

The Noble Savage Was a Drag Queen: Hybridity and Transformation in Kent Monkman's Performance and Visual Art Interventions

Kerry Swanson

The idea of the North American Indian man – stoic, primitive, dark, Other – can be largely credited to the epic paintings of celebrated 19th-century white European-American artists whose work remains housed in the national institutions and galleries of Europe, America, and Canada. In their romanticized landscapes of the New World, colonial artists such as George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, and the Hudson River school of painters mythologized the "dying" race of Red Men while propagating their own personas as heroic adventurers in a wild, undiscovered land. The iconography created in these works and those that followed, which depicted the Indian man as the doomed noble savage, are among what the late Native theorist Louis Owens called the "hyperreal."¹ These paintings gave birth to an imaginary Indian – the highly masculinized noble savage – that became the popular model for authenticity, challenging the identities of all those who did not fit into this limiting construct. They created a mythology that cast the Native people of the period, and therefore those who followed, as either brutal animalistic warriors, or sad victims of Darwinian destiny. In a current body of work that is gaining attention both in Canada and internationally, Canadian Cree visual and performance artist Kent Monkman challenges this imagery, and the mainstream Christian version of history perpetuated by 19th-century colonial artists, by appropriating their landscapes, language,

¹ Louis Owens. *Mixed Blood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998, p 13. Of mixed Cherokee, Choctaw and Irish heritage, Owens focuses on the theme of mixed blood identity in much of his writing, in which he disputes the notion of the "real Indian" and the imagery proliferated by this limited social construct. Owen's own life, cut short by suicide in 2002, was deeply affected by his inability to prove his Native ancestry, thereby branding him a non-Indian in the eyes of the American government.

and propaganda to create a space for himself, and queer identity, in the story of the early Wild West. In Monkman's version of history, his half-breed drag-queen alter-ego, Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle, runs riot on the unspoilt vistas of the 19th century, affirming her existence and (re)negotiating her queer sexual power. Prior to colonization, queer identity (known in Native communities as Two-Spirit in honour of the existence of both the male and female spirit in one body) was widely accepted among many different North American tribes,² although this fact has been virtually eliminated from historical renderings of the period. Through his humorous and provoking interventions, Monkman reclaims that history and, using Foucault's concept of sexuality as a site of cultural power, insists on the existence and continued survival of queer Native identities.

In the performance art piece *Traveling Gallery and European Male Emporium*, which emerged from the series of paintings entitled *Eros and Empire*, Monkman celebrates and utilizes the concept of hybridity to offer an alternative mythology that transforms the prevailing fixed and static notions of Native sexuality, identity, and history. Jose Muñoz writes: "*Hybrid* catches the fragmentary subject formation of people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality, and gender identifications."³ Identifying as mixed-race/mixed-gender in his work, Monkman effectively embodies and applies the concept of hybridity as a method for cultural navigation, demonstrating its transformative power in creating new identities and historical perspectives. Homi Bhabha argues that by occupying a hybrid space, the colonized can renegotiate the terms of

² Deschamps, Gilbert. *We Are Part of a Tradition: A Guide on Two-Spirited People for First Nations Communities*. Mino-B'maadiziwin Project: www.2spirits.com. Toronto: 2-Spirited People of the First Nations, 1998. This short guide offers the history of the Two-Spirit in a modern context, explaining some of the basic philosophical approaches and the current issues that continue to affect Two-Spirit people.

³ Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 31. Muñoz looks at queer theatre as a process or outcome of what he terms *disidentification*. He describes this as a point of departure, of building, where queer artists build identities and politics in the present and in the future, a concept that fittingly describes Monkman's work.

colonization, effectively moving beyond the identity constructs that have been created around him/her.⁴ Through his alter-ego Share, the ultimate hybrid who incorporates past and present, male and female, Native and white, Monkman renegotiates the terms of power in Western society and seizes the most powerful and transformative role available: the role of storyteller.

