Framing Representation: An Ethnographic Exploration of Visual Sovereignty and Contemporary Native American Art

Laura A. Hughes
University of Denver

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Framing Representation: An Ethnographic Exploration of Visual Sovereignty and Contemporary Native American Art

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Laura A. Hughes

August 2020

Advisor: Dr. Christina Kreps
Abstract

The nature of this research is to explore the idea of visual sovereignty within contemporary Native American art, and how this concept engages with practices of decolonization. Through conducting semi-structured interviews with five artists who self-identify as Native American, I explore how the artists engage with this concept, what visual narratives their artwork presents, and how their works function as acts of decolonization. I connect their narratives to a broader conversation of critical museology and museum anthropology within museum spaces including how to reconsider the art/artifact divide, how to frame Indigenous arts reception through Indigenous aesthetics, and how their narratives add multiplicity to the concept of sovereignty. This research utilizes critical ethnography and narrative methodology to present the data, which is interpreted through the frameworks of visual sovereignty, Tribal Critical Race Theory, and both relational and Indigenous aesthetics.
Acknowledgements

I would like to pay special regards to the artists who participated in this research, imparting their invaluable knowledge and time to contribute to my ongoing journey of education and self-reflection. To Melanie Yazzie, Gregg Deal, Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, and Rose B. Simpson, this research would not have succeeded, nor been as meaningful, without your thoughtful contributions to such a complicated area of research. I would like to thank all of the faculty in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Denver, especially my committee members, Dr. Christina Kreps, Dr. Kelly Fayard, Dr. Dean Saitta, and Dr. Annabeth Headrick from Art History. To Dr. Kreps and Dr. Fayard, I want to specifically thank you both for your patience, feedback, and advice as I worked through the many drafts of this thesis. I want to express gratitude to Melissa Kocelko, Manuel Ferreira, Talaya Banks, Madeline Rahme, Sarah Beals, Lucor Jordan, Madison Dillard, and Nicholas Dungey for being an incredibly supportive cohort who have each contributed to my overall success as a graduate student. Last and certainly not least, I want to thank my mother Kathleen, my father William Jr., my siblings Elizabeth and William III, and all of my family and friends for the emotional support and encouragement they have offered along the way. I truly could not have done this without you all.
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iv
Chapter One: Introduction and Background

This thesis is an exploration of Jolene Rickard’s (Tuscarora) theoretical concept of visual sovereignty. Since the early 1990’s, Rickard has been theorizing about visual sovereignty as a way to diversify political sovereignty through Indigenous art. As a paradigmatic tool, Rickard argues that visual sovereignty becomes a crucial concept to engage with when understanding “Indigeneity, the interconnected space of the colonial gaze, and deconstruction of the colonizing image or text” (Rickard 2017, 83). Rickard’s concept of expanding discussions of sovereignty into visual discourse is especially prudent to explore as a student engaged in museum anthropology. Decolonization is at the forefront of practices among many museum professionals today through redefining how stewardship over Indigenous collections is held, and representations of Native peoples and cultures within exhibition spaces are presented. This process requires museums to collaborate with Indigenous communities to prioritize their opinions and knowledge on how to present information and what can, or cannot, be shared with the public (Smith 2012, 221). Rickard asserts that art as aesthetic practice can be used as a “colonial intervention” (Rickard 2017, 83). When this idea is considered among the practices of visual reassessment of Indigenous representation within Western museum spaces, it begs the question of how practices of visual sovereignty can inform decolonizing practices while highlighting Indigenous voices. In approaching this research, I was specifically interested in exploring how visual sovereignty reclaims
political sovereignty adds multiplicity to ideas of sovereignty, and how it many intersect with practices of critical museology within Western institutions.

While visual sovereignty is utilized as an overarching theoretical framework for this research, it is important to give a more explicit definition of how it will be used when discussing art specifically. For this research, visual sovereignty within art reception is defined as “the right claimed by Indigenous artists to determine their modes of self-expression and to own space for the presentation of their work independently of direction or approval from outsiders” (Ash-Milby and Phillips 2017, 12). Contemporary art being produced by the artists within this research encompasses a multitude of styles and utilizes a variety of mediums. This influences how I understand art as it is used within this research. Art will be understood as a broad term for the production of visual material culture that creates and recreates cultural narratives within their creation.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of this theory, ethnographic research was conducted with five self-identifying contemporary Native American artists over the summer and fall of 2019. I was fortunate enough to speak with, and learn from, the following artists: Melanie Yazzie (Diné), Gregg Deal (Pyramid Lake Paiute), Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand (Sicangu Lakota/Cherokee), Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho), and Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo). Critical ethnography and narrative methodology were chosen to frame the approach of this research in order to prioritize the artist’s experiences, art processes, dialogues, and opinions on visual sovereignty to explore the concept from their perspectives. Thematic analysis of the artist’s discussions was completed after their interviews were transcribed. Sovereignty,
Tribal Critical Race Theory, and relational as well as Indigenous aesthetics are used as theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis and discussion of this research.

