

Body Politics and the Art of Norval Morrisseau

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Article abstract

L'artiste Anishnaabe Norval Morrisseau utilise un langage visuel unique pour construire symboliquement des corps, alliant expressions formelles et culturelles dans plusieurs de ses oeuvres. Le présent texte explore l'engagement de Morrisseau envers la colonisation, telle qu'elle s'inscrit sur le corps. Ses figures incarnent le message politique de Morrisseau, alors qu'il exploite adroitement forme et médium pour aborder, de manière critique, la politique du corps autochtone. Les corps expriment en termes visuels les points de vue divergents créés par la colonisation de même que l'ambiguïté de l'hybridité culturelle. Dans un style autochtone qui montre les mécanismes intérieurs du corps, Morrisseau commente l'histoire troublante de la colonisation canadienne, l'héritage de la variole et les relations entre les Autochtones et le courant dominant, tout en renvoyant aux traditions artistiques anishnaabe. Ainsi, pour Morrisseau, le corps devient un site politique.

Body Politics and the Art of Norval Morrisseau

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Résumé

L'artiste Anishnaabe Norval Morrisseau utilise un langage visuel unique pour construire symboliquement des corps, alliant expressions formelles et culturelles dans plusieurs de ses œuvres. Le présent texte explore l'engagement de Morrisseau envers la colonisation, telle qu'elle s'inscrit sur le corps. Ses figures incarnent le message politique de Morrisseau, alors qu'il exploite adroitement forme et médium pour aborder, de manière critique, la politique du corps autochtone. Les corps expriment en termes visuels les points de vue

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Two Men Holding Hands

Mapping meaning from an image of two men holding hands today demands a negotiation through a number of discourses surrounding the body, identity, and agency, linking them to theoretical developments in post-colonial frames related to analysis of contemporary culture. Such an image attests to notions that bodies are socially and culturally shaped. Anishnaabe artist Norval Morrisseau's paintings enter into this discourse via a pathway typically unnoticed in mainstream scholarship – that of indigenous body politics.¹ These paintings constitute a rupture in Canadian art as they expertly and honestly undertake a commentary on colonial ambiguity, hybridity, and borderland spaces of identification seldom addressed by others. I have attempted to negotiate this terrain while satisfying what Jolene Rickard argues is an integral aspect in indigenous art criticism, that of aesthetic sovereignty. In her essay "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," Rickard asserts, "As an ongoing strategy for survival, the work of indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization, and identity politics."²

Discussions of Aboriginal art remain fraught with colonial baggage. When Morrisseau painted *White Man's Curse* in 1969 (fig. 1), *The Gift* in 1975 (fig. 2), and *The Land (Landrights)* in 1976 (fig. 3), he offered up intertextual readings of male bodies that locate a plurality of meaning. I will focus on examinations of Morrisseau's bodies as visual texts that are contextualized by Anishnaabek aesthetics and cultural relations. The three paintings discussed in this essay confront the subject of colonization: a subject addressed by many contemporary indigenous artists, although Morrisseau seizes upon this topic using indigenous aesthetic traditions and joins this discursive space earlier than most, predating much post-colonial analysis.

According to Michel Foucault, the body is "the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration."³ Foucault

directs our attention to the contested arena of body politics, power's relational form, and to the dynamics that underwrite the complexities of the corporeal image. Foucault's conceptual template for analyzing the body provides insights into colonial relations and racism. Homi Bhabha initiates a discourse that requires one to look beyond "narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences."⁴ Morrisseau problematizes his visual discourse on body politics by focusing on those "in between" spaces where signs of identity and contestation emerge. The racialized space in which Morrisseau's own body and his work are positioned and negotiated further informs this discussion.

Enter *White Man's Curse*, *The Gift*, and *The Land (Landrights)*. These paintings, with their provocative titles and unorthodox forms, challenge viewers. The titles unsettle and incite. They cast blame and call attention to issues many Canadians prefer to ignore. This mainstream Canadian penchant for silence and seeming ambivalence with regard to questions of race and marginality has thus left these Morrisseau paintings largely outside the realm of liberal discourse. Instead, analysis surrounding Morrisseau's oeuvre has been centered exclusively on spiritual aspects of his art and his role as artist. Yet Morrisseau's art, especially his work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, contains a rich dialogue on race and colonial relations that calls for further scrutiny.⁵ Issues of cultural assimilation, fallout from the Trudeau government's White Paper on Indian Policy in 1969, a rise in militancy and activism related to sovereignty and land rights, exemplified by the Anicinabe Park standoff in 1974, the MacKenzie pipeline project in the 1970s, and the James Bay Northern Quebec land secession of the mid-70s, resonate in these works.⁶ That this aspect of Morrisseau's art has not been engaged critically in depth speaks, in part, to the lack of attention to politically sensitive details, but also to the way Morrisseau fashioned this contested space.

