Photographic Palimpsest: Rewriting the Colonial Gaze in *Portraits Against Amnesia*

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Portraits Against Amnesia is a series of ten photographs from 2003 by Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, an artist of Seminole, Muskogee, and Dinê ancestry, and a former IAIA student. Each work in the series is based on one historic, studio-style photograph common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Fig. 1). After Tsinhnahjinnie's intervention, Native figures in the old photographs are the only part that remains, and the rest of the surface becomes subject to erasure and manipulation, leaving a palimpsest of new meaning. *Portraits Against Amnesia* is a series that challenges the potential amnesia latent in the archives of American history, as it interrogates demands placed upon Native Americans, which are ensconced and upheld in the structures of public archives.

Tsinhnahjinnie's series counters the publicly available visual record of indigenous history, as she brings historical figures into the contemporary world. Through her process of enlarging and digitally altering the surfaces of images, historical, intimate family photographs become palimpsestic, and meaning is altered. I argue that this series recovers identity, probes history, and aids in healing against what Marianne Hirsch, in her book *Family Frames* has called the "post-memory" of traumatic events.[i] Although Tsinhnahjinnie's work is not *about* trauma, it recovers the historical truth, presence, and sovereignty of Native peoples, which have been erased in dominant discourse, and so she responds to the traumatizing impact of erasure itself. The series challenges ideas about indigenous identity through a reconsideration of family history, place, and the archive, giving central consideration to Native American perspectives on our own histories.

Hirsch adopted the term "post-memory" in the mid-1990's to describe the relationship that succeeding generations bear to the "personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before--to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up."[ii] This relationship is constructed through archival retention of past events: oral recollections, photographs, literature, and paper documents constitute the primary text in forming cultural and intergenerational memory. Archival structure authenticates the narrative of history, and for the generations who follow traumatic cultural events, the archive is the primary reference point. In her original inception, Hirsch applied the theoretical structure of the post-memory to Jewish artists whose parents had survived the Holocaust.

To be clear, the focus group is *not* the generation who experienced trauma, but rather the generation(s) that follow, who gaze at these documents and must construct a distanced meaning from them.[iii] I propose this framework can also be beneficial in examining artworks made by contemporary indigenous artists, including Tsinhnahijinnie, who respond to the traumatic history of colonialism and the erasure of indigenous narrative. Trans-generational transmission of identity and the ideas that surround distressing events are at once examined and interrupted in her images, creating a space where healing might begin.

The "trauma" I refer to is the history of colonial contact with indigenous peoples, and its detrimental effects. Although studies have explored the

psychological implications of the events surrounding this history, those studies aren't the focus here.[iv] Rather, my paper addresses the visual evidence of, and implied structural relationship between the dominant society and Native America. Evidence of the contemporary value, which the dominant society places on images of Native Americans, is reflected in their market availability and their monetary value. A cursory internet search (Fig 2) indicates the type of Native American images that are common and available. For this my search terms were simply "Native American Photograph." The words "chief," "battle," "rare," "traditional," and "Edward S. Curtis" are tags that appear most often, and with the highest price. They suggest the structure surrounding popular conceptions of indigeneity.

In the introduction to his critical anthology, *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations,* Dietmar Rothermund suggests that "memory makers" (such as: images, individuals, and stories which bring memory to the forefront of the imagination) "provide narratives, which confirm social identity of the group to which they belong."[v] That the keywords "chief, battle, rare, traditional and Curtis" are the most common and fetch the highest prices reveals a market-assigned valuation (or rather *de*-valuation), which reflects a controlling colonial gaze; a gaze which demands a specific indigenous subjectivity that is romantic, dangerous, powerful (masculine) and on the brink of vanishing. Tsinhnahjinnie encountered this fact, and it is the point at which the series *Portraits Against Amnesia*, intervenes in the dominant narratives about Native history, identity, and presence. In a 2003 interview with art historian Veronica Passalacqua (who is also Tsinhnahjinnie's partner), Tsinhnahjinnie commented that the photographs she selected to work with were *affordable*, and therefore *accessible* because the subjects are not dressed in regalia, and so they don't "fit the white man's code of Indian wearing feathers and buckskin."[vi] Instead, these subjects are sovereign, revealing their own agency. The series challenges the well-known story of indigenous vanishing and replaces it with a different chronicle of ongoing presence. Historical photographs are reinserted as the primary evidence of this truth.[vii]

