

SURVIVANCE, SIGNS, AND MEDIA ART HISTORIES:

New Temporalities and Productive Tensions in Dana Claxton's Made to Be Ready

A Review Essay

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Since our work documents records, and interprets decolonization, and is an expression of our cultures, our social relationships to the state and church, and our communities, what is the exchange with the viewer? One of pedagogy, understanding, truth, hope? Perhaps all and more.

– Dana Claxton, “Re:Wind”¹

LARGE-SCALE LIGHTBOX photographs and projections,² reminiscent of Vancouver’s photo-conceptualistic narratives, dominate the darkened Simon Fraser University’s Audain Gallery. The eye moves from static images to moving projections. The content of the images is visibly interconnected: the figure depicted in each appears to be the same woman; the punchy clarity, vivid palette, and the glossy, high definition and resolution as well as the contemporary aesthetic of the photographic images are also measurably consistent throughout. But although the works share an author, the theme, or intention, underlying them is challenging to discern. Although there are, ostensibly, referents available for issues of identity and remediation, they transcend the once traditional frameworks of conventional art historical categorization. The artist, Dana Claxton, is an artist-critic born in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, is of Hunkpapa Lakota descent, and is an associate professor in the University of British Columbia’s Art History, Visual Art, and Theory

¹ Dana Claxton, “Re:Wind,” in *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Native New Media*, ed. Candice Hopkins, Melanie Townsend, Dana Claxton, Stephen Loft (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2005), 16.

² Claxton’s works are actually shown on LED fireboxes, a contemporary take on Jeff Wall and Ian Baxter’s fluorescent lightboxes of the late twentieth century.

program. She is best known for her photography and multi-channel video installation work, but she also works in film and performance art. Although her practice is often experimental, unless viewers are familiar with her work and the legacies of decolonization, cultural self-determination, reclamation, and technology from which she borrows, her 2016 exhibition *Made to Be Ready* likely strikes viewers unfamiliar with her career as a paradox. While the work is observably dealing in traditionalist Indigenous themes, the imagery and many issues it represents, such as Indigenous decolonization,³ are notably contemporary, and the formats and general aesthetics point to a praxis based in a deep investment in media arts and new media, a field to which she also contributes as a curator, theorist, critic, and arts organizer.

Made to Be Ready consists of four artworks: *Buffalo Woman 1 and 2* (2015), *Headdress* (2015), *Cultural Belongings* (2015), and *Uplifting* (2015), occupying the four walls, including the wall of windows, of the white cube space of the Audain Gallery. The photographic and cinematographic works convey images in the conventional, austere mode expected within contemporary art: the space is dark, silent, and contemplative, and the images quietly dominate. Curated by Audain curator Amy Kazymierchuk, best known for her work in new media and artist-run spaces in Vancouver, there is a pared-back approach to the way the works are presented. But this subdued, surface-oriented, and minimalistic aesthetic is in explicit tension with the dynamic energy of the images themselves and the concepts and material histories they represent and summon.

Indeed, Claxton's 2016 exhibition, like her practice in general, is in many ways paradoxical, at least according to a superficial and essentialist reading premised on traditional approaches to established categories in visual arts. The works, as a group, resist being analyzed according to a specific structural framework, and they are intentionally couched in a form of ambiguity that is best described as epistemological instability as it builds from what initially reads as the incompatible interpretive codes of "Indigenous art" and "new media."⁴ This sense of generative indeter-

³ Decolonization, as it transpires in Claxton's work in the context of contemporary Indigenous communities in Canada, has a specific but multiplicitous definition. As scholar Mark Aquash explains in his 2011 essay written for the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, "Relations with First Nations: Decolonization in the Canadian Context," it implicates the interconnected issues of "the legacies of Canada's colonial history; ... working towards the decolonization of Canadian legislation and relations with First Nations; and ... decolonizing the colonial mindset and educational system as well as First Nations identities and communities." See <http://www.ideas-idees.ca/blog/relations-first-nations-decolonization-canadian-context>.

⁴ Epistemological instability here gestures towards conversations traditionally associated with postmodernist feminist epistemology (see, for instance, Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

minacy is the result of her deliberate bringing together of Indigenous themes and histories with digital art forms. According to the binary paradigms of settler colonialism and Western art historical conventions within media arts, such a pairing is uneasy and ambitious, even if building from an emergent field in Indigenous digital and new media art.