It is worth recalling Bhabha's declaration that ambivalence has for too long been overlooked as "one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power."⁷ The dominant silence of "whiteness" allows, as Richard Dyer

deftly puts it, for “a passport to privilege” and is often played out in politics relating to the body.⁸ As Mary Douglas has shown, the body operates as a symbol of society across cultures, and the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning bodily behaviour can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies.⁹ Sandra Gilman further reminds us that “the Other’s pathology is revealed in anatomy.”¹⁰ To that end, Franz Fanon associates the “sensuality of racism” with nervous bodily reactions and phobias of racial proximity.¹¹ Morrisseau provides a discourse on whiteness and redness (if I can use such a term), racism, agency, and colonization in the manner in which he conceives of the image of two men holding hands.

The Myth of the Man

Born in 1931 at Sandy Lake Reserve in northwestern Ontario, Norval Morrisseau grew up with his Anishnaabe grandmother Veronique and grandfather Moses “Potan” Nanakonagos, a sixth-generation shaman in the Midewiwin society,¹² whose members, according to Ruth Phillips, “recorded their oral traditions, esoteric knowledge, and complex rituals of initiation by incising pictographic symbols on birchbark panels.¹³ Morrisseau’s pictorial influences as a youth were rock paintings of vision quests and ceremonial images and, most significantly, the noted Midewiwin birchbark scrolls. It was in these sacred drawings that Morrisseau found an aesthetic that shaped his own signification of the body. Using heavy black outlines and interior bodily segmentation, Morrisseau began to produce art that reflected these influences.

Morrisseau at different points in his career suffered scorn from both First Nations and mainstream communities. In the 1950s his local elders chided him for exposing ceremonial images to mainstream audiences. Morrisseau resisted challenges from Anishnaabek traditionalists by arguing that his images were unique, not merely copies of sacred images. He opposed community members with the argument that his personal aesthetic helped decolonize artistic practice and social issues, and eventually community members conceded his point. In the late 1950s Morrisseau’s work centered on vision-derived images of spiritual experiences and animals painted on what Ruth Phillips calls “commodity genres such as birchbark containers and replicas of drums.”¹⁴ On the advice of early patrons such as Dr Joseph Weinstein and anthropologist Selwyn Dewdney, both trained artists, Morrisseau began to move his art onto paper and canvas. Weinstein, according to Phillips, provided the introduction to “modernist artistic sensibility and the values and conventions of the art world.”¹⁵ Easel painting afforded him a level of seriousness that conformed to Western notions of “high” art and that would have been unattainable had he continued to work in birchbark or hide.¹⁶ This trajectory is not unique to Morrisseau,

however. As art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault notes:

[First Nations artists’] work is prone to ready valorization by sensitive description, but they are scarcely allowed to work from their own home base, as the grounds on which to be legitimated. Everything they do, including strategic essentializing, including withholding or protecting knowledge, is seen and judged through liberal tolerances.¹⁷

Toronto Gallery owner and art instructor Jack Pollock met Morrisseau in 1962 in Beardsmore, Ontario, and shortly afterwards Pollock orchestrated a solo show for the artist at his gallery. In his 1989 autobiography, Pollock confirmed the importance of this pivotal exhibition. “The exhibit made both him and me,” he explained. “It brought him to international attention and it made the Pollock Gallery a public name.”¹⁸ His work found immediate commercial success; the show sold out. Curator Greg Hill suggests that Morrisseau as “exotic other” remained a significant factor in his entry into the art establishment. “He was received simultaneously as both a primitive and modern artist,” writes Hill.¹⁹ Concerning Morrisseau’s inaugural exhibition, Pearl McCarthy, then art critic for *The Globe and Mail*, stated: “Morrisseau’s genius for unifying or breaking space in his designs is astounding, as is his sureness of line. It cannot be classed as primitive art, because both the ideas and the expression evince cultivated thought. As this mysticism has never been recorded, he is breaking new ground.”²⁰ In 1962, *Time* magazine did a story on the exhibition at Pollock’s gallery, and described a “[h]ulking (6 foot 2 inches) Primitivist Morrisseau [who] began to paint only three years ago after a dream in which he was told to set down the symbols and myths of his fellow Ojibways ... The constantly beaming artist himself was almost a larger attraction than his work.”²¹

The notion of the exotic, primitive artist continues to haunt Morrisseau and his work. Cast as both a drunk and a shaman, the artist remains trapped in this racialized space – the boundaries set by mainstream Canada. Media sources have, since the 1960s, typically cast the artist in the stereotypical lens of both the noble and ignoble savage – at once spiritual and connected to the land, but also drunken and violent.²² Jack Pollock, his “discoverer” and gallery representative, advanced a polarized description of the artist, casting him as an idiot savant. In a 1979 text, Pollock remembered Morrisseau on the evening of the successful opening of the 1962 exhibition in this way:

I sat there in terror watching this great and sensitive artist drink himself into a complete stupor. Then, keeping vigil over the sleeping giant of the north, I began to think about the native people and their mistrust of the white man and his ways. This mistrust lies behind the passive and

nonexpressive façade, until alcohol ... chisels away at that layer of quiet to bring out the hatred and rejection of an alien society.²³

Curator and writer Barry Ace asserts that Morrisseau also worked to fashion a mythic public persona as an exotic yet primitive artist to appease his collectors. Morrisseau, according to Ace, offered the art-buying public, “a rare opportunity to own a fragmentary glimpse of a mythical past.”²⁴ Whether Morrisseau played to his audience or his audience demanded such performances, simplistic constructions persist.

