Designing, Producing and Enacting Nationalisms: Contemporary Amerindian Fashion in Canada

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Today, generations after the adoption of European styles, Amerindian people’s everyday clothing is almost indistinguishable from that of other residents of North America. Until recently their culturally distinct clothing has been mainly reserved for ceremonial occasions such as powwows and religious rituals. This bifurcation of clothing styles and contexts parallels the dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘assimilated’ Native identity that has been imposed by the dominant society. The dichotomy is a double bind: adopting ‘traditional’ identities, Native peoples are cast into a static ahistorical frame, while appearing ‘assimilated’ erases cultural distinctiveness. In both cases, Native peoples cannot effectively stake claims to a place in contemporary society. Whereas Jennifer Kramer and Rosemary Coombe advocate ‘double-voiced rhetoric’, that is, ‘oscillation between opposing cultures and systems’, I suggest that First Nations contemporary fashion designers have integrated the opposing identity poles in new clothing styles for everyday
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wear that simultaneously combine ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ elements. The strategies they use to create this new integrated Aboriginal identity subvert colonial oppression through nation-building initiatives that contribute significantly to fluid and multi-levelled constructions of intertribal Native nationhood. To demonstrate this thesis, I will survey nation-building projects among established nation-states, and show how these historical processes are strikingly similar to the social movement among urban North American Native peoples from the 1960s to the 1970s. I will then demonstrate how contemporary Native Canadian fashion designers use strategies that both materialize and enact intertribal nationhood in the realms of design, production and cultural performance.

Nations and Nation-building Processes

As Benedict Anderson points out, Western concepts and manifestations of nationhood are historically contingent: ‘nationality, … nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind’ that came into being towards the end of the eighteenth century. Anderson further notes that ‘the nation’ is ‘an imagined political community’ that is imagined as ‘both limited and sovereign’. Whereas Anderson identified the crucial role of mass media in the formation of nations, Orvar Löfgren conceives the role of cultural phenomena on a much broader basis. In contrast to the ‘traditional patriotism linking the sovereign to his people’, the new ‘idea of the nation … proceeded from the belief that the boundaries of the political state should coincide with a national culture’. Löfgren observes that the idea of the nation is ‘an international ideology that is imported for national ends’, which provides ‘fixed ideas about what a national cultural heritage should include’. Hence, nations ‘amass a symbolic capital of myths, heroes, occasions of national destiny and pomp, and develop patterns for national iconography and aesthetics’. Clothing was an important component of these international ‘building instructions’. For example, all over Europe, Löfgren observes, the ‘dress of the peasantry was synthesized into national costume and displayed at folk dance performances, which became an important way to stage national distinctiveness and cohesion’. Patricia Williams observed a similar phenomenon with regard to peasant dress in Norway, as did Ruta Salikis for Lithuania.

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At the same time, certain cultural forms of nation-ness are so entirely integrated into daily life that they appear self-evident until a national border crossing confronts one with different everyday forms and practices. Löfgren observes that a ‘prominent feature of the international paradigm’ is that the existence of nations depends on their mutual recognition. Not only are there losers in this ‘identity game’, specifically the ethnic groups that are not recognized as nations, but there is also a hierarchy among the recognized nations. Nations are in a competitive relationship that was formally enacted through international expositions, but has now turned mainly to international sports events.  

Löfgren’s analysis of the historical construction of modern nation-states makes clear the difficulties confronting communities that ‘imagine’ alternative constructions of nationhood, particularly among would-be nations that lack recognition of political sovereignty. According to Partha Chatterjee, ‘anticolonial nationalists rose to this challenge in Asia and Africa by ‘dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual’, in which the former represents outer/colonial and the latter inner/native. In this way, ‘anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power’. The nationalist project within the inner domain, however, is not to create a ‘traditional’ native ‘self’ in contrast to the modern colonial ‘other’, but rather to ‘fashion a modern national culture that is nevertheless not Western’. Historically, Chatterjee argues, this project took place in India in the realms of language, drama performances, art, education and the family, all of which are facets of what cultural anthropologists would call ‘culture’. Historically, Chatterjee’s analysis of anti-colonial national projects demonstrates the crucial role of culture in the creation of national identities prior to political sovereignty. His discussion is confined, however, to the histories of postcolonial states that have, in fact, now achieved international recognition as sovereign nation-states.

The term ‘cultural nationalism’ is often applied in situations where national identities are imagined by communities that have all the features of the international standards for nationhood except political sovereignty. Ireland is a classic case of this scenario where national dress was also a prominent feature of the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist cultural revival movement. ‘Cultural nationalism’ is

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8 Löfgren, ‘Materializing the Nation in Sweden and America’, pp. 166, 168–70, 189–90.
10 Chatterjee, Nation and its Fragments, pp. 7–9.
a misleading term if we accept Anderson’s argument that nationhood itself is a ‘cultural artefact’ and, following Löfgren and Chatterjee, that the mobilization of cultural forms and practices is indispensable to successful nation building. From this point of view, the term ‘cultural nationalism’ reinforces the illusion that internationally recognized nations are ‘natural’, as if they did not also depend on cultural forms for their creation and maintenance. Whereas deep, subconscious cultural processes thereby undermine the legitimacy of politically dominated, but geographically bounded, nations, more severe challenges confront groups that lack both political sovereignty and geographical territories. The question then becomes: is it possible to imagine nationhood without either of these key factors in the international paradigm?

