



I awoke to find my spirit had returned

ESSAYS

NANABOZHO'S SISTERS

WANDA NANIBUSH

Nanabozho is a half-spirit, half-human shape-shifting Anishinaabe who lives on in our stories and art. They (and this is the proper pronoun) break rules and boundaries through hilarious, sometimes ridiculous situations for the benefit of the whole community. The laughter that comes from their actions shows us our own flawed character and the changeability of our way of doing things. The spirit of Nanabozho lives in the sisters (meaning friends) gathered together in this exhibition: Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Dana Claxton, Thirza Cuthand, Rosalie Favell, Ursula Johnson, Shelley Niro, and Anna Tsouhlarakis. Their works are audacious, rebellious, and cutting edge. The freedom to be whoever one wants to be outside the prescriptions and oppressions of a two-gender system, colonialism, sexism, and heteronormativity is created through imagination, satire, and ironic reversals. Video and photography allow for the active construction of images of family, childhood, sexuality, and play that honour the contemporary lives of Indigenous people that are not built on the tired notion of authentic ‘Indians’. There is also the subtle humour of everyday life in First Nations country that allows us to survive. Finally, all of the images present a more realistic view of Indigenous women’s bodies in all their lived glory, allowing humour to function both as empowering and humbling.

The exhibition begins in 1987 in two very different places: Thunder Bay and Six Nations with *High Tech Teepee Trauma Mama* by Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe, b. 1960) and *The Rebel* by Shelley Niro (Mohawk, b. 1954). 1987 saw Brian Mulroney in power and very little headway for the advancement of Indigenous Rights in Canada. It was a time when artists of colour and Indigenous artists were fighting back against a history of exclusion. The term “identity politics” became a label for their artistic endeavors. The term “identity” was and still is used to demean artistic production. The actual term is thought to be coined by Black women fighting against oppression:

[A]s children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated different—for example, when we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being ‘ladylike’ and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. In the process of consciousness-raising, actually life-sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression.... We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.

— Zillah R. Eisenstein (1978), The Combahee River Collective Statement

It is this rebellious and loving spirit that was in the air when Rebecca Belmore decided to leave art school at the Ontario College of Art and return to Thunder Bay. The backlash against identity politics was very real and she relates that one of her teachers at OCA asked her if her Indian-ness was going to interfere with her art. In audacious fashion she quits and decides to make work for her people by testing it on them at the Friendship Centre and other northern spaces. This is where *High Tech Teepee Trauma Mama* was performed. Belmore sings a song she wrote with Alan Deleary of Seventh Fire parodying the souvenir versions of First Nations culture. She resists by dancing and singing “Come on Souvenir Seeker free me from this plastic.” Part of her point is to connect her song to a video



Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, 1987/2018. Photograph, hand tinted digital print, 32.8 x 47.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

playing scenes from the popular film *Little Big Man* (1970) where violence is perpetrated against Indigenous women. This juxtaposition shows that the material consequences of stereotyping is real violence. *High Tech Teepee Trauma Mama* is an anthem for all Indigenous women as much as *The Rebel* by Shelley Niro has become an icon. The sight of Niro's mother lying in a stereotypical model pose on top of the Rebel sports car is a tribute to the ways we honour our women in all their diversity and power. Niro had seen the fourth First Ministers constitutional conferences on Aboriginal rights break down in 1987 precisely over the issue of First Nations self-government. Niro comes from a matriarchal society that had experienced repeated colonial attempts to destroy the power of their traditional government by removing their clan mothers' and chiefs' power. To lighten everyone's load she created *The Rebel* in a beautiful tribute to her living familial matriarchy.

Lori Blondeau picks up this line of work in her performance personas Cosmo-Squaw and Lonely Surfer Squaw, as a way to undermine the squaw and princess stereotypes that have become colonialism's main presentations of Indigenous women. Blondeau also tells a story of experiencing childhood racism in being labelled "a squaw", which her grandmother

quickly transformed into an empowering moment by telling her "You are a squaw – it just means woman." Again, the strength of women challenged Blondeau to be proud of herself as an Indigenous woman. There is an absurdity to the sight of her in a buffalo bikini in the snow on the prairies with a pink surfboard, that pushes the boundaries of what are acceptable desires for all women. And when she puckers her lips for her own First Nations inspired *Cosmo* magazine, we realize that a completely alien culture setting the standard for beauty for brown women everywhere is absurd.