The National Film Board of Canada’s popular 1973 film *The Paradox of Norval Morrisseau*, for example, an early but influential didactic source about the artist and his work, framed him as drunken, childlike, and violent, but also as being at one with nature and native spirituality.²⁵ Jack Pollock appears throughout the documentary, giving expert testimony to reinforce this perspective. The film makes much of Morrisseau’s tortured pull between Catholicism and Anishnaabek religious traditions while curiously offering little tangible discussion of his art. The framing of the artist in this film continues to haunt Morrisseau.²⁶ Racially cast constructions aside, Morrisseau’s oeuvre, and notably the three works discussed here, defies such facile and polarized representations.

The Curse

The title *White Man’s Curse* (fig. 1) politically and socially articulates and situates the painting within a racialized context. To what curse or curses does the artist refer by means of bodily associations on the canvas? Disease, Christianity, dominant world view, sexual control, and cultural assimilation are at issue here.

One emergent curse is smallpox, the bodily scourge that plagued Aboriginal peoples throughout the Americas at the time of Contact. We can clearly view the spread of disease from the missionary on the right side of the canvas to the warrior on the left through the interior segmentation of Morrisseau’s articulated corporeal forms. Pathogens, in the form of red dots, invade the bodies of each figure, symbolically tracking the fierce spread of the disease through communities.

Scholars now agree that epidemic disease, and notably smallpox, should be considered the major factor in the population decline of indigenous peoples in the Americas. Disease began killing immense numbers of Aboriginal peoples soon after Europeans began to arrive in the New World. For example, in groups such as the Beothuks of Newfoundland or the Haida of the Northwest Coast islands as much as ninety percent of the population disappeared, a catastrophe that, according to David Cook, “far exceed[ed] even the disaster of the Black Death in medieval Europe.”²⁷ The Anishnaabe have a related oral tradi-

Figure 1. Norval Morrisseau, *White Man’s Curse*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 127 × 101.6 cm. Regina, MacKenzie Art Gallery (Photo: courtesy of MacKenzie Art Gallery).



tion about seven prophets who forecast disaster if the people did not leave the Atlantic coastal region.²⁸ The westward migration undertaken by the Anishnaabe was documented in birchbark scrolls.

Morrisseau’s representation of disease and of the body, more generally, reveals his decidedly indigenous aesthetic. Morrisseau’s visual vocabulary, often referred to in terms of x-rays or as Woodland style, demonstrates interior segmentations encapsulated by thick black lines, utilized symbolically to reveal the spread of both cultural and biological disease through the male bodies. In this way the artist masterfully creates a contemporary form of artistic expression linked to pre-Contact Anishnaabek aesthetic traditions. In *White Man’s Curse*, Morrisseau pushes the limits of his visual language and his indigenous aesthetic to construct the painting to engage viewers in a colonial history lesson. Clearly, Morrisseau’s upbringing in a racially charged environment informs the realization of his bodies. The painting aggressively seizes an opportunity to comment on and confirm the exchange of pathogens. However, the devastating effect of disease is but one of the curses Morrisseau includes in this powerful canvas.

The missionary figure on the right of the canvas, carrying his cross, emblematically introduces the spread of Christianity

among Aboriginal communities. The cross, swung casually across the figure's shoulder (a visual mimesis of Christ's own burden), signifies the symbolic and tangible reality of adherents to Christianity. According to Morriseau, the destructive mission of Christianity, like smallpox, has cursed Aboriginal peoples. Certainly, from the outlaw of Anishnaabek ceremony to the destruction of social and political institutions, loss of language, and the residential school experience, the assimilating force of Christianity cannot be denied.

Like almost all First Nations people of Morriseau's generation, the artist experienced the harsh reality of residential school first hand.²⁹ Forcibly sent to an institution in Fort Frances as a youth, Morriseau suffered psychological and sexual abuse.³⁰ The power dynamic of hand holding conveyed in the painting may obliquely refer to the widespread occurrence of sexual abuse suffered by Aboriginal youth within the religious-controlled schools and may serve as an allusion to Morriseau's own painful school experience.³¹ For scores of Aboriginal peoples in Canada the residential school experience remains another curse associated with Christianity. The missionary, read as a priest, conflates historical accounts of suffering by Aboriginal peoples since Contact with Morriseau's own personal trauma at residential school.

