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Indigenous Artistic Expression in the Crossroads of Los Angeles:

Adornment, Beautification, and Guerrilla Jewelry

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of the Arts

in American Indian Studies

by

Damien P. Montano

2017



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Indigenous Artistic Expression in the Crossroads of Los Angeles:

Adornment, Beautification, and Guerrilla Jewelry

by

Damien P. Montano

Master of Arts in American Indian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Mishuana R. Goeman, Chair

The intended purpose of my thesis is to, initially, explore the transformation of the cultural functions of traditional Native American artwork and jewelry occurring today. In addition, I will define the concept “Guerrilla Jewelry” in the particular context which I have applied the term by presenting existing figurative and literal representations relevant to my work. Furthermore, I will present an argument distinguishing the correlation between Indigenous Art and Guerrilla Art.

The thesis of Damien P. Montano is approved

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Mishuana R. Goeman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

This work was completed in dedication to  
The Resilience of the Tongva and Seri peoples.

And to my Ancestors, whose wisdom, guidance, and strength  
have enlightened me on this journey.

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## Chapter 1 : In The Crossroads of Los Angeles

As I made my usual bus commute to UCLA, in the crossroads of Los Angeles, a woman standing at my stop piqued my interest. She was a Native woman and she wore a pair of uniquely crafted earrings made of walrus tusk, or maybe whale bone. In a time and place where urban diversity somewhat lessens cultural distinctions, those earrings told of so much more than a fashion statement. I looked at this woman and thought, “she is a Native sister!” Clearly, the adornments we wear serve as an identity symbol as we cross paths on the Los Angeles thruways.

We use this art form in the beautification rituals we conduct each morning when we look in the mirror to prepare for each new day. A ritual that begins when we conceive of our regalia, deciding what to wear and the image we portray as Native people in this vast urban space. Besides the aesthetic quality of this woman’s jewelry, I began to contemplate the full significance and dynamic role of Native American adornment. In this study, I explore the deliberate creation and application of jewelry and other artistic expressions in Native American cultures and how this craft fulfills many purposes beyond decoration.

Some Native art and craft work is widely unknown or misunderstood by non-Natives and consumers of the Indian Art market. Furthermore, the traditional cultural role of artistic creativity is transforming in the modern age, and the extent to which the artwork specified here relates to current social issues is significant enough to deserve acknowledgement as such. The underlining concept of my work is a term I have, informally, applied and defined as Guerrilla Jewelry - Indigenous expressions and representations of socio-political dynamics through cultural art pieces and wearable adornments. My findings stem from researching academic texts

documenting the history of various tribal craftwork, the effects modern government structures and policies have on Native art and the use of Guerrilla art to promote social awareness and individual identity. Most notable, and perhaps the most influential contribution in my studies, were the personal experiences directly related to my thesis topic which I was fortunate enough to engage in. These activities provided focused insight into the Seri and Tongva Indian Tribes' use of various artworks. Additionally, this work briefly reflects on the contributions of Two-Spirit Native artists to the Indigenous craft movement, exemplifying the various ways jewelry and other art is influenced and consequently, changing.

This study identifies how some Native artists make their presence known in spaces that are not always conducive to Indigenous art. Though all key concepts I have researched have been extensively documented, none of the texts cited here made the direct associations among Indigenous art and its representation of Guerrilla movements such that I propose. I will attempt to thoroughly explain the correlation between existing Native art forms, the transitional trends I have observed and the corresponding characteristics of Guerilla Jewelry to include the spiritual, cultural, and even political significances and complexity of this specific work.

## Chapter 2 : Background and Literature

### 2.1 Guerrilla Jewelry

The term “Guerrilla” is often associated with insurgent groups working to overthrow or work outside of colonial nation state mentality. My use of the term is in a context derivative of the socio-political depictions of some 20th century art Medias. Pioneering this association was Luis Valdez in 1975, founding *El Teatro Campesino*, a theatrical production representative to the front lines of the United Farm Workers Struggle in 1960's Delano, California and the Zoot Suit

subculture within the Chicano movement<sup>1</sup>. The new theme encompassing “Guerrilla” was further popularized by anonymous art project *Guerrilla Girls*. The collaborative group of artists, writers, and activists targeted racial and gender oppression in a public poster campaign launched throughout 1980’s and 1990’s America<sup>2</sup>. Similar representations continued through the Millennium in works by performance artists Guillermo Gomez-Peña and writer Coco Fusco, as they also utilized creative avenues, primarily visual arts, theater, and literature to depict social conditions of their generation. The work of these artists is guerrilla art because of its anti-colonial messages, its political associations, and critiques on the systems that perpetuate the marginalization of the communities these artists represent. Guerrilla jewelry is more than the physical objects we create, it's symbolic and figurative as displayed in the processes of creating and our art. It is the throwing down of a blanket on a crowded street to sell your art, or the young child walking around with earrings punched into cardboard, attempting to sell them at the powwow. Guerilla jewelry is subverting institutional processes of controlling art and expression. It is about finding opportunities to sell your work and simultaneously build bridges throughout communities.