All three artists, Niro, Belmore, and Blondeau, are given voice in quotes laid across three performative and playful self-portraits by Ursula Johnson. She pays homage to the influence of each artist, as well as a fourth artist, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, in clearing the path for her generation to make and exhibit art, and to feel at home in their skin and culture. She replays Blondeau's bikini-clad pose, creating space for us to stand in solidarity and to laugh cathartically at our own painful memories and experiences of trying to fit into an image not made for us.

Performance artists Blondeau and Shawna Dempsey are honoured in Thirza Cuthand's innovative experimental video work *Through the*



Thirza Cuthand, video still, *Through the Looking Glass*, 1999. Courtesy of the artist and Vtape.

Looking Glass where they appear as Red Queen and White Queen. Cuthand's genuine, honest, and humorous voice really defined a new genre of autobiographical video art. As Alice, she is caught between a First Nations culture that has absorbed the homophobia brought through contact and a white culture that would see her people disappear. Alice wants to wake up to a world where difference isn't violently expunged.

In a similar use of pop culture references, Rosalie Favell's work cites Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Favell wakes up back in Kansas to feel "her spirit had returned" to her. A cultural hero, Louis Riel, is peaking in the window. He led a resistance in 1885 that desired to realize a Métis and First Nations Manitoba. Favell's Dorothy is wrapped in a Hudson Bay blanket which was used as a trade item during the fur trade and became a way that smallpox was spread through Indigenous communities, causing millions of deaths. I have included three other photographs from Favell's series *Plain(s) Warrior Artist* where she creates mini narratives of herself as a hero whose adventures lead us through multi-vocal narratives to find room for a Métis lesbian artist in the history books.

Shelley Niro's film *Honey Moccasin* also uses fiction as a way to imagine a world as it should

be, where the acceptance of homosexuality, boys who want to jingle dress, and young performance artists isn't even a question. Niro clearly respects her community, and cares for everyone by showing us it's better when everyone is allowed to belong. Dana Claxton, like Niro, uses photography to construct images of family, childhood, sexuality, and play that honour contemporary lives of First Nations people. There is a clear, powerful assertion of sexuality throughout most of the works in the exhibition, including *Momma Has a Pony Girl... (named History and sets her free)*. Sexual bondage and pony play is used as metaphor for the trap of euro-centric colonial versions of history. In the photo, the powerful dominant is played by a famous First Nations stage actress who is looking across at her blonde pony-girl who is the submissive in the relationship. Claxton, like Blondeau, points to the desires that underplay colonial history and its representations for all parties. Sometimes, in playing with them in reverse, where we are the stars and the doms, we can see freedom at the edges of the present. Instead of subjugation we can be set free.

Belmore's *Five Sisters* assumes our freedom by enacting everyday scenes of five First Nations women—all played by herself—going to work, having a drink, tracking the land, making fun



Dana Claxton, *Momma Has a Pony Girl! ... (named History and sets her free)*, 2008, from *The Mustang Suite*. Lightjet C-print, 121.2 x 151.5 cm. Collection of the Dalhousie Art Gallery, gift of the artist, 2016.

of a racist statue, and looking tough. The works underscore the fact that the everyday of our lives is constantly eroded by the suffocating racism that reduces these images to supposed fictions. By embedding these contemporary women into a kitschy form of craft presentation like wood decoupage, Belmore resists the temptation to separate high art from low art. Instead, she renders our contemporary everyday as a subject for art and as a hoped-for fixture for First Nations living rooms. She asks: What would happen if we hung these photos in our homes? A craft that was the preferred pastime of the European courts at the height of colonialism becomes a mode of generating positive identity in the living rooms of First Nations people in the former colonies.

