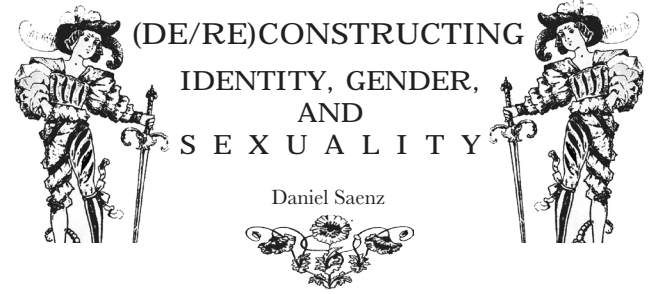# KENT MONKMAN'S TRAPPERS OF MEN:

(DE/RE)CONSTRUCTING
IDENTITY, GENDER, AND
S E X U A L I T Y

Daniel Saenz

Walking through the underground corridor in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts one sees a painting that, from a distance, appears to be a nineteenth-century Romantic landscape. The painting does not seem to belong to the same collection as the contemporary Canadian works surrounding it. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the painting is in fact not a Romantic landscape, but rather, a critique of that very same style executed by the queer Cree Canadian artist Kent Monkman. This paper argues that the painting, entitled *Trappers of Men*, challenges the Western canon by deconstructing both colonial representations of Native Americans and colonialism's westernization of Native gender and sexuality. The paper begins with an explanation of the two theoretical frameworks that permit an understanding of Monkman's work: queer and deconstructionist theories. This is followed by an examination of the artist's appropriation and deconstruction of nineteenth-century colonial landscapes. Then, examples of colonial representations of Native Americans are introduced, followed by a discussion of how Monkman challenges such authoritative portrayals. Finally, the impact of European conquest on Native American ideas of gender and sexuality is presented, accompanied by an exploration of how Monkman subverts this normative European influence.

Figure 1: Kent Monkman, Trappers of Men, 2006, acrylic on canvas, Musée des beaux-arts de Montreal. Photo reproduced with permission from Kent Monkman. Courtesy of the Musée des beaux-arts de Montreal.

Since the term *queer* possesses many different meanings, it is important to define its use in this paper. Culturally-speaking, the term queer means "weird" and it has been used as a derogatory slang for non-heterosexual individuals. Some queer theo-

rists, however, have reclaimed the word *queer* and have included it in their work as a means to subvert its stigma.[1] Queer theorist and literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines *queer* as:

The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality [are not] made (or [cannot] be made) to signify monolithically.[2]

Queer, therefore, means that gender and sexuality are not a static, indivisible, and fixed essence. Classics scholar and queer theorist David Halperin's definition of *queer* complements that of Sedgwick. He argues that *queer* is "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant."[3] In this case, *queer* is anything that is not normative and thus challenges entrenched authorities.[4] In this essay, the word *queer* is used to indicate something, or someone, whose sexuality, gender, or identity cannot be placed in a sexual or gender binary and, because of this ambiguity, challenges normative views of sexuality.

Queer theory allows scholars to destabilize the binary understanding of sexuality.[5] According to art historian Anne D'Alleva, the purpose of queer theory is to trace the power dynamics of "compulsory heterosexuality," which is the way in which society idolizes heterosexuality and marginalizes all other forms of sexuality.[6] Therefore, queer theory challenges the assumption, explicit or implicit, that everyone is heterosexual, or else they are not 'normal.'[7] Furthermore, queer studies subvert the belief "that heterosexuality is the norm and anything else is a special case."[8] Such naturalization of (heterosexual) desire conceals a wide range of human sexual desires.[9] Queer theory, then, allows scholars to lift that veil and discover the range of human desire that goes beyond compulsory heterosexuality.[10]

Deconstructionism is also critical to the discussion of Monkman's work. Deconstruction allows theorists to critically revisit the conventional meaning of texts and images. Jacques Derrida, a French-Algerian philosopher, used the term deconstruction to indicate a project which examines how knowledge and meaning are constructed.[11] A key term in Derrida's theoretical project was that of *différence,* "which

refers to the idea that signifiers and signifieds are not identical: they differ from each other, there is a space between them."[12] In art-historical terms, deconstructionists expand the gap between the signifier (an image) and its signified (the meaning), thus creating an open mesh of possible meanings.[13] Most of art history, up to the mid-twentieth century, has focused on the work of art as a logical, comprehensible, mimetic and representative of reality.[14] However, within a deconstructionist theoretical framework, everything is multiple, unstable, and divisible.[15] Because nothing has a definitive meaning, it is possible to revisit ideas and artworks, look at them critically, and find new meanings or ways of interpreting them.

