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Pocahontas Looks Back and then Looks Elsewhere:
The Entangled Gaze in Contemporary Indigenous Art

Abstract

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, various genres of visual art in North America feature Indigenous subjects looking from the canvas or the screen at the viewers to interpellate them as implicated in the gaze framing the artwork. In this article, I provide an historical genealogy of this returned gaze, starting with Simon van de Passe's 1616 engraving, *Matoaka als Lady Rebecca*. I show how subsequent depictions of Pocahontas depart from the reciprocal gaze of de Passe's portrait and how contemporary art returns to this theme of the returned gaze, using Shelley Niro's video work *The Shirt* (2003) as an example. *The Shirt* deploys the returned gaze as an indictment of settler colonialism in North America, yet frets that this kind of indictment becomes too easily coopted as the familiar trope of the Indian complaint, its public circulation strengthening the multiculturalist credentials of North American democracies. So Niro frames *The Shirt* with two momentary gestures of willful looking away from the camera, to some unrepresented elsewhere, thus reconfiguring the entangled gaze of contemporary North American art. The looking elsewhere bypasses the scopic regime that endows the viewer with mastery while it reduces the Indigenous subject to the object of this masterful gaze. Further, it implies a political and social space of privacy and agency that does not have to be made transparent and accessible for the benefit of the settler viewer's enlightenment. *The Shirt* makes clear, however, that such an attempt is paradoxical: the looking elsewhere reconfigures the dominant gaze but remains entangled with it nevertheless.

Keywords

Contemporary Indigenous art, gaze, video/film, settler colonialism, Shelley Niro, *The Shirt* (2003)

There's a curious moment in the opening sequences of Shelley Niro's 2003 video work *The Shirt*. Seemingly insignificant—a mere few seconds in a six-minute long film—it features a panning medium shot which brings into view a woman standing in a green meadow looking off to the side and laughing, as if she were engaged in good conversation, perhaps with the support crew, who remain outside the frame and thus invisible to the spectators (Figure 1). As the pan brings her into the center, the woman slowly turns to face the camera and contends with its presence, as laughter gradually fades from her face and her expression freezes into an ironized version of a stereotype pervasive in United States (U.S.) cultural iconography, the stoic Indian. Yet, her jeans, T-shirt, reflective sunglasses, and the U.S. flag folded into a bandana on her head also recall the Indigenous North Americans depicted in Fritz Scholder's and T.C. Cannon's paintings or Sam English's posters: figures embodying the contemporary syncretic iterations of North American indigeneity (Figure 1). The emphatic change in her facial expression suggests that looking away from and looking back at the camera involve different kinds of engagement with the object of her gaze beyond the frame on one hand, and with the spectator, on the other.

<Insert Fig. 1>

However, this initial moment of a joyous interaction with an explicitly extra-diegetic reality risks being overlooked. The rest of Niro's video repeatedly reprises the woman's gaze straight into the camera, which in subsequent shots is paired with indictments of expropriation, removal, and treaty abrogation visited on Indigenous peoples by North American colonial governments, printed in black on the white T-shirt she is wearing (Figure 2). The film intercuts the images of the woman looking at us with images from a camera tracking from right to left (and from east to west) along Grand River all the way to Niagara Falls, passing natural and industrial scapes on the U.S.-Canadian border. By intertwining these panning and tracking shots in a consistent pattern, the film juxtaposes the woman's direct gaze resolutely trained on the camera against the viewers' indirect gaze sweeping across the land and the woman's body, thus reflecting two different postures towards the land: one rooted and the other migratory. As our eyes travel across the various landscapes and return to her, still standing in her initial spot in shot after shot, to read the next page of the T-shirt book, we can't help but assume the migratory stance. Throughout the film, then, viewers look, intermittently, at the land passing before them and at the woman looking at them looking at her, the arrangement evidenced by the reflection of the camera in the woman's glasses.¹ An entangled gaze indeed. And a familiar one as well; by

the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries various genres of visual art in North America are populated by Indigenous subjects looking back from the canvas or the screen to interpellate the viewers as participants in the gaze framing the artwork and to level pointed indictments of settler colonialism.

<Insert Fig. 2>

There is so much intensity, and familiarity, in this returned gaze that by the time the video ends, the viewers have likely forgotten that it began, a mere five minutes earlier, with the woman looking someplace else altogether, as if in a fleeting prefatory gesture to the serious work of contestation and resistance that follows. So, albeit fleetingly again, in its final second of fading into black, *The Shirt*'s concluding shot re-enacts the opening gesture of looking elsewhere, now with a different woman wearing the white shirt with the same final inscription.² Yet if *The Shirt*'s main interest is historical revisionist work, why frame the video with this kind of formal digression constituting a clear departure from its otherwise consistent structural design? Given the obvious cultural capital of looking back at the camera to assert subjectivity and expose the various investments of the viewers' gaze, what is the power of looking not just away but elsewhere? Why engage the viewers only to point out their exclusion from an implied but invisible physical universe and its joyous circle of sociality? What is the rhetorical function of this willful looking away and towards where the viewers cannot follow, if we consider the full extent to which looking has been theorized in the visual arts scholarship and bring the political histories of Indigenous nations in North America to bear on the concept of the gaze and its practices in contemporary North American Indigenous art?