Morriseau visually reveals the distinct world views held by each figure on the canvas by employing the Anishnaabek aesthetic tradition of interior segmentation and a symbolic colour system to reveal the interior world of the body. Utilizing red and green to illustrate bodily dynamics, his coloration of the cross bearer emphasizes the brain – a site for reasoned understanding of the world – as the body's power source. Christian doctrine and rational thought fuse in Western philosophical traditions, and Morriseau convincingly reveals the right figure's world view and his Eurocentric colonialist motivations.

Morriseau attempts to redress the balance between colonizer and colonized with regard to epistemology and ontology by locating indigenous ways of knowing and being within the body of the figure on the left side of the canvas, in order to expound a Aboriginal world view that places the heart, rather than the brain, at the centre of all understanding.³² By painting the left figure's internal chest cavity and heart in green (juxtaposed with coloration applied to the right figure's brain), Morriseau makes visible their clashing world views. Utilizing colours that for the Anishnaabe symbolically refer to both power and to the earth, the artist's palette supports the importance of each figure's unique ways of knowing. In Anishnaabe culture, and indeed, in many indigenous cultures in the Americas, decision making "from the heart" acknowledges systemic differences between the colonizer and the colonized. While each body evokes distinct ways of knowing the world, this image signifies a curse caused by the imposition of an opposing

and dominant world view – a result of thinking with only the brain rather than including the heart.

Each of the curses discussed thus far relates to colonizing events that occurred after Contact. Not surprisingly, the politics of 1969 also found their way into this discursive space. The year 1969 remains pivotal in Canadian indigenous politics: a time when civil-rights movements and politics clashed. The year marks the beginnings of a united First Nations political voice. Morriseau responds to such developments in this canvas. Political events related to the Trudeau government's assimilationist policies specifically articulated in the White Paper surface in Morriseau's painting.

This political importance of 1969 resulted from political machinations of the Trudeau government to change Canada's relationship with Aboriginal peoples. Trudeau's Minister of Indian Affairs, Jean Chrétien, issued the White Paper, the *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy*, in June of that year.³³ It proposed the abrogation of the Indian Act, the abolition of special status for Aboriginal peoples, and the closure of Indian reserves. This assimilationist document became a rallying cry for "Red Power" in Canada, akin to organized civil-rights movements in the United States, and helped fashion a political voice for Aboriginal peoples in Canada – one to which Morriseau added his voice.³⁴

According to the Liberal government, the release of the White Paper promised a new direction in Canadian-First Nations relations. However, among First Nations, the document caused a furor and the National Indian Brotherhood, precursor to the Assembly of First Nations, issued a press release stating that the effect of the White Paper would be "the destruction of a nation of people by legislation and cultural genocide."³⁵ The Trudeau government essentially rejected the idea of Aboriginal rights, and argued for a time limit to honour the treaties. Neither Chrétien nor Trudeau calculated, however, how the White Paper would mobilize and unite First Nations across Canada.

Alberta quickly became the battleground to fight the White Paper, with the province's First Nations leaders responding to the controversy with the aptly named counter-attack, the Red Paper, written by National Indian Brotherhood representative Harold Cardinal on behalf of the Chiefs of Alberta.³⁶ Though most of the treatise read as a clause by clause refutation of the White Paper, it also stated that the government was offering Indian people a future "with no land and consequently the future generation would be condemned to the despair and ugly specter of urban poverty in ghettos."³⁷ Soon after the release of the Red Paper, the National Indian Brotherhood adopted it as its official national position, and the Trudeau government abandoned its own assimilationist position paper.

Assimilation, of course, did not just happen with the arrival

of Trudeau or the White Paper. The long process to “kill the Indian and save the man”³⁸ had begun shortly after Contact, almost five hundred years earlier. Morrisseau’s two bodies united in *The White Man’s Curse* express a different position, however. Bhabha describes this as “an alienated image; not Self and Other but the otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity.”³⁹ Morrisseau painted two figures expounding different world views, but, significantly, the figures are not cast as racially separate. The assimilated figure on the right of the canvas expresses the concept of mimicry – he is almost the same, but not quite, as the figure on the left. He is at best a “partial” representation of the colonizer and the colonized together. Morrisseau’s title proclaims the “white man’s curse,” yet the canvas shows two brown bodies interconnecting. The two culturally ambiguous men remain brothers, connected racially despite being influenced by differing religions and divergent ways of knowing.⁴⁰ Through the processes of assimilation, the figure on the right of the canvas remains a complex racial construction, a hybrid actually, that holds the white man’s curses in his brown body.

The two Aboriginal men hold hands as they walk together, the left side figure leading the way. With this dynamic, the artist reveals his agency in this equation as well as his own decolonizing motivations. Clearly Morrisseau recognizes the contested arena of racial politics. Viewers witness the complexities of such a relationship through the indigenous aesthetic space Morrisseau occupies. With a stroke of his brush, a thick black line unites the two figures, framing them and symbolically linking them. This visual device signifies the energy force the artist recognizes in all living beings. The two energy bundles in the upper portion of the canvas relate to Anishnaabe teachings. The circular forms conform to images of the sun and moon, and also symbolically represent *megis* – the cowrie shell that alludes to the Anishnaabe story of creation.⁴¹

By fusing the two men, Morrisseau further acknowledges notions of hybridity in this colonized space. Bhabha refers to contingent, borderline experiences that open up “in-between colonizer and colonized.”⁴² Morrisseau has fashioned what Bhabha calls a “space of cultural and interpretive undecidability” that is produced in the *present* of the colonial moment.⁴³ Although Morrisseau’s painting reflects a conciliatory approach to racial politics, the Canadian government’s Indian Act resisted this understanding, preferring the paternalistic and assimilationist approach.

