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Playing Indian, between Idealization and Vilification: Seems You have to Play Indian to be Indian

By Rosy Simas and Sam Aros Mitchell

[Editor's note: This article is a dialogue between Rosy Simas and Sam Aros Mitchell, both of whom have worked extensively in the field of dance.]

Mitchell: Because settlers renamed us “Indians,” Rosy and I have agreed to place the word “Indian” within quotation marks as a way to demarcate and resist such categorizations. As Native people, we remain as multiple, sovereign nations as well as a diverse population of people. The term “Indian” flattens and denies the vast differences and rich diversities of those Indigenous nations. Philip J. Deloria writes in his book *Playing Indian* that “Non-Indians began taking up permanent native identities in order to lay claim to the cultural power of Indianness in the white imagination.”¹ In essence, settlers discovered a way to define a uniquely singular, American identity by playing “Indian.” Historically speaking, this identity in the early stages was still “unfinished”: not European, yet not in tune with the American continent either. The

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SAM AROS MITCHELL is an enrolled member of the Texas Band of Yaqui Indians. Sam earned his MFA in dance theater from UC San Diego (Kumeyaay land) and a BFA in dance from UC Santa Barbara (Chumash land). Sam has performed as a dance artist nationally and internationally and resides in Minneapolis. He is completing his PhD at UC San Diego, where his research focuses on Indigenous dance and theater artists. He recently coauthored an article with Zoë Klein for the *Movement Research Performance Journal*'s first Native issue.

use of Native Americans as symbols worked to stand in for ideas that were just too difficult to articulate. After all, how does one transmit ideas around a new continent or the promise of land, freedom, and vastness—especially with the troubling knowledge that the land was never really for the taking? By playing “Indian,” new identities can constantly be forged, manipulated, and eventually discarded when the goal has been attained. Consider the Boston Tea Party, or even the Boy Scouts of America.

Simas: Three years after the Boston Tea Party, Native people were defined in the US Constitution as “merciless ‘Indian’ savages.” Even though there may have been admiration for the fictional noble savage, one hundred years after the birth of the nation, the main sentiment towards actual Native people was “the only good ‘Indian’ is a dead ‘Indian.’”

Mitchell: Sadly, I am reminded of the Boy Scouts of America and the “back to nature” legacy of playing “Indian,” which in my opinion caused detrimental harm by way of plundering the traditions of Native people.

Simas: I think that this is an important point to consider, because, after all, it is sometimes the frauds who are remembered, and they are also sometimes the ones who contribute to the stereotypes rather than contribute to the reality of what it means to be a Native person.

Mitchell: I also see the symbolism of the natural world being shut out when I look at Julie [Buffalohead]’s painting [see fig. 1 and the cover of this special issue], and it makes me consider the painful irony of the Boy Scouts of America, shutting out the natural world by trying to get back to nature.²

Simas: When I look at Julie’s painting, I think about the expectations that are put onto Native artists as well as the intense pressure that exists for them to perform being “Indian.”

Mitchell: That raises the question of what it means for those Native artists who are pressured to perform being “Indian.” If Native artists are being asked by funders, audiences, and the general public to “play ‘Indian’ to be an “‘Indian,’” how does this affect their work and livelihood? How has it affected you, Rosy?

Simas: I have been making dance for thirty years. Early on I realized my work is Native, not because an authority on contemporary dance told me it was or because I felt the need to “perform” Native, but because I am Native. I realized that regardless of the subject matter of my work, my culture, history, and identity remain the underpinning to all of my dances. Creating is a spiritual act for me, rooted in nature, formed through my connection with my ancestors and the land of which we are made. I have developed a method, or rather a method has been revealed to me through my ancestors, of deep listening as a way to awaken movement from the body. My whole being becomes a hearing mechanism. Through this practice, I ask generations of my family which stories need to be told through which movements. I reveal their invisible presence through dance, emotions, and images. I am interpreting their direction to the audience. It is their story and my story. We make and share these dances together.

