LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

OBJECTS OF ART—ESSAY

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For the first time in our history, we are ingesting images of ourselves created for us by people other than us. We have always created our own images, our own music, our own methods of speech and dress and submitted only to our own rhythms, memories, and inherited traditions.

—American Indian artist Ernie Paniccioli[1]

It would not be surprising to discover that no other people on earth have been more studied, described, sketched, interviewed, examined, photographed, or painted than the original inhabitants of the Western hemisphere and their descendants. It started with Columbus himself, who noted on October 12, 1492:

> They all go completely naked, even the women, though I saw but one girl. All whom I saw were young, not above thirty years of age, well made, with fine shapes and faces; their hair short, and coarse like that of a horse's tail, combed toward the forehead, except a small portion which they suffer to hang down behind, and never cut. Some paint themselves with black, which makes them appear like those of the Canaries, neither black nor white; others with white, others with red, and others with such colors as they can find. Some paint the face, and some the whole body; others only the eyes, and others the nose.[2]

Can you picture those island people? Colorful, vital—stylin' hair—individually arrayed yet naked at the same time, a people deserving of comment. And if Columbus, the original tourist, had had a cell phone, he would doubtless have taken a picture to post to Facebook.

No sooner had he described how pretty the people were than Columbus stated his intention to "carry home six of them to your Highnesses . . . " presumably to study their language, and as objects of curiosity. Thus began centuries of seeing American Indians as *objects*, an attitude still evident today. The fact that the most widely disseminated images of American Indians—from sports team mascots to the maiden on millions of butter boxes—have not been created by American Indians themselves leads to a tension often expressed by American Indian writers: How do we become the artists rather than the object of the art?

The books in the **Objects of Art** series dramatize—in fiction, poetry, and mixed-genre works—the struggle of a diverse people to control their own images. *Night Sky, Morning Star* gives a Pueblo view of a Southwest Indian art market. In a poem series in *Evidence of Red,* a stereotypical Noble Savage and Sports Team Mascot swap dialogue, argue, and eventually fall in love. A tribal art historian figures prominently in *Mending Skins.* A brilliant painter's breakdown is described, in *Shadow Tag,* through the eyes of the painter's muse/wife, a scholar of painter George Caitlin, whose subjects were American Indians. Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, although considered a young adult book, gives adults as well an engrossing glimpse of a Spokane Indian teen confronted by (and confronting) what others imagine about American Indians and his own thoughts about his people.

In each book, American Indian artists encounter portraits (whether in visual art or other media) that use them as object. Inevitably, these characters and figures confront such objectifying art in complex ways. This is a literature created by writers acutely aware of their roles as image-makers and, often, image-correctors. These books give voice to the objectified, those who have long been the subject of art without their active involvement in that art. They seem to say that when the object talks back, art becomes more rich and real for all of us.

Twenty years ago, the work of just a handful of American Indian writers was being published. Now, major awards and nominations go to authors such as Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich and poets Joy Harjo and Simon Ortiz, to name only a few. Many writers teach at universities, and most are called upon to make critical comment about what is written by and about American Indians, as well as to perform as culture critics, commenting on works of visual art created by and about American Indians. We authors who write from our tribal worldview can say that our time as object has ended, that we have taken on the task of directing readers and viewers to see us in our full human complexity.

However, both the content and the form of American Indian literature can be challenging. These works don't always stay within the boundaries of genre, sometimes mixing drama with poetry, stories with songs, even fiction with visual art. Our literature isn't meant to be comfortable. It reveals pain, passion, rage, deep ties to our people, self-loathing, and self-love, often with humor or other contradictory emotions—all while remaining true to our reality as colonized and often-misunderstood people. American Indian literature tries to create a bridge of understanding without compromising truth.

It is not surprising, then, that the creative work of American Indian poets and storytellers often includes critical comment on image and stereotype and those who construct them: Hollywood, pop culture, and museums, to name three powerful influences. Much of what the world recognizes (and misunderstands) about American Indians comes through film imagery (the war whoop echoes from '50s Westerns), museum presentations (of both ancient and contemporary traditional art), and popular culture, which perpetuates the image of the noble savage as well as his less-positive cousins: the warrior or the savage/drunk, the squaw or the maiden/Indian Princess.

