

GRAMMAR FOR THE TIME TRAVELER

It's never the "simple past" nor the "past perfect"

by Genevieve Quick



Installation view of *We have teeth too*, curated by Natani Notah at the Berkeley Art Center, Fall 2020

For many of us who come from historically marginalized and colonized communities, we are time travelers: we attempt to locate the past, act in the present, and imagine the future. In this amorphous sense of time we negotiate historic representations that defined our "authenticity" as "primitive" and "Other" while participating in contemporary culture. As language shapes how we construct the past, time travelers require specific grammar to frame the ways we straddle time. In English grammar, *simple past* and *past perfect* are not just ironic, but the former suggests that there are abrupt shifts in which actions are simply in the past and the latter considers that when an action, a verb, is completed, things are perfect. American history is not simple and it is far from perfect. However, English grammar is not fruitless. As *past continuous* describes actions starting in the past and continuing to the present, it acknowledges that completion may not be a definite

act, thus affording time travelers a more flexible grammar. The artists included in the expansive and rich collection of works in *We have teeth too*, curated by Natani Notah at the Berkeley Art Center, straddle time to complexly intersect indigeneity with history and the present. As these artists point to the past and present simultaneously, they highlight the ways in which history is neither simple nor perfect and dive into the fluidity of the past continuous that enables re-authoring, renaming, and re-contextualizing.

It is not a simple past for Indigenous communities. Edward Curtis' problematic photographs continue to haunt representations of Native peoples. In his attempt to record "vanishing" Indigenous populations, Curtis imposed his own flawed ideals of Native nations that presented "authenticity" and "Indian" in direct binary opposition to "modernity" and "European."

When describing “Indians” as “vanishing,” Curtis imposes a passivity and ethereal ghost-like quality to Indigenous Americans. When people are said to “vanish,” it alludes to the unexplainable or unexplained. But there is no mystery about what happened to Indigenous nations. The damage done was the direct result of systemic American genocide, theft, and discrimination. Moreover, as we know, Native peoples did not vanish; they are very much alive. This liveliness is present in Amanda Roy’s altered photographs. In these

as family, tying them directly to her own community and relationships.

As side-by-side images, individually Roy’s photographs create a chronology of “before” and “after,” where the “before” is Curtis’ original image and the “after” is Roy’s altered image. But, because Roy has placed them together in one frame, they are read not individually, but as a whole where “before” and “after” exist simultaneously. In addition to this temporal complexity, when



Amanda Roy, *Nwendaaganag (relatives) No. 5* (from the series *Stoic Indians*), 2020. Image courtesy of the artist.

works, the artist transforms Curtis’ “stoic” portraits of “Indians” into smiling faces. This simple act realigns Curtis’ images more closely with Roy’s vision of her culture, reflecting her community’s and family’s joy, humor, and love. These individuals are not blank slates who hide their emotions, nor are they ones that viewers can blankly project onto. Roy’s photographs present radiant faces that project personality towards her viewers, such that their infectious smiles invite viewers into a welcoming exchange. Moreover, these expressions impart a sense of personality onto Curtis’ subjects, moving them from being “Indians” into individuals who are children, mothers, and fathers. By titling each photograph *Stoic Indians: Nwendaaganag (relatives)*, Roy uses the Anishinaabe word to claim these people

read as stereoscopic images, Roy’s work also imparts a sense of dimensionality. In stereoscopy, depth perception is created as the brain processes perspectival shifts between the left and right eye, such that individually neither provide the full depth of reality. However, when the brain processes both images, viewers develop perspectival space. Both Curtis’ and Roy’s photographs are in dialogue with one another, where each image presents a perspective. As problematic as Curtis’ images are, Roy’s work is contingent upon them, wherein she presents a corrective vision that creates a deeper and more nuanced representation of her community.

Shifting perceptual depth and time are also evident in Jordan Ann Craig’s painting *Crying Over Spilled Wine* (2020).

Strikingly, Craig's sharp diagonals cut her canvas into triangles and rhomboids that float atop each other to create the dimensionality of layers, while her parallel lines create the visual disorientation of Op Art. Craig fuses a traditional Indigenous textile pattern with modernist geometric painting to create a dialogue and lineage between familial and community craft traditions and contemporary art historical painters.