Mitchell: My western dance training stressed a pedagogy that was primarily centered on the self, the individual, leaving no room to explore my own Native history and culture. I found that I had to push through the boundaries within the complexities of



FIGURE 1: Julie Buffalohead, *Seems You have to Play Indian to be Indian*, 2010. Mixed media on paper.

existing when the world wants us to be subsumed, imagined, mythologized, consumed. Quite honestly, I believe there was a time when I felt the need to play “Indian” to be “Indian.” I think it’s difficult for Western, settler audiences to view work that is based on a cosmology that goes back thousands of years, that invites ancestors to join us on the stage. These audiences clearly desire to ask us to play “Indian” so that they might see themselves. The long history in which the stereotype of the Native has played into the collective conscious of the settler-mind continues to inflict harm. A double-ness occurs in which we are asked to play “Indian” so that we can be recognized as Native, which in turn only seems to embolden settlers to fraudulently play “Indian,” which consequently seems to contribute to the erasure of Native people.

Simas: To be fair, I think the history of playing “Indian” in the performing arts was started long ago, by both Native people and non-Native people, who performed in wild west shows and within the early days of the film industry. Where do you think it began?

Mitchell: You are absolutely correct. It started with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, which toured around Nebraska, during the early 1880s. Audiences devoured these frontier dramas with cowboys and “Indians.” These shows were wildly successful. Ten years later, the same audiences rushed to see Thomas Edison’s film of Laguna Pueblo dances in Times Square, New York City. During that same year, three hundred women, children, and men were killed at the Wounded Knee massacre.

These archetypes/stereotypes, as you point out, are very powerful. Several examples of stereotypes come to mind here, like the Native Informant inhabiting the films *Pocahontas* and *Avatar*. Pocahontas and Neytiri (*Avatar*) both have visions of a prophet-like figure that will bring change. They both reject the worthiest warrior of their nations to favor a white man (who eventually surpasses the best warriors of that nation). Their love and willing offering of themselves to their white partner creates a powerful allegory for colonization.

On the other hand, the Mythological Native operates as “ahistorical other”: the “Indian” without a past, present, or future. This is what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang identify as “the settlers’ move to innocence.”³ By “innocently” placing Native Americans outside of history, settlers have found a convenient way to avoid dealing with Natives’ contemporary presence and political demands. You will notice in many films a white, benevolent, sympathetic, counterpart “goes native,” but solidifies and absolves white guilt. Settlers love to portray themselves as saviors. The Mythological Native is an “imaginary “Indian,” a figure on and through which settlers have come to articulate their own sense of self. However, this tactic is far from innocent. The “Mythological Native” defines America’s hopes, dreams, and promises, standing in as surrogate to show what makes America different from the European countries they fled. This imaginary “Indian” is portrayed as belonging to an ahistorical world, either the stuff of fantasy or the equivalent of a mythical figure.

Simas: There is something so slippery and deceitful about the ways that settler-colonial violence changes form. It is truly maddening and destructive.

Mitchell: There are even poetic examples, in which the Native appears docile, stoic, or wise, like the Romantic Native: a metaphor for the promise of America, or as I mentioned before, a move back to nature. There are portrayals of Native Americans as vicious, barbaric, war-hungry savages, a brutal and uncivilized “reminder” (in the settler’s imagination) of what halted America’s progress. It’s very disturbing to think that these Western films perpetrated such brutal depictions, and yet American history books suppress the fact that Native American children were taken by force from their families and put in residential and boarding schools, where they were stripped of their culture, abused, murdered, or scarred so deeply that generations are still struggling to heal from that trauma.

Simas: It is from those disturbing archetypes/stereotypes that we encounter those who not only played “Indian” on stage but extended the role into their personal lives.

