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Prologue Opening Addresses

Partial Transcript: Keynote Address, Society for the Protection and Reclamation of Indian Images, Seventh Annual Conference, May 3, 1998

Tommy Jack Howkowski

Thank you. Welcome to the Seventh Annual Conference of the Society for the Protection and Reclamation of Indian Images. “SPRY,” as we like to call it, is an organization dedicated to the eradication of clichéd and stereotypical images of Indians in whatever mass-market ways they have crept into the national psyche, by exposing these images for what they are, and by then providing positive alternatives. We have, in the recent past, successfully eliminated some of the most degrading sports mascots out there, but, until every last tomahawk has been “chopped,” we will continue to be warriors for this cause.

In the year the organization was founded, 1992, the quincentenary of colonialism on Turtle Island, it was important that we consistently sent out the message to mainstream America that we were alive and thriving—that we were, indeed, spry, and now, seven years later, as that celebration fades from the public consciousness, our presence is even more significant.

My name is T. J. Howkowski, and I am this year’s conference host. Some of you might recognize me from an appearance on the television show “Justice Scales” last season, in an episode concerning repatriation and adoptions, but only if you didn’t blink. Or maybe some of you know me as Professor

Howkowski, in the theater department here at the college, and maybe even some of you know me as “Frederick Eagle Cry’s son,” or, as I am called back home on the reservation, at Tuscarora, where my good friend Dr. Anne Boans also hails from, “Fred Howkowski’s boy.” Given that bit of history, it is with tremendous pleasure and an overwhelming sense of honor that I introduce tonight’s keynote presenter.

Dr. Anne Boans (Tuscarora) was born and raised in the city of Niagara Falls, New York. Her relations had always lived among their people within the borders of the Tuscarora Nation until the introduction of the hydroelectric water reservoir at midcentury, in which the government forced the Tuscarora Nation to sell nearly a third of its precious small amount of tribal land, homes bulldozed and whole families forever displaced under rock and earth and hundreds of thousands of gallons of water, ensuring that much of New York State would have a consistent electrical power source for generations to come. The state needed the reservoir as a backup for peak hours of electricity-generating needs and believed this place was the most appropriate. So, again, indigenous families were removed in the United States’ insatiable thirst for power. Dr. Boans’s family was among those displaced, living near the border of their ancestral land but not wholly of its national psyche.

Dr. Boans utilized and embraced the unique position this life experience has delivered her and, in true survivor spirit, has developed the keen eye of a cultural observer who is able to see the idiosyncrasies within a group identity and yet be distanced enough from it to offer sharp, pointed, accurate, and often hilarious commentary on the marginalized viewpoints of modern Native America. Armed with several de-

grees and an impressive presentation list, she has been widely published in many prestigious art history and culture journals, and her monograph on Indian humor in art has recently gone into its second printing. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Anne Boans.

Anne Boans, Ph.D.

Nyah-when, thank you, so much for inviting me to deliver the keynote for this year's conference. It is truly an honor, and I will do my best to live up to your expectations. My presentation tonight is called "Threads: The Hair-Ties That Bind." I have prepared a slide show, from my personal collection, of our visual national obsession with stereotypical images of Native America, particularly as manifested in images of braids, as somehow representing the pinnacle of Native identity.

My collection began years ago, when, as a teen, I struggled with the concept of my own identity, attempting to explore where I fit into larger communities, and, admittedly, my initial acquisitions were not made with any sense of cultural juxtaposition at all. I celebrated these images, trying to find my way home in them. In truth, a fair number of these slides did not originate in my own collection but, instead, were borrowed and photographed from the homes of relatives and friends, where the works are displayed with full admiration and embrace and not even the slightest trace of irony.

I have envied some pieces for their succinct capturing of deep cultural confusion and have offered to purchase these outright from the current owners, but in each case my advances have been rebuffed. The owners would no sooner give up these odd icons than they would family members. And, while he is not here, I always publicly thank my husband for

aiding me in the procurement of items for my collection. He has the most amazing eye for finding outrageous items that dialogue with this outright exuberant embrace of stereotypes, but I have never dared ask him if he is buying them with culture critique in mind.

As an example, the item in this first slide was a gift from my husband for our seventh anniversary. Here we see a highly traditional bust of a Lakota in war bonnet, mouth wide open, presumably in full war cry, thick braids trailing out from beneath this explosion of feathers surrounding his face. Please note, this item is a bottle opener, the stainless steel lip that catches the bottle cap discreetly embedded behind the resin Lakota man's impressive row of front teeth. So, whenever the person who owns this opens a bottle of beer, the Lakota gets the first drink.

