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Abstract

Museums play a prominent role in crafting racial narratives in the United States, and as evidenced by recent social uprisings, these institutions have come under scrutiny. Take, for example, the statue outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which depicts U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt on horseback flanked by a Black man and an American Indian, both unnamed. As [National Public Radio](#) reported in June 2020, “The statue was intended to pay homage to Roosevelt as a ‘devoted naturalist and author of works on natural history,’” but, in calling for its removal, Mayor Bill de Blasio’s office affirmed that it “explicitly depicts Black and Indigenous people as subjugated and racially inferior.” [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Indigenous art, decolonization, humor, Wendy Red Star, museums, environment

Disciplines

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How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play

BY [SALMA MONANI](#) AND [NICOLE SEYMOUR](#) · PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 30, 2020 · UPDATED OCTOBER 8, 2020



“Spring” (Four Seasons). Image by Wendy Red Star, 2006.

Museums play a prominent role in crafting racial narratives in the United States, and as evidenced by recent social uprisings, these institutions have come under scrutiny. Take, for example, the statue outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which depicts U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt on horseback flanked by a Black man and an American Indian, both unnamed. As [National Public Radio](#) reported in June 2020, “The statue was intended to pay homage to Roosevelt as a ‘devoted naturalist and author of works on natural history,’” but, in calling for its removal, Mayor Bill de Blasio’s office affirmed that it “explicitly depicts Black and Indigenous people as subjugated and racially inferior.”

Even before this moment of increased social awareness, BIPOC artists have long interrogated museum practice and redefined it to be more inclusive and creative. One such artist is [Wendy Red Star](#) (Apsáalooke/Crow). Red Star grew up on the Crow Reservation in Montana and is

currently based in Portland, Oregon. Her work has been exhibited everywhere from the Met in New York to the Seattle Art Museum, and it spans from photography to textiles to multimedia installations. In 2018 she received a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, and the following year she was honored with her first mid-career retrospective at the Newark Museum, [Wendy Red Star: A Scratch on the Earth](#). Last month saw the release of the special issue of *Aperture*—“the magazine of photography and ideas”—that she edited on the topic of “[Native America](#).” We—Nicole Seymour, an affect and queer studies scholar, and Salma Monani, an ecomedia and Indigenous studies scholar—are fascinated by the humor and playfulness in Red Star’s work. Late last year, we interviewed Red Star over Skype. Sitting at home in her kitchen with her puppy curled on her lap, Red Star shared with us how she defies popular misperceptions about Native peoples as “noble savages of the past” by using humor to represent Indigenous cultural continuity in her artwork. As we elaborate below, both of these themes—humor and cultural continuity—have ecological import.

Humor, Playfulness, and Irony in Red Star’s Work

The work that first brought Red Star to our attention was a piece called “[Spring](#),” which Seymour saw at the Palm Springs Art Museum in 2017, and which is part of a 2006 quadriptych titled *Four Seasons*. At first glance, many viewers may see this piece as exemplifying the colonial tropes of the [Ecological Indian](#), the representation created by white settlers of Native peoples living in static primitivistic harmony with nature in some bygone era, and the Indian Princess, the Disneyfied Pocahontas who lives in a “woodland paradise,” embodying “America’s attachment to a romantic past and to a far distant nobility,” as [Rayna Green](#) puts it.



"Spring" (Four Seasons). Image by Wendy Red Star, 2006.

While Red Star is dressed in elk tooth dress and maintains a serious and composed posture and affect, a closer look reveals some ironic details about her surroundings: the animals are actually flat, one-dimensional cardboard cutouts and the bright green "grass" is Astroturf. The notable creases of the backdrop also reference a kind of fetishization, as if the image were a poster you would pull out from a copy of *National Geographic*. The juxtaposition of authenticity and modern kitsch evokes gentle humor and also serves as a critique of museum representations. The *Four Seasons* series ironically references natural history museum dioramas. Such dioramas have been popular in U.S. museums for centuries, displaying taxidermied animals and, sometimes, human models as frozen in historical time.

Red Star has remarked on similar exhibition practices in interviews, recalling a trip to a big-city natural history museum wherein she realized that Native representation was literally placed next to the dinosaurs. Importantly, then, countering the settler colonial mythology that reduces Native

Americans to vanished (and vanquished) species, Red Star has continued to riff on the diorama form across many public-facing sites. In 2015, she staged [Tableaux Vivant: Nature's Playground](#) in a Seattle park. As the installation description read, “Visitors . . . are encouraged to pose within the landscape of this semi-fake and natural environment for selfies or photographs taken by the artist”—in a reversal of the colonial gaze. And her current show at MASS MoCA’s Kidspace, [Apsáalooke: Children of the Large-Beaked Bird](#) (showing until May 2021), re-exhibits her “artificial, colorful dioramas” alongside playful, child-friendly elements such as “plush stuffed toy animals.”

