

Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease in Four Scenes

GERALD VIZENOR

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

MICHEL FOUCAULT (1974)

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

ERIC HOBBSBAWM (1983)

Scene One: Release from Captured Images

Roland Barthes shows that the striptease is a contradiction; at the final moment of nakedness a "woman is desexualized." He writes in his book

All of the contributors to this volume were encouraged to write in a mode that they felt would best convey their vision of the subject. Thus they were all free to choose their own literary manner of expression. In this instance, the author chose to write what he has termed a mythic satire, where he has (in his words) "played" with his sources. Thus the reader will notice that there are no page numbers furnished for quoted passages within the text. Vizenor explains that the omission is deliberate — an effort to unharness the reader from scholarly convention. It is truly another expression of the striptease. [Editor's note.]

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Mythologies (1972) that the spectacle is based on the "pretence of fear, as if eroticism here went no further than a sort of delicious terror, whose ritual signs have only to be announced to evoke at once the idea of sex and its conjuration."

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

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

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

The inventions and historical plunders of tribal cultures by colonists, corporations, academic culture cultists, with their missions, reservations, deceptions, muse² in durance, have inhibited the sovereign striptease; racism and linear methods of perception have denied a theater for tribal events in mythic time.

Scene Two: Euphemisms for Linguistic Colonization

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

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

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

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

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

Lyman writes that the "removal of unwanted detail was certainly not the only end toward which Curtis employed retouching. When it came to pictorialist aesthetics, he was dedicated in his pursuit of dramatic effect."

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

Photographs are ambiguous, according to the novelist and art critic

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

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

Scene Three: Metasavages in Perfect Opposition

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

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

"The Indian leaders whose likenesses appear in this exhibition represent every major region of the country and span more than four

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

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

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

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

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Scene Four: Evelybody Is Hoppy in Mythic Time

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

Tune captured his own electronic and emulsion image when he first saw his outsized face and eruptive nostrils on television and in newspaper photographs. He improved his pose from week to week, one image to the next: he cocked his cheeks high at a traditional angle to mimic the old photographs, bought a watch, and dressed in leathers and beads, bits and pieces at first, and then in six months' time he appeared on election eve in braids and feathers, a proud reversal of the striptease. He seldom responded to abstract questions about economies; and in spite of his captured images, he found himself in the oral tradition from time to time. It happened when he removed his watch: he told stories then, myths and metaphors unfurled like blue herons in flight at dusk. Linear time seemed to vanish when he removed his watch.

Tune lost the election, he even lost the urban tribal vote, but he had earned the distinction of being the first tribal person to enter the aldermanic race. Months later in editorial articles, pictures of him in feathers and braids appeared—dubious footnotes to a loser—which he soon recognized as captured images, his image, from the past.

"Who was that stranger image?" he asked in a rhetorical pose at the first international conference on socioacupuncture and tribal identities. Tune was dressed in his leather and beads for the conference, redundant beside his photographic image on the right side of the screen behind the podium. "A dreamer who lost his soul for a time and found his families in still photographs," he said as he projected a second photograph on the left side of the screen.

Tune moves in mythic time, an unusual dreamer who tells that he shaves with crows and drives behind bears to the cedar treelines near the cites, hunkers with beaver over breakfast, and walks backwards under fluorescent lights and in institutions without windows. When he cannot see a tree he loses four white faces from his memories, an urban revision of the Ghost Dance.

The lead speaker on tribal identities in the modern world, Tune

stands on stage, between two photographic images. On the right is his captured image in braids, sitting on the ground in a tepee with several peacepipes and an alarm clock. The photograph projected on the left side of the screen is "In a Piegan Lodge," by Edward Curtis.

"See here," Tune said as he pointed to the images, "Curtis has removed the clock, colonized the culture games and denied us our time in the world. . . . Christopher Lyman wrote that the clock could have been a medal, a peace medal, but the box is too thick and besides, we wore medals then, never museum-boxed medals for a posed picture. . . ."

"Curtis paid us for the poses; it was hot then, but he wanted us to wear leathers to create the appearance of a traditional scene, his idea of the past. . . . Curtis stood alone behind his camera, we pitied him there, he seemed lost, separated from his shadow, a desperate man who paid tribal people to become the images in his captured families. We never saw the photographs then and never thought that it would make a difference in the world of dreams, that we would become *his* images."

Tune pushed the podium aside and measured the captured images on the screen with his outstretched hands; from heads to hands he moved his fingers in shadow gestures over the screen. "But it did make a difference, we were caught dead in camera time, extinct in photographs, and now in search of our past and common memories we walk right back into these photographs, we become the invented images as this one did during the aldermanic election, to validate those who invented us on negatives."