## 2.2 The Seri Nation and Guerrilla Artisans

The Seri people come from Desemboque and Punta Chueca, a region on the Sea of Cortez in Sonora, Mexico. They are an ancient people who continue to thrive and survive by many means. A National Geographic magazine article describes, “The Seri people of Mexico

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<sup>1</sup> *Latino Dreams: Transcultural Traffic and the U.S. National Imaginary*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi Press, 2002, pp. 253-306

<sup>2</sup> *The Guerrilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*. New York: Penguin, 1998

were traditionally seminomadic hunter-gatherers living in the western Sonoran Desert near the Gulf of California. Their survival was tied to the traits and behaviors of the species that live in the desert and the sea. An intimate relationship with the plant and animal worlds is a hallmark of the Seri's life and of their language, Cmiiique Iitom".<sup>3</sup> In 2012 National Geographic featured a story reporting the Tribe as one of the global Indigenous groups with an 'endangered' language with an estimated population of 1,000, mentioning briefly that, "[i]n El Desemboque power lines have been run through the desert to drive an electrical pump for a municipal well".<sup>4</sup> The introduction of electricity to the Seri community is one that will affect their way of life in ways we can only begin to imagine. The vague description of the Seri people in articles such as this, reflects the generally *vague* understanding of their cultural practices.

The documentary, *Seri: People Live by the Desert and Sea* gives an in-depth look at their community and their new directions in self-sustainability focusing primarily on their jewelry, basket making and ironwood carvings that have become examples of sustainability and resilience. The availability of ironwood is one struggle the Seri/Comcaac people must encounter as deforestation, global warming, and appropriation of Seri woodcarving designs threaten the natural resources essential to certain craftworks. The Comcaac people experience an encroaching world around them, as a small but irreplaceable population of Indigenous people in Mexico. They are unique in all of the world's Indigenous peoples. During primary colonist contact in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Spaniards interacted mostly with the neighboring tribes of the region where the Seri lived. The Seri tribe had tense contact with Spanish missionaries and settlers. According to

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<sup>3</sup> Russ Rymer, "Vanishing Voices" in *National Geographic Magazine*, (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

one historical record, “[i]n 1662 several hundred Seri were killed in the desert west of Ures”, over land disputes and accusations of raiding Spanish settlements.<sup>5</sup> Both the Spanish rule and Mexican governments used military campaigns and spiritual warfare to slaughter, displace, or Christianize the Comcaac people who maintained resistance from the beginning of these conflicts.<sup>6</sup> The Seri/Comcaac were displaced from their ancestral lands, yet they continued their cultural traditions of jewelry making, basket weaving and woodcarving deep in the deserts of Sonora and on the coasts on the Sea of Cortez.

Because of the Mexican fishing industry, a practice of overfishing, as well as history of colonization on Seri/Comcaac lands the people have been banned from hunting the life-giving sea turtle; an animal their tribe has depended on for spiritual survival for thousands of years. Mexican fishermen have infringed the traditional fishing areas the Seri/Comcaac community normally protect for the tribe by ordinance from the Mexican Government. Parts of Tiburon Island, Desemboque and Punta Chueca are the lands designated to the Seri/Comcaac people by the Mexican Government in order to compensate the tribe for their losses at the hands of the Spanish, and later, Mexican power structures.<sup>7</sup> As a people of duality, of the desert and of the waters, the Seri/Comcaac have long held the sea turtle as their source of strength and universal connection. The turtle has been identified in their stories, as having “flung earth on its back” to create the Tiburon Islands.<sup>8</sup> When a sea turtle is spotted, a four day ceremony is held in order to

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Stephen Felger and Mary Beck Moser, “People of the Desert and Sea: Ethnobotany of the Seri Indians. University of Arizona Press, (1985). p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Public Women, Private Lives: Gender in the Missions. Barbara Reyes.

<sup>7</sup> Seri. People Live by the Desert and the Sea. International Wood Culture Society. Documentary 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2015.

give thanks and celebrate the continuing relationship and agreement made between the people and this great animal. As a result of the endangerment of the sea turtles, which have been central to Seri culture, they formed an organization called Grupo Tortuguero Comcáac, “created by their elders to help save traditional knowledge about the turtles and to use that knowledge, along with technology and science, to help monitor and restore their sacred animals.”<sup>9</sup> The lands allotted to them by the government of Mexico serve as the site for their fishing and oceanic lifestyle. They are connected to these lands and waters through their stories and movements. In order to substitute the revenue lost from the decline of the fishing industry, the Seri/Comcaac people have turned to arts and crafts as sustainable ways of creating work for sale. Because of the gendered nature of a male dominated fishing industry, women artisans become ambassadors for the Seri. Although diminishing revenue from fishing has been impactful to the tribe, the revenue made from jewelry, ironwood carvings, and baskets has been a key form of supplemental income for families and individual artisans from the Seri/Comcaac Nation. An example of guerilla jewelry, the Seri seek out opportunities to sell and exchange their work, crossing international borders while simultaneously defending their lands against mining companies.

