

Mapping Modern-Tradish: Native Street Art and (De)Colonial Space

Synopsis

This project utilizes archival studies, ethnographic research, and self-reflexive artistic endeavors to examine street art as an aesthetic praxis for Native American artists, and the roles it can play in the (re)defining of Native cultural traditions and practices, as well as the reterritorialization of colonized space. Building off the work of Philip Deloria, Jessica Metcalfe, Paige West, Rosemary Coombe, and Mishuana Goeman, this project asserts notions of culture, tradition, and territory that remain fluid and recognize the ways in which Native peoples have actively shaped their own understandings and realities of ‘modern’ Native worlds. Through the study of both contemporary studio art as well as ‘traditional’ mediums, the creation of original artwork, and work with seven selected Native street artists, this project aims to explore spaces of the ‘modern-tradish’—blends of ‘modern’ practices with cultural forms perceived to be traditional. In exploring cultural expression created through the lens of the modern-tradish, this project will ultimately analyze the possible theoretical and methodological contributions Native street art can make to Native cultural revitalization efforts and movements towards the creation of decolonial spaces.

Project Description

This project seeks to explore ways in which Native American street art engages issues of territory, culture, and (de)colonial space. Predicated on a mutually constitutive relationship between discursive space and material landscape, this project is an examination of aesthetic praxes contemporary Native artists are forging in the spaces left outside the rigid colonial imaginary of modern-traditional dichotomies, creating new ideas of what it is to be a ‘modern-tradish’ Indian asserting cultural life-ways and territory under the current colonial occupation. Indeed, in recognition of both the roots of and innovations in these aesthetics, this project will map some of the complexities of Native street art’s relations to cultural revitalization and territorialized decolonial praxis.

Studying the works of seven selected Native artists—Jaque Fragua (Jemez Pueblo), Douglas Miles (Apache), Jesse Hernandez (Aztec), Corey Bulpitt (Haida), Louie Gong (Nooksack), Bobby Wilson (Dakota), and Quinton Maldonado (Lakota)—this project aims to look beyond discrete ideas of street, studio, and traditional arts; each of the artists selected creates works that not only span such categories, but combine and blur them. Maldonado, Hernandez, and Miles are known for designs representing Native people and spiritual figures in ‘traditional’ forms that incorporate graffiti-style aesthetics. Bulpitt and Maldonado utilize ‘traditional’ art forms to create pieces that speak to the ways in which Natives relate to urban spaces, while Wilson and Miles similarly draw on Native skate culture in their works. Gong, Wilson, Fragua, and Hernandez each have crafted graffiti aesthetics based on combinations of ‘traditional’ tribe-specific motifs, which are splashed across everything from billboards, to studio walls, to sneakers. In these ways, each artist employs varying understandings of tradition, culture, and distinctly Native modernity in their works, creating powerful statements on contemporary Native identity, cultural practice, and discursive-material decolonial space.

This project also seeks to be a kind of auto-ethnography—I myself will be the final and eighth artist featured in the project’s collection of selected works. My work draws influence from both my Cheyenne heritage and lived experiences among tribal communities in Northern California, in part addressing issues of colonial displacement and diasporic Native identity. I am particularly interested in reterritorializations of spaces coded as public into an understanding of public space predicated on colonial occupation—in this vein, I have created a series of stickers meant to demarcate Native land bases in a regional and tribally-specific manner. Moreover, firmly rooted in an assertion of responsibility to those whose land one occupies in addition to one’s own tribal community, my art also engages histories and legacies of colonial genocide in Northern California, in hopes of remapping both the spatial and temporal imaginations of such violence. For example, I have created a series of educational postcards written to tourists visiting Redwood National Park, Yurok territory and the location of the Bald Hills War, where some of the most egregious Gold Rush violence took place. It is my hope to include such personal artwork in this project as not only a means of self-reflection, but as an open and honest narration of how this art is and can be integral to personal cultural revitalization and contemporary decolonial praxis for the artists creating it.

It is from this perspective that this project will examine themes of culture, tradition, and space in works created by the selected artists, with the hope of charting some of both the material and discursive territorialities employed and created in Native street art. Indeed, this project seeks to explore Native street art as an aesthetic praxis, discursive intervention, and tactile engagement with landscapes, ultimately situated in larger cartographies of Native decolonial space.