To answer these questions, I first offer a genealogy of the returned gaze prevalent in particular in contemporary Indigenous art, by going all the way back to, arguably, its first precedent and the most consequential image of an Indigenous person looking back at the viewers examining her likeness: *Matoaka als Lady Rebecca*, a famous portrait of Pocahontas by a Dutch engraver Simon van de Passe. I then investigate how subsequent depictions of Pocahontas depart from the reciprocal gaze of de Passe's portrait and how contemporary Indigenous art returns to it, using *The Shirt* as the central example. I conclude by arguing that Niro's video work deploys the returned gaze to offer an indictment of settler colonialism in North America, yet frets that this kind of indictment becomes too easily coopted as its public circulation via indigenous artworks strengthens the multiculturalist credentials of North American democracies. In this context, the

gesture of looking elsewhere opening *The Shirt* takes on important meaning. It shifts the entangled gaze of contemporary North American art by refusing the scopic relation that imbues the viewer with mastery and subjectivity at the expense of the indigenous object of the gaze, all the while implying a political and social space of privacy and agency that excludes the viewer. It also makes clear, however, that such a shift is thoroughly paradoxical: the looking elsewhere reconfigures the dominant gaze but remains entangled with it nevertheless.

Images of Pocahontas are central to U.S. iconography, because the figure of this Powhatan woman has so persistently been used to make sense of the complicated engagement between the European colonial empires and Indigenous nations in North America. She has been variously claimed as the mother of all Americans, denounced as a traitor, the North American La Malinche,³ and reclaimed as a diplomat, spy, and medicine woman (Allen 2003). That most recently she has returned in *Americans*, a major exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., as one of the four narratives/symbols of the twisted nexus of American attitudes regarding Indigenous peoples, further testifies to how indispensable she has been to the self-understanding of the U.S. as a nation (see review by Barrara, this issue). De Passe's engraving reminds us that who Pocahontas is taken to be, and how her images are deployed as expedient cultural capital, has much to do with where she is looking and what her gaze reveals about the scopic regimes encoded in her depictions at various historical junctions.

<Insert Fig. 3>

Created in 1616 during Pocahontas's visit to London with her husband John Rolfe and infant son Thomas, de Passe's engraving was printed and reprinted often in the early seventeenth century (Figure 3). It has inspired countless reprisals over the last 400 years, by European, American, and Indigenous artists, resulting in a variety of Pocahontases, each suited to the ideological exigencies of the historical moment of its production. In a very concrete sense, then, de Passe's engraving serves as an apt point of origin for the subsequent entanglements of the American gaze, understood as the vast catalogue of the various acts of looking at each other undertaken by European and American settlers and Indigenous peoples in North America as well as the subjectivities and relationships that this very looking both constituted and undermined, all evidenced to some extent in the resulting artwork.

Her original likeness, believed to be taken from life, depicts Pocahontas in the then-contemporary conventions of royal portraiture,⁴ wearing European dress and holding an ostrich

feather in her right hand, her eyes meeting the artist's and the presumed viewers' gaze. In this returned gaze, the portrait encodes visually a reciprocal engagement between Powhatan Matoaka as Lady Rebecca and her English hosts, Pocahontas being looked at but also looking back, enacting her complex subjectivity and political agency, both aptly captured in her two names and in her parentage, which is detailed in the inscription surrounding her image. She is an object of the painter's and then of the public's gaze, certainly one of those "Indians" brought back to the European courts from the American voyages as curiosities testifying to the wonders of the New World, especially its promise for both spiritual and economic harvests. Yet she is clearly the subject of her own gaze too, acknowledging the viewers' eyes by meeting them with her own; perhaps, contemporary scholars might want to imagine, even aware of the ideological ends to which her likeness would be put in efforts to raise funds for the Virginia Company's continuing support. De Passe extends to Pocahontas a subjectivity similar to that assumed by and of European royalty at the time via the imperial accoutrements, the conventions of royal portraiture, and her direct gaze. Thus, his portrait reflects the then-reciprocal political and economic relations between England and the Powhatan Confederacy as well as between English colonists and Indigenous nations elsewhere in North America well into the eighteenth century, as testified to by the practice of treaty negotiations. If we take this reciprocal gaze structuring Pocahontas' first portrait as an origin point of the history of the North American entangled gaze, then we can trace how subsequent representations regress from it, return to it, and perhaps move beyond it to other possibilities both representational and political.