In the past the Seri people depended heavily on the gifts of the ocean to survive and sustain their communities, but now more than ever the Seri/Comcaac rely on the arts and crafts that their communities produce. Joanne Barker, in her article, *Indian TM*, references the Allotment Act, which required Indian peoples pay property taxes as part of land ownership and citizenship. Could the Seri be forced to make jewelry as part of a community income to pay for neoliberal policies enforced by the Mexican government? Government policies have often been

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<sup>9</sup> Deborah Small, Deborah Small’s Ethnobotany blog, *Seri Face painting Preparation for Xipe Projects Gallery Cultural Exchange*, 2013.

made without the full consent of tribes. This is evident in the imposition of electricity and mining operations opposed by the Tribal communities. This opposition is against the Mexican government acquiring new revenue source, while the Seri accrue a new bill for the issuance of a utility. In addition to a bill, the Seri people become dependent on an outside entity but receive the bare minimum from the government of Mexico to fund social resources such as education. For instance the development of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 remains contested within the United States, while this act has no jurisdiction over an international tribe such as the Seri. In the documentary, *Seri: People Who Live by the Desert and Sea*, “[t]he Seri believe their culture is beautiful because of their isolation,” yet electric power lines through the desert, pipeline projects, and expected tourism is changing the landscapes and culture of this distinctive place and peoples. Sovereignty looks like government stepping back and funding programs that help recover and heal the Seri/Comcaac people’s way of life by preserving natural resources and endangered ecosystems.

## 2.3 California Indians and Abalone Adornment

Many Indigenous people in the California regions are connected to shells such as dentalium, mollusks, and abalone as they are rooted in various creation stories. In the book, *North American Indian Jewelry and Adornment* by Lois Sherr Dubin discusses that for ancient Basin tribes, “[b]urials four to six thousand years old contain olivella-shell and stone gorges, which were probably amulets. About A.D. 1000, dentalium shells began to replace olivella. Ancient Basin burial objects were gifts to the dead, signifying status, wealth, and affection”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lois Sherr Dubin, “North American Jewelry and Adornment: From Prehistory to the Present” (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1999), 322.

These shells were even considered “Indian money” and they became extremely important in the systems of trade, barter, and exchange systems that connected many tribes from north to south, and from east to west. Interestingly, Les Field in his book, *Abalone Tales: Collaborative Explorations of Sovereignty and Identity in Native California*, discusses the stories told by the Wiyot people and the relationship between Abalone Woman and Dentalium Man.<sup>11</sup> Dentalium and pine nuts are often beaded into many necklaces and pieces of adornment for California Indian people. Dentalium and abalone are the most symbolic shells and are status symbols and identity markers in ancient and current pieces of California Indian Jewelry. Sometimes the bigger the abalone centerpiece, the more exquisite the piece becomes. It is a greater connection to the source, the land, the ocean.

Physical examples of these connections are the mollusks, abalone and various types of shells used in jewelry are the connections shared between the people of Alta and Baja California. Like each and every bead strung in an intricate necklace, like each olivella shell gathered on the beach, the histories of California Indian people are unique and valuable. The Seri like the Tongva share deep connections with the land but also the ocean. The tribes gather shells that hold power and meaning to the community and artists. For instance, “[m]ore than twenty five plant and twenty nine animal species were used in Seri necklaces and other personal ornaments.”<sup>12</sup> Coastal tribes like the Tongva and Seri utilized all of the oceanic gifts sent in their direction in order to create beautiful and lasting pieces of jewelry and art. An essential part of Tongva adornment is the putting on of abalone during beautification.

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<sup>11</sup> Les Field, *Abalone Tales: Collaborative Explorations of Sovereignty and Identity in Native California* (Duke University Press, 2008), 99.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Stephen Felger and Mary Beck Moser. “People of the Desert and Sea.” University of Arizona Press. 1985. p.148

## 2.4 Government Policies, Recognition, and Sovereignty

The Autry held an annual Indian Art Market which hosted various tribes selling traditional and modern craftwork, jewelry, and many other cultural items. Interestingly, the Tongva Nation, original people of the LA basin, were not allowed to sell their craftwork because of the Indian Arts and Craft Act of 1990. This Act has roots in the early twentieth century formerly known as the Indian Arts and Craft Act of 1935. Originally this act was initiated to surveillance the production of Indian Art, and protect these creations from appropriation. The IACA, as critiqued and outlined by Joanne Barker in her article *Indian TM*, restricts the definitions of Indian in accordance with settler colonial notions and perceptions about Indian communities. The IACA perpetuates the ideas of heteronormativity and patriarchy expressed through male dominated tribal governments who work under the Department of the Interior to make sure members fulfill requirements for enrollment. The Department of the Interior has outlined specific terms for who is able and unable to sell craftwork as authentic Indian art, the most important factor is that the artisan is an enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe.<sup>13</sup> As the Tongva and Seri/Comcaac prepare their own approaches to creating artwork for sale, it is at the crossroads of Los Angeles where the divisions between federal and state recognition climax. Guerrilla art subverts the institutions of colonial recognition. A reliance and dependence on recognition issued by the federal government leaves one asking, who really defines “Indian?” The debate is an ongoing one, whether federal and state agencies have the right to appoint Indian status, or does this recognition lie in the Native community and their embracing of individuals based on tribal protocols? Having certification might serve the government agencies that keep control and surveillance over tribal rolls and records, but does certification oblige Indian people?

