigenous artists and activists to differentiate indigenous identities and cultures from those of settler societies. In the most general sense, then, this project sets out to examine the sorts of contradictions and controversies that surround the very idea of indigeneity with respect to First Nations people.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, this dissertation concerns how epistemological, phenomenological, and metaphysical experiences of looking open up questions of blindness and visibility. But these various experiences of visibility have, in turn, acquired different sorts of political values in concert with the shifting and ongoing practices of colonization, and with countervailing strategies of indigenous emancipation. Salient events of the 1990s include: the 1990 Mohawk standoff in Quebec, the controversy over a 1991 judgment by the Supreme Court of British Columbia concerning the *Gitk’san and Wet’suwet’en* land claim, and protests regarding the 1992 commemoration of the Columbian Quincentenary. These acts of political emancipation were often engineered with visibility as a leading concern, to capture the attention of press photographers, so these political events could not be ignored by the public at large.

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada the expression “First Nations” is most often used to describe aboriginal people, while in the United States the term “Native American” is more common. I use the terms interchangeably throughout my dissertation simply to allow for diversity. Likewise, I use the terms Northwest Coast and “Pacific Northwest” to describe maritime aboriginal cultures from Oregon to Alaska.

This dissertation specifically focuses on the sorts of strategies that Kwagiutl<sup>2</sup> (variant spelling: Kwakiutl) photographer, painter, and carver David Neel (b. 1960) deploys to articulate the concept of indigeneity to an array of audiences. Neel's approach is exemplified by the expression "I won't play primitive to your modern," which he used on several occasions during visits I made to his North Vancouver studio in the summer of 2002. By calling attention to the various ways that Neel's art takes on meaning, I endeavour to reveal the complexities and nuances that inhere in his praxis of art making and enable him to engage with members of disparate groups. Like other acts of indigenous emancipation, much of Neel's art and his relationship to the press are designed to reach audiences both inside and outside of aboriginal circles, where his art performs different sorts of tasks in these various constituencies.

The goals of this project, then, are threefold. First, I set out to connect with Michel de Certeau's theorization of indigenous empowerment, which incorporates an artist's or political activist's capacity to reach and impact a variety of audiences.<sup>3</sup> Another goal of this project, centered in the fields of art history and visual culture studies, is to situate Neel's life and art within the 1994 model that literary theorist W. T.J. Mitchell refers to as "the pictorial turn." Mitchell's idea includes:

the rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or "visual literacy" might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I will use the term Kwagiutl solely for the Kwakwaka'wakw of Fort Rupert, in particular, and I will employ the term Kwakwaka'wakw for Kwakwala-speakers as a group. In many publications, the term Kwakiutl is used to describe all Kwakwala-speakers, who are now more appropriately known as the Kwakwaka'wakw. Kwakwaka'wakw people cite their identities in relationship to the land, specifically their home village-nation. Today there are more than twenty Kwakwaka'wakw village-nations in British Columbia, and the term Kwagiutl (along with its more familiar variant spelling, 'Kwakiutl') properly describes only the Kwakwaka'wakw of Fort Rupert, British Columbia ('Tsakis'), which is David Neel's home community.

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> W.T.J. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Reception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

The overarching goal of this project, then, is to examine how Neel's art accrues meaning in a labyrinth of visual exchanges. At times Neel finds power for the colonized by engaging with oppositional Euro-American conceptions of images rooted in positivism and skepticism that respectively inhere in formalism in art history and in law's code of blindness. As a project centered on the potential for more positive construction of acts of looking and being seen, this dissertation also endeavours to build upon the project set out by art historian Barbara Maria Stafford in her 1996 book *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*, which considers the European experiences of looking and competing epistemological systems of the early modern period.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of following common Euro-American modernist constructions of representation that picture the Pacific Northwest as a timeless and unpopulated landscape, Neel twists the viewer's perspective with photographs that populate the landscape with indigenous people, and with carved masks that depict alarming, contemporary subject matter such as the beaten face of Rodney King. At the same time, Neel often alters the visual experience through the addition of narratives of the worldly and culturally engaged lives of Northwest Coast people. Through display of his photographs and his masks, the senses of sound, touch, or smell are further supplements, as Neel moves his viewers, indigenous and otherwise, towards Northwest Coast aesthetic sensibilities. In this sense, Neel connects with indigenous constructions of *embodied* spectatorship similar to that suggested for another culture by anthropologist Christopher Pinney in his 2004 book *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*.<sup>6</sup> A related goal of Chapter 2.0 is to connect Neel's art to the discourses of visibility, which, itself, has had a politically charged history in Indigenous Studies during the last twenty years. Criticism of

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 8–11.

formalist analysis has become charged in recent years with the concern that all visual engagements hazard the imposition of western ideals of seeing upon all viewers, not excepting indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup>

I have chosen to center my program of research on David Neel's life and artistic development because they reveal much about the political struggles that shape the contemporary indigenous world in several important ways. First, Neel is one of a group of indigenous artists including Jane Ash Poitras (Chipewyan Cree, b. 1951), Rebecca Bellmore (Anishinabekwe, b.1960), Shelley Niro (Mohawk, b. 1954), Lawrence Paul/Yuwelptun (Coast Salish, b. 1957), and Carl Beam (Ojibwe, 1943–2005), who came into prominence during the early 1990s and gained public recognition with politically charged exhibitions, such as the Canadian Museum of Civilization's *Indigena* (1992) and the Glenbow Museum's *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (1988), both of which raised important issues about indigenous identity, land, property, and aesthetics. As an artist, Neel is best known for related work: *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* (1990), a silkscreen print that commemorates the Mohawk standoff, *The Mask Of the Injustice System* (1991), a carved portrait of the judge who presided over the *Gitk'san and Wet'suwet'en* landclaim case, and *Our Chiefs and Elders* (1990), a black-and-white photo-essay that presents a show-and-tell of an ever-changing aboriginal world. Neel's artistic identity, then, much like those of Poitras, Bellmore, Niro, Yuxwelptun, and Beam, is closely associated with the political struggles of indigenous people of the 1990s.

Second, I have chosen to focus upon Neel because he is especially well-suited to such a study about the interplays between visibility and indigeneity, due to his unusual education in both photography and carving. Neel's carved masks, photographs, and silkscreen prints deliberately draw upon both Euro-American and Kwagiutl aesthetic conventions, while at the same time he develops a consciousness of the contemporary world and calls attention to intersections that he sees between theories of photography and carving which concern masks, narratives, familial identity, and mobility. Neel's compositions are often unusual combinations drawing from several familial and artistic lines represented in the work of his

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<sup>7</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 48-51.

predecessors: his ancestor Charlie James (ca. 1867-1938), who is routinely described as the seminal Kwagiutl carver of the twentieth century, and James' granddaughter Ellen Neel (1916-1966), who is often characterized as the first indigenous woman carver of the Pacific Northwest. David Neel's art also draws upon James' more famous Euro-American counterpart, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), whose artistic program most notably manifests an interest in masks and newspapers, and upon the globetrotting photojournalist of the following generation W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978), who is often credited as the father of the photo essay.<sup>8</sup>

Neel's exploration of indigeneity is especially poignant due to the fact that his artistic practice draws upon his Kwagiutl heritage, for Kwagiutl culture holds a prominent place in Euro-American narratives about aesthetics and culture. For example, anthropologists Franz Boas (1858-1942), Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), and Claude Levi-Strauss (b. 1908) have all constructed accounts that call attention to and popularize Kwagiutl culture, and that of other Kwak'waka-speaking groups now commonly known as the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples.<sup>9</sup> These narratives, alongside imperial legal sanctions against Kwakwaka'wakw feasts, or potlatches, continued from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. At times, the pairing would yield the confiscation of Kwakwaka'wakw masks and other potlatch paraphernalia from their indigenous owners, and a subsequent bolstering of Euro-American collections that suggests another valuing of the artifacts. Thus, the artifacts subsequently circulated and informed the discourses of modern art in the work of artists such as Max Ernst (1891-1976), who amassed an extensive collection of Northwest Coast objects.<sup>10</sup> Neel was educated in this paradigm, most

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ben Maddow, *Let the Truth Be the Prejudice: W. Eugene Smith: His Life and Photographs* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> See Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (1927, reprint, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York: Capitol Publishing, 1951); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967); Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*, trans. Sylvia Moldeski (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> For an authoritative history on the confiscation and sale of the masks see, U'mista Cultural Society, "Potlatch Collection." For an overview of the Surrealists' history of collecting Native North American objects, see Elizabeth Cowling, "The Eskimos, The American Indians and the Surrealists," *Art History* 1 (December 1978): 485-500. For



practically in his training and subsequent exposure to the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition 'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, which will be considered in Chapter 2.0. He goes on to twist this paradigm by adding references to Euro-American artistic conventions, revealing some of the asymmetries of power embedded in these rather popular Eurocentric accounts, and this allows him to further complicate the multi-directional exchanges between Kwagiutl narratives and those commonly associated with modernity.

Finally, the fact that Neel and his work have received a mixed reception in Kwakwaka'wakw circles reveals much about the complex construction of indigenous identities, and so makes him suitable for this study. In the mid 1990s, some years after Neel's return to British Columbia, several powerful Kwakwaka'wakw voices called into question Neel's Kwagiutl identity and status as a carver, citing his unorthodox mask vocabulary as evidence of his outsider status.<sup>11</sup> Other Kwakwaka'wakw engage in quieter acts of support, as exemplified by a 1990 ceremonial dancing of Neel's *Mask of the Mohawk Warrior*, and by Daisy Sewid-Smith and Martine J. Reid's display of his black-and-white *Portrait of Agnes Alfred* on the cover of their 2005 book *Paddling To Where I Stand: Agnes Alfred, Qwiquwasutinuxw Noblewoman*.<sup>12</sup> These differences of opinion may be motivated by Kwakwaka'wakw conventions of identity negotiation that can include overt contest, as exemplified by the historic practice of potlatch rivals cutting and displaying coppers in protest of others' claims to a specific right or identity. The debates are also informed by colonialism's unevenness and the political charge that can erupt as the experiences of different indigenous individuals or communities intersect, especially when facilitated by late twentieth-century technologies, creating a condition that artist, critic, and curator Gerald McMaster

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details about the repatriation of the Andre Breton mask to the U'mista Cultural Center, see Clifford Krauss, "Reclaiming Stolen Faces of Their Forefathers," *New York Times*, 18 September 2003, sec. A, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> "Another White Native Artist," letter to the editor, *Monday Magazine vol19 no 8*, Feb 18–24, 1993, p12.

<sup>12</sup> David Neel, "Modernism in Northwest Coast Art," in *David Neel: Living Traditions* (Kamloops: Art Gallery, 1998), 15-16; See the cover of Martine J. Reid and Daisy Sewid-Smith, *Paddling to Where I Stand: Agnes Alfred Noblewoman* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), cover. Daisy Sewid-Smith confirmed her selection of Neel's photograph for the cover of the book during a telephone conversation with myself, 27 April, 2006.

(Plains Cree) has described as “Reservation X.”<sup>13</sup> As we shall see in Chapter 4.0, such differences politicize Neel’s reception in indigenous circles.

### 1.1 SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF NEEL AND HIS ART

Scholarly interpretations have situated Neel’s work primarily within the discourses of Native American representation and Northwest Coast art, an interpretive tone that was set by anthropologist Marjorie Halpin’s essay “Afterword,” which appears in Neel’s 1992 book *Our Chief and Elders*. In keeping with period debates about photographic representations of Native Americans, Halpin juxtaposes Neel’s images with familiar images taken by Euro-American photographers, including the genres of the noble savage, the Vanishing Indian, before-and-after shots, and ethnographic images. Halpin rightly praises Neel for stepping outside of these codified conventions, and though Halpin acknowledges Neel’s training as a photojournalist and mentions his work in Texas and Mexico, she does not endeavour to connect his work to a broader array of photographic disciplines. Instead, she probes these projects for evidence of Neel’s Northwest Coast sensibilities prior to his return to British Columbia, by calling attention to his interest in rituals of death and family.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, anthropologist Allan Ryan’s 1999 book *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Native Contemporary Art* positions Neel’s landmark photomontage *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* within a First Nations aesthetic of humour, outside of European and North American artistic conventions. In one of the most extensive and lushly illustrated surveys of contemporary Native American art that also includes the work of artists such as Carl Beam, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Jane Ash Poitras, Edward Poitras, and Shelly Niro, Ryan configures Neel’s *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* as part of the canon of contemporary

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<sup>13</sup> Gerald McMaster, “Living on Reservation X,” in *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Art*, ed. Gerald McMaster (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998), 28. McMaster coins the expression “Reservation X” to describe the political tensions indigenous artists often face both from inside their communities and from cultural outsiders.

<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Halpin, afterword to David Neel, *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders* (Vancouver: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 183–189.

indigenous art in North America. Within the pages of *The Trickster Shift*, Ryan displays *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* along with numerous other First Nations' representations of the Mohawk standoff. In this respect, Ryan contextualizes Neel's art within the political struggles of indigenous people.<sup>15</sup>

Anthropologist Charlotte Townsend-Gault's 1998 encyclopedia entry places Neel within the Northwest Coast artistic arena. To these ends, she focuses on Neel's work after his return to British Columbia and calls particular attention to *Our Chiefs and Elders* and to Neel's series of contemporary-themed masks. Townsend-Gault's regional focus is underscored by the comparison she draws between Neel's carving skills and those of the most accomplished living Haida carver, Robert Davidson. She also calls attention to the fact that Neel has encountered some criticism in Northwest Coast indigenous circles, but she finds words of praise for his efforts to reconfigure public perceptions of First Nations people.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Townsend-Gault briefly acknowledges the divergent audiences with which Neel engages as well as the heterogeneity of his reception within them.

Northwest Coast curators also have their differences concerning how to situate Neel's work within the regional discourse. For example, in the Vancouver Art Gallery's 1995 exhibition *Down From the Shimmering Sky*, a major Northwest Coast mask exhibit, one of Neel's masks was to be hung in a space adjacent to the main exhibition galleries alongside several other unconventional pieces. Neel ended up removing the mask from the show in protest.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, The National Museum of the American Indian's (NMAI) *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life Along the North Pacific Coast*, which opened in January 2006, does not include any of Neel's art within its exhibition space. Nevertheless, Neel holds a noteworthy liminal place, for he is the sole artist to have an entire display case dedicated to his

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<sup>15</sup> Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 232–233.

<sup>16</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Neel, David" in *St. James Guide to North American Native Artists*, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 1998), 409–11.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Grenville, quoted in Layne Christensen, "Artist Charges Censorship," *North Shore News*, 15 June 1998, <http://www.nsnews.com/issues98/w061598/arts.html> (accessed 1 July 2002); David Neel, "Vancouver Art Gallery Censors Native Art," press release, 22 May 1998, photocopy, Vancouver Art Gallery Library, David Neel Clip File.

work in the NMAI's gift shop. Neel's marginal position in Washington D.C. contrasts with a newly acquired status at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) in Washington State. I was recently informed that the museum is currently redesigning its Charlie James exhibit and plans to incorporate Neel's *Chernobyl* mask into the James display case, a curatorial statement that positions Neel and his contemporary-themed masks solidly within the Northwest Coast canon.<sup>18</sup>

Responding to criticism of Neel arising from Northwest Coast circles, Kamloops Gallery curator Andrew Hunter in his 1998 *Living Traditions* catalogue essay endeavours to position Neel outside the usual parameters of Northwest Coast art, presenting him as an artist "living in two worlds" and as a "hybrid."<sup>19</sup> Hunter observes that Neel's contemporary-themed masks are not only indebted to his training as carver, but they are also informed by Neel's background in photojournalism. To illustrate this point, he calls attention to the fact that Neel's *Mask of Racism (Rodney King)* found its source partly in the amateur video of a police beating that was repeatedly aired on network news shows, and partly in Northwest Coast mask conventions. Hunter also draws connections between Neel's art and the hybrid work of other contemporary artists, specifically Vancouver-based Chinese artist Gu Xiong (b.1957) and Toronto artist Spring Hulbut (b.1952).<sup>20</sup> Despite Hunter's cross-cultural allusions, he considers neither how Neel's photography is inflected with Northwest Coast aesthetic concerns, nor how the criticisms some Kwakwaka'wakw have of Neel might be factored into his analysis.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara Brotherton, "Curatorial Question," e-mail to author, 2 March 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Hunter, "David Neel: Living Traditions" in *David Neel: Living Traditions* (Kamloops, BC, Canada: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1998), 3–4.

<sup>20</sup> Hunter 6.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Hunter, "David Neel: Living Traditions" in *David Neel: Living Traditions* (Kamloops, BC, Canada: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1998), 3–4.

## 1.2 METHODOLOGY

My study is a departure from those reviewed above, theorizing instead that Neel's art and the debates about the validity of his Kwagwiltl identity register the ebb and flow that connect the concepts of indigeneity and modernity inextricably. This study is specifically concerned with how acts of looking and issues of mobility are important variables that make up this shifting matrix. Unlike my predecessors, I pay particular attention to Neel's knowledge of the theories and practices of photojournalism, and most particularly, his interest in the tenets of "concerned photography," a practice of the post World War II era exemplified by the work of W. Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), which asserts that individuals have fundamental rights that transcend national, cultural, religious, and ideological boundaries—a concern for all of humanity that supersedes an alternative ideal of national fraternity codified by the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>22</sup> Because issues of visibility are a central focus of my project, I rely on the art historical methodology of visual analysis in conjunction with archival research and oral histories conducted over a period of about four years. To gain a greater sense of cultural context and to observe multiple modes of indigenous engagement with images, I have also performed intermittent fieldwork from Samish Territory, in Washington State, to the closed community of Kluckwan, in Alaska, work which took place over the course of four years beginning in the summer of 2000.

This project does not set out to cover all of Neel's art, which includes black-and-white photographs, carved masks, paintings, and jewelry. Instead, I have chosen to anchor my discussion on the pieces most associated with the formation of Neel's artistic identity, such as *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* (1990), *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* (ca. 1992), *Oil Spill Mask* (1989), and *The Mask of the Injustice System*. In order to map the development of his artistic program and its nuances, I compare the above-listed pieces to some of Neel's lesser-known work, specifically the *Neel Family Diptych*, and

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<sup>22</sup> See for example, Marjorie Halpin, afterword to David Neel, *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders* (Vancouver: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 184. Criticisms of Smith's and Cartier-Bresson's photography date back to Roland Barthes 1957 critique of *The Family of Man Exhibit*, "The Great Family of Man," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Wang and Hill, 1972), 100–2.

*Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway*. In addition, I analyze how Neel manipulates ready-made images and how he compares his work to that of his ancestors Charlie James and Ellen Neel, as well as to that of concerned photographers such as W. Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

This interdisciplinary methodology proved to be fruitful in revealing another important theme that percolates throughout Neel's aesthetic practice: an allegiance to people over nations. This is a worldview he often indicates with many allusions in his work to "The Four Sacred Directions" and "The Races Red, White, Black, and Yellow."<sup>23</sup> In an artist's statement intended to accompany *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, Neel explains this view in the description of a symbol situated at the four corners of the print. He writes:

The circle is the Circle of Life, the arrows [are the] The Four Directions, four being the number of balance and completeness. The red dots represent the blood of man...the red, the yellow, the black, and the white man. Jointly they remind us of the common bond of all men.<sup>24</sup>

Neel offers up the Four Directions as a cure for political and racial discord: both unity and negotiation among peoples is at the heart of Neel's work. Neel shares a goal of unity, and he often alludes to the work of concerned photographers W. Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson, which has often been criticized for its universalizing assumptions, yet Neel's art is infused with distinctive properties of localization. A linked concern for localization also infuses the ideals presented in contemporaneous debates about rights and justice that criticize the homogeneity of the mid-century attitude, and that argue for the recognition of cultural and political differences, as exemplified in 1994 Draft Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> David Neel, "Artist Statement: Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole," photocopy, "Life on the 18th Hole Preparation File," David Neel Studio, North Vancouver. Examples may be found in silkscreens such as *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* (1990), *Heroes #1—Sitting Bull* (1992), and *The Four Directions* (ca. 1991), as well as the painting *The Young Chief* (2002).

<sup>24</sup> Neel, "Artist Statement: Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole."

<sup>25</sup> For other models of localization see, Lucy R. Lippard in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New York Press, 1997), 7; Hal Foster, "Artist and Ethnographer" in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2001), 171–203; Miwon Kwan, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002). These authors argue for ideas about localization that focus on realizing connections to physical sites, but not on issues of The Sacred.

### 1.3 A NOTE ABOUT THE USE OF TERMINOLOGY

The term ‘indigenous peoples’ is itself an alternative designation that is reactive to, as opposed to being receptive of, the conceptual structures of the Enlightenment and the construction of a distinctly ‘modern’ identity. Writers such as literary scholar Chadwick Allen and Maori scholar and political activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith locate the origin of this expression with political organizations such as the American Indian Movement and Canadian Native Brotherhood. During the 1970s, these groups brought goals of self-determination around the globe to the international political venue of the United Nations, a forum outside the jurisdiction of any modern nation-state.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, ‘indigenous peoples’ resonates with goals of political emancipation and is often used in opposition to modes of identification, such as the expression ‘status Indian,’ that have been imposed by various forces of colonialism, including the legal and the academic.

As the terminal ‘s’ in ‘indigenous peoples’ suggests, the idiom registers the reality that colonialism has been radically uneven in application and that the effects of oppression continue to manifest themselves in many new ways, for colonialism is an incomplete project. The idea of indigenous peoples, then, consists of a set of concepts that takes into account and validates vastly different experiences of colonization that contain divisions such as urban and reserve, developing and first world nations, children raised by cultural insiders and those raised by cultural outsiders, and collective identities and the personal struggles of individuals. These differences can contribute to tensions among indigenous groups as well as raise questions of authenticity posed by cultural outsiders, as Tuhiwai Smith and others have pointed out. Thus, from a conceptual standpoint, ‘indigenous peoples’ is constantly shifting — moving in multiple and unexpected directions simultaneously.

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<sup>26</sup> Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narratives: Indigenous Identity in American Indian Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 7-8; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books), 6-7. For more on the plurality of contemporary indigenous North America, see, Jack Hitt, “The Newest Indians,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 21 2005.

The mobile quality of the indigenous peoples politicizes the relationships between the categories of modern and indigenous, shattering the dualist structure represented in the dichotomies of Enlightenment thinking. Configured as flowing relations, the terms of which are negotiated in various communities, the modern and the indigenous no longer seem entirely discrete. In an effort to reconfigure the relationship between another of the Enlightenment's classic dualist systems, the mind-body distinction, philosopher Elizabeth Grosz invokes the Möbius strip, a three-dimensional structure that, though apparently dual-sided, is in fact single-sided and single-edged.<sup>27</sup> Grosz deploys the model of the Möbius strip, a structure that is obtained by twisting a ribbon just one half-turn and then joining the two ends together, because she sees it as

quite suitable for a way of rethinking the relations between body and mind. Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of the mind into the body and body into the mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another.<sup>28</sup>

I see the idea of indigenous peoples as suggesting a similar sort of flux between the concepts of indigenous and modern: they are much closer in their connections and renegotiations than is suggested by the older binary model. In this regard, the categories of indigeneity and modernity affect each other, and yet they are not fully synthesized.

#### 1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation is composed of an introductory chapter (Chapter 1.0), the body of the work in four chapters, and a conclusion (Chapter 6.0). Each of the four central chapters probes different aspects of Neel's biography and artwork and delves into various ways that he responds to images in contemporary art, politics and culture. Together the chapters also reflect upon how his work is received differently by

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), xxii.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii.



the members of distinct audiences. The second and fifth chapters are designed to call attention to the assorted nature of visibility and Neel's efforts to engage with more than one mode. More particularly, these two chapters are designed to reveal opposing conceptions of visibility that inflect the Euro-American discourse of modernity—conceptions that on the one hand privilege visually-based knowledge systems and on the other hand regard images as simply deceptive constructions. The second chapter also situates Neel's childhood within the political history of indigenous families, noting his departure from British Columbia following the death of his father when Neel was less than two years old, and his very limited subsequent access to his Kwakwaka'wakw family, and to representations of that family. The chapter probes how this absence shapes Neel's response to representations of his family, specifically animated by the present, given to him by one of his aunts, of amateur historian Phil Nuytten's 1982 book *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, and Mungo Martin*. Nuytten's book, filled with photographs and stories of Neel's carving family, locates in that nexus a number of the Northwest Coast carvings that were also displayed in the Museum of Modern Art's traveling exhibition '*Primitivism*' in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, launched in 1984.

Chapters Three, Four and Five focus on Neel's practice of art making after he returned to British Columbia, considering his photographs, contemporary-themed masks, and silkscreen prints, respectively, and each is discussed in conjunction with theses relevant to different aesthetic and political discussions. Chapter 3.0 considers how Neel uses photography's reproductive capabilities and also his knowledge of the press to help reconstruct a mass media vision of indigenous identity, exploring the impact of the history of colonialism on indigenous relationships to the land, and articulating a sense of ancestral embodiment in the medium of photography. This chapter explores Neel's *Self-Portrait with Charlie James Swanson* in conjunction with contrasting legal narratives and popular images that present British Columbia as an unoccupied land. Chapter 4.0 deploys environmental debates to situate Northwest Coast concerns within a web of global relations. In addition, McMaster's notion of "Reservation X" plays a role, supporting a discussion of the political history of Kwakwaka'wakw masks, and of Neel's belated connection to Kwakwaka'wakw carving circles, his contested reception, and the construction of his own

artistic identity inside and outside the indigenous world. Chapter 5.0 is centered on Neel's use of photomontage as a means of subverting Euro-Centric ideas about truth and authority, and specifically those that infuse the discourses of photography and the tenets of "modern" jurisprudence. The chapter examines how Neel reasserts indigenous constructions of truth and justice by using the tools of display, montage, and ridicule.

## 2.0 'PRIMITIVISM' IN 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ART AND FAMILY NARRATIVE

The prevailing viewpoint is made all too clear in one of the 'affinities' featured on the catalogue covers, a juxtaposition of Picasso's *Girl before A Mirror...* with a Kwakiutl half-mask, a type quite rare among Northwest coast creations. Its task here is simply to produce an effect of resemblance (an effect actually created by the camera angle). In this exhibition a universal message, 'Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,' is produced by careful selection and maintenance of a specific angle of vision.<sup>1</sup>

James Clifford

A 100-year-old legacy of curatorial colonialism has produced profound disorganizations of unique knowledge systems...The subjugation of indigenous peoples under colonialism results in innumerable forms of oppression from which the arts are not immune. A focus on institutions and patrons of the arts (academics being defined as one type of patron or consumer of native arts) cannot significantly enhance a reading of indigenous aesthetic or world worldviews. By shifting the locus of the analysis from the psychology of the oppressor to the experiences of the oppressed, a discursive space is made available in which new paradigms of knowledge may become accessible.<sup>2</sup>

Nancy Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache)

Your questions have brought back memories of the time. I definitely recall the book about my family, *The Totem Carvers*, and that show [*'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*] and its catalogue being major catalysts in my need to return to BC [British Columbia] and take up the art. The catalogue for that show has a Kwakiutl mask on the cover, along with a painting by Picasso, my favorite painter even then. There was a Charlie James piece in the show too. Those were pivotal in my beginning to comprehend the influence my artistic heritage was to play in my life.<sup>3</sup>

David Neel (Kwakiutl)

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<sup>1</sup> James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America*, April 1985, 166, 171. (Hereafter cited as "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *AIA*).

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Marie Mithlo, "We Have All Been Colonized—Subordination and Resistance on a Global Arts Stage," *Visual Anthropology* 17 (July–December 2004): 230.

<sup>3</sup> David Neel, interview by author, text record, 28 September 2002. My question was prompted by the catalogue's presence in a small case of reference books that I observed during my studio visits in the summer of 2002.

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1985, a twenty-five-year-old professional photographer, David Neel, walked through the doors of the Dallas Museum of Fine Art and into the traveling exhibition, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.<sup>4</sup> Initiated by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York City, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* made visual an historical narrative of European and Euro-American interest in “non-Western art” by juxtaposing the art of Euro-American Modernists with cultural objects from around the world.<sup>5</sup> Two months after the exhibition’s New York debut in September 1984, a now infamous debate erupted over the exhibition’s Eurocentric underpinnings. In April, 1985, just one month before the exhibition opened in Dallas, *Art in America* published anthropologist James Clifford’s essay, “Histories of the Tribal and Modern,” which charges the exhibition’s curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnendoe with creating a “modernist family of art,” “decontextualizing cultural objects” and “reproducing colonial” assumptions.<sup>6</sup> Clifford connects his critique to the discourses of identity politics and difference that raged during 1980s, and as Clifford predicts, the exhibition has become important within the discourses of modern art history because of the debates that ensued.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard E. Oldenberg, William Rubin, and Kirk Varnendoe, eds., *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> The exhibition dates for *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art, 27 September 1984–15 January 1985; at the Detroit Institute of Arts, 27 February 1984–19 May 1985; and at The Dallas Museum of Fine Art 23 June–1 September 1985. See Thomas McEvelly, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art,” *Artforum International* 23 (November 1984): 54–60.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *AIA*, 166, 171, 215. See also an expanded version of Clifford’s argument in “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 189–214. (Hereafter cited as “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *POC*.)

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*; Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “Kwakiutl Ready-Mades?” *Vanguard* 17 (November 1999): 28–33; Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); M. M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992); Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 171–204; George E. Marcus and Fred

In his exhibition review, Clifford also calls explicit attention to a pair of photographs that appear on the cover of the accompanying exhibition catalogue. One photograph depicts what Clifford refers to as a “Kwakiutl half-mask.” The other is a close-up shot of a carefully selected section of Pablo Picasso’s oil-on-canvas painting, *Girl Before A Mirror* (1932). As Clifford points out, the juxtaposition is problematic because it highlights what he says is a superficial set of “affinities” predicated on the objects’ visual properties alone. Clifford uses the comparison to showcase the shortcomings of formalism, and specifically its tendency to physically and theoretically abstract objects from their cultural contexts: it is a curatorial practice, he argues, that is in itself a perpetuation of colonialism—a strategy of suppression.

Clifford’s essay was geared towards a specific demographic group. His exhibition review first appeared in *Art in America*, a glossy journal that in the mid 1980s was routinely filled with essays about Euro-American artistic conventions, and with an array of slick advertisements that targeted collectors; a journal that, unlike *Ethnohistory* or *American Indian Art*, was important enough to MoMA that the museum officials paid attention. That Clifford’s essay was designed for a very specific—in fact localized—discursive arena is further underscored by the fact that he had to point out that many of the included artifacts were in museum collections as a consequence of routine confiscation by colonial authorities. Unlike most Euro-Americans, many indigenous people were probably quite aware of this state of affairs.<sup>8</sup> The limits of Clifford’s discursive arena are revealed by the fact that his critique of ‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art and the subsequent debates are not an overt part of the discussion of Northwest Coast art history.

When Neel walked into ‘Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art’ he carried knowledge quite apart from that of Clifford’s target audience, as I will show in this chapter. Neel was born into one of the most

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R. Myers, eds., *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002). In addition, the institutional critique of artists such as Fred Wilson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Renee Green come to mind as another measure of the exhibition’s impact. The controversy may have spurred the work of indigenous curators, for example Gerald McMaster, Nancy Marie Mithlo, and other members of the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (formerly known as the Native American Arts Alliance).

<sup>8</sup> U’mista Cultural Centre, “Potlatch Collection,” <http://www.umista.org/potlatch/potlatch.asp> (accessed 22 March 2002, link now defunct).

eminent families of Kwagiutl carvers, which includes Charlie James (c. 1867-1938), Mungo Martin (c.1881-1962), and Ellen Neel (1916-1966), whose works are held in high esteem throughout the Pacific Northwest. James, Martin, and Neel are also known for resisting the prohibition of the potlatch, the internment of potlatchers, and the laws against carving: they are famous for resisting the oppression of Kwakwaka'wakw people, in general. In this respect, James's, Neel's, and Martin's art can be seen as an act of resistance against the policies of a nation-state — in this instance the Dominion of Canada — much like the resistance of Pablo Picasso against Fascist Spain and the Surrealists against Nazi Germany, respectively. Neel's experience of *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* was enriched by bits and pieces of family lore that he had gleaned from a few photographs, stories, and works of art to which he had access as a child. That piecemeal narrative was also greatly enhanced by his contact with an array of family photographs that appeared in *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, and Mungo Martin* (1982), a book by Phil Nuytten, an amateur historian and former student of Ellen Neel's, just three years before *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* opened in Dallas.<sup>9</sup>

Neel's encounter with *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art*, then, was one in a series of events that enabled him to write himself into the narrative of a family from whom he had been separated since his early childhood.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Neel, much like Clifford, was responding to the utterly shattered state of the contemporary indigenous world that includes the dislocation of objects; the loss of land and languages; the criminalization of religion; and the then routine separation of children from indigenous family members.<sup>11</sup> Because Neel spent much of his childhood at a distance from his father's family, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art*, despite the shortcomings of its formalist approach, helped enable

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<sup>9</sup> Phil Nuytten, *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, and Mungo Martin* (Vancouver: Panorama Publications, 1982), 13, 43, 75.

<sup>10</sup> David Neel, introduction to *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders* (Vancouver: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 28; see also Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 40–43, 236–254.

David Neel—against the odds—to recognize, validate, and shape his indigenous persona, and specifically his identity as a Kwagiutl carver. The exhibition was extremely important to Neel after his return to British Columbia in the late 1980s. Neel would cite, reinterpret, commemorate, and critique it in the photographs, carved masks, silk-screens, and essays that he created throughout the 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter, I situate *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* within the family narrative that Neel was assembling and editing as he gathered information about his family—about his own identity. As Neel's epigraph to this chapter suggests, his response was forged not only by his visit to the exhibition, but also by the photographs that appear in the accompanying catalogue, which he has studied over the years. But *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* took on significance for Neel in conjunction with family narratives as exemplified by Nuytten's, *The Totem Carvers*. For, together the book and exhibition catalogue connect his family to two discourses of art, one of which explicitly invokes family identity in the hereditary carving rights of the Kwakwaka'wakw.<sup>13</sup> The importance of family history, obscured in *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* but manifest in *The Totem Carvers*, is perhaps a reason that family, lineage, and affiliation are of such importance in Neel's art of the late 1980s and upon his return to the Northwest Coast. Neel's focus on portraiture at these junctures, and on portraiture that stresses family lineage, will culminate in the *Neel Family Diptych* (ca.1992), which I consider in the following chapter.

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<sup>12</sup> Neel was not the only one who was set in motion by the photographs on the catalogue cover. By 1988, James Clifford had also traveled to British Columbia to study the ways in which objects are displayed at the Kwakwaka'wakw institutions such as Museum and Cultural Center at Cape Mudge and the U'mista Cultural Centre located at Alert Bay. For more details about Clifford's journey through British Columbia, see James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 215–251 and "Four Northwest Coast Museums," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 212–254.

