

THE RHYTHM OF THIS DESIRE: AN ESSAY BY ERICA VIOLET LEE

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The first time I saw Thirza Cuthand's work, I blushed. The last time I viewed her work, I blushed harder. It never seems to get easier to hide what you're feeling when you're in a room with such raw and potent materials.

Cuthand's films are not an uncomplicated experience for the viewer. That would be far too unfulfilling. If there's anything I know about Thirza, it's that, like any great performer, they are all about the tease.

The first Thirza Cuthand film I saw was in a little theatre in Saskatoon. Entitled "You Are a Lesbian Vampire" (2008), this experience of Cuthand's signature, casual parlance overlaid on a scenario of lust and queer maybe-could-be-love was one of the first times I saw queer – and more specifically (as we must be) lesbian Indigenous sexualities displayed onscreen. At the time, I didn't yet know I was queer, or more likely, just hadn't yet admitted it to myself because there was little room to even consider queerness as possibly existing in tandem with Nativeness.

I do not exaggerate when I say that it is thanks to the work of artists like Cuthand and Cuthand specifically that so many of us are now able to exist in ways that are much more honest and genuine to our Two-Spirit souls and bodies. In stark contrast to the heteronormative standards of love that overwhelm Indigenous discourse to this day, Cuthand's films are fearless declaration after fearless declaration of something much deeper than the shallow, packaged "pride" we are sold – they are embodied queer NDN sovereignty enacted.

The impact of Cuthand's works never fails to strike fear into the hearts of colonizers and provoke lust in the gay little hearts of prairie neechies. Her career, which has been ongoing since 1995, has accomplished more in shaping the world of plains art and theory than any white dude you can name, and she does it all using a bare (often quite literally)

minimalist approach that is at once intentional and practical.

"Thirza Cuthand is an Indian Within the Meaning of the Indian Act" (2017) may be one of the artist's most well-known pieces. Cuthand provocatively addresses the notions of whiteness in Indigenous communities and the difficulties of being a "white-passing" or "light-skinned" Indigenous person, contrasting the differences of her own experience with that of her family. "...white people thinking I was one of the 'better ones'," Cuthand contends, due to their appearance, is still a story rooted in anti-Indigenous racism, and deeper still, I consider, of anti-Blackness. In a conversation of identity that continues and evolves daily, the stakes are these: a demand for Native life and Native survival, despite and in spite of colonialism that still threatens to tear apart our worlds and our communities.

In "[Woman Dress](#)" (2019), a piece for the National Film Board, Cuthand documents an interview with her auntie. "Hi Auntie!", the video begins, with familiar and warm phrasing; among images of the plains and running buffalo, a woman in a hide dress appears, like a long-gone but never forgotten ancestor walking into the room. Launching into a lesson about the traditional lack of gender pronouns in Cree culture and language, Cuthand is never afraid to challenge patriarchal notions of who our people are often assumed to be. By the end of the story, a powerful urban presence is established, complete with colorful graffiti and a conclusion that dreams of the Native femme freedom to travel and move through our lands without restraint that we are so often denied. "Medicine Bundle" (2020) juxtaposes beautiful imagery of the prairies with stories of the varied, complex relationships between Cree people and bears; weaving tales that honour both the material and spiritual elements of such animal-human relations through the lens of sickness and pandemics. Cuthand outlines the significance of dreams and dreaming to our survival as Indigenous people. "Settlers don't really understand...", Cuthand says, "...so it's not a

story I tell often.” Thankfully, she trusts us as her audience just enough to lend us these precious, vulnerable histories of her family and of our nations, if only for a moment.

Intense is too quotidian a word to describe Cuthand’s art when dirt, flesh, and earth are her specialties. Flirting with form and the feel of its breaking, remaking queer and Two-Spirit histories, presence, and futures in a world where Indigenous people are allowed and encouraged to be complicated, messy, beautiful lovers, Cuthand is one of the most alluring, incisive, and hilarious political commentators of this moment. *Smart* is too neat a word for Cuthand’s art when it ranges from futuristic speculative Indigenous fiction in works like “Just Dandy” (2013), where the Evil Colonizing Queen is responsible for Turtle Island’s contraction of an invasive European flora, to “2 Spirit Introductory Special \$19.99” (2015), an advertisement for a coming-out package (pun intended). Her imagination is expansive and her talent never fails to meet the challenge set out.

Given their extraordinarily impressive range and prolific output, it’s clear that Cuthand is at once an artist, a theorist, a poet, a documentarian, a performer, and even a historian – though I’m certain all of these labels would be rejected outright for something way cooler. After all, queerness is not only about sexuality (though it doesn’t hurt), but about choosing to live as a creature inherently transgressive of borders and boundaries that some folks are so eager to impose on our skins and lands. Films like “Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory” (1995) still hold up as an intimate and vulnerable - yet never consumable - autobiographical look into Cuthand’s high school experience, skillfully thinking through representation, loneliness, and emerging victorious.

One thing is certain: Regina’s own (but never owned) anticolonial dreamer, Thirza Cuthand, is just at the baby-dyke-beginning of a remarkable, one-of-a-kind career that will no doubt continue to make us blush like a prairie sunset bursting over the horizon: untameable, dreamy, material, and intangible. It’s one of those things you just need to experience for yourself.