I created questions to guide this research that would lead me to see if the artist’s artworks functioned to dispel stereotypes and depict their lived cultural, social, and political realities while understanding how visual sovereignty may connect to their narratives. Using semi-structured interviews, each discussion provided insight and knowledge from the artists who graciously gave their time to assist in the research of this topic. Their discussions have culminated to guide my conclusions on how to engage with visual sovereignty, that while informed from artist interviews, is representative of my opinions.

In order to explore visual sovereignty and the processes behind the participant’s art making, the following research questions were used to inform the questions presented to artists in their interviews:

- What does the practice of visual sovereignty mean to these artists through the presentation of narratives regarding self-determination and representation in their art?
- What are the most common social, cultural, and/or political themes that may arise in contemporary Native art, and how do they function within the framework of visual sovereignty? How are the narratives for pieces decided on?
- How do these artists see visual sovereignty engaging with individual and communal experiences of Native American existence?
• How do artists use the idea of visual sovereignty to engage with the post-colonial work of decolonization? If they do not consciously engage with the idea, does their work still function as a decolonial tool?

Background

My engagement in this research topic stems from two areas of interest: Indigenous representations within museum spaces and building a theoretical baseline during my education to guide my practices as a future museum professional. I am concerned about the lack of information non-Native populations have regarding Native American histories and present-day realities, and how this will inevitably affect how they understand issues such as water and land rights, sovereignty, and various social issues that stem from the continued effects of settler colonialism. From 2016-2018, IllumiNative founder Crystal Echo Hawk (Pawnee) conducted a public opinion research study, Reclaiming Native Truth (RNT), whose findings indicate that the invisibility of and toxic misconceptions about Native peoples create very serious biases among diverse demographics and institutions including the Courts, Congress, philanthropy, and other sectors. Invisibility, perpetuated in pop culture, media and K-12 education, is one of the biggest drivers behind endemic bias (IllumiNative 2018).

RNT found that invisibility of Indigenous populations today is an immense barrier in “advocating for tribal sovereignty, equity, and social justice” and also discovered that judges and law clerks within the study “admitted to knowing little about tribal sovereignty and Federal Indian Law” (IllumiNative 2018). These findings are both alarming and significant when we consider present day assertions of sovereignty against colonial powers, and the ways in which they are misunderstood by the general public; the
Standing Rock Sioux fighting back against the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Wet’suwet’en First Nations in Canada’s refusal of the proposed Coastal GasLink’s pipeline, are two critical land based sovereignty issues that have caused very public divisions of non-Natives against Indigenous communities. These divisions and misunderstandings of sovereignty are directly correlated to how “invisibility, erasure, stereotypes, and false narratives underlie the stories being told right now about Native people in the 21st century” (IllumiNative 2018). Considering this, it becomes vital to understanding how visual sovereignty facilitates in deconstructing colonial narratives, and how sovereign practices can guide decolonizing practices within Western museums.

As institutions of perceived objective knowledge, museums hold a responsibility to the Indigenous communities represented within their walls to forefront Indigenous epistemologies within both practices and narratives of representation; this includes the responsibility to exhibit sovereignty within those practices. This idea is further supported by Amy Lonetree (2012), who finds the role of museums among contemporary Indigenous communities today to be a “part of the self-determination and cultural sovereignty movement” (1). While decolonization efforts have been a topic of discussion since the 1960’s and the emergence of post-colonial theories, continued engagement of diversifying practices is necessary as there is no end point to decolonization within a settler colonial society and within the colonial institutions of Western museums.