He lowered his arms, spread his stout fingers like birds in flight and released several feathers from his vest. The lights were dim, the audience in the conference center was silent. Crows called in the distance, an otter slid down a river bank and snapped back in mythic time like a trickster on a high wire between the woodland and the cities.

"Socioacupuncture is our means of survival on the wire, our striptease in mythic time," he said in a deep voice as he untied the ties of the costumes in captured images, unhooked the hooks to museum commodities, and bead over bead he performed a slow striptease, a ritual contradiction between two frozen photographic images from the time-bound past.

"Not satire as shame," Tune explained to the tribal people at the conference, "not social ridicule as a form of social control," he continued as he dropped his bone choker to the floor, "but satire from magical connections with the oral tradition. . . . Robert Elliott writes about a 'mystical ethos' in satire, from ritual dances and tribal tricker-

ies. Mythic satire, not as a moral lesson, but a dream voice out of time like a striptease in the middle of the word wars."

Tune removed his beaded leather vest and dropped it to the floor of the stage. His hands danced as he continued his lecture stories on the ethos of ritual striptease.

"Socioacupuncture reverses the documents, deflates data, dissolves historical time, releases the pressure in captured images, and exposes the pale inventors of the tribes. Lyman tells us that Curtis set out to construct a 'photographic monument to a vanishing race.' Not so, it was the photographer who would have vanished without our images to take as captured families.

"On the frontier, white settlers were offered free guns with the purchase of sewing machines," Tune announced to the conference participants as he untied his moccasins. "The tribes were offered free clocks with a peace medal and a reservation. . . . Curtis stole our alarm clocks and we missed the plane and lost the election, dressed in leather and feathers."

"Take it off," someone yelled from the audience.

"Give him time," someone responded.

"Roy Wagner must have stopped the clocks for a time when he wrote *The Invention of Culture* [1981]." Tune said as he kicked his pinched moccasins with the floral bead patterns into the audience and gestured, at the same time, toward his image on the screen to the right. "He wrote that 'the study of culture is in fact *our* culture'—the dominant culture is what he means here—and 'it operates through our forms, creates in our terms, borrows our words and concepts for its meanings, and re-creates us through our efforts. . . . By applying universal theories naively to the study of cultures we invent those cultures as stubborn and inviolable individualities. Each failure motivates a greater collectivizing effort.'

"We lose the elections in leathers and feathers, failed and fixed in histories, but through mythic satire we reverse the inventions, and during our ritual striptease the inventors vanish."

"Take it off," the tribal audience chanted again and again as Tune unbuttoned his shirt and unbraided his hair and shivered between the captured images at his sides.

"Wagner tells how Ishi, the last survivor of the Yahi tribe in California, 'brought the world into the museum,' where we lived and worked after our capture," Tune confessed, as he threw his shirt and the ribbons from his braids to the audience. "In good weather anthropologists and others would take the two of us from the museum back to the hills

where we would demonstrate how to survive with a small bow and wooden arrows. He was the 'ideal museum specimen. . . . Ishi accomplished the metaphorization of life into culture that defines much of anthropological understanding.' Wagner wrote."

"Take it off."

"Take it off."

"Take it off."

"Take it off."

"Tune is the name and the end of the captured game," he chanted as he combed his hair free from braids, and then united the beaded belt that held his leather trousers erect, "the end of the captured game."

Tune turned the projectors off and the captured images died when he dropped his trousers in a sovereign striptease. The audience burst into wild cheers and peals of animal laughter in the dim light, even the cats and crows called from the crowd. Tune listened to the birds over the trees and when he removed his wristwatch the dichotomies of past and present dissolved one last time. The inventors and colonialists vanished with the striptease; even those whose ideas he had quoted seemed to vanish like petals on a pasture rose. The conference on socioacupuncture was silent.

Tune turned toward the trees in mythic time and told how he and Ishi lived together and worked at the museum to protect the anthropologists, for a time, from vanishing. Then, last summer, "the anthropologists were secure enough in their own culture to recommend that we receive honorary degrees from the University of California at Berkeley."

Tune paused in silence to celebrate the trees in his vision. Then he told stories about the graduation ceremonies in the redwoods: Morning ghosts ride with our dreams over the tribal stories from the past, dark waves, slow waves, water demons under our ocean skin waves, trickeries and turtle memories under the stone waves, under the word gates, through the earth where we hold our origins with the trees and the wind, creation myths with ocean roots. . . . The ghosts dance round-about in our dreams, clouds dance and burn free in the rituals of the morning sun. . . .