Indigenous digital and new media art builds from trajectories in historic new media while also corresponding to developments in the evolution of Indigenous visual and oral cultures, including what Steven Loft calls the “aesthetic of nexus based on a storytelling (knowledge transference) tradition.”⁵ Despite what Heather Igloliorte, Julie Nagam, and Carla Taunton describe as the “new era of resurgence” in Indigenous contemporary art in Canada and international contexts, this ever-expanding field is yet to receive sufficient critical, academic attention,⁶ which explains some of the challenges in categorizing Claxton’s exhibition. While her work is premised on a combination of traditional (printmaking, photography) and digital (digital video) media, the discourse in which she critically participates is that of contemporary Indigenous art, a conversation invested in the pluralistic, participatory affordances and “dialogic aesthetics” of digital media and networked consciousness.⁷

The dualistic or, indeed, pluralistic nature of Claxton’s framework of production throughout her oeuvre calls attention to hermeneutic concepts and contexts that are useful in elucidating the general, inchoate state of contemporary art premised on the exploration and performance of Indigenous identities – at least according to the terms and conditions of decolonization and self-determination as defined by scholars Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson as well as by Claxton herself.⁸ In her critical article “Re:Wind,” Claxton premises her definition of decolonization on the unique capacities of Indigenous artists to share “interior realities, observations, and intimate elucidations” from within

[Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984]) and suggests that traditional knowledge categories are inherently biased, and therefore problematic, constructs.

⁵ Steven Loft, “Decolonizing the Web,” in *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, ed. Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014), xv.

⁶ Heather Igloliorte, Julie Nagam, and Carla Taunton, “Transmissions: The Future Possibilities of Indigenous Digital and New Media Art,” *Public* 27, 54 (2016): 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ See Glen Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *Islands of Decolonial Love* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2013); and Coulthard and Simpson’s “Grounded Normativity/Place-Based Solidarity” (*American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2016): 249–55) for a more in-depth discussion of their views. I draw upon them primarily because they address decolonization within the specific context of Canadian settler-colonialism, which is different from the way decolonization is discussed in the United States and other countries.

the gallery space.⁹ In the case of *Made to Be Ready*, the complex facets of the artworks gesture to a multiplicity of potential readings, each of them simultaneously invested in aesthetics, community, and culture, and each feeding into a broader understanding of the work that functions quite apart from binary thinking. Her artistic production gathers from a variety of sources that are both personal and community-driven, and that build from the emergent epistemologies that inform and surface from contemporary Indigenous artistic production and discourses as a result of what Igloliorte, Nagam, and Taunton refer to as “Indigenous continuities, resiliencies, and resurgences” and the resistant, chronological multiplicities that digital media and contemporary media aesthetics are so well poised to invoke.¹⁰ The work in *Made to Be Ready* calls into question individualistic notions of beauty and aesthetics, and asks questions that bring together past and present from a variety of historical perspectives. “What is indigenous beauty?” and “what is a Lakota aesthetic?” she asks in a recent media interview as a means of revealing the intentions and thematic resonances of the exhibition,¹¹ noting that the inspiration for the show came from her contribution to *Rising Voices/Hóthąŋiipi* (2014), a film project documenting the Lakota language revitalization movement. She also makes explicit reference to art world paradigms, such as the legacy of Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made, to which she attributes the word play in the exhibition’s title, commenting: “Duchamp’s intervention into the idea of what art is was so significant.”¹²

Claxton’s images, in *Made to Be Ready* as elsewhere, display signs of Indigeneity in ways that resist conforming to accepted narratives in what has become the settler-colonial “canon” of Indigenous artwork. Her works speak to a presentism, and even a futurity, rather than to a historicity or a past, and this can make her work challenging to interpret according to what is effectively a colonial – or colonized – understanding of how Indigenous identity is represented in visual art, including within the context of contemporary art. The settler-colonial schema for the analysis of Indigenous art continues to be framed according to the debate that is premised on the question: “Is it art or is it craft?”¹³ This is a question that delimits the potential for Indigenous artists to reshape contemporary art discourses in a way that includes their voices and

⁹ Claxton, “Re:Wind,” 16.

¹⁰ Igloliorte, Nagam, and Taunton, “Transmissions,” 5.