Mitchell: I’m reminded of the counterculture movement and the young people who began starting communes in the late 1960s. As they struggled against the confines of conformity, they began to forge a new identity. Philip Deloria writes that as “heirs of the white middle class of the 1950s, the communalists worked hard to counteract their parents’ America, perceived in terms of consumptive excess, alienated individualism, immoral authority, and capitalism. . . . As an antidote, they promoted community, and at least some of them thought it might be found in an Indianness imagined as social harmony.”⁴

Simas: Those non-Natives who played “Indian” brought something unique to their personas. They might have been associated with conformity, as you mention, Sam. Or

perhaps mediocrity. Yet through this performance of Indianness, they evaded those perceptions and reinvented themselves and “a new movement.” Only it wasn’t a new movement. It was appropriation. Don’t you find it menacing that through this perpetuation of stereotypes, certain privileges were afforded? These imaginary “Indians” performed stoicism, spirituality, wisdom, courage, and exoticism until eventually this performance was subsumed into the performance of America, invested in a collective settler imagination. All the while actual Native people were erased, unless they agreed to play “Indian” as well, and yet their “performance” was met with either indifference or intolerance.

Mitchell: Again, I am reminded of the Western epistemology of the individual. This approach not only allows for an individual to swoop in and take bits and pieces of whatever they find fascinating without ever having to get it right, but they never need to be accountable to the community from which they have appropriated and misrepresented. Specifically speaking within the field of contemporary dance, where I have seen videos and clips of non-Native performers wearing war bonnets, appearing onstage nude, conflating political platforms and ideologies concerning Native issues on Turtle Island with other oppressed people around the globe, of which, sadly, there are many. I’ve also been made aware of choreographers who grant themselves permission to appropriate Native cultures by doing their own postmodern interpretation of Native dance, complete with costumes and masks that have no connection whatsoever to a community, a land, or a tradition.

Simas: I believe my work is owned collectively by all of my ancestors who converse with me, dreamed me, and physically made me into being. Seven generations ago my ancestors could only imagine me, a face from the clay. It is their diplomacy and sacrifices for the survival of our people that made it possible for me to be here.

Mitchell: I see the connection between the Wild West Buffalo Bill shows, which were happening on the plains, and these early films and what Patrick Wolfe describes as a settler logic of elimination.⁵ Settler societies always need to eliminate what they don’t need, yet they must also constantly reinvent themselves. Wolfe describes how they always keep refractory traces of the past. In essence, the logic of elimination works to eliminate Native American presence but keeps its mascots and the names, streets, schools, and businesses with Native names. This same logic denies that Native American laws are legal, yet refuses to acknowledge that the US Constitution was greatly influenced by the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) confederacy and their Great Law of Peace.⁶⁶ Your very existence, Rosy, plays against this logic. Because you are still here, despite the generations of trauma and genocide, your presence and your work shows that which cannot be buried, hidden, or denied. I wonder if you might share more of what the experience of making work has been like for you.

Simas: In 2013, I created *We Wait In The Darkness*, a solo work about my grandmother’s life.⁷ She held my mother in her womb, and the ovum I would develop from. I wanted to create a dance work that would transcend space and time and heal the DNA scars my grandmother and I share. I had no idea that when I would later perform and tour the work throughout Turtle Island (with my mother reading my grandmother’s letters), my ancestors would show up to guide me through the evening-length solo improvisational

dance. The subject matter of *We Wait In The Darkness* was tragic for some audience members. And viewers would sometimes ask me if it was difficult emotionally, spiritually, and physically to perform the dance so much. But in fact the opposite was true. I am lifted, carried, and energized through the performance by my grandmother, my uncle, my elder cousin, and my great-great-grandmothers, who have all passed on.

During the performance, especially during reoccurring/repeated movement or phrases, I find that their presence is the generating force behind choreography I could never create on my own in a dance studio. This movement, created in the moment, is connected to the ancient, from a place that western Eurocentric contemporary dance cannot influence and doesn't touch.

Mitchell: I think you implicitly understand the kind of work and dedication that it takes to heal the very real historical trauma that exists for Native people. Yet this healing process really operates in a nonlinear way, and affects us in the past, present, and future. Through my own choreographic process, I have discovered that my Native, living body is one that not only senses and apprehends the living, breathing world, but also affects the world. The connection to my body and my ancestors, through my DNA, possesses the capability to elucidate perception, interaction, and creation within the environment, while moving seamlessly through time and space, past, present, and future.