<sup>13</sup> Bill McLennan and Karen Duffek, *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 206–208.

## 2.2 'PRIMITIVISM' IN 20TH CENTURY ART AND THE FRAGMENTS OF COLONIALISM

The exhibition catalogue that accompanied *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* exemplifies and contributes to the utter disarray of contemporary indigenous experiences. The catalogue cover, as Clifford quite rightly points out, consists of a carefully choreographed comparison between a swatch of Picasso's *Girl Before the Mirror* and a Kwakwaka'wakw mask in its entirety. Indeed, it emphasizes similarities of form and color as it obscures enormous cultural and historical differences, which led the artist Andy Warhol to characterize the theme of the show as "what had been taken from what."<sup>14</sup> Within the exhibition catalogue, *Girl Before the Mirror* is contextualized by a narrative about Picasso's interest in nonwestern objects, photographs of his studio and artwork, and the date of the painting's fabrication—a narrative that is supplemented by a rather enormous body of literature on the art and life of Pablo Picasso known, at least in part, to some of the exhibit's viewers.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the mask is presented as an anonymous nineteenth century "Kwakiutl" creation and is woven into a chapter about Picasso with only a fleeting connection that links it to Northwest Coast conventions of cosmology; consequently the history and the meaning of Northwest Coast masks go otherwise unmentioned.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, the small portion of the Picasso painting stands for a more fleshed out and readily accessible history, while the mask alone indexes MoMA's superficial account and highlights and exacerbates the perforated structure of indigenous histories, cultures, and identities.

Clifford also observes that the history of colonialism was absent from MoMA's historical explanation. The manifestations of British Imperialism in its daughter nation, the Dominion of Canada, have a particularly notorious reputation *vis-à-vis* Kwakwaka'wakw masks. From 1884 to 1951, the Indian Act, the main body of legislation governing Canada's indigenous population, rendered the indigenous

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<sup>14</sup> Andy Warhol, *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. Pat Hackett (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 601.

<sup>15</sup> William Rubin, "Picasso," in *"Primitivism" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, eds. Richard E. Oldenberg, William Rubin, and Kirk Varnendoe, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 241–334.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 238–23, 9.



practice of feasting, or “potlatching,” illegal. During the following sixty-seven years the potlatch prohibition was modified several times to include prison sentences for violations, including the possession of masks. Nonetheless, the Kwakwaka’wakw practices of potlatching and carving continued. Forty-five people were arrested after the Cranmer potlatch of 1921, twenty served prison sentences, and many of the confiscated masks and much other feast hardware ended up in museums around the globe.<sup>17</sup> Neel’s uncle, Mungo Martin, is often credited with holding the first legal potlatch, in 1953, after the prohibition was quietly erased from the Indian Act.<sup>18</sup>

The mask that appears on the catalogue cover is a *Ridicule Mask* with ties to historic conventions of feasting. As art historian Aldona Jonaitis points out in her 1991 essay “Chiefly Feasts: The Creation of an Exhibition,” the consumption of food was a forum in which identity was articulated through seating order and crest display. She goes on to note that Kwakwaka’wakw construction of identity was not formulated in a single event, but rather, through the display of crests over the years and across generations. As a consequence, she notes that objects embellished with crests were often preserved as heirlooms.<sup>19</sup> Although Jonaitis’s discussion is focused on crest-emblazoned dinnerware, crest display can also be expressed in other media such as the dancing of heirloom masks. But ridicule masks, such as the one that appears on the cover of the *‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* catalogue, are associated with the grease feast, a potlatch held to settle rivalries between chiefs from various communities. On such occasions, chiefs gathered around the fire telling stories of their wealth, such as their village’s beautiful women or plentiful salmon runs. The *Ridicule Mask* refers specifically to one chief’s display of wealth, represented in the act of pouring copious amounts of oulachen (smelt) oil, a precious commodity, onto the

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<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed political history of the potlatch, see Aldona Jonaitis, ed., *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch* (Huntington, NY: American Museum of Natural History; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), especially page 11; see also Daisy Sewid-Smith, *Prosecution or Persecution* (Cape Mudge, BC, Canada: Nu-Yum Baleess Society, 1979), and U’mista Cultural Society, *Potlatch: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*, dir. Dennis Wheeler, 53 min., Vancouver: Canadian Filmmakers, 1975, video recording.

<sup>18</sup> Nuytten, *Totem Carvers*, 90–101.

<sup>19</sup> Jonaitis, *Chiefly Feasts*, 25.

fire, causing it to rapidly combust.<sup>20</sup> In some accounts, this arrogant display burns half of the oil-pouring chief's visage. In others, the burned face signifies the unflinching nobility of the *witnessing* chiefs, who neither react to their colleague's pyrotechnical display, nor to the flying sparks that singe their own eyelashes and skin. In contrast to a feast focused on identity assertion, the purpose of a grease feast was to make a statement of ridicule.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in contrast to crest-bearing objects, which are often safeguarded for future displays, there would be less reason to preserve the paraphernalia associated with grease feasts, which is perhaps why James Clifford characterized the genre of the *Ridicule Mask*, which he referred to as a "half-mask," as a "rare" entity.<sup>22</sup>

MoMA curators treated most of the "tribal" objects that appear in the catalogue in a similarly cavalier fashion. The majority of these objects are identified by their culture of origin, few are dated, and rarely is the patron, clan, or maker identified. One of the more detailed accounts concerns the memorial pole raised in honor of Mungo Martin.<sup>23</sup> In this instance, the catalogue notes the carvers, Tony and Henry Hunt, as well as the fact that the pole is located in the Alert Bay cemetery. There is, however, no indication that the pole was carved in 1970, nor is there any detailed biographical information about Mungo Martin, the Hunts, or the crests that appear on the pole. Instead, the Mungo Martin pole is situated in a narrative about Max Ernst's avian sculptures and alongside an undated 'Tlingit pole from Saxman

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<sup>20</sup> For a more extensive description of the Grease Feast, see Irving Goldman, *The Mouth of Heaven: An Introduction to Kwakiutl Religious Thought* (1975; reprint, Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1981), 158–163; see also Franz Boas, *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*, United States National Museum Report for 1895, 355. See Aldona Joantis's description in her essay "Chiefly Feasts: The Creation of an Exhibition," in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (New York: American Museum of Natural History; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Goldman, *Mouth of Heaven*, 158–163, and for an easily accessible description of Ridicule masks see Coghlant Art Studio and Gallery, "Ridicule Mask," <http://www.coghlantart.com/ridicule.htm> (accessed 28 March 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *AIA*, 166.

Although Clifford does not differentiate between old and newly created ridicule masks, David Neel has mentioned on several occasions that when he began carving in the late 1980s, the ridicule masks were popular with carvers producing masks to sell to cultural outsiders, for it only requires carving half a mask. With Neel's remarks in mind, it would appear that only historic ridicule masks are rare entities.

<sup>23</sup> Oldenberg, Rubin, and Varnendoe, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art*, 573.

Village, in Alaska.<sup>24</sup> With differences of style and period obscured, the *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* catalogue emphatically reasserts the trope of the tribal as timeless, and was primarily designed to highlight the works of canonical Euro-American artists.

### 2.3 COMPLEMENTARY TEXTS: *'PRIMITIVISM' IN 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ART* *AND THE TOTEM CARVERS*

Unlike the members of Clifford's imagined audience, who may not have otherwise realized that MoMA's narrative was patchy at best, Neel's experience of *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* was primarily enriched by Phil Nuytten's book *The Totem Carvers*, which one of Neel's aunts had mailed to him a year or two earlier.<sup>25</sup> By comparing the *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* catalogue with Nuytten's book, it becomes very clear that MoMA officials happened to have selected a very important work when they chose Martin's memorial pole to juxtapose with Ernst's *Spirit of Bastille*, important for reasons other than the Surrealist's interest in Northwest Coast art. In fact, ten pages of Nuytten's one-hundred-and-thirty-two-page book are dedicated to the Martin memorial, and no other single object in *The Totem Carvers* receives more than a two-page spread.<sup>26</sup> Nuytten's historical account reveals that Martin's memorial pole was raised in 1970, about twenty years after the legal prohibition against the potlatch ended; the Martin pole was the first pole to be planted in Alert Bay in more than forty years.<sup>27</sup> In much the same fashion as MoMA calls attention to the Euro-American artist's work with photographs of their studios and portraits of them at work, Nuytten underscores the importance of the memorial pole by including photographs of Henry and Tony Hunt carving it, close-up shots of the four displayed crests, the pole raising ceremony,

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<sup>24</sup> Many of the poles at Saxman village were carved or "restored" as a part of the United States government's 1930s Works Project Association mission. For more details regarding the Saxman Pole see Aldona Jonaitis, "Totem Poles and the Indian New Deal," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 9 (1989): 237–251.

<sup>25</sup> David Neel, interview by author, tape-recorded telephone interview, 27 June 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Nuytten, *Totem Carvers*, 20–21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

and contextualizing shots of the pole's position *in situ* in the Alert Bay cemetery surrounded by an array of memorial and telephone poles. In addition, Nuytten makes references to the feast and songs, and speeches by chiefs Jimmy Sewid, Jim King, Tommy Hunt, and Peter Smith that identify the pole's four crests (Kulus, 'Tsekame, Gwai'wina, and Dzunukwa) and validate Martin's rights to display them.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Nuytten's text suggests that the Martin memorial pole accrues meaning through touch, taste, sound, and sight, and through culture and connection with the land—not through form alone.

With photographs and text, *The Totem Carvers* chronicles over fifty years of Neel family carving practices, and specifically the lives and work of David Neel's grandmother, Ellen Neel, her uncle, Mungo Martin, and her grandfather, Charlie James. In contrast to the static image of Kwagiutl culture presented by MoMA curators, Nuytten pieces together a picture of a Kwagiutl family engaged with ceremonial life in the Kwakwaka'wakw villages of Alert Bay and Fort Rupert, while simultaneously in touch with contemporary technologies, and connected to the world at large. Charlie James is characterized as a prolific carver, a movie buff, and a frequent traveler between Alert Bay and Vancouver; Ellen Neel is presented as a mother, a Vancouver politician, and a carver with an interest in the art of Pablo Picasso; and Mungo Martin appears as the carver and restorer of poles, a Kwagiutl nobleman, and a diplomat who travelled to London to present a pole to Elizabeth II, the ruling monarch of the entire British Empire including the Dominion of Canada.<sup>29</sup>

*The Totem Carvers* reveals that acts of copying connected generations of this carving family. In a discussion with Phil Nuytten, Ellen Neel recalls training by her grandfather in her description of her painting of Thunder-bird-under-the-sea:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 15, 30–36, 47–51, 104–106.

[My grandfather] used to draw out a drawing and then make me copy it over and over. When my lines wavered, he would draw over them. He said I had to learn to do it his way. Sometimes I would cry. There was so much to learn. These drawings here—they were made when I was only ten or eleven years old—most are my grandfather’s but some are mine. This one is the Thunderbird-under-the-sea...he has something like scales on...you can see my lines underneath and then where he went over top to show me the right way. He had dozens of variations of the thunderbird and he called each one differently according to the pattern of the painting and carving.<sup>30</sup>

James’ insistence that his granddaughter so closely emulate his art provides an important clue: copying is not just a way of learning, but it is also a central tenet of Northwest Coast aesthetics and family identity.

The reproduction of a predecessor’s calligraphic lines, often referred to as “formlines,” activates connections with and expresses an allegiance to family.<sup>31</sup> Copying is a way of honoring The Ancestors, as we shall see in this chapter and delve into more deeply in the subsequent chapter.

When David Neel walked into *‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art*, he also knew something about his family’s history of political resistance. Nuytten’s book follows the family’s migration from the Kwakwaka’wakw village of Alert Bay to the cities of Victoria and Vancouver during the 1940s. In these urban locales, David Neel’s predecessors eked out a living in conjunction with British Columbia’s tourist economy, but James, Neel, and Martin also engineered several ways to preserve the art of carving at a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>31</sup> The term “formline” is one of several expressions introduced into the vocabulary of Northwest Coast art scholarship by Bill Holm in his highly influential text *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965). Holm defines a formline as,

the characteristic swelling and diminishing linelike figure delineating design units. These formlines merge and divide to make a continuous flowing grid over the whole decorated area, establishing the principal [design units, or] forms of the design.”(See Holm, 29).

In the introduction to *Northwest Coast Indian Art*, Holm situates his formal study within the interpretive history of Northwest Coast art, which he contends had been narrowly focused on symbolism, and goes on to link his project to the interest in form voiced by anthropologist Franz Boas. In addition to symbolism, form was an essential component of art as expressed in Boas’s 1927 book *Primitive Art*. (See Holm, 8-9). Thus, Holm sees his form-focused project as balancing Northwest Coast art history that was advocated by Boas almost forty years earlier.

In contrast with Holm’s singular use of the term “form,” Franz Boas in *Primitive Art* (1927, reprint, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York: Capitol Publishing, 1951), summarizes theories of art as they relate to ideas about form asserted by prominent art historians and philosophers, including those of Gustav Theodore Fechner, Wilhelm Wundt, Max Verworn, Richard Thurnwald, Yrjö Hirn, Ernst Grosse, Emil Stephan, Alfred C. Haddon, Gottfried Semper, Alois Riegl, and Alfred Veirkandt (11-16). Boas aligns his conception of art most closely with Fechner’s, and specifically with his conception of form as autonomous from meaning. Yet, Boas does not see form as a universal construction. In this sense, Boas’s conception differs from that deployed by the curators of MoMA’s *‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*.

time when it was illegal for a Kwagiutl person to carve, through the creation of miniature tourist collectibles and the restoration of old poles for museums and tourist attractions in these two cities. Although urban migration may appear to have been a capitulation to the insurmountable forces of assimilation for the Neel family, Victoria and Vancouver were actually venues where they could publicly chip away at the most ominous manifestations of cultural coercion —the criminalization of the potlatch. Thus, through *The Totem Carvers*, David Neel knew his ancestors as political agents, who, much like the Euro-American artists such as Max Ernst and Pablo Picasso featured in ‘*Primitivism*’ in *20th Century Art*, responded to contemporary political concerns.

Change is also indexed by the vast collection of photographs that Nuytten includes in his book. *The Totem Carvers* is filled with a wide variety of photographs, including family snapshots, portraits depicting Ellen Neel and Mungo Martin, and stills from Edward S. Curtis’s film *The Land of the War Canoes* (1914), which was produced with the aid of Kwakwaka’wakw carvers and actors.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the book includes press photographs of family members at work carving, amateur photographs of the family potlatching, still lives of carvings and maquettes, and landscape photographs of Alert Bay. Although carvings of various sorts appear in most of the photographs, they are displayed alongside family members clad in Western-style clothing, not regalia, which, in itself, disrupts the sense of timelessness suggested by the MoMA exhibit and catalogue.<sup>33</sup> This disruption is amplified by the fact that in the earliest photographs, female family members appear in long skirts and shawls, but in the photographs of the 1940s, Ellen Neel and her daughters, in keeping with period fashion trends are dressed in more tailored attire.

The promotional images of the 40s and 50s depicting Ellen Neel, her young family, and their trade ware are especially subversive constructions of the Neel family’s identity. In the eyes of Canadian

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<sup>32</sup> Nuytten, *Totem Carvers*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret B. Blackman, “‘Copying People’: Northwest Coast Native Response to Early Photography,” *BC Studies* (Winter 1981–82): 107–110.

law, she and her children would have lost their Indian status due to her marriage to Ted Neel, a man of Irish-American heritage.<sup>34</sup> Publicity shots of Ellen Neel taken by the *Victoria Times Colonist* photographer Jim Ryan, opened up a space in which she publicly reasserted a Kwagiutl identity, however. For example, Ryan's photograph, *Neel Totem* (1959), depicts Ellen and Ted Neel along with five of their children standing on a ladder to form a human totem pole.<sup>35</sup> Ellen Neel, clad in a button-embellished velvet jacket and holding a small Thunderbird pole, stands on the highest rung, followed by Ted, and their sons and daughters, all of whom also hold masks or miniature poles. As a depiction of a smiling mom, dad and their kids, the *Neel Totem* conforms to popular culture representations of the patriarchal post-war nuclear family. But the *Neel Totem* notably also recalls a historic Northwest Coast convention of family photography described by anthropologist Margaret Blackman in her 1982 essay, *Copying People*.<sup>36</sup> Blackman observes that in earliest practices of Northwest Coast portrait photography, the sitter usually wears Western attire and displays some sort of crest as a means of connecting identity to the family and to the land. With Blackman's thoughts in mind, the *Neel Totem* sends a clear message about the family's collective identity and its connection to the land, despite the family's physical distance from Kwakwaka'wakw territories. Moreover, Ellen Neel's position atop the *Neel Totem* makes a claim that her family's Kwagiutl identity flows from her.<sup>37</sup>

Although *The Totem Carvers* was not published until the early 1980s, when David Neel was already in his twenties, it was one of his earliest and certainly one of the most extensive representations of

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<sup>34</sup> Department of Indian Affairs (Canada), "Bill C-31." [http://www.johnco.com/native1/bill\\_c31.html](http://www.johnco.com/native1/bill_c31.html) (accessed 14 March 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Nuytten, *Totem Carvers*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> Although Blackman does not make specific reference to the land, she observes how photographs produced for indigenous use often incorporate crests as a mode of completing their identity.

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed explanation on how Kwagiutl property and identity is transferred see Wayne Suttles, "Streams of Property, Armor of Wealth: The Traditional Kwakiutl Potlatch," in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (New York: American Museum of Natural History; Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1991), 71–94. See also *Goldman's Mouth of Heaven*, 35–45.

his Kwagiutl family he had seen up until that point. Photographs such as the *Neel Totem* presented Neel with a picture of a playful and happy family with which he had had little contact. Their smiling faces and outward looking eyes are inviting images, designed to promote the family and Ellen Neel's line of commercial carvings to would-be buyers of the 1950s. Some thirty years later, in the early 1980s, the warmth of these images opened up a space in which David Neel could imagine himself as part of his father's family, and, as his epigraph to this chapter suggests, induced him to return home from Dallas, Texas. In addition, as a professionally trained photojournalist, Neel probably would have appreciated his grandmother's use of the press as a space where she performed her identity for indigenous and other viewers.<sup>38</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, David Neel similarly relied on the press after he returned to British Columbia.

Read together, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* and *The Totem Carvers* broaden our understanding of the connections between Kwakwaka'wakw carving and Euro-American modernism and provide useful insight into Neel's reaction to the exhibition. Neel's response is importantly different from Clifford's critique, because Neel's was shaped by questions about his own identity and his relationship to his father's family. I contend that to Neel's eyes the catalogue and the book function as family albums, of sorts—albums that afforded him a belated first view of his Kwagiutl family. But as I shall show in the following section, Neel's reception of the book and exhibition catalogue was also tied into his simultaneous professional investigations into the genre of family photography. Thus, I now turn to Neel's praxis of photography in the 1980s, which explores the various roles that photography itself plays in the shaping of family identity.

#### **2.4 DAVID NEEL AND THE DISCOURSES OF FAMILY AND PHOTOGRAPHY**

In the mid 1980s, Neel had a professional interest in family photographs. Anthropologist Marjorie Halpin in her "Afterword" to Neel's 1992 book, *Our Chiefs and Elders*, describes one of Neel's earliest photo-

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<sup>38</sup> Neel has subsequently corroborated this observation when he read an earlier draft of this chapter.



essays of Mexican cemeteries (ca. 1982), and emphasizes the parallels that Neel then saw between Kwakwaka'wakw and Mexican celebrations of death and family.<sup>39</sup> Neel clearly continued his exploration of family photography in his *Portrait of Mrs. Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* (ca.1985)—one of a series of black-and-white photographs that he made of Dallas's Freedman's Town and State-Thomas neighborhoods.<sup>40</sup> Neel's photograph depicts Lily-Bee, a fifty-year resident of the African American neighborhood, and her daughter, Mertel, who has traveled "from Washington State to care for her mother who has developed a heart condition."<sup>41</sup> Mother and daughter sit in the front room of Lily-Bee's small house—her home of thirty-seven years—with Lily-Bee in the foreground, Mertel in the middle ground, and a box of cornflakes in the background.<sup>42</sup> Neel's photograph not only depicts a family reunion, but also calls attention to Lily-Bee's collection of family photographs. Between the two women is an end table that holds a Kleenex box, a bottle of hand lotion, a manicure set, and a portrait photograph. A television set and family shrine built from an organic assemblage of family photographs, a clock, and greeting cards sit across the room. Neel presents Lily-Bee's home as a sensuous space filled with the experiences of sound, sight, smell, touch, and taste—a space where people dwell.

Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* connects him with a generation of photographers who freely mix documentary photography with other media or strategies of art photography. In terms of composition, Neel's black-and-white photograph warmly recalls the documentary style of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), one of three photographers that Neel routinely

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<sup>39</sup> Halpin, afterword, 184. Neel's photographs of Mexico were unfortunately inaccessible during my studio visits during the summers of 2001 and 2002; however, judging from Neel's later photographic projects it is possible that the shrines caught Neel's attention because they integrated family photographs, Christian themes, and consumer products. For expressions of family identity with respect to Mexican shrines, see Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: Art And Meaning in Women's Shrines* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Denise M. Ford, "Deep Ellum" (master's thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1982), 1.

<sup>41</sup> David Neel, Freedman's Town/State-Thomas File, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

credits with having shaped his own practice of photography.<sup>43</sup> Cartier-Bresson's mid-century portraits often depict people in various locales with their collections of paintings, family photographs, and jewelry—expressions of personal identity—as does Neel's portrait of the Holloways. In 1986, Neel exhibited his *Freedman's Town/State-Thomas* series in the lobby of Dallas's LTV Center, where he contextualized his photographs with panels of descriptive text. Some of the panels merely provided an address or the name of an area resident, others recounted histories of local landmarks, or traced brief biographies of Freedman's Town and State-Thomas citizens, and still others quoted the words of area residents. In this regard, Neel's exhibition strategy shares much with other photographers of the period, as exemplified by Carrie Mae Weems' *Family Pictures and Stories* (1982-84), a series of black-and-white photographs in which she mixes casual compositions, captions, and stories recorded on audio-tapes.

Neel also added dabs of orange, blue, and yellow paint to the black-and-white photograph. Writing with respect to the work of photographers and artists such as Oscar Rejlander (1813-75), Andy Warhol (1928-87), and Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), scholars have explained similar acts of intervention to test the parameters of art, challenge the notion of artistic identity, or suggest the fluidity of vision, respectively.<sup>44</sup> But I think Neel's application of colour to Lily-Bee's skirt, to the cornflake box, and to some of the embedded family photographs alludes to a multi-sensory aesthetic experience of Lily-Bee's home; an experience that does not elude the photographic image. As Neel's photograph reveals, Lily-Bee has carefully tucked some of her photographs in the doorframe, pinned or taped others to the wall, and slipped one or two of her family photographs into frames. As we shall see later on in this chapter, the sense of touch not only plays an important role in Neel's own experiences of familial representations, but

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<sup>43</sup> Neel, *Our Chiefs and Elders*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> See for example, Stephanie Spencer, "O.G. Rejlander: Art Studies," in *British Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Mike Weaver (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 121–123; Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1192–204; Gerhard Richter, "Notes, 1964-1965," and "Interview with Peter Sager," in *Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, trans. David Britt (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1998), 35–37, and 66–68.

it is also important to his own practice of photography, as I will demonstrate with respect to the series *Our Chiefs and Elders*, in Chapter 3.0.

Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* explores photography's role in the construction of family identity, as elucidated by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1965 book, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. Bourdieu writes about the relationship between the popularization of photography and the construction of family identity among the French middle-class during the 1960s, creating an interplay that he argues was informed by both demographic and economic changes. Bourdieu goes on to argue that it was a demographic trend that provoked a geographic separation—fragmentation—of the extended family.<sup>45</sup> With these shifts, Bourdieu observes corresponding changes in the practice of family photography as well; cameras have become more readily available, and photographs of family members are mailed to geographically distant siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, Bourdieu argues that such conventions of circulating family photographs have played an integral role in reaffirming a sense of domestic cohesion, which he refers to as photography's "family function."<sup>47</sup> As evidence of this, Bourdieu points out that the trade in family photographs is usually limited to members of the depicted family.<sup>48</sup> The resultant collections not only map a network of kinship, but also aid in recounting family histories that teach newly acquired relatives, such as children and spouses, about the family. Bourdieu postulates that it is the way family photographs are used rather than their visual properties that strengthens a sense of kinship and brings new members into the fold. Thus, in this era of fragmented families, he sees the process of circulating photographs as an instrument of familial

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<sup>45</sup> Pierre Bourdieu with Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Dominique Schnapper, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. Sharon Whiteside (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 25, 28–9, 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

cohesion that gradually replaces older, now eroding, emblems of family identity such as ancestral houses and family jewels.<sup>49</sup>

Bourdieu's family function is suggested in Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway*. Lily-Bee's assemblage of greeting cards and photographs situates her in a complex network of friends and relatives, whose relationships are renewed through the exchange and display of pictures and well-wishing cards. That some of these images were sent by far-flung family members is suggested by the fact that Lily-Bee's daughter, Mertel, is paying a visit from Washington State. Neel used a methodology that fed into the family function as well: he began distributing copies of pictures he took to the people he photographed.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Neel's distribution practice simultaneously provided his subjects with the opportunity for the renewal and replenishment of local practices of image exchange that fortify friendships and family identity; presumably, Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* is now a part of a family member's assemblage of photographs.

Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel* seems to conform to the conventions of family-making that Bourdieu describes with respect to issues of urbanism and family diffusion, conventions that include visits between and the circulation of photographs among family members. Perhaps the most notable difference between Bourdieu's and Neel's work is registered by the fact that the Neel's documents the experiences of a relatively poor urban African American family, and not of the French middle class. However, as we turn to Neel's own biography, we shall see, both family visits and family photographs were scarce commodities earlier in his life. In this regard, Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* is perhaps more aptly seen as a self-conscious study of the photographs and narratives that were absent from his childhood, but that were seeping into his life via *The Totem Carvers* and 'Primitivism' in *20th Century Art* at about the same time as he was working on the *Freedman's Town/State-Thomas* series.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>50</sup> Toni Giovanetti, "Capturing a Neighborhood's Past," *Dallas Times Herald*, 20 September 1986, sec. C, p. 5.

## 2.5 COLONIALISM AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF FAMILIES:

### NEEL'S CHILDHOOD YEARS

Discussions of urbanization and geographic diffusion punctuate most narratives about David Neel's life.

In the "Introduction" to Neel's 1992 book, *Our Chiefs and Elders*, he penned the following autobiographical account,

My father and grandmother, both artists, I lost in my childhood and so I was raised by my mother in Alberta, away from my father's culture and people. During this time, my mother taught me to stand on my own feet—to be self-sufficient.<sup>51</sup>

Writing with respect to Neel's rearing in the suburbs of Calgary, Alberta, a Canadian Press report later suggested that this experience rendered him "a candidate to vanish as an Indian."<sup>52</sup> The narrative of separation is also woven into anthropologist Charlotte Townsend-Gault's 1998 account, in which she locates Neel's earliest identification with his father's Kwakwaka'wakw family to a date after his return to the Pacific Northwest in 1986.<sup>53</sup> As with Bourdieu's study of French middle-class families, these three narratives focus on the interplay between mobility and identity that is at play in North America during the 1960s. However, this trio of biographical tales also calls critical attention to the fact that geographic diffusion complicates indigenous identity. This represents an important difference between Neel's experiences and those of his middle-class counterparts, as described by Bourdieu; diffusion and its relation to colonization are especially important for theorizing indigenous identity in general. A detailed analysis of this topic, and the place of that difference in the case of the Neel family, will be the subject of this section.

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<sup>51</sup> Neel, *Our Chiefs and Elders*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Canadian Press, "Artist Aims to Reflect True Native Spirit In Masks," *Vancouver Sun*, 1 April 1991, sec. B, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Townsend-Gault, "Neel, David," 409–11.

An indigenous person's identity and familial connections are "framed" by imperialism, as Maori scholar and political activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues in her 1997 book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*.<sup>54</sup> Tuhiwai Smith observes that,

legislated identities which regulated who was an Indian and who was not, who was *metis*, who had lost their status as an indigenous person, who had the correct fraction of blood quantum, who lived in the regulated spaces of reserves and communities were all worked out arbitrarily (but systematically), to serve the interests of the colonizing society. The specificities of imperialism help to explain the different ways in which indigenous people have struggled to recover histories, lands, languages, and basic human dignity.<sup>55</sup>

As I noted earlier with respect to Ellen Neel's status, in Canada prior to 1985, *The Indian Act* determined status in a patriarchal manner. Although most First Nations societies are either matrilineal or ambi-lateral, a woman's legal identity was based on her husband's status, and a child's on that of his or her father. In Canada, there are still women, born to parents of settler societies, who are First Nations by law because they are (or were) married to a status First Nations man.<sup>56</sup>

Tuhiwai Smith also points out that imperialism has a hand-in-hand relationship to the "impoverished material conditions" of indigenous people in both First World and developing nations.<sup>57</sup> In the case of the Neel family, the forces of colonialism produced limited livelihoods and shortened lifespans. As I showed earlier in this chapter, one of the most ominous forces of colonialism, the criminalization of the potlatch, played an instrumental role in the relocation of Ellen Neel's family from the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Alert Bay to Vancouver. Prior to the prohibition of the potlatch, Kwakwaka'wakw carvers were members of and professionally patronized by a chief's court, but the prohibition of the potlatch yielded a decline in court pageantry and provoked a related downturn in the carver's conventional economy. Thus, it is true that the Neels' new urban locale allowed the family to

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<sup>54</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> See Dara Culhane's autobiographical account in *The Pleasure of the Crown: Anthropology, Law and First Nations* (Burnaby, BC, Canada: Talonbooks, 1998); see footnote 4 on page 25.

<sup>57</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 4.

make a living by tapping into the tourist industry, but at the same time it must also be remembered that Ellen Newman Neel was a high-status Kwagiutl noblewoman who ended up raising her own children in a house next to the freight tracks in Vancouver's East end—one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. In addition, the process of urbanization seems to correspond with a shortening of individual family members' lifespan. Although Ellen Neel's grandfather, Charlie James, died in his sixties, and her uncle Mungo Martin lived well into his seventies, members of subsequent urban generations did not live as long: Martin's eldest son died, in 1959, when he was forty-two; Ellen Neel's eldest son—the father of the then one-year-old David Neel—died in 1961, at the age of twenty-four. Ellen Neel, herself, died only five years later, in 1966, at the age of forty-nine; moreover, only four of her seven children lived beyond the age of fifty-five—her daughters outlived her sons.

In Canada, federal policy played a further role in the dismantling of aboriginal families in the 1950s and 60s. Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, in their 1997 book, *Stolen From Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities*, argue that since the time of contact with Europeans, aboriginal children have been taken from their homes as trophies, for the purpose of religious conversion, and as part of a strategy of forced cultural assimilation.<sup>58</sup> By the 1950s, several generations of aboriginal children had been “reared” in the residential school system, where they faced an array of deplorable living conditions including a high incidence of sexual abuse. Residential school survivors usually knew their birth names and retained some connection to their birth family and their home community; they routinely had difficulties forming bonds with family members including their

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<sup>58</sup> See Fournier and Crey, *Stolen From Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), 17–8. The lives of aboriginal people raised outside their communities are the subject of an emerging discourse. I cite Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey because of their personal involvement with the issue. Fournier is a French Canadian of aboriginal descent and Crey (Sto:Lo) runs the United Native Nations office in downtown Vancouver, where he assists aboriginal individuals who have been separated from their families. It is also a topic that Crey knows from personal experience; as a child he and his siblings were taken from their mother and placed in foster care. Moreover, *Stolen From Our Embrace* includes a series of portrait photographs taken by David Neel, an act of inclusion that subtly situates Neel within a historical narrative about the fractured state of indigenous families.

own children, who often ended up “orphaned,” (frequently living with aged grandparents).<sup>59</sup> Orphaning, along with the impoverished conditions that characterized reserve living in the postwar era, was often cited by federal and provincial officials as justification for separating children from their aboriginal relatives and placing them with families of the settler societies. This particular practice of dismantling indigenous families intensified in 1959 and went on for more than twenty years—a social event commonly known as “the sixties scoop.”<sup>60</sup>

The authors of *Stolen From Our Embrace* contend that the sixties scoop has had a devastating effect on many aboriginal children, families, and communities partly due to the sheer number of displaced children. As evidence of this, the authors note that by the late 1970s approximately twenty-five percent of Canada’s legally recognized population of First Nations children grew up separated from aboriginal family members; Fournier and Crey go on to speculate that if “Métis,” children of mixed parentage, and non status First Nations children, for whom no statistics were kept, are factored into the equation, the product would probably be closer to thirty-three percent.<sup>61</sup> These exiled children, like most First Nations people, were surrounded by very negative representations of indigenous people, and constant reminders that they were different despite the prevalent rhetoric of indigenous assimilation as a reality. Consequently, displaced aboriginal children rarely fit with the suburban ideals of the 1960s and 70s. In contrast to their residential school counterparts who faced similar sorts of humiliation as a group, those who were removed from their aboriginal families suffered acts of degradation more-or-less in isolation, which in turn eroded self-esteem to extremely low levels; consequently, as adults these exiled aboriginal children often have difficulty fitting into any community. As evidence of this, Fournier and Crey point out that in the 1990s about ninety-five percent of the First Nations population incarcerated in British Columbia’s penitentiary system, and somewhere between fifty and seventy-five percent of the aboriginal

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 81–2.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 88.



youth who live on the streets of Vancouver, were reared in geographic separation from their aboriginal communities and relatives.<sup>62</sup>

David Neel is one of the many First Nations children who grew up separated from his aboriginal family members and community. Neel was born in April 1960, to Karen Neel (née Clemenson), a Euro-Canadian woman and her husband Dave Neel (Kwagiutl), the eldest son of the carver Ellen Neel. A year later, in 1961, Dave Neel died suddenly, and had the seventeen-year-old widow Karen Neel been a First Nations woman, social workers would probably have whisked her child away, as Fournier and Crey's history suggests. Shortly thereafter, Karen Neel and her only son left the Vancouver area, where Ellen Neel and other members of her family lived. Karen and her child eventually ended up in North East Calgary, a suburb of Calgary, Alberta—about seven hundred miles east of Vancouver and her son's Kwagiutl relatives. By the time David Neel was attending kindergarten, his mother had married a butcher, Brian Waterman, and within a few years two more children were born: Bruce in 1964 and Dana in 1965.<sup>63</sup>

Neel's biography provides important clues that Neel's childhood spent in Calgary has much in common with those of other indigenous children. As Fournier and Crey suggest, many in this generation of aboriginal children, though reared in urban or suburban areas, were, in fact, treated very differently from their Euro-Canadian counterparts. One important register of this difference is manifest in the sorts of careers pursued by indigenous people versus those pursued by people from settler societies.