Anna Tsouhlarakis's video work takes a sweet dance between strangers to showcase the subtle humour of everyday life in First Nations country that allows us to survive. The simple act of trying to learn a new dance every day from many different people is a beautiful, self-effacing, positive presentation of diversity and connection. The video gives us an experience of the way laughter creates relationships.

Nanabozho's Sisters is an exhibition that acknowledges the history of Indigenous women artists' contribution to the deployment of

humour, irony, and satire within the visual arts. The Trickster spirit is released in this exhibition through the artistic strategies of masquerade, mimicry, parody, ironic reversals, comedic scenarios, anachronistic combinations, and satirical creations. Through the Trickster spirit all things that seem fixed, accepted, entrenched, held sacred, formalized, and organized can be disrupted, scattered, disorganized, and transformed. The artists in ***Nanabozho's Sisters*** throw the weight of colonial representations onto the fire and dance us into a new future.

JANE AFFLECK

Hannah Gadsby, in her recent stand-up comedy performance *Nanette*, deconstructs the nature of comedy to make several points. Possibly the most important is that humour depends on context: she says that a lesbian's self-deprecating "joke" is, within homophobic patriarchy, not a form of humility but of "humiliation" – to make people laugh at her means she effectively remains marginalized.¹ To be aware of context is to understand the potential that an instance of humour has to defamiliarize and subvert norms.

The artworks Wanda Nanibush has included in *Nanabozho's Sisters*, all by Indigenous women from across Turtle Island, were made in the "post-colonial" context.² Their multi-faceted uses of humour speak to Indigenous viewers, as many may recognize and relate to aspects of Indigenous experience within the present-day colonial context. It has been noted that Indigenous peoples' humour is a form of resilience within and resistance to colonial oppression. Bruce Johansen says that "[h]umour has been a survival tool and a means of facilitating self-awareness and identity among Native Americans for centuries," and that humour functions as "catharsis ... in the face of oppression, contemporary and historical."³ Johansen quotes artist Bently Spang (Northern Cheyenne): "regardless of how the experts define the function of humour in my culture, the bottom line is that we are a pretty darn funny people. Humour has helped us deal with incredible adversity and hardship over the years and is still an integral part of life today."⁴ Artist Caroline Monnet (Algonquin, Quebecoise, and French) has a similar view: "There has been so much trauma and hardship in our history. How come we're still there and we're still able to have humour and laugh...? Is resilience a part of our protective shield?"⁵

While jokes might still be funny to the teller even when they "bomb," their success does depend on both a skilled raconteur and a receptive listener; in other words, humour is social. Responses to humour are rooted in shared beliefs and/or values, as both Noël Carroll and Simon Critchley discuss.⁶

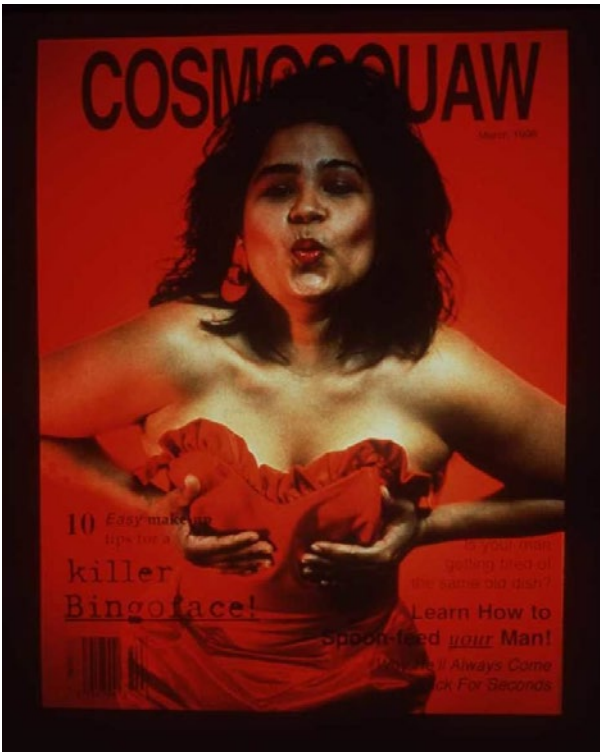
More crucial, perhaps, is that

by distancing us from [common sense], humour familiarizes us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization. If humour recalls us to *sensus communis*, then it does this by momentarily pulling us out of common sense, where jokes function as moments of *dis-sensus communis*.⁷

Humour facilitates a new perspective, and situations once accepted as "normal" now seem strange, even against our values and beliefs – a situation such as colonialism, for example. For settler-viewers of the artworks in *Nanabozho's Sisters*, then, humour's defamiliarizing effects may prompt us to see colonialism as strange, even counter to our self-concept that Canadians are "nice," not racist, etc.

