

2017

Necessary Affairs: Exploring the Relationship Between Indigenous Art and Activism

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Recommended Citation

Siddiqui, Jasmeen, "Necessary Affairs: Exploring the Relationship Between Indigenous Art and Activism" (2017). *2017 Undergraduate Awards*. 26.

https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/undergradawards_2017/26

Necessary Affairs:
Exploring the Relationship Between Indigenous Art and Activism

Much of the Indigenous work—the films, poetry, and literature—we have analysed in this course on human rights and creativity functions both as art and as a form of activism for Indigenous peoples, tying art and activism in a special relationship. This essay will investigate the effectiveness of art as activism, and it will turn upon the assumption that art can, in fact, perform a function, and that its function is social, political, and/or cultural—in the case of Indigenous art, it is often all three. Not all art must be created with political intentions, but somewhere in the process, context, product, or interpretation of art lies social, political, or cultural value. Every work of art is a product of its time and place, and it is indicative of a relationship, sentiment, or occurrence in the artist's life. More specifically, Indigenous art is innately functional because the creation of art by marginalized communities is always contributing to representation, which this essay will later discuss. Though the function of art is a highly-debated point to turn an entire essay upon, the following exploration of art as activism will be considerably less tedious to read if we can begin from common ground. Art and activism bring out positive and negative attributes in each other, helping each other in some ways and perhaps hurting each other in other ways. Nonetheless, this essay will argue that art, in both its process and product, is both an effective and necessary means for Indigenous peoples to engage in healing, decolonization, and social, cultural, and political processes.

This argument will benefit from first discussing why the relationship between art and activism exists, for which the most evident reason is the ability to cultivate empathy. One of the first readings for this course was from *Freedom: Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, published by Amnesty International on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration. If one wants to understand why art and activism work well together, one might consider the

reason why this collection of literature was put together by an organization which “has exposed serious human rights violations and mobilized millions of ordinary citizens to prevent and stop abuses,” and “has helped free tens of thousands of political prisoners, brought justice to victims of rights abuse, stopped torture and executions, and helped spur a global human rights movement” (Press Release, 2011). At its most basic, stories *do* something to their reader, and make their reader do something as well, by nature of the giving and receiving of knowledge. In Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s “Foreword,” he writes that through stories “we understand that we are human” and that “Throughout our lives we tell stories and we listen to them, and when we do this we are building bridges. Our stories are carried on our breath into the minds and hearts of others” (7). Stories are how we know each other and our selves, and that relation between self and other also forms the basis for empathy, which Tutu claims is the tie between art and human rights (9). The achievement of this book lies in the reader’s ability to step into another person’s shoes, because that is the necessary step to “overcome prejudice, develop tolerance and ultimately understand love. Stories can bring understanding, healing, reconciliation and unity” (Tutu 9). Similarly, Vered Cohen-Barzilay, Director of Communications and Publications at Amnesty International Israel, argues that “literature can be as powerful as life itself,” that it can inspire change while also lending us the comfort, hope, passion, and strength it will take to do so (12). The Director of Amnesty International UK, Kate Allen, highlights another link between art and activism: Article 19 of the Declaration, which states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.” This Article binds art with human rights—or literature and Amnesty International in this case—because artists are often the first to present their opinions and expressions in the public sphere, and therefore they are often the first to be threatened by their governments (Allen 13-14). Allen argues that governments are threatened because of the power

stories wield in showing us what *could* be as opposed to what *is*, and she writes, “This is why those who abuse human rights fear writers and artists and seek to oppress them” (14). Expressing oneself, as one inevitably does at least to some degree when creating art, is therefore asserting a right, and consequently falls under the category of activism as it advocates for the beliefs of Human Rights. Amnesty International clearly intended this compilation of art to take form as a piece of activism, pushing forward political agendas of peace and equality, as the press release states, “FREEDOM is a call to stand-up for the rights of all” (2011)—a direct call to action.