Although not all writers of contemporary American Indian literature take image and visual art as their theme, a surprising number of recent and excellent works do. And they do so not as an assertion of political agenda, but because visual art is an integral part of the everyday environment in many American Indian communities. Many tribes and pueblos have active art markets and trading posts or cultural centers where locally created art is sold. Certainly, a large number of American Indian families include artists, whether traditional artists (whose work might be referred to as craft) or contemporary fine artists creating paintings, photographs, carvings, sculpture, drawings, or, increasingly, films, all with American Indian subjects. Visual arts (and music, for that matter) are at the heart of the American Indian community. In some areas, a culture may be defined by its basketry, pottery, sculptures, and other art to such an extent that individuals must struggle against the expectation that all indigenous Americans are artistic, much as they struggle against the image of all American Indians as environmentally sensitive and spiritually attuned to nature. In fact, today's contemporary artists often refute such stereotypes, positive though they may seem, with their creative work, and authors writing about American Indian artists show their awareness of this dilemma in their characters' struggles.

Evelina Zuni Lucero's potter creates work that pushes beyond the more marketable Pueblo tradition, Sherman Alexie's main character creates cartoons that seem an extension of the traditional (and unpaid) role of storyteller, and Louise Erdrich's painter struggles with the value that non-Natives place on his work, but only if it is "Indian" enough for their tastes. Still other figures in these books create art that at once references and updates American Indian artistic traditions.

Today's artists face the urgent issue of control of cultural image and who determines what kind of art is considered American Indian art. At its heart, this is an economic problem, as non-Indians, with the money to buy, are the main consumers of American Indian

art. In her essay, "The Story of a Cultural Arts Worker," Jaune Quick-to-See Smith explains how American Indian art became commodified through institutions[3] and formal means:

> Institutionalized Indian art was and is a stylized form taught at the boarding schools such as the Institute of American Indian Arts or Haskell or Bacone, although in recent times they are breaking away from their stylized formats. Contemporary Indian art is usually made by a college-educated Native artist who may include imagery or design elements from art anywhere in the world in any media but may also reflect their tribal arts. The important thing is for them to be true to themselves and their life experiences rather than copy or mimic art for the sake of marketing.[4]

American Indian authors face a similar concern as they create literature that often goes against what the book world expects, especially in terms of genre categories. However, such flexibility makes American Indian literature a good companion to visual images.

Evelina Zuni Lucero, *Night Sky, Morning Star*

"I looked out from the protected shade of my booth at the Blue Corn Indian Art Show with a practiced detachment, an expression on my face that revealed nothing. My eyes looked above the row of booths across from me where other artisans sat, like me, in a measured space we had paid no small sum for. We anticipated a weekend of wrangling and bargaining with tourists, collectors, locals, and Indian people who love nothing more than a hot piece of fry bread, some Indian dancing and drumming, and a good buy to brag about." (p. 13)

The images included in **Picturing America** complement the **Objects of Art** reading list, providing a focal point for the themes and settings that readers encounter in these books. Fabulously formed pots from the Southwest tradition, shown in *Pottery and Baskets* (1A), also act as a strong central image in the first novel in the **Objects of Art** series. *Night Sky, Morning Star* by Evelina Zuni Lucero tells the story of a Pueblo potter, her son's search for his father, and an incarcerated man who finds freedom in spirituality and art. Relationships between characters are as important in this book as plot. The story unfolds through a series of first-person narratives that relate the intimate memories of a group of American Indians who bonded when they were young and full of promise, but whose lives turn in tragic directions.

While *Night Sky, Morning Star* does not soft-pedal the hard facts of American Indian life—for example, that American Indians as a group have a shorter average life span and a higher risk of death from violent causes than any other population group in the United States[5]—it also reveals how art and beauty remain open to even the most hopeless. Lucero's potter, Cecelia, and her female friends have survived since their days together at a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school. Cecelia has had her heartache, but her arts education, first in San Francisco, then at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, has given her a path to follow and some degree of peace. The storyteller figure depicted on her pots, a traditional Pueblo elder with a lap full of children listening to stories, takes on her own character so that her work is considered "contemporary" art—an uncomfortable label for this character. Cecelia also creates traditional Pueblo bowls and pots, but puts her own designs into a special piece that evolves along with the story.

LeAnne Howe, *Evidence of Red*

"My name is Noble Savage
You killed me
In order to bring me back to life
As your pet, a mascot,
A man.
Since I'm your invention,
Everything I say comes true."
(excerpt from "My Name is Noble Savage")

Set partly in Texas and other areas of the American Southwest and Southeast, LeAnne Howe's mixed-genre collection, *Evidence of Red,* seems a fitting companion to the images of Mission Concepción (1B) in **Picturing America**. Many pieces in Howe's book describe a struggle between the "Three-headed Deity" of Christianity and the mother-centered spiritual beliefs of indigenous peoples. Churches such as Mission Concepción, with their indigenous style (adobe construction, sun-god imagery) blended with European tradition, can also stand as counterpoint to Howe's implied critique of Christian traditions. Howe's "evidence" of red, her proof of Indian-ness in the world, is expressed in her love of the female qualities of nature—both benign and mother-fierce when faced with threats to her people—contrasted with Christian commands that "man" have "dominion," over

creation. Some of the poems are based on Choctaw origin stories and traditional imagery of the red earth as female creative force.

