

A Reparative Act

“You must not only be able to understand and co-exist in the worlds of the Zhaagaanash and Wemtigoozhii, but even more importantly, you must never forget your Anishnaabek people, language, traditions and homeland”. Excerpt from a personal conversation with the late Ernie Debassige, M’Chigeeng, Manitoulin Island, Ontario.

At the onset of 1843, a small group of Mississauga cultural ambassadors destined for Europe left their small and modest community of Bkejwanong¹ (*where the waters divide*), nestled on the Great Lakes waterway that separates Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario. Organized by a former devout Methodist, traditionalist, linguist and translator George Henry, Maungwudaus, this newly formed dance troupe would hone and refine their performances in North America, conducting a series of them in Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, Utica, Albany and finally New York City, before setting sail at the beginning of March for the bustling commercial shipping port of Portsmouth, England. Maungwudaus and his troupe would venture onward into continental Europe performing before the royal courts of France and Belgium. Through his self-published accounts we begin to garner a rare glimpse of this period from a perspective offering a voluminous depth of understanding and insight into a profound and astonishing journey, physically and emotionally, considering the insurmountable ravages of smallpox sweeping Paris at the time.

Their travels would take them through barren pre-industrial and impoverished cities, towns and rural villages of England, Scotland and Ireland, and after several months of gruelling travel and public performances, fate would unite them with American frontier painter George Catlin, whose traveling Indian Portrait Gallery was a grand affair that included hundreds of colourful portraits of Amerindians inspired by a narrative of impending disappearance and performances that used authentic articles of clothing, teepees, canoes and weapons to animate a dying way of life. Validated and defined in public lectures by Catlin himself² in notable venues such as the Egyptian Hall in London, it heightened public awareness of Maungwudaus and his troupe bestowing a kind of celebrity status resulting in invitations to dine with the upper class of English society, including an invitation by Queen Victoria to Windsor Castle, and later forays into other royal courts including that of Louis-Philippe of France³.

By the time they appeared in France, Maungwudaus and the Mississauga were increasingly strained and fatigued from travel. Time there would be short-lived as sickness and death from smallpox took its toll. Surviving members of the troupe would eventually repair to Belgium to convalesce for more than a year, a remarkable story of

¹ Walpole Island is situated near Sarnia, Ontario.

² Catlin, George. *Notes of Eight Years’ Travels and Residence in Europe: With His North American Indian Collection*. With anecdotes and incidents of the travels and adventures of three different parties of American Indians who he introduced to the Courts of England, France and Belgium. 2 vols. London. 1848.

³ Feest, Christian F. Mulvey, Christopher. *Among the Sag-a-noshes: Ojibwa and Iowa Indians with George Catlin in Europe*, in *Indians and Europe: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London. 1989. pp. 253-277. Feest’s essay provides a substantive and detailed chronology of events tracing the three Ojibwa and Iowa dance troupes who toured with George Catlin.

loss and trauma, lavishly ensconced in the romanticism of the period. The pen and ink sketches of Eugene Delacroix who witnessed the performances, are interwoven with the disappearance narrative, the clash of two very polarized cultures fused together in a fleeting moment of time through art, politics and literature. A miniscule moment in history deeply shrouded under a veil of mysticism, exoticism and romance, monumental in its celebration of a distant foreign space and time.

Sleeping in the vaults and archives of the Louvre (the former Royal Palace), the relatively unassuming Delacroix sketches of the Mississauga had lain dormant wrapped in archival paper, ironically only metres away from where they were originally drawn and equally profound, and somewhat prophetic, they would be viewed and sketched by Robert Houle more than a century later. This act of re-awakening the spirit entered into the lives of most if not all of us who became connected with *Paris/Ojibwa*, a transcendent human experience of art, whispering respectfully about the sense of a presence.

Listening on several occasions to Houle talk of his rich and spiritually charged trips to Paris to visit the Delacroix drawings, my own personal interest was piqued as a contemporary Southern Straight powwow dancer. I was literally jolted into a profound intellectual and emotional space resonating so strongly that I felt an overwhelming sense of affinity with these dancers. I knew what drove these dancers to want to share the beauty of their people, culture and spirituality. Understanding the power of dance and how it has traditionally been used to instill personal and collective healing, it would have been innate in those dancer's performances during a time of unpredictable and random vulnerability. The great distance they traveled also resonated strongly within me as I too travel vast distances every summer with my powwow family on the North American dance circuit, driving for days to distant powwows just to dance, perform, and celebrate!

The memory and spirit of these dancers had to be honoured. Having gone through the protocol, ceremony, teachings and initiation that dancers undergo upon entry into the dance circle, I knew it was my responsibility to somehow recognize and repatriate their trapped spirits back to their traditional homeland on the Great Lakes. Repatriation for us is new, we never had the need to create a special ceremony or develop a ritual protocol for retrieving the remains of our people or sacred bundles taken and housed in distant and inaccessible museum collections around the world. Several emerging cultural practitioners have cautioned on how spiritually and physically debilitating it can be to bring ancestors and sacred objects home for reburial, so I knew that if I was to undertake a series of honouring performances, I needed to be physically and spiritually prepared, I had to train and dance hard that summer. After several conversations with Robert, I proposed a series of four public dance performances to be presented as performance works deeply rooted in ceremony and honour. They had to be simple and uncomplicated, so I chose to use a "boombox" and an iPhone instead of live drummers. In order to acknowledge each of the dancers, I presaged each performance by calling out a single name, for I felt it was important that that their name be remembered and announced as it had been spoken in Paris 167 years ago.