My husband purchased this item at one of the many tax-free cigarette shops that litter most contemporary reservations, where, presumably, a majority of the patrons are going to be peoples of indigenous origin. This in itself speaks volumes about niche marketing and our own communities' involvement in the perpetuation of these stereotypes. In all fairness to my husband the bottle opener was not the only anniversary gift he presented me that year. He also handed me a down payment receipt on a mobile home, which allowed us to move back among our people, where we continue to live, on land that has been his family's since the reservation's inception.

This next slide I have included especially for our esteemed host. I am sure you recognize these plastic Native warrior figures from when you were children, either playing with them or knowing other children who had them and envying them. These were produced in an era in which children's action fig-

ures did not come with articulated limbs, and, as a result of the immobility of the figures, they were generally produced in poses suggesting elements of their presumed social standing and class designations. In direct contrast to the other western-themed character figures—the cowboys—who were frequently produced standing surefooted and broad shouldered, hats cocked at jaunty angles as they gracefully slid their revolvers from hip holsters, the Natives were most commonly posed flailing about, limbs stretched far, defying the laws of anatomy and physics. Ever present on these figures, again, thick dual braids mimic the movements of said warrior, frozen in mid-sweep from the warrior's head, two angry vipers, arched and ready for attack.

In this detail from that group of figures we have the local connection I mentioned a few moments ago. While I have found no conclusive evidence that this identification occurred anywhere other than within the borders of our community, it has generally been agreed upon by those of us living here that this figure was based on none other than Fred Howkowski, a.k.a. Frederick Eagle Cry, a.k.a. T.J.'s father. Fred Howkowski had left our community in the 1960s to follow a dream of acting in the movies. I explored his career in depth in my dissertation chapter and subsequent paper, "Silent Screams: The Indian Actor as Angry Landscape in the American Film Western." It is paramount to note that our small local community so embraced these stereotypical images that it chose to identify one of these pieces of molded plastic with its own native son.

The two items in this next slide, while to some degree different, hold at the crux of their metaphors exactly the same idea. What we have here are two collector's plates from the

Alexander Mint Company, which seems to specialize in codifying and commodifying images some individual in marketing designates as somehow “truly American” images. From dead celebrities to cherubic flights among the clouds, this company suggests in the global span of their themes that America is in love with that which is unattainable and in some fashion legendary. Falling thoroughly in the pendulum swing between gorgeous foreign dead royalty and handsome yet brusque dead millionaire racecar drivers, we find more of this stereotypical fascination with a particular image of the indigenous peoples of this continent.

On the left we see an image we have seen just a few moments ago, at the beginning of this presentation—the ubiquitous war bonnet-wearing Lakota man standing among the equally ubiquitous buttes and mesas of the American West. And on the right, also in Lakota motif, a young woman, who we might suspect would be referred to as “maiden” in the advertising literature for this particular item, dressed heavily in a beaded buckskin outfit, kneeling subserviently in an overgrown meadow. The metalanguages of these two images, the relationships each figure has with its particular setting, are extremely sexually charged. The mesas surrounding the man are tall and narrow, shooting straight up into the pure sky, clearly strong phallic symbols suggesting the man’s virility, while the meadow in which the young woman kneels is flooded with wildflowers, suggesting she is naturally among those wildflowers, open, receptive, and in full blossom herself, begging to be deflowered, as it were.

While these curious parallel elements are deeply disturbing in and of themselves, other, even more alarming suggestions are made by the rest of the compositions. Please observe, in

each case, the Native figure seems to have some nearly supernatural relationship with an animal, as if we were all dark-skinned Dr. Dolittles, chatting up our animal friends. Significantly, though, in both cases the relationship is an ominous one, speaking of impending betrayal. The Lakota man holds out his arms, and a bald eagle lights gracefully on the man's wrist, and from what is the man's head accoutrement made primarily? Eagle feathers! Similarly, a spotted fawn rests its head on the young Lakota woman's lap, contentedly nibbling on some wildflower—that would be the young Lakota woman's lap . . . covered in deerskin!

In both cases these individuals are clearly gorgeous and toned, as if, when not cavorting with their animal friends, they are spending much time at Gold's Gym or, in this case, Red's Gym. Are these supernatural gym rats using their unearthly powers merely to cultivate new wardrobe accessories? Again, in both cases, regardless of all other visual dynamics, the one consistent element that tells us explicitly these must be Natives of the Americas—these thick shiny, nearly shellacked-appearing braids—stream from their heads dramatically.