In response to this challenge, Renato Rosaldo argues for a redefinition of nationhood premised on the concept of ‘cultural citizenship’, which emphasizes ‘local, informal notions of membership, entitlements and influence’, as well as ‘vernacular definitions of community, identity, and human dignity, particularly those of subordinate groups’. Rosaldo’s strategy circumvents the international conventions for ‘nationhood’ and shifts attention instead to indigenous constructions of ‘Native nationhood’.

Building upon my work on Anishnaabe narrative and social structure, I can illustrate this concept for Algonquian-speaking Native nations in the Great Lakes region throughout the period of contact with colonial powers. At time of first contact, these Native nations were neither dynasties nor nation-states. Their borders and boundaries were not determined, demarcated or enforced by central governments and armies. Rather their membership was determined by kinship, while their boundaries were enforced by customary practices such as the Calumet Ceremony and small-scale warfare. Most groups had both hereditary and acquired leadership roles, but in either case leadership depended upon personal powers of persuasion rather than authority deriving from the position. These nations were made up of a number of kin groups that shared cultural traits such as language, dress, religion and oral traditions. The kin groups

\[\text{12} \quad \text{Renato Rosaldo, ‘Social Justice and the Crisis of National Communities’, in Francis Parker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson (eds), Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory (Manchester, 1994), pp. 243–4, 251.}\]


were allied through marriage and trade. Their socio-economic bonds were renewed annually at shared religious and political ceremonies. Kinship and alliance were the two most significant determinants of group boundaries and identities. They were the root principles that bonded larger groups together, and hence, informed concepts of ‘nationhood’.

Similar in its fluidity to pre-nineteenth century constructions of Native nationhood, those promoted by contemporary Native fashion designers may be seen in the light of an intertribal nation composed of several levels of allied groups. The members of this ‘imagined community’ share a vision of the structure of borders that are conceptually firm and clear even though they may be blurred and dynamic in social practice. During my seven years of embedded participation in the Native community of Toronto and Southern Ontario (1993–2000), I developed the understanding that the borders of the intertribal nation do not correspond to precise geographic territories. This is in contrast to the unequivocally geographical orientation of individual First Nations or American Indian tribal land claims, and in spite of the profound consequences the geographic boundary imposed by the colonial nation-states has had upon Aboriginal nations that were divided arbitrarily down the centre. Rather, one might imagine the intertribal nation’s ‘territory’ as a cosmological map that is oriented to the four cardinal directions. But it also employs shifting variables of race, ethnicity, cultural competency and social action as determinants of boundaries. This intertribal nation tends towards inclusiveness more so than the legal definitions of the Canadian Indian Act or the constitutions of American tribes.

Direct expressions of intertribal nationhood based on principles of cultural/spiritual solidarity are found in the histories of twentieth century urban Native communities. For example, Adam (Nordwall) Fortunate Eagle describes the ‘new Indian clubs’ in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1950s: ‘Some of them, such as the Sioux Club and the Navajo Club, were formed around tribal identities, others, such as the Four Winds Club, focused on social objectives.’ In 1961, an umbrella organization was founded, called the United Bay Area Council of American Indian Affairs, Inc. The United Council, as it was called for short, was ‘an Indian mini-version of the United Nations’. The events surrounding the United Council’s 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island were directly related to the founding of the American Indian Movement, or AIM, which brought the new urban political consciousness ‘back home’ to the American reservations. In Canada, the cultural and intertribal aspects of American Indian activism helped fuse the ideas of ‘Native Art’, ‘high art’ and Canadian national identity in the Indians of Canada.

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Pavilion at Expo 67. For both sides of the border, this political movement rested on the principle, identified by Chatterjee, in which would-be nations established sovereignty in an inner/spiritual realm that was sharply contrasted to the outer/material realm of the colonizers. As in Chatterjee’s examples, ‘the spiritual’ consisted of things that were culturally distinctive, yet were adapted, revised or reinvented to suit modern urban life. This cultural movement consisted of a ‘supratribal popular culture in areas such as music, films, dress and jewelry, and crafts’ whose message urged ‘intertribal unity’ and ‘adherence to spiritual values and cultural traditions’.  

Scholars usually apply the term ‘Pan-Indianism’ to the distinctive values, social conventions and cultural expressions of urban Native communities. As ‘Pan-Indianism’ developed, common history, culture and concerns began to determine membership more than tribal affiliation as increasing numbers of second and third generation urban Natives made up its membership. Reminiscent of Rosaldo’s interpretation of ‘cultural citizenship’, Susan Lobo suggests that urban Indian community boundaries are determined by ‘strongly situational and to some degree negotiable criteria’, in particular: ancestry, appearance, cultural knowledge and Indian community participation. These criteria, she elaborates, are ‘perhaps reflecting a reality closer to that of Native homelands prior to the imposition of reservation borders’. In the history of the urban Indian political mobilization we see the adoption of certain aspects of the ‘international blueprint’, including an organizational structure that demands nation-to-nation negotiation and the development of a distinctive intertribal national culture. The fact that historically colonial nation states once recognized and dealt with Native nations as ‘nations’ forms the basis of a unique conception of intertribal nationhood today. In the remaining sections I will illustrate how contemporary Native fashion designers manipulate the cultural symbols of intertribal nationhood through the realms of design, production and cultural performance.