Deconstruction and queer theory allows theorists, scholars, and students to challenge the Western canon. Much like queer theory, deconstructing an artwork allows us to "challenge the metaphysical foundation of our civilization."[16] This metaphysical foundation can very well be the understanding of gender, sexuality, or race as binary opposites. Also, it is possible to explore and reconstruct ideas or histories that we, as Westerners, understand as normative. French postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard argues that, "Western civilization's master narratives—those overreaching truths that claim to explain everything—no longer work."[17] According to Lyotard, we must identify, challenge, subvert, and deconstruct these narratives, which hide as much as they reveal, and oppress as much as they promote human action.[18] Once this is done, there is no universal (usually male, heterosexist, and white) standard by which to judge history, culture, and truth.[19] This approach, thus, challenges the primacy of Western culture as we know it, thereby creating a new history.

In *Trappers of Men*, Monkman quotes traditional depictions of North American landscapes. He creates a background that resembles that of *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (1868) by the nineteenth-century American-German painter Albert Bierstadt, as well as other works by Canadian artist Paul Kane and American painter George Catlin.[20] When one looks at Monkman's and Bierstadt's work side by side, the resemblance is impossible to deny.

Figure 2: Kent Monkman, Trappers of Men, detail from the lower left corner, 2006, acrylic on canvas, Musée des beaux-arts de Montreal. Photo reproduced with permission from Kent Monkman. Courtesy of the Musée des beaux-arts de Montreal.

These colonial paintings played an important role in the writing of history. Shirley J. Madill, the executive director of the Waterloo Art Gallery, writes that, "the paintings of Catlin and Kane in particular were perceived as official documents—evidence that provided historically accurate information on First Nations culture."[21] The works of colonial artists were thought to accurately portray the lives of Native Americans. These works, however, "were more truthfully evidence of European domination of First Peoples' culture."[22] These paintings, Madill argues, are examples of the belief in Manifest Destiny, "the principle that the white American/Canadian has a God-given mandate to conquer and rule […] North America […]."[23] Therefore, these works dictated the way in which settlers understood their role and their relationship with the land and with Native Americans.

By appropriating the visual language of colonial paintings, Kent Monkman provides an alternative account of colonial history. In the words of Madill, "by re-contextualizing images or frag-

ments of images, Monkman creates turbulence in our complacent sense of identification with pop(ular) [sic] history, allowing the possibility for new narratives and new representations."[24] In other words, Monkman deconstructs nineteenth-century colonial paintings. He shows that the landscapes (the signifier) can have different meanings or (hi)stories (signifieds), and in this way, history is not a static essence, but rather an open mesh of possibilities where different discourses (meanings, myths) take place. In what follows, this paper will restrict itself to the analysis of this process of deconstruction through the discussion of two of the painting's characters, Edward S. Curtis and Miss Chief Eagle Testickle.

The work of early twentieth-century American photographer Edward S. Curtis exemplifies colonial representations of Native Americans. In *The North American Indian* (1907-1930), Curtis hoped to document all phases and aspects of Native American life.[25] He did this in "an attempt to arouse popular interest in Native American cultures as a means of rescuing them from oblivion."[26] His work tended to privilege the Native American past, rather than its present or future.[27] In doing so, he did not 'rescue' Native Americans, but instead idealized them as a dying or vanishing race.[28] Such depictions allowed colonizers to blame the colonized for their own extinction "because they stubbornly refused to abandon their savage ways."[29] Curtis was therefore less interested in a realistic portrayal of Native American life than he was in romanticizing Aboriginal peoples as a dying race which refused to become civilized and who was thus responsible for their disappearance.

Curtis was interested in preserving the ideal Native American in his photographs. In *American Navaho,* Curtis maintained that his subjects willingly cooperated with him because they sympathized with his aims, but this idea is not consistent with his son's statement that he "carried a number of bank sacks filled with silver dollars to pay Indians for posing—one dollar a time."[30] Curtis' photographs thus did not capture the true nature of Native American life, but rather a romanticization of it. Speaking of Curtis' work, Anne Maxwell writes that he:

Painstakingly concealed every trace of a subject's contact with Euro-American culture, *furnished his Indian sitters with props such as feather bonnets, masks, and costumes,* which often circulated indiscriminately across his photographs of different tribes. In some photographs *Curtis dressed his subjects in wigs to conceal their contemporary hairstyles*, and he cropped and retouched prints to remove all signs of white contact (*Italics* mine).[31]

In order to better depict the 'traditional' ways of Native American culture, Curtis insisted on showing no trace of Western influences in his work.[32] To this end, he issued props to his models, such as wigs and costumes, thus removing any sign of the twentieth-century and intercultural exchange.[33] Curtis' photographs are, therefore, *mise-en-scènes*, which tell us more about his ideals and aspirations than the situation of Native Americans in the early-twentieth century.