Evidence of Red is challenging, provocative, sexual, and even violent at times. Howe's many poetic personae and the characters in her prose reveal themselves in dramatic works. In fact, many poems in the collection are written as performance pieces, so it may be helpful to readers to take roles or read these works aloud.

Howe's poem sequence in the section "Cannibalism" is perhaps the most appropriate of her works to focus on as part of the **Objects of Art** series. Poems that address stereotypes begin with "My Name is Noble Savage" and continue through to "The Way We Were—Indian Mascot Laments His Lost Love, Anyway." Both humorous and vulgar, the banter between poetic personae makes a powerful point about what happens when cultures consume others' images of themselves. The sequence tries to answer an implied question, central to most American Indian artists: Between the Noble Savage and the Indian Sports Team Mascot, who are we?

The notion of the noble savage as the natural human state before civilization's corrupting influence is central to an understanding of Howe's work. The term, credited to eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is worth exploring in connection to this reading and art series, as numerous works of literature and visual art have depicted or responded to the idea of the noble savage.

Eric Gansworth, *Mending Skins*

"Here we see a highly traditional bust of a Lakota in a war bonnet, mouth wide open, presumably in full war cry, thick braids trailing out from beneath this explosion of feathers surrounding his face. Please note, this item is a bottle opener, the stainless steel lip that catches the bottle cap discreetly embedded behind the resin Lakota man's impressive row of front teeth. So, whenever the person who owns this opens a bottle of beer, the Lakota man gets the first drink." (p. 6)

Another work of art in **Picturing America** is N. C. Wyeth's rich illustration *The Last of the Mohicans* (5B). Many Americans now know that American Indians, including the Mohicans, did not become "Vanishing Americans," as was suggested more than a hundred years ago by artists including photographer Edward Curtis, who produced a series with that title. However, the notion that American Indian culture has died off or has been reduced to casino glitz is the widely held and firmly rooted public perception. The image of the solitary, resigning American Indian male holds sway, Eric Gansworth's *Mending Skins* reminds us. His use of an art historian's keynote address as the opening to his novel and his inclusion of his own visual art within the text further comments on the problem of image and stereotype. We tend to think of stereotype as a matter of perception, even an abstraction, but in his many narrators Gansworth makes stereotype real and brings it home through TV, that glowing box so central to contemporary life. Indian actors on TV, in the movies, and on the stage both inform and conform to stereotype.

In a work not included in this series, Ojibwe poet Jim Northrup makes clear that American Indians are aware of the problem of image when he writes: "We have TV/that window on America./We see you, but you don't see us."[6] Similarly, Gansworth's characters, representing two generations romanced by the Hollywood image of the Chief, swap the reality of reservation life to become Indian actors. These actors are the obsession of three women who remain home on the reservation (or in nearby urban areas) and whose own art eludes until, it seems, one actor comes home to play a real role in the life of his community.

Gansworth's stories make us take a look around and recognize kitsch, that peculiarly American category of art. American Indian kitsch embarrasses with its everyday use of stereotypes (buxom maidens with fawns in their laps) and sometimes debasing references to alcoholism. Gansworth describes (and illustrates with a painting at the section break) a beer opener that forces a warrior to grip the bottle cap in his teeth and "take the first drink" of each bottle that is opened. American Indian kitsch also figures in Louise Erdrich's *Shadow Tag*: "What's kitsch is Indians . . . as images. There is no way around it. We'll never get the franchise back." The effort of fighting images, it seems, has given way to exhaustion—but the battle continues, with full awareness of its historical causes.