**Designing Nationalisms**

The individuals included in the term ‘contemporary Native Canadian fashion designers’ are entrepreneurial small business owners whose main product lines

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are non-ceremonial clothing and accessories. Although they may design some ceremonial regalia, their main focus is on ‘everyday wear’, by which I mean all categories of dress that are not intended specifically for ethnic events such as powwows and/or religious ceremonies – from T-shirts to evening gowns. I include small-scale designers who have local businesses based on made to order one-of-a-kind pieces through large-scale ones who have both high and low end lines that ship nationally and internationally. I also consider fashion show producers and production managers who have contributed to the contemporary First Nations fashion movement.

One of Native fashion designers’ main objectives is to use mainstream fashion styles to create culturally distinct clothing. As Navajo journalist Linda Martin explains, they attempt to ‘balance innovative adaptations and clothing heritage preservation’.

Similarly, Haida designer Dorothy Grant’s vision is to: ‘Merge art with fashion and forge a link between ancient heritage and modern society.’

Native designers use two main design strategies to achieve this goal. Most commonly, they apply easily recognized ‘Indian’ motifs on garments made in mainstream silhouettes and styles. Alternatively, they create garments in mainstream silhouettes and styles using materials associated with ‘Indianness’, such as blankets, fur, deerhide, hair pipe beads, animal teeth, silver conches, ribbons or shells.

With regard to the first strategy, First Nations designers whose design strategies draw heavily upon aesthetic traditions tend to frame their work within the category of ‘wearable art’. Under the mentorship of a long lineage of esteemed Northwest Coast artists, as well as her former husband, Haida artist Robert Davidson, Dorothy Grant was one of the first Native Canadian designers to incorporate ‘formline’ motifs into contemporary fashion. Beginning in the 1980s, prestigious museums such as the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Museum of Natural History, the de Young Art Museum and others have collected her pieces.

There are now over a dozen Northwest Coast fashion designers who apply ‘formline’ motifs to evening wear, outerwear and sportswear. Ron Everett Green, for example, explains that he wants to teach people about his Tsimshian heritage by ‘pushing the boundaries’ and ‘making new and innovative ways to show heritage, not just the Melton wool coats’. Rather, he wants to ‘show it in a contemporary way’ for an international audience and clientele. He has incorporated ‘formline’ designs into satin and velvet evening ensembles (Illustration 8.1). He has also used an airbrush technique to apply Native themed motifs to his ‘day wear, casual fun wear, and funky little tops’. Most recently he applied both ‘formline’ and feather motifs to

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Concerning the second strategy, those First Nations designers and/or companies whose work focuses more on indigenous materials tend to orient their marketing towards ecological lifestyles. D’Arcy Moses and Dene Fur Clouds are good examples of this strategy. Moses designs coats of wild fur and the latter specializes in contemporary uses of fur, most particularly, beaver fur strips knit into mittens, scarves, vests and hats (Illustration 8.2). The Dene Fur Clouds ‘design team has drawn inspiration and materials from habitat and history in the design and making of their line of sustainable urban accessories for people and homes’.25

Both of these design strategies blend global modernity with timeless indigenous tradition. Remarkably, this is exactly the same formula that characterizes the nation-

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building projects of recognized nation-states. Under the influence of evolutionism, however, different rules applied to ‘folk art’ and ‘primitive art’. Where the latter was concerned, scholars and the public alike previously regarded such ‘mixing of genres’ as indicative of aesthetic degeneracy or cultural contamination. Postmodernists, however, have embraced cultural mixture, a phenomenon that is intimately connected to the burgeoning interest in globalization and diasporas. Hence, a series of descriptive explanatory concepts have arisen, which include ‘syncretism’, ‘bricolage’, ‘creolization’, ‘conflation’, ‘transculturation’ and

26 Chatterjee The Nation and its Fragments, p. 6; Löfgren, ‘Materializing the Nation in Sweden and America’, p. 169.


‘hybridity’. This last concept has become so ubiquitous that it appears to offer a self-evident and ‘natural’ explanation.

All of these concepts celebrate the emergence of ‘the new’ and the ‘transcendence of boundaries’. They also share, however, a spurious ‘background of authenticity’ that assumes original discrete units that join together to create new forms. Another problem with an analytic approach that ends with the blurring of genres and a homogeneous ‘new’ form is that it focuses on the genealogy of the object or cultural form, as if objects had reproductive powers of their own. In fact, scholars formerly referred to such objects as ‘promiscuous’. The main problem with these explanatory models, however, is that they actually serve to ‘reinforce the notion of static and unequal set of power relations’ that such objects embody.