Framing Research Questions

In his acclaimed text *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Philip Deloria asks, “Why should any audience allow [any Indian person] engaged in anything unexpected to be persistently and automatically designated anomalous? What would happen if we were to take a cue from indigenous viewers and question every instance in which Indians are anomalies?”¹ Though this project is in no way a comprehensive answer to these questions, it is in many ways born out of them, and takes up a shared ideological intervention—namely what Native American relationships to modernity can look like. Deloria’s book, primarily concerned with placing early 20th century Natives outside racist stereotypes and inside cars, films, and other hallmarks of Western modernity, challenges settler imaginations of how, when, and where Indian-ness is signified; in this sense, it is first and foremost written for non-Natives. Shifting away from a settler-centric perspective, in its broadest iteration, it is the intent of this project to approach similar questions of Native cultures, peoples, and modernities as articulated by and for Native communities themselves.

Despite this shift in audience, my work here is built on foundations provided in the overarching arguments made in *Indians in Unexpected Places*. Indeed, Deloria writes—

¹ 2006; pg 6

there were and are significant numbers of Indian anomalies, enough that we must rethink familiar categories. Taken together, it seems to me, the cumulative experiences of such anomalous Indians point to new kinds of questions...perhaps toward a reimagining of the contours of modernity itself. They suggest a secret history of the unexpected, of the complex lineaments of personal and cultural identity that can never be captured by dichotomies built around crude notions of difference and assimilation, white and Indian, primitive and advanced.²

It is from this perspective that I begin the task of situating Native street art. There may be quite a few places settlers imagine Native artists to be—Santa Fe jewelry shops, powwow stands, history museums—but standing at a wall, spray-paint can in hand, is not frequently one of them. Similarly, the rigid settler-imposed imagination of Native art as visibly and traditionally Indian has categorically excluded all kinds of cultural expression outside the bounds of squash blossom necklaces, katsina dolls, and totem poles. Of course most Native people are well-aware that there is plenty of art created by Natives that is anything but traditional (at least in the settler-defined understanding of tradition), which is why this project is concerned with the following—once we no longer understand the Native street artist as anomalous, what are we left with? If these no-longer-anomalous Indians are reflective of Native interrogations of the artificial modern-traditional dichotomy, what can their work tell fellow Natives about contemporary Native modernities? About Native relationships to and definitions of modernity, tradition, and culture?

What I want to suggest here is something that Deloria just barely touches on in *Indians in Unexpected Places*—that for Native peoples in their everyday lives, the divide between modern and traditional is not only subjective, but incredibly blurry, and that this may be indicative of questions of the validity of those very discrete categorizations in the first place. This project additionally builds on interventions made by Native scholar and fashionista Jessica Metcalfe, who has asserted similar claims in her dissertation, *Native Designers of High Fashion: Expressing Identity, Creativity, and Tradition in Contemporary Customary Clothing Design*. Indeed Metcalfe argues that the designers she studied “have taken up new materials to display their traditional art forms in innovative ways to uphold and maintain their unique cultures,”³ navigating the space colloquially referred to by Natives as ‘modern-tradish’—a blending of the allegedly modern with (re)constructed pieces of the traditional. Native street art can be understood in similar fashion, firmly placed in a cultural landscape of the modern-tradish.

In taking up Deloria and Metcalfe, this project is based on a fluid understanding of the traditional grounded in the fundamentals of the relationships between Native cultures and the landscapes in which they are practiced. In other words, this project asks, if Native cultural practices have traditionally been based on what is relevant and available to Native communities, does that not mean that Native street art could, at its essence, be

² 2006; pg 14

³ 2010; pg 1

understood as traditional? This is, of course, compounded by the fact that the vast majority of Native street artists utilize ‘traditional’ motifs in their work and a further subset of them are asserting their presence and interacting with the available land base on their own ancestral territory—what is more traditional than that? Moreover, many create studio and ‘traditional’ art in addition to their street art, have attended institutions like the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), and have had their work exhibited in the likes of the Heard Museum of American Indian Art and History and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI); is a painting traditional when it is hung in the NMAI, but modern when pasted up in an alley?

In this vein, I also draw inspiration from Paige West’s *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive*. Though West’s text is concerned with coffee production in Papua New Guinea, it raises a number of questions pertinent to this project, particularly regarding culture and modernity in indigenous communities. Indeed, West demonstrates indigenous Papuans’ complex relationship to traditionalism, commodity production, and colonial imaginaries, revealing the ways in which imaginations of primitive Papuans are not only entirely inconsistent with Papuans’ lived experiences, but mobilized by colonial-imperial entities. The global trade on exotic images of essentialized Papuan coffee farmers, can, at times, mirror the global indigenous arts industries, and for that matter, trades of American Indian art specifically. As outlined previously, there are stereotypes and imaginations of what ‘Native American art’ is and should be, that is often totally inconsistent with Native lived experiences, much less reflective of Native traditions in a holistic sense; similar to the Papuan coffee farmers, however, Native artists are navigating those constraints and questions of indigenous modernity in a myriad of ways that speak to their positions in their own communities as well as larger (trans)national flows of culture and capital.