To capture the particular ways in which depictions of Pocahontas by artists in the United States in particular depart from the reciprocal gaze of de Passe's portrait, we can turn to the four artworks featuring her on display in the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C.: Antonio Capellano's 1825 sandstone carving (Figure 4) and a section of Constantino Brumidi's *Frieze of American History* (1859, 1877),⁵ both depicting the purported rescue of John Smith; John Gadsby Chapman's 1839 *Baptism of Pocahontas*, one of the eight monumental Historic Rotunda Paintings (Figure 4); and a copy of the eighteenth century Booton Hall oil painting after de Passe's 1616 engraving, now held by the U.S. Senate (Figure 5). Sanctioned by the U.S. government at various historical junctions, these four depictions readily represent the general trend in representing Pocahontas as an object rather than a subject of the gaze. The two works that depict the mythical Smith rescue exemplify a tradition that emerged nearly

contemporaneously with de Passe's portrait (with its first known example included in John Smith's 1624 *Generall Historie*), to become central to U.S. national creation stories in the early nineteenth century and endure in popular culture, from thousands of children's books to Disney films. In the Capitol pieces, as in other Smith rescue images, Pocahontas is undeniably a figure of action: she dramatically interposes herself between the prostrate Smith and the club-wielding Powhatan men, her arms and eyes raised imploringly towards them. But her agency does not stem from her direct gaze signaling a reciprocal engagement with the viewers that reconfirms the subjectivities of both, as in de Passe's portrait. Rather, her agency arises from her intervention on behalf of Smith, an act meaningful only to the extent that it is auxiliary to American settler colonialism, and thus marks a particularly ironic historic turning point, the beginning of the rise of the British colonial empire and the demise of the Powhatan one. Pocahontas' feather skirt and headdress serve to highlight the liminality of this moment: while her clothing signifies her Indianness, she already grasps the incoming future by aligning her imploring look with that of Smith.⁶ The gaze deployed in these images reflects the favorite American fantasy that translates a bloody conquest into a story of romance and marriage featuring a willing Indigenous woman,⁷ precisely by containing Pocahontas' vision within the dominant scopic regime, subsuming her in the nineteenth century's U.S. nationalist myth making.⁸

< Insert Fig. 4 >

Chapman's *Baptism of Pocahontas*, a logical extension of the Smith rescue depictions,⁹ forecloses Pocahontas' gaze even further: in fact, she does not look at anybody or anything at all; her gaze is notable for its lack of object (Figure 4). Thus it has no power other than that of signaling submission to a higher authority, one she cannot even implore, let alone challenge. While Chapman's painting somewhat abides by historical fact by having replaced John Smith with Pocahontas' English husband to be, John Rolfe,¹⁰ it allegorizes Pocahontas as the willing handmaid to British colonialism, and by extension, when it was installed in the Capitol in 1840, to U.S. continental expansionism.¹¹ And yet, the painting also preserves the traces of her former gaze, the one at the center of de Passe's engraving: while Pocahontas lowers her eyes while kneeling in front of Reverend Whitaker with Rolfe standing right behind her, thus framed/captured by the English patriarchal order about to become ascendant in North America,¹² her brother Nantequaus and her uncle Opechankanough participate in the event by refusing to serve witness to it, each purposefully averting his gaze, the latter almost— but not quite—

meeting the viewers' eyes as a result.¹³ However indicative that refusal might be of a residual Powhatan subjectivity and political agency, the formal strategies of the painting—from calculated juxtapositions in the placing of the figures, heightened by the strategic use of light and dark colors, to the intertwining of various acts of looking within the image—literally plunge the Powhatan elite into the darkness of the past as they recede before the light of Christianity and English civilization. The painting celebrates Pocahontas' choice of alliance as divinely sanctioned and historically prescient, thus legitimating the conquest and settlement of North America as Manifest Destiny; at the painting's illuminated center, Pocahontas is rescued from historical oblivion, but at the cost of her Powhatan self. The less subjectivity Pocahontas claims and performs, the more emphatically she is the mother of Americans, her agency reduced to her subjection to religious and political authority, an abdication best communicated by her downcast gaze.

The copy of the Booton Hall portrait displayed in the Senate chambers exemplifies the changes in Pocahontas' portraiture—the disappearance of her Powhatan features and the diminishing of her gaze—that go hand in hand with the Smith rescue images (Figure 5). The original oil painting translated de Passe's engraving into color while retaining the iconic posture, clothing, accessories, and Pocahontas' direct gaze. But it likened its subject to European women: the skin is rendered pale, the hair brown, the facial features lacking the distinctiveness of de Passe portrait. Believed to be painted by 1760-70, though its author remains unidentified, this image of Pocahontas gets taken up by the 19th century American portraitists. Richard Norris-Brooke's *Pocahontas*, for example, begun in the 1880s but not completed until 1907, for the 300th anniversary of the settlement of Jamestown, reinterprets the Booton Hall painting as a standing portrait, faithfully preserving the details of the clothing (Figure 5). Norris-Brooke's Pocahontas looks back at the viewers, but her gaze is de-emphasized by the rescaling of the portrait from bust to full figure, thus no longer a focal point as was the case in the de Passe and Booton Hall versions. In addition, the phenotypic conversion begun in the Booton Hall painting runs full course here: Pocahontas looks altogether like a white American woman, her tiny face nearly obliterated by her elaborate clothing. Gone as well is her geopolitical context made visible in the inscription surrounding her portrait by de Passe and retained in the Booton Hall version. Posed on a blank black background, with an adoption of European culture signified by her dress as her only relevant context, she has become fully incorporated into the U.S. foundational myth.