The dialogic nature of humour may also facilitate an affinity between the artist as subject/agent and the settler-viewer as recipient/interpreter. As settler-viewers recognize the humour within these artworks, we come to share these Indigenous women's perspectives, which is to step away from our settler perspective but also to be reminded of our complicit role within colonialism. The majority of these works involve self-portraiture, which contributes to settler-viewers' recognition of the subject positions of these women, whose self-representation subverts stereotypes perpetuated within settler-colonial culture. Wanda Nanibush, discussing Rebecca Belmore's performance art, has stated: "[t]he presence of an Indigenous woman's body pushes through stories of victimhood to resilience and strength, it pushes through the overwhelming denigration of stereotypes."⁸

Several works in *Nanabozho's Sisters* use parody to defamiliarize both stereotypical representations of Indigenous women and colonialism. Parody, by Linda Hutcheon's definition, is "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity," with "tension



Lori Blondeau, *Cosmosquaw*, 1996. Duratrans lightbox, 31.4 x 25.4 x 10 cm. Collection of John Cook, Ottawa.

between the potentially conservative effect of repetition and the potentially revolutionary impact of difference.”⁹ Parody, whether humorous or not, also invites viewers to recognize the intentions of the artist as “encoding agent”¹⁰ – countering the ethos of post-structuralism, which posits the “death of the author” or artist and privileges the reader’s/viewer’s interpretations.¹¹ The parodic work’s differences from the precursor artwork (or other cultural reference point) enable viewers to recognize the artist through recognizing her intentions. The differences render the precursor work, as well as the past and present socio-cultural context, strange – the incongruity of this defamiliarization might indeed be humorous.

Lori Blondeau (Cree, Salteaux, Métis) uses parody in *Cosmosquaw* (1996) to critique popular media representations of women in general, but also white-settler-dominated media representations of Indigenous women, as well as their exclusion/erasure from these media. Blondeau dramatizes the typical *Cosmopolitan* magazine’s covergirl’s sexuality to the point of burlesque, both in the sense of an “absurd or comically exaggerated imitation,” and as the entertainment form that often involves scantily dressed women.¹² While *Cosmo* covergirls are passive objects for the male gaze (and cater to the assumption that women wish to be the object of that gaze), Blondeau’s covergirl is active. By re-

fusing passivity through mocking this stereotype, she resists objectification.

In keeping with the magazine cover form, Blondeau’s parody includes cover sells, one of which states: “10 Easy makeup tips for a killer Bingoface!” Departing from the usual exhortations to “seduce him,” this text implies readers who can’t afford an expensive “night on the town” – perhaps girls from the “rez” who frequent the bingo hall.¹³ Indigenous viewers of Blondeau’s work might laugh in recognition.¹⁴ Yet, settler-viewers are also assumed to want to look good for bingo, or to place themselves in the shoes of women who do. Here, then, through the incongruous and thus humorous reference to bingo, the settler-viewer potentially recognizes the position of the Indigenous artist. However, for low-waged Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks alike, bingo jackpots, like lottery tickets, enable fantasies of escaping harsh economic reality; bingo may also represent the cycles of poverty both economic and spiritual in some Indigenous communities brought about by colonial policies of cultural genocide. So while *Cosmosquaw* is humorous, the context sobers the tone.