¹¹ Leah Collins, “Dana Claxton Wants to Change the Way You Think about Indigenous Women,” CBC Arts, 14 January 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/dana-claxton-wants-to-change-the-way-you-think-about-indigenous-women-1.3403600>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Claxton, “Re:Wind,” 16.

increases the Indigenous presence in contemporary art spaces, ultimately shifting such narratives. In placing Indigenous art production within the realm of craft and tradition,¹⁴ works are considered exclusively according to their connection with the past rather than according to their potentialities within present and future contexts. Claxton's practice, like those of other contemporary artists of Indigenous ancestry working in digital media and dealing in themes of identity and culture, breaks from these archaic representational structures in bringing together the threads of continuity, community, and shared stories while engaging in strategies that forge an undeniable, immediate connection to the current moment in arts and culture.¹⁵ While such strategies seem relatively straightforward, they are derived from complex histories, contexts, and methods.

Claxton, like many artists of Indigenous descent, is often introduced in print and web publications by means of a discussion of her Hunkpapa Lakota ancestry,¹⁶ with frequent mentions of connections to the followers of the well-known activist Sitting Bull. For recent controversies around the representation of Indigenous identity in arts and culture, particularly in Canada, we can look to the widespread discussions around author Joseph Boyden's identity.¹⁷ Or, more recently, we can look at the international conversations around artist Jimmie Durham's claims to a Cherokee identity.¹⁸ Gestures towards lineage and cultural belonging are useful in assessing how an audience might interpret a creative practice that attempts to uncover, subvert, or overturn these narratives. Who is allowed to speak on behalf of a community? How is belonging measured, and how is it determined? These are useful questions to ask in any context, and they are, in many ways, being revisited as Indigenous ways of knowing are regaining prominence as a restorative methodology, perhaps particularly following the official report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹⁹ Such concerns undergird Claxton's

¹⁴ Gerald Vizenor, "American Indian Art and Literature Today: Survivance and Tragic Wisdom," *Museum International* 62, 3 (2010): 41–42.

¹⁵ Claxton, "Re:Wind," 40.

¹⁶ See, for example, Lynne Bell's February 2011 article in *Canadian Art*, "Dana Claxton: From a Whisper to a Scream," http://canadianart.ca/features/dana_claxton/; or Collins, "Dana Claxton Wants to Change."

¹⁷ See the APTN news release, "Joseph Boyden's Shape-Shifting Indigenous Identity," 23 December 2016, <http://aptnnews.ca/2016/12/23/author-joseph-boydens-shape-shifting-indigenous-identity/>.

¹⁸ For more details, see Faazine's "Facts and Resources: Jimmie Durham," in *First American Art Magazine*, 8 June 2017, <http://firstamericanartmagazine.com/facts-resources-jimmie-durham/>; or Aruna d'Souza's "Mourning Jimmie Durham," in *Momus*, 20 July 2017, <http://momus.ca/mourning-jimmie-durham/>.

¹⁹ For more details, see the website for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3>.

body of work, with the intricacies of the reclamation and resurgence of Indigenous identities being embodied in her images and texts.

But identity circulates differently in different cultural contexts. In literary theory, for instance, a strictly biographical interpretation of cultural objects is outmoded. So why do critics impose such a reading on works that attempt to deal directly with specific, often collective, identities? Why interpret works that grapple with identity in a way that is meaningful to communities according to methods that strip away important content? Such an approach to analysis is contentious within many cultural contexts. Increasingly, members of Indigenous communities are rejecting colonial interpretations of their histories and heritage as well as the ways their works circulate in museological and gallery contexts.²⁰ Here is where the issue becomes more complicated, even as the lines are being redrawn – and repatriated – according to a straightforward ethos that reflects the subjectivities of those most affected: those who author, and those represented within, the works themselves. Why are Indigenous artworks, like those of Claxton, created within the context of the mainstream art world *interpreted* according to different codes than are non-Indigenous works, effectively removing them from dominant critical conversations in the arts even though they are being produced according to the codes and conditions of the contemporary moment? In most instances, the reading and context of contemporary art produced by artists of Indigenous ancestry cannot be determined according to identity politics alone, but issues of strict and restrictive nomenclature and interpretive frameworks continue to dictate how the works are shown and viewed, often in spite of the way artists themselves position their work and their praxes.²¹ Further, why deny contemporary art produced in Indigenous art contexts the ability to participate in both discussions at

²⁰ See, for example, Miriam Clavir's discussion of participatory Indigenous curatorial strategies in museums in her 2002 book *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); or scholar Kimberly Christen's ongoing project, *Mukurtu CMS* (<https://mukurtu.org/>), which her website (<http://www.kimchristen.com/about/>) describes as "a free and open source content management system and community digital archive platform designed to meet the curatorial and archival needs of indigenous communities to manage and share materials using local cultural protocols." It is important to note that such projects enable curatorial self-determination within communities, allowing them to decide how they would like their stories and data to be disseminated within the database.