Except for the name in the title, her Powhatan provenience is erased; one could quip that Pocahontas becomes an immigrant in her own country.

< Insert Fig. 5 >

While in the Norris-Brooke painting Pocahontas looks back at the viewers, albeit as a White woman whose direct gaze cedes the stage to her properly attired body signifying the success of the American civilizational progress, in other 19th century portraits, she is often represented facing the viewers but looking off to the side. Rather than meeting their gaze, she facilitates its uncontested deployment. Thomas Sully's 1852 painting, for example, depicts Pocahontas seated, in European attire and adorned in pearls, the ostrich feather replaced by a flower, the dramatic landscape in the background an acknowledgment of the period's aesthetic conventions (Figure 5). Her hair flows long and black; her features have been described as Mediterranean rather than Powhatan; she is looking off to the side, not at anything in particular, with a placid expression on her face. By the mid-nineteenth century Pocahontas is firmly ensconced in the U.S. national mythology as a mother of the nation, and particularly revered in Virginia as the progenitor of local aristocracy. And so in Sully's portrait, she delivers herself, presumably willingly, to the nation's appropriating gaze, just as she does in Chapman's painting over a decade earlier. When she does look back at the viewer, as she does in Norris-Brooke's painting fifty years later, it is as a Christianized handmaid to the American empire, first imagined in the Smith rescue renderings, now entirely committed—her body fully clothed in western attire—to the American imperial project.

These depictions of Pocahontas as a willing object of the imperial (male) gaze solidify into a long-lived aesthetic convention of depicting Indigenous subjects, and women in particular, in new media as well, beginning with photography which was buoyed especially by the rise of ethnology in the late 19th century. For a telling example, we might recall the work of the most prolific photographer of North America's Indigenous peoples, Edward Curtis. In his portraits in particular, Indigenous men and women either look away to facilitate the deployment of the ethnographic gaze, typically focused on the highlighted details of material culture and presumed phenotype, or look back, only to affirm the civilizational superiority of North American settler culture, as the photographs' captions offered by the author himself often insist.¹⁴ The hold of this ethnographic convention, which reflected the notion of Indians as the vanishing race and the mandate of salvage ethnography, has been tenacious. It is not until the second half of the

twentieth century that Pocahontas starts looking back again, so to say, as an assertively Indigenous woman; this time she does so in decidedly contestatory ways as well. Working to recapture Indigenous subjectivity and agency from the legacy of objectification, if not outright erasure, contemporary North American visual artists focus on the valences of Pocahontas' direct gaze, as if purposely going back to de Passe's portrait to offer its updated versions. Overt rejoinders to depictions such as the Booton Hall and Norris-Brooke's paintings imbue Pocahontas' gaze with explicitly Indigenous subjectivity by restoring her features highlighted in de Passe. The cultural capital of the explicitly Indigenous subject's returned gaze invigorates the broader late-twentieth / early-twenty-first century project of remaking the American Indian portraiture in the work of artists such as Dougan Aguilar, Pamela Shields, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Shelley Niro, Richard Ray Whitman, Matika Wilbur, and Gwendolen Cates, among others. Indigenous women and men look from canvases or screens in these works, intently and often in extreme close-up, explicitly interpellating the viewers as active participants in the various transactions of recognition taking place across the artworks, in their acknowledgement and reconfiguration of the gaze. Unlike de Passe's engraving, where Pocahontas's returned gaze signified reciprocal engagement of equals, these depictions deploy the direct looking back of their subjects with the added imperative of contesting the dominant gaze and the scopic regime it reflects and maintains.

Shelley Niro's *The Shirt* eloquently reaffirms the political efficacy of this kind of deliberately performed looking back at the viewer stance in the context of Indigenous representation in European and North American visual arts, especially its ability to claim representational agency, both political and cultural, for Indigenous peoples. That the woman at the center of Niro's film is Hulleah J Tsinhnahjinnie, an acclaimed visual artist whose body of work explicitly engages the politics of the gaze, reinforces the centrality of this issue in *The Shirt*. Both Niro and Tsinhnahjinnie often deploy the direct gaze of the Indigenous subject in their artworks.¹⁵ Niro turns to it throughout her career, for example, in *Rebel* (1987), *Mohawks in Beehives* (1991), *This Land Is Mime Land* (1992), *Abnormally Aboriginal* (2013), and in multiple self-portraits, some serious and some tongue-in-cheek, many often both at the same time. In her triptychs, a genre Niro engages frequently, the returned gaze is at times put into sharper relief by comparison to its obverse, the subject depicted in dark glasses covering her eyes in *Abnormally Aboriginal* or with her back turned to the camera in *This Land Is Mime Land*, for example. This

