

### **Skeena Reece's Regalia in Her Performance "Raven: On the Colonial Fleet" (2010)**

Positioning herself within the politics of native resistance against colonialism and its racist/sexist manifestations directed towards native women, Skeena Reece stands as a warrior, proud and powerful in her performance "Raven: On the Colonial Fleet." In her performance, she wears regalia that is composed of a corset and a dance apron with Northwest Coast figures on them, a button blanket and a feathered headdress. Her regalia doesn't belong to a particular indigenous nation, but it is borrowing elements both from indigenous cultures of the Northwest Coast and the Plains.<sup>1</sup> Further, through incorporating a dance headdress that is traditionally worn by men, she is blurring the imposed gender lines, transgressing a gender norm within the native context.<sup>2</sup> Her choice of combining elements that come from different native tribes might be considered offensive from a conservative point of view, but her purpose is not to display the traditional regalia of a particular native tribe; it is rather to make a political statement with her regalia. At the back of her button blanket, where traditionally the family crest is embroidered with shells or buttons, we see a glittering image of a grenade sequined. She doesn't display her family or tribal crest on her button blanket; instead she incorporates an image of war, quite provocative but not aggressive in its feminine appropriation. When we move to the dance apron, we see another provocative image of a thunderbird throwing arms to people and finally on the corset we see Sisiutl, the two-headed serpent, which can be regarded as a sign of protection as it was traditionally painted over doorways for guarding the entrance of houses.<sup>3</sup> These figures displayed on the regalia empower Reece and transform her into a "fe/male warrior."<sup>4</sup> Mythological figures are transferred into a world in which colonialism, racism and sexual violence reign. They arrive from the skies and the ocean to the earth where human beings dwell and support native people's resistance against ongoing colonialism and its violent manifestations.

Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" argues that "as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics."<sup>5</sup> Traditionally the thunderbird would be either carved into a mask to be danced, or painted on a ceremonial screen, and it would mediate a communication with the spiritual world. The mask or the screen would carry an "aura" of magical power that would originate from the ritual function.<sup>6</sup> When we consider the print on Reece's dance apron, the mythological thunderbird dropping arms to resistors as illustrated by Gord Hill, the thunderbird figure does not carry an aura of the kind that

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<sup>1</sup> Skeena Reece, interview by Miguel Burr, *Decoy Magazine*, May 28, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> During her guest lecture at University of British Columbia, ARTH 376 on 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2013 Dana Claxton's comment.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary Stewart, *Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Ritter and Tania Willard, *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* (Vancouver Art Gallery in Collaboration with grunt gallery), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

would emanate from a thunderbird ceremonial mask danced at a ritual, but the figure does something else: it politicizes Reece's performance. On the dance apron of Reece's regalia it gives the message that the woman who wears this regalia is an empowered woman, a "fe/male warrior" declaring that she is armed against colonialism and against the racist/sexist sexual violence directed to her body. She carries a bruise on her shoulder, but more than a victim she stands as a resistor. Reece combats the victimized and disempowered image of the sexually abused native woman through her portrayal of a woman "standing within her sexuality, strong and unashamed in her sexual power."<sup>7</sup> She proudly displays her nativeness and her fe/male sexuality to assert her empowered existence not defined by and defined for the male colonialist gaze, but for herself and for other native women in their resistance against colonialism and its racist/sexist manifestations.

**References:**

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.