I accept that contemporary dance is a difficult field. It seems as though choreographers are allowing themselves to identify as Native, as you say here, Rosy, to give themselves an advantage. They must think, "Honestly, what's the harm if someone identifies as Native when they are applying for grants?"—because to the world, Natives have been erased, replaced, and mythologized. Following this, one could argue that if there aren't any real "Natives" around anyway, who is it hurting? If there aren't any Natives who are making contemporary dance work, since "real" Natives only do "traditional" dances, where's the harm in that?

The harm is that these approaches are truly disingenuous, further contributing to a settler culture that brandishes tactics like "the logic of elimination" and "settler moves to innocence" almost by second nature.⁸ The harm is that the resources intended to help Natives are taken by imposters, who have deceived and replaced themselves as Natives, while once again erasing, ignoring, and mythologizing our culture, our history, and, ultimately, our very lives.

Simas: A choreographer who is not Native, but plays one, is not making Native dance. Choreographers who are not Native who use Native ideas, concepts, and cultural beliefs to develop their Native dance pedagogy are not teaching Native dance; they are teaching cultural appropriation. They cannot escape their own privileged position that allows them to detach from the historical trauma and present-day reality of being an Indigenous person from Turtle Island. It is not something that one can put on and take off. Not that historical trauma is the one thing that we share as Native people that culturally binds us, but it does speak clearly through our DNA to the present day for most of us. And most of us are working to heal that trauma to not pass it on to future generations.

Mitchell: To be a contemporary Native performer is to resist, because we are still here, we are still alive, and we still continue to evolve. I agree that we are bound by our DNA and our inherited trauma. I would make the argument that this binding also

links us to our community, to one another, and to our ancestors. As a dancer/choreographer, I argue that the corporeal experience required from a Native is not a role that one can simply step into without rigor and diligence. Especially if they are not Native. **Simas:** Whatever the definitions employed to categorize our work, whether through “traditional,” “modern,” “improvisational,” or any other label, we are simply “contemporary.” Western settler society has defined itself as ever-evolving, progressing, constructing, and deconstructing. Why do we continue to be defined as though we exist as an archive or relic, to be gazed upon behind a glass case? Is it so difficult to imagine that we, as Natives, have been improvising, constructing, deconstructing, and progressing for thousands of years? When a non-Native person understands the limitations of what they can know in their body of being Native, then they can potentially do good work. When that person denies this, they do harm.

Simas and Mitchell: We have discussed how the elimination and erasure of Natives continues, while the simultaneous substitution of non-Natives “playing ‘Indian’” works towards a false American narrative of freedom, vastness, and honor. I think it has to do with this brazen, Western ontology of the self. Again, in the American myth, it is the individual who prevails. To take on the role of the imaginary “Indian,” non-Native people lay claim to everything that is available—even “playing ‘Indian.’” It’s all part of America’s troubling history, and if Native Americans represent a new continent with its promise of freedom and vastness, then it follows that embodying that idea is to embrace this new identity wholeheartedly. In essence, we all become “Native,” which results in the continued genocide of Native people through erasure and denial. There remains an incredible potential for the healing of past traumas within Native dance. It is through our refusal to be categorized, mythologized, and invisibilized.

NOTES

1. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 168.
2. Julie Buffalohead, *Seems You have to Play Indian to be Indian*, 2010, mixed media on paper, 20 × 32 inches (50.8 × 81.3 cm). Used by arrangement with Todd Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis, MN.
3. Eve Tuck and K. Wang Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.
4. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 155.
5. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4 (2006): 387–409.
6. Donald A. Grinde, Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1991).
7. Rosy Simas, *We Wait In The Darkness*, 2013.
8. Settler colonialism operates through a “logic of elimination”—that is to say, that settler colonial power both requires and is generated by the destruction of Indigenous peoples and politics. See Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>. Settler “moves to innocence” are strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, and without having to change much at all. See Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.”

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