Activism often finds itself in art, but there are also many ways that art as a medium increases the effectiveness of activism through its magnificent ability to layer meaning, filter emotion, and push the boundaries of reality. Fiction itself is a powerful tool in relaying a message because symbols lend themselves to interpretation, and much of the work is done in the audience’s mind. Bringing the focus back to Indigenous art specifically, fiction is also a form of truth, and myths play a dominant role in Indigenous knowledge. One asset that art brings to activism—something typically thought of as quite serious and high-stakes—is humour. Shelley Niro’s *Honey Moccasin* is a wonderful example of how art can have a social, cultural and/or political function and how it can touch upon heavy ideas and traumatic experiences but inflict no pain, and even evoke some laughter. Paul Chaat Smith, in *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, writes that the traditional outfits made from found objects, like bottle caps and car tires, in *Honey Moccasin* “display Niro’s humour,” (Smith 111) but at the same time those strange outfits deliver the message that the Indigenous community need not define themselves solely by the objects that popular culture has reduced them to (feathers, beads, etc.). Humour, for Niro, was also a way of ensuring that her people were her target audience, as she wanted them “to relate to the situations in this film without trying to find a way in,” (Niro

115) and the humour of *Honey Moccasin*—the outfits, the stories, the quips, Zachary’s karaoke machine, his dressing as a woman—all bases itself in the native community and the fictional reserve. Niro also created a work of art that is completely by and for Indigenous people, and that is itself a form of activism against popular culture’s assimilative efforts and the dominance of non-Indigenous media. This essay will later expand on art’s activism through representation, but first we return to humour. Niro writes, “The use of humour makes the listener sit a little closer to what is being said and wait for the bite,” (115) and though *Honey Moccasin* does not aim to reproduce violence on its audience, it asks them to enter the narrative and learn something where they might not have expected to. Humour in art also contributes to Niro’s ability to look at how Indigenous have been portrayed in the art world and work *with* those images. She writes, “In the past, I wanted to create opposing views of how Indian women were seen. By playing with what was already there, I could deconstruct and invent new personalities,” (113) and she does so in jest, and with a Camp-esque aesthetic of hyperbole and plasticity.

Humour’s role in mental health is important to consider because it adds another layer to the work that art can do for activism. Bill Borchardt, in his article “Humor and its Contributions to Mental Health,” identifies a few kinds of humour, including commercialized humour—which is a convenient momentary laugh—and rational humour, which encourages thought for a life time, in addition to a momentary laugh (248). Rational humour “provides laughter that not only lightens but permits a humor learning format,” (Borchardt 248) and some types of rational humour include counter exaggeration & absurdity (we think of the crime and the outfits in *Honey Moccasin*), emotive humorous language (Zachary’s speech), clever word play (the many interpretations of the song “Fever”), provocation/confrontation (when Zachary is caught by Honey), and storytelling (the structure of the entire film) (Borchardt 254). Among the benefits

of humour that Borchardt lists, a few stand out as they directly pertain to activism: humour “energizes and involves,” “signals hope,” “encourages alertness, discourages take-for-grantedness,” “supports and encourages the entertainment of newer, more hopeful possibilities,” and humour is “the antithesis of whining and screaming about life’s innumerable injustices” (251). Humour *does* in the same way that literature *does* something to its audience, and even though the article is linked to mental health, the humour in *Honey Moccasin* can be viewed similarly as it engages the audience and gives Niro’s people faith in the idea that they mean more than just beads and feathers, and that good—like art and laughter—can come from their experiences. Borchardt even draws a line connecting humour and action as he says, “When you can laugh at a problem, you imply that you will prevail against it. Humor humanizes—it takes you from being a part time professional to the realm of being a full-time human,” (248) much like how Tutu related literature to empathy. Humour opens avenues for realizing that what was thought as right may actually be wrong, and, funnily enough, Borchardt adds that humour allows one to “Practice empathy—the ability to walk in other people’s moccasins and get a sense for their feelings at the time” (252).

Art employs many tools beyond humour to skillfully deliver complex, traumatic, and/or difficult activist subject matter to an audience, but the goals of activism can also be found in the process of creating art. Niro used art as a way to protect herself from boredom, but in that same way the process of art-making exhibited activist themes by keeping Niro in the field of empathy, protecting her from developing worse coping mechanisms, and showing her and others around her a continuously different possibility for reality. She writes that art was also her way of participating and belonging in a community—which is especially important since she feels marginalized from any major art centre and from her own reserve—and explains, “At this point

in my life, I want to contribute in a positive way. This is through art-making and an ongoing dialogue through my work” (113). In this quote, she draws forward the activism that lies both in her work and in the process of participating in her community through the creation of art. Niro also collaborated with Indigenous musicians, art students, poets, and actors to put *Honey Moccasin* together, and that collaborative process of art-making creates solidarity and support amongst people the Western world has tried repeatedly, and over decades, to divide and conquer.