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<sup>13</sup> Department of the Interior. Indian Arts and Craft Act of 1990. [www.doi.gov](http://www.doi.gov)

Specifically, Native artists who create work that is reflective of their culture? Clearly, in light of appropriation and globalization, the need to preserve tribal designs and concepts is very real. Barker is clear that she agrees with a need for regulations surrounding the security of native people and their livelihood through craftwork, although she is critical of the necessity that those who purchase Indian products seek artists who meet criteria set forth by the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990.<sup>14</sup> The conditions of recognition found throughout the Indian Arts and Crafts Act are tactics of elimination and disappearance. The Tongva Nation, the original people of the LA basin<sup>15</sup>, were not allowed to sell their craftwork because of the status of their tribe not being federally recognized. It is here where the distinctions between federal and state recognition climax. A prime example of the situations Indigenous people encounter when entering the market system. The Seri made the journey from El Desemboque and Punta Chueca areas arriving in the crossroads of Los Angeles. They visited with Tongva cultural bearers at Puvuunga, and days later were present selling at the Autry Indian Art Market.

In the process of recovery, many Indigenous people are finding their Indigenous rights within nation states are more important than ever. Indigenous people who are seeking recovery might have to combat the ideas of the nation as they move towards employing their own sovereignty. Part of the moves Indigenous people have made is the revitalization of language, preparing traditional foods, and also breathing new life into their traditional forms of art and craft work. The guerrilla aspects of this artwork Indigenous people create speaks to a legacy of resistance in the face of destruction, colonialism, and marginalization. Like a phoenix from the ashes, Indigenous artistry experiences a rebirth each century, each epoch in which it emerges.

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<sup>14</sup> Joanne Barker. "Indian TM." *Wicaso Za Review*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Today, there are many tribes who are unable to access their ancestral homelands or areas of mineral plant, and medicinal sources because they are not federally recognized tribes. In the book, *Recognition, Sovereignty, Struggles, & Indigenous Rights in the United States*, Amy E. Ouden and Jean M. O'Brien discuss the dynamics of being federally and state recognized are explored in the U.S. context. Many of the essays in the book speak to issues facing communities on both the East and West coasts of Turtle Island. The discussions go deep and articles explore issues of authenticity and lead us to questions of "who is Indian?" and "who is Indian enough?"<sup>16</sup> Essays throughout the text redefine Indian people to fit the mold set forth for them by settler colonial imaginations of what it means to be associated with Indigenous. In addition, the book and discussions of recognition leads to ideas about "authenticity" and what that means for Indian people as well as governmental forces seeking to impose identities on Indigenous people.

## Chapter 3 : Methodology

### 3.1 Seri Encounter: The Crossroads

Aside from the various texts and media outlets I have consulted on this subject, there were a few personal experiences in which I was fortunate enough to engage in guerilla jewelry within the Native community. In November, 2014 I was invited to Puvuunga, a sacred Tongva site occupied by present-day California State University, Long Beach. A rare cultural exchange was to take part in the Crossroads of Los Angeles, between the Tongva people of Los Angeles

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<sup>16</sup> Amy Ouden and Jean M. O'Brien, Eds., *Recognition, Sovereignty, Struggles, & Indigenous Rights in the United States*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 2.

and the Seri people travelling from Sonora, Mexico. At the time my knowledge of this visiting Seri tribe was limited to a short summary from a magazine feature and a recollection of learning of their ancient alliances with Yoeme, Mayo, Tohono O’odham, and Opata tribes. In anticipation for the exchange, I was only told to bring money in the event I wanted to purchase anything from the Seri artisans. My curiosity and interests grew in the approaching days, excited for the opportunity.

The Seri women journeyed from Mexico to attend the Annual American Indian Art Market in Downtown Los Angeles. These Women make up a female collective of artists and jewelers actively selling handmade items in available marketplaces. Events such as the American Indian Art Market are considered a prominent chance to earn a substantial profit for their artwork. Such promising venues for their craft are non-existent in Mexico, so these Seri Women embrace the long journey. The Tongva, being ancestral people of Los Angeles, respectfully invited and received the six Seri Women at Puvuunga for a day of ceremony, appreciation, and kinship. I purchased a necklace of purple and pink dyed sea snail shells and a necklace with the rattle of a snake that served as a charm. This necklace included the rib cage of a serpent separated by, “the small black seed beads from the *Viscainoa*” plant found near the Seri villages.<sup>17</sup> The black seeds like the shells and mollusks the Seri people collect are the oldest and most original beads that the Seri have continuously used.<sup>18</sup> These two elements perfectly represent the relationship the Seri artists have with both the land and the ocean.