Anthropologist Nancy Mithlo, for example, in her 2001 essay "No John Wayne, No Jesus Christ, No Geronimo: A Native American Statement at the Venice Biennale" observes,

Where other American communities might encourage their young to [go] to college with the hopes of attaining professional training in law, the science or education, most native students find their options are limited by both access and acceptability. A profession in the arts is a legitimate pursuit in most native communities, one that is expected, encouraged and institutionalized.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 81, 90.

<sup>63</sup> Neel, interview, 27 June 2002.

In an accompanying footnote she goes on to explain,

This comparison came glaringly to light as I discovered how unreflective our Southwestern museum volunteers were at their disdain for their own children to become professional artists, while virtually mandating Indian children to enter the arts as their natural calling.<sup>65</sup>

With Mithlo's observations in mind, it is plausible that Neel, regardless of any innate ability and his own statements that he enjoyed drawing as child, was steered towards courses and a career in photography and the fine arts because educators were treating him like an Indian.<sup>66</sup>

The impoverished material that characterized indigenous life ways in the 1960s also differentiates Neel's childhood experiences and those of the settler populations. Neel does not recall members of his father's family having much money for travel or phone calls between Calgary and Vancouver.<sup>67</sup> In addition, I suspect that Ellen Neel's untimely death, in 1966, when David Neel was only five-years old, further reduced connections to his father's family. Perhaps the most accurate measure of their poverty is indexed by the relative absence of Neel family photographs from David Neel's childhood.<sup>68</sup> The circulation of family photographs that Bourdieu describes depends on the availability of money for film, processing, and stamps; disposable income to which members of the extended Neel family probably had little access. The reality of this void was brought home to me when, in passing, I asked David Neel, if he had any photographs of himself with either his father or grandmother Ellen Neel. He replied that he knew of only one such image: a snapshot of himself as a baby with his father.<sup>69</sup> This void was belatedly filled

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<sup>64</sup> Nancy Mithlo, "No John Wayne, No Jesus Christ, No Geronimo: A Native American Statement at the Venice Biennale," *Santa Fe THE Magazine*, Aug 2001, p. 37.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Nanaimo Free Press, "Carver Unmasks Agony," *The Victoria Province*, 12 April 1991, p.18 and Neel, interview, 27 June 2002. In several autobiographical accounts, Neel recalls his childhood love of drawing and the notes the encouragement he received from teachers to pursue a career in photography.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

with representations of family in the *Totem Carvers* and *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, which he gained access to only as a young adult.

Nevertheless, Neel tried to assemble a narrative about his father's family from the few fragments of familial representation to which he had access. Looking back at his childhood, Neel recalled,

[My mother] told me stories but not so many. She told me what she could, but I don't remember a lot of information forthcoming; I think I picked it up in bits and pieces. As opposed to my children, they get an intensive course in it: they live it. I had no connection to my family and no connection to my father, I think the art functioned as that. I think that it functions very well in that capacity. I think children can get their heads around that. Children are more open to symbolism and iconography: they are not closed and conditioned. So, I think the art served very well for me as a representation of the family... and as a representation of [my] place in the world.<sup>70</sup>

As Neel's words suggest, his family was represented by several pieces of their art that were in his childhood home. Although there were no masks or potlatch paraphernalia, he told me that he used to leaf through a stack of his father's paintings—stored under the basement stairs—and play with a hand puppet carved in Ellen Neel's Totem Land Studio. David clearly recalled another Totem Land product: a toothpick holder incised with Sea Otter, one of his family crests.<sup>71</sup> Neel's recollections are also reaffirmed by his actions. At about the age of nine, he modeled an image of a brightly painted red, brown, and blue bear from a published photograph of a woven Chilkat blanket.<sup>72</sup> Thus, Neel began the process of weaving together a family narrative from these bits and pieces.

As with many indigenous children reared in the 1960s, Neel's early life experiences were largely shaped by the forces of imperialism such as the premature deaths of his father and grandmother, separation from other indigenous family members, the reality of indigenous poverty, and an education closely focused on the arts. In the following section, I will return to my discussion of Neel's reaction to *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, and I will show that his view of the exhibit was much very informed by

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<sup>69</sup> David Neel, telephone conversation with author, 12 February 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Neel, interview, 27 June 2002.

<sup>71</sup> David Neel, conversation with author (unrecorded), August 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Neel, interview, 27 June 2002.

the disarray of his indigenous world, and specifically the shattered state of his indigenous family structure.

## 2.6 'PRIMITIVISM' IN 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ART AND WAYS OF LOOKING AT FAMILY

In this section, then, I return to my point of departure, to the sentiments parallel to those expressed by Mithlo in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, as I endeavor to shift the locus of the analysis about 'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art from one focused on criticizing the psychology of the oppressor to one that facilitates a better understanding of the experiences of the oppressed, especially as this pertains to the processes of looking at and seeing images. I venture to move away from Clifford's critique of MoMA and aim to theorize Neel's reception of 'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art by situating his stated reaction within a network of theories about viewing beyond those centered on issues of formalism and objectivity.<sup>73</sup> As much of Neel's epigraph to this chapter suggests, his response to the exhibit was not only formulated within the context of the Dallas Museum of Art, but it was also shaped by his repeated viewing of the pair of photographs that appears on the catalogue cover. In the following analysis of Neel's response, I make a double theoretical move that begins with ideas about different ways of seeing photographic images, and then turns to indigenous theories of exhibit reception.

As the details of Neel's childhood suggest, his reception of 'Primitivism' in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the accompanying catalogue are part of his lifelong quest for family members he lost as a child. Neel's sense of loss and reclamation shares much with Roland Barthes' description of his own reliance on photographs to mourn the loss of a parent, his mother, in his 1981 book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*.<sup>74</sup> In this passage, Barthes recalls the solitary process of sifting through an assortment of

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<sup>73</sup> Mithlo's essay is especially important because it provides a unique opportunity to trace important political shifts in the discourses of curatorial colonialism twenty years after Clifford published his review of 'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, in which he cites Mithlo (as Nancy Mitchell) as one of the colleagues he consulted prior to the publication of his essay. Although there is no indication that she concurs with all or any aspects of Clifford's argument, I think it is important to recognize that Mithlo is one of a growing number of aboriginal women now curating exhibitions and writing about similar sorts of issues, and this denotes an important shift in the academic landscape. Nancy Mithlo is now Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Smith College in North Hampton, MA.

family photographs and his own struggle to find his recently deceased mother; he references a photograph taken before he was born that depicts his mother on the beaches of Les Landes, and another of his mother holding him as a child. But he finds his mother's "essence" in *The Winter Garden* photograph, which depicts her as a five-year old girl standing alongside her slightly older brother in the conservatory, the "winter garden," of their childhood home. Barthes describes his response as a subjective, loving reaction that he refers to as *punctum*, an emotional prick or wound.<sup>75</sup> Much like Barthes' experience of the Winter Garden photograph, 'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art was for Neel a representation of long lost family members. Thus, quite understandably, I contend that in his eyes, the exhibit provoked an emotional response similar to that of Barthes.

Barthes' theorization of the *punctum* can be deployed to expose some limits of Clifford's exhibition critique. Elsewhere in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes delves into more details about the *punctum* experience as he sets it in opposition to *studium*, a way of looking at photographic images predicated on a sense of disinterest or objectivity.<sup>76</sup> As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Clifford's critique targets various shortcomings of MoMA's formalist approach and the sense of objectivity that inheres within it. But with Barthes' dualist construction of viewing in mind, it becomes apparent that Clifford, in his exhibition review, is focused on a singular mode of looking, one that is in keeping with *studium*. If there are, indeed, different sorts of responses to photographic images, then it is important to note that in his review, Clifford does not set out to explore other ways of looking at the exhibit, such as Barthes' *punctum*, alternatives that will be reflected, for example, in the words of Robert Davidson several paragraphs below.

Despite the method of analysis contained in Clifford's exhibition review, three years later he went on to theorize other modes of looking at photographic images, though in a different context. In 1988, Clifford traveled to British Columbia and made his way into Kwakwaka'wakw territories, a journey

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<sup>74</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 63–77.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–71.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

which he recorded in his 1991 essay, “Four Northwest Coast Museums.” In this essay, Clifford noted that postcards made from photographs taken by Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) were for sale at the Kwakwaka’wakw-run museum at Cape Mudge, and he revealed his initial disappointment to find such “stereotypic faces” in this indigenous setting.<sup>77</sup> He goes on, however, to reassess the display of Curtis’s photograph within the context of Kwakwaka’wakw conceptions of viewing. He writes,

I realize that [it]...represents an individual, a named ancestor. What the image communicates here may be quite different from the exoticism and pathos registered by an audience of strangers.<sup>78</sup>

With these words, Clifford concludes that even the most colonizing representation can elicit another set of reactions from indigenous viewers. Clifford points out that indigenous people often see representations of family in these images—not just tropes of imperialism. Thus, the process of mapping of familial relationships often distinguishes the experiences of indigenous viewers from those that Clifford, himself, initially imagined with respect to Curtis’s photographs and *‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art*.<sup>79</sup>

As with Barthes’ ideas about *punctum* and *studium*, in “Four Northwest Coast Museums” Clifford thoughtfully considers multiple modes of looking, though his analysis also points towards a question about how the legacies of colonialism have a dramatic impact on the way indigenous people, including David Neel, experience representations of the family. In order to better illuminate this difference, I turn to literary scholar Marianne Hirsch’s discussion of Barthes’ representation of *The Winter Garden Photograph* in her 1997 book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Hirsch points out that his iconoclastic approach reaffirms what she refers to as the ‘family look,’ an exchange of various sorts of looks and gazes that situates an individual within a family. Hirsch goes on to argue that

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<sup>77</sup> Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums,” 230.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>79</sup> Several other scholars have made similar arguments with respect to the reception of Curtis’s photographs by aboriginal people. See for example Anne Makepeace, *Coming to Light* (video recording) as well as Ruth Kirk, *Tradition and Change on the Northwest Coast: The Makah, Nuuchahnulth, Southern Kwakiutl and Nuxalk* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 15; Jolene Rickard, “The Occupation of Indigenous Space as ‘Photograph,’” in *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, ed. Jane Allison (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2000), 58–59.

participation in the family look, much like Bourdieu's construction of photography's family function, corresponds to and defines the structure of family. In her eyes, the editing of the *Winter Garden* photograph from Barthes' book is not merely a means of preventing the objectification of his mother; it also sets the space of family quite apart from the public sphere in which *Camera Lucida* readers participate.<sup>80</sup> Thus, if, as Hirsch suggests, Barthes' exclusively verbal representation of *The Winter Garden* photograph is an effort to delineate a boundary between the public sphere and the privacy of his family space, his ability to protect the space of family is also an index of his social power and privilege.

Such regard for power and privilege has not been regularly granted to most indigenous people, and this is one of the reasons that photography is a contentious medium in indigenous circles. Many of the earliest photographs that depict Native Americans were taken by and circulated among cultural outsiders, and the depicted individuals or their families were not considered to be part of the audience, as anthropologist Margaret Blackman and others have previously observed.<sup>81</sup> Thus, portraits of Native Americans have routinely hung on the walls of Euro-American houses, been published in books, been preserved in museum archives, and been reproduced as posters, calendars, and placemats—often with the permission of the photographer or archives, but not of the depicted individuals nor their families. In this sense, indigenous people have rarely had the same sort of power to prevent the objectification of family members such as that exerted by Barthes in his option to conceal the *Winter Garden* photograph. As a consequence, many Native Americans and First Nations people such as David Neel routinely experience representations of family in relatively public venues such as books or museum exhibits, rather than in the privacy of the domestic realm, as is the case for most families of North America's settler societies. Thus,

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<sup>80</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 54.

<sup>81</sup> Margaret Blackman, "'Copying People.'" See also Laurel Kendall, Barbara Mathé, and Thomas Ross Miller, *Drawing Shadows to Stone: The Photography of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897–1902* (New York: American Museum of Natural History; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Anne Makepeace, *Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the American Indians*, 85 min., Reading, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2000, video recording.

such public displays of indigenous families index the utterly shattered state of their world and register the disempowerment of indigenous people that has been shaped by the forces of colonialism.

Partly because of this fragmentation, public displays such as Neel's of *'Primitivism' in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* may produce very different sorts of experiences, which require the exploration of an indigenous theory of photography. I turn to the concept of "Transformation," or "déjà vu," as described by the now eminent carver Robert Davidson (Haida) in his 1994 exhibition catalogue, *The Eagle Transforming: The Art of Robert Davidson*.<sup>82</sup> Davidson writes,

My interest in Haida art began when I was very young, watching my father carve wood, my grandfather carve argillite...When I was thirteen, my father insisted that I start learning to carve. He didn't ask me if I wanted to start carving, he insisted that I start. I had a real feeling of déjà-vu, that I'd carved before in another lifetime.<sup>83</sup>

With these words, Davidson reaffirms the importance of copying to Northwest Coast aesthetics noted earlier in this chapter with Ellen Neel's description of her training with Charlie James. Davidson goes on to describe a similar phenomenological experience with respect to his encounters with historic photographs and museum exhibitions. In 1965, six years after his father began teaching him to carve, Davidson moved from Massett to Vancouver in order to complete his high school education. By visiting Vancouver museums, Davidson gained access to historic photographs of and carvings from his home village of Massett, which had since lost its former splendor, erased prior to his childhood. He describes his experiences in the following manner,

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<sup>82</sup> I cite Robert Davidson not only because his description of Transformation is so clearly articulated, but also because he is often credited as one of the most important Northwest Coast carvers working in the latter half of the twentieth century.

<sup>83</sup> Ulli Steltzer and Robert Davidson, *The Eagle Transforming: The Art of Robert Davidson* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1994), 16.



Then I started to go to museums and saw for the first time art done by my ancestors, art beyond my wildest dreams, art I did not understand, art whose purpose I did not know. I discovered that there was more than argillite totem poles. There were carved rattles carved bowls, carved speaker staffs, carved paddles, carved and painted canoes. I saw photographs of ancient Haida villages, with many totem poles lining the fronts of the villages.

I was in dreamland, I was in the spirit world, images were alive. It was another déjà-vu experience. I felt that I had been there before. These images made me hungry. I wanted to learn more about them, what they meant and what they represented. I spent many hours studying these new-found treasures, these masterpieces, and they still influence my work today.<sup>84</sup>

Similarly to Barthes' description of *punctum*, Davidson's words reveal his transfigured world as a very real and animated space; a previously unseen world brought into high relief through a variety of interactions with carved objects and photographic images; spaces in which indigenous people reassemble and lay claim to their lost worlds. That such an experience occurs in a public setting, drawing from a museum exhibit in this case, or published photographs in another, however, distinguishes the experiences of déjà-vu or Transformation from the private spaces of *punctum*, as described by Barthes with respect to the *Winter Garden* photograph. Moreover, as a spiritual conception, Davidson's Transformation suggests embodiment, as exemplified by his statement, "I was in dreamland...", while Barthes's notion of *punctum* brings his mother to life.

As I have already demonstrated, the forces of imperialism originally cast much of Neel's life into a state of disarray, though his experiences of the indigenous world differ in several respects from those of Davidson. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Neel is one among many First Nations children who grew up separated from his indigenous family members and from the land. And, as we shall see in Chapter 4.0, some may see Neel's Calgary-based rearing as setting him beyond the pale of any sort of Kwakwaka'wakw or indigenous identity. Such differences, as Tuhiwai Smith has insightfully pointed out, have much to do with the fact that imperialism is not a fixed entity and the forces of colonialism have not been uniformly applied.<sup>85</sup> In this regard, Neel has much in common with many First Nations people of his generation, but due to colonialism's unevenness, his experiences differ greatly from those of Haida artist

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>85</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 6–7.

Robert Davidson as well those of Kwakwaka'wakw raised in Alert Bay or Vancouver. Moreover, Tuhiwai Smith's remarks suggest that there is a great variety of experiences even within these roughly hewn groups as well. In this sense, neither the social constructions of indigeneity, in general, nor that of the Kwakwaka'wakw, in particular, are monolithic. Thus, as with Davidson's recollection of seeing photographs and museum exhibits in Vancouver, one of Neel's interpretations of *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* is part of his on-going effort to piece together a more complete picture of his world and identity. In this sense, his response is in keeping with Davidson's description of Transformation or déjà-vu.

Neel's initial experience of Transformation or déjà-vu is also heavily marked by his interest in the role photography plays in construction of family identity. As I have shown, his period practice of photography, as exemplified by his *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway*, explored issues of family identity with respect to the display and creation of photographic images. Neel's interest in family photography is entwined with his childhood separation from family along with the absence of family photographs from his life. Before seeing *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, Neel had only a few glimpses of his family, such as the small-scale carvings and paintings made by his father and other members of the Totem Land studio, and a snapshot of a young David Neel with his father. It was not until the publication of Nuytten's *The Totem Carvers* in the early 1980s that Neel was afforded a more extensive view of his indigenous family. With this in mind, I have situated Neel's reception within a cluster of ideas about family photography including Bourdieu's family function, Barthes' *punctum*, and Hirsch's family look. But it is in the experience that Clifford refers to as the named ancestors, which twists what may appear to be colonizing stereotype into a representation of family, that Neel's experience of *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* is most clearly reflected, and Davidson's analysis of dreamland helps the account along further still. Thus, Neel's experience of Transformation or déjà-vu was focused on family.

During the summer of 1986, only one year after the Dallas Museum of Art showed *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, Neel took a personal journey to British Columbia, where he was reunited with members

of his father's family, whom David Neel had not seen for more than twenty years.<sup>86</sup> A year later, in 1987, he moved back to his birthplace, Vancouver, where he established a commercial photography studio.<sup>87</sup> Shortly after relocating to Vancouver, Neel began a much belated two-year apprenticeship with Kwakwaka'wakw master carvers Beau Dick and Wayne Alfred.<sup>88</sup> This education contrasts with that of his grandmother, Ellen Neel, who was taught to carve by her grandfather Charlie James, and, who, by age twelve, was a sufficiently skilled carver to sell her carvings to tourists who stopped in Alert Bay on cruise ships bound for Alaska, and it similarly differs from that of her eldest son Dave Neel whose carving skills at age twelve are said to have matched her own.<sup>89</sup> However, his son, David Neel (b. 1960), did not receive guidance from either his father or grandmother, due to their untimely deaths. Thus, as a hereditary carver, David Neel has been privileged by birth and underprivileged by education and social connections.

My purpose in telling the story of Neel's reaction to '*Primitivism*' in 20<sup>th</sup> Art has been twofold. First, by situating the exhibition within the context of Neel's biography, I have shown how his experiences of the world, and specifically his separation from family, are typical of those of many indigenous children reared in the 1960s, and reveal how his indigenous persona was—against the odds—recognized, constructed, and politicized. Second, by looking at how Neel's reception of '*Primitivism*' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art was shaped by the discourse of family photography, I have set out to complicate our understanding of '*Primitivism*' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, which has largely focused on the shortcomings of MoMA's curatorial program, as exemplified by James Clifford's exhibition. In the following chapter, I will examine how Neel uses his skills as a photographer of the press and his knowledge to open up different ways of viewing the indigenous world as he closes down imperial constructions of display. As

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<sup>86</sup> David Neel, interview, 27 June 2002.

<sup>87</sup> *Vancouver B.C. City Directory*, (n.p.: n., 1987) Special Collections, Vancouver Public Library.

<sup>88</sup> David Neel, interview, 27 June 2002.

<sup>89</sup> Nuytten, *Totem Carvers*, 43 and 54.

we shall see, he does so partly by exploiting the reproductive capabilities of the photographic medium and the aesthetic imperative of carving, and by using masks, portraits, photographs, and texts to probe and challenge the primitive-modern dichotomy that James Clifford so forcefully contests in his 1985 exhibition review.

### 3.0 INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN MULTIPLE FRAMES: NEEL'S PRAXIS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

The ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers' "success" in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians is well known. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often *made* of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were *other* within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it. The strength of their difference lay in procedures of "consumption."<sup>1</sup>

Michel de Certeau

The communication arts are being employed to tell the First Nations viewpoint. Artists, writer, filmmakers, and performers are using modern media in addition to their traditional cultural ways. This book [*Our Chiefs and Elders*] is part of that trend. What has historically been a non-written or orally transmitted culture has come to utilize many media. The result has been access to a much larger and more varied audience.<sup>2</sup>

David Neel

Is it not natural that the photograph should, in the absence of other supports [the family house...the traditional situation and reputation], be given the function of compiling the family heritage?<sup>3</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu

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<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Neel, introduction to *Our Chiefs and Elders*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu, *Photography*, 28.

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

David Neel became a prominent First Nations photographer in Canada and abroad in the early 1990s, several years after his 1987 move from Dallas, Texas to Vancouver, British Columbia. Much of Neel's early professional success both inside and outside of aboriginal circles was forged in conjunction with the production and exhibition of *Our Chiefs and Elders*, a series of black-and-white portrait photographs depicting notable First Nations people of British Columbia. *Our Chiefs and Elders* made its public debut in 1990 at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MoA) and then traveled to venues throughout Canada, Mexico, and the United States including the National Archives of Canada, in Ottawa, and Cameraworks, in San Francisco. Two years later, in 1992, Neel released an expanded version of the series as the book *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders*, a format that allowed the series to circulate even more broadly.<sup>4</sup> *Our Chiefs and Elders* also appears to have retained significance in at least some Kwakwaka'wakw circles, as is suggested by the decision of Martine J. Reid and Daisy Sewid-Smith's (Mamaliliqala) to display one of the images from *Our Chiefs and Elders*, Neel's *Portrait of Agnes Alfred*, on the cover of their 2005 book *Paddling to Where I Stand: Agnes Alfred Qwiqwasut'Inuxw Noblewoman*, a biography of the Kwakwaka'wakw elder.<sup>5</sup>

*Our Chiefs and Elders* has garnered the most attention among Neel's photographic works; in fact, practically nothing has been written on any of his other photographic projects. The literature that surrounds *Our Chiefs and Elders* has centered on how the series seeks to overcome the shortcomings of Euro-American conventions of representation of First Nations peoples, and most specifically, a legacy linked to the photographs of Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952). *Our Chiefs and Elders* also plays an integral role in Neel's biography, the construction of his artistic identity, his praxis of image making in general, and his exploration of indigenous identity as a socio-political complex that includes connections to family

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<sup>4</sup> Neel, *Our Chiefs and Elders*.

<sup>5</sup> Daisy Sewid-Smith, telephone conversation with author, 27 April, 2006.

heritage, band, and the land as well as to physical appearance. As Neel's introductory essay to *Our Chiefs and Elders* intimates, he is also fully aware of how racializing stereotypes of indigenous people not only permeate the discourses of photography, but also deeply infuse the rhetoric of the law and tourism. As his essay goes on to suggest, cultural outsiders routinely use such stereotypes to challenge the authenticity of indigenous cultures, efface the ongoing political struggles of indigenous people, and facilitate the appropriation of indigenous land.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in contrast with the conventional interpretation of *Our Chiefs and Elders*, I will show that Neel inflects the series with the potential for multiple modes of viewing reception that include embodiment and a critique of the interrelated Eurocentric constructions of objectivity and imperialism.

But Neel's practice of photography in British Columbia also extends far beyond that of *Our Chiefs and Elders*. He used his skills as a photographer and his knowledge of the press as a venue of display outside the confines of museum and gallery spaces. In addition, Neel used the press to help shape a public persona as carver, photographer, and political activist, through biographical and editorial writing illustrated with photographs of his silkscreen prints, carved masks, and portraits, published in both aboriginal and mainstream presses. Examples include two essays concerning the abuses of aboriginal people by Canada's legal and educational systems, essays that are accompanied by black-and-white photographs of Neel's *Mask of the Injustice System* (1990) and his *Residential School Mask* (1991).<sup>7</sup> In the second half of the 1990s, Neel went on to create other photo essays including *Our Great Canoes* (1995), and *Pow Wows* (ca. 1996). Neel also continues his work concerning tribal identity in the ongoing production of the *Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Portrait*, which he began in 1991.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Neel, "Introduction, 18–19.

<sup>7</sup> David Neel, "An Opportunity Missed," *Vancouver Sun*, 29 April 1991, sec. A, p. 11. Vancouver Public Library, Gitksan-Wetsuwet'en Decision (Vertical File); David Neel, "O Canada, Remember the Legacy," *Victoria Times Colonist*, 26 December 1996, sec. A, p. 15.

In the early 1990s, Neel continued to explore issues about family identity, embodiment, and photography in *The Neel Family Diptych* (ca. 1992), a work of silkscreened photographs and text on cedar panel, and in *You Give To Me* (ca. 1992), a photograph and poem on canvas. As I have argued in Chapter 2.0, family was a significant theme in his Dallas work, and the desire for family played an important role in Neel's early identification as Kwagiutl. After he returned to British Columbia, in 1987, Neel quickly surrounded himself with indigenous family, and began to publicly identify with his family's carving legacies after Kwakwaka'wakw carvers Beau Dick (b.1955) and Wayne Alfred (b. 1958) invited Neel to work alongside them. Shortly after settling in Vancouver, Neel married Sharon Marshall (Nuu-chah-nulth), and together they had three children: Edwin, in 1990, followed by twins, Ellen and Jamie, in 1992.<sup>9</sup>

After Neel returned to British Columbia and started carving, his praxis of photography started to change. He became particularly interested in how these two disciplines are used to represent and replenish family identity, and specifically, how family photographs function much like carved crests in the Pacific Northwest. In British Columbia, Neel connected his own practice of photography to local conventions regarding the circulation and display of family photographs; he also experimented with compositional strategies modeled upon conventions of crest display. At the same time, Neel strategically deployed the medium of photography to challenge perceptions that indigenous cultures are immutable: perceptions exemplified by the narrative presented by the curators of *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, discussed in Chapter 2.0, as well as those represented in Curtis's photographs and implicated in the occupation of indigenous land by settler societies, as we shall see in this chapter. In what is an obviously rich and politicizing act, Neel's photographs destabilize the modern-primitive dichotomy as they simultaneously present an image of British Columbia as a land still visibly occupied by indigenous people.

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<sup>8</sup> David Neel, *Our Great Canoes: Reviving A Northwest Coast Tradition* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre), 1995; David Neel, "The Pow Wow Series," in *David Neel: Living Traditions* (Kamloops, BC, Canada: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1998), 18–32.

<sup>9</sup> David Neel, *The Family Diptych*, 1992.



In this chapter, I focus my attention on how Neel indigenizes his praxis of photography. As we shall see, Neel adapts his photography as he tries to take into account Northwest Coast concerns about identity, display, and representation as they relate to issues of privacy and family identity. Neel routinely credits luminary mid-twentieth-century photojournalists such as W. Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson with having informed his own practice of photography, though critics have Smith's and Cartier-Bresson's work inflected with universalizing assumptions, especially with respect to family identity, as Roland Barthes argued in his 1957 critique of *The Family of Man Exhibition*. I contend that Neel's sensitivity to local aesthetic concerns distinguishes his practice of photography from Cartier-Bresson's and Smith's, shifting their universalizing assumptions through acts of localization.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, a study of Neel's photography is not only important to Northwest Coast scholars, but to the discourses of photography in general.

I begin this chapter with an examination of Neel's use of the press as space of identity performance and an alternative exhibition venue. In this section, I also catch up on details about his biography after his return to British Columbia. I then argue that Neel's most famous portrait series, *Our Chiefs and Elders*, maps and politicizes indigenous space by presenting the Pacific Northwest as a peopled landscape, not as a space of emptiness ready for settlement, by delving into colonial discourses of photography such as the vanishing Indian motif that Neel seeks to offset. I bring this chapter to a close by turning to Neel's exploration of how to photographically represent a particularly Kwagiutl conception of family in the *Neel Family Diptych* and thus I return to the issue of embodied viewing that I introduced with the words of Robert Davidson in Chapter 2.0.

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<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Wang and Hill, 1972), 100–2.

### 3.2 NEEL'S KWAGIUTL IDENTITY AND THE POLITICS OF DUAL LINEAGE

After Neel returned to British Columbia, he began using the media to help fashion his artistic identity in aboriginal circles as well as in the eyes of the general public. Press releases, artist's statements, and news stories that appeared in the early 1990s all incorporate varied details about Neel's family history, his training as a photographer, and facts about his art. For example, Neel's 1991 "Artist's Statement" about his silkscreen print, *The Trial of Tears*, is accompanied by a one-page narrative about Neel's life and artistic practice. This biographical account introduces Neel in the following manner,

David Neel is a professional photographer and a hereditary artist in the Kwagiutl tradition...Born in 1960, Neel draws on both his Kwagiutl and European heritage for his artistic direction. He inherits his name Tlat'lala'wis from his father, Dave Neel Sr., in addition to a rich artist heritage. Dave Sr., a Fort Rupert (Tsaxis) Kwagiutl, was taught to carve by his mother, Ellen Neel, and her uncle Mungo Martin. Ellen received her instruction in carving and design from her maternal grandfather, Charlie James. All were carvers of totem poles and traditional Kwagiutl regalia, and this is the direction [David Neel] chooses to follow.... He works mainly in wood creating masks and regalia from Kwagiutl mythology and potlatch culture, as well as contemporary pieces.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative also mentions the fact that Neel trained as a photojournalist at the University of Kansas and that he worked with commercial photographers in Dallas, Texas. The account goes on to connect Neel's photography to the convention of "concerned photography," a phrase that photographer and writer Cornell Capa (b. 1918) coined in the late 1960s to describe a genre of documentary photographs capable of eliciting social change.<sup>12</sup> Neel is specifically indebted to the work of the legendary mid-century concerned photographers W. Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson, who are known for picturing people from the four corners of the earth. The biography concludes by drawing a parallel between the tenets of concerned photography and Neel's commentaries on "Native and global" affairs in photographs, silkscreen prints, and carvings.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> David Neel Studio, "David Neel Artist/Photographer," 1991, *Trial of Tears* pamphlet, David Neel Studio Files.

<sup>12</sup> See Cornell Capa, "Introduction," in *The Concerned Photographer: The Photographs of Werner Bischof, André Kertész, Robert Capa, Leonard Freed, David Seymour ["Chim"], and Dan Weiner*, ed. Cornell Capa (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968), n.p. and Michael Ignatieff, "Introduction," in *Magnum Degrees* (New York: Pahidon Press, 2000), 51-62.

<sup>13</sup> Halpin, "Afterword," 183.

Neel's 1992 book *Our Chiefs and Elders* contains additional biographical information. In his introductory essay, Neel notes the deaths of his father and grandmother when he was just a child. In this account, Neel points out that he grew up in Calgary, Alberta, away from his father's family. In the "Afterword" to *Our Chiefs and Elders*, anthropologist Marjorie Halpin mentions that Neel studied photojournalism at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta, and then went to the University of Kansas in Lawrence. She also calls attention to Neel's travels through Mexico and the United States and yet again references the concerned photographers.<sup>14</sup> Thus, much like the narrative that accompanied the *Trial of Tears*, *Our Chief and Elders* paints a picture of Neel as part of a family of carvers, a traveler, a humanitarian, and a photographer.

As Neel trained as a photojournalist, it is not terribly surprising that he also relied on the press to showcase artwork. During the early 1990s, a prominent Vancouver-based aboriginal paper, *Kahtou*, was edited by Maurice Nahanee—a close friend of Neel's and an admirer of his work. Throughout the decade, *Kahtou* carried illustrated articles about Neel and his artwork, including a glowing review of *Our Chiefs and Elders* and announcements about the release of silkscreens such as *The Trial of Tears*, *Out of Sight/Out of Mind*, and *Just Say No*. Neel also managed to negotiate space within the mainstream press by submitting editorials about contemporary news events, each accompanied by a photograph of a thematically related work of art. For example, in April 1991, *The Vancouver Sun* published Neel's editorial critiquing the outcome of the *Gitk'san and Wet'suwet'en* landclaim case, the text of which frames a photograph of Neel's *Mask of the Injustice System* (1991), which he described as a "sardonic" portrait of the presiding judge.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Neel's tales of travel appear in a number of autobiographical accounts. In an early biographical account, he notes the various places he has lived (David Neel, pamphlet, c. 1991, artist's file, David Neel Studio). The rhetoric of travel emerges in his introduction to *Our Chiefs and Elders*, 13, and also appears in more recent biographical accounts; see, for example, David Neel, <http://www.neel.org/photo.cfm> (accessed 29 March 2001, link now defunct).

<sup>15</sup> Neel, "Opportunity Missed."

In 1996, Neel used a similar format in his *Victoria Times-Colonist* editorial “O Canada, Remember The Legacy,” which comments on the November 1996 Royal Commission Report that advocated sweeping changes between aboriginal and nonaboriginal Canada and included a commentary about the tragic impact of the residential school system. Neel’s editorial about residential schools takes on a very personal tone; he writes about the 1995 break-up of his marriage to Sharon Neel, which he attributes to her residential school rearing, and he goes on to detail the impact her departure had on their three young children, which resonates with issues similar to those raised by Fournier and Crey, as discussed in Chapter 2.0. Neel’s essay is accompanied by a photograph of his *Residential School Mask* (1991), a transformation mask that, when opened, reveals an interior portrait mask that depicts his eldest son, Edwin, with tears running down his cheeks.<sup>16</sup>

Neel’s use of the media disrupts conventional taxonomic categories in important ways. On the one the hand, Neel’s references to the import of carvers like Charlie James and Mungo Martin to his work is in keeping with the published biographies of other carvers, which usually focus solely on the artist’s indigenous family and training as a carver, as exemplified by this biography of Tony Hunt:

Tony Hunt is active both as an artist and hereditary chief of the Kwakiutl [Kwagiutl] nation, work which he sees as intertwined. His celebrated artistic family is distinguished for keeping traditions alive during the arduous period in which the potlatch was outlawed by the Canadian government. With his father Henry, Hunt apprenticed with Mungo Martin at Royal British Columbia Museum’s Thunderbird Park from 1952 to 1962.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Neel’s overt acknowledgement of his mother’s Euro-Canadian heritage, his Calgary rearing and education in photojournalism and contemporary art, along with references to the work of photojournalists such as W. Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson, distinguish Neel’s narrative from the more conventional, as exemplified by Hunt’s. But as I noted in my discussion of the *Neel Totem* in Chapter 2.0, Kwagiutl family identity is not patrilineal, rather, it is an ambi-lateral construction. With this in mind, Neel’s references to his Euro-Canadian mother and to work of photographers Smith and Cartier-

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<sup>16</sup> Neel, “O Canada.”