multivalent returned gaze structures much of Tsinhnahjinnie's work as well, such as the *Portraits Against Amnesia* (2003) collection, and in pieces such as *It's time to go home* from *Photographic Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant* (1994) and *The Promises were so Sweet* from *Double Vision* (2010)—works that recover Indigenous agency from the settler photographic archive by digitally manipulating 19th and early 20th century Curtis-like portraits of American Indians. The returned gaze takes on a particularly explicit political edge in Tsinhnahjinnie's 4-minute video, *An Aboriginal Worldview* (2002),¹⁶ in which a woman, clad in full burka made of American flags, her hands bound in front of her, dances to a soundtrack of drumming and singing all across the American continent in a series of increasingly visually distorted images, alternating in long and medium shots. The last shot of the video features the only part of her body not obliterated by the flag burka, a sliver of her eyes centered in the shot and trained intensely on the viewer in an increasingly extreme close-up, explicitly drawing attention of the U.S. public away from the post 9/11 war on terror and towards the ongoing colonial subjugation of Indigenous North Americans.

Like *An Aboriginal Worldview*, *The Shirt* repopulates the American landscape with Indigenous subjects cognizant of their history and asserting their political agency. Against the expectations instilled by multiculturalism, Niro's film eschews any ethnographic narrative, offering in its place an indictment of North American settler colonialism, an indictment that does not have to be made legitimate by auto-ethnographic displays of Indigenous cultures. It foregrounds instead contemporary economic and political issues affecting Indigenous peoples in North America. Images of waterfalls, rivers, and electric power lines serve to highlight the importance of land and water rights. The visual references to what is often called the *Guswenta*, the Haudenosaunee wampum belt (see Hill, this issue),¹⁷ in the film's opening shot, remind us of the continued relevance of the historic treaties negotiated between Indigenous nations and European and American colonial governments. With this evocation of the long history of diplomacy, *The Shirt* also harkens back to Pocahontas' direct gaze in de Passe's engraving, investing the returned gaze of Niro's protagonist with the authority derived from political sovereignty of Indigenous nations. The film's framing and editing reinforces the notion of political sovereignty with that of indigeneity understood literally as rootedness in place. The juxtaposition of the landscape shots continuously tracking east to west against the shots featuring the two shirt wearers, which pan to the left to bring the figure to the center and then pan back to the right, also emphasize their rootedness in place: very literally, the shirt wearers never move at

all. By the film's final sequences, the camera ceases to move as well. The recurring tracking shots across the landscape yield to alternating shots of water and of the second shirt wearer, but without any tracking or panning, all movement of the frame gone as the final stable shot fades to black, the land itself joining the shirt wearers in gazing back at the viewer. The direct gaze of the video's protagonists, and their rootedness in place and in the land, carry the authority of the *The Shirt*'s specific interjection into the dominant North American scopic regime.

Still, embedded in *The Shirt* are worries about the efficacy of this kind of oppositional gaze, especially when focused primarily on the indictment of settler colonialism. Since the rise of the multiculturalist ethos in North America in the late 20th century, art critics and scholars have argued that such indictments leveled at the dominant culture in minority art, have become an expected form of cultural expression in North America. For example, in "Legal Aliens," an essay included in his 1992 collection of art criticism, *A Certain Lack of Coherence*, Jimmie Durham observed that,

It is curious that our most intense works, showing the pain and crises of being 'non-white' in a racist society, have become so popular that they are almost obligatory...In the most harshly accusatory works there's comfort for the white art world. It is not threatened, but it comes to the show with the pretense that it will be threatened. It enjoys the pretense in direct relation to how well we ourselves are into it; in other words, it has come to see its own show in which we are enlisted as bit-players...Letting us scream at them is their ace up the sleeve and ultimately another roadside attraction. (225-6)

A decade later, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Rey Chow identified a similar dynamic suggesting that "ethnic struggles have become...an indisputable symptom of the thoroughly and irrevocably mediatized relations of capitalism and its biopolitics" (48). She argued further that,

To be ethnic is to protest—but perhaps less for actual emancipation of any kind than for the benefits of worldwide visibility, currency, circulation. In the age of globalization, ethnics are first and foremost protesting ethnics, but this is not because they are possessed of some "soul" or "humanity" that cannot be changed into commodities. Rather, it is because protesting constitutes the economically logical and socially viable vocation for them to assume. (48)

The North American multiculturalist art market puts a premium on minority-authored articulations of historic suffering, or the performed complaint of the protestant ethnic, because they help legitimize the claims of North American democracies (Canada and the United States) to a reformed and avowedly multicultural present. The public circulation of art featuring the protestant Indians in particular in settler colonial societies provides evidence that the former colonial state has been reformed, because it now extends cultural recognition to Indigenous and minority ethnic populations via their art.