Introducing Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle's European Male Emporium

Share Eagle Testickle is a glamorous character who flounces around the 19th-century past/present in an ankle-length feather headdress, Louis Vuitton quiver, and spiked heels. Partly spoofing gay pop icon Cher, particularly during the period of her 1970's hit song "Half-Breed," Monkman's persona plays with Native stereotypes, pop culture, and queer culture. Appearing first in Monkman's 2004 landscape paintings, a nondescript early incarnation of a prototype Share morphs into the artist himself as the series progresses. **[image]** As Share's persona becomes more undeniably linked to that of the artist himself, Monkman gives his alter-ego a physical incarnation in his first "colonial art space intervention," *Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle's Traveling Gallery and European Male Emporium*. Staged in August 2004 at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, famous for housing many of the works of Canada's Group of Seven painters, Share's *tableau vivant* focused on the Group of Seven landscape paintings and the Edward Curtis film, *In the Land of the Headhunters*. The Group of Seven refers to Canada's renowned white

⁴ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge: 1994, p 7. Although I have argued that, for Indigenous people, we are not living in a postcolonial world, Bhabha's theory of postcolonialism is effective for an analysis of the methods of utilizing the concept of hybridity as a source of agency. Bhabha theorizes that agency exists in the moment of enunciation, in the spaces between language, which I would argue is the space in which Monkman's performance, which creates a new language, exists.

landscape painters of the early- to mid-20th century, whose paintings mythologized the Canadian landscape as wild and untouched by human contact. The Group of Seven are part of the Canadian colonial establishment, and their work is considered to mark the beginning of "Canadian art," thus obliterating the importance and existence of Native Canadian artists and their preceding work. In his challenge on Canada's institutional "untouchable" artists, Monkman announces his subversive agenda. He challenges not only the white artists who claimed Canada's landscapes as their own private discoveries, but also the institutions that have, until very recently, chosen to exclude Native perspectives in their galleries. In a recent article profiling Monkman in *Canadian Art Magazine*, David Liss explains the significance of choosing the McMichael Gallery and the Group of Seven as the site of intervention for Share's debut performance:

As the premier home of the art of the Group of Seven, the McMichael is significant in the accepted canon of what constitutes Canadian identity, or at least one version that is readily identifiable. As an institutional gatekeeper, the McMichael exercises a certain power over what is included and what is not. The Group's romanticized depiction of Canadian landscape as an unpopulated, undiscovered wilderness is not lost on Monkman, who regards history as a mythology forged from relationships of power and subjugation.⁵

In this performance, Share arrives on the back of a white horse, resplendent in elaborate headdress, Louis Vuitton and Hudson Bay Company accessories, and cartoonish drag-queen heels. On her way into the gallery space, she entices two young white men dressed in loincloths, who become the subjects of her "taxonomy of the European male." Bringing to mind the work of Mexican *mestizo* performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, whose work is heavily infused with humour and a taste for the ironic, Monkman's

⁵ Liss, David. "Miss Chief's Return." *Canadian Art Magazine*. Volume 22, Number 3, Fall 2005, p. 82. This is one of the first major pieces written about Monkman's current work, which is quickly gaining popularity in the Toronto and international art scene.

Share is performed with a wink and a nudge, allowing mainstream audiences access to the larger theme of cultural subjectivity and bias, while leaving those without specific historical and cultural knowledge on the outside of some of the subtler messages and references. Just as Gomez Peña's romantic Mexican stereotype "El Mariachi Liberace"⁶ creates an exaggerated caricature as a method of subverting mainstream stereotypes,⁶ Monkman's Share reveals the ridiculousness and subjectivity of colonial artists who created mainstream Native mythologies through their work. Like Gomez-Peña, Monkman uses his hybrid, mixed-race identity to his advantage, demonstrating his authority and power as cross-cultural navigator. Lisa Wolford writes that Gomez-Peña's work is characterized by a type of artistic and political strategy that he describes as "reverse anthropology,"⁷ which Monkman also effectively employs. By virtually travelling back in time in order to occupy the romantic landscapes and scenes that became the source of manly noble Native stereotypes, Monkman claims them as his own territory – a territory free of the borders of time and space, where he is the master of his own history, sexuality, and identity. Muñoz writes that masculinity is "a cultural imperative to enact a mode of power that labours to invalidate, exclude, and extinguish faggots, effeminacy, and queerly coated butchness."⁸ In the creation and performance of Share, Monkman refutes the static and masculinized imagery of the Indian; his location in the present/past allows him to speak from within but beyond the boundaries and confines that have kept this image in the fixed past for over a century.