<sup>17</sup> Joan Acland, et al., “Tony Hunt,” in *First Nations Art: An Introduction to Contemporary Native Artists in Canada*, [http://collections.ic.gc.ca/artists/hunt\\_tony.html](http://collections.ic.gc.ca/artists/hunt_tony.html) (accessed 17 March 2000).

Bresson, who are also of European heritage, along with his references the European master Pablo Picasso in other narratives, bespeak his European heritage in a fashion that recalls the construction of Kwagiutl family narratives. Moreover, Neel's claims to the legacies of European artistic legacies are also entangled with Nuytten's construction of Ellen Neel as a Picasso admirer, as I noted in Chapter 2.0.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, that Neel lays claim to two lines of descent also complicates his indigenous identity, a point that I will begin to examine in the following section and to which I will return in Chapter 4.0.

Beyond a forum of identity construction, Neel's use of the press also intervenes in deeply entrenched practices of museum display, a point which can be clarified by turning to anthropologist Charlotte Townsend-Gault's 2004 essay, "Circulating Aboriginality."<sup>19</sup> Townsend-Gault's stated interest is how the proliferation of trivia—key chains, bottle openers, and copper-coloured tissue paper that are routinely encountered in the Vancouver metropolitan area—can politicize cross-cultural interfaces in ways that works of art cannot. As Townsend-Gault rightly points out, Western eyes have so privileged the visual properties of Northwest Coast carvings that the very real violence of colonialism and the political struggles of indigenous people have been hidden from their view and consciousness.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the act of viewing Northwest Coast art, she argues, the consumption of trivia is often a predominantly tactile, rather than visual, experience, a point to which I will return when I discuss Neel's masks in Chapter 4.0. This sensory redirection, she argues, facilitates a reconfiguration of settler-indigenous relations that is renewed and reinvigorated through each tactile engagement that may be obscured by the visually based aesthetic experience. Townsend-Gault goes on to point out that the relatively low cost of production allows evidence of indigenous presence—particularly crests—to circulate much more freely in the form of trivia than in expensive works of art. Since cultural outsiders do not usually understand the function of

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Neel's epigraph to Chapter 1.0 of this dissertation.

<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Circulating Aboriginality," *Journal of Material Culture* 9 (2004): 183.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 188–90.

crests, she notes that their proliferation in the form of trivia helps popularize a statement of indigenous difference.<sup>21</sup>

Neel's mask display within the media similarly politicizes the cross-cultural aesthetic experience. As Townsend-Gault observes, our interest in the visual properties of Northwest Coast carving has ordinarily diverted our attention away from the political struggles of indigenous people. Unlike most Northwest Coast masks, however, some subject matter found on Neel's masks, such as residential schools and the justice system, are enmeshed with contemporary political concerns. In this sense, the masks themselves serve to illuminate rather than obscure indigenous struggle; a point to which I will return in the following chapter. Displayed within the forum of the press, Neel's masks, surrounded by the words of his politically charged essays, make a clear statement of indigenous difference, a clarity that I think is deliberately absent from the trivia mentioned in Townsend-Gault's analysis. That these masks are also encountered outside conventional spaces for the public display of Pacific Northwest Coast art renders them and their political content accessible to a different sort of audience than those with exclusive tastes for trinkets and galleries.

The degree to which Neel utilized the press also sets him apart from most other carvers working in the early 1990s. As a professionally trained photojournalist, he knew how to work the media system more effectively than most carvers, and he was especially capable of feeding the press's love of images, because, in contrast with most carvers, Neel had the necessary skills to produce high quality composite still-life photographs of his own artwork. With his background in photojournalism and years spent in Dallas's contemporary art circles, Neel was probably also very aware that representation in the press was an effective way to shape his public identity as an artist. Neel's use of the press was also reminiscent of the many newspaper photographs depicting his grandmother Ellen Neel and her family, reproduced in Nuytten's *The Totem Carvers*, a compendium that illustrates the significance of press to Ellen Neel's work of the post war era and the work of Nuuchahnulth artist George Clutesi (1907-88), who, as art

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 196-7.

historian Ronald W. Hawker observed in his 2003 book *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922-61*, produced paintings that appeared in *Native Voice*, an aboriginal newspaper.<sup>22</sup>

In this section, I have probed some of the ways in which Neel used the press as a means of shaping his identity as a First Nations artist and as an alternative exhibition venue. In the following section, I turn to Neel's production and exhibition of *Our Chiefs and Elders*, his most famous photographic essay, as another mechanism important to the construction of his identity.

### 3.3 OUR CHIEFS AND ELDERS: PRODUCTION AND EXHIBITION

Neel's *Freedman's Town/State-Thomas* series, which he completed while he was living in Dallas, Texas, is an experiment in photography as a medium of social connection that stands as the prototype for the making of *Our Chiefs and Elders*. News stories about Neel's making of the *Freedman's Town/State-Thomas* series call attention to the fact that taking pictures of people and their houses requires diplomacy and trust. For example, *Dallas Times Herald* reporter Toni Giovanetti reported that Neel earned the trust of Freedman's Town and State-Thomas residents by establishing a presence in the community and by distributing copies of his photographs to his sitters —acts that earned him the moniker "The Picture Man."<sup>23</sup> Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway*, discussed in the previous chapter, alludes to the extent of this trust as Neel's photograph depicts the two sitting in Lily-Bee's living room. People who feel vulnerable—as many older women do—are not always eager to open their doors and invite strangers, especially men, into their homes.

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<sup>22</sup> Many of the photographs depicting Ellen Neel and her children appear to be taken by professionally-trained photojournalists, and Nuytten notes that at least five of the photographs appeared in British Columbia newspapers. Nuytten credits an additional eight photographs to a professional photographer named Jim Ryan, though it is unclear from Nuytten's citation whether some or all of Ryan's photographs were published in the press. Nuytten also notes the appearance of Ellen Neel's son, Bob Neel, on the C.B.C. television show *Flashback* in 1966.

See also Ronald W. Hawker, *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922-61* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2003), 122.

<sup>23</sup> Giovanetti, "Capturing a Neighborhood's Past," sec. C, p. 5.

The creation of *Our Chiefs and Elders* similarly depended on Neel's ability to establish a relationship of trust with individuals who are often skeptical and fearful of strangers, for reasons that extend far beyond those of physical safety. In an effort to illuminate the sorts of obstacles that Neel probably encountered while making *Our Chiefs and Elders*, I turn to Maori scholar and political activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith's 1999 book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*. Writing with respect to the legacies that scholarly researchers have left behind in the indigenous world, Tuhiwai Smith points out that "research" (including activities such as amateur collecting, photography, and anthropology) was usually designed to serve the goals of cultural outsiders, even to validate imperial oppression of indigenous people.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, "research" of any stripe can easily conjure fear and distrust among indigenous people around the globe. Tuhiwai Smith observes that indigenous researchers working within indigenous communities are not absolved of criticism. Although indigenous researchers may gain access because of their further connection, their training in Western-style academic institutions often codes them as cultural outsiders—as less than authentic.<sup>25</sup>

As a visual and verbal record of contemporary indigenous lifeways, *Our Chiefs and Elders* is a research project of sorts. As a professionally trained photographer and a relative newcomer to British Columbia's First Nations' circles, Neel would undoubtedly have been considered an outsider, at least to some extent—someone to be wary of. But in contrast to the making of his *Freedman's Town/State-Thomas* prototype, in which he fostered a sense of trust by establishing a physical presence in these two geographically cohesive neighbourhoods, the terrain is more challenging in Neel's later project. *Our Chiefs and Elders* depicts more than forty leaders scattered across the province of British Columbia, and as a consequence he could not ensconce himself within a community: Neel had to rely on a different trust-building mechanism. As the grandson of Ellen Neel, as the spouse of a Nuu-chah-nulth woman, and as an apprentice carver, David Neel was plugged into a network of First Nations people on which he depended

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<sup>24</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, 13–14.



to gain initial access to his sitters. But in order to record the faces and words of his eminent subjects, Neel would also have had to personally earn the trust of each of his sitters. This would have been a particularly difficult task, given the lack of authority that indigenous people have had over the public circulation of their photographic images, as I discussed in Chapter 2.0. I strongly suspect that Neel's practice of distributing copies of his photographs to his subjects (thus, giving something back to sitters) and his efforts to contextualize their portraits with their words were complex and extremely important trust-building acts. Moreover, Neel's approach to the production of *Our Chiefs and Elders* involved the construction and recognition of his indigenous identity, through means that share much with Bourdieu's ideas about the creation and circulation of photographs as a means of constructing and reaffirming family identity.

Neel's photographic essay was also destined for public exhibition. In August 1990, fifty-five of Neel's black and white photographs, accompanied by short quotes from interviews with subjects, made their public debut at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MoA) in the exhibition, *Our Chiefs and Elders*.<sup>26</sup> The MoA-originated exhibit then went on to travel to museums throughout British Columbia, to Seattle's The Burke Museum, to San Francisco's Cameraworks, and to Ottawa's National Archives.<sup>27</sup> In 1992, the University of British Columbia Press published the book, *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders*, which includes an introductory essay written by Neel, autobiographical accounts in the words of thirty-nine chiefs and elders, sixty black-and-white portraits taken by Neel (five more than in the exhibition), and a concluding essay by MoA curator Marjorie Halpin.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, "Press Release," 18 July 1990, David Neel Vertical File, Vancouver Art Gallery Archives.

<sup>27</sup> In British Columbia *Our Chiefs and Elders* traveled to the Native Heritage Centre as well as the Vernon, Kamloops, Langley, Richmond, and Delta museums. David Neel, "Solo Exhibits. See David Neel Studio." <http://www.neel.org/biography2.cfm?category+solo> (accessed 29 March, 2001, link now defunct).

From the beginning, *Our Chiefs and Elders* has been interpreted in conjunction with issues of First Nations representation. In 1991, MoA produced a high-school educational package, “The Role of Photography in Stereotyping,” to accompany the exhibit.<sup>29</sup> Lyn Cockburn, a reporter for the Vancouver-based daily, *The Province*, saw Neel’s collection of faces as an anti-essentializing statement, due to the diversity among the faces.<sup>30</sup> Writing with respect to the book, Maurice Nahanee, the editor of the local aboriginal newspaper, *Kahtou*, characterized Neel’s photographs as far “from Hollywood images,” and called explicit attention to the fact that Neel also made space for First Nations voices.<sup>31</sup> In a book review for *Northwest Parks and Wildlife* magazine, Dave Peden saw the everydayness of Neel’s images as a tool for unpacking First Nations stereotypes. In fact, seven of the eight period reviews that I have found made some sort of reference to *Our Chiefs and Elders* as the antithesis of Edward S. Curtis’s vanishing Indian thesis—Nahanee’s was the sole exception.<sup>32</sup> This anti-Curtis thesis surfaces, in part, because Neel explicitly notes Christopher Lyman’s 1982 book *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions*, which argues that photographs taken by Curtis have served to blot out evidence of change within the indigenous world. The ideological representation of the eternal yet paradoxically vanishing Indian yields an image of

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<sup>28</sup> *Our Chiefs and Elders* made its public debut at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology in August 1990. The exhibit then traveled to venues in Canada and the United States. In 1992, Neel released the book *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders* (Vancouver: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, “The Role of Photography in Stereotyping: Educational Package to Accompany ‘Our Chiefs and Elders: Photographs by David Neel Kwagiutl,’” slides/sound cassette/essay, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> Lyn Cockburn, “David Neel Captures the Dignity of Native Elders,” *Vancouver Province*, 6 August 1990, 48, Vancouver Art Gallery, David Neel Vertical File.

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Nahanee, “Our Chiefs and Elders,” *Kahtou News*, 1 October 1992, pp. 14–15.

<sup>32</sup> For additional reviews of *Our Chiefs and Elders*, see “Native Photos Capture Culture,” *Vancouver Courier*, 18 August 1990, p. 14, David Neel Vertical File, Vancouver Art Gallery; Robin Laurence, “Native Lensman Affirms Elders’ Dignity,” *Georgia Straight*, 17–24 May 1991, p. 27, David Neel Vertical File, Vancouver Art Gallery; Bruce Nixon, “The Editorial Eye: *Shadowy Evidence* and *Our Chiefs and Elders* at SF Camerawork,” *Artweek*, 24 January 1991, p. 11; “Beyond Racism,” *B.C. Bookworld*, Autumn 1992, p. 5; Phyllis Braff, “Myths of the American Indian and Significant Photographs,” *New York Times*, Sunday, 15 August 1993, p. 16; Dave Peden, “Our Chiefs and Elders: Book Review,” *Northwest Parks and Wildlife*, pp. 41–43, David Neel Studio file.

cultures that die in conjunction with the triumphant introduction of Western expansion and Western technology.

### **3.4 LANDSCAPES WITHOUT PEOPLE: THE VANISHING INDIAN MOTIF, PAST AND PRESENT**

Although Neel's essay focuses on troubling representations of indigenous people, a number of scholars have commented on the interconnections between photographs of Indigenous North America, the rhetoric of the vanishing Indian, and the colonization of the land. For example, art historian and photographer Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora), in her 2000 essay "The Occupation of Indigenous Space as 'Photography'," reminds us that the medium of photography came into being at about same time the idea of the nation-state was becoming a political reality. She argues that the United States government used photographic surveys and the discourse of vanishing people to legitimize settler occupation of the land west of Mississippi, an occupation made legitimate because it was land that appeared to be unoccupied, or at least in the process of being depopulated.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, she contends that the medium of photography was an instrument of colonialism. Nevertheless, Rickard goes on to argue that these images, if carefully reinterpreted, can also be used to reclaim some of the remaining fragments of the indigenous world. In this sense, Rickard's project is connected to Mithlo's indigenous knowledge project, discussed in Chapter 2.0.

In a slightly different vein, novelist and critic Marina Warner probes the photographic image in conjunction with European myths in her 1993 essay "Stealing Souls and Catching Shadows." Warner maps the soul-stealing myth amidst a constellation of tales about reflected images and shadows—spaces where the properties of life can merge with those of death. As evidence of soul catching, she points to Italian and German mourning rituals that include the shrouding of mirrors as a means of preventing the soul of the recently deceased from becoming trapped within the reflective surface. Shadows, she goes on

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<sup>33</sup> Rickard, "Occupation of Indigenous Space."

to argue, also signal a liminal space between the living and the departed. To illustrate her point, Warner recalls tales about Transylvanian vampires (the undead) who cannot cast shadows. She also notes that histories of portraiture that were popular during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, just prior photography's advent, trace the origins of portraiture to Pliny's tale of Dibutade. Pliny credits Dibutade, a young woman who traced a charcoal outline of her lover's shadow just before he left on a long journey, as having created the first portrait; thus, monochromatic images in particular are associated with departure, if not death.<sup>34</sup>

With this backdrop in place, Warner goes on to argue that these tales about mirrors, shadows, and portraiture were quickly transposed onto the daguerreotype, an early photographic technology that fixed shadows onto glass plates or mirrors. Yet, despite the European origins of these myths, Warner observes that narratives of soul stealing and shadow catching are rarely applied in a self-reflexive manner; instead, Euro-American photographers, anthropologists, and travelers repeatedly cast these myths onto indigenous people around the globe. Through such symbolic associations, photographic images, along with tales of soul snatching and shadow catching, fixed yet another cultural meaning; they recorded the vanishing Indian during the westward expansion, memorializing departing cultures in black-and-white, and ultimately legitimizing, rather than challenging, an imperialist occupation.

The Pacific Northwest did not escape the vanishing Indian narrative. There, too, photography played an instrumental role in the region's construction as a no-man's land. But as art historian Aldona Jonaitis has pointed out, the idea of the Pacific Northwest as empty landscape was amplified by the fact that the tourist industry and museum collections have routinely directed outsiders' eyes towards carvings such as monumental poles and masks.<sup>35</sup> Among indigenous people the display of carved objects is often intended to map human connection to the land, but cultural outsiders usually see masks and poles in

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<sup>34</sup> Marina Warner, "Stealing Souls and Catching Shadows," *Tate; the Art Magazine*, Summer 1995, pp. 45–46.

<sup>35</sup> Jonaitis, "Totem Poles and the Indian New Deal," 243–249.

museums and parks, settings quite detached from their original cultural contexts of dances and village life. Thus, cultural outsiders tend to think of the Pacific Northwest in terms of objects, not people.

In 1990s British Columbia, the vanishing Indian motif was not a relic of the past, but rather, a leading player in the now infamous *Gitk'san Wet'suwet'en* landclaim trial, as historian Eva Marie Garrouette observes in her 2003 essay “What if My Grandma Eats Big Macs?” Garrouette notes that although the Gitk'san and Wet'suwet'en people retained their languages, story narratives, dances, and a relationship to the land, lawyers for the crown have questioned the validity of their distinct indigenous identities due to band members' relationships with technology, calling specific attention to their use of cars and fast food restaurants.<sup>36</sup> In an effort to show the shortcomings of the Big Mac assimilation argument, Garrouette refers to James Clifford's critique of a similar sort of logic, used to defeat the 1976 Mashpee claim to land near Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts.<sup>37</sup>

In his 1988 essay “Identity in Mashpee,” Clifford contends that the challenge to the Mashpee claim was based on the same dubious model of culture as that of the Vanishing Indian. He goes on to assert that this model is predicated on the assumption that culture is an organic entity that must be whole, and must grow in an “uninterrupted” and “linear” fashion in order to survive; thus, any rupture is seen as destroying the integrity of the culture. Although this model may accurately index modern Euro-American forms of dominant culture, Clifford rightly argues that this model fails to accurately register the contours of cultures that have been severely oppressed—cultures that nevertheless live on, although their “central organs” have been removed. Thus, Clifford declares that the cohesive cultural agent is not language or bloodlines, but rather the struggle to survive—a struggle for survival that often requires the “remaking” of a culture in concert with changes in its relationships to other cultures.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Eva Marie Garrouette, “What If My Grandma Eats Big Macs? *Culture*,” in *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 61–66.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

Clifford's argument is partly indebted to the sentiments expressed by sociologist Michel de Certeau in his 1982 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. As indicated in his epigraph to this chapter, de Certeau contends that use of technology does not collapse differences between settlers and indigenous people. Instead, he contends that indigenous people often use technology to serve their own needs, and not the goals of colonialism. In de Certeau's eyes, then, indigenous use of technology is not evidence of assimilation, but rather, of difference. Together, Clifford's and de Certeau's words suggest that indigenous use of technology, including Gitk'san and Wet'suwet'en use of cars and McDonalds, may signal survival, resistance, or rebellion rather than cultural assimilation.

Despite the political import of the vanishing Indian motif during the 1980s and 90s, *Our Chiefs and Elders* has become so tethered to the discourse of photography and First Nations representation sketched above that the series' connections with larger social-political concerns have become obscured. In the following section, then, I turn to Neel's effort to construct a view of native British Columbia as a peopled and technological landscape in the photographs of *Our Chiefs and Elders*, which shows an interesting approach to safeguarding indigenous spaces and cultures against additional encroachment.

### **3.5 OUR CHIEFS AND ELDERS: FIRST NATIONS VISIBILITY AND THE POLITICS OF LOOKING**

The delineation of indigenous space is often connected to issues of representation and identity. For example, in Chapter 2.0, I called attention to Barthes' omission of the *Wintergarden* photograph from his book *Camera Lucida*, a strategy indicative of his effort to define and protect familial space and familial membership. Instead of reproducing the photographic image, Barthes represents it with words alone, creating what W. J. T. Mitchell refers to as an imagetext.<sup>39</sup> The absence of images also plays a crucial

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<sup>38</sup> James Clifford, "Identity in Mashpee," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 339–343.

<sup>39</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 9.

role in the conception of decolonizing representation that Homi Bhabha outlines in his 1994 book *The Location of Culture*. According to Bhabha, only language-based depictions can offset the experience of alienation that colonized people experience with respect to visual images.<sup>40</sup> Yet, as the public exhibition of *Our Chiefs and Elders* suggests, it was also designed to capture the attention of the members of settler societies. Thus, in contrast to these text-based strategies, I argue that *Our Chiefs and Elders* is, at least in part, about seeing indigenous people and visualizing an explicit visual presentation of indigenous spaces that vividly counters the theme of vanishing. In contrast to the MoA exhibit, the book presents sixty photographs of individual engaged in the currents of contemporary culture. The essays by Neel and Halpin and the words of the thirty-nine chiefs and elders represented there also serve specific political purposes for Neel, binding him closely to the indigenous cultures of the Northwest Coast, as he constructs a new strategy for presentation of those cultures.

In an effort to reveal the many political currents that run through *Our Chief and Elders*, I begin by comparing the most famous image of the series, *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson*, to the *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* of the *Freedman's Town/State-Thomas* series.<sup>41</sup> As I discussed in the previous chapter, Neel's portrait of the Holloway women was shot in Lily-Bee's home, where the pair appears surrounded by the stuff of everyday, including an end table piled with photographs, a box of Kleenex, and a bottle of lotion. The other side of the room is cluttered with family photographs, as well as a television set and a circular clock, the latter halved by the photograph's frame. Like this picture, Neel's *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* is a portrait of two people that includes an end table piled high with bric-a-brac, including a bottle of lotion and a bisected circular object—this time a mirror—at the photograph's right edge.

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<sup>40</sup> Bhabha, 43–48.

<sup>41</sup> In addition to appearing in conjunction with *Our Chiefs and Elders*, Neel's *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* was exhibited in Lucy Lippard's 1992 traveling exhibition *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native North Americans*; Aperture's 1995 exhibit, *Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices*; and the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, *About Face: Self-Portraits by Native Americans, First Nations and Inuit Artists, 2005-2006*, an exhibition of Native self-portraiture co-curated by Allan J. Ryan and Zena Pearlstone.

There are also important differences between the two compositions, however. For example, Neel's portrait of the Holloways presents the two women in casual attire in the foreground of a seemingly unobstructed view of Lily-Bee's home. Neel's *Self Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson*, by contrast, is staged in front of a photographer's screen erected within the chief's home, and it seems much more explicitly composed partly because of the contrast between Neel's apparently daily attire and accoutrements—a Thunderbird t-shirt, a pair of jeans, and a camera in hand—and Swanson's regalia—a ceremonial robe, a headdress, and a chief's staff—which are not Swanson's house clothes. The latter's composed quality is amplified through references to the making of the photograph that are included within the image—lights, diffuser, and photographic screen—along with the echoing of the staff's top most shape in the clips attached to the light standards. Thus, in contrast with the spontaneous visit that is suggested by Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway*, the *Self Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* appears an overtly constructed image—a photograph about portraiture and photography.

The compositional structure of Neel's *Self Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* calls attention to the parallels between photographic images and more conventional Northwest Coast modes of representation, as Neel's epigraph to this chapter suggests. In the photograph, Swanson appears holding a carved chief's staff, an instrument that usually represents the chief's office or voice, particularly when held by a person other than the chief.<sup>42</sup> That Neel cradles a camera as he sits next to Swanson suggests his own office as an artist, asserting a similarity between his practice of photography and conventional Northwest Coast customs of representation, and this is done in a way that suggests something important about Neel's place. The effect is further amplified by the differences in Neel's and Swanson's modes of crest display, as Neel's photo-mechanically embellished t-shirt is juxtaposed against Swanson's use of carved wood and hand-fashioned textile appliqué. As if taking a cue from de Certeau's epigraph to this chapter, Neel shows how photo-technology flows into and replenishes indigenous cultural practices, and specifically indicates the effect with respect to assertions of family heritage—crest display. This

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<sup>42</sup> Suttles, "Streams of Property," 86.



photograph is placed as the frontispiece to Neel's essay in *Our Chiefs and Elders*, and by seating himself thus with Swanson, Neel brilliantly enlists Swanson in his own claim to status as a Kwagiutl artist who has returned to British Columbia.

As an image about the indigenization of photography, Neel's *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* also makes an overt political statement. As I noted in the previous section, at the time of the book's publication, the vanishing Indian motif was present in the legal debates of the *Gitksan Wet'suwet'en* landclaim trial, and was represented in the fallacious assumption that indigenous cultures are immutable, and in the corollary that Western technology is absent from "real" indigenous cultures. In contrast to Neel's references to photography and contemporary fashion in his *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway*, within the context of his *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson*, the evident presence of the apparatus of technology participating side-by-side with tradition cleverly destabilizes the stereotype of indigenous stasis by presenting an image of indigenous lifeways as both various and mutable. In this composition, Neel uses the "modern" technology of the photographic medium to trouble the primitive-modern dichotomy that is deeply rooted in the narrative of the vanishing Indian and its offspring, the Big Mac assimilation argument.

The juxtaposition of Neel's *Portrait with Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* against the *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* also reveals how he uses the medium of photography to define and protect indigenous space. In the former image, Neel provides us with a seemingly unedited view of Lily-Bee's home. With this photograph, Neel not only allows us to see her personal possessions, but also seems to invite us right into the living room—to occupy the Holloways' space. By contrast, the Neel-Swanson portrait appears a more controlled scene. The placement of the screen affords only a glimpse of Swanson's personal effects and space, as it simultaneously directs our attention towards indigenous people: the screen intervenes in and politicizes the convention of looking at British Columbia as an empty land, in some places cluttered with unattended carved and painted artifacts. As I have argued earlier in the chapter, the inability to block the prying and colonizing eyes is an ongoing problem for indigenous people. Thus, the photographic screen—which may also allude to a chief's screen that separates the

public area of a longhouse from the chief's sacred repositories—doubles as an imposing emblem of Neel's art while it shields the culture, allowing the viewer access only to what Neel and Swanson have cooperatively and deliberately chosen to show and to share with the viewer.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.6 FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHY AND NORTHWEST COAST FAMILIAL IDENTITY

The photographs of *Our Chiefs and Elders* are also enmeshed in the issue of familial representation in photography, a professional and personal interest of Neel's since the mid 1980s. As I argued in Chapter 2.0, Neel's *Portrait of Lily-Bee and Mertel Holloway* is about the representation of family in photographs as well as the circulation of family photographs, and these serve to bind members of a geographically diffuse family together. Neel's *Portrait of Lucy Smith* in his *Our Chiefs and Elders* series similarly depicts a grandmother surrounded by photographs of her family members. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Neel continued his practice of distributing copies of his photographs to his sitters in British Columbia, as he had done with the Holloway women in Dallas, Texas. In this sense, Neel's practice of photography is designed to reaffirm and reinvigorate familial identity among physically distant individuals.

In the Pacific Northwest, the topic of family identity is enriched because spiritual essence plays a crucial role in the construction and renewal of family identity. Intergenerational solidarity that includes the actual presence of ancestors is conventionally signaled through the display of crests, as Townsend-Gault suggests in the following passage. "Crests," she writes,

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<sup>43</sup> According to art historian Edward Malin, there are different sorts of interior house screens in the Pacific Northwest, and there is much variation in use. The sort of chief's screen that I have described above was common to the Northern tribes. Malin notes that the Kwagiutl did not tend to permanently partition their long houses with screens. Instead, screens were used solely during performances, to shield performers as they prepared to dance. See Edward Malin, *Northwest Coast Indian Painting: House Fronts and Interior Screens* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1999), 52, 98.

are insignia displaying characteristics of animals or other nonhumans, frequently in combination with humans. Supernatural beings and their transformations are recounted in the oral histories, the mythological characters designated as immaterial and inalienable property and inheritable by high-status individuals or kin groups. In many cases they will only be there because the person initiating the design has the right to use that crest; but alternatively they may be derived from stories or histories that are the cultural property of a community.<sup>44</sup>

That Townsend-Gault's language is peppered with terms such as "supernatural," "transformation," and "immaterial" provides us with clues to indicate that such a sense of familial identity—ancestral omnipresence—is conceived as existing outside linear time, as is suggested by Davidson's description of Transformation that appears in Chapter 2.0. Transformation is predicated on the idea that a singular identity can simultaneously occupy—*embody*—more than one person as well as move through people in sequence. Thus, the display of a family crest demarcates an identity that transcends time and space, a point to which I will return in my discussion of the *Neel Family Diptych*.

In *Our Chiefs and Elders* Neel grapples with the problem of how to photographically represent this form of omnipresent identity. I suspect Neel's *Portrait of Lucy Smith*, with Smith surrounded by her collection of photographs, is intended to signal such a conception of family identity, for First Nations' homes are often filled with kaleidoscopic displays of old and new family photographs, which, much like crests, are used in conjunction with the recitation of family histories.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the composition itself reveals little of the unique properties of Northwest coast familial identity. Smith's photographic assemblage appears much like that of any grandmother, including Lily-Bee Holloway. Other photographs in the series include references to family crests, for example, *Portrait of Lily Speck (Tlowitsis-Mumtagila)*, *Portrait of*

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<sup>44</sup> Townsend-Gault, "Circulating Aboriginality," 184.

<sup>45</sup> I was first introduced to Northwest Coast practices of photokeeping during the summer of 2000 when I was invited to stay at Lushootseed Elder Vi Hilbert's Seattle home. I was immediately struck by the number of family photographs—forty or fifty—that were hanging on the walls of her living room. One of the photographs was of my then six-year-old niece Elizabeth, which Hilbert called to my attention in conjunction with a description of our connections to Elizabeth, our relationship to each other as her godmother and aunt, and stories about the wind, sea, trees, and land; thus, Hilbert mapped her family heritage. During later years of fieldwork, I had many similar encounters with photographs in indigenous homes.

*Chief Ernie Yeltzie (Haida)*, and *Portrait of Chief Edwin Newman (Heiltsuk/Kwagiutl)*, which present the sitters clad in regalia.

I find these depictions of enrobed individuals problematic, however, and the criticism requires a few paragraphs' development. In contrast to Neel's *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson*, these photographs contain a single person clad in regalia with few markers to direct the reader away from the hazards of the vanishing Indian that may be found in Curtis' photographs. Neel is clearly aware of the problem, for in his introductory essay he endeavours to distinguish his photographs from those of Curtis, who frequently clothed his sitters to suit his own taste. Neel points out that his photographs, by contrast, depict his sitters displaying their hereditary entitlements, and Neel's photographs of Lily Speck, Ernie Yeltazie, and Edwin Neel are engaged with local conventions of portrait photography and displays of family identity.<sup>46</sup> Neel's move, however, has only partially addressed the problem, for Neel's audience includes those who would be unaware of, and unable to pass judgment upon, such details. James Clifford's troubled reaction to similar sorts of photographs for sale in the Cape Mudge museum gift shop, a reaction noted in the second chapter, provides an example in this regard. Taking the cue that these photographs are sold in the Cape Mudge museum, Clifford goes on to revise his estimate of their presence, finding that they are photos of personal relations, rather than icons of colonialism, in that context. A less attuned viewer may have trouble finding that next step, and so, Neel hazards the danger of reproducing the Curtis stereotypes, for some viewers, despite his written introduction. When the photos are pulled individually from their context in the museum show or the book—as they have been, in postcard distributions—the danger of reinforcing the stereotypes of Curtis is increased.

In a move that may be intended to offset the sense of timeless absolutism, Neel publishes these images next to another portrait of the same individual in contemporary attire, creating diptychs that span the book's double-page spread. Since the debates of the 1970s about the truth value of photography, led by critics such as Allan Sekula, the diptych has emerged as an example of a photo-based project that

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<sup>46</sup> Neel, *Our Chiefs and Elders*, 13, 17.

exposes the limits of photographic truth.<sup>47</sup> The diptych has become part of a trend in contemporary indigenous representation, as exemplified by Ruth Kirk's pairing of Curtis's photograph of *Virginia Tom* with a 1980s photograph of Tom's granddaughter, Marina Tom, in Kirk's 1986 book *Tradition and Change on the Northwest Coast*.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Anne Makepeace, in her 2001 book *Edward S. Curtis: Coming to Light*, created a diptych from her 1991 photograph of Ethel Mahle (Hopi) and another of Mahle's mother, taken by Curtis in the early twentieth century.<sup>49</sup> In a similar vein, the cover of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's 1999 book *Decolonizing Methodologies* is composed of two images of indigenous women—an historic European engraving and a contemporary photograph of a second woman in sunglasses.<sup>50</sup> To varying degrees, Kirk, Makepeace, and Tuhiwai Smith use diptychs to destabilize assumptions about indigenous people as merely historic. In this regard, Neel's coupling of images reflects a recent strategy that maps the contemporary indigenous body as a site of contested meaning.

Nevertheless, I find the diptychs that appear in the book version of *Our Chiefs and Elders* less effective than those of Kirk, Makepeace, and Tuhiwai Smith. They are less effective, partly, because of the overall organization of the book's photographic section. Fifteen of the fifty-eight double-page spreads include a pair of photographs of the same individual; in most instances, one of the photographs depicts the person in regalia and the other presents the same individual in street attire. However, these diptychs appear to be randomly interleaved with another twenty-three double-page spreads that dedicate single pages to different individuals. The difference between the diptychs and the single-page portraits is not clearly signaled. For example, several of the single-page portraits pair a person in regalia with another in common attire, as exemplified by the positioning of Neel's *Portrait of Agnes Alfred (Namgis)* draped in a

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<sup>47</sup> Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," in *Photography: Current Perspectives*, ed. Jerome Liebling (Rochester, NY: Light Impressions: 1978), 238–241.

<sup>48</sup> Kirk, *Tradition and Change on the Northwest Coast*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Anne Makepeace, *Edward S. Curtis, Coming to Light* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2001), 11.

<sup>50</sup> Tuhiwai Smith cover. Although Andrew Corbett is credited with designing the book's cover, no information is provided about either the photograph or the engraving.

button blanket next to the *Portrait of Hazel Stevens (Haida)* wearing pants and a sweater. Thus, the logic of Neel's diptychs is not consistently carried through, and a reader may make the mistake of interpreting 'the timeless eternal,' and 'the contemporary and changing' as contrasts represented across all of the pages that *might* be taken for diptychs.

I think Neel's efforts to photographically represent familial identity *qua* crest would have been better served if he had modeled his photographs more closely on historic Northwest Coast conventions of photography, rather than the style of Euro-American photographic portraiture that many of Curtis' photos present. The alternative tradition to which I refer—represented, for example, in *The Totem Carvers* and in Margaret Blackman's essay, "Copying People"—often depicted individuals in modern attire along with small-scale poles, as I discussed in Chapter 2.0. One example, albeit a humorous one, is Jim Ryan's *Neel Totem*, which has the Neel family posed on a ladder. Such representation of a group is an example of a use of photography that does not reproduce the tradition of portraiture identified both as a bulwark of colonialism and as a particularly Euro-American ideal of the individual. But as we shall see in the following section, Neel quite eloquently overcomes these shortcomings in the construction and composition of *The Neel Family Diptych*, as he delves deeper into some Kwakwaka'wakw conceptions of *embodiment* that include: the body, family, time, and artistic identity.