In this context, Tsinhnahjinnie's shirt wearer both is the putative protesting ethnic and refuses to be one. As the former she offers lessons in political history in place of ethnographic gloss familiar from Curtis' portraits and captions, in a kind of visual finger in the face of settler notions of Indigenous authenticity. *The Shirt* makes clear, however, that for that history to register it has to be choreographed through recognizable "Indian" poses, especially those, like in Chapman's *Baptism of Pocahontas*, featuring the averted gaze and made popular by settler painters, photographers, and sculptors as well as contemporary Indigenous artists. When in one of the shots Tsinhnahjinnie slowly and deliberately turns her head away from the camera to reveal her profile, she mimics "the stoic Indian" perpetuated in Edward Curtis photographs, the "Buffalo nickel," while her dark sunglasses reprise T.C. Cannon, Fritz Scholder, and Sam English. Like these artists, Niro is acutely aware of the centrality of this image to American iconography and of how it has been deployed to subsume Indigenous protests into the national myth. How relentless this cooption can be is additionally obvious from the fact that even when Tsinhnahjinnie looks straight back at the spectator her gaze is refracted. What she sees while looking at the camera is embedded, mirror-like, in the shot but only as a mediated image, through its reflection in her glasses, rather than in the diegesis through shot/reverse shot editing. In Cannon and Scholder's self-portraits, the sunglasses obscuring the subjects' eyes served as metaphors for demand for privacy, refusal of objectification, and denial of access to eye-to-eye contact and the illusion of authenticity such personal contact implies, and thus to insider cultural knowledge. They also yanked its subjects from the sepia-toned portraits of the past into the modernity via the cool factor associated with the celebrity. Niro's use of the reflective sunglasses suggests yet another layer of reflection (!) on the complexities of both the returned and the refused gaze as well as the risk of the latter's cooption in turn. Despite its potential to intimidate by refusing the exchange via the use of the sunglasses, and thus creating an uneven scopic

relation with the viewer, Niro's subject's gaze is circumscribed again, or is representable only via the viewers' gaze. A strong sense of the limitations of such refraction might help explain why for one shot, and her last appearance, Tsinhnahjinnie discards the glasses, the shirt, and the flag bandana—all settler technologies of communication: the reproduced image, the book, the nation—and confronts the camera with her unobstructed eyes trained on the viewers, evoking the final shot of her own work, *An Aboriginal Worldview*, but with the body now nude, arms crossed against her chest, abandoning the alphabetic writing of the T-shirts for the signifying tattoos visible on her arms. And yet, her left eyebrow lifts up ironically as the shot lingers, perhaps in acknowledgement of the risk involved in evoking the convention of (ethnographic) representation that historically built its legitimacy by disrobing Indigenous women (Figure 6). No matter whether the subject extends or refuses the returned gaze, she encounters representational precedent circumscribing the meanings of her looking. The predicament intensifies further when the T-shirt returns in a comic twist at the film's conclusion, reading "And all I's get is this shirt," evoking both Durham's minority artist as a tourist attraction and Chow's commodified protestant ethnic. And further still, when in the video's final shot it is sported, with the same inscription, by the second shirt wearer, Veronica Passalacqua, smiling pleasantly at the viewer, American flag bandana now adorning her neck but the reflective sunglasses, and all the attending ironies, nowhere in sight. Niro's last gesture is a poignant critique of the relentless commodification of Indigenous history and culture, including the Indian protest, in North America (Figure 6).¹⁸

< Insert Fig. 6 >

The Shirt's rehearsal of these various Indian poses—alternating between being an object and subject of the gaze—posits the urgent question of the very possibility of engaging the dominant gaze in ways that avoid cooption by the American nationalist mythmaking, multiculturalist or not. Which brings us back to the initial query, the function of the momentary looking away beyond the frame in Tsinhnahjinnie's first appearance, especially so, that it returns in the final second of the film, as the last shot fades to black. In that moment, Veronica Passalacqua, the second shirt wearer, turns to her right to look in the same direction Tsinhnahjinnie looks just before she starts posing for the camera as the stoic or/and protestant Indian in the film's opening. As Passalacqua turns, her smile for the camera transforms into laughter for somebody beyond the frame, shoulders shrugging as if she has just gotten away with