⁶ Wolford, Lisa "Guillermo Gomez-Peña: An Introduction" *Theatre Topics*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Volume 9, Number 1, March 1999, pp. 89-91. A further comparative examination of the Gomez-Peña and Monkman's work is an area of future research interest for me.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Muñoz, 1999:58.

Reversing the Colonial Gaze

Share's taxonomy reverses the gaze of white colonizer and Native subject, using text taken directly from the letters and notes of famous colonial artists George Catlin and Paul Kane, who were two of the most prolific artists in documenting Native peoples and lives during the 19th century. Both have been highly celebrated in their respective countries, the United States and Canada, for over a century. In a typical quote from one of his letters, George Catlin writes: "I find that the principal cause why we underrate and despise the savage, is generally because we do not understand him; and the reason why we are ignorant of him and his modes, is that we do not stoop to investigate."⁹ In Monkman's performance, it is Share who plays the role of Catlin and his contemporaries, investigating the savage and primitive white man, in an earnest attempt to understand their strange habits, dress, and physical make-up before they become extinct. The performance immediately highlights how strange and uncivilized the white man is in comparison to the glamorous, immaculately dressed Share. Share takes her complicit models to her studio (the gallery), where she plies them with whiskey, forces them into more European-style clothes, and ultimately exploits her position of power and authority over them by making them pose for her. In the final act, Monkman's original landscape paintings become a part of the performance, when Share reveals them as the final product of her efforts at the easel. In this final scene, Share highlights the commodification of

⁹ Catlin, George. *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians: Written During Eight Years' Travel (1832-1839) Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America*. London: D. Bogue, 1844, p.102. The most striking things I found in reading Catlin's letters were how earnestly he believed he was doing the right and just thing, and the important role he felt he played in recording what appeared to be a dying race. While he claimed to like the "red man" and considered him to be human, his letters reflect a tone of colonial and patronizing racial superiority.

the Native that has been generated through image production and consumption. In turning the tables and becoming the creator of the image, as opposed to the subject, Share further confirms her position of power. While Share is still subjected to the gaze of her audience, it is now Monkman, the Native and artist, who controls the image. In this instance, and in other live performances I have seen by Monkman, Share is the ultimate embodiment of Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle. Debord writes that "[t]he world at once present and absent that the spectacle *holds up to view* is the world of the commodity dominating all living experience."¹⁰ By becoming a commodity producer, Share transforms the role of Native as victim of commodification without denying her past. The Louis Vuitton and Hudson Bay accessories indicate that she has moved beyond her commodification but maintains her past knowledge of this legacy, again demonstrating the transformative power of her hybridity as a tool for agency, affirmation, and power.

Renowned Native American performance artist James Luna has said that performance art and installation offer an opportunity like never before for Native artists to express themselves without compromise.¹¹ Part of the freedom that is available to Native artists through performance is access to a continuation of oral storytelling traditions in a modern context. Performance art as a language and a discipline allows Native artists to speak in a language that is not the colonizer's, and is closer to traditional Indigenous perspectives and worldviews as opposed to European. Performance, in Monkman's work, allows him to move beyond the colonial language of landscape painting, which he mimics. As Homi Bhabha argues, mimicry can be a dangerous form

¹⁰ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Bureau of Public Secrets website: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/>. October, 2005. Monkman's performance as spectacle could provide the basis for another paper, but I thought it was worth addressing briefly in the context of this paper.

¹¹ Luna, James. "Allow Me to Introduce Myself." *Canadian Theatre Review*. Issue 68, Fall 1991.

of agency that maintains the colonial power structure.¹² In occupying the performance art space, Monkman demonstrates that he is aware of the limitations of speaking solely through the language of colonialism. Through performance, Monkman is able not only to reimagine, but to *relive* colonization with the roles of colonized and colonizer reversed. He is able to utilize the physical, namely his skin colour, voice, mannerisms and physique, to corporeally demonstrate his occupation of the hybrid and his use of this fragmented identity as a site of cultural power. Muñoz writes that "identity practices such as queerness and hybridity are not a priori sites of contestation but, instead, spaces of productivity where identity's fragmentary nature is accepted."¹³ Monkman not only embraces hybridity, he effectively demonstrates its many uses for renegotiating colonial power structures in the here and now. His performance shows that there is a space where time, space, gender, and race can be embodied as a whole. Here, he is free to adapt the storytelling and myth-making traditions of both European and Native cultures to create a space for himself, and Native gay and transgendered sexuality, in both the historical past and present.