Through her title, *Crying Over Spilled Wine*, Craig plays on the dismissive adage of "no use in crying over spilled milk." By replacing "milk" with "wine," Craig's title takes on a more adult tone and possibly graver consequences. Wine is a libation of celebration and ritual, but is also associated with blood. As spilled wine or blood invokes the recklessness or assault of inebriation or vice, when stated in combination with "crying," the artist addresses the consequences, her mourning over symbolical or bodily injury. In her artist statement, Craig writes, "My mother tells me her greatest gift is Native American blood: Northern Cheyenne and a little Zuni." In this context, blood is not only present in death, but also in the resilience and connectedness to her family.

Under the colonization of white settlers, Indigenous peoples have not had a past perfect, where verbs were completed, actions taken. In particular, in the mid-1800s, the US government created 18 unratified and unfulfilled treaties with Californian Native nations. In Emma Robbins' series *Tseebiitsáadah*, she refers to the "lost" treaties, in which Indigenous communities agreed to cede land rights in exchange for money, goods, and the establishment of reservations. Of this series, in *Treaty No. 2* (2018) Robbins presents 20 face cards (Kings, Queens, and Jacks) from a playing deck from the Fire Rock Casino, the first of four Navajo-owned casinos. The casino has replaced the European Kings, Queens, and Jacks of most playing decks to figures dressed in feathered headdresses, beads, patterned blankets, braids, etc. In this act, the casino elevates Native nations, making them on par with the European monarchies, as the US government has historically failed to fully respect Indigenous nations when addressing and legislating with them. However, it is also an historic and romanticized representation, one that does not portray the contemporary lives of Indigenous peoples. While the casino is owned by the Navajo Nation and generates some



Jordan Ann Craig, *Crying Over Spilled Wine*, 2020

revenue for current and future generations, it does not solve all of the issues the communities face today, such as the longstanding environmental and health hazards from radon mining on tribal lands, which Robbins addresses in *What You Should Know About Radon* (2020). Robbins' work sparks a conversation about the wagers people make in balancing the desire to celebrate one's own traditions, the reality of the present, and making positive outcomes for the future.

As objects, playing cards are to be held, traded in a wager, and guarded from other players until one is ready to act. In Robbins' work, porcupine quills lance the cards' edges and the Kings', Queens', and Jacks' eyes. The Indigenous face cards protect themselves. No one can physically hold these cards, and by extension representations of Indigenous peoples cannot be commodified, possessed, or traded. Their quill eyes are fangs, bearing witness, not just passive recipients of what they are watching. In showing her cards, Robbins issues a symbolic warning.

The past perfect also is insufficient when addressing The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (Public Law 101-601; 25 U.S.C. 3001-3013), which mandates that anyone possessing tribal remains or artifacts excavated or "discovered" on federal or tribal lands must return them to lineal descendants or

those with cultural affiliation. Additionally, any agencies and museums receiving federal funds must create an inventory of Native human remains. Natalie Ball's *Hey Berkeley's Phoebe Hearst Museum, this is Natalie Ball. Put my Bones in the Box. Wrap them in the fabric, children and women first. And return my Ancestors. I'll cover shipping.* (2020), invokes the failure of museums to return remains and artifacts to Indigenous communities. In this work, the artist has placed a modest cardboard box atop a white pedestal. The ordinary box stands as an everyday container for unfulfilled promises. Additionally, the red cloth in the box alludes to the interior of a body, a reminder that what museums consider to be artifacts are human skeletons. By sharply referring to "my Bones" as "my Ancestors," Ball reclaims what museums and Western culture have abstractly described as specimens from a category of people, into individuals with familial and social relationships.

The past is not complete, not perfect and never simple. The artists in *We have teeth too* revisit the past, but do so from the position of contemporary culture. These works possess a sharpness that employs humor, poetry, wistfulness, and anger as strategies. As time travelers, they grapple with how to move towards completion, towards the perfect, by activating the past while living in the present and imagining the future. These artists stand as stewards of their cultures, showing their teeth when needed, speaking for themselves, and authoring their past continuous.



Emma Robbins, *Treaty No. 2*, 2018



Natalie Ball, *Hey Berkeley's Phoebe Hearst Museum, this is Natalie Ball. Put my Bones in the Box. Wrap them in the fabric, children and women first. And return my Ancestors. I'll cover shipping*, 2020

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