²¹ This interpretive paradigm undergirds the critical praxes of artists Brian Jungen and Raymond Boisjoly, who regularly express frustration about the production and reception contexts of contemporary Indigenous art. For more details, see Kimberly Phillips, "Fetishism, Curiosity, and the Work of Brian Jungen," *Fillip* 3 (Summer 2006), <https://fillip.ca/content/fetishism-curiosity-and-the-work-of-brian-jungen>; and Jesse McKee, "In Front of One's Nose: Raymond Boisjoly and the Art of Learning," *Canadian Art*, 15 September 2015, <http://canadianart.ca/features/in-front-of-ones-nose-raymond-boisjoly/>.

once? This issue challenges the settler-colonial inscription of Indigenous artwork as “other” than works produced within what might be considered the “mainstream.” It is within these complex and politicized contexts that the threads of ambiguity and epistemological instability that run through Claxton’s works prove productive and provocative.

In producing her work throughout her practice, Claxton strategically draws upon contemporary debates around Indigenous identity in a way that interrogates certain problematics endemic to much of the context of the production and reception of Indigenous contemporary art. While she does this, she also suggests aesthetic and conceptual solutions to these challenges, even though her “theses” often result in deliberately multiplicitous and amorphous artistic postulations.

The works in *Made to Be Ready* deal primarily with themes of Indigenous “womanhood and sovereignty,” and intersect with her ongoing interest in the notion of “survivance,” a term coined by Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor.²² Survivance, a portmanteau combining survival and resistance, is defined as “an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of dominance and tragedy, nihilism, and victimry.”²³ Survivance is key to Claxton’s artistic positionality, as are the related themes of self-determination and resurgence.

Survivance also connects meaningfully to the idea of specifically Indigenous ways of knowing. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson discusses the ways that Michi Saagiig Nishnaabe epistemology is premised on a unique relationship between the self and ancestral land (*aki*), which is both “context and process,” creating a relational method for “coming to know” that is unprecedented in colonial contexts.²⁴ Such a relational and unhierarchical approach to self and space underlies the themes of Claxton’s production, particularly in terms of the temporalities – specifically in bringing the past into conversation with the present and future – inherent to the multiple dimensions of her work. This transpires not only in the ways that she brings together stories and technology but also on the level of how she recombines Indigenous and colonial material histories to create new and empowering, often polyvocal, narratives

²² Amy Kazymierchuk, “Dana Claxton: *Made to Be Ready*,” SFU Galleries, 2016, <http://www.sfu.ca/galleries/audain-gallery/Upcoming.html>.

²³ Gerald Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 11.

²⁴ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3, 3 (2014): 7, <http://whereareyouquetzalcoatl.com/mesofigurineproject/EthnicAndIndigenousStudiesArticles/Simpson2014.pdf>.

premised on culturally specific epistemologies and ontologies, as she does in the critical strategies deployed in *Made to Be Ready*.

This multiplicity, as it connects to the ideas underlying survivance and Claxton's positionality, also touches on another concept that addresses the complexity inherent to identity: intersectionality. Intersectionality, or intersectional feminism, a concept Kimberlé Crenshaw outlines in her pivotal 1991 article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour," allows for a methodology to address and to decode simultaneous factors within colonialist oppression, and it is thus useful in untangling how womanhood and sovereignty might coexist in harmony with an ethos of survival and resistance. Intersectionality also points to issues of violence that underlie the Canadian context of the production of Claxton's work; for instance, although the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is not formally addressed in her work, it is a matter of such pressing importance that it underscores the visceral need for feminist conceptions of survivance in Indigenous communities, including within the arts.

Claxton's relationship to the concepts of survivance and intersectionality is also helpful in deconstructing the tensions between her use of digital media and themes that speak to community histories and narratives. Her work contravenes a number of categorical expectations often encoded in encounters with Indigenous art. First, there is the use of the photographic and cinematic form. In a 2010 article, Vizenor explains the history of the bifurcation of Indigenous art practices and dominant art narratives, explicating the history of how young Indigenous artists were instructed to take part in ostensibly traditional artistic practices (which were often distorted, defying traditions that decried physical representations of spiritual matters) while ignoring both popular culture and high cultural styles and forms. This resulted in a kind of "primitivism" that invoked a positive response among Western viewers, collectors, and museums alike.²⁵ Add to this the predatory and flattening habits of mind built into the visual cultures surrounding depictions of Indigenous figures – the harmful legacies of Edward Curtis's photography and George Catlin's portraits are well-known examples – and the empowering message built into Claxton's recurring images of assertive women, refuting the viewer's gaze by averting their own, is all the more astounding.