In her discussion of commodified images of ‘primitive’ Papuan coffee farmers, West also asserts a larger struggle over representation and meaning-making in popular spheres. This has a clear parallel in Rosemary Coombe’s work, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties*, in which two highly contested representations of indigenous peoples are closely examined. One such case, Crazy Horse malt liquor, highlights the particular hardships indigenous peoples can face in contesting offensive racist public images created by settlers; forced to decide between abandoning cultural morays or utilizing the US legal system’s weapons in an attempt to fight the image, the descendants’ predicament ultimately led to considerable community trauma. This fight over the image of Crazy Horse liquor is emblematic of a larger discursive struggle over self-representation and determination for contemporary Native peoples, and is a clear example of the need for Native-defined parameters of discussion and conversational means regarding images of Native American people and cultures. This project posits Native street art as a possible alternative to attempting to violently transposing Native struggles into Western legal frameworks; in its public assertion of Native cultural vitality and change as well as Native voices themselves, Native street art may be seen as a Native-defined medium in which to have conversations on cultural knowledge and expression.

This is all to say that this project's goal, inspired by the above scholastic works, is to make a larger intervention regarding Native street art's roles in the practice of Native cultural expression, and ultimately its relationship to the assertion of Native decolonial space. Street art, is after all, decidedly a spatial assertion, and Native cultures are fundamentally place-based. For these reasons, this project does not merely study what Native street art can mean, but where it is producing meanings, and how it relates specific Native cultural forms and experiences to a (de)colonial landscape. This builds off the recent work of Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*; though Goeman focuses on the ways in which Native women have been instrumental in defining Native nations in their creative endeavors, primarily written works, the larger ties Goeman makes between Native cultural expression, nation, and sovereignty have greatly informed this project. It is from this vantage point that I posit the project's overarching question—what can Native street art tell Natives about confluences of culture, tradition, and territory under the current colonial occupation?

Research Design and Implementation

This project will combine ethnographic and archival studies, which fall into three phases or categorical subdivisions—archival research regarding both contemporary studio art as well as historical 'traditional' art pieces from which the selected artists draw influence, auto-ethnographical art production, and work with the selected artists.

The first portion of this work—the archival studies—is crucial to the project's genesis and formative foundations. I feel it is necessary to gain a strong working knowledge of the greater trends, conversations, and themes taken up by contemporary Native artists who are engaging questions of culture, modernity, and territory in their works in order to adequately contextualize and situate the specific artists selected for in-depth study. Again, it is notable that nearly all of the artists selected have had their studio works exhibited in prominent museums and galleries alongside the broader array of contemporary Native artists, and indeed many of them find colleagues, collaborators, and friends among this group. Jeremy Singer, for example, a Diné painter well known for his pieces depicting modern-tradish Diné themes, has worked with Jaque Fragua, who has frequently collaborated with Yatika Starr Fields (Creek, Cherokee, Osage), a close friend of painter Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee, Yakama), who is a member of the same indigenous art collective as Corey Bulpitt (Beat Nation). This archival work is aimed not just at studies of contemporary studio arts, however, but also of how the works of these artists are placed in larger understandings of Native art, particularly the more 'traditional' forms of cultural expression from which they draw influence. It would be difficult, for example, to fully understand the radical nature of Quinton Maldonado's aesthetic without background knowledge on ledger art as a medium, or in the case of Louie Gong and Corey Bulpitt, the centrality of formline designs in Northwest Coast arts.

This archival work also leads through to continuations of my own artistic endeavors. Similar to each of the artists listed above, my work, in its own ways, draws from my Native heritage and region/tribe-specific cultural expressions that are more popularly construed as 'traditional.' As a Cheyenne, I have particular interest in Cheyenne beadwork patterns, ledger drawings, and representations of Cheyenne heroes such as

Buffalo Calf Road Woman, not only because they are Cheyenne-specific, but because they are each taken to be representative of Cheyenne traditional cultural practices, but in reality are yet another iteration of the modern-tradish—beadwork, ledger drawing, and photography all being mediums that appropriate and retool settler-imposed materials. The opportunity to work with such materials would have a large impact on my work, which deals with diasporic Cheyenne identity largely in the form of paintings, graphic design, and beadwork. A further interest my work takes is the ways in which graffiti can be used to reterritorialize, and indeed much of my street art is graffiti built on ‘traditional’ Native understandings of land. I will document my thoughts and experiences as an artist both during my time in the archives and while creating pieces, with the idea that the process of learning and creating can shed light on how street art can provide the means to cultural (re)vitalization and construction of decolonial space for Native people.

