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Art, Aesthetics, and Indigenous Ways of Knowing

June Scudeler and Patricia Marroquin Norby

In scholarly critiques, artists' statements, family memoirs, and photo essays, the contributors to this special edition of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* center indigenous aesthetics both as innovative creative acts and continuations of indigenous sensibilities and ways of knowing. Presented by practicing artists, educators, and scholars working within urban and land-based communities, each author demonstrates that indigenous aesthetic practices hold the power to address the complexities and challenges of sovereignty, personal and communal histories, and spatial and environmental activism.

Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) redefines tradition as “maintaining responsibilities, relationships, and affinities with distinctive worlds of meaning.”¹ At this moment, many indigenous artists are exploring these distinctive worlds from differing perspectives on gender, personal history, cyberspace, and performance. Such works unapologetically break down the historically imposed limitations of materiality, time, and place to articulate distinct traditions of diverse communities—not as relegated to the past, but as living and changing through time. Foregrounding current tensions between theory and praxis, the following essays explore multiple approaches of indigenous artists who are creating work for themselves and their communities as methods of resurgence and regeneration. The authors gathered here frame their own aesthetic investigations as vibrant contributions to communities and cultures that build on, reimagine, and question preconceived concepts of tradition that are too easily embraced.

Jeneen Frei Njootli (Gwich'in) critiques the consumption of indigenous art while enacting performance and visual installations firmly situated in her Yukon community. This artist's work assesses the uncomfortable marriage between indigenous aesthetic practices, capitalist markets, and institutional archives. Her text asks artists and viewers alike to consider “how are indigenous artists reappropriating these images to create new and divergent art forms? The answer is as complex and diverse as the artists

themselves” (116). Frei Njootli’s aesthetic interrogations remind us of our ongoing responsibilities to our own and other indigenous communities and expresses the interpretive tone of this special issue.

Reaching across imposed borders between the United States and Mexico, Susannah Daniels explores the communal aesthetic practices of indigenous women. Featuring The Foundation Strength of Mayan Women (FOMMA), a theater company and activist collective located in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, Daniels shows how this community-based group fosters the rights of indigenous women as well as the collective rights of indigenous peoples in Mexico. Through plays and theatrical performances such as *Crecí solo con el amor de mi madre* (2000), FOMMA fearlessly confronts the effects of colonization and globalization upon Mayan women’s bodies and concepts of gender equality.

Musician and music scholar Gretchen Peters examines Anishinaabe playwright Marcie Rendon’s 1998 play, *SongCatcher: A Native Interpretation of the Story of Frances Densmore*, as an exposé of the complex effects of Densmore’s ethnography at White Earth Nation in Minnesota. Following Rendon’s theatrical critique of Densmore’s transmission of hundreds of traditional songs as an encroachment upon Anishinaabe space, Peters contemplates the contemporary results of a time when ethnographers positioned themselves as the cultural keepers of indigenous knowledge for both indigenous and academic audiences. Peters reads Rendon’s assertion about cultural and aesthetic property as a complication of our understandings about place and intellectual territories.

Territory and concepts of space are reconfigured as reflections of current indigenous realities in David Gaertner’s study of Kevin Lee Burton (Swampy Cree) and the online works of Skawennati Tricia Fragnito (Mohawk). Stepping into digital realms, Gaertner demonstrates how indigenous new media artists are transforming cyberspace into indigenous territory. These new territories are altering the ways in which land and sovereignty are conceptualized, and securing cyberspace as a method and as a place of sustenance and renewal for indigenous people.

Thomas Swensen (Alutiiq) asserts an urban indigenous presence in Seattle, Washington, through tangible markers of place, sound, and time, specifically the John T. Williams Memorial pole, and memorial tributes, such as A Tribe Called Red’s music video *Woodcarver* and a poem written and performed by Storme Webber. Swensen revisits the August 2010 shooting of the unarmed, hearing-disabled Nuuh-Chal-Nulth carver John T. Williams to interrogate the murderous forces of colonization in urban settings. Swensen’s investigation is especially critical in context with current devaluations of indigenous lives and bodies, an issue that, for indigenous peoples, transgresses urban, rural, and international boundaries.

James Luna (Luiseño) traces the trajectory of his performance art career to “conceptualize and formulate ways [that] visually confront and shift people’s perceptions of ‘Indian’ in order to free myself and Native people from the confines of the imagined: from expectations that lock us in history and deny us a voice and place in contemporary culture” (46). Luna’s photo essay of his 2013 performance *Futuristic Retro Ritual* animates the tensions between memory and evolving indigenous identities.

Similarly, June Scudeler (Métis) places two-spirit artist Kent Monkman (Swampy Cree) at the center of a decolonial aesthetics. Scudeler argues that Monkman not only reclaims two-spirit traditions, but also constructs both history and gender as fluid concepts. Monkman's paintings, installations, and films insist that indigeneity is not fixed, but is an unabashed reinsertion of two-spirit perspectives into colonial art history.

Evoking family memory through photographs, bodily adornment, and visual demarcations, Patricia Marroquin Norby (Purépecha/Chicana) pictorially traces Purépecha aesthetic articulations across international borders within intimate and gendered spaces. An exercise in the visualization of decolonial practices, Marroquin Norby illustrates how migrant indigenous peoples consciously create places of affirmation and renewal through everyday aesthetic choices. For migrant communities—invisible peoples whose labor and love are shadowed by international legal systems and clipped by geopolitical borders—such spaces of refuge are nowhere and everywhere, locatable by visual and material aesthetic languages.

The essays in this special issue are not reactions to colonial art history, but reflect broader intellectual and aesthetic articulations of indigenous art. The contributors are all intellectually and personally active within distinct indigenous communities that challenge, inform, and nourish their creatively political acts. Encompassing diverse media, these essays show the vibrancy and continuance of indigenous ways of being and of knowing. Taken together, these essays recenter aesthetic and artistic practices in rural and urban spaces—places that have always been and will always be indigenous.

NOTE

1. Daniel Heath Justice, "Notes toward a Theory of Anomaly," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, nos. 1 and 2 (2010), 214, doi 10.1215/10642684-2009-020.