Instead of reproducing these biologically-based metaphors of object evolution, scholars should examine the history of the social movement of which a cultural form is a part, and/or the biographies of its producers.

Clothing, in particular, is always about identity. I agree with Jonathan Friedman that hybridity is ‘only significant where it is practiced as a self-identification’. When we reframe the question to focus on peoples’ identities, it appears that hybridity is especially the identity project of diasporic ‘cosmopolitan elites’. Native peoples have suffered successive waves of diasporic experiences, the most recent of which was the mass migrations to cities that began in the late 1950s, a process that has continued ever since. I previously mentioned that the project of intertribal nationhood developed in the crucible of urban Native communities. One might therefore suppose that the projects of intertribal nationhood and diasporic nationhood are similar. As James Clifford astutely points out, however, in contrast with diasporic discourse, the claims of indigenous peoples challenge the hegemony of the modern nation-state in a different way. Tribal or Fourth World assertions of sovereignty and ‘first-nationhood’ do not feature histories of travel and settlement, though these may be part of the indigenous historical experience. They stress continuity of habitation, aboriginality, and often a ‘natural’ connection to the land.

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33 Friedman, ‘Hybridization of Roots’, p. 252.
The reclamation of ‘traditional’ clothing was a feature of the urban Native political movement from its inception. Anny Hubbard told me that AIM members organized the first powwow that she attended in Sault St. Marie, Michigan. Although they did not have regalia at that first event, subsequently they were ‘really working hard on [their] outfits’. Taking elements from pageant regalia and ‘historical stuff’, a ‘contemporary traditional’ style emerged. As Anny put it: ‘Oh man, it was seventies!’ This style was politically significant because it holistically integrated the old and the new, as well as the ‘ethnic’ and the ‘mainstream’, and thereby transcended the dichotomy between the modernity of ‘world fashion’ everyday wear and ‘past-oriented’ ‘ethnic’ ceremonial dress that characterizes the historical experience of most ethnic groups.

I suggest that the ‘ethnification’ of the national dress styles of minority peoples is one way that their subordinate status is maintained. As I mentioned earlier, often nation-states appropriate these styles for the purpose of creating and maintaining their national identities. The particular design strategy of using Native national symbols with mainstream fashion styles for everyday wear is no exception to this historical trend. It was first developed and promoted by American and Canadian fashion designers, textile manufacturers, anthropologists and government officials. Despite diverging interests between these disparate groups, their common purpose was to create distinctly North American fashions. These fashions were symbols of Canadian and American nationalism, made to be worn by North Americans and tourists. In the United States, for example, during the first few decades of the twentieth century the Pendleton Blanket Company bought Navajo blanket designs from Southwestern trading companies and developed a product line that included fashionable women’s coats. During World War I, severance of trade with Paris stimulated efforts to promote culturally distinct American fashions. This trend produced many Pendleton imitators, such as those produced by Powers Fashions in 1925 (Illustration 8.3).

In the late 1930s under President Roosevelt’s administration, Rene D’Harnoncourt was hired to develop markets for Native arts and crafts. His idea was to create high-end markets by changing the image of crafts to fine arts, and retaining their ‘exotic’ character while simultaneously re-contextualizing them in modern consumer settings. For the influential exhibition he produced at the Museum of Modern Art in 1940, D’Harnoncourt provided fashion designer Fred Picard with ‘articles of Indian manufacture’ that he used in his line of women’s

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wear (Illustration 8.4). Anthropologist Fred Douglas used Native women’s ensembles from the Denver Art Museum in a haute couture fashion show that was produced from 1942 to 1972, and even appeared on TV. Imitations were soon available in major department stores across America. While American nationalist initiatives such as Pendleton, D’Harnoncourt and Douglas succeeded in creating mainstream markets for Native-inspired fashions, they did not link these markets to Native producers. That was not their intent.

Native fashion designers view this ‘borrowing’ of cultural symbols by and for the colonizers as a form of appropriation. This legacy has in large part provided the

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nation-building context in which Native fashion designers from different Native nations bond together to form an intertribal unity. Very often, they express this unity by using style genres whose markets were previously created and monopolized by non-Natives. Literally dozens of Native designers from all parts of North America design outerwear using Southwestern themes, including Pendleton blankets. For example, Northwest Coast designer Shannon Kilroy and Mohawk designer Sandra Jean Lazore showed vests and coats made from Pendleton blankets at the Canadian Aboriginal Festival fashion shows in 1998 and 2000, respectively. The widespread use of the Southwestern blanket theme gives form to intertribal nationhood. In order to redefine Native identity, and to encompass both Native and non-Native markets, contemporary Native fashion must convey messages that are in some respects different for the two groups, yet at the same time reasonably coherent to both. Perhaps ironically, easily recognized symbols of ‘Indianness’, even stereotypical symbols, seem to be the most effective for these purposes.