²⁵ Vizenor, "Aesthetics," 43–44. Vizenor speculates that this tendency in Indigenous art originated with the establishment of a teaching regimen founded on certain styles and techniques developed by Dorothy Dunn, the founder of the Studio School at the Santa Fe Indian School in New Mexico in the 1930s.

There is also the specific ways that Claxton invokes Indigenous identity. In the works comprising *Made to Be Ready*, she brings together signs symbolic of Indigenous traditions of Plains communities, such as the recurring buffalo skull in the silk-on-windbox installation *Buffalo Woman 1 and 2*, which stands at 244 centimetres tall by 122 centimetres wide, with objects that signal the contemporary moment, including the blue-beaded evening gown adorning the woman gracefully holding up the skull. That the “skull” itself is unnatural and translucent adds further dimension to the sense that it signals challenging chronologies and representational codes. The complex juxtaposition of materials, iconography, and embodied gestures pulls what might be viewed as a sign for a stereotypical genre of Indigeneity into the present, breaking from the diegetic frame of conventional readings of Indigenous art-as-artefact to which Vizenor responds.

Tensions and dynamics related to the convergence of the asynchronous politics of the gallery space and the emergence of Indigenous media ecologies, or what Loft refers to as “cosmologies,”²⁶ also occurs in *Headdress*, an 81 by 122 centimetre LED firebox photograph depicting a beaded headdress, almost completely obscuring a woman’s face and shoulders. Again, the viewer is provided with signs of Indigenous spirituality and symbology, but in an image that reads as strictly contemporary due to the superb image quality and the recognizable ubiquity of the plunging neckline of the woman’s ivory dress, which is revealed in full length alongside a variety of traditional-looking objects strewn on the floor in *Cultural Belongings*, a 244 by 133 centimetre photographic image printed on LED firebox. Another work depicting the gown-clad woman (this time in blood red), the variable-dimension, fifteen-minute digital video *Uplifting* projected on the back wall of the gallery, animates the space while adding affective dimension to the otherwise sterile viewing environment of the Audain. The repetition of the woman’s figure connects all four works, emphasizing the sense that there is a narrative connection and sense of progression at play between the images. The signifiers throughout *Made to Be Ready* are all but emptied of their meaning, but there is something in the recurring figure’s commanding, often emotive posture that contradicts such a reading and, in fact, imbues the signs with a powerful energy, pushing them beyond the banality of a

²⁶ Steven Loft, “Decolonizing the Web,” in *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, ed. Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014), xvi.

settler-colonial interpretation of the skull, beads, and other “Indigenous” objects and into the realm of the contemporary.

Throughout *Made to Be Ready*, Claxton is destabilizing, if not denying, the reading of her work according to a traditionalism derived from a flattening colonial interpretation of Indigenous identity, both in a general sense and in that of Indigenous art, while also asserting a feminist positionality within this decolonial stance. While there is a chance that viewers might overlook or misapprehend the artist’s critical project as it relates to the show, one has only to turn to a carefully curated list of readings suggested by the artist herself, and listed in the bibliography provided on the Audain webpage for the exhibition,²⁷ to see that the layering of signs is a means to revealing the thoughtful framework underlying her praxis. She points the curious viewer to scholars such as Lee Maracle, Marie Battiste, Vine Deloria Jr., and M. Jacqui Alexander and their generative, affirmative writings on the assertion of marginalized identities within colonized contexts, giving further dimension to her gesture towards the concept of survivance. Claxton’s use of near-homogenous signs of Indigeneity, such as beads and buffalo skulls, that are often shown as a way of suggesting a compartmentalized, settler-colonial form of Indigenous cultural identity is an act of decolonial reclamation and defiance, albeit in a way that suggests self-empowerment and self-determination rather than violence, or even defiance or subversion. Artworks such as *Cultural Belongings* and *Buffalo Woman 1 and 2* embody the affirmatory and pluralistic ethos that underlies many Indigenous approaches to self-actualization. As Simpson explains in her discussion of her own ancestral ways of knowing:

Coming to know is the pursuit of whole body intelligence practiced in the context of freedom, and when realized collectively it generates generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, interdependent and self-regulating community minded individuals. It creates communities of individuals with the capacity to uphold and move forward our political traditions and systems of governance.²⁸

Such an epistemological position circulates within Claxton’s meta-analysis of the uneven relationship between Indigenous and settler-colonial art histories. The ideal of a community of empowered and self-determining individuals taking control of its cultural and political

²⁷ <http://www.sfu.ca/galleries/audain-gallery/Dana-Claxton-Made-To-Be-Ready.html>.