I mentioned above that many museum professionals are engaged in practices and processes of decolonization, so it is necessary to explore why they are doing so. Museums, more specifically Natural History Museums, are filled with the remains of
Indigenous individuals and objects of stolen Indigenous cultural patrimony. This process worked, as David Garneau (Métis) understands it, to “sublimate First Nations” by collecting their most beautiful and interesting things. Freezing drying and editing them. The colonial curators cured, they made cultural preserves. They exhibited a select, authentic, and dead Indianness in order to delegitimize, and eventually repress, the possibility of contemporary Indigeneity (2016).

Above I asserted that it is necessary to consider how sovereignty can guide decolonizing practices, which becomes even more clear when Garneau continues with how museological processes suppress ideas of a modern Native:

The implied story goes, diluted by European blood, and especially by modernity, Indians are not really Aboriginal anymore. And unreal aboriginals are not really entitled to treaty land and sovereignty. Not quite aboriginals are just another minority group, more colored tiles in our cultural mosaic (Garneau 2016).

Museums have, and continue to, display exhibits and narratives that ignore sovereignty and omit how colonialism has shaped a non-Native perception of Indigenous peoples today. Garneau is quick to point out that museums are at a point of realizing their own anxieties over narrative missteps and are “struggling to free themselves from their colonial carapace, and cautiously approach Indigeneity” (Garneau 2016). Indeed, as I am about to go into, American museums are going through the processes of collaboration with Indigenous peoples to engage in decolonizing practices. What I understand Garneau to be saying, is that without an acknowledgement of underlying colonial practices and biases, these practices can still fall short. Decolonizing work and processes need to be considered over whether they are mere acts of performative inclusions, or those that are founded on sovereignty that can lead to transformative action (Ash-Milby and Phillips 2017; Coulthard 2014). There should be a critical eye turned towards any decolonizing
processes within dominate culture spaces that fail to account for their own hand in the necessity of these practices, and transparency in how they are engaging in them.

At the time of this writing, there are a number of major American institutions collaborating with Indigenous communities to reassess how narratives of their cultures and histories have been presented. The Field Museum of Chicago is in the process of renovating their Native North America Hall as of October 2018, to “introduce a new way of thinking” in a space that has not been updated since the 1950’s (Field Museum of Chicago 2018). The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City is restoring Franz Boas’ historic Northwest Coast Hall in collaboration with Pacific Northwest Coast communities to “enrich the interpretation of the gallery’s exhibits” (American Museum of Natural History 2019). The Denver Art Museum is beginning to open parts of the Martin Building (formerly the North Building), which will include a new exhibition space for their Native North American art collections under the supervision of their new Assistant Curator of Native arts, Dakota Hoska (Oglála Lakȟóta) (Denver Art Museum 2019).

While these are important steps forward, the need to remain critical of, and critically engaged with, decolonizing practices is highlighted when considering how mainstream, dominant-culture museums are operating outside of large-scale renovations. The AMNH, for instance, has been under criticism from the group Decolonize This Place (DTP) for allowing a statute of Theodore Roosevelt flanked by a Native American man and an African American man on his sides, both unnamed, to stand at the entrance to the museum (Martin and Harding 2017, 1). As of June 21, 2020, the museum has finally announced that the statute will come down, an event which will be
further discussed in the conclusion of this thesis. However, as the statue has been there since 1940, its position as a visible expression of colonialism as the first thing visitors saw when they walked into the museum problematized how the museum conducted decolonial efforts elsewhere in the space. When it comes to their stewardship over Indigenous collections, other glaring issues of misguided decolonial practices arise. After the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, AMNH removed False Face Masks from their display in the Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians, leaving nothing but an empty case behind. Beyond the issue that leaving an empty display case without a narrative on why the case is empty and the importance of recognizing the cultural knowledge and sacred status of the masks to the Haudenosaunee, the masks continue to remain “on digital display, with no mention of their private status” (Martin and Harding 2017, 7). In another part of the museum, a shirt taken off the body of Cheyenne Chief White Antelope after he was murdered during the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 remains on display (Yohe 2019).

I do not mean to use these examples to diminish the important collaborative work being conducted at the AMNH in renovating their Northwest Coast Hall. Rather, these examples are meant to highlight the necessity of incorporating sovereignty into decolonizing practices of Indigenous representations, and that colonialism must continue to be acknowledged in these spaces as a part of that process. Considering the agency that is present within material culture like the False Face Masks and Chief White Antelope’s shirt is a recognition that they “embody sovereign knowledge and experience” (Yohe 2019). Given that the AMNH alone serves 4 million visitors annually, with half of their audience being school-aged children, exhibiting sovereignty and Indigenous
epistemologies becomes critical in facilitating how non-Native peoples are engaging
with, and understanding the realities of, contemporary Native Americans (American
Museum of Natural History 2019). It also becomes clear that museums need to consider
their role in global processes, as tourists come from all over the world to visit Western
institutions, and the role they play in creating both social relationships and in building
identity.