The juxtaposition of authenticity and modern kitsch evokes gentle humor and also serves as a critique of museum representations.

In addition to critiquing museum practice, Red Star’s art brings humor, playfulness, and irony to Indigenous representation. Elsewhere, Seymour has drawn on [Sianne Ngai’s](#) concept of “racialized affect” to describe the problem of “[racialized environmental affect](#)”: the limited repertoire of feelings about environmental issues that the public sphere affords marginalized groups. For Indigenous peoples, this has meant being relegated to stoic and/or tragic modes—think of the “granite-faced grunting redskin” as critiqued by Standing Rock Sioux activist and author [Vine Deloria Jr.](#) Seymour’s recent work has shown how Indigenous writers and comedians work to, instead, produce *animated* and *lively* self-representations. As a visual artist, Red Star has made her own unique contributions in this direction.

Often, collaboration is key to these efforts. For [Alterations](#), a show at Oregon’s Linfield University featuring fashion inspired by Apsáalooke men’s “hot dance” outfits, Red Star was paired with drag queen [Kaj-anne Pepper](#). She explained to the blog [Daily Serving](#), “I thought it would be fun to have [Kaj-anne] activate my outfits. Too often Native dress is shown in pictures or on dress forms, but rarely in an animated state.” As Red Star described the process to us, *The curator there had wanted a two-person show with me [and originally proposed] another Indigenous person and I thought, “I don’t really want to do that just for the sake that we’re two Indigenous people. I want to have a show with somebody because I think their work is challenging and would bring light to my work in interesting ways.” And so, she suggested this other artist who is a drag queen and I thought, “That’s amazing! Let’s do that!”*

Red Star has added comedians to her list of collaborators. She reported to us that, while participating in a group show at the [Des Moines Art Center in Iowa](#) based on her *White Squaw* series, the organizers “asked me if I wanted to do a talk and I said, ‘Really, I’d be more

interested in having a dialogue, and I'd love to have [it] with a comedian.” She chose [Ryan McMahon](#) (Couchiching First Nation) for the task because of his podcast *Thunder Bay*: *I was impressed with the way that he [handled] the story of this huge epidemic and murder of Indigenous people found in the river that runs through this [eponymous] town. I think comedians have this take on viewing a story in ways that really connect to a wide variety of people and so I'm interested in that.*

More broadly, Red Star observed, “When talking about Indigenous history you can just devastate yourself. And so, humor has been a way for me to cope with that.”

Indigenous Cultural Continuity: Collaboration across Generations

Red Star's use of humor and playfulness is more than a way to cope with a brutal history, it's a way to re-vision (that is, to revise and re-envision) how museums account for Indigenous futures. Nothing speaks to this better than Red Star's collaborations with her young daughter Beatrice. Take, for example, the 2014 exhibition *1880 Crow Peace Delegation* at the Portland Art Museum. The project involved “re-animating” late nineteenth-century photographs of Apsáalooke chiefs with attention to the symbolic and material meanings of their regalia. Red Star recalls how, as she was drafting the project, then-seven-year-old Beatrice “came [over] and plopped down this [Xeroxed] image of one of the chiefs that she had colored over. And I thought, ‘Well this is it—it's about her and the next generation.’ They're going to be responsible for owning their own history.”



“Medicine Crow.” Drawing on pigment paper by Beatrice Red Star Fletcher, 2014.

The exhibit incorporated Beatrice’s colorful re-animations of the photographs to demonstrate intergenerational conversations. At the Denver Art Museum, Beatrice took the lead on a project that involved a similar re-interpretation of Native museum collections. Red Star notes: “I gave it completely over to her. She decided on giving a tour. She selected objects from both the Native gallery *and* the Western Art gallery to speak about as a docent.”