In 1975 Morrisseau painted the ironically titled *The Gift* (fig. 2). Here the artist revisited themes and visual signifiers introduced in *White Man’s Curse*, providing further dialogue about his conceptions of racial politics. As in the earlier painting, Morrisseau employs the body as a discursive space. In the five years that passed from the date of the earlier canvas, the

Figure 2. Norval Morrisseau, *The Gift*, 1975. Acrylic on kraft paper, 196 × 122 cm. Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Helen E. Band Collection (Photo: courtesy of Thunder Bay Art Gallery).

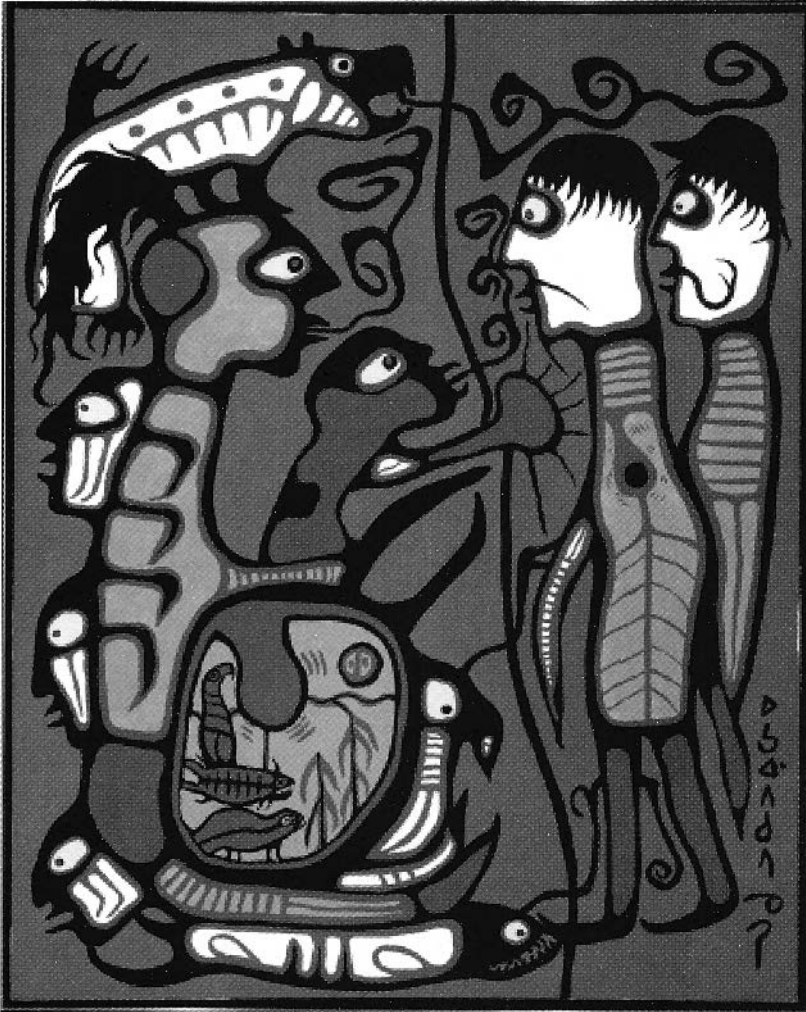


artist fundamentally shifted the power dynamic that he was exploring in his art. Maintaining a similar earthy colour palette, Morrisseau in *The Gift* again employs green and red to exhibit areas of the heart and the brain as juxtaposed focal points and world views. However, the body politics of the two forms changes to further elucidate the contested space of hybridity.

Whereas the shaman led the Christianized figure in *White Man’s Curse*, here a face-to-face encounter transpires. The shaman figure appears on the right of the canvas, accompanied by a child. The missionary character no longer bears a cross, but carries a medicine bag decorated with a cross. The colonizer adeptly co-opts the signs of the colonized. The Aboriginal medicine bag, with its sacred meaning, is appropriated, becoming a circulating sign of colonization.

The youngster reaches for this sacred bundle of Christian doctrine. With his glowing yellow eye and outreached arms, the child is clearly captivated by the bag and all it signifies. Morrisseau paints the fringe on the leather pouch in such a way that it

Figure 3. Norval Morrisseau, *The Land (Landrights)*, 1976. Acrylic on canvas, 122 × 96.7 cm. Kleinburg, ON, McMichael Canadian Art Collection (Photo: courtesy of McMichael Canadian Art Collection).



appears to emit a powerful, tantalizing force. The small figure stretches beyond the shaman's protective body to welcome the so-called gift.