### **3.7 FROM FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHY TO A PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE KINSHIP I**

*The Neel Family Diptych* is an assemblage that Neel created from two family photographs. The diptych's right panel consists of a newly created photograph—a self-portrait of David Neel holding his eldest son, baby Edwin, on his lap, with a mask in the foreground that Neel has been carving. Judging from the baby's appearance, I suspect the photograph was taken late in 1990, about six months after Edwin's June birth. The left panel is a historic family photograph that, according to David Neel, depicts Ellen Newman Neel—his own grandmother, and Charlie James' granddaughter—as one of the three little girls watching Charlie James, who appears to be putting the finishing touches on a pole destined for Christ Church

Cathedral in Victoria, British Columbia. To make the *Diptych*, David Neel silkscreen transferred the pair of images onto an alder panel and connected them with a column of white letters that lists the names and vital dates of family members, including Charlie James, Mungo Martin, Ellen Neel, David Neel's father Dave Neel, David Neel, and his three children Edwin, Ellen, and Jamie.

As the familial subject matter may suggest, *The Neel Family Diptych* has primarily been displayed within the privacy of Neel's home. Neel told me that when his children were young it hung in the living room alongside *You Give to Me*, a diptych with a poem on the right panel, and a photograph on the left that portrays baby Edwin being held by his mother, Sharon Neel, who is flanked by her two eldest sons, Alvin and Simon, a pair who wear contemporary-themed masks carved by David Neel. Together, this pair of diptychs accomplishes more than merely mapping the contours of Edwin's family along his father's and mother's lines, respectively. Their juxtaposition also calls attention to the fact that *The Neel Family Diptych* is about carving as a patrilineal prerogative. I contend that, in the construction and composition of *The Neel Family Diptych*, Neel sets out to situate himself and his children within the artistic legacies of Charlie James, signaling a synchronization of artistic identity across the generations; a notion of artistic identity that is spiritual, not material, and quite distinct from Eurocentric conceptions of individualism and ideas about artistic authority.

In this specific cultural context, Neel's reproduction of the historic family photograph is an act of honour. As I showed in Chapter 2.0, Neel first gained access to many family photographs via the publication of Nuytten's book *The Totem Carvers*. In this regard, Neel's act of rephotography alludes to the importance of *The Totem Carvers* in his life, which led to his reunion with family members and his subsequent education in the art of carving. The sense of honour is amplified when we consider the fact that copying is a central tenet of Kwagiutl aesthetics. As a means of activating familial relationships, carvers and painters routinely replicate and adapt the calligraphic lines, the "formlines," configured by their ancestors. Although Neel used a camera, not a knife, to re-present Charlie James and Ellen Neel, he was copying the forms of his ancestors—albeit not their formlines. Neel makes further allusions to the

Kwagiutl aesthetic of copying in his choice of subject matter—family members at work carving—and by printing the photographs onto an alder panel.

If Neel's rephotographed image is predicated on Kwagiutl conceptions of copying, it also signals a conception of artistic authority that flows across generations. In an effort to illuminate this nonindividualistic construction of artistic authority, I turn to literary scholar Chadwick Allen's redeployment of the expression "The Kinship I" in his 2002 book *Blood Narratives: Indigenous Identity in American Indian Maori Literary and Activist Texts*. According to Allen, the Kinship I was first coined in the 1950s by anthropologist J. Prytz Johansen, writing with respect to Maori practices of story telling in which the narrator participates in stories that happened prior to his or her birth.<sup>51</sup> Allen himself adds further clarity to the term as he applies it to the work of Kiowa writer Scott Momaday in the following passage:

In the epilogue to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday evokes one of the tangible artifacts of Kiowa Historical memory, their pictographic calendars. He notes that one of the earliest events recorded on the Kiowa calendars is the great meteor shower that was observable across the United States in 1833. Momaday then asserts that the event is "within the reach of memory still, though tenuously now, and moreover it is even defined in a remarkably rich and living verbal tradition which demands to be preserved for its own sake. The living memory and verbal tradition which transcend it were brought together for me once and for all in the person of Ko-sahn." Momaday ends the *Way to Rainy Mountain* by remember Ko-Sahn, the hundred-year old Kiowa woman whom he knew as a child. In a scene of indigenous instruction, Ko-sahn had told him a story from her own childhood, an account of the Kiowa Sun Dance. Preparing for the ceremony, an old woman carries a bag of sandy earth to sprinkle across the dance arena. After recounting Ko-sahn's story, Momaday wonders if she ever imagined herself as the ancient woman of her own youth, and he speculates "in her mind, at times, did she see the falling stars?" As in his introduction, in his epilogue Momaday imagines Kiowa elders in order to project himself back through their lifespans—through their 'blood'—and beyond to even older Kiowa memories.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> J. Prytz-Johansen, *The Maori and His Religion in Its Non-Ritualistic Aspects*, (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1954), 149. See also Judith Binny, "Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts: Two Forms of Telling History," *New Zealand Journal of History* 21 (1987): 25. For example, Prytz-Johansen describes the Kinship I in the following manner: The relationship to the ancestors is a big chapter in the Maori's life, but also a difficult one, because the ancestors are not only kinsmen, but dead as well. Therefore fear and familiarity mingle in a way which can only be unraveled by a close study of the situations in which the living and the dead have intercourse. How the ancestors give omens to the living and fortify them, how sacrifices are made to them, etc., must therefore on the whole be treated together with a study of gods and sacrifices. In the chapter on the 'spirit', however, we shall see just how decisive the situation is for the Maori's experience of the departed. We shall in this place restrict ourselves to a sphere independent of actual situations, viz. What may collectively be called inheritance from the ancestors, – what forms that 'I' which is the kinship group takes through the ages. What is the share of the ancestors in this? In a certain sense there is no problem. The 'I' which lives through the ages, the kinship I, is the fellowship in contrast to the individual life.



I think Neel's act of rephotography similarly propels him across time and synthesizes his artistic identity with that of Charlie James. If photographic reproduction of images may be likened to the copying of formlines, then Neel's homage bears resemblance to the Kinship I as described by Johansen, Binny, and Allen.

*The Neel Family Diptych*'s overall composition reaffirms Neel's nonindividualistic approach to artistic authority. To create *The Neel Family Diptych*, Neel carefully positioned the new and old photographs in parallel compositions, and through various photographic processes harmonized their size and color as he attached them to an alder panel. I think Neel's assemblage recalls the form and function of Kwakwaka'wakw dowry boards, such as an eighteenth-century example that appears in MoA curators Bill McLennan and Karen Duffeck's 2000 book, *The Transforming Image*. McLennan and Duffeck described the conventional format of the dowry board as, "a frontal face... composed of two profiles facing inward and separated by a vertical band or series of bands....Sea-otter teeth, and rarely opercula or pieces of abalone shell, are set at varying intervals within the painted line."<sup>53</sup> *The Neel Family Diptych* also consists of inward pointing faces separated by a black band, yet here the central band is embellished with white letters, rather than shells or teeth.

The dowry board connection is richly symbolic, because such boards are associated with the transfer of wealth and family identity. These highly decorative boards were at one time physically attached to bentwood storage boxes, which were used in the transportation of material wealth such as blankets and masks. During the nineteenth century, boxes could also symbolize the transfer of intellectual property associated with its contents, such as names and dance prerogatives, as the late anthropologist Wayne Suttles argued in his 1991 essay, "*Streams of Property, Armour of Wealth: Traditional Kwakiutl Potlatch*." Suttles goes on to note that long after the boxes were gone, their decorative lids served as

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<sup>52</sup> Allen, *Blood Narrative*, 83–84.

<sup>53</sup> Bill McLennan and Karen Duffeck, *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 52.

emblems of the inheritances once associated with the box and the property it once contained.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, McLennan and Duffeck have suggested that these vertical mosaics may also symbolize a family's riches.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout the Pacific Northwest, the box is also a metaphor for the body, as anthropologist Marjorie Halpin argued in her unpublished 1988 essay, "The Being-of-the-Box." To make her point, Halpin included a quote from an 1897 letter written by Franz Boas to the Kwakwaka'wakw, in which he referred to his colleague, George Hunt, as a box. In addition, she quoted an ethnographic field report by Margaret Seguin, who in her research among the Tsimshian found "emphasis on containers (in images [and] metaphors...), [and] on 'emptying' containers (including the human body, in preparation for encountering animals or supernatural [beings])."<sup>56</sup> In a similar fashion, Nora and Richard Dauenhauer, in their 1987 book *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors*, translated the Tlingit word for grandparents as "outer containers."<sup>57</sup> Together these metaphors point towards a construction of identity as one that moves across the generations, much as material wealth can move from box to box. In this regard, the aspect of identity that is the spiritual essence is ever present, even if its box (i.e. the body) changes. This model of the box shares theoretical overlaps with two others discussed above, ancestral omnipresence and The Kinship I, and each is a specific model that articulates the general category of spiritual essence.

*The Neel Family Diptych* and its companion piece, *You Give to Me*, provide evidence that Neel was familiar with the category of spiritual essence, and with the box model, when he created these pieces. In the photograph of Sharon surrounded by her children, Neel presents an image of motherhood and

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<sup>54</sup> Suttles, "Streams of Property, Armor of Wealth," 94.

<sup>55</sup> McLennan and Duffek, *Transforming Image*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> Marjorie Halpin, "The-Being-of -the-Box," a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Aesthetics, Vancouver, October 1988 (photocopy), professional papers of Karne Duffek, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver B.C.

<sup>57</sup> Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, *Haa Kunsteeyi: Our Culture 'Tlingit Life Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Juneau, AK: Sealaka Heritage Foundation, 1987), 133, 346.

human reproduction—generations of family. A poem written by Neel makes up the right panel of the work, and clearly articulates a fluid construction of identity and wealth, with the following words, “Children/I give to you/So I may live/My parents may live/Our grandparents may live/You are my grandparents/My parents/My future/You give to me.”<sup>58</sup> *The Neel Family Diptych* visualizes similar slippage between wealth and identity. For example, the photograph of Ellen Neel witnessing Charlie James at work visually conveys a transfer of intellectual property rights. Likewise, the list of family members that links the two photographs alludes to a string of similar sorts of transfers, from Charlie James to his stepson and friend Mungo Martin; from Ellen Neel to her eldest son Dave Neel; from Dave Neel to his eldest son David Neel, and finally, from David Neel to baby Edwin. Thus, much as a dowry board symbolizes the transfer of title, *The Neel Family Diptych* represents Edwin as a beneficiary of the family’s carving heritage—its wealth. The essence from which Charlie James, Mungo Martin, Ellen Neel, Dave Neel, and David Neel all partake resonates in the carving activities of Edwin and his younger siblings Ellen and Jamie, and is represented in and by *The Neel Family Diptych*.

In this chapter, I have traced the breadth of Neel’s photographic praxis in British Columbia. Although he is primarily known as a portraitist with an anti-Curtis sensibility and for images such as those found in *Our Chiefs and Elders*, his most familiar work, I have shown that Neel’s photography is more diverse, and its diversity engages more richly with contemporary political issues than simply a response to Curtis and the associated mindset of colonialism. In *Our Chiefs and Elders*, Neel does reply to Curtis’s vanishing Indian motif, but his reply also introduces a Kwakwaka’wakw culture that connects with technology, and controls and limits its own public presentation. Neel’s artistic choices mesh with Northwest Coast constructions of identity that include physical appearance, crest display, the protection of indigenous places, and the spiritual omnipresence of previous generations. But at the same time, Neel’s photographs also acknowledge and intervene in the Eurocentric impulse to look and colonize indigenous spaces. I have also argued that the *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson* displays all of these

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<sup>58</sup> David Neel, *You Give to Me*, 1992.

characteristics, and also plays a particularly significant role for Neel's self-fashioning, in his assertion of claims to the artistic rights of another Charlie James, unrelated to the depicted individual, of several generations earlier.

Neel delves even deeper into a complex treatment of identity, specifically of family identity, in two other photographic works, *The Neel Family Diptych* and its companion piece, *You Give to Me*. By modeling his display of photographs on a conventional Kwakwaka'wakw mode of display, the dowry board, and by printing the former piece on alder wood, Neel cleverly connects photography with carving. The dowry board format also enables him to allude to distinctive properties of Northwest Coast identity and family structures and conceptions of body and wealth, in the model of spiritual essence, or sense of embodiment, referred to as 'the box.' Neel's use of text and images—the visual and the nonvisual—is an especially adept reflection of the model of the Kinship I. As was the case with *Self-Portrait with Chief Charlie James Swanson*, Neel's diptychs serve to promote claims to artistic rights, this time, for the generation of family that follows David Neel. In the following chapter, I will analyze how the production and reception of Neel's portrait masks further complicate his identity.

#### 4.0 CARVING THE HEADLINE NEWS, 1989-99

The tradition of keeping the history through the creation of new masks all but died out in the last century. There is not the freedom to create new works today without concern about how “Indian” or “traditional” they are. Much of today’s art follows “ethnographically correct” guidelines. A NWC Native artist today comes under a lot of pressure to produce this ethnographically correct work.<sup>1</sup>

David Neel

Anyone can become an artist, but not anyone can become an Indian. The identity of the artist is mobile and unfixed, as is the artist’s cultural identity, yet together the two identities contribute to the makeup of a complex modern subject.<sup>2</sup>

Gerald McMaster

Neel has encountered some opposition in Native communities from those for whom innovation means an erosion of the culture as they define it.<sup>3</sup>

Charlotte Townsend-Gault

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1989, David Neel began carving masks that depict headline news stories from around the world—the damage done by leaking oil-tankers, the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police, the 1990 Mohawk-police standoff in Quebec, and the burning of

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<sup>1</sup> David Neel, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” in *David Neel: Living Traditions* (Kamloops, BC, Canada: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1998), 14.

<sup>2</sup> McMaster, “Living on Reservation X,” in *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, ed. Gerald McMaster (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Townsend-Gault, “Neel, David,” 411.

the Kuwaiti oil fields by Saddam Hussein, for example.<sup>4</sup> By the time Neel brought his contemporary mask project to a close in 1999, he had carved at least twenty-nine masks with contemporary motifs that include: psychological stress, overpopulation, and capitalism. In a manner that parallels the global themes of his art, Neel has exhibited his masks in a variety of venues around the world. Some of his masks have been danced in indigenous and international fora, and others have been displayed in regional and national galleries and museums.<sup>5</sup> In 1999, he exhibited some of his masks and a carved canoe in the *A latere* section of the Venice Biennale, an especially prestigious international venue.<sup>6</sup> Photographs of these masks have also made their way into the pages and onto the covers of books and magazines focused on the environment, justice, and art.<sup>7</sup> Neel's appearance at the Biennale also yielded a short documentary film produced for Bravo, a Canadian cable television network.<sup>8</sup>

Neel's contemporary-themed masks have provoked myriad responses inside and outside of Northwest coast circles. Some Kwakwaka'wakw have characterized Neel and his masks as "shallow" and "culturally exploitative," but others have enabled some of his masks to be danced at feasts, suggesting their staunch support of Neel.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, cultural outsiders often react with surprise. Anthropologist Charlotte Townsend-Gault finds that Neel's masks "make a strong impact, [which] is to some extent

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<sup>4</sup> David Neel, *Spirit of the Earth: Exhibition Guide* (Vancouver: Vancouver Museum, 1993), 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> Neel, "Modernism in Northwest Coast Art," 15–16.

<sup>6</sup> OnEdge, "WALAS-KWIS-GILA-Travels Great Distances," in *La Biennale di Venezia: 48a Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte*, ed. Harold Szeemann and Cecilia Livernero (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 1999), 246.

<sup>7</sup> Photographs of Neel's masks appear in a variety of venues. For example, Neel's *Mask of the Injustice System* appears on the cover of Dara Culhane's, *The Pleasure of the Crown*; Neel's *Ridicule Mask* appears on the March 1993 cover of *Where Magazine* (Vancouver); Neel's *Lungs of the World* are on the cover of the March/April issue of the environmental newspaper, *EverWild* (Vancouver). Neel's *Residential School Mask* is reproduced in Gary Wyatt's *Spirit Faces: Contemporary Masks of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994). Other Neel masks appear in conjunction with exhibition reviews and announcements.

<sup>8</sup> Neel, David. *Venice Canoe*, dir. Zoe Dirse. 6 min., Bravo Television, 1999, videocassette.

<sup>9</sup> "Another White Native Artist."

dependent on their novelty.”<sup>10</sup> His masks are filled with visual clues about contemporary subject matter that are initially obscured by the medium of carved and painted wood. At presentations that I have given, other scholars, facing what at first appears to be some sort of “traditional” mask, audibly gasp when they hear the mask’s title, *Chernobyl*, for example. Despite the fact that Euro-American artists have routinely alluded to mass media images at least since the 1950s, Neel’s Northwest Coast masks continue to shock, and they remain noteworthy more than fifteen years after their inception.

Neel’s contemporary-themed masks have not gone unnoticed. Letters to the editor, articles, and exhibition reviews appeared in British Columbia newspapers during the early and mid 1990s in conjunction with Neel’s 1991 *Spirit of the Earth* exhibition, which traveled to several sites in Canada.<sup>11</sup> The most extensive scholarly treatment of the masks is contained in the catalogue that accompanied the 1998 Kamloops Art Gallery exhibition, *David Neel: Living Traditions*.<sup>12</sup> The catalogue contains two essays—one by the curator, Andrew Hunter, the other by the artist. Hunter’s essay calls explicit attention to Neel’s training as a photojournalist, to his reverence for the work of the luminary press photographer W. Eugene Smith, and to the fact that headline news is Neel’s mask-making muse.<sup>13</sup> Neel recognizes the complexity of this negotiation. His essay, “Modernism on the Northwest Coast,” responds to others arguing that the Northwest Coast mask-making “tradition” has long been “modern” and is ever changing.<sup>14</sup> As evidence of the tradition’s mutability, he cites historic examples of masks that break from

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<sup>10</sup> Townsend-Gault, “Neel, David,” 409–411.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ruth Raziell, “Masks,” *Shared Vision Magazine*, November 1993; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, “Spirit of the Earth: Masks by David Neel,” *Thunder Bay Art Gallery Imprint*, March–April–May 1995, n.p.; Sharon Shorty, “Masks Show Artist’s Concern for Earth,” *Yukon Times*, 17 November 1995, p. 36; Anne Rosenberg, “David Neel Show,” *Saturday Review*, 3 June 1993, sec. C, p. 7; Alexander Varty, “Neel Carves New Tradition from Suppressed Art,” *Georgia Straight*, 26 March–2 April 1993, p. 31; Karen Romell, “Spirit of the Earth,” *Vancouver Step*, May–June 1993, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> See Hunter, “Director’s Forward,” and Neel, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art.”

<sup>13</sup> Hunter, “Director’s Forward,” 7.

<sup>14</sup> Neel, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” 12–17.

conventions of crest display, and masks dating back to the eighteenth century, depicting drunken European sailors and tragedies such as the smallpox disease.<sup>15</sup> Thus Neel finds a tradition interconnected with the world at large and sees his work as perpetuating that tradition.<sup>16</sup> To further buttress his argument, Neel refers to the contentious entanglement between Northwest Coast masks and European modernism in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition '*Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, and specifically to the pairing of a Kwakwaka'wakw mask and a detail of a Picasso painting on the catalogue cover.<sup>17</sup> In this essay, in contrast to Neel's familial sentiment that I explored in Chapter 2.0, he levies sharp criticism against the European artists who conceptualized indigenous artists as "primitive," echoing some of the sentiments expressed by Clifford in celebrated his exhibition review. Neel's critique situated in conjunction with his familial response provides an important clue to indicate that, in fact, he has multiple responses to the MoMA exhibition. The essays in the *David Neel: Living Traditions* catalogue, then, provide an enticing argument that places Neel's masks at an especially interesting confluence of European Modernism, photojournalism, and Northwest Coast aesthetics.

Instead of perpetuating the Kwakwaka'wakw-or-not stalemate, I will argue that with his contemporary themed masks, Neel sets out to engender a third, politicized, aesthetic space that links several seemingly antithetical categories: contemporary and traditional, religious object and work of art, news stories and story narratives. I will show why the masks provoke, and how they carry currency in more than one discursive community, by mobilizing the assumptions of each domain to challenge those of the others. As a consequence, the masks ultimately have a polarizing effect on their viewers; they are especially charged because they prompt the recognition of difference in distinctive ways within and outside of Kwakwaka'wakw circles. Neel's masks demand the recognition of Kwakwaka'wakw culture as one with global concerns. This demand has struck sparks among the Kwakwaka'wakw, and has to a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13.



great degree marginalized Neel in Northwest Coast carving circles. At the same time, Neel's masks have played an important role in establishing his reputation nationally and internationally as a Native American artist.

In this chapter, I trace the history of Neel's masks, including their exhibition and reception history during the 1990s. To do so, I will begin with Neel's environmental mask series, his earliest program of contemporary-themed masks. We will see that Neel's concerns shift over the course of the decade, broadening to include social ills, anxiety, capital, and technology. Before I proceed further, I should indicate that I have deferred any detailed discussion of Neel's politically themed masks—*The Mask of The Injustice System*, *The Mask of Racism (Rodney King)*, and *The Mohawk Warrior*—until the following chapter, where I will position them in relationship to a companion silkscreen series and with respect to political discussions of truth, identity, and justice.

#### 4.2 CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPES: THE ENVIRONMENTAL MASKS

For many, the pairing of Native Americans and environmentalism brings to mind a tired trope of Native Americans as guardians of a pristine wilderness, exemplified by the “Crying Indian,” played by Iron Eyes Cody, featured in the United States Government's 1974 *Keep America Beautiful* advertising campaign.<sup>18</sup> With images of contemporary ecological disasters from the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East incised into wood, David Neel's environmentally themed masks are suggestive of quite another image. Neel began making the masks in 1989, two years after his return to British Columbia, when he started his apprenticeship with carvers Beau Dick and Wayne Alfred. Thus, Neel initiated the series while he was still relatively new to the discipline and still experimenting with Northwest Coast painting and carving techniques. As with most Northwest Coast masks, those in Neel's series depict faces made of carved and

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<sup>18</sup> For a reproduction of the image, see ““Crying Indian’ Iron Eyes Cody Dies,” CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/US/9901/04/obit.cody/> (accessed 16 June 2004). For more details on Euro-American representations of Indigenous people as nature, see Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 38–49.

painted wood, using colors that are in keeping with the conventional palette of the region, including green, red, black, blue, brown, and yellow. Many of the masks are adorned with the expected sorts of embellishments—horsehair, cow’s teeth, and cedar, but others are decked out in bank notes, coins, and computer disks.

Neel’s earliest masks were inspired by environmental disasters close to his British Columbia home.<sup>19</sup> One such mask, *Clear Cut* (1989), is a carved face embellished with painted branches, and commemorates the logging of the rainforests of British Columbia’s Meares Island that violated Nuu-Chah-Nulth claims to aboriginal title over the land and infringed on the efforts of environmental groups to preserve one of the few old growth forests left in the province.<sup>20</sup> Histories of the event, recorded in environmental newsletters, suggest that logging activities of 1988 and 1989 provoked several acts of political intervention by members of environmental and aboriginal groups, including the disruption of travel along logging routes; acts of intervention that continued throughout the 1990s.<sup>21</sup> Another early mask, *Oil Spill* (1989), was also inspired by the jagged intersections between humans, corporations, and the environment—marine pollution in the waters near Vancouver, British Columbia that occurred just prior to the more famous spill of the *Exxon Valdez* in March 1989.<sup>22</sup> The smudged faces that emerged from the oil saturated water signal the animals’ newly acquired tragic identities; they wear oily masks imposed by outside forces—the forces of the modern world.

Of these two masks, *Oil Spill* quickly emerged as the public face of Neel’s nascent mask series. In February 1991, *Oil Spill* was exhibited in *The Spirit Sings*, an exhibition of contemporary indigenous

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<sup>19</sup> Neel, *Spirit of the Earth*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Western Canada Wilderness Committee, “Beautiful Clayoquot Sound,” Educational Report, Summer 1996, <http://www.wildernesscommittee.org/campaigns/rainforest/island/clayoquot/reports/Vol15No12/> (accessed 16 March 2005).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Neel, *Spirit of the Earth*, 1.

art at the Glenbow Gallery, near Calgary, Alberta.<sup>23</sup> A photograph of the mask was one of four images of contemporary Native American art reproduced in Townsend-Gault's review of the exhibition.<sup>24</sup> Two months later a photograph of *Oil Spill* surfaced again alongside an article, published in the British Columbia based newspaper *Kahtou*, announcing Neel's receipt of government grant monies and his plans to expand the series.<sup>25</sup> In the eyes of some Kwakwaka'wakw, *Oil Spill* became an early emblem of the series and of Neel's identity, as will become evident in the following section.

By 1993, Neel had carved more than a dozen masks that centered on an array of ecological issues: masks with titles such as *Endangered Species*, *Overpopulation*, *Ozone*, *Smog*, *Chernobyl*, *The Kuwaiti Smoke Creature*, and *Industrial Age*.<sup>26</sup> As his subject matter suggests, Neel was tapping into international debates about the environment. Anthropologists Mario Blaser, Harvey Feit, and Glenn McRae noted in the introductory essay to their 2004 book, *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization*, that during the 1980s many indigenous rights organizations were allied with environmental groups in an effort to protect indigenous life ways and knowledge systems.<sup>27</sup> The authors went on to note that by 1992, with the signing of the United Nations' *Agenda 21*, the preservation of indigenous people was deemed the most important concern of contemporary environmental legislation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Having Voices and Using Them: First Nations Artists and 'Native Art,'" *Arts Magazine* (Vancouver), February 1991, 70.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> "Kwagiutl Artist Addresses World Issues," *Kahtou News*, April 1991, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> In an effort determine if Neel moved from local to global environmental themes, I have endeavored to date his masks. However, this is no easy undertaking due to the scarcity of written documentation prior to the *Spirit of the Earth* exhibition pamphlet of 1993. Although the pamphlet describes the twenty exhibited masks, it only dates his first two, *Oil Spill* and *Clear Cut*. The *Kahtou* article makes it clear that the *Mask of War* and *Chernobyl* were also in existence by April of 1991.

<sup>27</sup> Mario Blaser, Harvey Feit, and Glenn McRae, *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 9–11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

With these anthropologists' observations in mind, we can see that Neel's masks, in general, not only visualize indigenous participation in shaping international environmental treaties, but also reveal that indigenous people are a part of the world's environment worthy of preservation. Neel appears to explicitly underscore this with his *Endangered Species Mask*, which, according to his catalogue entry, commemorates the 230 Amazonian tribes that have been wiped out over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup>

Neel's mask series, though global in its concerns, has very explicit Northwest Coast roots. Like other Northwest Coast masks, all of those in Neel's environmental group depict the relationships between human beings and beings of the land, sea, and sky. Neel's masks, however, do not generally represent the more conventional figures such as Kumugwe' (Lord-of-the-Undersea) or Thunderbird, but rather, they present newfangled beings such as nondescript oil-saturated beasts and smoke creatures. For two of his masks, however, the *Kuwaiti Smoke Creature* and *Chernobyl*, Neel incised current disasters onto conventional Northwest Coast mask designs. The *Smoke Creature* is based on a 'Tlingit mask and *Chernobyl* is predicated on a Kwakwaka'wakw mask of Bukwis, (The-Wild-Man-of-the-Woods).<sup>30</sup> Another aspect is that Northwest Coast masks are conventionally meant to be "danced," and in a letter written to another family member in the Winter of 1993, Neel described a masked play about the environment that he was working on in collaboration with the prominent Canadian *Métis* playwright and performance artist Margo Kane.<sup>31</sup> In a subsequent e-mail, Neel told me that the play was to be based on the Kingdom of the Animals dance, which incorporates more than forty non-crest bearing masks that

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<sup>29</sup> Neel, *Spirit of the Earth*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> David Neel, "Kuwaiti Smoke Creature," e-mail to author, 26 August 2002.

<sup>31</sup> David Neel, letter dated Spring 1991, Neel Family Papers. Margo Kane is a prominent performance artist, who rose to national attention in the mid 1980s. More details of her biography are available at "Margo Kane: 'I Have a Voice That Wants to Say Something.'" *First Nations Drum*, Fall 2000, [http://www.firstnationsdrum.com/fall2000/bio\\_kane.htm](http://www.firstnationsdrum.com/fall2000/bio_kane.htm) (accessed 27 October 2004).

danced simultaneously.<sup>32</sup> Although, the play was never performed (in fact, the script was never completed), the letter suggests that early on in the project, Neel intended the masks to be danced and not just to be seen as static sculptural forms.

### 4.3 PHOTOJOURNALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES

Headline news was also one of Neel's sources of inspiration, as Andrew Hunter observed in his 1997 *David Neel: Living Traditions* catalogue essay.<sup>33</sup> Writing with respect to the *Mask of Racism* (Rodney King), Hunter called attention to mass media coverage of the 1991 Rodney King beating that introduced both himself and Neel to a brutal event that took place almost two thousand miles away from his home in British Columbia.<sup>34</sup> In keeping with a rather common sentiment, that engagement with the mass media creates a viewing community, Hunter conceptualizes the mass viewing of the amateur video of the King beating as a point of communion.<sup>35</sup> In his analysis, however, Hunter does not take into account how different sorts of life experiences can dramatically affect the individual viewer's preparedness to receive and respond to images of the King beating. Some citizens of Los Angeles rioted. Then president George H. W. Bush sent troops to Los Angeles. Neel carved a Northwest Coast style mask. Neel's alternative choice of action might more aptly be interpreted as showing that mass media produces variety of responses, rather than provoking cultural synthesis.

I think the work of photojournalist W. Eugene Smith, whom, as I noted in Chapter 3.0, Neel routinely credits with having shaped his praxis of photography, is especially present in Neel's masks.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> David Neel, "Masks," e-mail to author, 18 November 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Hunter, "Director's Forward," 6–7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See for example, Benedict Anderson's analysis of print capitalism in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 41–46.

<sup>36</sup> David Neel, Introduction to *Our Chiefs and Elders*, 11.

As a student of photojournalism Neel carefully studied the work of Smith, who, like Neel, was concerned with the environmental issues, as illustrated by *Minimata*, a photoessay that Smith authored with his wife Aileen during the early 1970s. Essayist Ben Maddow in his 1986 book, *Let The Truth Be the Prejudice, W. Eugene Smith: His Life and Photographs*, recalls that the Japanese-owned Chisso Corporation, a large chemical company and plastic manufacturer, began dumping mercury-laden waste into the bay near the Japanese island village of Minimata shortly before World War II. The industrial waste was then absorbed by plankton and transformed into an organic poison that killed local marine life.<sup>37</sup> People who consumed the mercury-laced fish suffered damage to their kidneys and to their central nervous system. According to Maddow, Minamata disease could also initiate miscarriages and cripple children before they were born. By 1968, there were 600 tons of mercury at the bottom of Minamata Bay, and the incurable disease had struck more than 10,000 people.<sup>38</sup>

With the hope of raising public awareness about the relatively unknown tragedy, the Smiths began photographing Minamata.<sup>39</sup> Some of their photographs depict the effluent spilling out of the Chisso plant, but most of them show the victims of Minamata disease—the crippled hands and legs, and the public protests against the Chisso Corporation. In keeping with the tenor of Eugene Smith’s previous photo essays, *Minimata* aimed to raise global awareness and thus reduce human injustice through that dissemination. Nonetheless, the Smiths’ photographs present a picture of the disease and its victims as regionally specific; there are no references to the impact of the disease on aquatic life or to the world beyond the island city of Minamata. Yet, it now seems almost inconceivable that Minamata disease was entirely isolated, for some sea life moves around and becomes food for more than one community, as

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Maddow, *Let the Truth Be the Prejudice: W. Eugene Smith, His Life and Photographs* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1986), 71.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

recent warnings about the mercury content in tuna fish indicate.<sup>40</sup> *Minimata* presents a picture of a devastated microcosm, a sense of isolation reaffirmed by the essay's site-specific title. In contrast, Neel not only depicts topics that move across borders—nuclear disasters, Ozone depletion, and deforestation, for example—but by filtering these global concerns through the medium of the carved mask, he also suggests that whatever happens on the other side of the world affects indigenous life in the Pacific Northwest.

The differences between the Smiths' depiction of the poisonous waters of Minamita Bay and Neel's more generic interpretation of environmental issues can be explained partially by a shift in popular perceptions of environment and pollution that occurred during the mid 1970s. Political scientists Ken Conca, Michael Albery, and Geoffrey D. Dabelko in the introductory essay to their 1995 book *Green Planet Blues: Environmental Politics from Stockholm to Rio* focus on changes in public perceptions of the environment between the first United Nations conference about the environment, held in Stockholm, in 1972, and the next United Nations environmental gathering held twenty years later in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>41</sup> They note a shift from a focus on specific issues of water and air pollution towards a more systemic scientific paradigm, a rise in the press corps from a few journalists to the attendance of about 8,000 reporters, and a more diverse array of political players, including greater representation from the Southern Hemisphere and non-governmental organizations. Despite these changes, the authors argue that people were still polarized by political and cultural differences, and thus they characterized environmental politics as a site of interconnection and fracture.<sup>42</sup>

The rise in press focus on the environment that Conca, Albery, and Dableko date to the late 1980s, and the history of photojournalism, including Smith's contribution in particular, provide partial

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<sup>40</sup> See for example, Vincent Iannelli, "Fish and Mercury Warning: Read About the Latest Guidelines," About.com, [http://pediatrics.about.com/cs/nutrition/a/mercury\\_fish.htm](http://pediatrics.about.com/cs/nutrition/a/mercury_fish.htm) (accessed 31 March 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Ken Conca, Michael Albery, and Geoffrey D. Dabelko, eds., *Green Planet Blues: Environmental Politics from Stockholm to Rio* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 6–9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

aspects of an explanation of Neel's own selection of subject matter and methods of expression. Neel also builds upon a practice most notably developed by Warhol in the 60s and Picasso in the 30s, of artists who also transformed the traumas of headline news—automobile accidents and war, respectively—into works of art. These artistic connections, and their dependence on the tools and products of photojournalism, will be considered in the following chapter.