Outside the intertribal nation, the merging of cultural symbols and markets tends to blur the boundary between Native and non-Native cultures and nations, in part because clothing messages are seldom if ever perfectly coherent across
cultures. To achieve economic and representational control, however, it is necessary for Native designers to maintain the distinction between themselves and the non-Native producers who presently enjoy the bulk of the market for contemporary Native fashions. For example, two different applications of Plains-style hair pipe bead decorations illustrate differences between appropriation, on the one hand, and intertribal nationalism on the other. In 1992, the London-based Turkish designer, Rifat Ozbek, produced an ensemble inspired by the movie ‘Dances With Wolves’, displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 2001 (Illustration 8.5).


Dave Jones of Garden River, Ontario, the founder of Turtle Concepts Inc., designed a set of tuxedo vests for the fashion finale at the Native Music Awards held at Toronto’s Canadian Aboriginal Festival in 1999 (Illustration 8.6). Jones uses fashion as a means through which to build self-esteem and self-presentation skills among Native youth. These models are among the many graduates of his six-week
‘Self-Improvement Course (S.I.C.).’ They wear the tuxedo vests to convey Turtle Concepts’ message, ‘It’s O.K. to feel good about yourself’.

Like the Southwestern blankets, Plains-style hair pipe beads embody a unified intertribal identity. Angela Gonzales, a Hopi sociologist, similarly remarks that as ‘both an identity and a culture’, the pan-Indianism that characterizes most urban Native communities ‘draws heavily from popular images and traditions of Plains Indians, namely the Lakota (Sioux). Such ethnic markers are normative, ahistorical and often based on stereotypes.’

It would be virtually impossible to determine the racial affiliations of these garments if the Ozbek and Jones vests were placed side by side in a department store. Although they may look alike, there are major differences in their meanings and values that arise from the contexts of the museum mannequin versus the Native models. The issue of appropriation hinges on the criteria of proximity to, and control by, Native peoples in the processes of design, production and distribution, as well as the enactment of identity through ownership and display. Appropriation is not simply a good versus bad racial dichotomy, however. Like Ozbek’s forerunners in mainstream fashion discussed above, the ‘Dances

Illustration 8.6 Turtle Concepts tuxedo vests modelled by Amerindian youths at Canadian Aboriginal Festival (CANAB) at Toronto, 1999 (Photo by Cory Willmott)

with Wolves’ couture outfit may function to create and/or maintain a niche market demand for ethnic styles. In turn, this consumer demand enables Amerindian designers to counter appropriate the salient symbols of the genre to profitable and political effect.

Whereas American and Canadian nation-building projects strove to modernize Native fashion for the modern North American consumer, the intertribal nation-building project of contemporary Native fashion designers strives to ‘indigenize’ the modern for both Native and non-Native consumers. For Native consumers, their objective is to claim a specifically Native modernity. For non-Native consumers, their aim is to reclaim the market and the power of representation from non-Native producers. In order to claim a new Native modernity, contemporary Native designers must counteract the stereotypes that ‘Indianness’ entails static traditionalism and chronic poverty. Rather, many Native designers insist that ‘Indianness’ is contemporary, professional and high class, and therefore partakes of all the privileges of twenty-first-century civilization. This fashion statement empowers Native people to be current, successful and glamorous without sacrificing cultural identity. Significantly, it also enables and encourages them to wear culturally distinct styles for everyday wear which, as Aaron Glass points out, become ‘indexical vehicle(s) for relations of belonging and affiliation … the objective basis for claims about personhood and kinship’.41

Despite the apparent ‘mixing of genres’, contemporary Native fashion designers express an unequivocally First Nations identity, one that is self-consciously contemporary and forward-looking. Simultaneously, however, this vision enables ‘Indian fashion’ to be stylish and appealing for non-Native consumers because it allows them to be ‘exotic’ without sacrificing privileges. Moreover, this design strategy stimulates both Native and non-Native markets. The foregoing examples demonstrate that design alone is not sufficient to mark the distinction between appropriation and intertribal nationalism. Rather, the critical factor is that of proximity to Native people, in terms of both economic production and cultural enactments.

**Economic Nationalism**

One of the international standards for nationhood is that nations produce commodities that are marketable to other nations. Contemporary Native fashion designers employ a number of strategies that approximate the economic nationalisms of established nation-states, even though, or perhaps because, the intertribal nation does not have the sort of borders over which imports and exports can be monitored. As I mentioned, the issue of who makes the blanket coat, or the hair pipe beaded vest, is a critical component of Native fashion designers’ desire

to reclaim economic control and monetary gain from colonial and Third World usurpers. Many designers choose to produce one-of-a-kind originals, or made-to-order custom work, in order to keep all aspects of production within their own hands (often literally). Sue Smoke, for example, told me that she only does one-of-a-kind garments. Although she said she would like eventually to mass produce ‘smaller end items like vests’, she is apprehensive: ‘I think that’s where you get into problems with mass production and things being shipped everywhere … and then having them take those apart, make the patterns, and then mass produce them … And that’s why I didn’t go into that, even off the internet.’