Humour, Irony, and the Trickster Character

Humour and irony are used heavily to bring audiences into the ruse of Share's performance and to challenge the mock-innocence of the original diarists and painters who expressed pity and childlike fascination for the Indigenous people with one hand, while exploiting them with the other. The hegemonic power relationship that exists in

¹² Bhabha, 1994. Muñoz also discusses Bhabha's concept of mimicry as a complex, "double articulation," disavowing as it affirms the dominant power structure (1999:78).

¹³ Muñoz, 1999:79. Muñoz affirms my contention of hybridity as a site of power for cross-cultural/cross-gender identity politics.

any colonial relationship is acknowledged through the complicity of the white models; like well-behaved children they dress up for Share, play the piano, and dance. As in the paintings, in the performance Share is a sexually charged entity, displaying the hyper-femininity of the drag queen with an authority that is distinctly masculine. Foucault writes that sexuality is "endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies."¹⁴ In bringing Share to life, Monkman uses his own sexuality as an instrument of power to support his goal of deconstructing imperial historical constructs. This is a highly effective strategy that allows him to physically reclaim and affirm the lost history, sexuality, and social status of the Two-Spirited person.

An androgynous character capable of shape-shifting and time travel, Share's role as a trickster is fundamental to her character. As trickster, her identity is firmly rooted in both past and present, comprising part of her hybrid identity. A central figure in Native storytelling, the trickster is a mischievous rebel, a jester who consistently challenges authority and is unbound by the rules of time. Owens writes, "appropriation, inversion, and abrogation of authority are always trickster's strategies."¹⁵ In traditional trickster fashion, Share disarms her audiences with humour while mocking and dismantling their assumptions, in this case regarding the history of Native sexuality and its history. By mimicking a colonial structure in the guise of trickster, Share is making it very clear that she is undertaking a process of dismantling, of (re)telling the false stories we have been told and (re)imagining our version of the world. Thomas King, one of Canada's master

¹⁴ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: The Will to Knowledge*. London: 1990, p. 103.

¹⁵ Owens, 1998:26.

trickster storytellers, writes, "[t]he truth about stories is that that's all we are".¹⁶ While we cannot change history, we can change, subvert, and dismantle the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories that are told about us. By affirming the Two-Spirit identity in a historical context, Monkman's performances retell the story of colonization and create a worldview that pays homage – albeit cheekily – to the traditional values of accepting and honouring sexual diversity, which will be discussed in greater detail further in this paper.

(Re)Constructing Sexuality and Culture

Foucault argues that sexuality is not a "natural given," but rather a historical construct in which physical stimulation and pleasure are controlled and manipulated according to the dominant power structures and ideologies.¹⁷ In the tradition of Foucault, Monkman approaches his examination of native sexuality by examining the existing power relations of colonial North America. Native North Americans are still living in a colonial world in which their traditional lands, cultures, and identities remain colonized; therefore, Monkman makes no clear differentiation between past and present, as Native lives and identities continue to be shaped by the colonial power structure as it existed in the 19th century. Monkman's work addresses and bridges the ongoing relationship between the colonial past and the colonial present, and also confronts the significant lack of discourse and knowledge regarding the history of Two-Spirited people and their suppression through Christian indoctrination. Prior to colonization, many of the North American tribes including the Cree, Ojibwe, Mohave, Navajo, Lakota, and Winnebago, honoured

¹⁶ King, Thomas. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2004, p. 1.

King, also of mixed heritage, is one of Canada's foremost Native authors, writing trickster narratives and texts asserting the importance of storytelling and the need to revisit history from the perspective of Native worldviews.

¹⁷ Foucault, 1990:106.

Two-Spirited people as accepted and even sacred members of tribal society.¹⁸ Monkman's work returns to the source of the original propaganda that culminated in modern stereotypes about Native peoples, thereby revealing and challenging the subjectivity of the artists and their self-serving mythologizing. By returning to the site of colonization, Monkman works to decolonize Native sexuality by offering up an alternative to the accepted version of history, an alternative that also happens to be closer to the realities of the period.

Often tied to the creation stories of the tribe, the concept of Two-Spiritedness is not centred on the physical act of sex; it is the European worldview which essentializes sexuality in physiological terms. Historically, many tribes gave credence to the existence of what ethnographer Sue-Ellen Jacobs calls "the third gender," which is as much a spiritual as it is a physical state of being. The Cree word *ayekkwew*, for example, means "neither man nor woman" or "man and woman".¹⁹ This is a fitting example for a study of Monkman, who embodies both gender and racial hybridity as a fundamental aspect to his identity and work. Monkman refers to these traditions, and his alter-ego is likewise androgynous, resisting black or white identity markers with her medium-toned skin and careful balance of male and female. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the modern term, Two-Spirit, reflects the concept that a person can house both the male and female spirit in one body, that not every individual can be categorized in a heterosexual way. The term "Two Spirit" has gained popularity within the Native gay community

¹⁸ Williams, Walter. *The Spirit and The Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press: 1986. Although Williams employs the "berdache" terminology, he offers a thorough history of Two-Spirit life and identity pre-colonialism, affirming its existence and positive status while highlighting the difficulties of researching a topic that has been so deeply shut down through systematic colonial oppression.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

because it reflects an Indigenous worldview and rejects the previous white/colonial term of "berdache" which was used to describe traditional Native Two-Spirit individuals, and the Arabic roots of which imply the meaning of male sodomized slave.²⁰ As mentioned, Monkman's use of performance is particularly suitable to relaying the Two-Spirit concept of "undefinability," as the artist is able to utilize the masculine elements of his physique, voice, and mannerisms, along with the hyper-feminine *modus operandi* of the drag queen, in a physical incarnation not possible on canvas. Bhabha writes that freedom exists in a decolonization of the imagined spaces created by colonizers and imperialists and that those who are marginalized must create a "third space."²¹ Like the third gender, the third space is a free zone that exists somewhere beyond the margins of definable cultures or identities and their inherent limitations. This is the space occupied by the hybrid Share, who, as trickster, cannot be defined or bound by time, sex, or geography.

The Suppression of Native Sexuality in Hegemonic North America

The diversity of Native sexuality in pre-colonized North America is seldom mentioned or illustrated in mainstream art and media, although we know that it existed. In her groundbreaking anthropological work, Jacobs researched centuries of written documents for references to the third gender or Two-Spirited people in Native North American tribes. Out of 99 tribes, 88 referred to Two-Spirited culture, including both male and female homosexuality or transgender. In 19th-century Europe, however, views towards non-heterosexual practices were extremely different. Foucault writes that by this time:

Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation or transfigured by it could expect sanction or protection. Nor did it merit a hearing. It would

²⁰ Deschamps, 1998.

²¹ Bhabha, 1998:8.

be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation – whether in acts or in words.²²

The diverse sexual practices of Native people were quickly suppressed by Christian European colonizers – with remaining repercussions. In Jacobs's research on modern tribes, "eleven tribes denied any homosexuality to the anthropologists and other writers." The denials came from tribes with the longest history of contact with white Christian cultures that severely punished homosexuality.²³

Foucault defines power as a relationship forged through a series of tactics, in which both the subject and object are complicit.²⁴ At a time when the Indigenous populations of the Americas were being swiftly killed off, both through war and disease, the denial of beliefs that made them further vulnerable to persecution was a tactic of survival. Under the heavy influence and rhetoric of Christianity, many tribes had also "become ashamed of the [Two-Spirit] custom because the white people thought it was amusing or evil."²⁵ As a result, many individual tribes suppressed their long-held beliefs and denied the expression of sexual diversity, taking on the Christian worldview that held any sexual practices other than heterosexuality as deviant. Just as shamanism became taboo, so too did homosexuality. What was once deemed sacred and spiritual became something to hide and be ashamed of. As a mode of self-protection and self-preservation, a hegemonic power relationship was forged between the Native population and the white rulers. Trinh T. Minh-ha writes that "[h]egemony is most difficult to deal with because it does not really spare any of us. Hegemony is established to the extent that the worldview

²² Foucault, 1990.

²³ Deschamps, 1998.

²⁴ Foucault, 1990:95.

²⁵ Williams 1986:187.

of the rulers is also the worldview of the ruled".²⁶ This is the challenge faced by Monkman, who through his work attempts to reclaim a worldview that has been suppressed, from both sides, by centuries of colonial rule. By incorporating elements of Native, European, colonial, and modern cultures and traditions, the artist references the complexities of the present hegemonic colonial landscape, where the boundaries between "us" and "them," "then" and "now," are blurred.

Sexuality as "Divine" Intervention

In the meticulously rendered landscape paintings that preceded his performance art debut and gave birth to Share, Monkman steps back to the very point in time when colonial mythmaking and sexual suppression is beginning to take shape. Share debuts, literally with a bang, in the 2001 painting *Heaven and Earth*, in which she sodomizes a muscular frontiersman under a halo of celestial light that announces the mythological proportions of the event. **[image]** Monkman aligns the mythologizing of the American frontier with the epic mythology of ancient Rome and Greece.²⁷ The light signifies the arrival of a new dawn, in which Native peoples reclaim their sexual identities and their authority over their own history. It also alludes to a literal coming-out, both from the shadows of historical marginality and from the shadows of Monkman's past work, which depicted

²⁶ Minh-ha, Trinh T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London and New York: Routledge: 1991, p. 145. Monkman is careful to acknowledge the hegemonic colonial relationship that has oppressed Native sexuality. His work speaks to both Native and non-Native audiences.

²⁷ Monkman, Kent. Artist notes, *The Trilogy of St. Thomas*, 2004.

ambiguous homoerotic characters barely discernible under heavy Cree text. In *Heaven and Earth*, Share is distinctly masculine; her femininity and persona as the artist's alter-ego emerge as the series progresses. It is through the act of performing sexuality that Share comes into her own existence and that the artist recognizes himself in her. The series also begins with more ambiguities than Share's gender; this first scene could be interpreted as an act of rape or as a complicit act. This is an interesting point, given Foucault's notion of complicity as being a necessary component of power. Share is using her sexuality as a site of power, and stamping her authority on land, culture, and history; yet there is the suggestion that perhaps her partner is ready. Performance plays heavily in the painting, as sex is performed as a function of transformation; Share's act insists on the existence of queer Native identity on the colonial landscape.

Re-Mythologizing the West

Monkman continues to create new myths in the subsequent paintings in the series. In *The Trilogy of St. Thomas*, a tragic love story unfolds between Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle and her Orangeman lover, the young Thomas Scott. **[show image]** The trilogy uses the standard tragic love affair format to draw parallels to the complex relationship between Native peoples and their colonizers. The first painting in the trilogy, *The Impending Storm*, references Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole, the highly religious Hudson River School painter, using the storm as an allegory for the "end of innocence" and "impending doom of civilization" that are about to encroach on Native life.²⁸ Next, *The Fourth of March* references the execution of Thomas Scott by Louis Riel, a historical event that had a significant political impact on what was to come for the Cree people of Manitoba, Monkman's ancestors.

²⁸ Ibid.

In this series, Monkman inserts himself in the role of Share, a decision that will later allow him to give life to his alter-ego off-canvas. Monkman writes that by inserting himself in the series, he "relate[s] the importance of this historical event to [his] own identity as a Native person".²⁹ In his decision to create Share in his own image, the artist blatantly references his own sexuality as a site of power. Share and her overt sexuality are always the focus of each work, with a blunt refusal to play second fiddle or to be upstaged by even her own lover's death. Minh-ha writes that "the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals."³⁰ By making himself the subject of his intervention on 19th-century colonial art, Monkman is effectively creating a place for himself, a place that previously did not exist, in the history books. Putting himself in his works also serves the purpose of overtly mocking "the self-aggrandisement of the original artists like George Catlin, who would occasionally place themselves in their work."³¹ The "Eagle Testickle" in our hero/ine's name is also a play on the egotism of the 19th-century artists who saw fit to create the mythologized Native image for world consumption. Monkman's challenge to the subjectivity of ego-driven colonial artists is most obvious in an earlier painting, *Artist and Model*. In this piece, Share paints a petroglyph-style image of her handsome white hostage, whom she has tied to a tree. Share's image looks nothing like her subject, yet she appears swooning, her back arched with pride over her work. Below her easel is a Louis Vuitton quiver or paint brush holder, a symbol of the commodification of both the original paintings and their Native subjects. In claiming a modern symbol of wealth, status, and luxury, Share reaffirms her power and further identifies herself with both the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Minh-ha, 1991:14.