The series' title, *Portraits Against Amnesia,* is implicated in the visual form of individual pieces of the series. Namely, each finished piece is much larger than the photographs' original postcard size (Fig. 3- I include this image as an example of the type of works Tsinhnahjinnie pursued for this series, though it is not directly related).[viii] By enlarging the final pieces to 20x30", she makes the subjects of these works primary, unforgettable evidence that argues against an amnesia of their own existence. All works in the series reconsider images that are culled from family collections, library and museum holdings, or from eBay. The subjects are self-determined individuals who sought images of themselves. By selecting images that don't fit commonly understood taxonomies of Native Americans, she provides an important alternative to reductive public histories. By enlarging the originals and reworking their surfaces, the subjects become relevant and immediate in a contemporary context, as they signal visual affirmation and sovereignty for contemporary Native audiences. And for non-Native audiences, they raise awareness of the ongoing and unending perseverance of Native people in the Americas.

Of the ten works in the series, I am excited to consider three here. I believe the remaining seven will prove an immensely rich source for analysis in subsequent work. I have performed a close visual analysis of each of these three and hope to show how each of them engages post-memory by interrogating the archive. I also hope to show how new meaning is made as their surfaces become palimpsestic, and signal indigenous identity anew. The three pieces considered here represent different dominant themes present in the series: the family archive, the trauma of displacement, and alternative depictions of the imagined "Other."

The family archive presents a paradigm different from than that of the public or market archive. Family collections of photographs are intimate, and not necessarily meant for consumption beyond the family itself. While famous photographs of Native Americans might constitute a part of the family archive, the collections maintained exclusively by a family differ in their purposes and sometimes subvert the selective memory of official history.[ix] Stored in boxes in garages, hanging on walls in non-archival settings, or in the wallets or purses of individuals within the family, these images connote intimacy. Of the ten pieces in the *Portraits Against Amnesia*, at least three (Fig. 4) are from Tsinhnahjinnie's personal family archive. The effect of plumbing her family's collection elevates the personal story of her own indigenous family to the level of public consideration, as the private becomes public and the personal becomes political. These works function to situate Tsinhnahijinnie within the macro-history of American indigeneity, and reinserts them into the American narrative. By invoking her family's own history, Tsinhnahjinnie creates a space of visual sovereignty in which the history of her family is controlled *internally* rather than *externally*.[x] In selecting these three images from her personal family archive, reductive public memory is circumvented, and attention is brought back home.

The work titled *Dad* (Fig. 5) is one example of this type of internal control. A photo of her father, Andrew Van Tsihnahjinnie, is centered in the composition.[xi] Photographed as a young man, he wears a military uniform with a hat tipped to the left; a large jacket with the number five stitched on his left breast pocket covers his button- up shirt and his pants hang loose about his legs. Both pants and jacket seem oversized on his frame and have rolled up legs and sleeves. He looks out of the picture to meet the gaze of the audience, asserting himself in the midst of surrounding elements. Her father, Andrew Van Tsihnijinnie, was a Navajo painter trained by Dorothy Dunn at the Studio School 1930s. Upon graduation he served in the Pacific during WWII. He worked as a successful professional artist for the remainder of his life. On his right, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie has digitally added a drawing that was created by him in 1965 called *The Mule Rider*. Near his left arm, a small Hogan stands on the horizon, rooting her father to his home place. Abstract plant forms flank his legs, evoking similar designs that Hulleah 's father used in some of his own work (Fig. 6). The photograph in *Dad* was also the one that Hulleah gifted to members of her family who gathered to mourn her father's passing in 2000.[xii] By using this photograph for a professional work of art, the audience is invited to join her family in memorializing her father.

Dad evokes and creates intergenerational meanings through the use of these combined elements, as Tsinhnahjinnie effectively constructs a self-evident archive

of her father's life and work. This is a memorial that not only situates him in the history of the Tsinhnahjinnie family, but one which *also* invokes the history of Native American military service and the artistic traditions of the Southwest in the 20th century; themes which are lost in accepted narratives of indigenous *vanishing*. In this work, Hulleah overwrites the imagined "Other" created in public archives of historical photographs.[xiii] Her father is more fully humanized as an individual with a family, whose history implies a broader narrative than his own. This image challenges notions about a vanished Native America, which are romantic and nostalgic for some non-native audiences, but traumatizing for Natives. The possibility of the intricate and multivalent complexity of lived reality replaces tired ideas about the romance of indigeneity.