Arts-based research, often coordinated by activists, is an increasingly popular method that highlights the effectiveness of the process of art-making in empowering Indigenous peoples. In a report about a group called *Taking Action*—formed with the purpose of involving Indigenous youth in the production of art with the ultimate goal of educating them on the rising threat of HIV—the authors write:

Drumming, singing, carving, weaving, and beading continue to be considered important forms of storytelling. Traditional knowledge is transmitted through myths, legends, stories, dances, images, and experiential learning. The arts are aesthetic, functional, and sacred endeavours that continue to be used for communication, teaching, and values transmission (Flicker et. al).

The process of art-making is rooted in, and integral to, Indigenous tradition and ceremony, and since the Indian Act “outlawed cultural expressions related to ceremonies and gatherings, such as dances, songs, regalia, masks, and musical instruments” (Flicker et. al)—essentially most of Indigenous forms of art—there is activism in reclaiming the artistic process, just as there is activism in expressing oneself freely as per Article 19 of the Declaration. The report discusses in length the duality of art’s activist function, arguing that while the final product is a medium for conveying a message, the process also becomes a “medium for engaging with power structures, cultural values, and identity development,” which continues in a cyclical motion as, for example, “creating a film (process) leads to the final video (product), which then gets used as a

springboard for discussion and activism in another community (process)” (Flicker et. al). The space of free creation allows artists to make meaning for themselves as opposed to having meaning shoved upon them, and in that way the artist is able to see things both as they are and as they might be—to envision a counter-hegemonic political reality, perhaps, which may manifest in real change. Both the art process and product perform vital acts of decolonization in the minds of those creating and consuming the work, as *Taking Action* reported for their group, and as we may find in innumerable works of Indigenous art.

Leanne Simpson’s collection of prose and poetry, *Islands of Decolonial Love*, is an act of decolonization in the way that she artfully remembers colonial history, addresses the real pain that was passed along generations in the form of a “gaping hole” motif, and actively uses her art to participate in the healing process, which includes returning to tradition and Indigenous relations, and learning to love freely again. Simpson uses Indigenous tools of traditional storytelling and music while ignoring Western literary codes—a result of the creative space which allowed her to make meaning for herself—and by doing so, her book strongly opposes colonial life, and plants seeds for rebirth and reconnection with the Anishinaabe tradition, ultimately embodying a radical act of decolonisation. An important element to add to these conclusions is the importance of Simpson’s contribution to the representation of Indigenous people in the public imagination. Gülriz Büken discusses how the image of the “Indian” became dominated by popular culture and what some Indigenous artists are doing to combat the misrepresentations in his paper, “Construction of the Mythic Indian in Mainstream Media and the Demystification of the Stereotype by American Indian Artists.” He touches on how Indigenous people have been portrayed by non-Indigenous people in the media beginning in the 19th century and continuing into the 21st century; Indigenous people have been conveyed as

“mythical/legendary beings rather than flesh and blood ordinary humans with vices and virtues, sufferings and joys, failures and accomplishments,” and as “nomadic, monolithic, undifferentiated, idealized communities rather than being acknowledged as individuals whose actual existence deserves to be defined not only by their ethnic but also by their cultural identity” (2002). Indigenous people have always been conceived as the “other,” and so Niro’s decision to make non-Indigenous viewers the “other” speaks volumes about her own efforts to bring Indigenous-made representations of Indigenous people to the forefront. The stereotypes of Indigenous people have caused so much damage that it is difficult to list all the effects, but some are as follows: the detriment of cultural pride and self-esteem, the erasure of individual and cultural identity, the reductionism of values and symbols into commercial products and caricatures, the destructive grouping of all Indigenous peoples into one identity, the sexual fetishization of bodies and false tropes, and the attitudes cultivated in non-Indigenous people towards Indigenous people (Büken 2002). Half of the colonization process occurred in the ideological sphere, in the sphere of imagination and representation, largely using forms of art which manifested as popular culture. Art was used to hurt Indigenous culture and identity, and Büken asks many questions in his paper about the realistic possibility of reclaiming, changing, or bleaching out these “obsolete images, stereotyped concepts, and engendered preconceptions from the collective memory of the mainstream culture,” to which the answer must be “yes,” but also “slowly.” Since the past cannot be erased—and it should not be, because one cannot heal if one does not address the point of pain—Indigenous artists are constantly using their past experiences as inspiration for their work and incorporating it into the healing process, just as Simpson does in *Islands*. Having discussed the effectiveness of activism even in the art-making process, it is a viable argument that Indigenous art does not *have* to enter the Western public sphere in a large

