

Wagon Burner, This! Princess Moonrider That!

**Maria Hupfield
Terrance Houle**



Opening Reception Friday September 15, 7-9 pm

Interactive Performance Friday September 15, 7:30 PM

Artist Talk Saturday September 16, 2 PM

Interactive Performance Friday, October 20, 6:30 PM

Presented in collaboration with the ImagineNative Film & Media Arts Festival

You'd Better Smile When You Say That: Wagon Burner This! Princes Moonrider That!

by Richard William Hill

This is a funny but also serious and smart exhibition about stereotypes and racial slurs. It is focused around two in particular, which the artists literally embody in various forms and in doing so, defeat. Maria Hupfield undoes the Indian princess, who has paddled her canoe everywhere from Disney cartoons to Niagara Falls and the Banff Indian Days. Terrance Houle satirizes the "wagon burning" Indian of the Hollywood western, particularly the way in which the term has come to be used as a racial epithet.

Stereotypes are the dark side of the human mind's capacity for symbolic abstraction. Symbolic abstraction helps us make sense of the world in many practical ways, but it also lays the ground for one of the most persistent and destructive forms of human stupidity – the inability to see the limits of generalization or to distinguish between the general and the particular. This might involve assuming that the behaviour of a particular individual is necessarily indicative of that of an entire class or imagining that a generalization – an abstract category that we apply for convenience – is the whole story of each individual. This is what we often do instead of thinking about and examining specific circumstances. Notice how often violence and hatred are focused against symbols that reflect, for the perpetrator, an abstract category. Rapists want to terrorize the entire class of people defined as "women", soldiers kill "the enemy", religious fanatics kill "infidels". Of all the victims of violence in human history I suspect that only a small minority were hurt because of who they were as individuals.

Symbolic abstraction becomes particularly potent and destructive when it gets tied to a particular ideology – patriarchy, say, or the notion of Western superiority that underpins the colonization of North America. In these cases, the generalization in question often finds itself detached entirely from observation, becoming free to wander off in whichever direction is expedient. This is the regime of the stereotype and almost every mainstream representation of Indigenous North America is liberated from the discipline of experience, whether particular or general. It is a childish mode of thinking that society at large seems unable to outgrow. This may be partly due to old habits, but mostly, I suspect, because too many people have too much invested in the power relations that stereotypes support.

I remember the first time I heard the term "wagon burner." There was this white kid I knew from grades 3 to 5 when we both lived in the family residence building at Simon Fraser University. His mother moved them back home to the town of Williams Lake when she completed her BA, but they visited us once when I was in grade 7. My friend and I were excited and a bit nervous to test how far we had grown apart. As our shyness passed we talked about interesting things we'd

done or heard about since we'd last seen each other. After the more impressive conversational gambits were explored and exhausted (trip to Disneyland, new pellet gun) things began to slow down. Suddenly he piped up, excited by something he remembered:

"Hey, I learned a new word for Indians!"

"Oh yeah?" I said, but I was thinking, "Uh, oh."

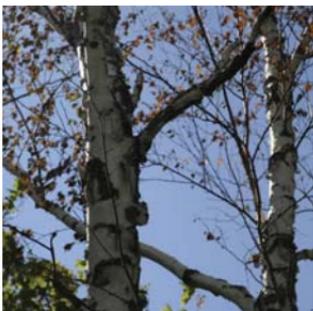
"Yeah: wagon burners."

"Hmm."

I hadn't heard that one before, but I recognized it immediately as a racist slur. He obviously didn't. Or didn't understand why such a thing would be wrong. His innocent pride wasn't tinged with malice toward me – it was just what you called Indians in Williams Lake, and an interesting bit of local knowledge he could pass along. In retrospect I suppose he must have been a bit dim, or astonishingly insensitive, but at the time it just seemed natural that white people didn't get this sort of thing. I don't remember whether I tried to convince him that the term was offensive. Probably. What I remember most was feeling disappointed and embarrassed for him and – for maybe the first time in my life – weary of the world in an adult way. Did my pal have to come back from home with the vocabulary of a racist moron? Would anything I say in our short meeting have more influence on him than his redneck family and his redneck town? I thought it almost certainly wouldn't. The problem seemed too big. I never saw him again after that. I never really wanted to.

Since then I've never known what to make of "wagon burner" as a racist slur. The kids in my school used "chug" instead, and that slur is the one that still sounds most hurtful to my ear – a potent, no-nonsense bit of distilled hatred. (Canadian soldiers called in to repress Mohawks at Oka, Quebec, in 1990 wrote "chug busters" on the side of their armoured personnel carrier.) For me, in comparison, wagon burner seems, well, open to interpretation, open to being read against the grain. I know that any signifier can be loaded up with enough hatred to sting and that anyone who grew up being called "wagon burner" will likely feel differently, but for me I just refused to accept the insult in the phrase itself. Damn right I'd burn your wagon, I would think. If you've got one, bring it on.