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Felger and Mary Beck Moser. “People of the Desert and Sea”. (University of Arizona Press, 1985.)

<sup>18</sup> Observations from Cultural Exchange. November, 2014.

## 3.2 The Tongva Story and Sand Painting

Part of my privilege as an Indigenous student is writing this work on Tongva Land. California Indian nations have their own history of making art and adornment. As this research was culminating I was invited to a Winter Solstice ceremony which took place at Puvuunga in Tongva territory. One of the leaders at this gathering was Craig Torres who is a cultural bearer for the Tongva people and a community figure. He is also, “a descendant of Prospero Elias Dominguez, one of the few Tongva to receive a Mexican land grant, a twenty-two-acre grant near San Gabriel by Governor Micheltorena in 1843.”<sup>19</sup> Craig sent me a message saying that if I had time to please come to the ceremony because the Tongva will be creating a sand painting. It took me by surprise at first because in my research I never thought of California Indian people making sand paintings. My initial thoughts were towards the Diné tradition and not the Tongva. When I arrived at the site, the construction of a large sand painting began. I found people of all ages preparing the sand painting and laying out materials. I came upon Craig who held abalone shells with hand crushed pigments in one hand, a rock in his lap, and a paintbrush in the other hand. Craig was painting the story of how the Sun started to rise for the people.<sup>20</sup> The sand painting surrounded an ancestor pole and was circular in shape. In each of the four directions there were whale tails of white sand. The ocean backdrop was done with black sand. A trim of red sand outlined the circumference of the sand painting and marked red circles.

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<sup>19</sup> Claudia Jurmain and William McCawley. *O, My Ancestor: Recognition and Renewal for the Gabrielino-Tongva People of the Los Angeles Area*.

<sup>20</sup> Craig Tee, Observed by Damien P. Montañó, December 2014.

In speaking of California, I am not a California Native. These nations have their own history of making art and adornment. As this research was culminating I was invited to a Winter Solstice ceremony which took place at Puvuunga in Tongva territory. A large sand painting was to be constructed. It took me by surprise because California Indian people are rarely associated with sand paintings, even though the Tongva were a coastal people. My initial thoughts were towards the Diné tradition and not the Tongva. When I arrived at the site, the construction of a large sand painting began. I found people of all ages preparing the sand painting and laying out materials. I came upon Craig who held abalone shells with hand crushed pigments in one hand, a rock in his lap, and a paintbrush in the other hand painting the story of how the Sun started to rise for the people.<sup>21</sup> The sand painting surrounded an ancestor pole and was circular in shape. In each of the four directions there were whale tails of white sand. The ocean backdrop was done with black sand. A trim of red sand outlined the circumference of the sand painting and marked red circles.



**FIGURE 3.1** ROCK DEPICTING THE RISING OF THE SUN



**FIGURE 3.2** COMPLETED SAND PAINTING AT PUVUUNGA

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<sup>21</sup> Craig Tee, Observed by Damien P. Montaño, December 2014.

Interestingly, during the process Tongva educator Cindi Alvitre instructed one of the children assisting to make a circle of scarlet red beads on one of the whale's tails. The child instead threw the beads. All sand painting collaborators stood back, and decided to follow the child's pattern on the following tails. Witnessing this young ancestor in training throw the beads down was powerful as I felt this child already setting in motion positive change and creativity of ceremony for the Tongva people. I was encouraged to work on the piece but I was hesitant to put sand down because I thought to myself, "I am not Tongva and other Tongva folks their perhaps should be doing this work." I then looked around and noticed there was maybe twenty five people present, and in the totality of that I realized that every Native hand was precious.

After the sand painting was completed everyone present gathered around a built fire and offered prayers with offerings of tobacco. There was also a feast afterwards of amaranth, cactus fruit, tamales, fish, and acorn pumpkin bread. Many more things happened which I will not reveal in this work, but the event was a shift in my understanding of art as connected to



*FIGURE 3.3 CRAIG TEE AND I AT PUVUUNGA WITH THE SERI/COMCAAC*



*FIGURE 3.4 ME LAYING DOWN SAND AT PUVUUNGA*

spirituality.<sup>22</sup> I kept wondering and asking myself why would the Tongva create this piece of art?

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<sup>22</sup> I am trying to be hyperconscious and respectful of the ceremony and so I won't go into further detail.