Monkman deconstructs Curtis' work and offers a different perspective on colonial history in *Trappers of Men*. In the lower left corner of the painting, we see two individuals, presumably Native Americans, posing for a picture. The standing figure has long hair, is half-naked—except for his loincloth—and is holding a lance. In other words, he 'looks' very Native American. However, the seated figure has a very modern hairstyle, and is holding a wig in his hands, similar to the ones Curtis supplied to his models. The two figures are staring towards the right of the painting, where the viewer encounters a photographer and camera. This photographer is Edward S. Curtis.[34] On the ground, next to him, there is a suitcase with different 'Native American' props and garments, and as well as Western-like garments—boots, pants, and a shirt—presumably those of the model posing as a Native American. Monkman is therefore reminding his audience that Curtis consciously hid all influences from the West and arranged the scene to make the subject look 'traditionally Native.' Therefore, Monkman's deconstruction of, and

challenge to, the Western canon consists in questioning the knowledge acquired through these photographs. He provides the viewer with a new historical point-of-view, in opposition to that of the West. What the canon considers to be historically accurate depictions of Native American life are, as Monkman suggests, fabricated by Westerners to conform to their own expectations and values.[35]

In addition to defining the way in which Natives were portrayed, colonial powers also influenced how Native Americans perceived gender and sexuality. Before the arrival of Europeans on North American soil, "many North American tribes recognized more than two genders."[36] In Native American culture, mixed-gendered individuals assumed roles as healers, counsellors, and were considered to be very powerful.[37] In fact, they "occupied positions of honour and communal value."[38] However, the European conquest led to attempts to suppress mixed-gendered traditions, which ranged from "the regulation of mixed-gender individuals in missions and boarding schools to their actual murder."[39] As a consequence, by the turn of the twentieth century, Native attitudes toward sex and gender were heavily influenced by European standards, and mixed-gendered individuals were no longer accepted; rather, these persons were disparaged.[40]

The presence of Monkman's alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, in the painting indicates a subversion of European standards of sexuality, sex, and gender. We see a (muscular) male, wearing pink high heels, long blond hair, and whose nakedness is half-concealed by pink drapery (though it reveals what looks like a huge erection). Miss Chief's presence brings forth the existence and relevance of mix-gendered individuals prior to the European Conquest. In the painting, most of the characters (all male) stop their activities to look at Miss Chief. Here, Monkman explores the "forbidden relationships, which have only been hinted at throughout history, between Natives and Whites; tenuous at best, but they aren't [*sic*] about heterosexuality but homosexuality."[41] By placing Miss Chief and homoerotic desire amongst masculine-looking cowboys, Monkman is queering the Western canon, reminding us that queers are everywhere in history, constantly subverting its heteronormative claims.[42]

Miss Chief's presence in other paintings, such as *Artist and Model*, furthers his/her role as subverter of the Western canon. In this case, we see Miss Chief, the artist, painting a portrait of a white male. The model is tied to a tree and his body has been penetrated by arrows but, nevertheless, we see his penis "erect in sublime pain."[43] Monkman, with the help of Miss Chief, reverses the power relations established during the colonial period.[44] Miss Chief toys with the European in a way that destabilizes the hetero-colonial discourse of the Western Canon, where European standards of race and sexuality are reversed so as to privilege Native Americans. Miss Chief is, therefore, a constant reminder that what we *know* about colonial history is not entirely accurate. Monkman is therefore creating a queer space within the Western canon, subverting and denaturalizing compulsory heterosexuality.

A queer and deconstructive approach to Kent Monkman's *Trappers of Men* posits a challenge to and subversion of the Western canon, destabilizing its idealized depictions of Native Americans and Eurocentric conceptions of gender and sexuality. By appropriating landscapes from nineteenth-century colonial paintings as the background of non-normative scenes, Monkman reminds the viewer that history is not a static, unchanging, indivisible narrative, but rather an open mesh of possible meanings and different perspectives. Furthermore, Monkman's depiction of Curtis and his not-so-Aboriginal models reminds us that Curtis' photographs were taken through a Western white gaze, and thus tell us more about racial ideals of the time, rather than how Native Americans perceived themselves. Finally, Monkman's inclusion of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle is a reminder that our understanding of gender and sexuality as binary opposites is a consequence of European domination, and s/he permits a subversion of such dichotomy, thereby queering history. In the same way that Colonial paintings were considered historical documents, one may understand Monkman's work as an alternative account which explores Colonial power relations in a new, non-normative way. It is an attempt at deconstructing the canon, reinterpreting tradition, and reconstructing Aboriginal identity.