The next slide offers a new twist on the braid motif. I found this in a gallery at the center of town in old Santa Fe, on the plaza, when I was delivering a paper at a conference sponsored by the Art Institute. That it was painted on black velvet, of course, truly set the tone for the piece, but I suspect it would have been as absurd had it been rendered in more traditional fine art techniques and materials.

The painter was selling the work himself, but I did not dare ask him for any further clarification. I feared any dialogue with the artist might ruin what was plainly evident in the piece. The artist called this piece . . . *Jesus and the End of the Calvary*

Trail. As we could have guessed from the title, the painter has merged the image of Christ and one of the stations of the Cross with that old western classic, *The End of the Trail*, where the downtrodden Native brave and his nearly broken horse head to the sunset of their lives, engaging these two characters as fellow travelers, a not unoriginal image in its own right, but note! Not only does the dying brave wear braids, but Christ himself has tied down his wavy locks in a herringbone braid as well! One can only speculate that the priest and nuns in the church far off in this painting's landscape must need hair ties as well. The style in which this piece was painted clearly harks back to an earlier era, rejecting the strides made by such contemporaries as Quincy Fisher or Janis SpringBee.

Shirley Mounter 2001

Yes, that's my daughter, shooting off her mouth in public again, though she calls herself Annie out here on the reservation, and she leaves all those other extra letters off, too. Ha! I could get up there and tell things better. I could tell the truth, but they don't usually want to pay so much for that. I was with her in Santa Fe when she bought that piece off that painter, and what she's not saying up there on the stage, with all those other fancy Indians in their coordinated beadwork and fashion ribbon shirts, pretending it's so quaint that someone got fry bread catered for their gathering, is that she saw that painting there, all right, but the rest of the story is a little different. She might say she fell in love with it right then and there, but she still negotiated down, because she said the people in the background weren't clear enough to show what they were. The painter said, "I know what they are," but that wasn't good enough for her, and she made him knock twenty-five off the final price.

But I wouldn't say anything even if they asked me up there on that stage with my daughter. She lets me keep my lies and half-truths, and I let her keep hers. She did until now, anyway. She's a smart one, and I always figured she'd just chosen not to ask me those questions, but I also knew they would come, had even practiced how I might answer them over the years, on occasions when I've been alone.

The answers in my pretend conversations haven't always been the same. Sometimes I said, "No, are you crazy?" Other times, "Yes, and I'm sorry I never told you before." Most often it was something in between, an "It's possible," which you'd think might be an easier answer, but it truly wasn't. It takes into account both possible paths Annie might be looking for and implicates me without giving her any satisfaction. I leaned more toward that one because it seemed to suit the reality of my life.

"Ma!" she said, firm, when I picked up the phone this morning. I was drinking my first morning cup and had worked my way through part of the newspaper. "You busy? I'm coming over in a while. How full is the back bedroom?" she said. Her mother-in-law's tv was on in the background with those overly perky eight in the morning people.

"Odds and ends, as usual, why?" I said.

"I have something I need to talk to you about, so don't leave, okay? See you in a bit." Where was I going to go? I didn't even own a car. I had to rely on my boy, Royal, or anyone else who stopped by to give me rides to the store or wherever, if they were going. I have to do my shopping by the needs of other people's bellies and hope we're hungry at the same time of the week. She hung up, and I went to clear the back bedroom of my things and see what I might do with Royal's stuff, too.

I knew, hanging up, that, when she got here, there was likely to be some major shift in her life, and I was going to be the one cleaning up again, putting things back together.

I had already guessed Annie's mother-in-law had more than a hand in this. Martha Boans has never been the easiest to get along with, and we go way back, Martha and me, but my Annie knows the good side of a fight, too. My daughter used to always like the city life, said it toughened her up, but that's not really true. She liked being anonymous, walking down the street, changing her curtains, buying a new car, and not having a couple hundred other people commenting on these things, which is the way it is out here. It took some getting used to, I'd be the first to admit, but I had a head start. I'd spent all my growing up years here and some of my adult life, before the state uprooted us like bad teeth. The nerves inside those teeth supposedly die when they're yanked, but, I can tell you, they throb for a long time, and then they only grow sleepy. Those nerves never die.

I'd known Martha for years, and our shared history was one of complications. So, when my daughter married her son, Dougie, it was just another level. Then, on their anniversary seven years ago, two things happened, and Annie felt the yank, deep, and I swear, she still to this day throbs with it and believes Dougie somehow set up both those things to bring her to this point. The first thing was his gift. The second, who could say why it happened? These stories fold, cross over, split, and reassemble themselves, and, though we'd known each other for years before, the first pulled thread was probably the one where my husband sold my house to Martha's husband on a drunk one night, and we didn't know a thing until after money and paper had exchanged hands.