Rebecca Belmore’s series *Five Sisters* (1995) can also be read as parody. These photographs mounted on wood are reminiscent of kitschy souvenir-



Rebecca Belmore, detail, *Five Sisters*, 1995. Photographic prints mounted on wood, dimensions vary. Collection of the Blackwood Gallery.

type photos popular in the twentieth century.¹⁵ Wanda Nanibush recounts that many Indigenous homes, including her own, had these “wood-slice” images, which featured stereotypical “Indians” (e.g., an “Indian maiden”).¹⁶ Belmore retains the form of these photos but replaces the mythological “Indian” with a contemporary Indigenous woman, in locations that potentially challenge even as they allude to stereotypical representations. In one, Belmore crouches beneath a taxidermy moose. In another, her profile appears alongside that of a dark-skinned statue, as though inviting comparisons.

Belmore’s works offer subtle critiques. The stuffed moose might remind viewers of the effects of colonization and colonialism, including the fact that many animal populations have been reduced, and that the Crown’s disrespect for treaties has resulted in many Indigenous peoples being disconnected from traditions such as hunting. The profile with the fibreglass “Indian head” juxtaposes a stereotypical representation with a contemporary; here, the incongruous differences might provoke a response that is less amused than bemused. For settler-viewers, Belmore’s parodic photos, in offering a counter-narrative to stereotypes, may defamiliarize not only those stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples but also themselves as settler-Canadians: if Indigenous women are not

who I thought they were, then who am I?

Humour in Indigenous art might be understood as a kind of “counting coup.” Originally, this involved “striking an enemy” with the hand, a weapon, or a “coupstick” during “intertribal” warfare in the region known as the Great Plains and was considered a demonstration of courage. With the spread of colonialism across Turtle Island, counting coup was also used in clashes with “American troops.”¹⁸ According to Brian Noble, associate professor in Dalhousie University’s Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, it also took other forms: the colonizer’s shirt or buckled belt, for example, enabled the wearer to “[take] on some of the rival’s power [while] inviting them to ... join into a good relationship.”¹⁹ When parodic humour targets colonialism, it “touches” the rival (settler-Canadians) not physically but perhaps emotionally. For Indigenous peoples, humour may indeed be a form of resilience and a means of reclaiming power. But it also emphasizes relationship, in requiring a response from settler-viewers – whether wry laughter or ontological discomfort.

When settler-viewers share the humour presented in the works in *Nanabozho’s Sisters*, we effectively accept the invitation “to join into a good relationship.” But this is just the first step. Simon

Critchley says, “If humour tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are perhaps not the person you would like to be. ... [H]umour might ... contain an indirect appeal that this place stands in need of change.”²⁰ Settler-viewers, seeing themselves from a new perspective as aspects of colonialism are defamiliarized, might also begin to see that the Canadian “ideal” doesn’t quite line up with reality, and that this place called Canada needs to be transformed – to be decolonized, perhaps through the humour integral to these women’s artworks.