²⁸ Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy,” 7.

destinies seems to underlie the imaginary that imbues her work with social significance.

Not only is Claxton pushing back against conventional, colonial readings of Indigenous artwork, but she is also commenting on the colonial history of the forms and media she employs to enact her commentary. In *Made to Be Ready*, as well as in her broader practice, she employs a sophisticated, often trenchantly critical remediative methodology to reimagine Indigenous imagery and identities within the context of the genealogy of media-based art, not only within the legacies of feminist critical praxis in media art in North America but also, significantly, within the development of Western Canadian video and new media art. Both archives play important roles in the analysis of Claxton's work and help unravel some of the paradoxes, or anxieties, within its interpretive tensions. Moreover, reading Claxton's practice, including the four interrelated works in *Made to Be Ready* as well as early projects, against the backdrop of these image and media histories provides a useful way of addressing how identity, expression, and decolonial agency are intertwined. Such an analytical strategy also assists in uncovering the mechanics of how her work addresses and participates in several conversations at once, concerning (variously) the restorative capacity of image-based strategies and cultural self-determination. Within the context of the history of media art, or postmodernist art in general, the impact of collective movements is indisputable in that the artists implicated are also grappling with the ways that technological art forms could address pluralistic narratives so as to channel the indeterminacies built into feminist epistemologies as a means of addressing the insufficiencies of essentialist frameworks and narratives. The art historical legacy of canonical movements has helped to define and to transform much of how art historians and critics understand the evolution of appropriative methods in art and visual culture, and the influence of its artists is omnipresent, if only in a formal sense, in contemporary video and new media art in terms of both its production and reception. Early media artists, particularly Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Dara Birnbaum, and Cindy Sherman, all artists of the Pictures Generation, are also known for groundbreaking works of critical feminist media art, often in a way that transcends or subverts the divide between "high" and "low" culture, particularly in terms of how interpretive frameworks are deployed in the analysis of these constructed categories.

Similarly, another of the many relevant formal nodes worth mentioning in the line of art historical influence on Claxton's praxis comes

from the conceptualist lineage of institutional critique. Her work, albeit quietly and indirectly, reflects the concerns of artists such as Adrian Piper and Andrea Fraser, whose performance-based works are similarly documented and distributed photographically or video-recorded, and similarly ascribe to an institutionally sanctioned gallery aesthetic while simultaneously critiquing and seeking to disrupt this very context. From a political and cultural standpoint, it is worth considering why Claxton explicitly investigates concepts of beauty and performativity in a way that evokes legacies in media art and performance not often included in the discourse of Indigenous new media and digital art but, at the same time, charts a trajectory that is driven by an investment in the dialectical pursuit of reclaiming Indigenous modes of individual and collective agency and self-knowledge. Issues of cultural identity and marginalization are a primary reason that Claxton's contemporary interventions become more difficult to place in the art world, including within the context of the interrogative methodologies of feminist artists in media and institutional critique.

Claxton's work, informed by her own pluralistic identity as a full-time faculty member in a university visual arts department and as a woman of Indigenous ancestry, addresses art histories that exclude Indigenous artists and cordon off feminist narratives while, at the same time, acknowledging the specific politics of Indigenous art production and reception. She is effectively bridging the aforementioned categories of and conversations about "Indigenous art" with those of the broader field of contemporary art, uncovering, foregrounding, and problematizing conventional, often flattening, taxonomies. Her use of a photographic and cinematic form that complicates her work's relationship to settler-colonial expectations of Indigenous art also connects her praxis to a lineage of feminist artistic production. The works in *Made to Be Ready* draw upon the critical legacy of artists such as Levine, Kruger, Birnbaum, and Sherman because of a shared investment in technology and the polyvocalism of images, while recalling the trenchant critical cultural commentary of Fraser and Piper in the socio-political stakes of building identity issues into aestheticized works. However, more obvious, deliberate, responsive, and sometimes ironic connections between Claxton and this feminist trajectory in new media arts happen, predominantly, in her earlier work.