If the tribes were coastal then they used what materials they had available to them. I began also to think about the differences between western art and Native art. Art created in western spaces is meant to be preserved, priced, and prestigiously hung on a gallery wall. The piece was made detailed with elements of spontaneity for spiritual purposes of balancing and giving offerings on a powerful day in the Native calendrical cycle. As soon as the sand painting was constructed I could already imagine it disappearing, weathering away, disintegrating and returning to the earth as an offering. The sand paintings of the Tongva and Diné remind me of the mandalas that Buddhist monks create. Once they are completed they have served their purpose and they are then destroyed exemplifying the temporary nature and fragility of our lives.

### 3.3 Beading the Odds

My own jewelry making and artistry has been continuously inspired not only by my heritage and family legacy but also by Two-Spirit artists across space and time. Artists like Hastiin Klah, L. Frank Manriquez, Kent Monkman as well as Tongva and Seri artists have been at the forefront of my inspirations. I began creating pieces that I imagined myself wearing; also pieces from old photos of California, Maya, and Aztec jewelry which gave off primitive and ancient energy. Jade and turquoise has always been a favorite stone which I use in many different pieces. Much of what I do has been a manifestation of cellular memory as I was never formally instructed to bead or make artistic creations not only painting but also constructing from materials found in nature. After graduation from California State University, Fullerton I entered a transitional phase in my life which took me back to ancestry and manifested through sacred art. I was going through a personal trial and I began to make jewelry as a form of expression but also

to keep my mind occupied. I never imagined it could take off the way it did. At a time when I had graduated and was broke I realized I had a myriad of stones, beads, feathers, horn, antler, and various implements in my craft tool boxes.

Interestingly, this was my personal entrance into tribal capitalism- a complex term that involves a system foreign to Indigenous people, guerilla jewelry, and a form of the Indian marketplace. Many people commented on my work and began asking what I could assemble for them. Lots of the inquiries came from other Native and Chicana/o students, academics, as well as other jewelry making folks interested in these pieces I was making. I began taking orders and producing pieces. My guerilla jewelry began when I attended a conference in April of 2014 and could not afford the table next to academic presses selling books. I went underground and shared photos through social media, and put a blanket down in the back of panel presentations and sold my work there. My work was received well and it was an amazing networking tool as some scholars I very much respected bought pieces from me. The methods and processes of making jewelry are similar to those of writing. Everything must flow. There are main components to pieces, and certain jewels (of wisdom) that are used throughout the entirety of the piece. Jewelry and art also builds on examples from the past as we as Native scholars build our theories and ideas on those of past elders and scholars. Writing is ceremony. Creating art is ceremony.

Initially it crossed my mind that many non-Native people have desired Native jewelry as well as companies incorporating Indigenous adornments and symbolism into modern day fashions. Evidence of this is found in clothing companies such as Urban Outfitters selling items like a flask and women’s underwear with “Navajo print”. I asked myself the question more than once, is my artwork appropriating Indigenous cultures? If the “Indian Arts and crafts Act of 1990 stipulates that art labeled Indian must be produced by those possessing certified Indian membership”.<sup>23</sup> Could I call my work Native art or authentic? Does federal recognition make us



*FIGURE 3.5 RAINBOW EARRING SET BY DAMIEN MONTAÑO*



*FIGURE 3.6 CORAL BRANCHES & DISCS BY DAMIEN MONTAÑO*

Indians or does living the Native way and being recognized by the community? These are questions Indian people begin to ask themselves in the discussions of sovereignty over our lands, bodies, artistic and intellectual property. A relative saw my work and told me that perhaps one of our distant relatives was a bead maker or weaver and I could be a recipient of these gifts in this

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<sup>23</sup> Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, Eds., *Theorizing Native Studies*, (Duke University Press, 2014), 252.

lifetime. My jewelry making has been inspired by southwestern Indigenous people as some of my favorite materials has been abalone, dentalium, turquoise and bone.



FIGURE 3.7 ABALONE EARRINGS BY DAMIEN MONTAÑO



FIGURE 3. 8 BONE, TURQUOISE, AND CORAL BY DAMIEN MONTAÑO

### 3.4 Art as Sovereignty

Throughout this work, I have argued that the Seri, the Tongva and other artists engage in guerrilla jewelry, by weaving and beading their resistance into their artwork. This is an example of what Osage scholar Robert Warrior calls, “Intellectual Sovereignty”, which is described as our “decision” to be intellectually sovereign.<sup>24</sup> The idea that Warrior presents affirms the agency and freedom for Native people to tell their own stories and reconnect to cellular memory while creating modern renditions of older artwork and styles. Our cellular memory is something that we are gifted with when we enter this world and dimension. Passed down in our DNA from our ancestors, cellular memory means that we have stored memories in mind, body, and spirit, and

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<sup>24</sup> Qwo-Li Driskill, “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies”, *GLQ Journal* 16:1-2, 2010.

these can help individuals re-member something we have not yet experienced in this lifetime. Discussions of sovereignty and recognition are important because artists making jewelry are always practicing at some level a form of sovereignty and resistance. Art has many forms in Indigenous communities in the form of beading or gathering shells and basket materials for basket making and jewelry making.<sup>25</sup> Indigenous rights and sovereignty are of the utmost importance for access to land, the ability to practice continuity in making artistic and practical pieces for the use of the tribe, and to compete and sell their work in a capitalist based market system.