In contrast to ‘indie’ Native designers like Smoke, Dinawo was a Native owned-and-operated business that mass-produced a product line of active wear aimed at a Native youth market. Dinawo combined cultural representation and economic nationalism in strategies designed to improve self-esteem among Native youth while at the same time creating employment for Native people, and reclaiming the Native market from labels such as Nike, Hilfiger and Adidas. In 1999, the company’s former General Manager, Shelley Burnham, explained: ‘[Dinawo’s founders] wanted to create a label that would not only be cool, but give First Nations kids a meaning … that would motivate them in a positive way to believe and achieve in their goals.’ Additionally, Dinawo aimed to employ all Native people at their plant at Six Nations of Grand River in Ohsweken Ontario (just south of Toronto): ‘That would fulfil the whole Dinawo dream, not only to be giving back to the community by sending out a really strong message but also building the base up as far as jobs and employment.’

Dinawo’s dream, as well as their fashions, fit well with Dave Jones’ Turtle Concepts Inc. which takes a holistic approach to economic nationalism by working with Native youth to develop the human resource potential of the intertribal nation. Turtle Concepts youth at the 1999 Canadian Aboriginal Festival in Toronto performed a ‘Health and Fitness’ skit wearing active wear separates designed and distributed by Dinawo. The company also launched a widespread publicity campaign involving high profile Native performers and athletes. The Dinawo dream was not realized, however. Despite professional finance management advice, the high costs of production and transportation proved prohibitive and Burnham moved on to other entrepreneurial initiatives.

On the West Coast, Pam Baker has been more successful integrating design, production, and training First Nations youth, while using fashion shows to promote self-esteem. Her renovated loft includes not only a design studio and production factory, but also a fashion school. She initiated the ‘Self-Esteem One’ programme for youth, and has organized tours to Los Angeles and China for up-and-coming Native entrepreneurs to gain first-hand experience in the fashion world and to

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44 Dave Jones taped interview with Cory Willmott, 6 December 1999.
make connections for sourcing fashion materials. Her business and training programmes have operated successfully for over a decade. Although she aspires to employ mainly Native people in her production process, in 2004 she hired a highly qualified Korean production manager and resorted to outsourcing much of her production due to time constraints in making up orders.

As the retail industry is reorganizing towards consolidation of retail and production in large multinational companies, and small niche market entrepreneurial boutiques, it will become more and more difficult for mid-sized companies such as Baker’s TOC/Touch of Culture Legends to find markets. This will put increasing pressure upon First Nations entrepreneurs to turn towards fast and inexpensive production, principles that work against their ability to create sustainable and equitable jobs within their communities. Like clothing manufacturers in all segments of Canadian society, First Nations designers must often rely upon government subsidies to start and/or continue operating their businesses. Yet, First Nations fashion is a category that often slips through the cracks of government granting agencies. As Pam Baker explained: ‘For Native designers one of the main obstacles is getting money from Arts Canada or the Canada Arts Council. They don’t look at our work as art.’ Conversely, fashion projects are rarely considered for economic development funding, which tends to support local service industries, and/or modern industrial initiatives. For example, case studies considered for the comprehensive 1993 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report included forestry, a mechanical testing company, a hunters and trappers income security programme, a chocolate product line, a local daycare, pizza parlour and pub, hair salon, banking, and an industrial park that housed production of heating and cooling aids. Fashion initiatives escaped their attention.

The Arctic Co-operatives are in some respects an exception to these trends, probably due to the importance of fur harvesting to their local economy. In 1995, Dene designer D’Arcy Moses enjoyed a stellar career with Natural Furs International based in New York and Montreal. Representatives of the territorial government invited him to Northwest Territories to lead workshops with local artisans that year. Connecting with his heritage for the first time, he decided to stay

47 Pam Baker taped interview with Temperance McDonald, 27 May 2004.
49 Pam Baker taped interview with Temperance McDonald, 27 May 2004.
and has been there ever since. Setting up shop in Fort Simpson, Moses designed for Genuine MacKenzie Valley Furs (GMVF), sponsored by the Northwest Territories Development Corporation (NTDC), to promote international sales for locally harvested wild furs. Simultaneously, he trained and hired local Dene in production and marketing so that by 1998 he employed seven full time and three part time in-house workers, as well as 25–30 piecework sewers. He is also contracting with the Winnipeg-based union shop, Midwest Garment Apparel (MWG), for production and marketing of his Natsenelu sportswear line, which has sold to retailers such as Orvis Limited, Marks Work Warehouse and others. Moses also mentors another NTDC sponsored fashion company, Dene Fur Clouds, which employs five full-time and five part-time local Dene employees.

Like all companies in the garment industry in Canada, First Nations designers are experiencing varying degrees of financial distress, which makes it difficult to meet their ideals of creating jobs in the garment industry. However, a significant number of these entrepreneurs have endured throughout the decade of my study (1998–2008). Designers such as Dorothy Grant and D’Arcy Moses had already achieved significant success in the 1990s and they continue to expand and gain in prominence in the 2000s. Likewise Pamela Baker, Ronald Everett and Dene Fur Clouds, not previously well known, are now achieving national and international recognition. Economic viability is crucial to the success of these designers’ intertribal nation-building process. Sustained public exposure will help ensure the transformation of social categories and cultural values that the identity project entails.