Louise Erdrich, *Shadow Tag*

"Don't paint Indians. The subject wins. A Native painter himself had said this. You'll never be an artist. You'll be an American Indian artist. . . . Blacks can be post-racial. But Indians are stuck in 1892." (p. 32)

In the mid-nineteenth century, George Catlin painted the Mandan leader Ma-to-toh-pa in what became North Dakota, the home state of writer Louise Erdrich.[7] *Catlin Painting the Portrait of Ma-to-toh-pa—Mandan* (6B), which is included in **Picturing America**, becomes important in Erdrich's novel, *Shadow Tag*. The central character, Irene, is the muse of her American Indian painter husband, and is also a Catlin scholar. The novel itself plays with the idea of truth in images and truth in story, so what we learn of Catlin and the painting of Ma-to-toh-pa is less fact than it is a revelation of American Indians' feelings about having been the naive subjects of Catlin's paintings and journals. Irene suggests that Ma-to-toh-pa and other Mandan were spiritually injured by Catlin's paintings. Later, these claims are revoked. A curious tension arises because Irene is the sole subject of her obsessive husband's paintings and has, in fact, been hurt spiritually by the images he has made of her. We see in Erdrich's reference to Catlin a bridge between object and artist that is as fascinating as it is excruciating.

The main characters in *Shadow Tag* constantly confront the image they project (a happy, successful, and, importantly, an *American Indian* couple) against the reality of a tortured relationship. Readers eventually come to understand the couple's private ambivalence toward the cultural identity the painter has thrust upon them through the images of his muse/wife. Just as a thing and its image are not one and cannot meet, just as a shadow can never be caught in a game of shadow tag, this novel reveals the impossible distance between two things that seem so close: the image of American Indians in art and the real world we inhabit daily.

Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

"They stared at me, the Indian boy with the black eye and swollen nose, my going-away gifts from Rowdy. Those white kids couldn't believe their eyes. They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO. What was I doing in Reardan, whose mascot was an Indian, thereby making me the only other Indian in town?" (p. 56)

The *"Sans Arc Lakota" Ledger Book* (8B) images included in **Picturing America** show the remarkable ability of American Indians to create art out of materials at hand, even in desperate circumstances. Art in the ledger style is produced today by American Indian artists from all parts of the country.[8] Such chronicles have become identified with Plains tribes, but through mission and government schools, the practice spread across the West and into the Southwest in the late 1800s. It's a style whose roots go back millennia, to pictographic systems etched on rock, paper birch, bark, copper, and animal hides. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie's story of a young adult who draws and cartoons his way to personal liberation, seems an extension of the winter count and ledger art traditions that tell the tribal and personal histories of American Indians through images. And the novel's lengthy title sounds like a nineteenth-century conversion narrative, or even a captivity narrative, both genres common to the earliest American Indian writers. Part graphic novel, part coming-of-age journal, Alexie's book shows reservation life in a harsh light, but also reveals how the comfort of home, the sense of belonging, and love compel American Indians to stay or to return to their homelands.

Alexie's novel deals with adolescence in a frank manner, does not shy away from sexuality, and uses language a notch above PG. In fact, the book—which is used in classrooms across the country to help kids connect history to their own reality—is not unlike many of Alexie's adult novels in tone, subject, and characterization. The cartoons included in the book help cross race and class boundaries to tell the story of a place: the generic—many would say unfairly stereotypical—Indian reservation. Importantly, the book is funny. It may be disturbing at times, but Alexie's dark sense of humor shows human grace in horrible circumstances, much as the Sans Arc ledgers do. Such possibility of escape through art truly appeals to all ages, but particularly to younger readers who may, like Alexie's main character, feel their life unfolding in doodles and sketches, rather than in the world of words alone.

Finally, it is important to note that some of the American Indian authors chosen for this series are also accomplished visual artists. Louise Erdrich has illustrated her Birchbark House young adult novels. Eric Gansworth regularly exhibits his paintings and has included his visual work in novels, including *Mending Skins*, as well as in an acclaimed poetry collection, *A Half-Life of Cardio-Pulmonary Function*. Portraying American Indian artists in literature seems a personal as well as a creative choice and speaks to American Indians' holistic sense of art: Art is everyday, and being a writer does not preclude being a visual artist. As readers, we benefit from such a rich worldview, and the books in **Objects of Art,** taken together with the beautiful images of **Picturing America**, share and expand on that richness.