FIGURE 3.9 TWO SERI WOMEN @ PUVUUNGA



FIGURE 3.10 SERI/COMA'AC WOMEN SELLING CRAFTWORK

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Hosmer and Larry Nesper, Eds., *Tribal Worlds: Critical Studies in American Indian Nation Building*, (State University of New York Press, 2013).

## Chapter 4 : Findings

### 4.1 Seri Adornment

The role of Adornment here is notably relevant to the versatility presented in Guerrilla Jewelry, the depth beyond aesthetics where the buying and sharing and gifting of artistic work has sealed bonds and fostered friendships throughout history. Even at our small gathering an extensive array of jewelry and baskets filled the tables. The items were depictions of authenticity, created from materials collected in their homelands. Seri jewelry incorporates rib cages of desert snakes and vertebrae from fish and sharks (whom Tiburon Islands is named for) gathered along their coasts. Techniques I had never seen in Native work were applied to the pieces - glass beads and fish scales dried, dyed, and added spaces between shell beads. The glasswork suggests the jewelry makers incorporated modern materials, as the Seri people do in their ironwood carvings. Jewelry for the Comcaac also utilizes many different types of shells in their work. The necklaces were strung on fishing line, which I interpreted as a modern tool and a reflection of the fishing community in their area. The Seri use sandpaper and other materials to do touch up work on their ironwood carvings. The conflict of technology is present in the fact that the use of electricity and machinery could complete the work at a quicker pace than the hand carving and hacks from a machete. However, the modern tools assist in productivity for the Seri ironwood carvers. These carvings were said to be started by a man named Jose Estorga who was instructed in a dream to use the wood, to uplift his community. The dream world is a setting where some Native artists receive patterns, colors, or the concepts for many of their works that they create in this reality. Ironwood carving is not gendered as his daughter Olga Estorga carried

on this legacy which became a lucrative market for the Seri/Comcaac peoples. Interestingly, this craft started with a gifting or exchange between a non-Native tourist and Jose. The exchange led to the blooming and expansion of Seri craftwork that continues today.<sup>26</sup>

Amongst the Seri adornment is small hand-sewn pouches packed with crushed herbs and decorated with embroidered butterflies, hummingbirds, and celestial bodies like the sun and moon appealed to the spiritual and sacred elements. The Seri women themselves were adorned in shells and bone and their faces were painted with long horizontal lines in-between their eyes and their nose. The adornment ceremony the Seri women held that morning was intricate painting of their faces, and the placing of numerous beautiful necklaces suspended from their necks. In a cultural context, “[t]he elegant and often intricate face painting designs are applied for ceremonies, celebrations, markets, and fiestas. Historically, face paint was applied ‘as protection from the sun, for purely aesthetic or decorative purposes, for curative and supernatural purposes, and to influence nature’”.<sup>27</sup> Today it can be argued that placing the lines on their faces is an act of resistance and guerrilla art. The lines on their faces are shields that protect their identities and rich heritage, and are symbols of their resistance to relinquish their traditional culture in exchange for a fleeting modernity.

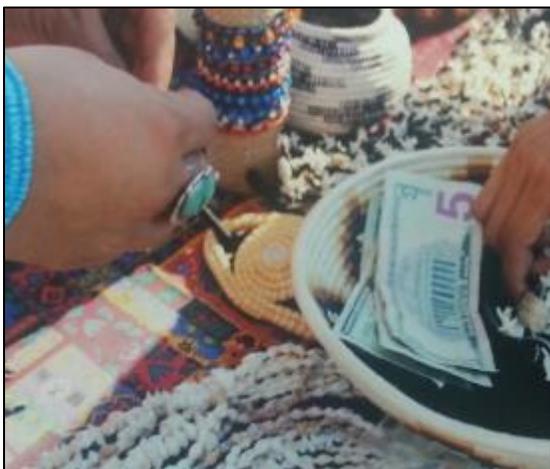
There was an organic theme surrounding the display before me. Every treasure the women brought exemplified authenticity, speaking the same ancient language as the guerrilla women able to recreate the image of the Seri Tribe within each piece. In many ways jewelers engage in guerrilla jewelry by strategically placing specific stones in particular pieces in order to

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<sup>26</sup> *Seri: People Live by the Desert and Sea*. Documentary. International Wood Culture Society. October 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Stephen Felger and Mary Beck Moser, “People of the Desert and Sea.” (University of Arizona Press, 2009)

convey a deeper cultural significance the wearer might not be aware of. For California Indian people their use of Abalone keeps them connected to this spirit being while this shell is resting on the chest of the descendants of good people. For different California Indian Nations, the Abalone holds great spiritual and cultural relevance. The Seri are connected to over 150 different types of mollusks and use the shells in their jewelry for generations. Sometimes physical structures divide people, and in the case of the Tongva and Seri, this physical structure is an international and colonial border that separates Alta and Baja California. Despite legal separation, when you cross the border the land is the same, and you will find the similar variations of the plants and materials used for craftwork.