way because artists like Simpson have argued that a sense of self and culture can be derived for Indigenous people through a return to tradition and relatives, no matter who views their artwork. Büken would disagree as he believes it is the “responsibility of every Native American to be a living image of the subverted stereotype,” and that “The heavy burden falls on the shoulders of Native American craftsmen, writers, poets, dramatists, artists, producers, directors, educators, lawyers, and entrepreneurs to expose what it is like to be a Native American citizen in contemporary America” (2002). Many of the professions he mentions are uncoincidentally involved in art, as art has historically been the main route of Indigenous resistance. At the rise of the “vanishing Indian” trope, largely attributed to James Earle Fraser's bronze sculpture “The End of the Trail,” Indigenous artists of United Native Americans Inc. appropriated the image and used it as their logo, and David Bradley (Ojibwa artist) created art to make fun of the popular image, titled “Endangered Species” (Büken 2002). Humour re-enters the discussion here as it is recognized in the Indigenous community as a useful tool; a national touring exhibition organized by *American Indian Contemporary Arts* in 1995 was called “Indian Humour” and sought to “deconstruct the stereotypical image of native peoples as ‘stoic and serious,’ lacking a sense of humor” (Büken 2002). Indigenous people have turned to art in response to the commercialization of their identities and cultures, and Büken further emphasises the relationships between art and activism for Indigenous people specifically when he writes, “Exhibitions are important venues for Native American artists to utilize in their effort to subvert stereotypes.” He also adds that artists who are “committed to launching a fatal attack on stereotypes subvert not only the image but also conventional approaches to native art,” and Simpson’s book is a fantastic example of a subversion of conventions as she combines written, oral, music, and video in her *Islands* endeavour.

Büken is not alone in his belief that the action for change falls upon the shoulders of Indigenous artists; Theodore Jojola, in his essay “Moo Mesa: Some Thoughts on Stereotypes and Image Appropriation,” in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, also argues that Indigenous people must pursue direct roles in the image industry and become articulate about the elements of their cultures and traditions (277). He warns, “This will take patience, since the task is to counter generations of distortions that have been accepted in the mainstream as truths,” but he contends,

“If native people are to make a significant impact on this front, then they have to re-appropriate and revise their own roles, basing that revision on their own context and understanding of their traditions. They have to become directly involved, so that their native voice becomes dominant” (278).

This is where the investigation of the effectiveness of art as activism must consider the potential problems or obstacles, like what the effects are on the artist if everything they do is tied to activism, and what the effects are on the art that is labelled as activism (as opposed to “pure” art). There is a quote by David Bradley next to his artwork on the *National Museum of the American Indian* website that reads, “Indians are, by definition, political beings. To be an artist is to seek the truth. I am an Indian who is an artist,” and that would extend the definition of political beings seeking the truth (activists) to every Indigenous artist. At one angle, contributing to the betterment of one’s people through representation and subversion of stereotypes is a fantastic default description to one’s artwork, but at another angle, there are people like Colin Greenland from *The Guardian* who described Amnesty International’s *Freedom* as “a tough box of chocolates: three dozen different centres, all containing the same indigestible nuts. So much poverty, oppression, torture; so many barbed wire fences, prison cells, smug politicians and dull-eyed soldiers.” From an Indigenous perspective, pain is nearly an impossible thing to avoid because their lives have been shaped by it from generations before them. Art occasionally may