What role then does art play in asserting sovereignty within settler colonial
society writ large, and within colonized Western museum spaces? Art asserts the
importance of visual cultural recognition and provides space for understanding how
Indigenous artists turn away from state-based recognition and find other possibilities for
self-recognition and self-determination (Cattelino 2008; Coulthard 2014; Fullenwider
2017; Simpson 2014). As Rickard argues, expanding art criticism and visual theory to
include discussions centered on colonization and sovereignty can lend to understanding
how to present “Indigenous visual culture within a framework of sovereignty with an
understanding of the unique legal position Indigenous nations have in relationship to
settler colonial nations in discourse around decolonization” (Rickard 2011, 471).

I earlier discussed the need to examine decolonizing acts as that of inclusion or
based on sovereignty. Speaking directly to the work of Indigenous artists, this illuminates
that “acts of inclusion do not in and of themselves respond to or resolve the decolonizing
critiques expressed in the works of many contemporary Native American artists” (Ash-
Milby and Phillips 2017, 36). Further, sovereignty within art practice can highlight the
relationality of this praxis, and how “cultural decolonization is the perpetual struggle to
make both Indigenous and settler peoples aware of the complexity of our shared colonial
condition, and how this legacy informs every person and institution” (Garneau 2013, 15). As Garneau understands it, there needs to be room for the “mutual adaptations” that have evolved with colonization, how decolonization directly challenges “colonial habits,” and how art and the revival of other customary practices is “noncolonial practice” (Garneau 2013, 17). I will further discuss Garneau’s concept of noncolonial practice as this thesis moves into a discussion over the intersection of visual sovereignty with critical museology.

As Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds asserts in his dialogue in the Artist Profiles chapter, starting with Indigenous artists in understanding how to diversify sovereignty and integrate it into decolonizing praxis is a good place to start because they are making exhibitions about themselves and their experiences. Further, artists are actively engaging with the topic of sovereignty within their work, including Heap of Birds. In his piece titled Native Hosts, he puts up signs across the United States to acknowledge the tribal nations that have resided there, “it’s about asserting sovereignty, and calling yourself or a tribe a ‘host’ is a gentle way of asserting ownership. Native people are hosts, considerate hosts” (Smith 2017, 114). The pieces are further meant to question Native citizenship in the United States, a position he questions as desired by Indigenous peoples in the first place. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish/Kootenai/Métis/Shoshone) challenges colonial borders through various series of pieces that use cartography to assert sovereignty. In a series titled Tribal Maps, she maintains state borders while erasing colonial names in an act of acknowledging the nations that have unsuccessfully been erased by colonial powers, “maps are [also] myths designed to conceal Indigenous ways of knowing and connecting with their homelands”
(Rader 2011, 61). She is claiming sovereign ties to land through engaging the viewer to acknowledge an uncomfortable past, while resisting the impositions of colonialism and borders through a visual narrative. Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (Seminole/Muskogee/Diné) explores the idea of visual sovereignty through both photography and curation, and asserts that Indigenous youth need to understand the importance of sovereignty, and that they “have a responsibility for creating visual sovereignty: images that remind, art that incorporates Aboriginal/Indigenous technology, shared visions of an Aboriginal/Indigenous past, present, and future” (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 15). Museum’s exhibiting sovereignty both within representation and in practices can provide an outlet for the presentation of these images, technologies, and Indigenous histories and views of their own pasts, presents, and futures.

Current exhibitions such as Kent Monkman’s (Cree) mistikosiwak (Wood Boat People) ¹ in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), and the Hearts of Our People exhibition ² at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, both insert Indigenous knowledge and visibility against colonial narratives. Monkman’s work at the MET works to not only “provide a view of history and art that centers those who have long been viewed as ‘other’,” but also to insert Indigenous understandings of two-spirit and gender fluid sexuality through the painting’s main character: Monkman’s alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (Cascone 2020). It is also significant that Monkman’s work is exhibited in the Great Hall of the MET, which provides the work premium visibility to all visitors.