Enacting Nationalisms

Enactment and exposure imply performance and audience. Because proximity to Native actors is crucial to the distinction between intertribal nationhood and appropriation, I consider only those performance events in which there is significant Native participation in production, fashion design or modelling. A Native audience is an important but insufficient component of the nation-building process. On the one hand, it is obvious that Native audiences to non-Native productions, designs and models will not fulfil the objectives of intertribal nationhood. On the other hand, it is obvious that Native audiences to non-Native productions, designs and models will not fulfil the objectives of intertribal nationhood. On the other

hand, returning to Löfgren’s observation that the existence of nations depends on their mutual recognition, it also becomes obvious that the performance of the new culturally distinct modern identity must be recognized by other nation-states in the international structure. Therefore contemporary Native Canadian fashion designers must penetrate the world of mainstream fashion in order to achieve this recognition, not simply as token representatives of Canadian nationalism, but as representatives of a self-defined collective identity. Overcoming tokenism requires unification on the intertribal level in order to reach the critical mass necessary to make an effective statement.

Fashion shows are one of the most dramatic contexts for the enactment of intertribal nationhood envisioned by contemporary Native fashion designers. Fashion shows play powerful political roles. Yet, as with production costs, getting a foothold in this domain has depended on government sponsorships. Although government-produced initiatives often took the competitive form of the international paradigm for nationhood, conformity to these conventions was not necessarily a bad thing for the intertribal nation-building project. For example, in 1993 the Canadian government sponsored the gala ‘Winds of Change’ fashion show in which Aboriginal designers competed against one another for prizes. Dorothy Grant won the prize for the best fashion designer in Canada, which included a trip to Paris where her work was showcased at the Canadian embassy. In this international venue, the symbols of ‘Indianness’ on Grant’s designs served to embody nationhood at the levels of the nation-state, the intertribal nation and the Haida nation. This example illustrates how the multivalency of contemporary Native fashion design contributes to its power to manifest cultural sovereignty, if not political recognition. As long as ‘Indian’ symbols on Western-styled garments remain associated with their Native creators, they are capable of simultaneously personifying Native and non-Native national identities. As well, non-Native consumers contribute to the economic independence of the intertribal nation.

Within the intertribal nation, however, contemporary Native fashion designers stress co-operation rather than competition. When asked why she works hard to build alliances among designers, designer and fashion show producer, Sue Smoke explained: ‘It’s just like our sweetgrass. They say that one blade is easily broken but when braided together there is a lot of strength and it cannot be broken. And that’s what I feel when I work with all these other designers.’

Lacking substantial resources, often without any financial backing, Aboriginal producers of fashion shows must rely on the collaborative effort of all participants: designers, models, stylists, technicians, dressers and others who help produce a show. Likewise,

55 Löfgren, ‘Materializing the Nation in Sweden and America’, p. 166.
57 Video recording of fashion show at Toronto International Powwow (CANAB) by Zeek Cywink, 21 November 1998.
because most individual designers lack widespread brand recognition, they multiply their audience by billing under a group identity. Famous First Nations designers lend their brand name to such events to promote the aims of the contemporary Native fashion movement as a whole. They thereby broaden recognition among non-Native audiences and validate modern identities within Native communities, breaking down dichotomies of colonial oppression such as: urban/rural, lower/upper class, traditional/contemporary and material/spiritual.

The function of fashion shows – to validate these new roles, promote social cohesion and raise community esteem – is particularly apparent where local youth model the fashions or where the proceeds are donated to local Native charities. In 1999, one such small-scale fashion show at the First Nations School of Toronto featured grade school and high school models wearing designs by Dinawo, M.J. Helmer, Barbara Owl, and other First Nations designers, as well as those by Linda Lundstrom.58 The latter is a Canadian designer who has lived and worked in the Canadian north, loans clothes for local fashion shows, hires First Nations artists to design motifs and donates her high end duffel coats to Native community fundraising events. The Home and School Liaison Coordinator who organized this show explained the inspiration behind the show was to ‘give the kids an opportunity to raise self-esteem and build confidence about themselves through getting up in front of a crowd, and through the role model mentorship of the older kids involved in the show’.59 The event opened with an elder offering a traditional prayer. It also included a traditional feast featuring corn soup, bannock, deer meat, wild rice casserole and berry desserts. The audience consisted almost exclusively of parents and relatives of the youth in the show: members of the Toronto Native community. The occasion served to validate the ties between old and new traditions, as well as between elders and youth in the community.

