



## A Dance Around Things

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I've driven past the pawnshop many times. But today I have brought my camera, and I ask the man behind the counter if I can take a picture of the statue guarding the entrance. "My Chief? Of course, be my guest. Thanks for asking."

The Chief's body is strangely flat, a composite of postures and insignia. He wears a full headdress of feathers, an animal skin around his shoulders, a beige skirt, blue army trousers, and a sash with stars and stripes draped over his bare chest. Even the white feathers tucked in the belt have a red and blue drawing. Left foot raised on a block, left hand shielding the eyes, the body draws a line that tilts forwards. In front view, shoulders and hips are in perfect parallel; no weight shift is helping the statue balance. Left foot raised on the curb, I try to copy the pose. I lean forward, flexing muscles in my legs and buttocks but almost topple over. The Chief watches me in silence. A wooden body and a piece of rope tied around his arm and fastened to the door prevent him from the same fate.

A long crack bulges open his chest. There's an odd violence to his warped body. A bunch of stereotypes in 3D, all carved out of one log. The stoic face, the face paint, the perfect scout, forced into a costume and chiseled into a pose. But there's also violence in the disjunctions, there are ways in which the different features don't add up. Standing face to face, the angular presence of the Chief's profile is gone; eyes set too narrow distort his face.

My Chief, the sound stays in my ears. Why my Chief and not the Chief? I wonder if the pawnbroker refers to other items in the store as his as well. My golden watch, my Asahi neon sign, my bass guitar, my engraved cufflinks, not to forget my shelf full of DVDs, two dollars apiece. The Chief is not for sale. In fact, standing at the door is his job, it's exactly what he was made for. What looks like a bundle of books in his right hand is actually a roll of cigars. He's standing in front of the wrong store. It's a cigar store Indian promoting a pawnshop.

Statue, Chief, cigar store Indian. I browse newspaper clippings, and it only goes down from here: wooden Indian, oaken tribesman, ligneous savages. The history of these "ligneous savages" goes back to 17<sup>th</sup> century England, when tobacco was first brought from the New World. Like other stores addressing a largely illiterate public, tobacconists searched for a recognizable emblem to advertise their goods. For Europeans, tobacco was associated with American Indians, and these early shop signs caught the the public's imagination gone wild: crowned, black figures wearing nothing but tobacco leaves. By the time the "Virginian" made it back to the States in the Mid

19<sup>th</sup> century, he'd changed crown for feathers and the occasional tomahawk, so as to live up to the American imagination of the American Indian.

Equipped with camera and tripod in front of the pawnshop, I'm less concerned with the racist history that brought the statue into being for the moment. At present, my main objective is to produce a steady panning shot that tracks the body from the feet upward to slowly reveal the Chief's identity. I move the camera up and down a couple of times, trying to keep the speed as even as I can, until I finally settle on the upper body and face. Only now I look at the image on the LCD screen and realize that the camera is recording an entirely different scene. Behind the statue, in the reflection of the shop window a man jumps up and down. It's a sign spinner, trying to lure customers into the thrift shop next door. I look up and watch the Chief observing his human colleague. Impenetrable, his face is a ready surface for projection; he is in the know, it seems to me. Stepping in place, jerking his knees up and down, the man's rhythmic movement uncannily resembles the stereotypical image of Native American tribal dance. Embarrassed at the thought, I switch the camera off.

Human billboards are not a novelty. Reportedly first spotted in England in the 1830s, they have been around for almost two centuries. Today, heightened competition to catch consumers' attention forces commodities' agents to be on their toes. Incessantly jumping and moving in the relentless sun, they become emblems of capitalist exploitation, ritualistic expressions to ensure the circulation of things. Buy and sell. A dance around things. Things like silver coins and DVDs, shiny, flat, thin, round objects, endowed with power over bodies.