



Screen Shot

Screening Indigenous Bodies

Unsettling Experience, Perception, and Display

Sol Neely

This Screen Shot section includes three texts—an interview and two articles—that, together, occasion an unsettling movement in the development of an Indigenous phenomenology staged upon *Screen Bodies*' concern for the critical tryptic *experience, perception, and display*. Such phenomenology, moreover, takes shape in the spirit of an enduring and persistent Indigenous cosmopolitanism, one organized by an appeal to a pan-tribal solidarity that is also not shy about drawing from efficacious sources of critique internal to European critical traditions.¹ Together, these texts—and the source materials that inspire them—build rich ecumenical perspectives in the service of decolonial justice and pedagogy. And while the texts included here are composed in English, each draws from and references Indigenous languages, articulating one kind of Indigenous cosmopolitanism that makes use of English as a kind of “trade language.”² To stage an Indigenous phenomenology by appeal to an Indigenous cosmopolitanism, in our contemporary political moment, thus calls for critical attention attuned to the perspectives, traditions, and imaginations of what Tlingit poet and author Ernestine Hayes describes as “Indigenous intellectual authority.”³ In this spirit, Indigenous cosmopolitanism occasions a decolonial-critical cosmopolitanism rooted not in the secular, Habermasian cosmopolitanism of Europe but in the modalities of consciousness, the literary genius and acumen, of Indigenous oral literary traditions. In the context of such a cosmopolitanism in which everyone is variably situated, across the spectrum that divides descendants of perpetrators and victims of settler colonialism, the critical imperative becomes a decolonial one, and non-Indigenous readers are called to shed the epistemological, ontological, and political priorities that broadly characterize European analytical and continental traditions, whatever their internal debates may be. Such an imperative forces phenomenological attention not only on the macrological instantiations of settler-colonial power but also against the “micrological textures of power” that ultimately shape the inner contours of self and, thus, what becomes phenomenologically legible to individuals situated in their cultural contexts.⁴

The three texts presented here include readings of Indigenous source material that draw from Indigenous histories, stage Indigenous presence, and imagine decolonial futures. These texts include (1) an interview with Ishmael Hope and Will Geiger on Tlingit house screens; (2) an article by Sol Neely on Jeff Barnaby's film *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013); and (3) an article by Joshua D. Miner on Indigenous video games and the politics and phenomenology of representation. When I first approached the editors of *Screen Bodies* about developing an edition of the Screen Shot section on screening Indigenous bodies, I was encouraged to think creatively about the interpretation of screens while maintaining a critical concern for bodies. Thus, while concern for cinema screens may seem to be the obvious starting point for an endeavor such as this, we broadened the critical purview to include video-game screens—for which Indigenous artistry enacts decolonial justice and pedagogy—as well as other notions of “screen” that do not ordinarily get much critical attention. In this spirit, I approached the editors about the possibility of publishing an interview with Ishmael Hope (Tlingit, *l̓n̓upiaq*) and Will Geiger on Tlingit house screens—an idea that was warmly received and encouraged by the editors. Adopting the genre of an interview to take up the question of house screens and Indigenous phenomenology was motivated by a concern to preserve, within the published written artifact, a sense of the oral tradition that bears within it a lived cadence of breath and respiration.

All three texts published here, despite the diversity of critical attention across genres, bear common features of an Indigenous phenomenology, which are purposively indexed to the critical concerns of *Screen Bodies*: experience, perception, display. The shared starting points of such phenomenology can be described in the following terms.

Experience: From an Ontology of Truth to an Ontology of Story

If much of the Western philosophical and critical tradition develops around a Platonic ontology of truth, especially in its Romantic traditions, Indigenous phenomenology begins with an ontology of story.⁵ If, accordingly, critical priority within an ontology of truth is given to epistemological concerns, an ontology of story prioritizes ethical relating. The shifting priority between epistemology and ethics does not entail a simple reversal of hierarchal priority. Rather than opposing the two terms, we can situate them as moments nested in each other. Within an ontology of truth, the ethical is secondary to the epistemological—which is to say that the ethical is only ever a moment within the epistemological. Such priority is inaugurated by Plato in his *Republic*, as he banishes the storytellers from his Kallipolis (Greek, lit. “beautiful city”). Story, or poetry, we are told, is “ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, unless as an antidote they possess the knowledge of the true nature of the originals” (2005: 29). Additionally, in the same section, we are told that “a man is not to be revered more than the truth.” In contrast, within an ontology of story, the epistemo-