Morrisseau conjoins the two men through serpentine lines that flow from one arm through the other – a handshake that does not end. Concomitantly, the men can be viewed as one, revealing a splitting of identity, a dissembling image of being, which constitutes a figure of colonial otherness – neither Anishnaabe nor White, in a state of ambiguity.⁴⁴ With this confrontation Morrisseau questions the *gift* offered by colonization, while acknowledging the complexities of racial identification. As Bhabha contends, hybridity is inclusive in that “the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the right of power is enacted on the site of desire, making objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory.”⁴⁵ In both *White Man's Curse* and *The Gift* Morrisseau acknowledges the complexities of hybridity.

The introduction of a third figure incorporates another

layer of discourse into Morrisseau's canvas, and directs attention away from a static reading of colonial relations. The young child, hugging the leg of the embracing right-hand figure, allows Morrisseau to further comment on the gift/curse he introduced in the 1969 canvas, adding a dynamic relational interaction that considers the generational effects wrought by the colonial condition. The youth looks beyond his elder to the assimilated figure. In this work the artist contemplates Native spirituality and racial identity for future generations. The child signifies the enticing pull of assimilation. In 1979 Morrisseau explained that “the younger you are, the greater the impression, and the stronger the belief will be.”⁴⁶ The artist captures the impressionable nature of youth and also the seductive force of assimilation. With assimilation comes an admixture of spiritual concerns. Morrisseau experienced this sense of hybridity throughout his life, as he studied and learned about religions and eventually settled on Eckankar as a directional outlet for his spiritual understandings.⁴⁷

Borderlands

The Land (Landrights) (fig. 3) from 1976 enters the arena of hybridity in a less subtle form. The work confronts timely challenges to land sovereignty and rights evinced by indigenous groups throughout Canada.⁴⁸ The painting is visually divided into a cultural borderland of post-colonial space. The bisecting line down the centre, according to Morrisseau, symbolizes each group's attitudes toward the land.⁴⁹ Both sides view the land as a valuable asset, but – again – world views and agendas clash.

In an intersection of power, identity, and place, Morrisseau's conception of the colonial landscape fully emerges in this painting. Neither *White Man's Curse* nor *The Gift* considers the broader concept of land in their articulations of body politics. Yet, the concept of land figures prominently in colonial politics and defies dismissal in considerations of the colonial landscape. *The Land (Landrights)* configures interiority and exteriority of place and identity at the borders – an interstitial space that both Aboriginal and mainstream Canadians must consider. Borders remain critical in the process of identification and dis/location, consisting of, as sociologist Avtar Brah states, “arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural, and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the

very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is the fear of the self; places where claims to ownership – claims to “mine”, “yours”, and “theirs” – are staked out, contested, defended and fought over.”⁵⁰ Morrisseau’s border spaces may be viewed as narrative sites of resistance.

Western conceptions of space have been conceived within the ideological position of dominance. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains, “Land, for example, was viewed as something to be tamed and brought under control ... Space was appropriated from indigenous cultures and the ‘gifted back’ as reservation, reserved pockets of land for indigenous people who once possessed all of it.”⁵¹ Indigenous scholar Gail Valaskakis adds, “Land is pivotal in the contemporary culture of Native America; and today, its meaning is negotiated in the discursive construction of contingent history, emerging heritage, and current practice in stories.”⁵² As artist and theorist Gerald McMaster describes land rights, “The struggle for land by (native) Canadians is a struggle to create and expand space: claiming land, claiming space. A land claim is an attempt to ‘reterritorialize’, to create in law new borders and divisions, and to mark off rights, privileges and obligations.”⁵³

From the perspective of the Anishnaabe and of Morrisseau, land is sacred. Utilizing his indigenous aesthetic to reflect this concept, Morrisseau infuses the left of the canvas with Anishnaabe realities of the earth as a living being. The right of the canvas, too, expresses a view of the earth as precious, but value in this sense translates as monetary value. Whiteness theorist George Lipsitz describes how mainstream Americans have used whiteness to create and secure economic advantages while forcing racialized camps to compete for approval.⁵⁴ However, Morrisseau’s reading of this interface challenges the power dynamics of this conception. The artist remains cognizant of his own agency in this colonial landscape. Morrisseau upsets the dominant power dynamic by using parody to define the bodies of the clownish “white” men. Morrisseau mocks the two government agents with their lily-white albino faces broken only by the tendril-like moustaches and stupefied looks. Using parody as a form of resistance, the artist takes power away from institutional authority figures, seizing the space for his contribution to this political situation. In place of a heart, a black void exists in the body of the bureaucrat. Morrisseau explained this piece in 1979:

The world of the white man represented by a government or corporation white man and a construction or miner white man. The Indian figure represents the older generation and the ancestors are behind him, looking backwards to the treaties they made with the white man. He speaks about the old ways. The baby looks aggressive. It represents the younger generation, the militants who speak about what they want. The worlds cross the lines between the white man and the