On the day of the opening, I prepared my regalia in my hotel room and ritually dressed myself with the intent of traveling by subway to the selected performance sites. I needed to experience the gaze that the dancers felt while walking the very same streets of Paris in full regalia and to feel the pain Maungwudaus wrote about in his account of their feet hurting continually from dancing hard on the stone surfaces and walking through the pebbled streets and parks of Paris in their moccasins. The forecast for the day was rain, and as I left my hotel and headed for the metro, the sky loomed dark and ominous. I remember emerging from the arched covered laneway of my hotel and immediately feeling the damp coolness of the air as I entered the narrow and crowded streets. Groups of pedestrians stopped and blatantly gawked, pointed and laughed at me in my floral beaded velvet regalia, others simply smiled, coyly ignored me or were completely oblivious as they went about their daily business. As I descended the steps of the metro, people who were in front of me turned around hearing the approach of my bells and quickly stepped out of the way to let me pass. I felt contagious, untouchable; someone to be avoided at all costs, like the dancers who had contracted smallpox. No one extended a welcoming hand, or stopped me to ask where I was from or why I was dressed that way. Standing on the busy metro platform waiting for the next train, I couldn't help but feel a plethora of conflicting emotions that fluctuated between sadness, happiness, fear and anger. Time transitioned into slow motion. I remember the gusts of wind from approaching trains blowing my regalia, feathers and porcupine roach all around me as if witnessing it from outside my body and through the glaring eyes of the oncoming train. As the doors shot open, passengers literally leaned out to catch a glimpse of me, the crowds exiting parted widely as I stepped towards them to board the train. As I hung onto the pole grasping my eagle feather fan and war club in hand, I felt like I was trapped inside a stasis of total silence; no one uttering a word. At that moment, I felt I had become the exotic, the Other, the *object d'art*. I felt truly alone without my community, sense of belonging, laughter, teasing and cajoling of my powwow companions. Now I understood their sense of loneliness and homesickness, yet in retrospective, I can't also help but think that this is exactly what the spirit of those dancers wanted me to feel and experience. For the remainder of the ride, I clearly felt their presence, each peering with me through my eyes as I left the train and made my way through the underground concourse labyrinth towards the Louvre metro exit.

Approaching the first performance location, the inner courtyard near the Louvre's Porte de Lions, a planned event was taking place inside celebrating the tenth anniversary of the musée du quai Branly's collection at the Louvre. A press conference was underway complimented by a small exhibition of Northwest Coast masks. Robert was to have accompanied Nelcya Delanoë to the event but being the day of the opening of *Paris/Ojibwa*, he suggested that I attend instead. After much controversy and resistance, we finally succeeded in gaining entrance and viewed the masks, most of which were previously owned by the French anthropologist Levis Strauss. A film crew recording the event for the archives of the Branly spotted me in full regalia and wanted to get my impression and opinion of the works. I told them that as dancer I was always deeply moved and saddened by masks displayed as *objects d'art*, knowing that they were once celebrated in song, story and dance and passed on in family lineage.

This ironic intervention and experience only strengthened my clarity, direction and purpose as I left the exhibition and immediately commenced my series of honour performances. As I stood on the grass and pushed the play button on my portable audio player, I looked up to see the sun breaking through a hole in the clouds revealing a patch of blue sky. The sun followed me the entire five kilometres of my route through the Tuileries, past the Place de la Concorde and finally to the final performance at the Canadian Cultural Centre where I called out the name of Saysaygon, the medicine-man who purportedly healed a French woman prior to his own death. Not long after I started to dance, a woman walked out from the small group of spectators and placed a euro at my feet. It was as if she was the healed woman returning to give thanks giving me a tremendous feeling of elation in witnessing another reparative act. Robert and I took the Euro into the exhibition and tucked it into the faux salon of the installation directly behind Saysaygon's portrait.

It is now a full year later and with much hindsight, I continue to unravel this all-consuming, powerful and transformative journey but am no where close to coming to terms with the inexplicable chain of events, sign-posts and markers that crossed my path. I would later reveal to Robert that it seemed as though the dancers were reaching out to us to make us feel and experience what they felt, far from their homeland, relatives and loved ones. These coincidences and events continued the next day. As I was preparing to leave Paris, Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupted spewing tons of volcanic ash grounding all flights in and out of Europe. Stranded for a week an opportunity finally appeared ending the arduous journey and allowing me to return home overwhelmed and exhausted.

I have only recently returned to the powwow trail after almost an entire year of not dancing. Ironically, it is ritual in the powwow community that after the death of a family member or close acquaintance, a dancer may take a hiatus. I did not deliberately choose not to dance, I simply did not have the desire to dance for it was as if there was nothing more I could ever experience if I had chosen to dance at that point in time. Having recently returned to the sacred circle, I now feel recharged and stronger than ever. Moreover, I know that deep in my heart this experience will never reveal all its secrets to me but when I enter the sacred circle at Grand Entry I unequivocally carry with me the memory and spirit of those dancers, and I will for the remainder of my dancing days - as one dancer to another.

Barry Ace, 2011