I think Terrance Houle is up to something similar. He wanted to burn a wagon so badly he had to make his own. Houle's work for this show features a covered wagon with video flames





projected on its canvas cover. Beside the wagon is a life-size plaster cast of the artist, who stands holding out a lighter. It is remarkable that, despite the deadpan way in which Houle has taken the phrase absolutely literally, he has nevertheless produced an image that is disarming and unexpected. This is because, despite the fact that all things to do with Indian stereotypes are supposed to be in the past, Houle insists on forsaking flaming arrows in favour of the modern expediency of a lighter. His loaded presence in the work is enough to turn the phrase against itself. "Wagon burner? Why I'd be happy to..."

In Houle's work, the artist's body is tangibly present in the gallery space, but in Maria Hupfield's it is displaced from its expected spot. The dominant image in her installation is an empty canoe. We know, from such informed sources as Disney's *Pocahontas* and endless 20th-century illustrations flogging any imaginable product, that every Indian princess has her own canoe. The Indian princess spends most of her time paddling around in the moonlight, thinking romantic thoughts about her white lover, whose side she will join against her people. That said, she is also a real sucker for a waterfall. In the mainstream white imagination waterfalls are just a magnet for Indian princesses. When an Indian princess sees a waterfall she just has to paddle over it (which is probably why you see so few Indian princesses around today). There is the pseudo-legendary "maid of the mist" Lelawala, who went over Niagara Falls, and Greenmantle, who is said to have paddled over Kakabeka Falls, where her spirit lives on as a rainbow. In the stories the princesses always seem to have a reason, but I suspect that this unusual predilection for death by waterfall is actually a strange side road in the ongoing discourse of the "vanishing Indian." The trope of the vanishing Indian is a tenacious bit of mid-19th-century Romanticism concerned with the poetics of what everyone then presumed would be the genocide of Indigenous North Americans. If, as Edgar Allan Poe insisted in another context, "the death... of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world," then the death of a beautiful young woman as a symbol for the inevitable death of an entire people must be even more so.

In Hupfield's installation there is a canoe that seems to be in the process of being paddled out of the wall, but the figure of the princess has been displaced to what appears to be almost a shadow on the wall itself. In fact, it is a silhouette of the artist, in the process of removing her princess crown. What a relief it must be to lift that burdensome thing off: to go from waterfall-prone Indian princess and unofficial ghost of genocides past to Maria Hupfield in all her particularity. In the image she is poised on the brink, waiting for the audience to mentally complete the act. There. Doesn't that feel better?



Biographies

Terrence Houle is an internationally recognized interdisciplinary media artist and a member of the Blood Tribe. A graduate of the Alberta College of Art & Design, Houle has developed an extensive portfolio that ranges from painting and drawing to video/film, mixed media, performance and installation. His works have been shown in Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto and internationally in Brisbane, Australia, and Warwickshire, England. In the fall of 2003 Terrence participated in a Thematic Residency at the Banff Centre of the Arts, which focused on 34 indigenous people working on issues of colonization and communion. Currently Houle works and maintains his art practice in Calgary.

Maria Hupfield is a conceptual artist working in sculpture, installation and performance. From the Martin Clan of Wasauksing First Nation, Hupfield is an art educator and community arts and culture programmer living in Toronto, where she bases her art practice. She currently teaches part time at the University of Toronto. Hupfield has a MFA in Sculpture from York University and an Honours BA Specialist in Art and Art History from the University of Toronto and Sheridan College. Her work has recently shown in New York City, Vancouver, Toronto and Calgary.

Richard William Hill is an independent curator and writer of Cree heritage. As a curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario he over-saw the museum's first substantial effort to include North American Aboriginal art and ideas in permanent collection galleries. He also co-curated, with Jimmie Durham, *The American West* at Compton Verney, UK in 2005. He is currently working on *The World Upside Down* for the Walter Philips Gallery at the Banff Centre, which opens fall 2006.

401 RICHMOND STREET WEST • STE 110 • TORONTO • ONTARIO • M5V 3A8
TEL 416-979-9633 • FAX 416-979-9683

WWW.ASPACEGALLERY.ORG
INFO@ASPACEGALLERY.ORG

GALLERY HOURS:
TUESDAY TO FRIDAY 11AM - 6PM
SATURDAY 12PM - 5PM

Board of Directors

Russell Brohier
Sheila Butler
Aries Cheung
Carole Condé
Mary Kainer
Rita Kamacho
Nina Leo

Staff

Vicky Moufawad-Paul · Programming/Exhibition Coordinator
Rebecca McGowan · Administrative/Planning Coordinator



torontodartscouncil
An arm's length body of the City of Toronto



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada