

The Iowa Review

Native American Visual Autobiography: Figuring Place, Subjectivity, and History

Author(s): Hertha D. Sweet Wong

Source: *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter, 2000/2001), pp. 145-156

Published by: [University of Iowa](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20154887>

Accessed: 02/10/2011 22:57

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Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds



Native Hosts, 1988. Reprinted with the artist's permission.



Neuf Series, number 4, 1990. Reprinted with the artist's permission.

Hertha D. Sweet Wong

NATIVE AMERICAN VISUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY:
FIGURING PLACE, SUBJECTIVITY, AND HISTORY

The intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand—our land, our place, the local. The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation. The lure of the local is that undertone to modern life that connects it to the past we know so little and the future we are aimlessly concocting.

—Lucy Lippard

Geographer Yi-fu Tuan claims that Americans have a sense of space (an abstract concept, a place of which one has no experience), rather than a sense of place (a space particularized through experience). For Native Americans, the “problem” of place (origins, home, social position) is not a generalized postmodern symptom of alienation. Historically, indigenous people have been displaced from homelands (cultures, languages) and replaced onto reservation lands or into urban centers. If geographical belonging is related to a cultural/spiritual at-homeness, who is at home in what is now the United States? Is belonging coterminous with indigenous? If indigenous people are defined (by the organization, Cultural Survival) as “culturally distinct groups that have occupied a region longer than other immigrant groups or colonist groups,” we must ask: how long a relationship with a specific place is necessary for a culture group to be considered indigenous? Does the term “indigenous” apply to nomadic peoples, who may also have an intimate connection to particular geographies, or to people who have been dispossessed of, or removed from, their land? “Native people, even when forced to relocate to prescribed land reserves, do not cease to be indigenous after being removed from their homelands,” I wrote elsewhere. “Being indigenous thus appears to be in some sense portable; people are connected to the land in psychological and spiritual as well as in physical ways.” Whether living on reservations or in cities or traveling between them, contemporary Native writers and artists must formulate and articulate themselves as correctives to the long history of misrepre-

sentation of Natives by colonizers, thus placing themselves as historical and contemporary subjects.

By “place,” following the lead of Tuan and Lippard, I mean a personal and cultural geography—“a place seen from within,” distinguished from “landscape”—“a place viewed from without.” Building on Tuan’s notion of place as a personalized, embodied space and in response to the contemporary “prevaling alienation” from place described above by Lippard (an alienation accentuated for displaced contemporary indigenous people), I want to illustrate how for many contemporary Native American writers and artists, subjectivity cannot be known without positioning oneself in relation to place(s) and to history (particularly a retelling of history and to narratives of the local).

Native North American cultures and the narratives they generate both arise from and refer to specific geographic sites that are mapped in a network of social relations. Leslie Marmon Silko and Alfonso Ortiz explain that the land itself is storied. For a Native person with a long history of residence in one place, stories of place are both personal and cultural. But when people are removed from their homelands, partially or completely dispossessed of cultures and languages, stories can help to maintain or restore such a relationship. Caren Kaplan anticipated what Lippard refers to as “the lure of the local,” when she wrote that “[t]he intersection of a politics of location and a politics of displacement marks a postmodern moment in which mapping and storytelling vie as technologies of identity formation.” In this paper, I am interested not so much in the mapping of space as I am in the precise positioning of oneself in place and the storytelling (particularly, self-narration that is inclusive of history and myth) that accompanies it. History is one kind of storytelling (as is myth) and I will begin with a brief review of a small segment of a history of indigenous visual self-representation.

In earlier work I have discussed nineteenth-century Plains Indian pictographic self-narrations and their transformations due to the introduction of European American notions of art, texts, and materials. In order to contextualize the work of a couple of contemporary Native American visual autobiographers, let me merely repeat that between 1830 and 1890 Plains Indian pictography changed as a result of the shift from indigenous to European American materials, from painting with earth paints on animal hides with and for one’s community to painting/drawing with commercial paints/colored pencils on paper for a primarily European American “reader.” Before 1830 Plains Indian men constructed personal narratives from the earth and animals of the plains,

while later artists picture-wrote their life stories with the colonizers' paper and pencils.

N. Scott Momaday and Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds

Neither pictography nor indigenous artists have disappeared. Even though Candace Green explains the "sudden disappearance of Cheyenne pictographic art in the mid-1890s" as due to the forced end of the warrior society, today both writers and visual artists continue to reconfigure pictographic (and other graphic) traditions and Native subjectivities. Let me briefly introduce a couple of examples: N. Scott Momaday and Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds.

N. Scott Momaday, Pulitzer Prize winning author as well as artist, has long been interested in the "correspondence between words and pictures, those two ways of seeing." "Writing is a kind of drawing," he notes, "words on the picture plane." This "angle of vision" is evident in Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in which the words (their layout and the images they evoke) are part of an intricate graphic structure, not surprisingly one that articulates a Kiowa subjectivity rooted in history (myth) and place. His father's (Al Momaday's) drawings, some of which hearken back to nineteenth-century pictographic conventions, contribute to the visual features of the autobiography, of course. Momaday's well known book presents a good example of one type of visual autobiography, what W.J.T. Mitchell might refer to as an "imagetext" (a "composite, synthetic work" combining "image and text"), with history and place and a collective Kiowa subjectivity at its center. This is evident in the four narrative modes (mythic, historical, personal, and visual) that merge in his ultimate call for an American Indian environmental ethic, a personal relationship to our histories, cultures, geographies. For Momaday, Native (indeed, human) subjectivity cannot be articulated except in relation to history and place.

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, a Cheyenne artist trained in the Western European art tradition, has made a conscious decision to articulate his personal and community history by exploring both Native North American and European art forms. He has explained that he tries to work in a way to unify both (and to resist easy pigeonholing as an "Indian artist"). Like many Plains warriors from the late nineteenth century, Edgar Heap of Birds' great great grandfather, Many Magpie Birds, was a prisoner in Fort Marion in the 1870s. Heap of Birds, then, has a personal connection to Cheyenne history and a familiarity with Plains Indian prison ledger books (several of which he has

examined). Furthermore, as “a headsman of the traditional Cheyenne Elk Warrior Society,” Heap of Birds considers himself a modern “warrior” who fights to keep alive Cheyenne culture and language. “Today strong artworks with the warrior spirit, such as these from Fort Marion,” he explains, “remain as a method of a more modern warfare.” Like the men imprisoned in Fort Marion a century ago, Heap of Birds uses contemporary forms to communicate to a (primarily, but not only) non-Native public as a way of making visible Native people. Even though separated by over one hundred years, the artists share certain concerns: resisting social and cultural captivity and erasure, negotiating with and critiquing the dominant society, and retaining or reclaiming tribal/community values and ideals. Heap of Birds sees himself as “on the edge of battle to re-educate non-Native peoples” about Indians. For him art is both a (multi)cultural tool and a weapon. But how does any artist educate and politicize and yet resist didacticism? Or move beyond realism? “Do I make a bunch of narrative paintings of Custer killing children in the Washita River?” Heap of Birds asks on a video.

Heap of Birds answers this question by working in a variety of forms: public art (in which he asserts, simultaneously, a historical and contemporary Native presence into the local); word drawings; abstract paintings; and charcoal studies. In each of these forms, he forces us as viewers to re-envision what we thought we knew. Each of his public art projects focuses on history and place and the necessity of understanding those in order to know yourself, ourselves—as individuals and nation/s. In one of his earliest public art installations (1982), “In Our Language,” Heap of Birds designed a 20 x 40-foot lightboard in New York City. Every twenty minutes for two weeks the Cheyenne “spoke” (in the Cheyenne language) about their views of the “white man”—the lightboard illuminating about one word per minute (like a drumbeat, he explained):

Tsistsistas
(Cheyenne)
Vehoe
(Spider)=
white man.
Both wrap up=
clothes, fences.

Heap of Birds describes this as a kind of “translation” in which he conveys bilingually what some members of his Cheyenne community say about Euro-

pean Americans. The form of presentation resists, at least momentarily, easy comprehension. Because just one word is displayed per minute, a viewer could pass by without ever seeing that “Tsistsistas” translates as “Cheyenne.” This emphasizes the alienation of a non-Cheyenne-speaking viewer as well as the gaps and interruptions inherent in any linguistic/cultural translation. Perhaps more significantly, the metaphor suggests that both the Native body and Native lands are “wrapped up,” entrapped, contained, restrained by the dominant society.

In one 1988 public installation entitled, “Native Hosts,” Heap of Birds placed six signs in lower Manhattan (see photo inset). As drivers commuted to their destinations, they were reminded of the genocide—the absent, indigenous nations—that lie beneath the cities and villages of what is now the United States. It is significant (and purposeful) that Heap of Birds employed the state and county producers of highway signs to make the pieces for this installation; that is, he used the dominant system of mapping and naming itself to criticize its own existence. The signs (from the modes and material of their production to their placement) look exactly like other road signs—only the message is from a radically different perspective. Rather than a sign that is overlaid upon a land (as all colonizing mapping) announcing with assurance where you are and how far it is to where you are headed, each of these is a sign that reverses the position (note the mirrored lettering of “NEW YORK” suggesting that the city is backwards, wrong). Mirrored words “disrupt legibility” as well as reflect the treacherous use of alphabetic literacy (treaties that were never kept, fraudulent land deeds, boarding school education as a policy of forced assimilation, etc.) against indigenous people. “Native Hosts” asks the question: do you know where you are? “Manhattan,” Heap of Birds reminds us, was “a nation of people, not a city on an island” (video). He has done several such versions of “Native Hosts,” each referring to the specific indigenous people of *this* place (this place is wherever his installation is, the ground upon which he stands).

Whereas pictographic artists used images as narrative (and sometimes added words, often in syllabary, to translate the pictography), in his word paintings, Heap of Birds uses words as images. In a familiar postmodern move, he empties the letters and words of their referentiality, forcing us to attend to his black-and-white or multi-colored writing as shapes and marks on the canvas. Most people try to “read” his word paintings such as “Peru-South” (a pastel on paper, 90 inches x 110 inches), looking for patterns, rhymes, alliteration,

thematic linkages, even color coordination, though it helps somewhat to realize that this is part of a four-part structure (an organizing device common to many Native ceremonial and storytelling practices) associated with the four directions; that, in fact, the piece is related to place—South (not just southern Oklahoma or the southern United States, but Peru).

In an 8-foot tall word painting (inspired by his research during which he found a list of the names of all the warriors imprisoned at Fort Marion), his method is purposeful. He uses the painting as a way to annotate history, using words not merely as forms of testimony or documentary, but as image. This is “a big painting,” he explains, “of just the words.” The red words refer to his relatives who died at Fort Marion. At times, though, in his word paintings, he distills verbal potency and constructs a visual syntax, interlinking seemingly disparate shapes and meanings. Addressing both Native and non-Native audiences, he challenges preconceived stereotypes about Native Americans and the history of this land. His aim is to reclaim his Cheyenne language, name, and nation and in so doing construct a contemporary Cheyenne subjectivity capacious enough for all the contradictions and cultural crossings of a postmodern world.

In all of his many artistic forms are embedded “coded little stories,” he says. But the fragmentation (reflective of postmodern deconstruction, to be sure, but also indigenous multiplicity) is dominant. He offers only fragments, only fragmentary knowledge, and it is the viewer who has to find “all the pieces [to] put it together.” Such a process forces viewers to reformulate notions of Native American history and subjectivity.

While Heap of Birds stridently criticizes the colonizers of Native bodies, histories, lands, he also offers solutions. Painful acknowledgment of history is only one step. In his more clearly autobiographical (or personal) paintings, he returns to his relationship with the land (particularly, Oklahoma and its landforms, water, trees). “This is where my paintings come from,” he says. Just as his word paintings disrupt referentiality, his landform (I don’t use the term “landscape”) paintings are equally non-figurative. Both, he insists, are parts of his visual autobiographical articulation. In his “Neuf” Series of 4 (acrylic on canvas, 56 inches x 72 inches, see photo inset), the shapes and colors allude to natural forms—of leaves or water. This is part of a series of how he maps himself in relation to each of the four directions as well as to Oklahoma, how he positions himself in a precise geography, a particular place called “home.”

In addition to his identification with nineteenth-century Cheyenne warrior culture, Heap of Birds, is Trickster-like (that is, a culture hero, a creator, a principle of energy) in his attempt to subvert the dominant discourse of American history and make possible Native subjectivities on their own terms. Like other male Native American artists and writers (like N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, and James Welch), he fancies himself a word warrior. Whereas pictographic artists moved from the freedom of the plains to the constraints of the reservation, Heap of Birds moves from the limitations of European/American definitions of Indians (and art) to the freedom of self-determination. He insists:

People of color have the right to invent their lives. It's not about how it can relate to the white man or even just back to their own indigenous culture. I'm very clear that what I'm doing is inventing my own life. (video)

Although this project of self-construction is fraught with the trappings of enlightenment notions of self-invention and the dangers of cultural and ethnic nationalism, such asserting/reclaiming/inventing an identity is fundamental to the experience of internally colonized Native people, people whose very self-imaginings have been objectified by the dominant society and transformed into ethnic commodities. Momaday has said that “the greatest tragedy is to go unimagined” but, I would add, it is far graver to leave yourself to the imaginings of others.

Leslie Marmon Silko

I want to move now briefly to a very different example, to shift from Native men from the Plains to a Native woman from the Southwest, from paintings, drawings, and word paintings to photography. Although this topic deserves a more thorough discussion, all I wish to do now is to expand the scope, to link the practice of visual autobiography from one place and set of culture groups to another. It is significant that reclaiming history and relating to place are just as crucial to a woman from the Southwest as it is to men from the Middle West. This is a need felt by and a form practiced by postcolonial, neo-colonial, and marginalized writers and artists of many backgrounds.

In *Storyteller*, Silko features her interest in the relationship between image and word. She places the photographs in relation to each other and the text throughout the book; she does not provide captions (sounds like “captive”)

for the photographs, just brief descriptions and stories placed at the end of the volume. This is an attempt to equalize the relationship between word and image and to allow (or force) readers to make connections (just like *Heap of Birds* insists that viewers make sense of the fragments). Silko is well aware of the history of ethnographic and photographic documentation/domination that constructed one version of Indian “authenticity.” “The Indian with a Camera” reverses the view and becomes, for Silko, “an omen of a time in the future when the indigenous people of the Americas will retake their land.” Silko is not unaware of the problems of objectification, commodification, and detachment unleashed by photographic images, but imagines self-representation as a more benign form of photography. Silko also likes to emphasize how the photographer constructs the shot and can never locate an essential object, only a consciousness-influenced posture. She claims, for instance, that when a Japanese photographer took her picture, influenced by his cultural/racialized gaze, she looked “Japanese” in the photograph.

It is not surprising, then, that in her “imagetext,” *Sacred Water*, Silko tells visually and verbally about her life on her ranch outside of Tucson—not her actions, but her relationships with the place—a kind of visual autobiographical nature writing. Through photographic images and prose, Silko depicts memories of childhood, reflections on various native kinship systems and beliefs—all linked by the central motif of water—a scarce, life-generating resource and the focus of most of the rituals among the peoples of the arid Southwest.

In *Sacred Water*, Silko continues her interest in telling a story through photographs and written narrative, in the tension between word and image, an effect she describes in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* as akin to “the effect that a photograph or other visual image has on our reading of a text.” She explains:

Sacred Water is my experiment. [I am] . . . interested in photographs that obscure rather than reveal; I am intrigued with photographs that don't tell you what you are supposed to notice, that don't illustrate the text, that don't serve the text, but form a part of the field of vision for the reading of the text and thereby become part of the reader's experience of the text. (168-69)

“The text of *Sacred Water* was composed,” continues Silko, “so that the words do not overpower the odd minimalism of the pictures but instead depend

upon the pictures for a subtle resonance.” Silko describes her photographic process—printing photographs on a laser copy machine in the “‘photo’ mode” to produce an “image . . . more stark and abstract than a traditional photographic print, which tends to dominate the page regardless of the text” (169). This is one way that Silko attempts to translate auto/geography into verbal/visual narrative.

As Momaday says in *The Names*, the “events of one’s life, take place, *take place*” (Momaday’s emphasis). For the Western Apache, as Keith Basso has described in detail, “wisdom sits in places”—all these places have stories and the places and stories together shape a Western Apache person’s subjectivity (a kind of psychic map). Here I do not wish to conflate distinct cultures and geographies, but to reiterate that there is a link between place and subjectivity in many indigenous cultures. “Our stories cannot be separated from their geographical locations, from actual physical places on the land,” insists Silko, “there is a story connected with every place, every object in the landscape” (*Yellow Woman*, 58). Of course there is a debate about whether you have to live in that particular place or if a remembered (from afar) place (“the remembered earth,” as Momaday referred to it in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, 83) is sufficient. The very construction of the handmade editions of *Sacred Water* emphasize place, but place transported elsewhere. In *Yellow Woman*, Silko reports that the blue cover is made of Stephen Watson’s Blue Corn paper (made in Albuquerque) and contains bits of blue corn (another limited edition was covered in Watson’s white Volcanic Ash paper containing small amounts of fine ash obtained from the volcanoes just west of Albuquerque).

For contemporary Native American writers and artists, like Momaday, Silko, and Heap of Birds, to articulate their distinctive, contemporary, transcultural subjectivities, they must counter stereotypes, they must retell history (not only the five-hundred-year history of European colonization, but the thousands of years before that—reaching back into “myth”—just another word for “history”—both a collection of “stories” rooted in a particular geography and experience); and they must tell the stories of place (including displacement—removal, relocation), the stories of home, homeland, or homelessness. Only by situating ourselves in relation to history (time) and place (space and memory), Momaday, Heap of Birds, and Silko suggest, can lushly polyphonous Native North American subjectivities be enabled.

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