a good prank. The moment is fleeting and easily missed as it gets eclipsed by the fade to black, yet if we do pay attention, it is long enough to evoke its opening counterpart and thus make clear that *The Shirt* hints at some “before” and “after” the entanglement of the North American gaze, with which it otherwise appears primarily preoccupied, as well as some contemporaneous “elsewhere” beyond its reach. As the shirt wearers’ gaze shifts direction, the camera does not follow, either by panning, tracking or shot/reverse shot editing, thus explicitly circumscribing the viewers’ gaze. Historically, the camera has often been understood to be a tool of intrusion; here, however, it functions to exclude, literally to refuse admittance. Scholars of literature and museology have argued that such gestures of deliberate refusal or displayed withholding of access function to reassert Indigenous agency in the overdetermined colonial context, in which Indigenous expression is coopted or erased (Sommer 1999; Lawlor 2006). The looking away in *The Shirt* enacts Indigenous subjectivity that is not dependent on a scopic engagement with the viewer, initiated by a returned gaze (as in de Passe’s engraving and all its contemporary reiterations), but rather by an engagement with somebody beyond the frame in the inaccessible elsewhere. Filming in historical Haudenosaunee territory,¹⁹ now divided by the U.S.-Canadian border, which was imposed in 1794 without regard to then-existing local political, economic, and social relations, Niro establishes her own purposefully impassable borders, exercising political authority by keeping the presumptuous immigrants out, so to speak. In that gesture, *The Shirt* offers a cinematographic equivalent to what Mohawk anthropologist, Audra Simpson has identified in her 2014 book *Mohawk Interruptus. Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* as (Indigenous) ethnographic refusal deployed in the confrontation with the (settler) anthropological need for access. For Simpson, this refusal is important, primarily, for the possibilities it engenders in the elsewhere, such as “subject formation, but also politics and resurgent histories” and for “an *enjoyment in the reveal*” (Simpson 2014, 106-7), in other words, the joyfulness we see captured in the opening and closing shots of Niro’s film. In those moments of joyful looking elsewhere, the indigenous subject also refuses the commodified trope of the protestant Indian.

The gesture of looking away from the camera reconfigures the gaze within *The Shirt* to highlight the protagonists’ subjectivity and agency as rooted in notions of indigeneity and political sovereignty. In the process, this gesture undermines the presumed mastery of the viewers within that gaze. Much of nineteenth-century American landscape painting (for example

The Hudson River School) as well as early photography (especially the work commissioned by the U.S federal surveyors) allows the viewers to assume what Mary Louise Pratt calls the master-of-all-I-survey position (*Imperial Eyes* 1992): from a vantage point on a high promontory, looking out over the land, the viewers imaginatively consolidate their colonial/imperial subjectivity. Such paintings and photographs served to generate the paradoxical fantasy of simultaneous dominance—the country showing itself to the viewer, not unlike Pocahontas in all the depictions featuring her averted gaze—and non-interference, powerlessness even, in the face of the land's enormity, thus obscuring the imperial stake in the European presence there (Pratt 1992, 59). *The Shirt* knocks the viewers off their promontory by dramatically reducing the scope of their gaze, and by confronting them with the Indigenous subject's direct gaze, all in medium shots, and more face-to-face, perhaps even inducing reactions of embarrassment and shame out our intrusion. The looking away gesture refashions the viewers into accidental witnesses to the fact that Indigenous lives unfold elsewhere, to whatever extent possible in the context of ongoing settler colonialism, apart and on their own terms.

In *The Shirt*, looking back at the camera and looking away from it work in tandem, responding to the long history of European and Anglo-American representations of Indigenous people. Once Indigenous subjectivity and agency within the North American cultural and political representation is secured by the returned direct gaze, once the specter of cooptation of this oppositional gaze by the multiculturalist ethos emerges, the looking elsewhere I describe as framing Niro's film surfaces as a plea for disengagement from the entangled North American gaze, from its contests over agency and subjectivity and from the imperatives of resistance it imposes. Indigenous artists know very well how central, and how ideologically overdetermined, images of Indigenous peoples, whether authored by Indigenous or non-Indigenous artists, have been to the various forms of national definition in North American settler colonial nations. Informed by this knowledge, the looking elsewhere expresses a desire to be released from this imposed signifiatory function in the mainstream imagination, including the imperative to confront and resist mainstream's misrepresentations, ironically embodied in the figure of the protestant Indian. The looking elsewhere implies a political and social space of privacy and agency that does not have to be made transparent and accessible, or made into ethnography, for the benefit of the settler viewers' enlightenment; a universe that demands recognition *a priori*

rather than at the end of a prolonged process of (photographic) exposure. Perhaps it even implies that the most progressive politics of Indigenous self-representation would not include the outsider/settler viewer into the field of power relations that is the gaze, instead focusing on community-specific cultural production, one shaped primarily by each community's own concerns, apart from the context of settler colonialism.

Yet, imagining the irrelevance of the colonial state in the conditions of ongoing colonialism is difficult, and risky. *The Shirt*'s wish for such a disentanglement is an aspirational horizon of possibility, evocative of the "long outwaiting" from N. Scott Momaday's *The House Made of Dawn* (1999). In the meantime, willful looking elsewhere within the entangled North American gaze is paradoxical: it is a performance of representational agency that depends on viewers being there to grasp its rhetorical functions. It expresses a desire to disentangle from the North American gaze while testifying to the impossibility of such disengagement at the same time. There's no escaping the entangled gaze of the North American art, historical and contemporary; there are only new configurations of recognition.