¹ On display in the Great Hall at the MET from December 19, 2019 to an undetermined end date.

² The exhibition is part of a four stop traveling show, starting at the Minneapolis Institute of Art on June 2, 2019 and tentatively planned to end at the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, OK on September 20, 2020.
to the museum. The *Hearts of Our People* show features Indigenous women artists who also challenge colonial patriarchy and gender roles, while bringing visibility to Indigenous women artists of the past whose work is held within museum collections. As Teri Greeves, Kiowa beadwork artist and co-curator of the show puts it, “from the hands of these women, Native visual languages, which articulate identities and illuminate histories, were born and shall continue into the future” (Greeves 2019, 12). While these two examples show that Native art and artists are making their way into more mainstream exhibition spaces and are able to use that platform to challenge master narratives, remaining critical of decolonizing practices remains necessary,

while such occasional success of a few artists should be applauded and supported, it has also become clear that the success of a few artists in major exhibitions at mainstream art museums and galleries does not solve the overriding issues of lack of visibility within the larger art landscape (Ash-Milby and Phillips 2017, 36).

In what ways do colonial attitudes toward Native art and aesthetics affect the lack of Indigenous visibility within these larger art landscapes? This statement also shows the need to critically question the art/artifact dichotomy that exists within museum classification processes and assess how this distinction hinders the inclusion of Indigenous art within a broader art narrative.

Visual sovereignty could create a necessary space for conversations of identity, gender, colonialism, and globalization to emerge in discourse surrounding decolonization that is rooted in Indigenous epistemologies. Critical discussion of how a lack of critical review of Indigenous art beyond its acknowledgment to ethnographic and tribal art can begin, and critique Western avoidance of their pieces due to “what they consider ‘universal art values’ are actually twentieth-century Eurocentric art values”
Intertwining visual sovereignty within decolonizing discourse also provides space for understanding how to recontextualize Indigenous visual culture in a way that “reject[s] the ethnocentric interpretations of Indigenous culture that are based on colonial models” (Traugott 1992, 38). Reassessing how Western institutions exhibit Indigenous visual material culture, allows for the renegotiation of object categorization while challenging the master narratives that have created notions of authentic, traditional, and historical objects that bleed into how Native peoples and art works are understood today (Yohe 2019, 173). Part of that process involves understanding how museums become spaces for exhibiting sovereignty (Lonetree 2012; Yohe 2019).

In exploring the concept of visual sovereignty, this thesis will work through how visual sovereignty could be used in these discussions from the perspective of the artists interviewed. In doing so, I aim to understand how this research could engage with decolonizing practices within museum spaces by integrating Indigenous knowledge systems found in art-based narratives to understand topics such as identity, gender relations, and commodification within contemporary Native American art practices. In the next chapter, I will work through colonialism’s relation to Indigenous studies as well as anthropology and its relationship to art, how this affected the art market, delve deeper into visual sovereignty, and discuss Indigenous aesthetics further to set the framework for understanding visual sovereignty and museum decolonization today.

**Terminology and Definitions**

The terms “Indigenous” and “Native American” will be used interchangeably throughout this research. As each term was used in a similar nature by the participants of
this research, this thesis will continue in that way. It is important to designate that these terms, at least for this research, are referring to peoples of the United States of America as Indigenous peoples from other parts of North America were not included in the research sample.

I find it important to touch on the use of “post-colonial” and “decolonization” as they are used within this thesis. I recognize that the semantics of those words would imply that we are in a world where colonialism is behind us, and that decolonization has an end point. I acknowledge, as a settler of European descent, that the United States is a settler colonial country that will never be in a “post” colonial state as settler colonialism is an ongoing experience with effects that continue today. The colonization of the United States by colonial powers is differentiated from extractive colonialism in that the resource desired in their invasion was land for occupation, and settlers weren’t going anywhere (Wolfe 2006). As Europeans landed on the United States and pushed west, they faced Indigenous nations occupying the lands they so desired. Colonizers turned to Christianized ideas of sovereignty rooted in the ideas of the divine right to rule, civility, and Manifest Destiny in order to “destroy to replace” Indigenous nations with colonial subjects (Barker 2005; Wolfe 2006, 388).