Indian. The fist is clenched. The animals are protesting the change in their environment. They are an important part of the land, the water, and the Indian’s life. In the center part of the painting I show the land and its ownership.⁵⁵

As in *White Man’s Curse* and *The Gift*, Morrisseau in *The Land (Landrights)* continues to express meaning through bodily form and indigenous aesthetics. The left side of the canvas, an organic whole expressing oneness, posits the generational understanding of unity between land, animal, and man. Ancestors form the backbone of this figure seated upon fish, cradling a womb made of plants and animals, protected by bird figures and the child seated upon it. Little commonality exists between this part of the image, painted on a blue field, and the opposing “red” contested borderland.

Unlike *White Man’s Curse* and *The Gift*, where Morrisseau explicates notions of hybridity through interiority, here the artist manipulates notions of space – both interior and exterior – using the border to demarcate oppositional power relations. A settler’s claim to possession of the land confronts an Aboriginal understanding of being in the land. Yet Morrisseau articulates this problematic site as both a zone of conjuncture and of re-territorialization. Rather than areas of marginalization, Morrisseau’s borderlands can be recognized as locations of power. Interestingly, the government official on the right side of the canvas has also broken the plane between the borderlands that Morrisseau has fashioned. The left foot of the central figure oversteps his border and disturbs the spaces presented. With this power-laden transgression the artist dramatizes the place-identity conjunctures of colonial politics.

A romanticized Aboriginal identity is often viewed as primordial, unchanged by time or contact with Western thought, but Morrisseau resists such facile cultural constructions. The animals, the elder, and the youth all actively speak out, their words – forms of resistance – displayed by black curvilinear lines that confront the government bureaucrats with little visible effect. However, it is the militant youth – keenly aware of both Aboriginal and Western ways – who literally straddles the two worlds, his fist thrust forth, breaking through the plane to do battle. The artist conceives the contested space of the borderlands, as place and identity coalesce on the canvas to reveal a narrative of contemporary political struggle within the colonial landscape.

Indeed, the mid-1970s was a time of intense political awareness and activism in indigenous politics. In the summer of 1974 the Ojibwe Warrior Society in Kenora, Ontario, near Morrisseau’s home, staged a standoff at so-called Anicinabe Park. This land rights issue saw a rise in militancy and activism that was one of the first of countless roadblocks and political protests over land issues across Canada. The MacKenzie pipeline project, the Berger

commission, and the beginning stages of the James Bay hydro project were all sites of Aboriginal resistance in the decade of the 1970s: efforts to re-territorialize and decolonize. *The Land (Landrights)* visually captures the political turmoil involved in these controversial flashpoints as contextualized by Anishnaabek aesthetics and cultural politics.

Conclusion

In the end, the *White Man's Curse*, *The Gift*, and *The Land (Landrights)* together read as a multi-layered palimpsest of the cultural landscape where Anishnaabe ideas commingle with a number of colonizing forces barely contained, some more visible than others, and all caught within the surface of the paint. Morrisseau contemplates notions of colonization and hybridity, and of the necessary engagements with the metonymic link to the corporeal bodies, which inhabit our nation and national identity. Reserve life, residential school, and contemporary politics inform his commentary as he attempts to positively imagine a politics of anti-imperialism. The access point Morrisseau chooses for his cross-cultural interpretation, however, demands acknowledgement. The body, articulated by Anishnaabek aesthetics, serves as the site for his colonial discourse.

"Exoticized spectacle" often results when indigenous art is framed by dominant culture.⁵⁶ Morrisseau's art has been confined to such a space although, on closer reflection, the artist clearly resists such categorization. Utilizing indigenous aesthetics, Morrisseau advances a critique of colonization and hybridity that engages this discourse in sophisticated terms. Through his images we learn of an Othered response to contemporary and historical political conditions. Morrisseau visually articulates his problematic role in Canada's colonial project. The body remains centrally implicated in Morrisseau's questions of self-identity and constructions of indigeneity at the borders of the Canadian cultural landscape.