The second theme I have found, of trauma through displacement, is the subject of *Oklahoma* (Fig. 7), in which *place* (Oklahoma) represents physical evidence of dislocation. Tsinhnahjinnie is reflecting on the history of the mid 19th century removal of the so-called "civilized tribes" of the southeast: The Choctaw, Cherokee, Seminole, Chickasaw and Creek or Muskogee. As Tsinhnahjinnie is a descendant of both the Seminole and Muskogee Nations, this piece also conflates public and private histories addressed in *Dad*. However, I'd like to focus instead on how *place* and *displacement* work in this piece as contributors to historical trauma, and the ways visual affirmation can prompt healing.

In *Oklahoma*, two women are situated between four abstracted shards with cool blue and purple streaks that represent "shifting and skewed slices of time."[xiv] The aggressive shards surround these two women, whose expressions are assertive, calm and watchful in the midst of the storm of color. These colored shards are situated against a white background, and emphasize the fading, poorly- fixed sepia tones of the photographic image of the women. The coolness of these shards is ironic, given that the word "Oklahoma" comes from Choctaw words "okla" and "humma,"meaning "red people." There is nothing red about this image, a fact that becomes especially striking when compared to another work from the series, *The Three Graces* (Fig. 8) which is notable for its strong red foreground. In *Oklahoma* Tsinhnahjinnie presents us with a formal joke, with a dark side, revealed in the history of removal from the traditional homelands of southeastern tribes to a new location in what was then called "Indian Territory," and now the state of Oklahoma. [xv] The lived experience of trauma has both physical and chronological components. For indigenous peoples, place is centrally important to cosmologies, epistemologies, and spiritual practices. The broken look of the shards conjures the disorienting quality of trauma via displacement, and by adding them Tsinhnahjinnie pushes the surface of the photograph to become a palimpsest that shatters apart with blank white space between the shards.[xvi] *Oklahoma* becomes the fractured site of trauma itself. And yet these women steel their composed gazes from within the center of the attendant storm, visually occupying and claiming a sovereign space.

A fifth shard floats adjacent to the standing woman's right shoulder above the head of the seated woman. Closer investigation reveals that this is a photograph of Rough Rock, Arizona (near the center of the Navajo Nation Reservation) where Tsinhnahjinnie grew up. In 2003, while working on this series Tsinhnahjinnie traveled to the state of Oklahoma with her mother, to meet Seminole and Mvskogee

relatives she hadn't known before.[xvii] By inserting her own Navajo homeland into the "Indian Territory," Tsinhnahjinnie makes a personal claim to this traumatic history.

The final work I will consider gently and humorously subverts the stereotypical depiction of "aboriginality" in dominant discourse (Fig. 9). *Hoke-Tee* shows an indigenous baby standing on a stool on a different colonized land, the surface of the moon. She wears a plaid dress and looks toward the camera with the facial expression of intrigue, concern and confusion common to little ones. Likely taken in a studio and commissioned by her parents, the photograph of Hoke-Tee was one of Tsinhnahjinnie's ebay purchases. The baby's history and lineage are unknown, and open to speculation.

While *Hoke-Tee* differs from the other works I've considered, with her lack of traceable descent, she does share in the theme of displacement. She's so far from home she isn't even on this planet! Receding into the background of the digitally inserted lunar landscape, an astronaut bounds away from the little girl. Of the astronaut, Tsinhnahjinnie has said, " man go[es] to the moon trying to claim it, but when he gets there, there is an aboriginal baby floating around on her little space scooter. So Colonisomo Spaceman picks up his bags and takes off because it is just too much!"[xviii] I'll remind you of the Internet search I undertook while working on this paper. The keywords "chief, battle, rare, traditional and Curtis" are in no way apt descriptors for this little space baby. Rather Hoke-Tee destabilizes commonly imagined masculine, stoic, romantic visions of indigeneity through her mere presence.

The examination of, and challenge to, the archive is an emergent theme in contemporary Native art. Tsinhnahjinnie's work joins with many other excellent artists who are asking questions about stereotypes, identity politic, and visual sovereignty. In *Portraits Against Amnesia* these themes beautifully empower photographic evidences of indigenous history and continued presence to come to life again in the 21st century.