These mother-daughter collaborations are not just playful in their re-imagination of museum practice, they present alternative modes of education. Though Beatrice was young, Red Star practices what Anishinaabe scholar [Leanne Betasamosake Simpson](#) describes as a central tenet of many traditional North American Indigenous cultures: “We should give our children the responsibility to take control of their learning.” Considering how colonial education has denied control to Indigenous children, such consensual collaboration is decidedly decolonial. Until much too recently the [Indian Residential School](#) system severed, without consent, children’s cultural and material ties to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Contemporary settler schools propagate similar disruptions, and the traditional museum, with its often-frozen portrayals of Indigenous peoples and their cultures, through which school children dutifully troop, has long been a [partner in such crimes](#). Allowing Beatrice control in how and whether she wants to partner with her, Red Star gives agency to this next generation.

This agency is about cultural continuity, in ways [traditionally not manifested in museum collections](#). While museums often store and exhibit material objects as fragments of exoticized cultures that have disappeared into the annals of history, for Red Star, these materials represent everyday and intergenerational functions that guide Apsáalooke sociality. For example, recalling finding a saddle owned by a great-grandmother in the Smithsonian archives, she notes, “I parade with Beatrice, and how wonderful would it be for her to have this saddle?”

Red Star knows that [current repatriation laws](#) do not aid in such objects being returned to her family as they are not considered sacred or human remains. She also points to the uneven power dynamics that often underlie such museum acquisitions. Discussing finding ancestral medicine bundles (which, because of their ceremonial value, she could petition to be repatriated), she muses:

I wonder what was happening to them [great-grandparents] at that time that they decided to sell these. These medicine bundles were pretty much necessary in leading a successful life. . . . I really do feel bad because they’ve just been at this institution, just wrapped in canvas, hanging out, you know?

Each of Red Star’s exhibits works against such stifling stasis. Through playful and colorful re-imaginings, they bring knowledge of Indigenous cultural dynamism to museum audiences and turn museums into lively sites of tradition-in-motion. Importantly, recognizing Apsáalooke material objects as part of these traditions cannot be untangled from how Red Star wants us to understand Apsáalooke relations to land. For example, medicine bundles are literally *from* the land and serve spiritual functions to connect back to land. Red Star’s choice to work with

historical photographs for the *1880 Crow Peace Delegation* exhibit reminds us that this delegation to Washington, D.C. was made to negotiate territory and land rights, which ultimately resulted in further loss of Crow reservation land—a fact made more poignant by the [seemingly quirky annotations](#) on the regalia that draw attention to land relatives (eagles, ermine, etc.) as material and cultural kin.

Indigenous Cultural Dynamism at Play

It's important to see how Red Star's work entwines environmentalism with the politics of race, sexuality, and gender. Yet, these intersectionalities are conducted in the spirit of humor, playfulness, and irony—crucial elements when we consider the preponderance of environmental gloom and doom. Environmental (and other forms of) gloom and doom are particularly problematic in terms of how they narrativize Indigenous lives. While museums have played an active part in plundering and generating Indigenous genocidal doom, they rarely make such acts visible, instead lamenting in romanticized narratives of the unfortunate (and so-called “natural”) demise of such cultures.

As the Roosevelt statue outside the American Museum of Natural History irritatingly reminds us, Indigenous (and other non-white people) are often presented as noble, if archaic and subordinated, species. Such practices entrench a settler rationality and ignore contemporary Indigenous activism, world-making, and survivance. Indigenous artists like Red Star disarmingly use humor and irreverence to decolonize how we understand Indigenous perspectives, agency, and cultural continuity as practiced in museums. As she says: “I find that if you have ever gone to a funeral; it's always so appreciated when someone tells a funny story, and everyone is so sad but then everyone laughs! It feels so good.”

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Featured image: “Spring” (Four Seasons). Image by Wendy Red Star, 2006.

Salma Monani employs decolonial methodologies, bringing Indigenous artists' voices into conversation with those of Indigenous scholars to provide alternative perspectives to those often

foregrounded in mainstream American mediascapes. Her current book project is titled “Indigenous Ecocinema: Decolonizing Media Environments.” She’s Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. [Website](#). [Contact](#).

Nicole Seymour is fascinated by the roles that queer styles such as kitsch, camp, and artificiality play in environmental movements, as discussed in her books [Strange Natures](#) (Illinois University Press, 2013) and [Bad Environmentalism](#) (University of Minnesota Press, 2018). She is Associate Professor of English at California State University, Fullerton. Currently, she is on sabbatical as an Alumni Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, working on a book about glitter. Her last contribution to Edge Effects was “[Citation in the #MeToo Era](#)” (September 2018), and you can catch her in conversation about Bad Environmentalism on the [Edge Effects podcast](#). [Website](#). [Twitter](#). [Contact](#).

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