logical is a moment within the ethical, and responsibility for the other assumes priority over reverence for an appeal to “truth” that has always, historically, smuggled within it economies of abjection. Plato occasions a question of justice that becomes a question of education, and with the abjection or expulsion of story Plato also inaugurates an impoverished political imagination. An ontology of story, however, bears rich inspirations and potentials for complex, dynamic political imagination—which is evident in all three texts published here. Within an ontology of story, experience itself is transformed.

Perception: From a Consciousness of Seeing to a “Consciousness Termed Hearing”

Within the history of Western philosophy, it is Emmanuel Levinas who radically shifts critical attention to the ethical when he announces “Ethics as First Philosophy” (1989: 21) Drawing from Jewish source material—which, unlike philosophy after Plato, does not abject its oral literary traditions—Levinas articulates a critique of Western modalities of consciousness that adopt models of knowledge predicated on vision, visibility, and light. Again, it is Plato who inaugurates such understanding of knowledge—and, as Levinas notes, such consciousness of seeing expresses itself through the operations of intentionality, of an intending consciousness. In contrast, Levinas calls for a “consciousness termed hearing” (1989: 147). For Levinas, the first movement of phenomenology within a consciousness termed hearing is not intentionality but inspiration, which he links to the literalness of *respiration*—by which we breathe in into vitality and breathe out into vulnerability. Thinking through an appeal to Indigenous cosmopolitanism, we can see that an Indigenous phenomenology, like Levinas’s description of Judaism, also remains attuned to its oral literary traditions and thus adopts fundamentally different modalities of consciousness. Perception, itself, is transformed as different qualities of being become legible across different registers of consciousness.⁶ Moreover, all three texts published here take up some concern for Indigenous cultural values and experience that remain necessarily illegible to a consciousness of seeing. It is simply the case that significant aspects of Indigenous oral literary traditions remain illegible to Western sensibilities, and non-Indigenous audiences must assume the responsibility for developing the wherewithal *to hear* such wisdom.

Display: On the Legibility of Transmotional Aesthetics across Indigenous Screens

If we consider these shifting phenomenological starting points by which experience is shaped by an ontology of story and perception is shaped by a “consciousness termed hearing,” our very approach to *display*—the varying genres of screen to which this journal is dedicated—becomes transformed in the interest of Indigenous survivance and sovereignty. In some respect, without naming it as

such, all three texts published here bear in some capacity the dynamics of what Gerald Vizenor calls “transmotion.” For Vizenor, “transmotion” preserves “the tease of creation in pictures, memories, and stories” (1998: 173). From Tlingit house screens, through Indigenous filmmaking, to Indigenous video games—our relation to *display* is characterized by such “transmotion” that is an inherent feature of Indigenous phenomenology rooted in the ceremonies and protocols of oral literary traditions. Vizenor’s sense of transmotion describes “the continuous variations of origin stories [that] create a discrete sense of presence and survivance” (2015: 17). As Billy Stratton writes, Vizenor’s transmotion “binds people, the land and each other, while evoking feelings of continuation and anticipation rather than of loss and mourning” (2015). Transmotion, as such, bears within it that which Western experience and perception has long since abjected: the spiritual. Such appeal to the transmotional qualities of display, as discerned through an Indigenous phenomenology, is especially evident in the interview on Tlingit house screens, where Ishmael Hope makes an appeal to this “tease of creation” for which these qualities of presence and survivance are elicited from within the whole body. Non-Indigenous audiences, for example, might look on a Tlingit house screen and discern no quality of transmotion carried by the art. Similarly, Joshua D. Miner puts forward a critique of colonial modalities of consciousness that remain “ocularcentric” and thus reproduce “aesthetic modes of perception . . . about what it means to *view* and then *master* a world.” In this way, both work to unsettle what might be expected of them.