ENDNOTES

1. Hannah Gadsby. *Nanette*. 69 minutes, performed at the Sydney Opera House, directed by Madeleine Parry and John Olb, Netflix, June 2018. Viewed July 2 and July 23, 2018.
2. Colonialism is not an historic one-time event but as an ongoing situation in nation-states such as Canada and the United States. Recognition of this has been accompanied by an increase in calls to “decolonize”; Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang, in “Decolonization Is not a Metaphor,” offer a perspective on the present context of colonialism and what decolonization means. In *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vo. 1., no. 1, 2012, pp.1–40, <https://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554>. Accessed July 29, 2018.
3. Bruce E. Johansen. “Catharsis vis-à-vis Oppression: Contemporary Native American Political Humour.” *Simile*, vol. 5, no. 2, May 2005, np.
4. *Ibid.*
5. CBC Arts. “In concrete and copper, Caroline Monnet pays tribute to Indigenous resilience,” March 29, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/exhibitionists/in-concrete-and-copper-caroline-monnet-pays-tribute-to-indigenous-resilience-1.4591007>. Accessed April 22, 2018.
6. Noël Carroll. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014. Simon Critchley. *On Humour*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2002.
7. Critchley, *On Humour*, 19.
8. Wanda Nanibush. “Anishinaabe-kwe and/or Indigenous feminist?” *C Magazine*. Winter 2017, p. 56.
9. Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. 1985. Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. xii.
10. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 53.
11. See Roland Barthes’ essay, “The Death of the Author,” first published in 1967 and republished in *Image, Music, Text* in 1977.
12. The definition of “burlesque” is from the Mac computer dictionary. Accessed July 28, 2018.
13. Tomson Highway’s 1986 play *The Rez Sisters* is about “seven impoverished Indians,” according to a 1994 review in *The New York Times*, who hope to win the jackpot at “the biggest bingo in the world.” David Richards, January 5, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/05/theater/review-theater-the-rez-sisters-bingo-as-the-way-of-escape-at-dismal-odds.html>. Accessed July 28, 2018.
14. As a white settler who hasn’t spent much time on reserves, I can’t be certain of the popularity of bingo or how many Indigenous people might relate to this. I did note, when I attended a stand-up comedy performance by Ryan McMahon (Anishinaabe) in October 2016, he made a few jokes about life “on the rez,” and an Indigenous woman I know and her friends, seated at the front of the hall, shook with laughter. (The performance was at Market Hall Performing Arts Centre, Nogojiwanong (Peterborough, ON), on October 15, 2016.)
15. My parents were given one by my grandfather in the 1980s – a thick slice of a real tree emblazoned with an image of Yellowstone Park.
16. Wanda Nanibush. Essay for Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto, 2012, <http://blackwoodgallery.ca/Web%20Images/Permanent%20Collection/PDF/Rebecca%20Belmore.pdf>. Accessed July 30, 2018.
17. McGinnis Lyons, Anthony R. “Counting Coup.” *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, edited by David J. Wishart, plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egg.war.013. Accessed April 19, 2018. (The webpage is based on McGinnis Lyons’ book, *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal War on the Northern Plains, 1738–1889*. Cordillera Press, Inc., 1990.)
18. *Ibid.*
19. Jane Affleck. “Keeping the beat: Aboriginal art and hip-hop at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.” *Dal News*, April 25, 2014. <https://www.dal.ca/news/2014/04/25/keeping-the-beat--aboriginal-art-and-hip-hop-at-the-dalhousie-ar.html>. Accessed July 29, 2018.
20. Critchley, *On Humour*, 75. In an interview, Critchley also states that “one of the interesting things about humor is that the ugly issue of national identity surfaces in a very powerful way, and I think it should. ... we all of us [are] rooted in national traditions which are ugly and horrible and make us what we are.” From Brian Dillon, “Very Funny: An Interview with Simon Critchley,” *Cabaret Magazine*, spring 2005, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/17/dillon.php>. Accessed July 23, 2018.



Ursula Johnson, detail, *Between My Body and Their Words*, 2017. Digital photographs printed on vinyl (series of 4), each 136.1 x 91.2 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, acquired with funds from The Winnipeg Art Gallery Foundation Kathleen M. Richardson Fund, 2018.

These essays accompany *Nanabozho's Sisters*, works by Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Dana Claxton, Thirza Cuthand, Rosalie Favell, Ursula Johnson, Shelley Niro, and Anna Tsouhlarakis, at the Doris McCarthy Gallery from February 9 - March 30, 2019. Exhibition curated by Wanda Nanibush and organized by Dalhousie Art Gallery.

Wanda Nanibush is an Anishinaabe-kwe curator, image and word warrior, and community organizer. Currently she is the inaugural curator of Canadian & Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. She holds a masters in Visual Studies from the University of Toronto where she has taught graduate courses. Her curatorial projects include: *Rita Letendre: Fire & Light* (AGO, 2017), *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971-1989* (AGO, 2016), *Sovereign Acts II* (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2017), *The Fifth World* (Mendel Art Gallery, 2015) and the award winning *KWE: The work of Rebecca Belmore* (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 2014).

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Anna Tsouhlarakis, video still, *Let's Dance!*, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

COVER IMAGE: Rosalie Favell, *I Awoke to Find My Spirit Had Returned*, 1999. Inkjet print, 82.3 x 76.9 cm.
Collection of the Dalhousie Art Gallery, gift of the artist, 2018.

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