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*Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind
Indigenous Cultural Preservation* (review)

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Taxidermic Signs marks a provocative and at times compelling exploration of colonial logics and practices, and especially of how “taxidermic modes of representation perpetually rearticulate past-ness and perpetuity in dynamic configurations” (17). Readers interested in the application of semiotics to colonial representations of native subjects will find it particularly instructive.

REVIEW ESSAY by *Leanne Simpson*

Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation

by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008

In searching through the database of racist slurs that have been hurled at me over my life as a Nishnaabekwe, I'm not sure I've ever actually been called “neolithic.” And I've never read an entire book (published in 2008, no less) that attempts to convince me that my caveman ways are inferior, outdated, and responsible for my maldevelopment and that of my Indigenous relations. I've never read a book that actually re-casts colonialism and residential schools as saviors for Indigenous peoples, primarily because the authors took it upon themselves to relegate their cartoonish characterization of Indigenous cultures inferior to all things European.

Until now.

I want to be up front with you. I am a Mississauga woman, I am a scholar, and I am a wholehearted advocate for Indigenous peoples. I believe Indigenous peoples have complex, intricate, and relevant intellectual traditions. I love my people, my land, and my culture, and I believe our political systems hold great promise for re-envisioning our relationships with state governments—all beliefs that the authors of this book, Francis Widdowson and her husband, Albert Howard, dismiss as deception, lies, and “traditional quackery” (255).

Throughout my professional life, Widdowson and Howard have misused my work, which is rooted in decolonizing and Indigenist theory and the work of my colleagues to advance their Euro-centric, neo-assimilative political agenda reminiscent of the nineteenth century. And for over ten years now, Indigenous scholars and our allies have critiqued Widdowson and Howard's work, only to be met with strikingly willful and committed ignorance and constant charges of anti-intellectualism, emotionalism, and romanticism, because, as they claim in this work, we have built our careers around obscuring the fact that Indigenous peoples are culturally inferior and neolithic in order to

secure our economic viability as part of the "Aboriginal Industry." In this book, they continue their attempt to use the writings of Indigenous scholars against our own peoples by decontextualizing our work and twisting it to say the exact opposite of its original intent or, if they find it too convincing, they ignore it altogether. A decade of engagement has only further entrenched them in their own web of untenable "scholarship." While they have been rejected from serious scholarly pursuits and Indigenous communities and organizations in general, neo-conservatives in Canada will no doubt embrace their racist rhetoric. And while mainstream media outlets have jumped on the bandwagon of manufactured controversy largely because racism against Indigenous peoples still sells papers in Canada, their work will not have any serious impact on scholarship or Canadian Aboriginal policy.

Widdowson and Howard attempt to expose the "Aboriginal Industry" that has developed around land claims and to demonstrate that Aboriginal policy in Canada has been manipulated by non-Aboriginal lawyers and consultants, hardly a novel claim. They take on all the major Aboriginal issues (the majority of which they have no expertise in whatsoever), including land claims, self-government, justice, child welfare, health care, education, environmental management, and Traditional Knowledge using disproven and outdated anthropological theory, retro Stalinist "socialism from above," and a battery of newspaper clippings, e-mails, chat room postings, a collection of bizarre personal anecdotes, and the lyrics of John Lennon (259). By avoiding the overwhelming majority of current social science research and the scholarship of every reputable Indigenous academic in North America, they are able to construct an insanely trite caricature of "Aboriginal culture," which they then proceed to attack. Using this fantastical approach to "research," which is best described as scrapbooking, they conclude that Aboriginal peoples should dissolve our cultures (or, sorry, our "culture"), welcome resource extraction industries to fully destroy our territories, and rush to assimilate into the wonders of white Canada.