On a much broader scale, the Canadian Aboriginal Festival (CANAB) held annually at the Rogers Center in Toronto since 1993 is one of the most influential promoters of contemporary First Nations fashion. This festival and powwow, which draws both Native and non-Native crowds from Canada and the United States, has featured a fashion design component since 1995. Dave Jones of Turtle Concepts Inc. has produced these events for the last decade, using graduates of his ‘Self Improvement Course’ (SIC) as models. These ‘Turtles’ are ordinary First Nations youths whom Jones and his team of SIC graduates have trained to employ fashion as a means to raise self-esteem, improve social skills and make positive lifestyle choices. They also create personal identities that bridge traditional and contemporary paradigms.60 Since 2001, Jones and his ‘Turtles’ have also produced a show for the annual Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards (CAMA), a similarly

60 Dave Jones taped interviews with Cory Willmott, 6 December 1999 and 30 August 2001.
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large-scale event at the same venue. The history of CANAB tells a story about the effectiveness of fashion as a medium of identity transformation. The earliest fashion shows were tucked into make-shift plastic tents in the back corners of the stadium, while the 2008 CANAB Festival includes not only a significant role in the CAMA award extravaganza, but also a ‘fashion alley’ for designers’ booths, graphic marketing of their products, and six high profile fashion shows over the three day festival period.61 The growing role of the fashion shows in the largest national Aboriginal gathering in Canada suggests that the fashion designers’ message of ‘contemporary’ intertribal national identity in everyday life is finding a place side-by-side with the celebration of ‘traditional’ ethnic identity embodied in the ceremonial powwow regalia.

The nation-building potential of fashion shows is most effectively realized when the venue is manipulated to strengthen group identity. For example, at the CANAB fashion show in 2000, the stage was adorned with banners in the four sacred colours (yellow, red, black, white), which in essence created an intertribal nationalist space. For the finale of the show, the models, who were all members of the ‘Turtle team’, were each introduced individually. With the exception of those wearing Turtle Concepts gowns, they all wore jackets with the Turtle Concepts logo on the back. This performance thereby enacted the principle of nationhood based on unity in diversity. Moreover, the ‘Turtle team’ is suggestive of a kin group. Dave Jones’s own doodem [clan] is the Loon, but his Anishnaabe name is Mishiikenh, a kind of snapping turtle.62 Although it was not his conscious intention to create a sort of extended kinship network among his students, he is pleased that his ‘Turtles’ share a strong sense of belonging. Just as historically clan members helped each other even if they were strangers, Turtles do the same when they are travelling in each other’s territories, or when they meet each other at schools away from home. Jones complains that it is hard to maintain this community across the wide distances that separate the Turtles, but, he jokes, ‘Thank god for the internet!’63

If there are challenges to be overcome gaining recognition within the intertribal Native community, the same may be said of national and international audiences, but for different reasons. Although designers such as D’Arcy Moses and Dorothy Grant have individually participated in mainstream fashion shows among internationally prominent designers, occasions for making a collective statement on the mainstream international fashion stage have been rare. One such opportunity occurred during Toronto’s 2004 Fashion Week, which included a highly visible and well promoted show devoted entirely to contemporary Native


Canadian designers. ‘Fashion-Nation’, as the show was called, included Pam Baker, Ronald Everett, D’Arcy Moses, Tammy Beauvais, Dene Fur Clouds and Angela DeMontigne (Illustration 8.2). The nationalism function of these ‘fashion weeks’, staged annually in different cities around the world, can be seen in Vittorio Missoni’s statement about his role as sponsor for the event: ‘I’ll be a good ambassador for’ Canadian designers in the international fashion world. Of Fashion-Nation he said, ‘I think the idea of these young Canadian designers was great, to use their origins and translate it into the fashion world’. Missoni, the leader of a world-renowned Italian fashion house, appears to understand and play his role in recognizing the distinctive identity of the First Nations’ designers among the Canadian designers. Yet, within Canada the deeply embedded stereotypes of ‘Indianness’ make it difficult to walk the fine line between racial stereotyping and recognizable symbols of cultural identity. For example, one probably well-intended reporter evoked racial stereotyping in her ‘praise’ of the show: ‘Given the rich history of handicraft in this country’s aboriginal culture, its no wonder that some of the details in the Fashion-Nation show were also standouts.’

The problem with this statement is that the observer ‘sees’ only the surface detail that conveys the ethnic identity, without ‘seeing’ the whole composition of its integration with contemporary fashion. It is only the complete picture, or total clothed appearance, that embodies the identity of intertribal nationhood.

Conclusion

As with all would-be nations, the ‘bottom line’ will ultimately be economic viability. This may depend upon the designers’ success at translating the complex world of fashion into a contemporary First Nations identity that resonates with the imagined nation’s citizens’ everyday lives, with lifestyles ranging from backwoods bush life to cocktail parties with international celebrities. Whereas individual designers and companies come and go, First Nations designers’ contribution to the intertribal nationalist movement continues to grow and gather strength, ensuring that their messages win a foothold in society at large.

Contemporary Native fashion designers are continually navigating paths and negotiating borders between multiple constructs of nationhood. Their cultural productions engage significantly with both Native and non-Native nations and cultures. They use design strategies that embody intertribal nationhood to accomplish their fundamental goals of gaining control over representation and economies. The enactment of nationhood through fashion shows and Native

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people’s everyday wear achieves a political unity and economic strength that bolsters their collective position in relation to non-Native competitors. It does so by creating and validating a contemporary Native identity that transcends the oppressive binary opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘assimilated’. In a broader context, the counter appropriation of high fashion and active wear from the non-Native producers, for Native everyday wear, reflects and influences the growing political power of Native peoples more generally. In this way, contemporary Native fashion designers’ enactment of intertribal nationhood ultimately serves the critical political interests of tribal nations and local Native communities.