The final portion of this project is the work with the selected artists. It is my hope to conduct interviews with the majority of artists selected—considering I have pre-existing connections with several of them as it is, I should, at the very least, be able to speak with a few. I also intend to examine a variety of pieces from each of their portfolios, as well as writings and interviews in which they are featured. I will not be approaching the artists or their works as an academic, rather a fellow Native artist conducting scholarly work. I feel this distinction is important because it marks my perspective on the project and their works, as well as my position in relation to the subject material and my goals for the project. I am not designing this project with a mere journal article in mind, though I do plan to write extensively; as I have written previously, I am interested in what Native artists and communities can learn from this art, and how we as Natives can utilize these discursive-material aesthetics in pursuit of decolonization. As the art itself, these conversations must take place in and blur the walls between formal professional spheres, ‘traditional’ communities, and Native public space.

Importance and Timeliness of the Work

There is currently a near-total dearth of scholarly work regarding Native American graffiti and street art, and this project would begin the work of filling in that void. Similarly, with the exception of Goeman’s newest book, very little recent work has been done relating Native creative endeavors to the mapping of territory, nation, and sovereignty—one of the goals of this project is to bridge the gap between these two points of interest, relate them to one another, and offer these reflections to Native artists, scholars, and communities more largely.

Questions of culture, tradition, and territory are pressing for Native communities in the United States and Canada, where the Idle No More movement has been going strong for nearly six months and shows no signs of stopping. While there are many noteworthy Idle No More events and communities that have been at the forefront of the movement, my location in Washington has been particularly enlightening in this regard; Northwest Coast Native communities residing in Washington, particularly Seattle, have crafted a political praxis firmly rooted in spiritual and cultural revitalization, and the Idle No More events they have held have reflected this push for a linkage between cultural, national, and territorial sovereignty. Having attended and participated in some of these events, I have

witnessed a beautiful merging of Native spiritual and cultural practices with political engagement and community organizing. Other Native communities across the continent are beginning to follow suit, and indeed Idle No More has accompanied a massive surge in cultural revitalization efforts and assertions of territorial land claims.

Taking a cue from these actions, it is my aim for this project to contribute to the dialogue currently taking place among Native communities regarding cultural practice, tradition, territory, sovereignty, and decolonial praxis. I myself, along with several of the artists selected, have even created Idle No More-specific art, and I believe that critical conversation among Natives on the roles that territorialized modern-tradish art more largely can play in sovereignty struggles is absolutely necessary for efforts at decolonization.

These questions are prescient not only for the aforementioned reasons, but also because Idle No More has come to be, in many ways, a battle over public and discursive spaces. Settlers, for their part, have not abandoned the fight—from racist remarks telling protesters to “go back to the reservation, where [Indians] belong,” to graffiti referring to Native college students as “prairie n*****s,” they have made it clear that Natives do not belong in the public (and implicitly modern) world. Natives have responded by reminding settlers that their ‘public space’ is actually colonized space, and have held round dances in shopping malls, prayer circles in tourist attractions, and tagging sessions on university campuses. This fight over public space has very real consequences—in the words of Edward Said, “Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”⁴ This fight to assert power over space is, in this sense, a critical aspect of decolonial struggle that Native peoples cannot risk leaving unaddressed. What ideas and imaginations of Native peoples, cultures, and lands can we create using notions of the modern-tradish or through street art? Conversely, what ideas and imaginations will we be left with if we allow settlers to define them?

⁴ 1994; pg 7

Appendix



Above: Corey Bulpitt in front of an untitled mural (2012); below: Louie Gong displaying one of his sneaker designs





Above: Tashadawn Hastings & Charmaine Sangster, for Douglas Miles' brand, Apache Skateboards (2009); below: mural by Jaque Fragua (2012)





Above: ledger drawing by Quinton Maldonado (2013); below: Bobby Wilson standing with his sculpture *Naturally Synthetic* (2011)





Hey, Someone Must Exist Here by Annita Lucchesi (Southern Cheyenne)

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