Notes

1. Ernie Paniccioli's essay, "New Enemy," particularly focuses on African American cultural influence on American Indian teens. Quote from *Sovereign Bones*: *New Native American Writing II,* Eric Ganswoth, ed.; Amerinda/Nation Books, New York, N.Y.; 2007.
2. Passage is attributed to Columbus through direct quote in the summary of his journals by Bartolome de Las Casas, widely available online, including at www.Wikiquote.org, the source of the text included here.
3. The acronym IAIA, used in a number of stories, refers to the Institute of American Indian Arts in New Mexico. This school for American Indians began as a U.S. industrial school in the late nineteenth century, and then operated as the Santa Fe Indian School (training students in printing and other arts) until the 1960s, when it became the Institute of American Indian Arts. The influence of IAIA on what is considered American Indian aesthetic is an important contextual consideration in reading American Indian literature.
4. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, "The Story of a Cultural Arts Worker," *Sovereign Bones*: *New Native American Writing II,* Eric Ganswoth, ed.; Amerinda/Nation Books, New York, N.Y.; 2007.
5. American Indians and Alaska natives have higher death rates than other Americans from tuberculosis (600% higher), alcoholism (510% higher), motor vehicle crashes (229% higher), diabetes (189% higher), unintentional injuries (152% higher), homicide (61% higher), and suicide (62% higher). These statistics and others are available at info.ihs.gov.
6. Jim Northrup, *With Reservations*, Native Arts Circle, Minneapolis, Minn.; 1999.
7. Louise Erdrich is my sister. As a rule, I do not make public comment about her writing. However, the subject of her recent novel perfectly suited itself to this series, so I have made an exception here.
8. One of my favorite contemporary ledger-style artists is Dwayne Wilcox (Lakota), who combines traditional style with humor not unlike that conveyed in many comic strips. You can find Dwayne's work at www.doghatstudio.com.

Heid E. Erdrich has written three collections of poems. Her most recent book, *National Monuments,* won the 2009 Minnesota Book Award for poetry. A longtime college professor, Heid Erdrich now works with American Indian visual artists and writers as a curator, editor, and mentor. She frequently presents papers, talks, and workshops on Native American literature and visual art. Her Web site is www.heiderdrich.com.

Let's Talk About It: Picturing America *is a project of the American Library Association Public Programs Office, developed with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute for Museum and Library Services.*

OBJECTS OF ART—RECOMMENDED READING

The following works are recommended for those who would like to continue reading and discussing books on this theme.

Bill Anthes and Nicholas Thomas, *Native Moderns: American Indian Paintings, 1940–1960.* Few people are aware of the history of American Indian artists in the modernist era. Ojibwe painter George Morrison and others are described in this book rich with illustrations. The book makes clear there has always been American Indian involvement—often significant—in mainstream American art.

George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*. These journals from the nineteenth-century artist (available in full text online) tell of Catlin's life among the various indigenous groups depicted in his paintings. Catlin's notes are often tales of circumstances surrounding the creation of specific paintings; some recount the lives of the subjectsand, occasionally, describe their reaction to his work.

Lise Erdrich (author) and Julie Buffalohead (illustrator), *Sacajawea*. Meant for early readers but attractive to adults for its amazing artwork and well-researched text, this book creates an interesting context when juxtaposed with the Sans Arc ledger drawings and Catlin's paintings. It's the tribally informed story of Sacajawea, a figure second only to Pocahontas as the stereotypical American Indian maiden.

Louise Erdrich, The Birchbark House series. These three books, written from an Ojibwe perspective, were created as a counterpoint to the Little House series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Rich narratives equal to those of Erdrich's adult novels, these books reveal historical details of the lives of American Indians during the time the "settlers" were claiming homesteads on lands recently taken from tribes by the U.S. government. In terms of the **Objects of Art** series, the series is of further interest because the author is also illustrator.

Eric Ganswoth, ed., *Sovereign Bones*: *New Native American Writing II*. This anthology of essays and creative fiction contains a number of statements on art, including the one that introduces this **Objects of Art** essay.

Eric Gansworth, *Half-Life of Cardio-Pulmonary Function*. A noted collection of poetry, this book makes a fine companion to *Evidence of Red,* and is also an example of a mixed-media work. Gansworth's illustrations give his poetry a narrative line, while his use of wampum patterns and other imagery reveals a particularly Iroquois aesthetic.

Eric Gansworth, *Extra Indians*. This new novel continues the theme of American Indian actors and their struggle with stereotype. Mysteries and story lines from Gansworth's earlier novel, *Mending Skins*, are continued in this book.

LeAnne Howe, *Miko Kings.* The story of a postmistress, a ghost, and the first baseball teams in the Americas, this novel is at once spooky and historical. Again, as with works chosen for the **Objects of Art** series, Howe's work treads a line between genres—in this case spoken word, collage-novel, and research essay. Along with *Shell Shaker*, Howe's other work of fiction, this is a great "next book" for any reader who enjoyed the author's powerful sensibility in *Evidence of Red.*

Susan Power, *Grass Dancer*. This novel tells the stories of several generations of Dakota and their Lakota relatives, shedding light on difficult periods such as those that resulted in the Sans Arc ledgers. Images of dance and the power of song play important roles in this saga.

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