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Daniel Saenz is currently working towards a BA in Religion (Honours) and Interdisciplinary Studies in Sexuality. His interests include queer theory, Christianity and same-sex desire, queer/Christian art, and critical theory. He has presented papers on the creation of a safer space for queer people within the Catholic tradition at the LACSAC (Concordia University) and at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences (University of Victoria). Issues of social justice are of the utmost importance to him.

ENDNOTES

[1] Anne D'Alleva, Methods and Theories of Art History (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 71.

[2] D'Alleva, 71.

[3] Nikki Sullivan, A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 43.

[4] In this essay, I use 'normative' to identify and critique oppressive gender / sexual standards and categories. 'Normative' does not mean 'what is normal,' but rather 'what is considered normal.' Anne D'Alleva illustrates this idea by writing that "[s]ociety dictates that certain ways of living are normal, and then coerces or persuades individuals to conform to these standards and perpetuate them. But when you look at the range of human behavior, you soon realize that there's [sic] no such thing as 'normal,' however much society would like us to think that there is." See D'Alleva, 71.

[5] By "binary understanding of sexuality" I mean that the West divides sexual orientation in two categories: heterosexual and homosexual.

[6] D'Alleva, 72.

[7] Robert Dale Parker, How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 180.

[8] Ibid.,180.

[9] Parker, 181.

[10] Ibid.

[11] D'Alleva, 143.

[12] D'Alleva, 144.

[13] Parker, 181.

[14] D'Alleva, 146.

[15] Parker, 89.

[16] D'Alleva, 145.

[17] D'Alleva, 152.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Shirley J. Madill, "Intelligent Mischief: The Paintings of Kent Monkman," in The Triumph of Mischief: Kent Monkman, ed. Audrey McClellan (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2008), 25.

[21] Ibid., 28.

[22] Madill, 28

[23] Ibid.

[24] Madil, 28-29.

[25] Shannon Egan, "'Yet in a Primitive Condition' Edward S. Curtis' North American Indian," American Art 20 no. 3 (2006): 59.

[26] Anne Maxwell, "Shifting Focus: Photographic Representations of Native Americans and African-Americans," in Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the 'Native' and the making of European Identity (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999), 110.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 107.

[30] Ibid., 111.

[31] David McIntosh, "Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Postindian Diva Warrior, in the Shadowy Hall of Mirrors," in The Triumph of Mischief: Kent Monkman, ed. Audrey McClellan (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2008), 37.

[32] Ibid., 111.

[33] Ibid., 111.

[34] Jordan Timm, "Landscape with Sexy Transvestite: Kent Monkman's Playful Subversions of an Old Form Tell a Different Story of the Frontier," Macleans, published on December 19, 2007, accessed March 17, 2013.

[35] David Liss, "Miss Chief's Return: Subverting the Canon Through Sublime Landscapes and Saucy Performances," Canadian Art 22 (2005): 80.

[36] Joyce M Youmans, "Native American Art," glbtq: An Encyvlopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture, accessed 19 November, 2012.

[37] Madill, 28. Mixed-gendered individuals are also called berdache, two-spirit, alternate gender, or nadleehi. For a more detailed and thorough discussion of these terms and the place of such individ-

uals in Native American culture, please refer to: Epplen, Carolyn. "Coming to Terms with Navajo 'Nadleehi': A Critique of 'berdache,' 'Gay,' 'Alternate-Gender,' and 'Two-Spirit.'" American Ethnologist 25 (1998): 267-290.

[38] Michelle Cameron, "Two-Spirited Aboriginal People: Continuing Cultural Appropriation by Non-Aboriginal Society," in First Voices: An Aboriginal Women's Reader, eds. Patricia A. Monture and Patricia D. McGuire (Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2009), 201.

[39] Youmans. The European influence on such views was heavily influenced by Christianity. In the history of Christianity, the belief that homosexuals were deviants and that homosexuality was a abomination heavily influenced the Western discourse on sexuality. Theologians, Church authorities, and Christians have quoted Leviticus 18:22, and Genesis 19 to condemn homosexuality. Although this goes beyond the focus of this paper, I feel that it is my ethical duty as a gay student of religion to clarify that we must read these passages from a historical-critical point-of-view. They were written at a period were reproduction was essential to preserve Israel. Also, abomination is used throughout the Bible to indicate something that is ritually wrong—eating pork and shrimp was an abomination, but I do not see Christians condemning people who decide to eat pork ribs or shrimps. Such selective readings of the Scriptures are misleading, and not accurate. A very clear and well-argued discussion of this topic is presented in a documentary by Daniel Karslake For the Bible Tells me So (2007).

[40] Youmans.

[41] Gerald McMaster, "The Geography of Love," in The Triumph of Mischief: Kent Monkman, ed. Audrey McClellan (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2008), 96.

[42] Donald L. Boisvert, Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 57-58.

[43] McIntosh, 33.

[44] McMaster, 96.

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