College degrees are degrees in words, with special awards for sentence structure, uniforms in the word wars, which is not much better than being elected to the plastic flower growers' association Hall of Fame, but we must not pluck the carrier pigeons with the documents too soon because the academics might vanish.

Silence.

Gregory Bateson writes in his book, *Mind and Nature* (1979), that in the affairs of living "there are typically two energetic systems in interdependence: One is the system that uses its energy to open and close the faucet or gate or relay; the other is the system whose energy 'flows through' the faucet or gate when it is open." Photographers and colonists are the faucets, historians hold the word-gates, and we are the energies of the tribes that run like dreams in a dance with the morning sun over wet meadows.

Ghosts hover in the tall redwoods roundabout the outdoor amphitheater in the Mather Redwood Grove. Animals and birds soar through the treescapes, dream beasts browse over the mountains. We remember the flood and call the crows back from the cities.

"The imagination is always aware of the present . . ." writes Mary Warnock in *Imagination* (1976). "Neither understanding alone nor sensation alone can do the work of imagination, nor can they be conceived to come together without imagination. . . . Only imagination is in this sense creative; only it makes pictures of things."

Alfred Kroeber, Thomas Waterman, Edward Sapir, the linguist, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, Regent of the University of California, Robert Sproul, and Benjamin Ide Wheeler were all there for the graduation ceremonies, roundabout in the redwood trees, soaring out of time and place in magical flight.

"The University of California strives not to isolate academic ideas, races and nations on our campus as single population groups. This is not a place of racial separations," asserted Provost Pontius Booker as he pinched the skin under his chin. "Our academic communities are based on trust, research, instruction, fair examinations, and, of course, on excellence. . . ."

"This afternoon we are privileged to announce that our very own Ishi, and Tune Browne, will receive honorary Doctor of Philosophy degrees here at the University of California, where these two instinctive native scholars have lived in a museum. . . . It is a distinct pleasure to announce these degrees and to introduce Alfred Kroeber, the famous anthropologist who worked with these two proud and unusual natives."

Kroeber shuffled on stage close to the microphone, leaned over and spoke in a gentle but distant voice: Ishi was the "most patient man I ever knew. I mean he had mastered the philosophy of patience. . . ."

Saxton Pope, our medical doctor and master of bows and arrows, was not present for the graduation but he wrote the following to be read at the ceremonies: Ishi "looked upon us as sophisticated children—

smart, but not wise. We knew many things, and much that is false. He knew nature, which is always true. . . . His soul was that of a child, his mind that of a philosopher."

Phoebe Apperson Hearst came down to the microphone from the right rim of the amphitheater to decorate us with colorful sashes and to present our degrees. "Doctor Ishi Ishi, Doctor Tune Browne, you are both intuitive scholars, we have all agreed. . . ." Doctor Kroeber has recorded the first words that Ishi spoke in English. "We are, at last, pleased to imitate this fine man on this special occasion, is 'evelybody hoppy?'"

"The transvaluation of roles that turns the despised and oppressed into symbols of salvation and rebirth is nothing new in the history of human culture," writes Robert Bellah, a sociologist from the University of California at Berkeley, in his book, *The Broken Covenant* (1975), "but when it occurs, it is an indication of new cultural directions, perhaps of a deep cultural revolution."

We danced roundabout on the stage of the amphitheater dressed in our breechcloths and academic sashes with all the animals and ghosts under the redwood trees; a striptease, deep in a cultural revolution.

The fogdogs laughed and barked from the rim.

"Evelybody hoppy?" asked Doctor Ishi.

"Time now for a word striptease," someone chanted.

"Take it off."

"Silence."

"We are what we imagine," wrote N. Scott Momaday, the Kiowa

novelist. "Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves."

. . . The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined."

"Evelybody hoppy?" asked Doctor Tune Browne.

Notes

1. Ishi, a Northern California Yahi, became an instant celebrity when, emaciated and frightened, and the sole survivor of his band, he emerged from the brush near Oroville and surrendered to twentieth-century America. It was 1911, and the nation's newspapers trumpeted him as the "last wild Indian of North America." He would live the remaining five years of his life as a ward of the anthropology department at the University of California at Berkeley, succumbing in the end to tuberculosis. See Kroeber (1961). [Editor's note.]

References

The following is a list of those sources which the author wished to acknowledge as having informed his writing but were not explicitly mentioned in the text. The reader should refer to the Cumulative Bibliography at the end of the volume for those titles which the author did cite in his text. [Editor's note.]

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