I initially assumed that the term "Aboriginal Industry" was being employed in this book to sidestep Canada's hate laws, that the authors were using the term as a substitute for "Indigenous people." Although they originally use the term to refer to non-Aboriginal lawyers and consultants, it is then quickly applied to Indigenous academics, layers, writers, consultants, "corrupt and self-serving leaders," and just about any other Indigenous person with a job of any kind. But the term "Indian Industry" has also been used over the last decade in exactly the same manner by the political right in Canada to promote exactly the same agenda of assimilation. And the anti-intellectualism that marks this racist rhetoric is also applied here when the authors categorically ignore every serious Indigenous scholar in Canada and the United States, while attacking and

denigrating the work of Vince Deloria Jr. (71), Georges Sioux (71), Kiera Ladner (73), and Taiaiake Alfred (74), to name just a few.

While there is a spattering of outdated Marxism, pre-1950s anthropology, and social darwinism, the basic theoretical foundation of this book, the one that permeates every chapter, is a full-hearted belief in Euro-centrism, diffusionism, and universality—all stemming from a nineteenth-century epistemological framework that provided the intellectual justification for colonialism in the first place (see “Post-Colonial Ghost Dancing” by Sakej Youngblood Henderson in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*). The authors might have been aware of this if they had familiarized themselves at all with colonial theory, the numerous bodies of theory dealing with the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples, Indigenous–state relations, or again the vast majority of social science research that points to self-determination as a way out of the legacy of colonialism.

The authors believe, at every turn, that the subjugation of Indigenous peoples will somehow greatly improve our lives and welfare because it would prevent us from clinging to our primitive, illiterate, dysfunctional, and corrupt savage mentalities—a belief that puts them in the company of the outdated political theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who ultimately were responsible for the horrors of residential schools that sought to “kill the Indian in the child,” for which Canada is so desperately trying to apologize. In doing so, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* reveals a shocking number of insane beliefs about Indigeniety that only a complete lack of methodology, research, and disregard for scholarship in general could produce, including the following: that our societies are characterized by “savagery” and “barbarism” (12); that Indigenous peoples are technologically less advanced (96); that our traditional economies and lifeways lack forethought, discipline, and cooperation (96); that we are lazy and unable to work (97), but when we do have jobs we have “high rates of tardiness and absenteeism” (96); that we are unable to participate in wider society (105); that nurturing Indigenous cultures is “remaining at a neolithic state” (255); that residential schools were positive and necessary (25); that Traditional Knowledge was a precursor to the scientific method (235); that our “spiritual connection to the land is a result of an *absence* of ecological understanding”; that Indigenous “animalistic beliefs are a reflection of the neolithic period’s lack of technological development and a lower capacity to control nature” (219); and that our legal systems were based on “blood vengeance” (138). They believe that we never had nations and have no claim to self-determination (113). They believe that Indigenous peoples lack intellect and that we would abandon our inferior “pre-literate languages, traditional quackery, animistic superstitions, tribalism, and unviable subsistence activities” if they were not funded by the federal government (255).

This is racism.

This is hate.

It is difficult to seriously engage this book. It would take volumes to address the mirage of weird and unsubstantiated claims the authors make. Spending that time gives the book more credence than it is worth, and it distracts us from the real work and agendas of our communities and nations. It distracts us from building our resurgence.

What is most appalling to me is not that the book was written but that such a weak manuscript passed through “scholarly peer review”—references in most chapters would not stand up in a first-year undergraduate essay. The manuscript is in desperate need of substantive editing—it is inconsistent in its arguments, contradictory in a number of places, incongruent, and poorly researched. It is simply stunning that a prominent so-called academic press, McGill-Queen’s (which has lost all credibility as a result), would publish this book. I can only assume it shares political motivations with Widdowson and Howard, because there is no scholarly merit here.

In short, the book is simply part of a racist colonial machine that still manages to find room to operate in Canada, much to the detriment of improving relations between Indigenous peoples and the state. It picks up from where overtly racist Canadian policy left off prior to 1951 and promotes it as a unique and refreshing direction for contemporary Aboriginal policy—this based on a grade school understanding of Indigenous peoples and our experiences in dealing with colonialism, honed through the lens of the empire. In doing so, the book takes for granted European superiority, justifies the atrocities of colonialism, and negates the complexity of our intellectual and political traditions, over five centuries of resistance and the diverse and beautiful cultures of Indigenous peoples.

My ancestors were not stupid or lazy; they were not cavemen and neither am I.