In taking up the relation of screen and body, all three texts offer important phenomenological interventions as means of unsettling experience, perception, and display. Moreover, all three texts are, to some extent, nested in each other. For this reason, readers are invited to encounter these three distinct texts *uno tenore*, or “in one breath,” as Søren Kierkegaard writes (2000: 172). In our interview, Ishmael Hope and Will Geiger not only offer cultural and historical understandings of Tlingit house screens, but also advise us on the requisite phenomenological approach proper to perceiving and experiencing the transmotional richness of house screens. Such transmotional richness is discerned and elaborated by Joshua Miner as he celebrates *Never Alone (Kisima Injitchujana)* for its “culturally situated perception” and potential for decolonial intervention against “settler digitality.” Ishmael Hope, of course, served as lead writer for *Never Alone*, so the discerning reader ought to encounter these texts as moments within each other. In the end, all three texts aim to occasion decolonial justice and pedagogy by unsettling experience, perception, and display by appealing to a consciousness of hearing as shaped by an ontology of story. Reading these texts together, “in one breath,” brings our critical attention back to *inspiration*, as the literalness of respiration, which is the starting point for the kind of Indigenous phenomenology accounted for here. As such, as you hold this journal in your hands, we invite you to inhale deeply and *listen*.

Notes

¹ As I invoke an appeal to “pan-tribal solidarity,” I do so with Craig Womack’s prior concern for preserving “Native American literary separatism.” In this case, Womack recognizes “the power of a pan-tribal vision when the writer is rooted in a solid national center” (1999: 223).

² Ishmael Hope, featured in the interview published here, is fond of citing Joy Harjo’s notion of English as a “trade language” with all its limitations and critical potentials. In her poem, “Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings,” she writes: “We speak together with this trade language of English. This trade language enables us to speak across many language boundaries” (2015: 81). I often read the idea of English as a trade language by appeal to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1986) concept of the “minor literature” in their essay on Franz Kafka, by which the use of the dominant language—in this case, English as the language of genocide and settler colonialism—by those whom it has historically oppressed and marginalized bears some revolutionary and decolonial potential in its deterritorializing and re-territorializing of its signifying economies.

³ I adopt this phrase, “Indigenous intellectual authority,” as coined by Ernestine Hayes, Professor Emeritus at University of Alaska Southeast and former Alaska Writer Laureate (2016–2018).

⁴ The expression “micrological textures of power” is used by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988: 279).

⁵ Sandor Goodhart offers a succinct description of what is meant by “Western,” namely, “the Western European historical experience which traces itself back through the romance language-speaking countries to Rome and ultimately to Greece” (2014: 117).

⁶ It is important to note that, in articulating a difference between a consciousness of seeing and a “consciousness termed hearing,” we are not fetishizing or diminishing particular senses. The appeal, here, is not to a literal hearing over seeing but to an understanding of experience as shaped by the modalities of consciousness that render it intelligible—and these modalities of consciousness are, in turn, shaped by models of knowledge that occasion structurally distinct phenomenological starting points. In the context of *Screen Bodies*, then, one might see this appeal in relation to calls for haptic and affective responses to screen bodies, ones which ask us to heed how screens call to us or touch us otherwise.

References

- Harjo, Joy. 2015. *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1986. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Goodhart, Sandor. 2014. *The Prophetic Law: Essays in Judaism, Girardianism, Literary Studies, and the Ethical*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 2000. “Stages on Life’s Way.” In *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 170–186. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1989. “The Transcendence of Words.” In *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Seán Hand, 144–149. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Plato. 2005. “Republic, Book X.” Trans. Benjamin Jowett. In *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, 21–29. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

- Stratton, Billy J. 2015. "'Carried in the Arms of Standing Waves:' The Transmotional Aesthetics of Nora Marks Dauenhauer." *Transmotion* 1 (2): 47. www.journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/transmotion/article/view/125.
- Vizenor, Gerald. 1998. *Fugitive Poses: Native American Scenes of Absence and Presence*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Vizenor, Gerald. 2015. "Literary Transmotion: Survivance and Totemic Motion in Native American Art and Literature." In *Twenty-First Century Perspectives on Indigenous Studies: Native North America in (Trans)Motion*, ed. Birgit Däwes, Karsten Fitz, and Sabine N. Meyer, 17–30. New York: Routledge.
- Womack, Craig. 1999. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
-