be perceived by critics to have less value if attributed too blatantly to real life experiences, as Greenland adds, “Creation reverts to transcription, as if the immensity of the issues overpowers the imagination.” Activist art might also not provide the same income as selling stereotyped imitation native reservation tours to non-Indigenous people—a strange career adopted by some Indigenous peoples, which both Büken and Jojola discuss in their papers. “There is no consensus among Indian people,” Jojola says about the stereotyped image of Indigenous people (277), because Western mainstream culture has marginalized, reduced, and trivialized Indigenous experience so much that sometimes the choice between following or subverting a stereotype is the choice between making a living or not.

All that being said, art is still the most accessible method for Indigenous peoples to use in their daily, necessarily activist, existence. Art provides a more equal playing ground—though still stratified in terms of “success”—because art is unique to each culture and does not (often) require Western credentials to produce. Art is also a peaceful gesture that resists assimilation while also inviting interpretation and a diplomatic interaction. Indigenous movements like *Idle No More* involved dancing and singing in malls because art is both a nonviolent and representational stance to take that is also symbolic, traditional, and ceremonial. In some ways, art has also been Indigenous movements’ last chance at controlled representation and effective action because other sources like the news media have not been reliable avenues. Cynthia-Lou Coleman, in her essay “A War of Words: How News Frames Define Legitimacy in a Native Conflict,” argued that claims are always re-interpreted, repackaged, or “framed” before emerging in news stories, and most often not in Indigenous peoples’ favour (181). She uses the example of the coppermine conflict in Ladysmith, Wisconsin in the early 1990s, where she examined eighteen months worth of newspaper articles from ten different newspapers—totalling in 571

stories—for different frames that reporters would use to filter information in a particular way. Coleman identified five different frames that the news media uses, which are all directly tied to the common narrative strung in popular culture surrounding Indigenous peoples: that they are unscientific, illegitimate, irrational conflict-makers, anti-technological, unpatriotic, and resistant to progress. Many articles would frame the protests as a battle, using war metaphors which recalled the long Indigenous military and cultural struggle in the history of Canada, and readers would suddenly feel that they knew what the outcome would be because history seems to repeat itself (184-5). Other frames involved labelling mining companies as “the sound of progress” (186) or holding technological standards and jargon surrounding the “facts” above the discussion of ethics or values (187-8). Indigenous people could not rely on the news to report justly on the advances or protests that their communities were making, and so, in a way, they were forced to produce their messages themselves, often in the form of art. *Honey Moccasin*’s Renalta makes a quip at the journalistic way of conveying information when she’s speaking to Honey, and the distinction between those forms of conveying knowledge have proven to make a huge difference if one looks at the impact Indigenous art has made in comparison to the impact Indigenous news has made (with exceptions considering the recent rise of pipeline-related news media). The whole story must be told—not half, not a similar version, not a more saleable version—and in that lens, it is easier to recognize that the only people who can truly be activists for the *whole* Indigenous story are Indigenous people.

Art can and should be used as a form of activism—whether as literature, film, visual art, music, etc.—because it has so many tools to help facilitate the digestion of loaded social, political, and cultural messages. Though activist art, labelled as such, can detriment the value of the art in some critics’ eyes, and through it is a heavy burden to bear for Indigenous artists, the

creation and dissemination of art, both its process and product, evidently unearths promises of healing, community, reclamation, solidarity, support, and decolonization. The benefits outweigh the potential disadvantages that Indigenous artists may face in choosing to resist the stereotypes and frames pressed upon them, because through art Indigenous peoples can express their opinions and their stories in a free, unmediated manner, which ultimately wields the power to entertain, provoke, and inspire audiences. Art and activism are inextricably tied in Indigenous life, as France Trépanier, co-chair of the *Aboriginal Curatorial Collective*, writes, “Art can be medicine, a survival tool, an antidote. Art is our identity, our place, a sign of our presence on this planet. It is medicine as it helps healing because we've been through so many things. Art is for the people. It can help build our communities,” (Trépanier 15) and the relationship between Indigenous art and activism is one that exudes hope, peace, and progress. It is a relationship that may be the best and only option for a future that is different from its long-standing past.

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