#### 4.4 CHERNOBYL: AN EVENT OF INTERCONNECTION AND FRACTURE

Between 1991 and 1993, Neel mobilized his masks along several different routes from the private space of his studio into the public sphere. In the spring of 1991, the aboriginal newspaper *Kahtou* published a photograph of his *Oil Spill* mask along with an article about the series.<sup>43</sup> In 1993, *Mother Earth* and *Lungs of the World* appeared within the context of Neel's photographic diptych, *You Give To Me*, displayed at the National Gallery of Canada. In *You Give to Me*, Neel's stepsons Alvin and Simon playfully wear the masks. The most comprehensive display of Neel's masks was the Vancouver Museum's 1993 *Spirit of the Earth*, a single artist show curated by David Neel. In this exhibition, many of the environmental masks made their public debut along with his series of politically themed masks; this exhibit echoed the structure of Neel's prior exhibits, *Freedman's Town/ State-Thomas* and *Our Chiefs and Elders*, which juxtaposed his images with panels of text. Instead of photographs, *The Spirit of the Earth* displayed twenty carved masks along with published quotations about the environment by noted Native American leaders—Sitting Bull, for example.<sup>44</sup> According to a review, by Ann Rosenberg that appeared in the *Vancouver Sun*, the masks and texts were hung along the outside walls and Neel's *Mother Earth* mask was placed in a cabinet at the center of the exhibition space.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "Kwagiutl Artist Addresses World Issues," 18.

<sup>44</sup> David Neel, "Spirit of the Earth," e-mail to author, 31 January 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Ann Rosenberg, "Now On Show," *Vancouver Sun*, 23 June 1993, n.p.



Neel and the staff of the Vancouver Museum took care to document *The Spirit of the Earth* in several ways. The Vancouver Museum published a five-page pamphlet that contained short verbal descriptions—two or three sentences—for each of the displayed pieces.<sup>46</sup> For example, Neel noted that the *Oil Spill* mask was inspired by a spill in the waters of British Columbia and *The Kuwaiti Smoke Creature* was prompted by Saddam Hussein’s burning of Kuwait’s oil fields at the end of the first Gulf War.<sup>47</sup> Although no images were included in the pamphlet, the Vancouver Museum filmed Neel’s installation, creating a separate visual record. In addition, there were fewer official forms of documentation. For example, local newspapers published exhibition reviews, which were usually illustrated with photographs of Neel’s masks.

As *The Spirit of the Earth* exhibition got underway, *Chernobyl* slipped into the limelight. Of the seven illustrated reviews that I found, photographs of *Chernobyl* accompanied at least four.<sup>48</sup> The other reviews included images of *Mother Earth*, *Ozone*, *Overpopulation*, *Ridicule of a Chief*, and *Lungs of The Earth*.<sup>49</sup> But Neel’s earlier favorite, *Oil Spill*, was not featured in any of the reviews that I found. The popularization of *Chernobyl* was manifest in other ways as well. For example, the exhibition pamphlet description refers to the meltdown, and for this mask alone, creates an iconographical statement by calling explicit attention to the cracked cooling towers painted in the mask’s crown.<sup>50</sup> Neel wrote,

Who does not know the name Chernobyl, the site of the major Russian nuclear disaster. A warning of thins to come? This mask depicts a creature, the demon of Chernobyl, with demonic contenance and cooling towers stylistically depicted on the forehead.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See Neel, *Spirit of the Earth*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Ann Rosenberg, “On Show,” *Saturday Review*, 5 June 1993, sec. C, p. 7; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, “Spirit of the Earth”; Varty, “Neel Carves New Tradition”; “David Neel,” *Reviews* Summer 1994. *Chernobyl* was one of four masks pictured in Raziell, “Masks.”

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Raziell, “Masks,” and Sorty, “Masks Show Artist’s Concern for Earth.”

<sup>50</sup> Neel, *Spirit of the Earth*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Notoably absent from Neel's description is the fact that the structure of *Chernobyl* is predicated on the mask associated with Bukwis (the Wild-Man-of-the-Woods), a conventional Kwakwaka'wakw mask design, known by its green complexion and emaciated facial structure.<sup>52</sup> Of the twelve masks in the environmental series, only *Chernobyl* forges a direct connection between a news story and a Kwakwaka'wakw story narrative.

Judging from newspaper accounts about the series, Neel probably carved *Chernobyl* sometime between the spring of 1991—when he received funds to support the creation of the mask series—and the spring of 1993, when *Chernobyl* first appeared at the opening of the *Spirit of the Earth* exhibition—at least five years after the meltdown. In the early 1990s, the word “Chernobyl” signaled the explosion at one of Soviet Union's nuclear power plants, the deaths of dozens of workers, the radioactive cloud that had spread across the European landscape, and some reports estimate that more than 4,000 Ukrainians died from the effects of the cloud.<sup>53</sup> The disaster at Chernobyl also left in its wake birth defects, evacuated cities or “ghost towns,” hundreds of orphans, a deadly cleanup mission, and a leaking containment structure mordantly referred to as the “sarcophagus” in some accounts, or as “Vesuvius,” after the volcanic eruption of ancient Rome in other narratives.<sup>54</sup>

Instead of drawing parallels between the macabre tale of Chernobyl and Mediterranean antiquity, Neel translated the disaster into the mask of Bukwis, connecting the news story to a Kwakwaka'wakw story narrative about a sinister being associated with death and poisonous food. Northwest Coast curator Peter McNair, in his 1997 essay, “Power of the Shining Heavens,” described Bukwis as “the keeper of

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<sup>52</sup> Peter MacNair, “Power of the Shining Heavens,” in *Down from the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 169.

<sup>53</sup> Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 89–220; International Chernobyl Research Information Network. “The Situation in Ukraine.” Chernobyl.Info, <http://www.chernobyl.info/index.php?userhash=5293354&%20navID=6&IID=2> (accessed 5 January 2005).

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

drowned souls, he causes loss of reason and sanity; he lures those seeking escape into the night woods with faint firelight...and those who are drowned or who are enticed to eat his food are lost forever and become members of his ghostly retinue.”<sup>55</sup> Neel visualized the parallels between the two stories by superimposing a painting of two cracked, hour-glass shaped cooling towers, structures commonly associated with nuclear power plants—onto a mask bearing some of Bukwis’s features, a green, skull-like face, and a pair of pointed ears. In this way, Neel calls attention to the similarities between the tales of Chernobyl and Bukwis.

To some extent the mask is about connections between images and subsequent meanings that emerge. Images of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant published shortly after the explosion usually feature the damaged reactor and the concrete sarcophagus designed to prevent further radiation leakage. They do not show a pair of hourglass-shaped cooling towers as the mask does; in fact, the cooling towers at Chernobyl were shorter conical structures. The sort of hourglass-shaped building that Neel depicted is one of the most common and effective shapes for cooling down a nuclear power plant’s core circulation system. They are the shape made famous by photographs of the three-mile island disaster in 1976, and have become the symbol of nuclear power.<sup>56</sup> By painting an image of the cooling towers on the *Chernobyl* mask, Neel appears to have equated the Ukrainian nuclear power plant with nuclear power plants in general, indicating a plethora of tragedies just waiting to happen.

But many of the mask’s viewers do not initially see the overlapping relationship between Neel’s painting of the hourglass-shaped towers and the face of Bukwis. The twin cooling towers are initially camouflaged by our expectation that we are looking at a “traditional” mask—at an historic or culturally isolated object (an expectation that the metaphor of the ancient volcanic eruption does not seem to carry). In an effort to challenge this blindness, Neel evokes text—the mask’s title and pamphlet description—to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> For popular culture images of Three Mile Island see, for example, Time Magazine Archives, [http://i.timeinc.net/time/magazine/archive/covers/1979/1101790409\\_400.jpg](http://i.timeinc.net/time/magazine/archive/covers/1979/1101790409_400.jpg) (accessed 28 February 2005).

redirect our viewing of his mask.<sup>57</sup> In this way, Neel forces us to confront some of our preconceived assumptions about indigenous people as either isolated from world events or living in the past: they too bear witness to the effects of Chernobyl. In contrast to his explicit representation of the Chernobyl narrative, Neel provides us with only visual cues to Bukwis's identity and the story of the malevolent apparition. By remaining silent about the Kwakwaka'wakw origins of the mask, he reserves Bukwis for the educated few.

Such an interpretive gap politicizes the aesthetics of *Chernobyl*, which can be illuminated by turning to theories concerned with a similar sort of linguistic structure: written narratives transcribed in parallel, referred to as a "dual-language text." Although the dual-language text is conventionally deployed for teaching a second or foreign language, or to ensure a more complete reading, Chadwick Allen theorized in *Blood Narrative* that the dual-language text can also be a political instrument as well.<sup>58</sup> Allen's explanation concerns Maori-English stories published in *Ta Ao Hou/The New World*, a government-sponsored magazine, and it is worth considering the significance of this duality.<sup>59</sup> According to Allen different modes of reading elicit different sorts of responses,

Read sequentially [the] Maori and English versions...are close approximations of each other. Differences become apparent, however, when one reads back and forth across the gap. No matter how accurate the translation, there are discrepancies between the culturally defined connotations of Maori and English expressions. And, less explicitly, there are indications of the power of dual-language texts to challenge dominant discourses...<sup>60</sup>

In a fashion similar to Townsend-Gault's argument about trivia discussed in Chapter 3.0, Allen goes on to point out that "The presence of the 'other' language in the dual-language text suggests the presence of additional meaning unavailable to the monolingual reader...only the bilingual reader has full access to all

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<sup>57</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 41.

<sup>58</sup> Allen, *Blood Narrative*, 50–51.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–61.

of the text's potential meanings: Maori, English, and the two combined..."<sup>61</sup> In much the same manner, the most complete interpretation of Neel's mask is only available to viewers who are familiar with the two tales. Thus, he makes us reckon with the limits of our knowledge and grapple with the presence of other cultures.

Allen's analysis of the dual-language text shares much with tenets of art historian Hal Foster's essay "The Return of the Real," in which he interprets how the misaligned registers of Warhol's *Ambulance Disasters* create a second order of trauma—beyond that of the image—an effect that Foster calls the "common *punctum*."<sup>62</sup> According to Foster, the second order of trauma is caused by a departure from what is anticipated—by the disruption of our *a priori* assumptions about the homogenizing forces of mass culture. Writing with respect to Warhol's *Ambulance Disasters*, Foster locates this form of *punctum* at the point at which we realize that the two mechanically reproduced images—images that according to the logic of mass production ought to be the same—are, in fact, quite different: the moment of the common *punctum* occurs when the unexpected is realized.<sup>63</sup> Neel's translation of current events into the medium of the carved mask produces a similar sort of effect. By evoking the medium of the carved mask, Neel sets up his viewers for a uniquely indigenous encounter, an expectation that he swiftly inverts through the interplay between mass media images and carved masks. Yet, unlike Foster's interpretation of Warhol, which is focused on his subtle challenges to the seeming reality of mass media, I think Neel has a somewhat more pronounced purpose. For, he provokes acknowledgement of indigenous co-presence that is easily obscured by the universal properties so often associated with photography and its offspring, the silkscreen print.

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

<sup>62</sup> Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 132.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 136.

Before proceeding further, I ought to be clear that this chapter, thus far, has addressed the theoretical complexity of Neel's masks with respect to the world at large, and especially how Allen's theorization of the dual-language text and Foster's of the common punctum problematize Andrew Hunter's belief that mass culture provokes a common experience of viewing. In the following section, I will turn to the political history of Kwakwaka'wakw masks and how that plays into the criticism of Neel's masks by some among the Kwakwaka'wakw.

#### 4.5 KWAKWAKA'WAKW RECEPTION AND CRITICISM OF NEEL'S MASKS

The reception of Neel's masks cannot be separated from the political history of Kwakwaka'wakw masks. From 1872 until 1951 the Federal Government of Canada criminalized the central mechanism of Kwakwaka'wakw religious and social life, the potlatch—the feast. As I discussed in Chapter 2.0, this entailed a prohibition of indigenous ownership of feast hardware, including masks.<sup>64</sup> One of the most notorious acts of religious and cultural persecution took place during a raid by government agents during the Dan Cranmer Potlatch of 1921, a raid that resulted in the confiscation of masks and the imprisonment of many members of the participating noble classes.<sup>65</sup> After the raid on the Cranmer potlatch, government officials sold off most of the surviving masks to collectors around the world, including the British Museum and the Heye Foundation, and some made their way into the private collections of Surrealists like André Breton.<sup>66</sup> The confiscated masks were sought after because they were composed of abstract

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<sup>64</sup> For a detailed political history, see Douglas Cole, "The History of the Kwakiutl Potlatch," in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (New York: American Museum of Natural History; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 134–176.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>66</sup> For an authoritative history on the confiscation and sale of the masks see, U'mista Cultural Society, "Potlatch Collection." For an overview of the Surrealists' history of collecting Native North American objects, see Elizabeth Cowling, "The Eskimos, The American Indians and the Surrealists," *Art History* 1 (December 1978): 485–500. For details about the repatriation of the Andre Breton mask to the U'mista Cultural Center, see Clifford Krauss, "Reclaiming Stolen Faces of Their Forefathers," *New York Times*, 18 September 2003, sec. A, p. 4.

forms that appealed to Euro-American aesthetic sensibilities shaped by Modernism, as is suggested by the thesis of MoMa's 'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art exhibit.

The history of mask production, display, and reception continues to be affected by events that took place during the first half of the twentieth century. During the prohibition of the potlatch, the production of ceremonial regalia went underground. Yet some carvers cleverly engineered a route around the obstacles and kept the practice of mask making alive by turning to the market economy provided by cultural outsiders, as Hawker, among others, has argued.<sup>67</sup> For example, during the 1940s and 50s, Ellen Neel designed masks to decorate the walls of suburban homes and translated Northwest Coast designs to unconventional media such as textiles and china.<sup>68</sup> Since the decriminalization of the potlatch in 1951, some Kwakwaka'wakw have worked towards the repatriation of the confiscated feast hardware and have founded the Kwakwaka'wakw museums at Cape Mudge and Alert Bay.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the production of masks has been on the rise throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, in 1983, more than thirty years after the Federal Government repealed the religious sanctions, anthropologist Karen Duffek noted that the majority of masks were being carved for the market economy, not feasts. Nonetheless, she also pointed out, the mask is arguably one of the most conservative of Northwest Coast artistic genres.<sup>70</sup> Her remarks suggest that even masks carved for the contemporary market economy are usually associated with story narratives and historic forms—unlike many of David Neel's masks.

With this historical backdrop in mind, it is not too surprising that Neel's masks have received some criticism from some other Kwakwaka'wakw. In March of 1993, just as Neel's *The Spirit of the*

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<sup>67</sup> Hawker 100–125.

<sup>68</sup> Peter MacNair, "Enduring and Evolving Traditions," in *Down from the Shimmering Sky: Mask of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press; Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1998), 181.

<sup>69</sup> U'mista Cultural Society, "The Potlatch Collection."

<sup>70</sup> In Karen Duffek's *A Guide to Buying Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Arts* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, 1983), 5, she points out that silkscreen prints are probably the most elastic Northwest Coast art medium.

*Earth* exhibition was about to open, one self-identified Kwakwaka'wakw verbally contested Neel's masks and his indigenous identity in a letter to the editor of *Monday Magazine*, an alternative press based in Victoria, British Columbia.<sup>71</sup> The letter begins with a reminder to readers of the confiscation of Kwakwaka'wakw masks and the imprisonment of mask holders in 1922. The letter quickly turns to Neel and his masks, and offers the following opinions,

The trouble I have with latter-day Indians like Neel is that they have little or no understanding of our culture...each real mask has a song, dance, and story...otherwise it is meaningless...What kind of dance does one do wearing an oilspill mask?<sup>72</sup>

The letter ended by accusing Neel of “cultural exploitation,” “of lacking humility,” and of being “just another White Native artist.”<sup>73</sup> It is difficult to know, more than ten years later, how representative these remarks are of the mindset of other Kwakwaka'wakw, for at the same time, other Kwakwaka'wakw were enabling Neel to dance some of his contemporary-themed masks in conventional venues, as I will detail with respect to the *Mask of the Mohawk Warrior* in Chapter 5.0.

Similar criticism re-emerged six years later, in a 1999 article, “Contemporary Mask-Makers Carve a New Niche,” published in the Vancouver based alternative press, *The Georgia Straight*. Reporter Beverly Cramp quoted another Kwakwaka'wakw who gave Neel the following mixed review,

I know David and his work and some of it really turns me on, but there is more he has to do. Tradition is important to us and David invents his own. We have to give our culture more reverence.<sup>74</sup>

In the same article, Cramp quoted yet another Kwakwaka'wakw, who describe Neel as

a bold artist and he does contemporary expressions using ancient techniques. The difference is the depth of meaning. Without a link to ancient stories, dancing with masks and songs would be theater...when you do not follow time honored ways, then you are violating your own protocol.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “Another White Native Artist.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Beverly Cramp, “Contemporary Mask-Makers Carve a New Niche,” *Georgia Straight*, 17–24 June 1999, p. 103.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 102.



The article closed with the latter's assessment, "All of us possess part of the truth, depending on our individual experiences, and as we share our personal truths we get closer to the universal truth...David Neel and all carvers are a part of that universal truth and that's what is really important."<sup>76</sup>

Although each of Neel's Kwakwaka'wakw critics targets different aspects of Neel's mask-making practice, all allude to Neel's relationship to Kwakwaka'wakw circles and to his subject matter. Their remarks about Neel, I will contend, cannot be separated from the history of colonialism, and in particular, efforts to destroy the heart of Kwakwaka'wakw culture, which include the potlatch and families. Their remarks about "latter-day Indians" or "White Native artists" are motivated, at least in part, by a justified concern about incursions by outsiders including those Kwakwaka'wakw who have made belated connections to Kwakwaka'wakw communities. As I noted in Chapter 2.0, Neel was born in Vancouver to Kwagiutl carver Dave Neel, whom family Phil Nuytten described in the *Totem Carvers* as the "heir apparent" to Ellen Neel's carving legacies.<sup>77</sup> In addition, I noted that after Dave Neel's death, his infant son, David Neel, was not reared among Kwakwaka'wakw carvers or with the guidance of Kwagiutl elders; he resided about seven hundred miles away in Calgary, Alberta. As a young adult, furthermore, he moved on to Lawrence, Kansas, and then to Dallas, Texas before he returned to British Columbia in 1987 at the age of twenty-seven. In the eyes of some, I suspect these biographical details render Neel just another cultural outsider irrespective of his Kwagiutl genealogy or of his efforts to revitalize family connections.

It must also be remembered that Neel is not the only "outsider" to have had a troubled reception within Kwakwaka'wakw circles. In 1982, only a few years before Neel's return to British Columbia, Nuytten, noted that, generally, "the children of white parentage were not as readily accepted in [Alert Bay]. Nuytten speculates that the 1920s were much like the mid 1980s in that "it matters little what your

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>77</sup> Nuytten, *Totem Carvers*, 43–75.

actual parentage was, only whether you look ‘white’ or ‘Indian.’”<sup>78</sup> And, he considered the specific case of Ellen Neel, who “was accepted,” though she was the child of mixed heritage. He goes on to argue that several factors contributed to her positive reception, “Her grandfather, Charlie James was well known for his carving. Ellen spoke both Kwak’wala and English with equal facility and she carved and painted in the traditional manner.”<sup>79</sup> Although Nuytten refers to the “look” of the individual, the evidence he relies on to explain Ellen Neel’s acceptance emphasizes her behavior and social connections, not her physical appearance.

If Nuytten’s analysis of Ellen Neel’s acceptance in Alert Bay is right, then it also provides valuable clues to the troubles David Neel encountered. In contrast with his grandmother, Neel did not grow up with the benefit of learning social mores from his Kwagiutl father or with the guidance of Kwakwaka’wakw elders, and he did not learn to carve before he was twenty-six-years old. In 1993, he had only been a part of the local Kwakwaka’wakw scene for five years, and so his social connections did not have deep roots. Yet he was also the eldest son of the illustrious Dave Neel, and as a consequence, I think, David Neel was probably held to higher standards than many other Kwakwaka’wakw who return home as adults. In the eyes of some Kwakwaka’wakw, he was probably supposed to know more than he did; he was supposed to behave differently than he did. In this regard, the debates about Neel’s identity and the validity of his masks are the product of the fragmented state of the indigenous world as well as the politics of his dual lineage that I discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

As a carver, Neel acted differently as well. Instead of simply adopting the Kwakwaka’wakw status quo, he chose to negotiate the perceived boundaries of Kwakwaka’wakw culture by highlighting concerns about new sorts of interconnections between Northwest Coast cultures and the wider world. In so doing, he highlighted parallels between Kwakwaka’wakw conventions of storytelling and those of the news media. This work also draws upon discussions of current events at potlatches that are now routine

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 44.

and practically embedded within the structure of the event, and so, Neel presented the up-to-date character of Kwakwaka'wakw life in his depictions of news stories. But, Neel's masks demanded recognition of a world beyond what *some* viewed as the boundaries of Kwakwaka'wakw culture. Thus, Neel and his masks gained political momentum because they provoked Kwakwaka'wakw "recognition" of the "other," much like Allen finds in his analysis of the dual-language text.

Neel appears, then, to be attempting a complex cultural negotiation that acknowledges a pre-existing Kwakwaka'wakw dialogue with a wider world. Although some of the Kwakwaka'wakw critics cited above find Neel's approach to be damaging to tradition, it is in keeping with a political aesthetic appreciated by some other contemporary Native American artists. Neel, his masks, and the surrounding criticism index a condition described by curator, critic, and artist Gerald McMaster (Plains Cree) in the introductory essay to his 1997 exhibition catalogue *Reservation X*. McMaster's "Living on Reservation X" focuses on the nature of the indigenous community and the goals of contemporary Indigenous artists. "Reservation X," McMaster wrote,

concerns the ideas of community and identity. As many of the artists affirm, a contemporary community is no longer a fixed, unified, or stable place; it exists in a state of flux. Communities were often a means of maintaining some sense of order and coherence. They established sameness, thereby making difference difficult. Similarly, identity is seen as mobile against the stable concepts of the past. Language and religion, the great integrating forces are now in a state of crisis. As the world grows more complex, so do our communities and our identities.<sup>80</sup>

Neel's childhood and education, like those of many twentieth-century children of Kwakwaka'wakw parentage, are "unconventional" by Kwakwaka'wakw standards. The difference indexes the sort of break in order brought about by the rapid rate of movement that McMaster describes. By depicting larger crises connected to the increase in mobility and cross-cultural flow, Neel attempts to re-build the coherence of contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw culture by acknowledging these changing conditions. This undertaking requires Neel to explore and map what McMaster describes as an "ambiguous zone...a space between two centres...reserve and urban...which is a politically charged, though highly permeable site."<sup>81</sup> Rather

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<sup>80</sup> McMaster, "Living on Reservation X," 20.

than seeing Neel's masks as a break from convention, I think a more precise interpretation sees them as situating Kwakwaka'wakw culture in relation to broader indigenous concerns of the late twentieth century.

Neel was not unaffected by the flurry of criticism that he faced. I think Neel began promoting the mask *Chernobyl*—which in contrast to *Oil Spill* had explicit connections to a Kwakwaka'wakw story narrative—in an effort both to neutralize the charge that his work was not sufficiently situated in traditional culture and to renegotiate the boundaries of successful communication with other Kwakwaka'wakw. The intelligibility of Neel's masks is not only shaped by Kwakwaka'wakw conceptions of masks, but it has also been informed by broader issues of representation, specifically those made public in tandem with MoMA's *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*—issues to which I now turn.

#### 4.6 MASKS AND THE DISCOURSES OF MODERNISM

In 1998, still in the midst of the controversies about his masks, Neel orchestrated another solo show, *David Neel: Living Traditions*, at the Kamloops Art Galley in British Columbia. According to the accompanying catalogue, *Living Traditions* included some of Neel's masks and a new *Pow Wow* photo-essay.<sup>82</sup> The catalogue cover features a transformation mask, *The Mask of Greed and Good*. Inside of the catalogue are photographs depicting other masks from a more recent series focused on emotion, including *The Mask of Stress* (a comical depiction of a face with furrowed brow and a pair of bug-eyes), and the *Jealous Old Woman of Yalis* (a gap-toothed face turned green with envy). The catalogue also contains photographs of Neel's *Mask of The Injustice System*, *Mask of Racism (Rodney King)*, and *The Kuwaiti Smoke Creature*. Essays written by Andrew Hunter, the curator of the Kamloops Gallery, and by Neel himself are complimented by photographs depicting historic Northwest Coast portrait masks, which support a visual argument contained in Neel's essay that will be examined shortly.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>82</sup> Neel, "The Pow Wow Series," 18–31.

The masks included in the exhibition catalogue suggest that *Living Traditions* was conceptualized as a rebuttal to *Down From The Shimmering Sky*, an exhibition of Northwest Coast masks mounted by the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) earlier that year. Neel was one of several dozen carvers invited by Daina Augaitis and Bruce Grenville of the VAG to participate in that exhibition.<sup>83</sup> *The Kuwaiti Smoke Creature* was purchased specifically for the exhibition, and, according to Neel, three or four of his masks were to be in the show, including the Kamloops Gallery's *The Mask of Good and Greed*.<sup>84</sup> For reasons that are still not entirely clear to me, only the *Kuwaiti Smoke Creature* appeared on the final exhibition list compiled by the exhibit's trio of curators: Bruce Grenville, Peter MacNair, and Chief Robert Joseph. That mask was to be exhibited in what Grenville later described as an "adjunct space" designated for at least three "contemporary pieces," while the rest of the exhibit was coded "traditional."<sup>85</sup> Neel objected to the marginalization of the *Smoke Creature* and the classification of it as "contemporary," and he responded by removing the mask from the exhibition. In a press release, he then charged the gallery with "censoring Native Art."<sup>86</sup>

Neel was not the only one who had concerns about the exhibition. According to a review of the show in *B.C. Studies* written by Charlotte Townsend-Gault, the curators of *Down from the Shimmering Sky* appear to have made an unsuccessful attempt to skirt some difficult problems of presentation.<sup>87</sup> The problems concerned authoritative story telling: who can tell stories to whom is restricted in Northwest

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<sup>83</sup> David Neel, "Down from the Shimmering Sky," e-mail to author, 15 March 2003.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Grenville, "Artist Charges Censorship."

<sup>86</sup> David Neel Studio, "Vancouver Art Gallery Censors Native Art," press release, 22 May 1998, photocopy, Vancouver Art Gallery Library, David Neel Clip File.

<sup>87</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, review of *Down from the Shimmering Sky*, by Peter MacNair, Robert Joseph, and Bruce Grenville, *British Columbia Studies* (Summer 1999): 111.

Coast culture by strict social conventions (and, in recent years, by intellectual property laws).<sup>88</sup> The curators solved these problems by not telling the masks' associated stories, but in so doing, they inadvertently decontextualized the masks by hanging them on spare walls without explanatory labels, stripping them of all cultural association. Townsend-Gault wrote that the "mask exhibition had been in the gallery's plans for four years before it was brought forward in what all concerned admit having been too much of a rush, ... [and ended up infused with] contradictions."<sup>89</sup> She elaborated,

Arguably the contradiction is really between the visual and other forms of knowledge, the balance between them shifting in response to the state of the struggle over who knows what and who has the right to tell it, and who has the right, or need, to apply the art label. That the art label is problematic is one of the interesting issues of the politico-aesthetic present. For the narratives about other ways of valuing do not tell themselves, as vox populi pointed out in the gallery, asking for more information, aware of ambiguities: If masks should not be shown except when performed, why are we looking at them? Where are the stories without which they are diminished and misunderstood?<sup>90</sup>

Townsend-Gault's concerns suggest to me that the institution of the art gallery finally came to reflect some of the features of the potlatch, as decorum, status, and storytelling became foci of the curatorial policy. In this context, Neel's removal of the *Smoke Creature* is charged with symbolic meaning: it is the action of a potlatch guest who walks out during the feast, in protest of the proceedings. The action reflects a standard challenge to legitimacy; in this case, a challenge to the curators' choice to establish a status division between the contemporary and the traditional.

Neel addresses *Shimmering Sky*'s reassertion of the contemporary-traditional dichotomy in his *Living Traditions* catalogue essay, "Modernism on the Northwest Coast."<sup>91</sup> There Neel targets the

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<sup>88</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "First Nations Culture: Who Knows What?" *Canadian Journal of Communications* 23 (Summer 1999), 31–43. For more details on Indigenous Rights and intellectual property, see the Draft Declaration of Indigenous Rights at United Nations Commission on Human Rights, "Discrimination Against Indigenous Peoples: Report of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations on its Eleventh Session," <http://www.cwis.org/drft9329.html> (accessed 21 August 2004). For details about Indigenous rights, traditional knowledge, and intellectual property, see World Intellectual Property Organization, "Traditional Knowledge," <http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/tk/index.html> (accessed 23 June 2004).

<sup>89</sup> Townsend-Gault, review of *Down from the Shimmering Sky*, 111.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

ubiquity with which the term “tradition” is used to describe Northwest Coast carving, and he suggests that many Euro-Americans have used “traditional” as a catch-all descriptor of Northwest Coast art.<sup>92</sup> In contrast to this concept of traditional, we might say, Euro-Americans have deployed the term “Modernism” to describe a construction of art that is enmeshed in a series of debates that originated in Europe, concerning the relationship between art and modernization. Modernism is made dynamic by the unfolding of these debates, which shape the shifting concepts of the Modern. This Euro-American discursive practice evokes “tradition” as a relative but necessary oppositional category: in this use of the term, tradition presents a picture of an immutable culture.

In contrast to the static-dynamic configuration of the tradition-modern dichotomy, Neel sees the art of the Northwest Coast as “vital.”<sup>93</sup> Neel includes with his essay photographs of several masks that precede his work by decades and by more than a century, including a *Jenna Cass Portrait Mask*, a portrait of a high noble woman carved for the trade market, and a *Mahmalh’nalalh Mask*, a representation of a drunken European sailor. Such art presents evidence of the fluidity of Northwest Coast culture, and of its long tradition of connection to the continuous present. Another Northwest Coast mask maker, Jerry Laktonen (Alutiiq), more recently created *Joe Hazelwood* (1999), to commemorate the story of another drunken sailor, the captain of the Exxon Valdez.<sup>94</sup> With these references to current events, Neel finds the

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<sup>91</sup> Neel’s critical assessment of “tradition” is in step with local and global intellectual trends of the late 1990s. For example, the year of Neel’s essay, 1998, the Seattle Art Museum’s associate curator of Northwest Coast art, Steve Brown, argued in the introduction to his book, *Native Visions: Evolution in Northwest Coast Art from the Eighteenth through the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum and University of Washington Press, 1998), that Northwest Coast tradition is continuously evolving, changing, and expanding, becoming something different than it was before. In 1998, the United Nations’ World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) also proffered the following definition of traditional knowledge (TK) as, “not ancient or inert, but is a vital dynamic part of contemporary lives of many [Indigenous] communities today.” (See “Traditional Knowledge” at <http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/tk/index.html>.) Although Brown and WIPO representatives argued the other side of the semantic coin, they share with Neel a desire to represent Indigenous lifeways as progressive. In the introduction to “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” Neel acknowledges the multiple meanings associated with the term “tradition.” Despite periodic efforts to redeploy the term, Neel finds the term especially problematic, because it is used with such ubiquity as the antithesis to all that is modern.

<sup>92</sup> Neel, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” 12–13.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

term “Modernism” to be a more accurate index of Northwest Coast artistic sensibilities than “tradition,” though he does not use it as a means of situating Northwest Coast art along a Euro-American trajectory.

In addition, Neel’s embrace of the term “modernism” in opposition to “traditional” recalls Clifford’s very public critique of *‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* in 1985. In his exhibition review, Clifford problematized another dichotomy, the primitive-modern and sought out non-western examples of modern art.<sup>95</sup> Although there is no clear evidence that Neel has read Clifford’s essay, Neel was clearly very engaged with the exhibit *‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*. As I argued in Chapters Two and Three, the show inspired Neel to return to British Columbia and to become a carver. But Neel’s subsequent praxis of art reveals that he was not oblivious to concerns like those of Clifford, for as I have shown in this chapter his contemporary-themed portrait masks were produced with a similar critique of dualism in mind.

Neel seems to be concerned about the promotion of an ideal of authenticity bound to a Euro-American ideal of consumption more recently articulated by Sinologist Jonathan Hay in the paper, “Double Modernity, Para-Modernity,” which he presented at the University of Pittsburgh’s symposium, *Modernity and Contemporaneity*, in the fall of 2004.<sup>96</sup> Hay centers his discussion upon two different ways in which Euro-American Modernism is implicated in the discourses of art around the globe, and he uses the expressions “double modernity” and “paramodernity” as descriptors of Modernism’s byproducts.<sup>97</sup> On the one hand, Hay argues, paramodernity is created by contemporary Euro-American consumer demand for “authentic” tribal objects. Writing about the trade market in African art, Hay asks:

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<sup>94</sup> Aron L. Crowell, Amy F. Steffian, and Gordon L. Pullar, *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2001), 201.

<sup>95</sup> Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *AIA*, 164–77.

<sup>96</sup> Jonathan Hay, “Double Modernity, Paramodernity,” in Terry Smith, Nancy Condee and Okwui Enwezor eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity and Contemporaneity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2007).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.



Do the colonial and post-colonial encounter situations significantly change a pre-existing intercultural calculus? I believe they do. The entry on to the scene of the juggernaut of capitalism brought with it a potentially unlimited market, with the result that the economic rewards of self-representation increased exponentially.<sup>98</sup>

Hay explains that “the Euro-American audience by and large wants the aura of the primitive, and it is the lack of our own kind of self-consciousness that we look for to guarantee this aura.”<sup>99</sup> The African artist, Hay contends, has great economic incentive to fulfill these desires, which in turn results in the production of “paramodern” objects that have “a parasitic relationship to both indigenous art and modernism.”<sup>100</sup> Paramodern objects fulfill the Euro-American desire for authenticity without making evident the fact that the object was made solely for Euro-American consumption. In Hay’s eyes paramodern objects are forgeries.

On the other hand, in Hay’s analysis, double modernity is produced by the intersection of two modern cultures, as exemplified by the current discourses of art in China. In an effort to make sense of the current debates, Hay looks back to China in the eighteenth-century, when Chinese-European relations first became significant, and he notes that it was at that time that Europeans began describing Chinese culture as “traditional” in contrast with European “modernity.”<sup>101</sup> Instead of seeing eighteenth century China as a traditional culture, Hay sees it as “progressive” and entertains the possibility that eighteenth century China might more accurately be described as “otherly modern.”<sup>102</sup> Hay then goes on to describe Chinese artistic production that results from the intersection between Chinese modernity and Euro-American modernity as “doubly modern,” and suggests that the tensions between these two versions of modernity form the cornerstone of the debates about a diverse array of contemporary Chinese art such as

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 6.