Notes

- 1 "Anishnaabe," meaning "the people," and "Anishnaabek," meaning "of the people," refer to the Ojibway, Ojibway-Cree, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples of north central North America.
- 2 Jolene Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," *Aperture*, 39 (Spring 1995), 51.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (London, 1977), 148.
- 4 Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London, 1998), 1.
- 5 In addition to these politically charged works, Morrisseau also produced a number of sexually charged paintings that demand further analysis.
- 6 For an overview of historic and contemporary indigenous relations with the Canadian government, see R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson, *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience* (Oxford and New York, 2004).
- 7 Bhabha, *Location*, 66.
- 8 Richard Dyer, *White* (New York, 1997), 44.
- 9 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and Boston, 1966), 125.
- 10 Sandra Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York, 2003), 147.
- 11 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967).
- 12 The Anishnaabe term for shaman is *shki kii niina*. The Midewiwin society, also known as the Grand Medicine Society, undertakes specific healing and spirit guidance functions within Anishnaabe culture under the direction of a shaman.
- 13 Ruth Phillips, "Morrisseau's 'Entrance': Negotiating Primitivism, Modernism, and Anishnaabe Tradition," *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*, ed. Greg Hill, exh. cat., Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 2006), 52.
- 14 Ruth Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Montreal, 1998), 266.
- 15 Phillips, "Morrisseau's 'Entrance,'" 60.
- 16 Phillips, *Trading Identities*, 266.
- 17 Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Have We Ever Been Good?" *Rebecca Belmore: The Named and the Unnamed*, exh. cat., Vancouver, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery (Vancouver, 2003), 17.
- 18 Jack Pollock, *Dear M: Letters from a Gentleman of Excess* (Toronto, 1989), 40.
- 19 Greg Hill, *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*, exh. cat., Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 2006), 21.
- 20 Pearl McCarthy, *The Globe and Mail*, 25 August 1962, R1.
- 21 Sinclair Lister and Jack Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau* (Toronto, 1979), 21.
- 22 For a detailed discussion of treatment of Morrisseau, see Carmen Robertson, "The Reel Norval Morrisseau: An Analysis of the National Film Board of Canada's Paradox of Norval Morrisseau," *International Journal of Learning*, XI (2005), 315–21.
- 23 Lister and Pollock, *Norval Morrisseau*, 24.
- 24 Barry Ace, "Artist as Shaman," *Aboriginal Curatorial Collective*, 2005, p. 3, <http://www.aboriginalcuratorialcollective.org/research/morrisseau3.html> (accessed January 5, 2007).
- 25 For further analysis of this film, see Robertson, "The Reel Norval Morrisseau," 315–21.
- 26 During Morrisseau's recent retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery in Ottawa, the NFB film *Paradox of Norval Morrisseau* was screened as part of the educational programming related to the event. No context for the film was provided.
- 27 Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492–1650* (Cambridge, 1998), 13. See also Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT, 2003).

- 28 Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (Hayward, WI, 1988), 95.
- 29 For a thorough discussion of the history of Canada's residential schools, see J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto, 1996).
- 30 The details of Morrisseau's sexual abuse were only recently made public by Morrisseau's adopted son, Gabe Vadis, in the documentary "A Separate Reality: Norval Morrisseau," director Paul Carvalho (2005).
- 31 This power dynamic remains an area for further analysis.
- 32 For an anthropological discussion of the Anishnaabe world view, see Alfred Irving Hallowell, *Contributions to Anthropology: Selected Papers of A. Irving Hallowell* (Chicago, 1976), 357–449.
- 33 Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* (Ottawa, 1969), 5–8. For an excellent analysis, see Sally M. Weaver, *Making Canadian Indian Policy: The Hidden Agenda, 1968–1970* (Toronto, 1980).
- 34 Gail Valaskakis, *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture* (Waterloo, ON, 2004).
- 35 Peter McFarlane, *Brotherhood to Nationhood: George Manuel and the Making of the Modern Indian Movement* (Toronto, 1993), 109.
- 36 Indian Association of Alberta, *Citizens Plus: A Presentation of the Indian Chiefs of Alberta to Right Honourable P. E. Trudeau* ([Edmonton], 1970).
- 37 McFarlane, *Brotherhood to Nationhood*, 116.
- 38 American Capt. Richard C. Pratt's position on the education of Native Americans and the founding of the vocational residential schools became a model for the Canadian residential school system. See his address given at an 1892 convention in "Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction (1892), 46. Reprinted in Richard H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880–1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 260.
- 39 Bhabha, *Location*, 44.
- 40 A useful survey of missionary efforts in Upper Canada is E. Graham, *Medicine Man to Missionary: Missionaries as Agents of Change among the Indians of Southern Ontario, 1784–1867* (Toronto, 1975).
- 41 Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* (Toronto, 1987).
- 42 Bhabha, *Location*, 206.
- 43 Bhabha, *Location*, 206.
- 44 Bhabha, *Location*, 45.
- 45 Bhabha, *Location*, 112.
- 46 Lister and Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, 64.
- 47 Norval Morrisseau, *Norval Morrisseau: Travels to the House of Invention* (Toronto, 1997).
- 48 *Time* magazine commissioned Morrisseau to create this work as a cover for their publication, though curator Greg Hill confirms that the work was never used by *Time*. One can only speculate as to whether the confrontational politics of the painting influenced the decision not to use the cover art. Hill, *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*, 23.
- 49 Lister and Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, 134.
- 50 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York, 1996), 198.
- 51 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York, 1999), 51.
- 52 Valaskakis, *Indian Country*, 94.
- 53 Gerald McMaster, "Borderzones: The 'Injun-uity' of Aesthetic Tricks," *Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 1 (January 1995), 80.
- 54 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998), 1–23.
- 55 Lister and Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, 134.
- 56 Fry and Willis, *Aboriginal Art*, 160.