Notes

[i] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1997).
[ii] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today*, 29:1 (Spring 2008), p. 103.
[iii] For these generations an added distress of displacement, uncertainty about what exactly took place in the original traumatizing event(s), and an enhanced understanding of the scale of the impact of these events might be present, extending and enlivening trauma anew.
[iv] See, for example Chase M. Brave Heart, J., J. Elkins, & D. B. Altschul, "Historical Trauma Among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, Research, and Clinical Considerations," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, Vol. 43 No. 4 (2011), 282–290; or M. Doucet, & M. Rovers, Generational Trauma, Attachment, and Spiritual/Religious Interventions," *Journal of Loss & Trauma,* Vol. 15, 93-105 (2010).
[v] Dietmar Rothermund. *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations*: *The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945-2013*, (Cambridge University Press, 2015) p.2.
[vi] Recorded and recounted in Veronica Passalacqua, *Archival Encounters*, part of the Geske Lectures series at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Hixon- Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts (January 31, 2011). Text published by the University of Nebraska.
[vii] See Joseph Bauerkemper, "Videographic Sovereignty: Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie's Aboriginal Worldview", in *Visualities: Perspectives in Contemporary American Indian Film and Art*, Ed. Denise K. Cummings, Michigan State University Press, (Lansing, 2011) p. 132.
[viii] The United States Post Office defines "postcard" dimensions between 3.5x5" and 4.5x6"
[ix] The work *Grandchildren* from this series is a prime example of this type of subversion, wherein the subjects are black indigenous descendants within Tsinhnahjinnie's own lineage. The convenient forgetting and erasure of Africana indigeneity is immensely traumatizing event, and one whose implications are ongoing.
[x] Veronica Passalacqua, "Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Dinê/Seminole/Muskogee)", in *Path Breakers: The Eiteljorg Fellowship of Native American Fine Art, 2003*, Eitljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis (University of Washington Press, Seattle. 2003), p. 81.
[xi] Hulleah and Andrew's last names are not spelled the same.
[xii] Tsinhnahjinnie, Hulleah, "Dragonfly's Home," in *Visual Currencies: Reflections on Native Photography,* Lidchi, Henrietta and Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie Ed., NMS Enterprises Limited, National Museums Scotland (Edinburgh, 2009), p.14.
[xiii] It is notable that the same photograph of Andrew Van Tsihnijinnie is also used in a different series created by Hulleah, *Photographic Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant (Living on Occupied Land)* from 1994. I believe this continues her work of circumventing the public archive through valuing physical evidence of her family's own history and the inclusion of the same photograph in two different bodies of her work establishes its permanence, a key component of archival truth. I believe this continuity will be important in future scholarship.
[xiv] Passalacqua, 2003 p.95
[xv] For a heightened formal comparison, *Three Graces* from the same series stands in dramatic contrast, with bright red surrounding the figures.
[xvi] A comparable discussion of how South Africa's recent racially charged past and the artworks that come from the traumatic history there can be found in Jill Bennett's *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford University Press (Stanford, 2005), pp. 70-77.
[xvii] Passalacqua, 2003 p.96
[xviii] Recounted in Passalcqua (2003), p 96

Figure List

Fig. 1 *Portraits Against Amnesia*
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Seminole, Muskogee, Dinê).
2003
Digital Prints

Fig. 2 Internet search

Fig. 3 Chief Lone Elk postcard
Photograph on cardstock
(Postcard Size: Between 3.5x5” and 4.5x6”)

Fig. 4 *Dad, Grandma, Grandchildren* from *Portraits Against Amnesia*
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Seminole, Muskogee, Dinê).
2003
Digital Prints

Fig. 5 *Dad* from *Portraits Against Amnesia*,
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003
Digital Print

Fig. 6 *Untitled*,
Andrew Van Tsihnahjinnie. c. 1950
Gouache on Canvas

Fig. 7 *Oklahoma* from *Portraits Against Amnesia*,
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003
Digital Print

Fig. 8 *The Three Graces* from *Portraits Against Amnesia*,
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003
Digital Print

Fig. 9 *Hoke-tee* from *Portraits Against Amnesia*,
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003
Digital Print

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