Wing Qingsong's performance piece *Night Revels of Lao Li* (2000), Ellen Pau's *Recycling Cinema* (2001), and the Three Georges ink painting series, *The Old One Hundred Names* (2002).<sup>103</sup>

Hay's concepts of double modernity and paramodernity have an isomorphic relationship with the twin tenets of Neel's essay, and they help clarify Neel's major points. Like Hay, Neel argues that Northwest Coast art is a dynamic discourse that has been impacted by collisions with Euro-American modernity, even though the collisions, such as the confiscation of potlatch hardware, are not always progressive. In this regard, we might see Neel's argument and his off-beat praxis of mask making as in keeping with Hay's theory of double modernity: where some expect "tradition," Neel strives for modernity, and perhaps double modernity, combining in new ways one progressive art form, Northwest Coast carving, with a progressive Euro-American approach. This is especially clear in the masks that have layers of cultural meaning, as in the interplay between Bukwis and the nuclear power plant in *Chernobyl*, but it is a property of all of these masks, which mesh local modes of expression with broader concerns.

Neel is also concerned about the compromises of paramodernity, and the Euro-American quest for "traditional" objects, a quest that is partially shaped by the traditional-modern binary cast by Euro-American Modernism almost a century ago. As Neel's epigraph to this chapter quite rightly suggests, the Euro-American Modernist desire for "ethnographically correct" pieces continues to impact the Northwest Coast art market today. Neel has a point: Vancouver commercial galleries specializing in Northwest Coast art are often filled with newly made objects, such as carved and painted masks and bowls made for the market economy, but some are also made to look as if they were to be used during a potlatch; the items are marketable because they look authentic, that is, traditional. Yet I have never seen an art gallery promoting among authentic potlatch hardware the Tupperware containers, paper plates, and coffee urns, now routinely used to serve food at these feasts. These do not qualify as authentic potlatch hardware,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 6–9.

whereas masks, raven rattles, and cedar troughs do so qualify, simply because objects in the former group do not allow Euro-American consumers to fulfill their fantasies of an untouched (authentic) culture.<sup>104</sup>

#### 4.7 NEEL IN VENICE: THE DISCOURSES OF COLONIALISM AND PARAMODERNITY

In the summer of 1999, six months after *Living Traditions*, Neel took a canoe that he carved and eight of his masks to the forty-eighth Venice Biennale (1999), to create *Walas-Kwis-Giala* (Travels-Great-Distance), an installation and performance piece named after the canoe. The display of masks included newly fabricated pieces such as *The Millennium Bug Mask*, *The Politician*, and *Wrath*, along with older works such as *The Mask of the Injustice System*, *The Mask of Racism (Rodney King)*, *The Mask of Stress*, *International Commerce*, and *The Keeper of the Animals*. The masks were hung on the wall along with short poems written by Neel in an exhibition space near *S. Stae*, where viewers were invited to look and handle the masks. Neel also danced *The Keeper of the Animals* along the banks of the Grand Canal.<sup>105</sup> During the Biennale's opening ceremonies, Neel and an international crew of oarsmen launched the canoe into the waterways after blessing it with the smoke of burning cedar. Then they paddled the canoe down the Grand Canal, and emulating a practice normally associated with visits between Northwest Coast villages, Neel performed a dance, a Peace dance, upon his arrival in the new territory and invited members of his audience to sit inside his canoe. Thus, Neel's *Walas-Kwis-Giala* was a multi-sensory experience as opposed to the visual focus of 'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art.

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<sup>104</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Northwest coast art galleries do not sell objects that have clear connections to other cultures. For example, since the 1960s, silkscreen prints and t-shirts have been standard fare. My point is rather that the picture of potlatching presented by Vancouver sales galleries is a rather partial view.

<sup>105</sup> In addition, Neel found new ways to overcome some of issues of labeling masks that were mentioned by Townsend-Gault with respect to *Down from the Shimmering Sky*. For example, *The Millennium Bug Mask* reveals much about the impending Y2K computer glitch through its adornments—keyboard grin, a pair of earrings made from computer disks, and a microchip eye. Neel told the story of Y2K with a short explanatory poem as well. Neel's *Millennium Bug* poem reads: "Much has been said of the Millennium Bug/Most of the world now feels smug/When 2000 comes will it be the end/Or like the trickster will all be pretend?"

The simplicity of Neel's doggerel is somewhat surprising given the high-culture Biennale venue. However, one of the purposes of Northwest Coast masks is to instruct children about the ways of the world. Thus, Neel cleverly redeploys the problematic art label to signal the didactic properties of Northwest Coast mask use. David Neel, *Installation Photographs*, photocopy, David Neel Studio.

Neel's mask display also renders a more up to date picture of colonial forces that includes the flow of people and money, as suggested by the mask of *International Commerce*. The exhibit's thesis regarding the intersection of cultures can be further illuminated by re-invoking Hay's concept of paramodernity in conjunction with *Walas-Kwis-Giala*'s curator Elspeth Sage's description of the exhibit. *North Shore News* reporter Layne Christensen in her article, "Carving his Way to the City of Masks," writes,

That Neel is showing his collection of carved wooden masks in the City of Masks during this premier art event may strike some critics as a cliché. But it just serves to heighten awareness of an overly commercialized art form, says the show's Vancouver curator.<sup>106</sup>

Christensen goes on to quote Sage,

'In the same way that Venetians hate masks because they've been so commodified for the tourist market, there's a real problem with the perception of First Nations art that it's not real art, it's just done for the tourists.'<sup>107</sup>

At this international venue, Neel connected the aesthetic paradigm of Northwest Coast masks to the global discourses surrounding masks that are enmeshed with capitalism; this connection represents a case of Hay's paramodernity, a discourse that is so pervasive that it even penetrates the consumer search for authenticity that is the mark of aesthetic practices even in Italy, the very seat of colonialism.

The exhibit *Walas-Kwis-Giala* is another example of how the protocols of potlatching have entered into exhibition practices, and shows how Neel carried the earlier debate over the VAG show all the way to the canals of Venice. The curator, Elspeth Sage, was one of the Vancouver art professionals who rose to Neel's defense in the debates surrounding *Down From the Shimmering Sky*. Neel's on-line essay pertaining to the *Down From the Shimmering Sky* debates, "Vancouver Art Gallery Censors Native Art," cites Sage as having said,

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<sup>106</sup> Layne Christensen, "Carving His Way to the City of Masks," *North Shore News*, 7 June 1999, <http://www.nsnews.com/issues99/w060799/neel.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Elspeth Sage, as quoted by Layne Christensen, "Carving His Way."

‘Neel has been criticized by some for not simply reproducing historical masks of his elders...his masks are a way of reclaiming the past and ensuring the future.’<sup>108</sup>

Neel’s troubled reception in Northwest Coast circles was also alluded to in promotional material released by OnEdge, one of the organizations sponsoring the *Walas-Kwis-Giala* exhibit, and with which Sage is affiliated.<sup>109</sup> If we interpret the thesis of *Walas-Kwis-Giala* in the same spirit of potlatch rivalry with which Neel removed his mask, then his appearance in Venice was intended as a clear show of power over his critics. Neel shows his strength in rivalry by appeal to venue, for in the opinion of many the Venice Biennale is a much more prestigious exhibition site than the Vancouver Art Gallery. Neel’s Biennale effort was *a tour de force*, weaving together many elements of Northwest Coast culture—mask making, potlatching, dancing, arrival and display in foreign villages with performance art. *Walas-Kwis-Giala* showed ironic sensibilities in his return to the Europe of Columbus in a sea craft, and in the relevance of comparison of masks across the two cultures.

In this chapter, I have shown that Neel and his masks have provoked myriad responses because they overlap with several discursive sets, including traditional Kwakwaka’wakw masks, the global discourses of indigenous rights, Euro-American Modernism with respect to popular culture and primitivism, and divergent definitions of modernity. I have argued that in his praxis of mask-making, Neel set out to expose the common elements that link these discursive communities together. But as the debates reveal, these sets are generated from such divergent axioms that Neel alone cannot unite them. The various interpretations of Neel’s masks not only index the boundaries between the invested discursive areas, but they also reveal the difficulties in solving the problems publicly voiced by Clifford almost twenty years ago about the public display of Kwakwaka’wakw masks and the now overused modern-traditional and modern-primitive dichotomies.

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<sup>108</sup> Neel, “Vancouver Art Gallery Censors Native Art.”

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

That Neel's masks are so enmeshed in controversy within Kwakwaka'wakw circles warrants recognition, for the discord itself indexes the acrimony surrounding the colonization of Kwakwaka'wakw masks for well over a century. Neel and his critics have more in common than any of the involved parties would willingly admit, for they are all responding to the external forces that have chipped away at Northwest Coast lifeways, and the production and use of masks. I have argued that some of the tensions between Neel and his Kwakwaka'wakw critics are fuelled by the fact that they are all engaged in anti-colonial projects, but they deploy radically different strategies. Neel's opponents endeavour to decolonize masks through the reaffirmation of what they see as local practices and respect for tradition in artistic expression. By contrast, he sees the need to make space for the Kwakwaka'wakw in an external arena. Neel chooses to erode colonialism using broader discourses of modernity and art, as if he is taking a cue from the interconnection and fracture that animate the current environmental debates. Neel, then, calls attention to how the sensibilities of other people affect the lives of people in the Pacific Northwest.

I am quite certain that the increased flow of information and people afforded by the technologies of the late twentieth century—automobiles, plane travel, mass production, and telecommunications—plays an important role in Neel's choices, and in the expressed criticism of Neel. I do not mean to suggest that there was no flow of information or people in earlier times, but rather that the movement occurs at a more rapid pace and is partly what is at issue in these debates. A century ago would it have been likely, or common, that an infant would have been taken more than seven hundred miles away from Kwakwaka'wakw territories? And, if so, would that child have been able to make the journey home? Neel may not have been motivated to return to British Columbia if it were not for the mass production that facilitated Nuytten's book and MoMA's catalogue. Then again, there is no doubt that some of Neel's Kwakwaka'wakw critics would also have been shaped by their travels to museums and access to mass-reproduced images.

But the jury is still out on the success of Neel's mask project. On the one hand, Neel has told me that he now feels isolated in Northwest Coast carving circles. In the beginning, he had hoped his masks would solidify his connection with other Kwakwaka'wakw, but instead they have set him apart from

many. Despite his appearance at the Venice Biennale, Neel has not been invited to participate in any major multi-artist exhibits of Northwest Coast art since *Down From the Shimmering Sky*. He now makes only the rare journey into the heart of Kwakwaka'wakw country. And, after the Biennale, he brought his series of contemporary themed masks to a close. On the other hand, from an external perspective, Neel's masks have challenged and continue to unsettle normative constructions of indigenous and modern cultures. In this regard, I argue, his masks continue to play a valuable role. In the following chapter, we will see Neel map cultural clashes once again, in a series of silkscreen prints and a series of accompanying masks as he delves into issues of justice and blindness.

## 5.0 JUSTICE IMAGINED

We find that the law has followed closely religious and philosophical anxieties about the power of images. In the Greek tradition, Plato excludes art and artists, poetry and poets from the real of reason and good government and inaugurates the ancient quarrel between art and poetry on the one hand and philosophy and truth on the other.<sup>1</sup>

Costas Douzinas and Lynda Nead

Photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken before that. They seem utterly real.<sup>2</sup>

Walter Lippman

I must speak in a language that is not my own because that will be more just.<sup>3</sup>

Jacques Derrida

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1990, David Neel began exploring the relationship between justice and the forces of law. Neel's justice-related pieces quickly grew to include a series of four limited-edition serigraphs, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* (1990), *Just Say No* (1991), *The Trial of Tears* (1991), and *Out of Sight/Out of Mind* (1994), and several thematically related carvings including *The Mask of the Mohawk Warrior* (1990), *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Costas Douzinas and Lynda Nead, *Law and the Image: The Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.



*Mask of the Injustice System* (1991), and the *Mask of Racism (Rodney King)*.<sup>4</sup> As the titles of these pieces may suggest, they are not representations of justice as the allegorical figure with blindfolded eyes and scales in hand, a sense of inconclaism that further complicates Neel's engagement with Euro-centric constructions of knowledge and the discourses of viusality. Instead, some of Neel's pieces depict questionable police conduct, while others illustrate the forces of colonialism embedded in conventional courtroom proceedings and the legislative process that thus bring out subtle distinctions between justice and the forces of law. Neel's depictions of justice have an extensive history of display in First Nations venues and beyond. He sold a poster version of *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, and commissioned the dancing of its companion piece, *The Mask of the Mohawk Warrior*, to help raise monies in support of a legal battle between the Mohawk nation of Kanehsatake and the Quebec Provincial Government.<sup>5</sup> Neel's justice-related pieces deserve our attention because they represent a challenge from outside the cultural system of Euro-American justice. The logic of that system is challenged by a logic of honor and ridicule that Neel has inherited from Northwest Coast culture and infused in his art. The Euro-American epistemology of law, particularly its skeptical view of images, the equating of blindness with justice, is questioned and redirected.

*Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* and *The Mask of the Injustice System* clearly captured people's attention in indigenous circles and beyond. At the time *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* was released, someone else produced and sold a bootlegged poster of the image with the caption, "We Are Not Criminals, We are Political

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<sup>4</sup> The four silkscreens were released over the course of four years and in variet of edition sizes. *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* was released as limited edition of seventy-five serigraphs, David Neel *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* 1991, serigraph, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver. *Just Say No* was released as limited edition of 135 seriegraphs. See D. Neel Studio, "Just Say No," 1991, files of the author, Meadville, PA. *Trial of Tears* was released ina limited edition 159 serigraphs, D. Neel Studio, "Trial of Tears," photocopy, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver. *Out of Sight/Out of Mind* was released in an edition of ninety-five prints along with ten artists proof and ten remarquées. See D. Neel Studio, "A New Print by David Neel: *Out of Sight/Out of Mind*, 1994, photocopy, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver.

<sup>5</sup> British Columbia Union of Indian Chiefs, pamphlet, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC, Canada; Neel, "Modernism in Northwest Coast Art," 6.

Prisoners,” printed in the lower border.<sup>6</sup> In 1991, one of the seventy-five *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* serigraphs was exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada.<sup>7</sup> *The Mask of the Injustice System* also has a diverse history of display, including The Vancouver Museum’s 1991 exhibition *The Spirit of the Earth* and the 1998 Venice Biennale. *The Mask of the Injustice System* also appeared in a television lead promoting the Vancouver Art Gallery’s 2001 exhibition, *Vancouver Collects*, and is featured on the cover of a book.<sup>8</sup>

As a group, Neel’s justice-related pieces reveal the brutal impact of Euro-American legal systems on indigenous lifeways. The legal system is enmeshed in contemporary Native American communities in ways that are almost unimaginable to cultural outsiders. Perhaps the most acute indicator of this difference is registered in the historic status of Canada’s indigenous people as wards of the Crown, and their more recent status in the Federal Government of Canada’s “fiduciary” responsibility towards the nation’s legally recognized indigenous people.<sup>9</sup> It must also be remembered that the legal system has actively suppressed many aspects of First Nations cultures. Of particular relevance to the understanding of Neel’s art are the notorious prohibition against Northwest Coast aesthetics (the carving and wearing of masks) and especially the trial and imprisonment of Kwakwaka’wakw potlatchers, as I noted in the previous chapter. As Neel turned to the theme of justice in the early 1990s, the courtroom had become the site of many legal battles between First Nations and the nation-state of Canada. The 1990s was also a time

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<sup>6</sup> *We Are Not Criminals, We Are Political Prisoners*, poster, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC, Canada.

<sup>7</sup> For details of the exhibition see, John Bentley Mays, “Making Visual Sense of a Mixed Heritage,” *Globe and Mail*, 29 November 1991, sec. A, p. 12, photocopy in David Neel Clip File, Vancouver Art Gallery Library.

<sup>8</sup> See the following exhibition catalogues: Neel, *Spirit of the Earth: Exhibition Guide*, 1; Harold Szeemann and Cecilia Liveriero, *La Biennale di Venezia 48a Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999), 246; Vancouver Art Gallery, *Vancouver Collects* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2001), 108.

<sup>9</sup> The Indian Act of 1867 is the main piece of legislation that governs the status of Canada’s Indigenous people and sanctions the nation-state intervention into Indigenous affairs, including issues of land, ownership, legal status, marriage, and childrearing beyond that of any other “group” of people. It has been amended on several occasions, including the Constitution Act of 1982, which altered facets of the nation-state/first-nations dynamic. One of the clearest accounts that I have found is published by Bill Henderson, “Henderson’s Annotated Indian Act,” *Virtual Law Office: Bill Henderson*, <http://www.bloorstreet.com/200block/sindact.htm#1> (accessed 8 June 2000).

when legal theory and courtroom protocol themselves became matters of legal contest in Canada and at the United Nations.<sup>10</sup>

Of Neel's justice-related pieces, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* and *The Mask of the Injustice System* have received most of the scholarly attention. Writing about wit in First Nations artists' depictions of the 1990 militarized Mohawk landclaim, anthropologist Allan Ryan included an image and brief comment on *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*.<sup>11</sup> Anthropologist Dara Culhane selected a photograph of *The Mask of the Injustice System* for the cover of her 1997 book, *Pleasure of the Crown: Anthropology, Law and First Nations*, which focuses on the politics of the court case, *Delgamuukw v. Regina*, but Calhane does not delve into any analysis of the mask *per se*.<sup>12</sup> Within these two scholarly accounts, then, photographic reproductions of Neel's art appear in conjunction with discussions of landmark legal-political events.

In this chapter, I center discussion on two of the four silkscreen prints, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* and *The Trial of Tears*, and their respective companion masks, *The Mask of the Mohawk Warrior* and *The Mask of the Injustice System*. I do so not only because they have garnered more scholarly attention than their counterparts, but also because I think they are more critically engaged with the aesthetics and epistemology of justice than are *Just Say No* and *Out of Sight/Out of Mind*. But in contrast with Ryan's and Culhane's event-oriented approaches, I argue that Neel's work maps the complex interchanges between jurisprudence and aesthetics as it imagines what a more just world would be like. I begin this chapter with Neel's first justice-related piece, *Life on the 18th Hole*. My discussion centers on how Neel positions himself against the prevailing discourses of legal authority that show a general distrust of images in favour of written documents. I then turn to another of Neel's serigraphs, *The Trial of Tears* and

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, United Nations Social and Economic Council, Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. *Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations: Studies on Treaties, Agreements, and other Constructive Arrangements between States and Indigenous Populations*. Report prepared by Miguel Alfonso Martinez. 43<sup>rd</sup> Session, Item 15 of the first provisional agenda. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1991/33, 31 July 1991. Geneva: United Nations Library.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan, *Trickster Shift*, 232–233.

<sup>12</sup> Culhane, *Pleasure of the Crown*.

its companion piece, *The Mask of the Injustice System*. Writing with respect to this pair of images, I go on to argue that Neel visualizes the problem of oration within the legal system, specifically indicating that its own oratorical practices have put a stranglehold on aboriginal voices and shut down aboriginal knowledge systems. Against a backdrop of these colonizing activities, Neel turns the tables and tries Western jurisprudence according to the Kwakwaka'wakw law of the masks.

## 5.2 FROM SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENTS TO INDIGENOUS LANDCLAIMS:

### *LIFE ON THE 18<sup>th</sup> HOLE*

The expression “life on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole” conjures up visions of manicured golf greens, plush country clubs, and an affluent suburban lifestyle, but Neel’s silkscreen print presents quite another picture. The large central photograph depicts the masked face of a Mohawk warrior, who is sandwiched between two ranks of little armed policemen. Neel clipped the former from the Toronto-based newspaper *The Globe And Mail* and cut the latter out of *MacLeans*, a Canadian newsmagazine.<sup>13</sup> Neel’s own photographs of spotted eagle feathers flank either side of the warrior, and in each of the four corners, Neel graphically reminds us of The Four Sacred Directions.<sup>14</sup> Neel created the photomontage in the midst of the seventy-eight-day armed Mohawk standoff against Canadian forces and Quebec provincial police that started in July 1990 in the Mohawk village of Kanehsatake near the town of Oka, Quebec, about twenty miles from Montreal. The dispute was ostensibly sparked by the proposed expansion of a nine-hole golf course and the construction of an upscale housing development that encroached upon both a Mohawk ancestral burial ground and a particular sacred pine forest. But three hundred years of imperial activities imposed by the Kings of France and England, and finally by the Government of Canada, are also implicated. These powers legally privileged written documents over oral agreements and visual records, and exploited

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<sup>13</sup> “Life on the 18th Hole Preparation File,” David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC, Canada.

<sup>14</sup> David Neel, “Artist Statement: Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole,” photocopy, “Life on the 18th Hole Preparation File,” David Neel Studio, North Vancouver.

differences between the laws brought over from France and those imported from England.<sup>15</sup> This legal history led one federal government official to characterize the Mohawk claim to Kanehsatake as “the most complex” in Canadian history.<sup>16</sup>

### 5.3 OKA, PHOTOJOURNALISM, AND *LIFE ON THE 18<sup>th</sup> HOLE*

The 1990 standoff engaged people from around the globe. Indigenous warriors who, in 1973, had held U.S. federal authorities at bay for seventy-one days during the standoff at Wounded Knee, traveled to Kanehsatake to lend their support and military expertise to the Mohawk cause. In an effort to rally support for the Mohawk, the famous American Indian Movement leader Russell Means gave speeches to members of an international peace camp that had assembled nearby. Religious practitioners from Mexico also arrived on the scene and performed acts of intercession, and representatives from an array of human rights organizations came to bear witness.<sup>17</sup> Via the mechanisms of the international press, the story of Oka also moved quickly from the sites of the lived experience to locations far and wide: *The London Times*, *Le Monde*, and *Time Magazine* were just some of the journals that printed stories about Oka.

During the seventy-eight day standoff, the press reported on an array of violent events. On July 11, 1990 about 100 provincial police attempted to dismantle the four-month old Mohawk barricade by relying on teargas and gunfire, and that day included the fatal shooting of a police officer, by either “friendly” or Mohawk fire. Later that day, the citizens of Kahnawake reserve, a sister Mohawk

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<sup>15</sup> For histories of Kanehsatake see Alanis Obomsawin, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada, 1995), videorecording; Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. *Corinthe et al. v. Seminary of St. Sulpice*. Report prepared by Viscount Haldane L.C., Lord Macnaghten, Lord Atkinson, Lord Shaw, and Sir Charles Fitzpatrick, 19 July 1912, republished by the University of Saskatchewan, <http://library.usask.ca/native/cnlc/vol04/083.html> (accessed 1 June 2004); Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera, *People of the Pines: The Warriors and the Unknown Legacy of Oka* (Toronto: Little and Brown, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Mary C. Hurley, “Bill S-24: The Kanesatake Interim Landbase Governance Act,” *Legislative Summaries: Library of Parliament-Parliamentary Information and Research Service*, 5 April 2001, revised 8 June 2001, republished by the Library of Parliament. [http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/Bills\\_ls.asp?Parl=37&Ses=1&ls=S24#A.%A0%201717%20to%201945txt](http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/Bills_ls.asp?Parl=37&Ses=1&ls=S24#A.%A0%201717%20to%201945txt) (accessed 6 June 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Obomasawin, *Kanehsatake*.

community about seventy miles from Kanehsatake, erected another barrier that blocked the Mercier Bridge, a major route between the island city of Montreal and its South Shore suburbs. On July 29<sup>th</sup>, about 2,400 Canadian troops were deployed to Mohawk territories. Throughout July and August, riots in the suburbs of Montreal included the throwing of Molotov cocktails and the burning in effigy of a Mohawk warrior. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, a Mohawk warrior was bludgeoned in the head by a group of patrolling Canadian soldiers, and, on September 26, a Canadian Armed Forces soldier bayoneted a fourteen-year-old Mohawk girl in the chest.<sup>18</sup>

The story of Oka is also a tale of concerned photography. From the beginning of the standoff, journalists' reports made references to police and military efforts to restrict their movement. As the standoff wore on, the military tried to control the flow of information.<sup>19</sup> The situation reached a climax on September 1, 1990, when the Canadian military began barring all reporters from an area they referred to as a "restricted zone," which surrounded the Mohawk encampment.<sup>20</sup> Although many journalists already embedded with the Mohawk group decided to stay, military officers made it difficult for journalists to communicate with the outside world: canisters of film were seized and eventually the journalists' cell phones were disconnected.<sup>21</sup> Unable to do their job, some members of the press corps left, but two, Albert Nerenberg and Robert Galbraith, slipped themselves and a video camera through barbed wire and past military patrols into the area still held by Mohawk warriors. According to Nerenberg, they did so because they

were concerned that a massacre might happen because it wouldn't be televised. We took a small video camera...and put it in a box. And we crawled through the forest... and we went past the army in broad daylight.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> York and Pindera, *People of the Pines*, 374.

<sup>20</sup> Obomasawin, *Kanehsatake*.

<sup>21</sup> York and Pindera, *People of the Pines*, 374.

<sup>22</sup> Obomasawin, *Kanehsatake*.

Nerenberg's language is peppered with the rhetoric of journalism as a moral cause. Authors York and Pinera also point out that human rights groups in the United States and Britain protested the restrictions placed on journalists.<sup>23</sup> Given Neel's training in photojournalism, I suspect Oka captured his attention not only because it was a story about indigenous resistance, but also because it was one about concerned photography.

At the time of the standoff, Neel lived along the coast of British Columbia—some 2,500 miles away from the barricades at Oka—and he relied primarily on the news media for information about the confrontation. As headline news transported the drama of Oka to Neel, he linked Oka to an international lexicon of war and oppression. In the Spring 1991 issue of the journal *B.C. Studies*, Neel credited the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, which was painted in reaction to press accounts of Franco's 1937 bombing of the Northern Spanish town, as an inspiration to commemorate the invasion of Kanehsatake.<sup>24</sup> Picasso's palette of black, white, and grey, along with the presence of cross-hatchings, are often interpreted as his allusion to the colour and text of press reports that informed him—then a Parisian resident—of events that took place miles away in his native Spain. In *Life on 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, Neel simultaneously reminds us of Oka as a headline news story, and pays homage to Picasso's painting with the use of a surrounding grey border and the stippled appearance of the embedded photographs.

Susan Sontag's 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of the Others* points to the Spanish Civil War as the first military campaign in which photojournalists were outfitted with portable camera equipment and were thus able to capture the action of war, and not just the ruins and the dead.<sup>25</sup> Sontag goes on to contend that Robert Capa's grainy photograph of a Republican soldier being shot is probably the most celebrated image of that war. Capa, like the other founding members of the concerned photography

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<sup>23</sup> York and Pinera, *People of the Pines*, 374.

<sup>24</sup> David Neel, "Life on the 18th Hole," *BC Studies* 89 (1991): 131.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 20–22.

movement generally, conceptualized photography as a protector of human rights.<sup>26</sup> As I argued in Chapter 2.0, Neel not only embraced the tenets of concerned photography, but also routinely credits Capa as one of three photographers who have informed his own praxis.

Neel was very familiar with the tenets of concerned photography. In Chapter 2.0, I showed that Neel was also introduced to the compositional conventions of news photography as exemplified by the work of Eugene Smith, another of the photojournalists who inspired Neel. For example, Smith's 1959 *Pittsburgh Steelworker* evokes the classical compositional strategies of photojournalism, including those of asymmetry, a close-up or zoomed-in shot, and a subject that does not look directly at the camera's lens. Smith often amplified the sense of indirect engagement by including a partially obscured or masked face in his photographic composition: for example, the steel-worker's goggled-covered eyes, or, in another, instance the half-hidden face of a musician.<sup>27</sup> These compositional strategies were taught to and reiterated by subsequent generations of news photographers, including Canadian Press photographer Ryan Remoirez, who utilized them in his 1990 photograph of a masked Mohawk warrior. Given Neel's professional training in photojournalism, I suspect Remoirez's conventional composition was one of the reasons Neel was attracted to this particular image. At the time, the press was filled with an array of images of masked and heavily armed Mohawk sentinels guarding the barricades, but few of the news images were so classically composed.

Neel first saw Remoirez's photograph on the front page of the July 13<sup>th</sup> 1990 issue of *The Globe and Mail*—the only nationally circulated newspaper in Canada at the time—where it accompanied journalist Andre Picard's written report on the negotiations between the nations of Kanehsatake and Canada and police investigations into the fatal shooting of their own Corporal LeMay, just two days earlier.<sup>28</sup> The image was also surrounded by printed stories about the prominent Soviet political figure

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 22, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Kevin G. Barnhurst, *Seeing the Newspaper* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 46–49.



Boris Yeltsen's resignation from the Communist Party and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's critique of German foreign policy. By placing the image within this context, *Globe and Mail* editors connected the story about Oka to the world and the Mohawk warrior to world leaders.

At first glance, most period readers of *The Globe and Mail* probably would have assumed the photograph to be of a Mohawk warrior, simply because such photographs saturated the press at that time. But the composition itself reveals nothing about the depicted man's identity. Only the small letters of the accompanying caption clearly identify the man as a Mohawk warrior, and the object in the corner of the frame as an eyepiece of a telescope or monocular—not a peep sight or scope mounted on top of a rifle.<sup>29</sup> I suspect that it was the composition's ambiguous properties that caught Neel's eye, for he told me that he liked the shot because, "it could be a photograph of anyone. It could be of you or of me. It could be of anyone standing their ground."<sup>30</sup> With these words, Neel connects the warrior's camouflage to the iconography of political dissent around the globe, as exemplified by news photographs such the bandana-covered faces of rebels in Nicaragua. Had Neel wanted to portray a victim, the headline news had already supplied him with an alternative array of bloody images from which to choose.

Not all *The Globe and Mail* readers would have interpreted Remoirez's image as Neel did. For, as semiologist Roland Barthes argued in his 1961 essay, "The Photographic Message," news photographs accrue meaning through various vectors that include the photographer's intention, the photograph's composition, and the viewer's culture and knowledge; thus a single image might carry multiple messages. Nonetheless, each of these resultant interpretations is based upon the photograph's air of objectivity; a subjective-objective interdependence that Barthes refers to as "the photographic paradox."<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> André Picard, "Minister, Mohawk Negotiate," *Globe and Mail*, 13 July, sec. 1, p. 1, photocopy, Life on the 18th Hole Preparation File, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC, Canada.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Neel, interview, 29 June 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 19.

messages that Remoirez's photograph sends deserve careful attention within Neel's work, for Neel endeavours to unpack some of the photograph's most troubling messages in *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*. So, before I delve deeper into my analysis of *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, I will first turn to alternative readings of Remoirez's photograph, which are informed by a shifting cluster of representations, including those of the mass media and the law.

#### 5.4 PHOTOGRAPHY, NATIVE AMERICANS, AND THE REGIME OF TRUTH

Some *Globe and Mail* readers probably saw a criminal in Remoirez's photograph, because the image of a masked man conforms to popular cultural portrayals of criminals who conceal their faces with nylon stockings, mirrored sunglasses, scarves, or Hallowe'en masks. Though the circumstances of Corporal LeMay's death remain a mystery to this day, because of the original positioning of the photograph as part of a story about his death, one might infer that a Mohawk warrior, if not this specific one, shot LeMay. This vilifying interpretation is not shaped solely by the configuration of *The Globe and Mail's* front page, but rather, in a flux of verbal and visual rhetoric that surrounded Oka. For example, the Canadian Police Association launched an advertising campaign that stated that police had been "ambushed" and LeMay had been "murdered."<sup>32</sup> Other citizens seemed to hold the Mohawk accountable, as is suggested by the riots and burning of warriors in effigy mentioned earlier in this chapter. The vilification of the Mohawk warriors continues to spread: in the spring of 2004, Member of Parliament Jim Pankiw circulated a pamphlet, "Stop Indian Crime," which has been heavily criticized by human rights organizations for its racializing message.<sup>33</sup> The cover of Pankiw's pamphlet features a different photograph of a masked Mohawk warrior, who is there identified as "a terrorist."<sup>34</sup> Such assumptions discount one reasonable

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<sup>32</sup> "Police Change Tone on Battle," *Calgary Herald*, 21 September 1990, quoted in <http://bcgreen.com/~samuel/lubicon/1990/OKA0921.txt> and in York and Pindera, *People of the Pines*, 414.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Barnsley, "RCMP Hears Pankiw Complaint," *Windspeaker News*, January 2003, <http://www.ammsa.com/windspeaker/topnews-Jan-2003.html> (accessed 12 March 2004).

alternative interpretation: that the laws of the nation state have criminalized indigenous lifeways and victimized indigenous people.

Photographs of the warriors' obscured faces bring to mind one of the dominant narratives about Native Americans and their fear of the camera as a "spirit" or "soul catcher." In a conversation that I had with David Neel's aunt, Pamela Creasy Neel (Kwagiutl), she offered a viable alternative explanation of this Native American fear:

You know, the United States government considered the great Indian warriors [of the nineteenth century] to be criminals! If they let someone take their pictures, their faces were bound to end up on a 'Wanted Poster!' So yeah, I think they had a very good reason to fear the camera.<sup>35</sup>

Creasy-Neel's explanation is consistent with other acts of political resistance. A fictional yet culturally indicative example may be found in filmmaker John Malkovich's 2002 film, *The Dancer Upstairs*, which weaves together a fictional portrayal of a philosopher and revolutionary leader of Peru's Shining Path.<sup>36</sup> In the film, the philosopher's success at eluding the police is attributed, at least in part, to his refusal to be photographed. There is never any speculation that the "rational" philosopher is afraid that the camera would steal his soul; removed from the tropes used to explain Native American behavior, we simply believe the cunning revolutionary masked his identity to retain at least some control over who recognized him.

In addition, Creasy-Neel's account connects indigenous responses to power dynamics and the production of knowledge systems, a structure that art historian John Tagg's 1980 essay, "A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law," further illuminates.<sup>37</sup> In his discussion, Tagg draws upon Foucault's theorization of power systems by situating the question of photography's truth-value

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<sup>34</sup> "Pankiw," *Saskatoon (Saskatchewan, Canada) Star Phoenix*, <http://www.canada.com/saskatoon/story.asp?id=D91F3000-D649-46A8-A48F-811EE3EE74E2> (accessed 15 March 2004, link now defunct).

<sup>35</sup> Pamela Creasy-Neel, unrecorded conversation with author, August 2003, quoted with explicit permission.

<sup>36</sup> John Malkovich, *The Dancer Upstairs*, 133 min., Los Angeles: Fox Pictures, 2003, videorecording.

<sup>37</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 66–102.

alongside the rise of police surveillance and the scientizing of courtroom evidence, beginning in the eighteenth century. According to Tagg, the police were mobilized to protect the property of the newly moneyed bourgeoisie against perceived depredation by the working class, who, as labourers, routinely interacted with the property of the wealthy.<sup>38</sup> Within this context, the police began using the new technology of photography beginning in the 1840s for the easy identification of criminals, and photographs acquired the status of proof in courts of law.<sup>39</sup> Tagg contends that the photographic image became such a credible form of evidence because it could easily be folded into the discourse of Realism, which he refers to as “the dominant form of signification,” as “bourgeois society attempted to establish its hegemony in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”<sup>40</sup> He goes on to argue that Realism thus infused the discursive network of increasingly powerful bourgeois institutions, including those of science, law, literature, and journalism.<sup>41</sup> These institutions, in turn, used Realism to reaffirm the power and knowledge of their own systems, creating an interplay that I will henceforth refer to as the “hermeneutic of truth,” a self-reinforcing discursive system reflecting a characterization of the political aspect of this relationship that Tagg dubbed “the regime of truth.”