Claxton has produced several bodies of work, and each possesses a unique relationship with the themes with which she regularly engages, including survivance, decolonization, and the uneven relationship

between Indigenous identities and visual representation. Her *Tonto Prayer* (2013) and *Love Me* (2013), artworks in *Indian Candy*, a 2014 exhibition at Vancouver's Winsor Gallery, layer iconic imagery with ironic, bold text, while *Longhair Blue Woman* (2013) and *Blue Headdress* (2013) contain no textual accompaniment but use heavy pixilation and bright, artificial colouration to convey a critical message about the circulation and commodification of Indigenous representations. These images speak, at times didactically, to the way that such imagery, commonly and often uncritically propagated in visual culture, has evolved and gained and lost various forms of currency throughout colonial history. She incisively reframes and inverts the aestheticization and commodification of images depicting conceptions of Indigeneity, critically revisiting contentious histories in the Western imaginary by means of such visual texts.

The works in *Indian Candy* pick up on threads in Claxton's earlier practice, such as her highly politicized C-prints *AIM 1* (2010) and *AIM 2* (2010), which directly reproduce classified FBI documents pertaining to the American Indian Movement with the majority of the text redacted. Her popular *Onto the Red Road*, a 2010 photographic series depicting women in red paraphernalia juxtaposed with anachronistic items-as-social-intertexts comments on notions of Indigenous feminine and feminist agency and power in a way that recalls and reimagines the feminist interrogatory methods so as to recast the exploration of female identity in a manner that specifically probes the depiction and representation of Indigenous women.

Claxton's politically engaged image-making practice is reflected in the body of her video performance and filmic work from the 1990s, which includes *I Want to Know Why* (1994), a montage video work, and the performance and installation-based *Buffalo Bone China* (1997). *I Want to Know Why* brings themes of colonialism and Indigenous femininity into the context of the urban environment while *Buffalo Bone China* smashes and symbolically arranges china against experimental video footage of plains buffalo and Indigenous figures amidst a haunting soundscape. These performance-based works reflect the artist's critical investment in drawing attention to issues of institutionalized identity from within the institution, building from a reflexive consciousness of, and a positionality dictated by, what Fraser describes as "the inescapability of institutional determination" within art and its discourses.²⁹

²⁹ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum International* 1 (2005): 104.

Made to Be Ready materializes from Claxton's praxis as a convergence of aesthetic and more resistant strategies, as a distillation of canonical feminist visual techniques and critical strategies that then expands on her political project, exploring the pluralism of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies as they pertain to both the art world and identity. Certainly, Claxton's conceptual and aesthetic production framework does not, by any means, borrow exclusively from the settler-colonial art historical narratives of institutionally sanctioned movements and artists. She instead uses media as a platform to bring community-driven issues into meaningful conversation with broader issues of art and socio-cultural histories. Her praxis speaks to a network of influence that is much closer to home, and one that is gaining momentum thanks to the success of exhibitions such as *Beat Nation* (2008; 2012-14) (which featured a work by Claxton in its latter, touring iterations), and such publications as the Winter 2016 special issue of the journal *PUBLIC*, "Indigenous Art: New Media and the Digital." In "Re:Wind," Claxton explains how her practice fits within the chronology of video and cinematic art in Canada. She names, among notable influential developments, such pivotal nodes as Vancouver's Video In(n) in the 1970s and 1990s, "which has become known as a site for Aboriginal independent media art production"³⁰ thanks to its pioneering of new media programs in general and addressing Indigenous artists in particular;³¹ the National Film Board, which "became increasingly committed to developing Aboriginal directors" who "greatly influenced the development of Aboriginal media art";³² and the Banff Centre,³³ which assisted in the creation of the Aboriginal Film and Media Arts Alliance (1991-2000) – an alliance that resulted in the development of the Aboriginal Arts Program and other Indigenous programming at the centre.³⁴ Such historic advancements helped to form "a community of artists and an

³⁰ Claxton uses the term "Aboriginal," which was the tendency at the time of the publication of the catalogue in 2004-05, whereas the term endorsed by institutions and assemblies in Canada is currently "Indigenous." For more information, see CBC's op ed, "What's In a Name: Indian, Native, Aboriginal, or Indigenous," which explains how a decision made by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs has been backed by the Anishinabek of Ontario, representing forty-two First Nations, in rejecting the prior term. See <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/what-s-in-a-name-indian-native-aboriginal-or-indigenous-1.2784518>.

³¹ Claxton, "Re:Wind," 18, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 18.