¹ Until the video's very last shot, that is, in which a different woman replaces the first shirt wearer; on the identities of the shirt wearers, and the significance thereof, please read on and see footnote 18 below.

² The moment is fleeting indeed; while clearly discernible in the fade to black on the DVD version of the work, it is hardly so in the version available on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx2lkFUJAY4>

³ La Malinche, or Malintzin, or Dona Marina was an indigenous woman who became the 16th century Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortez's lover, translator, and aide, as well as the mother of his child.

⁴ As Cecile Ganteaume pointed out, by setting de Passe's engraving side by side with that of Queen Elizabeth by Renold Elstrack included with 31 other portrait of sovereigns published in 1618 in *Baziliologia: A Booke of Kings*. Pocahontas' engraving appears in some of the later editions of the collection; <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2017/04/03/400th-anniversary-pocahontas-death/>

⁵ The image of Brumidi's frieze is available online: <https://www.aoc.gov/art/frieze-american-history/captain-smith-and-pocahontas>.

⁶ Contemporary historians have reinterpreted this encounter as a ritual of adoption performed at Powhatan's command; these readings might productively note that in the Cappellano and

Brumidi's works, Pocahontas' look is also aligned with that of her father rather than confronting or imploring him, as if acting on his behalf rather than against it, a dutiful rather than rebellious daughter.

⁷ The only Indigenous women depicted in the art on display at the U.S. Capitol are Pocahontas and Sacajawea, both commemorated for their crucially supportive roles in the process of American colonization.

⁸ Scopic regime, a term coined by Christian Metz (1982), refers to culturally specific ways of seeing the world and objects and people in it, variously mediated by technological and ideological systems and apparatuses.

⁹ Chapman completed a painting of the Smith rescue prior to finishing *Baptism of Pocahontas*: <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibit/pocahontas-saving-life-captain-john-smith>

¹⁰ For the wide gap between the historical facts surrounding Pocahontas' actual baptism and Chapman's interpretation see Ganteaume 2017.

¹¹ Chapman completed *Baptism of Pocahontas* in 1839 at the same time as the Cherokee suffered the Trail of Tears and Death; the painting was installed in the Capitol Rotunda in 1840, exactly a decade after the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

¹² Pocahontas was a captive at Jamestown Settlement at the time of her baptism, held as a bargaining chip in the negotiations between the English colonists and the Powhatan Confederacy.

¹³ The description of the painting at the Architect of the Capitol website identifies the historical figures depicted: <https://www.aoc.gov/art/historic-rotunda-paintings/baptism-pocahontas>.

¹⁴ For example, the caption of *A Son of the Desert - Navaho, 1904* reads: "In the early morning, this boy, as if springing from the earth itself, came to the author's desert camp. Indeed, he seemed a part of the very desert. His eyes bespeak all the curiosity, all the wonder of his primitive mind striving to grasp the meaning of the strange things about him" (Cardozo 1993, 95).

¹⁵ Many of Shelley Niro's and Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie's works can be viewed on the artists' websites at <http://www.shelleyniro.ca/index.php> and <http://www.hulleah.com/>. Shelley Niro speaks about inspiration for some of the images from *The Shirt* in an interview with the Art Gallery of Ontario (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUDop2VgIEg>) and more broadly about her art, and portraiture in particular, in interviews with the National Gallery of Canada (<https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/artists/interviews/an-interview-with-shelley-niro>), with Larry Abbott (<http://dev.cushing.org/abbott/sniro.htm>), and G44 Blog (<http://g44blogs.tumblr.com/post/101854627616/an-interview-with-shelley-niro>). Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie describes her approach to photography in "When is Photography worth a Thousand words" (Tsinhnahjinnie 1998, 2003) and available on her website: <http://www.hulleah.com/9to5/1000words.htm>

¹⁶ *An Aboriginal Worldview* is available for viewing on the artist's website: <http://www.hulleah.com/Video/AWV.htm>

¹⁷ On the origin and meanings of the *Guswenta*, see Onondaga Nation's site: <http://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/>

¹⁸ Veronica Passalacqua is a scholar of Native American art and a curator at the CN Gorman Museum at the University of California, Davis, where Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie is the museum director. Passalacqua and Tsinhnahjinnie collaborate frequently on exhibitions and catalogues (for example, *Our People, Our Land, Our Images: International Indigenous Photography*

(2007). Passalacqua has written about Tsinhnahjinnie's work
(<http://www.hulleah.com/essay.htm>).

¹⁹ The shots of the river and Niagara Falls evoke the historical Haudenosaunee territory around what it is now the U.S. – Canadian border. The two women shirt wearers were filmed near Davis, California.

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