*FIGURE 4.1 MONETARY EXCHANGE WITH THE SERI*



*FIGURE 4.2 SNAKE RIBCAGE NECKLACE WITH RATTLE CHARM*

## 4.2 The Tongva and Artistic Resistance

Continuity for Indigenous people is being able to access sources of stones and mineral, and lands where medicinal plants as well as artistic materials can be collected. Because of an encroaching world, sacred sites have been converted into private property. This collection of

materials comes with its own knowledge and training for individual artists as sometimes collecting is accompanied with songs, prayers, and asking of permission, as well as resistance. Sometimes permission is asked of a plant before the collector plucks leaves or flowers from it. But if materials needed to create cultural continuity are found on land inaccessible to Indian people what can be done? Guerrilla jewelers often circumvent private property signs to collect the herbs needed for healing, the reeds needed for basket making and the seed needed for jewelry. Often, the Seri and other tribes collect materials for their jewelry and craft work in areas that have been designated to them. In the case of the Tongva, their creation of art and continuity of ceremony carries on into today even though they lack federally designated lands. For the Tongva and other California Indian people, “the government’s failure to provide a reservation for the Tongva not only denied them a land base, it also made them seem less Indian to other tribes that had land.”<sup>28</sup> There are many resources such as different types of bark, reed and grasses, as well as turquoise and abalone that continue to be precious for Indigenous people and their craftwork, gift giving, and many other facets of Native life. The Tongva people have spoken through their work that their community is alive, thriving, and creating in new and sensational directions. Throughout this work I have found that Tongva artistry is healthy and continuing an old legacy handed down from past generations. This is the essence of Guerrilla Jewelry, finding resistance and resilience in the craftwork of Indigenous people despite numerous tactics of elimination, marginalization, and disappearance.

### 4.3 My Guerrilla Jewelry

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<sup>28</sup> Claudia and Jurmain and William McCawley. “O, My Ancestor: Recognition and Renewal for the Gabrielino-Tongva people of the Los Angeles Area.” (Heyday Books, 2009).

The honorable display of resilience in the form of creative expression from the Indigenous peoples I have observed and acknowledged here, has had a tremendous influence on my own pursuits and representations as an artist. As the depth of my studies on this subject expanded, so did my awareness of the familiarity between many aspects of my work and that of these Tribal artists. Like both the Tongva and Seri jewelers, I incorporate the use of indigenous natural materials often collected from the land. For us coastal dwellers, shells are prominent in our craft as Native culture has a profound spiritual symbolism in shells of all forms. From these artisans and their extensive array of materials, I am compelled to implement into my work a few natural elements and traditional techniques with my more modern approach. Particularly, braiding sinew rather than using metal wire, stone drills rather than a power tool, and always being mindful of the earth's resources though they are many, they are limited. Any artist, writer, basket-weaver, performer, or jeweler honing their skills to express cultural identity, circumvent government restrictions, or to provide fundamental sustainability participate in and define Guerilla Jewelry. My ability to participate is predicated on privilege to creatively convey the vision found at the crossroads of Los Angeles.

## Chapter 5 : Conclusions

I am most humbled to write this work on Tongva land, to meet the Seri artisans and purchase their intricate craftwork. The Tongva of Los Angeles remain examples of strength and triumph overcoming waves of displacement by colonial forces. Tongva artwork, basketry, and jewelry are physical manifestations of their resistance. The Tongva efforts to keep the traditions

of the past and move in new directions is resilience – the epitome of Guerilla Jewelry. The culmination of research, writing, and applying indigenous methodologies to approach the innovative cultures of the Seri and Tongva people has been mind-altering and transformative and has enhanced my appreciation for the tradition of craftwork and artistry across Indian Country. Across international borders, separated by ocean and desert, the Tongva and Seri are beading the odds of erasure and destruction. Both the Tongva and Seri people have displayed an immense perseverance in the face of their respective nation states' assimilation tactics. One prevalent form of this expression is through the arts and craftwork; through what is essentially, Guerilla Jewelry. Continuing the work of their ancestors, remembering stories of the earth and the human connection to each plant and animal, how to live in harmony with all living things and how to create with gifts we've been blessed with. There is a definite significance and dynamic role of Native American adornment and how this craft fulfills many purposes beyond decoration. Surely, Guerilla Jewelry serves as a fashion statement for some or an identity marker for other individuals. However, the artwork created by the Native tribes observed for this thesis is much more representative; symbols of socio-political resistance and Indigenous identity. Guerilla Jewelry is a movement. And it is gaining momentum in a culturally conscious direction conducive to the survival, hope, and change for Indigenous Nations throughout their ancestral homelands.

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