Patrick Wolfe (2006) describes settler colonialism an ongoing project framed by the logic of elimination towards Indigenous populations, in which “invasion is a structure and not an event” (Wolfe 2006, 388). Settler colonialism continues to be targeted at the acquisition of Indigenous land and territory, fueled by capitalist desires of economic gain and private ownership to generate capital for use on a global scale. In order to acquire Native lands, Indigenous populations must be eliminated from
them. While genocide was a part of the United States’ policies towards Native Americans in the past, the Nation’s continued growth and shift into modernity required a reevaluation of Indigenous destruction, something that was not a “disruptive affront” to the settlers ideological ways of being (Wolfe 2006, 402). Violent tactics have been replaced by “strategies for assimilating Indian people now that they had been contained within Euroamerican society” through processes of continued replacement and removal tactics (Wolfe 2006, 399).

Assimilation took shape through many different federally regulated policies (The Dawes Act, The Indian Reorganization Act, the Indian New Deal, and boarding schools to name a few), all aimed at what Wolfe describes as shift to cultural genocide. Understanding settler colonialism as a structure to the United States can bring to focus how projects of assimilation have shifted over time, and continue into the present, rather than focusing on invasion as a quantified event. Museums fall into the category of a project of assimilation, and Garneau notes that is important to understand how Indigenous peoples experience museums as “not just complicit with settler colonial hegemony, but as one of its finest instruments” (Garneau 2016). In using Wolfe’s approach to understanding settler colonialism, I frame my understanding of decolonization as an unfinished process that works to combat those experiences, while positioning Indigenous knowledge at the forefront of conversations surrounding both historical and contemporary realities of Native American peoples.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In order to frame the relationship of anthropology to Native arts today, it is important to understand how the discipline has understood and evaluated Indigenous visual and material culture in the past and what that means for their representations today. I will work through the early ways in which anthropology understood Indigenous material culture and its separation from art-based aesthetics, what this meant for the art market, and how post-colonialism has led to a resurgence of interest in art by the field of anthropology. I will then turn the discussion to Indigenous art and aesthetics, to set the framework for exploring the idea of visual sovereignty within contemporary Native American art. This will all culminate in understanding how visual sovereignty could lend to a useful intersection of Indigenous epistemologies and decolonizing practices within museum spaces.

Art and Anthropology

Historically, anthropology has assessed Indigenous visual culture from an interest in the social and cultural conditions that led to that object’s creation over its form and aesthetic value; an approach that would lead to the art versus cultural object divide (Errington 2005; Marcus and Myers 1995; Morphy 2006; Price 1989). However, categorizing material culture into either side of that divide has always been “fuzzy” and
more so reflects “culture as the metaphysical essence of society, incorporating standards by which the finest products of society are judged” (Morphy 2006, 1). However, categorizing material culture into either side of that divide has always been “fuzzy” and more so reflects “culture as the metaphysical essence of society, incorporating standards by which the finest products of society are judged” (Morphy 2006, 1). This difference in categorization can be further understood through an examination of American anthropology’s early roots in studies of alterity and racial hierarchies. Anthropology’s four field disciplines have long been concerned with Native Americans, conducting excavations and extractive research in an effort to know the Indigenous “other” while creating and defining their settler colonial state (Yanagisako 2005). One effort of laying “inalienable” rights to Indigenous lands came in the form of archaeological and anthropological discourse that “relegates subjects to earlier stages of cultural evolutionary development” (Yanagisako 2005, 85).

Anthropologists like Henry Lewis Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor followed the ideas of cultural evolution, and established the presumed stages of “primitive,” “barbarism,” and “civilization” that would inform an understanding of material culture (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 4). The study of what were deemed “primitive” cultures seemingly allowed for insight into earlier stages of human development, where true “art” in the Western sense was not considered to be within the purview of such societies (Morphy and Perkins 2006; Westermann 2005).

From the perspective of cultural evolution, those categorized as “primitive” had yet to achieve an enlightened status of “civilized” that would allow such a genius to form. Rather, “primitive” was to become a marked category for how Western societies
visualized and understood their own progress and measured change (Errington 1998, 5). The Eurocentric bias derived from Western art history’s notions of aesthetics and focus on individual genius and innovation that was further engrained by the connoisseurship of the “elite and the rhetoric of the auction market with its emphasis on uniqueness” (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 2). It is worth noting that Eurocentric bias’s extended beyond the art world. The categorization of “primitive” versus Eurocentric notions of “civilized” was a significant part of colonialism’s project of “othering” Indigenous and Aboriginal populations all over the world.