³¹ Monkman, *Trilogy of St. Thomas*: 2004.

present and the past. She negates the hierarchy of class, power, and wealth that has left many Native people living as impoverished citizens in their own land. In the final painting in the trilogy, *This is Not the End of the Trail*, Share buries her lover, but hope springs up in the lingering gaze of the white priest presiding over the funeral. Again, Monkman denies the sacredness of Christianity while alluding to a new chapter for Two-Spirited people.

Performance as Oral Tradition, Spectacle, and Authority

In the conscious decision to take his paintings to the forum of performance, Monkman gives a traditional voice to the story he is retelling, employing the oral tradition as opposed to the landscape art introduced to the continent through colonization. Minh-ha writes, "[s]/he who speaks, speaks to the tale as s/he begins telling and retelling it. S/he does not speak about it. For, without a certain work of displacement, 'speaking about' only partakes in the conservation of systems of binary opposition".³² Share is the s/he who, rather than condemning the actions of her predecessors through didactic lectures or tales, retells the tale in a way that speaks directly to Two-Spirit identities, in a way that encompasses both their past and present, and dismantles the authority of the colonial patriarchal ideology. Monkman's effectively re-imagines a new space where what Homi Bhabha calls "hybridity," the culture between cultures, can exist.³³ Catlin wrote that his work "will doubtless be interesting to future ages; who will have little else left from which to judge of the original inhabitants of this simple race of beings, who require but a few years more of the march of civilization and death, to deprive them of all their native

³² Minh-ha, 1991:12.

³³ Bhabha, 1994.

customs and character."³⁴ Catlin and his colleagues were convinced that they were recording the last gasping breaths of a soon-to-be-extinct race. In the McMichael performance, Share takes on the role of Catlin/colonizer, occupying the position of authority as a means of discrediting it. As the artist in the piece, it is she who is singularly responsible for creating the stories and images that will reinforce the power relationship between herself and her subjects. Monkman's simple use of role reversal, emphasized by switching references to white man and red man, savage and civilized, is a humorous way of highlighting the arbitrary nature of racist classification. In giving his community audiences a new history that is in opposition to the accepted version that denigrates Native people and their customs and excludes Two Spirited people, Monkman, like Catlin, offers a perspective that can be used as insight for future ages, as perhaps the era of white male supremacy nears its end. The "traveling gallery" is a reference to Catlin's traveling gallery, where his images reached mass audiences for the time. The traveling gallery served as one of the key methods by which Catlin's mythology of the Native people and tribes with which he came into contact was consumed. The Native person thus became a spectacle, an object of fascination, and an "other" offered up for public consumption. Share, similarly, will travel colonial galleries as a method of intervention on the spaces that continue to give ownership and authority of history to the colonial worldview. Share uses the concept of spectacle to her advantage; she embraces the idea of herself as "other," as a positive dichotomy to the oppressive identity constructs of hetero-Christianity.

Conclusion

³⁴ Catlin, 1884:16.

As Homi Bhabha writes, freedom for those marginalized by colonization exists through the creation of new hybrid spaces beyond the confines, constructs, and definitions created by the colonizers. Freedom is the act of creating and existing in a place beyond definitions, beyond black and white, somewhere in the blurry space beyond the culturally safe margins of identity. Sexuality and its many taboos are nothing more than imaginary constructs that are given codes and rules as a method to enforce power. Names, rules, and acceptance levels change according to the dominant ideology of a specific time and place. In this way, something that was once a source of pride can easily become a site of shame, as in the case of non-heterosexuality under Christianity. Monkman refuses to accept the Christian constructs that were established and reinforced by colonial rule, and continue to deny and suppress the once-celebrated sexual diversity within Native tribes. Through his visual and performance art, Monkman successfully creates a third space, where a time-traveling half-breed drag queen can take ownership over her history and sexual identity. From this position, the margins are the center, and the power of definition belongs to the once-marginalized. In creating this space, Monkman acknowledges the rightful place of the Two-Spirited person in traditional history, and encourages discourse that reflects on and amends the loss of Native sexuality through Christian imperialism.