Tagg argues that Realism, as a symbol of authority, is a site of political contest. Realism is such a pervasive force that it does not appear to be a cultural construction as an evidential standard; instead, Realism became understood as “reality,” against which all systems of truth are measured.<sup>42</sup> In Tagg’s eyes, effective acts of intervention not only disrupt Realism’s truth-value, but they also threaten the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 99–100.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 99–100.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 100.

authority of bourgeois systems of knowledge and power—the hermeneutic of truth.<sup>43</sup> Applying Tagg’s logic to Native American avoidance of the camera, we might, thus, see this as an act that disrupts and resists the Euro-American regime of truth, an act that is not just motivated by fear of criminal prosecution.

Photography has changed greatly between the time of the great Indian warriors of the nineteenth century and that of the Mohawk standoff in the summer of 1990. The production of a photograph in the nineteenth century required a long exposure time and a still subject. As a consequence, individuals could more easily mask their identity from popular recognition by merely refusing to sit in front of a camera. With the lighter and faster equipment of the late twentieth century, photojournalists could much more readily capture the body in motion and had the capacity to more rapidly disseminate their images than had their nineteenth century counterparts. As the discourse of concerned photography suggests, by the second half of the twentieth century, many photojournalists, including those who covered Oka, considered themselves moral agents. According to York and Pindera, the Mohawk not only relied on the media for public support, but they also hoped that the public witness of cameras would instill an ethos of morality.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the warriors feared that photographs of their faces would end up on ‘Wanted Posters,’ and so they updated the nineteenth century strategy of camera avoidance by covering their features with bandanas.

As we have seen in this section, the photograph of the warrior’s masked face is a sign that operates across several discursive spaces, including those of criminal, superstitious Indian, and shrewd revolutionary. In the following section, I will argue that as Neel moves the image of the warrior into *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, he blots out old stereotypes and allows a new range of significations to emerge as a means of celebrating the warrior’s image. At the same time, Neel’s reinterpretation of the photograph is an explicit critique of objective truth and an implicit critique of the legal system, which has frustrated the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 101–102.

<sup>44</sup> York and Pindera, *People of the Pines*, 390.

Mohawk landclaim for more than 250 years. In short, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* manifests a radical realignment of power structures.

## **5.5 RE-PRESENTING THE STORY OF OKA AND THE MASKED FACE OF THE MOHAWK WARRIOR**

*Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is a remarkably elegant political statement that is enlivened by its connections to an array of interpretive conventions. In a *BC Studies* article, published several months after *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* was released, Neel described the silkscreen print as

[drawing] upon my heritage as a hereditary Kwagiutl artist and my training as a professional photographer...[It is] a print that is contemporary in execution and traditional in foundation.<sup>45</sup>

With Neel's remark in mind, I will begin this section by analyzing how he incorporates the principles of Northwest Coast flat design as a tool for chipping away at EuroAmerican constructions of authority. I will then examine how Neel's use of photomontage adds an additional layer of political currency. Finally, I will consider how, in the flux between these two conventions of assemblage, Neel finds a way of revealing and validating the Mohawk's image within alternative—indigenous—constructions of truth and identity.

Neel launched his first volley against rationalism when he moved Remoirez's image from the grid of the newspaper, where discrete stories impose a sense of order on the chaos of the world, and put it into a composition that Neel described as “[in the] style of traditional [Northwest Coast] graphics.”<sup>46</sup> Given *Life on The 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*'s rectilinear shape, I think that it is likely that Neel modeled the layout of his photomontage particularly on the creatures painted on the sides of bentwood storage boxes, which were traded up and down the Pacific coast.

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<sup>45</sup> Neel, “Life on the 18th Hole,” *BC Studies*, 131.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Bill McLennan and Karen Duffek summarized the canonical features of bentwood box creatures in their book, *The Transforming Image*. Writing with respect to images such as this Haida bentwood box, McLennan and Duffek find that

Painters adapted the image to make full use of the rectangular field available on the...front and back panels of the chest. Dominating the front of the chest is a wide head of the represented creature usually featuring...double eye motifs [that consist of a pair of ovoids], pointed eyelines, a beak-like nose, and broad mouth. Situated below the head is a rectilinear body with arms and hands or claws generally on either side.<sup>47</sup>

But the creature on the box is not produced by a fixed formula; there are variations in the layout of individual box designs. In contrast with the most common representation of the creature, Duffek and McLennan identify an upper and lower creature in artist Lyle Wilson's delineation of what they describe as an archaic-style 'Tlingit box. In the second example, the upper creature has single—not double—eye motifs and a beak; the lower creature has a pair of eyes and a row of teeth, signifying an animal of prey.<sup>48</sup> Feather forms flank a human face, which is situated at the center of the composition. The fluidity of this formulation led anthropologist Wilson Duff to point out that unlike family crests, which bear specific attributes of identification, the creature-on-the-box sends multiple signals. With this in mind, Duff hypothesizes that the creature's iconology is one of deliberate ambiguity.<sup>49</sup>

*Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* shares with bentwood box designs properties of form and ambiguity. The overall configuration of the silkscreen print echoes that of the creature, though Neel's design is made of photographs, not calligraphic, "form," lines. At the center of *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is a human face, flanked by a pair of feathers on either side. In place of eye motifs, or ovoids, Neel symbolized The Four Sacred Directions; instead of dentals, Neel's animal of prey is a row of riotgear-clad policemen, a modification to a ready-made photograph published in *MacLeans* newsmagazine. In the accompanying

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<sup>47</sup> McLennan and Duffek, *Transforming Image*, 151.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 152–153.

<sup>49</sup> As cited in Bill Holm, "Structure and Design," in *Boxes and Bowls* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974), 20–32.

artist's statement, Neel notes that his redeployment of the intrepid Mohawk warrior refers sardonically to the racist underpinnings of the children's counting song "Ten Little Indians," also known as "One Little, Two Little."<sup>50</sup> In comparison with the surrounding elements the photograph of the warrior appears relatively grand: a heroic figure. Neel reaffirmed the sense of heroism by the close proximity of the spotted eagle feathers, which are often associated with the most difficult and soul seeking acts, as we shall see. In contrast, the ten little police officers are diminished, like the lives of "One Little, Two Little" in a different cultural context. At the same time, with the reference to Northwest coast flat design, Neel also implied that his little policemen, like animals of prey, are stalking the Mohawk warrior. With warrior as both victim and hero, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* also manifests a double entendre characteristic of bentwood box designs.

Within the visual economy of Northwest Coast art, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is an arresting image. In the early 1990s, one would expect a Northwest Coast silkscreen to be an assemblage of motifs—for example Raven, a box, and the sun, delineated with red, white, and black form lines—rather than an assemblage of photographs. *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is such a surprising image that I still clearly remember it stopping me in my tracks the first time I saw a print, just after its release, on display in the window of the Inuit Art Gallery in Vancouver. Allan Ryan's recollection of his first encounter with *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* proved a similar sort of reaction: he described the sense of shock that infiltrated the lecture hall when Neel introduced the image during an artist's talk at UBC's Museum of Anthropology, while the standoff was still underway.<sup>51</sup> Ryan also suggested that *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* provoked such a reaction because the crisis had not been resolved: no one knew how Oka would end.<sup>52</sup> Ryan's comment is indeed insightful, but at the same time, I do not think it fully explains *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*'s shock appeal, nor the complexity of the work's political commentary. In the following section, I argue that with *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> Neel, "Artist Statement: Life on the 18th Hole."

<sup>51</sup> Allan Ryan, unrecorded conversation with author, December 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Ryan, conversation.



*Hole*, Neel launches a second volley against the justice system by tapping into the political history of photomontage, and specifically the associated critiques of truth and objectivity.

## 5.6 POLITICAL CRISIS, PHOTOMONTAGE, AND THE POLITICS OF REALISM

From a biographical standpoint, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is a departure from Neel's usual practice of photography, which is informed by documentary conventions. That he depicted the Oka standoff with such a manipulated photographic image—a photomontage—suggests a deliberate effort to evoke the polemics of this pictorial technique. Neel's knowledge of the political history of photomontage could have been informed in several different ways, including his self-directed study of art history or his professional training in photojournalism. It might also arise from his involvement in a community of contemporary artists located in Dallas community of Deep Ellum during the early 1980s, when there was interest in the medium of photomontage and its political history as exemplified by contemporary artists such as Barbara Kruger and the group Grand Fury, whose respective practices of montage bespeak contemporary political crises of gender and AIDS. Likewise, art historians then working in the United States showed renewed interest in the political history and aesthetics of photomontage, beginning with the publication of Rosalind Krauss's essay, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," in 1981 and Benjamin Buchloch's "Allegorical Procedures and Montage in Contemporary Art," the following year.<sup>53</sup>

Krauss and Buchloch credit members of the Berlin Dada (Raoul Hausmann, Hanna Höch, and John Heartfield, for example) with having "invented" the medium of photomontage as a means of subverting Weimar institutions of political and social authority.<sup>54</sup> But photomontage is not a monolithic genre, as Krauss demonstrates in "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism." As the title of her essay suggests, she is primarily concerned with explaining how the Surrealist praxis of montage enables a

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Buchloch, "Allegorical Procedures and Montage in Contemporary Art," *ArtForum* 21 (September 1982): 43.

<sup>54</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism" *October* 19 (Winter, 1981): 7–10.

synthesis of writing and vision.<sup>55</sup> To do so, Krauss delves into the earlier practice of montage, and specifically that of the Dada.<sup>56</sup> In contrast to the Surrealist practice, Krauss sees that the Dada were engaged with issues of visual reality. She writes,

the experience of blanks or spacing is very strong, for between the silhouettes of the photographed forms the white page announces itself as the medium that both combines and separates them. The white page is not the opaque surface of cubist collage, asserting the formal and material unity within which each representation of reality is secured in isolation, held within a condition of exteriority, of syntax, of spacing.<sup>57</sup>

Krauss continues,

The photographic image, thus “spaced,” is deprived of one of the most powerful of photography’s many illusions. It is robbed of a sense of presence...the seamless integrity of the real...It is spacing that makes it clear—as it was to Heartfield, Tretyakov, Brecht, Aragon—that we are not looking at reality, but at the world infested by the interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality distended by gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, with this deft unpacking of realism’s relationship to reality, Krauss contends that the Dada politicize the photographic medium.<sup>59</sup>

The application of Krauss’s analysis of the Dada practice of montage to *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is warranted because her ideas so permeated the discourses about photomontage during the 1980s and 90s. Much like the Dada practice of montage, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* exhibits a sense of spacing, with the incorporated motifs—the warrior, eagle feathers, rows of policemen, and quatrefoils—both brought together and held apart by patches of grey that make up the background. In this instance, Neel’s efforts to shatter the conception of the reality to which photography alludes may also have been meant to target the hermeneutic of truth, a power-knowledge structure that has long frustrated Mohawk efforts for legal

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 7–10.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 20.

recognition of their entitlements to Kanehsatake. That Neel's use of photomontage so clearly conveys the state of the political crises to an array of people who may or may not be otherwise attuned to indigenous concerns is of equal import, in my opinion.

As a photomontage, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* engages with a conventional visual critique of objectivity. Neel's political agenda is not, however, limited to indicting this discourse of truth. *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is an extremely political image because it also reasserts Indigenous modes of identity construction and validates Indigenous knowledge systems. The purpose of the following section is to show how Neel's assemblage of motifs reveals that the warrior's image signifies more than what some readers might infer from its original framing on the front page of *The Globe and Mail*.

### **5.7 LIFE ON THE 18<sup>th</sup> HOLE: REASSERTING INDIGENOUS LIFEWAYS**

As Neel configured *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, he revealed another set of meanings that may be associated with this image of the warrior. He cropped the photograph along both sides and the bottom edge and added touches of red, yellow, and green to the black-and-white news photo, a palette that has historically been used by Kwakwaka'wakw artists, and expressly by his grandmother Ellen Neel.<sup>60</sup> With these adaptations, Neel seems to move the warrior's masked face towards the idea of the carved Kwagiutl masks, which are conventionally danced as part of a process of claiming territory in the Pacific Northwest. The fact that Neel also carved *The Mask of the Mohawk Warrior*—danced by Richard George in the Squamish Nation Bighouse as part of a fundraiser for the Mohawk cause—reaffirms this shift.<sup>61</sup> This slippage from camouflaged face to carved mask recodes the warrior's identity from one that is purposefully obscured to one that is specific, as Neel recognizes the interconnections between Mohawk identity and the land.

The new interpretive context also does much to exonerate the warrior's public identity. In *Life on the 18th Hole*, the warrior is sandwiched between images of the Sûreté de Québec clad in riot gear; thus,

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<sup>60</sup> See Nuytten's discussion of Ellen Neel's palette in *Totem Carvers*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Neel, "Modernism in Northwest Coast Art," 16.

Neel calls attention to how the standoff began and not to the death of LeMay. In *Life on the 18th Hole*, Remoirez's photograph is also bracketed by references to the sacred—eagle feathers and a pictogram of a pipe ceremony in honour of the Four Sacred Directions. In Obomasawin's documentary film, *Khanesatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, Mohawk warriors routinely appear wearing eagle feathers, and references are made to the use of peace pipes that were raised during the 1973 standoff at Wounded Knee and to the smell of burning tobacco.<sup>62</sup> Neel's inclusion of these particular images fills in details regarding Mohawk reliance on spiritual protection that do not appear in *The Globe and Mail* story of the standoff.

These sacred instruments are enmeshed in the discourse of war and death, as the words of cultural therapist Gene Thin Elk (Lakota) suggest. Speaking in reference to Native American veterans of Vietnam, in the 1996 educational film, *The Red Road to Sobriety*, Thin Elk notes that soldiers who "have taken a life [during this controversial war] ...sometimes...can't hold a sacred instrument, whether it is a sacred pipe or feather."<sup>63</sup> With Thin Elk's words in mind, Neel's composition seems to erase any suggestion that a warrior killed LeMay. Finally, by removing the photograph from the predominantly verbal realm of the newspaper and by placing it within his work of visual art, Neel pictured a much quieter image of Oka than did the editors of *The Globe And Mail*. Thus, much like Neel's silent reminder of The Four Sacred Directions, within the context of *Life On The18th Hole*, the muffled mouth of the Mohawk warrior signals the unspoken—the silent and the sacred—not the masked face of an outlaw.

Within indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere, the eagle feather is infused with rich cultural associations of truth-telling worthy of further exploration. Such associations are partly illuminated by Gayle Edmonds (Lakota), in *The Red Road to Sobriety*, about the passing of an eagle feather around a talking circle as part of a healing process for recovering alcoholics. He said,

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<sup>62</sup> Obomasawin, *Kanehsatake*.

<sup>63</sup> Chante Pierce and Gary Rhine, *The Red Road to Sobriety: Video Talking Circle*, 120 min., Malibu, CA: Kifaru Productions, 1995, videorecording. I have introduced *The Red Road* into my discussion of The Sacred because the video recording is so common in Native American communities. Thus, the context in which Thin Elk and Gayle Edmonds discuss these sacred instruments would be familiar to most Native Americans. I am very grateful to Lindy-Lou Flynn for understanding the complex issues surrounding any discussion of The Sacred and for directing me towards this valuable resource.

The individual holds the eagle feather and feels that power. And that power and the spiritual meaning of that is really [that] they are in their own time zone. Just to speak and say what is on their mind.<sup>64</sup>

Writing with respect to the inclusion of eagle feathers in another photomontage, *Just Say No*, Neel described the eagle feather in terms that ring very close to the words of Edmonds. Neel explains that the eagle feather is

... a source of strength and connection to the natural world [that] helps one [to] speak the truth when held.<sup>65</sup>

Together, Edmond and Neel suggest that Native American conceptions of truth telling are personal — subjective—statements. Furthermore, the eagle feather is associated with the story-telling profession of journalism. For example, the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) displays an eagle feather in the banner of its webpage.<sup>66</sup> With Edmond's and Neel's words in mind, *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* seems to align journalism with Native American conventions of truth telling, which are outside the traditional construction of truthful reporting that is informed by Euro-American conventions of objectivity. By nesting the photograph within an array of eagle feathers, I think Neel valorizes the news photograph specifically within aboriginal discourses of personal truth. In this regard, Neel's reproduction of the photograph was in itself an act that celebrates the image, as he simultaneously presents an alternative view of the warrior and links the profession of photojournalism to an epistemology quite apart from that of the law.

*Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole* is a testament to the importance of images to the creation of a more just world for indigenous people. As the history of legal contests over Kanehsatake reveals, the legal system's general skepticism of non-photographic images in favor of seemingly objective modes of documentation has tipped the scales of justice heavily in favor of European interests. As Neel developed a series in the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Neel, "Artist Statement: Just Say No," 1991, photocopy.

<sup>66</sup> See the homepage of the Native American Journalists Association, <http://www.naja.com/> (accessed 15 March 2004).

wake of *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, he also broadened his critique of the legal system's epistemological "blindspots," specifically courtroom conventions of oration. In the following, then, I turn to *The Trial of Tears*—a photomontage about another contest for land that manifested itself as a civil court case and its companion piece—*The Mask of the Injustice System*.

## **5.8 MUFFLED MOUTHS: FROM SACRED SILENCE TO THE SILENCING OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

Like *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, Neel's *Trial of Tears* is a composite image. The central image is a news photograph that depicts Nisga'a elder Mary Johnson claspng her hand over her mouth. Johnson was one of a number of aboriginal elders who donned court dress, particularly in the form of button blankets, and traveled to the Province of British Columbia's Supreme Court in Vancouver to wait on the courthouse steps to hear the verdict on the landclaim trial that had taken four years and twenty-five million dollars to adjudicate.<sup>67</sup> The news photograph was taken by Steve Bosch on March 7, 1991, in front of British Columbia's courthouse, shortly after Chief Justice Allan McEachern rendered his judgment against the Nisga'a plaintiffs, and it was published in *The Vancouver Sun* the following day in conjunction with an article about the trial.<sup>68</sup>

The Nisga'a landclaim was initiated by Earl Muldoe (also known as Delgamuukw), fifty-one hereditary chiefs, and the heads of many of the Gitk'san and Wet'suwet'en clan houses. Delgamuukw and others sought legal recognition of their claim to 22,000 square miles of traditional Nisga'a territories in northwest British Columbia.<sup>69</sup> Much like the ninety-five percent of the land that now constitutes the province of British Columbia, this particular area had never been the subject of a treaty agreement

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<sup>67</sup> Mark Hume and Scott Simpson, "Indians' Leaders Expect Violence, 'Confrontation,'" *Vancouver Sun*, Sunday 9 March 1991, sec. HA, pp. 1–2, photocopy, Gitksan-Wetsuwet'en Clip File, Vancouver Public Library.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Culhane, *Pleasure of the Crown*, 13.

between First Nations inhabitants and provincial or Canadian officials. The province of British Columbia, on behalf of the Crown (*Regina*), claimed that Aboriginal Title had been extinguished when British Columbia became the sixth province in the Dominion of Canada in 1871.

The Nisga'a landclaim has since become an icon of indigenous struggles for recognition during the 1990s and is referred to in scholarly and popular articles in several ways, including *Delgamuukw v. Regina*, *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, and the Gitk'san-Wet'suwet'en landclaim case. From the beginning, lawyers for the plaintiffs not only sought recognition of aboriginal title, but also asked the bench to reckon with Eurocentric biases embedded in the archival record and court proceedings.<sup>70</sup> To counter the bias, oral testimony was necessary, as oral tradition was the pertinent form of record keeping for the plaintiffs, as historian Adele Perry argued in her 2005 essay, "Colonialism and the Politics of History in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*." *Delgamuukw v. Regina* was the first time indigenous oral histories were used as evidence in a legal contest over a land title.<sup>71</sup> During the four years of trial more than sixty-one witnesses gave testimony and 141 days of 374 days spent in court were dedicated to oral testimony.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, Perry and others have argued that on judgment day, McEachern once again tipped the scales of justice against the oral record—against the plaintiffs and indigenous epistemology by relegating it to a supportive role.<sup>73</sup> Perry rightly finds that the suppression of the spoken records constitutes the suppression of the oral cultures of indigenous people: the written word does not represent

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<sup>70</sup> Adele Perry, "Colonialism and the Politics of History in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*," paper presented at the 20th International Congress of Historical Sciences, Sydney, July 2005, <http://cishsydney2005.org/images/perrysydney2005%20-%20Adele%20Perry.doc> (accessed 4 March 2005, link now defunct). Also in Adele Perry, "The Colonial Archive on Trial: Possession, Dispossession, and History in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Perry, "Colonial Archive on Trial," 1.

<sup>72</sup> Culhane, *Pleasure of the Crown*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Perry, "Colonial Archive on Trial," 5.

their history.<sup>74</sup> The Supreme Court of Canada overturned McEachern's decision in 1997, partly due to his choice in this regard.<sup>75</sup>

McEachern's evaluation of the presented evidence has provoked much criticism, and played an instrumental role in The Supreme Court of Canada's later reversal of his decision. Most notably, anthropologist Dara Culhane, in her 1998 book, *The Pleasure of the Crown: Anthropology, Law and First Nations*, finds a number of Eurocentric assumptions embedded in McEachern's approximately 400 page *Reasons for Judgment*, including conceptions of time, notions of territorial boundaries, and a biological construction of indigenous identity. Culhane was especially perturbed by the fact that McEachern only considered the oral testimony in as much as it helped support more "scientific" forms of evidence.<sup>76</sup> Perry's essay similarly takes issue with the judge's handling of oral history, and she notes that he was also disturbed by the narrative mode. For example, upon learning that Mary Johnson's history came in the form of a song, Perry notes that McEachern ordered her to write testimony down stating that the trial "is not a performance."<sup>77</sup>

To help elucidate the violence embedded in McEachern's protocol, I turn to Jacques Derrida's 1989 essay, "Force of Law: the 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'"<sup>78</sup> In this essay, Derrida endeavors to distinguish between "the just" and "the law."<sup>79</sup> To these ends, he uses the process of linguistic translation to convey his conception of justice as a transitive process.<sup>80</sup> For Derrida the act of speaking another's

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<sup>74</sup> Perry, *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Supreme Court of Canada, "Delgamuukw v. British Columbia on Appeal from British Columbia," 16 June 1997, <http://scc.lexum.umontreal.ca/en/1997/1997rcs3-1010/1997rcs3-1010.html> (accessed 5 June 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Culhane, *Pleasure of the Crown*, 257.

<sup>77</sup> Perry, "Colonial Archive on Trial," 5.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, "Force of Law," 3–67.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



language is about moving oneself towards the other; it is an act of mediation that implies the recognition of difference, which in turn opens up a potential space for justice.<sup>81</sup> By contrast, he sees “the law” as a system that legitimizes itself through an internal logic that, in turn, commands—forces—others as it compels them to move towards the law. Such imposition Derrida, quite rightly, considers violence.<sup>82</sup> With Derrida’s thoughts in mind, McEachern’s insistence on a “scientific” legal model with only peripheral support from oral histories is now more easily seen as a brutal imposition.

## 5.9 THE FORCE OF THE LAW AND THE STRANGLEHOLDS OF COLONIALISM

Derrida’s idea about the law and violence can also enrich our understanding of Mary Johnson’s expression. Her closed eyes, tear-streaked cheeks, and hand-covered mouth denote her immediate response to the news of McEachern’s verdict, a response that perhaps reflects the stranglehold he imposed on her testimony, but her responses denote the relentlessness of colonialism’s brutality, as also exemplified by the police action at Oka. Johnson’s muffled mouth, thus, depicts efforts to mute indigenous voices.

*The Trial of Tears* re-encodes the photograph of Johnson by surrounding it with motifs—copper shields, the tree of life, and White Raven—that recall the pageantry of the potlatch. In the ceremonies of this alternative court system, family histories are recounted and witnessed and property rights are asserted and mediated. Art historian Aldona Jonaitis, among many others, has pointed out that coppers are “the [Potlatch’s] most central symbol of wealth, power, prestige...and of rivalry and retaliation.”<sup>83</sup> The tree of life design is often the main motif that appears on the back of a ceremonial robe, much like the robe Johnson wore to the courthouse steps. White Raven is a symbol of the changing world. Within this

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 22–24.

<sup>83</sup> Aldona Jonaitis, introduction to *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (New York: American Museum of Natural History; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991) 40.

medley of potlatch imagery, the photograph also evokes thoughts of another famous trial, as chronicled by the following misinterpretation of Neel's photomontage, which is posted on the internet by the Canadian Heritage Information Network:

[*The Trial of Tears* is a] photo silkscreen of Ellen Neel, the artist's grandmother. It depicts her reaction to a guilty verdict at the 1922 trial of First Nations Elders who were convicted of holding a Potlatch. As a result, the masks and regalia of the Potlatch were confiscated by the Canadian Government and sold to museum collections in Canada and the United States. To date, many have been returned to the First Nations people and the Potlatch ceremony has been revived.<sup>84</sup>

Although this catalogue entry is filled with factual errors (the silkscreen depicts Mary Johnson in 1991 not Ellen Neel in 1922) it reveals connections between the *Trial of Tears* and the infamous 1921 potlatch demonstrating the Rule of Law's long legacy of oppressing British Columbia's indigenous people.

*The Trial of Tears* also forges fitting connections to Northwest Coast conventions of story telling, symbolism, and ceremony. Although the central image is derived from a photograph, all of the other motifs are graphic designs tied to emblems that typically embellish ceremonial objects. Neel's reference to the tree of life along with the photograph of Johnson enrobed in a button blanket ties *The Trial of Tears* to the cut work designs—the textile montages—that conventionally adorn ceremonial blankets. In contrast with *Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, which, as I argued earlier, is built primarily from photographs and is closely connected to the critical discourses of photomontage, *The Trial of Tears* appears to be more informed by Northwest Coast conventions of assemblage and thus alludes to the potlatch and its oral conventions. Thus, *The Trial of Tears* is not particularly engaged in the critical debates about photographic objectivity, but rather it points to a juxtaposition of two court systems in the legal debates about the validity of the oral archive and in the legal history of enforced silence.

*Delgamuukw v. Regina* was not a quiet negotiation, however. The judge and the lawyers engaged courtroom conventions of oration, and, as McEachern's four-hundred-page *Reasons For Judgment* suggests, this particular judge was not at a loss for words. In this regard, the trial was about competing

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<sup>84</sup> Canadian Heritage Information Network, "Highlights of Canadian Collections," *Canada's Digital Collections*, <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/canadiana/Enhigh/content/page1.htm> (accessed 15 March 2003).

conceptions of authority, into which Neel deftly intervenes again with *The Mask of the Injustice System*, as we shall see in the following section.

## 5.10 SUBVERTING MCEACHERN'S AUTHORITY:

### *THE MASK OF THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM*

*The Mask of the Injustice System* was designed as a portrait of Chief Justice Allan McEachern. Neel modeled his representation of McEachern from photographs of the judge that accompanied articles in the British-Columbia-based press during of trial.<sup>85</sup> In these photographs, McEachern is often represented as an enrobed judge, wearing attire that signals rank and social position. As Neel created *The Mask of the Injustice System*, he divested the judge of his white, red, and black robes and replaced them with a collar of cedar and currency, a collection of two and five dollar bills that signify the trial's twenty-five million dollar price tag.<sup>86</sup> The only vestiges of the judge's curial dress that remain are in his milky white complexion, bright red nostrils, and jet black hair; a white, red, and black palette that is also consistent with the conventional colors of Northwest Coast art. In addition, Neel's mask is an acerbic caricature that exaggerates many of McEachern's less flattering traits—his furrowed brow, baggy eyes, flared nostrils, dangling jowls, and double chin. Neel has also replaced McEachern's closely cropped locks with a scraggly mane of horsehair turning the "honorable" judge into a disheveled old man.

Neel's caricature taps into a central theme in Northwest Coast conventions of mediation: that of shaming.<sup>87</sup> For example, shame poles are occasionally erected to ridicule a chief or politician for not following the Potlatch codes of fair exchange, as exemplified by the Seward pole in Ketchikan, Alaska.

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<sup>85</sup> "Carver Unmasks Agony," *Vancouver Province*, 2 April 1991, sec. A, p. 18, photocopy, David Neel Vertical File, University of British Columbia, Fine Arts Library. Towards the end of the trial, *The Vancouver Sun* ran a series of human-interest articles about the judge and about the trial.

<sup>86</sup> Neel, "Opportunity Missed," sec. 1, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Daly, *Our Box Was Full: An Ethnography of the Delgamuukw Plaintiffs* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 65.

At the top of the Seward pole is an unflattering white-faced portrait of William Henry Seward, Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state, who helped negotiate the Alaska purchase. As the story goes, Seward did not reciprocate at 'Tlingit Potlatch, and so the pole was raised as a means of openly challenging Seward's conduct. But the act of shaming is not limited to the raising of poles; it can also include the unauthorized display of a crest, portrait, mask, or dance: shaming involves the violation of another's identity. At the same time, such modes of dishonor create the opportunity for mediation, for the shamefaced to right a wrong by throwing a proper Potlatch.<sup>88</sup> As an unauthorized "portrait" of McEachern, Neel's *Mask of the Injustice System* engages a similar sort of violation. Moreover, the title of the piece seems to equate shameful behavior with acts of injustice.

The mask's form also carries a challenge to the judge's integrity. Neel's pasty-faced judge is loosely modeled on a specific type of Kwakwaka'wakw mask, a Mahmalh'nalalh mask.<sup>89</sup> In an e-mail exchange between Neel and me, he described the mask form in the following manner,

There is a word: bakw'e m (accent above the first a), which refers to a Native person, or a 'real man...another word, mamalha (accent above the first a), refers to a white person or literally [to]'people who live on boats—from the days of the ships visiting the coast.<sup>90</sup>

From Neel's words, I infer that in contrast to the boat people who appear to be landless mahmalha, a bakw'em makes connections with the land and it is through the renewal of these connections that the bakw'em has the status of a "real" person. Embedded in Neel's explanation is the importance of land to the construction of indigenous identity. That Neel renders the judge as a mahmalha denies McEachern's relationship to the land. With this maneuver, Neel usurps the judge's identity in much the same manner that his legal decision impacts the plaintiffs in *Delgamuukw v. Regina*.

Neel self-consciously deploys the medium of the carved mask to create a space of mediation. As evidence of this, I turn to Neel's description of a Mahmalh'nalalh mask included in his 1998 catalogue

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>89</sup> David Neel, "Injustice," e-mail exchange with author, 15 July 2002.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

essay, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” in which he described the Mahmalh’nalalh Mask as a depiction of a “Caucasian man...[that] was used traditionally in feasts.”<sup>91</sup> Neel elaborated,

In a personal communication with Kwakwaka’wakw elders, Ethel Alfred and Daisy Sewid-Smith, I was told of a comical dance that depicted the Caucasian performer as clumsy, drunken, and oafish. On one occasion it was shown to the crew of a visiting trade ship who enjoyed it immensely, unaware of its contemptuous content.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, the Mahmalh’nalalh mask appears to be engaged in the Northwest Coast convention of mockery and shame, and Neel’s caricature of McEachern may well have been intended to pass unnoticed in front of the judge’s eyes, creating a fleeting moment of comical relief for cultural insiders. At the same time, Neel’s participation in the convention of shame also draws McEachern towards Northwest Coast conventions of mediation, as he becomes aware of the mask’s meaning. Thus, with *The Mask of the Injustice System*, Neel inverts the dynamics of the justice system and challenges the jurisdiction of McEachern’s courtroom by referencing Northwest Coast conceptions of honor.

*Life on The 18<sup>th</sup> Hole*, *The Trial of Tears*, and *The Mask of the Injustice System* are some of Neel’s most noted works of art inside the First Nations world and beyond. I think their success is due, at least in part, to the seriousness of their subjects—justice ought to be the concern of all court systems. I have argued that with these two photomontages and their thematically related masks, Neel set out to expose and critique epistemological and aesthetic biases embedded in the justice system such as its general dismissal of non-photographic images and biased oratory conventions. I have also argued that in these three pieces, Neel endeavours to reaffirm indigenous ways of knowing by focusing on the concept of personal truth, the practice of oration, and different manifestations of silence

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<sup>91</sup> Neel, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” 16.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

## 6.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This dissertation has set out to situate Neel's life and artistic practices within the discourses of indigeneity, and has focused upon the construction of personal and group identity in the context of visibility—of all acts of seeing and being seen, particularly as the political and the personal impinge upon artistic production. I have called attention to various mechanisms of colonialism, including the fragmentation of indigenous families, the occupation of indigenous land, the prohibition of the potlatch, the confiscation of Kwakwaka'wakw masks, and the more diffuse criminalization of indigenous lifeways generally. I have also shown how these experiences have infused the acts of looking and being seen with an array of values, beginning from the critique of formalism as an art historical methodology and positivism in the interpretation of photography, and introducing the key concepts of embodiment and display of the sacred as they arise in the context of art in the indigenous world. In keeping with the entangled relationships we find within Euro-American constructions of modernity, Neel simultaneously plays upon the external impulse to look as he politicizes the act of looking, by either twisting or disrupting the anticipated views of the indigenous world.

The circulation of people and objects along divergent paths further politicizes the reception of Neel's art. I have argued that Neel's mixed reception within Kwakwaka'wakw circles has been complicated by forces of colonialism, which have weakened the structure of the indigenous family, and particularly, his own connections to members of the Neel family. But twentieth-century mobility—represented in the reproduction of family photographs that appeared in Nuytten's book and the objects that appeared in MoMA's *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* exhibit—also afforded Neel a belated view of his geographically distant family. Twentieth century technologies of mobility eventually enabled him to reconnect with Neel family members and to make connections between his art and an array of images that

circulate in the international press. Yet, like many indigenous people, Neel's path of circulation and experience is singular, and diverges from those of other indigenous people, and such differences add political charge to Neel's reception, as his efforts to validate his experiences come under contest. Neel's own experiences, then, reflect the historic pattern of the cycle of confiscation and subsequent global re-circulation traced by Kwakwaka'wakw masks during the past two centuries.

I think the real importance of Neel's art lies in its capacity to engage with different audiences and to ignite debates that delineate the boundaries of various interpretive spheres, as exponents from differing spheres lay claims to interpretive authority over his work. In the end, the interpretive schisms that separate these spheres are sometimes jarring, and sometimes may be knit together into a whole. Neel's art allows us to feel—to embody—the shattered reality of the indigenous world, and to experiment with an active re-assembly of identity in an otherly modern worldview.

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