³³ For more on how support and programming at the Banff Centre was formative to the development of networks and production in Indigenous media arts, see Cheryl L'Hirondelle, "Re:lating Necessity and Invention: How Sara Diamond and the Banff Centre Aided Indigenous New Media Production (1992-2005)," *Public* 27, 54 (2016): 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

arts movement” that built upon “a common interest in image making, self representation, and storytelling.”³⁵ It is useful to note that, within the context of her critical writing, Claxton identifies these initiatives as structurally relevant not only for an exhibition initially staged at the Banff Centre’s Walter Phillips Gallery but also for how they play into the broader context of her art production while further demonstrating how survivance and intersectional politics can be reflected in expanded art historical narratives and exhibition contexts. The establishment of specifically Indigenous and self-governing administrative bodies in new media production gives Indigenous new media artists increased agency, helps advance decolonial epistemologies, and also imbues technology with new significance within both Indigenous and settler communities.

The events and evolutions Claxton outlines in her article help to explain how issues of sovereignty and self-determination spawned evolutions within new media contexts that allowed Indigenous artists to express themselves and their cultural identities by means of contemporary technologies, participating within and shifting the dominant arts discourses underlying available production contexts. Addressing an Indigenous collective, and premising her statement on Gitxsan elder Doreen Jensen’s notion that “Our Elders bequeathed us a great legacy of communication through the Arts,”³⁶ Claxton posits:

Aboriginal new media is connected in context and cultural practice as a result of shared socio-cultural experiences ... Our creative expression sustains a connection to ancient ways, places our identities and concerns in the immediate, while linking us to the future. To a broader audience, this expression conveys an Aboriginal worldview, revealing the Aboriginal experience in all its complexities.³⁷

Claxton’s remark recalls, in speaking to shared experience, identity, and a connection to specific traditions, Simpson’s discussion of how Indigenous world views, along with epistemologies, pedagogies, and specific metaphors, are reflected in the stories shared by specific communities.³⁸ And it reminds viewers that reading Claxton’s work according to settler-colonial art historical narratives alone, apart from the emerging

³⁵ Ibid., 20.

³⁶ Doreen Jensen, “Art History,” in *Give Back: First Nations Perspectives on Cultural Practice* (North Vancouver: Gallerie Publications, 1992), 6-14, quoted in Dana Claxton, “Re:Wind,” 16.

³⁷ Ibid., 40.

³⁸ Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy,” 8.

discourse of decolonial Indigenous media cosmologies, reduces the work's potential to be read as a materialization of cultural expression.

Claxton's nuanced approach to issues of identity, particularly in *Made to Be Ready*, as well as the parallels between form, content, and her personal positionality, enable her to address these issues in a way that is affirmative and constructive. Her work carries out successful interventions because, according to the intersectional dynamics Crenshaw outlines in her article,³⁹ Claxton's project recasts and celebrates Indigenous communities whose multiplicitous identities are at stake in her works. As a woman artist of Indigenous descent who has direct and ongoing meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities, her representations of Indigenous feminine and feminist identity can be understood as a generative attempt to empower these communities to reimagine the present and future without imposing undue restrictive representational frameworks. The interplay between settler-colonial interpretive conventions and those embraced by the dominant or mainstream art world is also centred by this intersectional approach. The photographic static or moving image-based works in *Made to Be Ready* convey the weight of the historically oppressive tendencies of the art world while also gesturing towards methods for self-actualization in the immediacy of the present, building on conversations central to the contemporary resurgence in Indigenous art. The artworks imagine futures in which cultural narratives may be conceived according to self-determined, asynchronous, and relational schemas, moving between stories and technology according to a renewed sense of freedom and agency.

Buffalo Woman 1 and 2, in its manifest layering of silk panel upon panel and image- and archive-based narrative strategies, suggests that the full range of Claxton's images has the quality of a palimpsest. An intersectional approach to the interpretation of Claxton's work, premised on broad and specific art histories, foregrounds and critically questions the inequities in the critical strategies common to the production and reception of Indigenous art while also engaging with the politics of decolonization and survivance as well as the ways that her practice extends beyond the restrictive boundaries of art about identity. This interpretive method allows the viewer to gain access to these notably central issues without risking losing sight of the important connections Claxton makes between her contemporary practice, Indigenous realities, and media art histories, and without sacrificing the ways in which these narratives serve to inform one another and to enrich the reception of her work.

³⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour," *Stanford Law Review* 43, 6 (1991): 1243-45.