The idea that Indigenous cultures would soon cease to exist lent to their material culture becoming coveted and lending stock to cabinets of curiosities during the 18th century Enlightenment period (Ames 1992; Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Morphy and Perkins 2006). Usually associated with royalty, scientists, and world travelers, these cabinets were often crowded with objects meant to “stand metonymically for a whole region or population” (Clifford 1988, 227). These cabinets were the foundation of what we know as museums today (Ames 1992, 17). Material culture from the proverbial ‘other’ were “aggressively pursued” through collecting practices of salvage anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which would supply early American anthropology and Natural History Museums with objects for research and display; museums such as the Smithsonian, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard, the Field Museum of Chicago, and the American Museum of Natural History in New York were established during this time (Lonetree 2012, 10). Anthropology was closely associated with these museums during their formative years, which gave them influence over the display and narratives of so called “primitive” material culture.
(Morphy and Perkins 2006, 5). Collections came to be grouped and organized “according to what at the time were thought to be universal themes, such as race or evolutionary stage” (Ames 1992, 17). Indigenous populations of North America came to be displayed within these evolutionist arrangements, exhibiting their objects in various stages of complexity, or taxonomically alongside dinosaurs and other extinct species and fauna (Clifford 1988; Lonetree 2012; Morphy 2006).

Looking deeper in the history of collecting material objects can provide insight into how anthropologists and art historians would come to understand a cultural object versus an artistic one, or in other words, what came to be referred to as the art/artifact distinction (Clifford 1988; Price 1989; Vogel 1988). The turn of the 20th century saw a shift towards Boasian anthropology and cultural relativism that would begin to shift how material culture would be both understood and displayed within institutional settings (Clifford 1988; Morphy 2006). Anthropology shifted into understanding and contextualizing artifacts ethnographically, whose value laid within their authentic cultural context; their “objective ‘witnesses’ to the total multidimensional life of a culture” (Clifford 1988, 228). The advancement of modernism and the establishment of Western art standards within the mid-twentieth century muddled this taxonomic organization, with Indigenous objects beginning to garner aesthetic admiration outside of ethnographic gazes; indeed, these objects had started to become foundational to forming a uniquely Western and national identity within the United States (Clifford 1988; Mullin 1995). It is here, James Clifford asserts, that we see the birth of “primitive” art as well as a shift in institutional collecting and exhibition practices. Anthropology museums continued to emphasize the cultural significance and context of visual material culture of their
collections, operating under the notion that if objects “were art, they were ‘primitive art’” (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 7). They continued to collect culture from what they understood to be typical of a group, the authentic, rather than emphasizing or exploring uniqueness or the work of an individual artist (Vogel 1988).

Art museums viewed their displays differently, providing little to no cultural information and instead concerning their preferences with uniqueness, “valuing originality and invention-the qualities that separate art from craftsmanship in Western definitions” (Vogel 1988, 211). Yet, what may be understood as typical by an anthropology museum and unique by an art museum are cut from the same cloth. What may be understood as ethnographic within an anthropology museum as “pre-industrial ‘primitive’ art objects” are found “in profusion in art museums as well” (Westermann 2005, xiv). The boundary between art and artifact is thin, and its fluidity and transformability are reflected in the ways the two institutions are beginning to resemble each other through displays that are typical of the other within their walls (Clifford 1988; Vogel 1988). While the art/artifact divide is an arbitrary division rooted in both anthropology’s and art history’s appropriation of “exotic things, facts, and meanings”, anthropology’s continued focus on authentic and “traditional” material culture kept art out of their main area of focus or study (Clifford 1988, 221).

Globalization, identity politics, and anthropological practices of post structuralism and post-colonialism all revived interest in and necessitated the reassertion of art into the field of anthropology (Morphy and Perkins 2006; Phillips 2005, 242). There has always been a “traffic in culture” between art and anthropology, and with visual anthropology coming to its own in the boom of film, television, and digital media, art could no longer
be ignored (Phillips 2005; Marcus and Myers 1995; Morphy and Perkins 2006). This has required anthropologists to acknowledge that “the coherence of the field is based on a shared understanding that visuality is historically, culturally, and interactively constructed and that visual experience is so pervasive in modernity that its formalized study is essential to the understanding of contemporary societies” (Phillips 2005, 245). Art has been argued to be more reactive and adaptable to the changing conditions of capitalism, homogenization, and mass consumption brought forth by modernism, and “continues to be the space in which difference, identity, and cultural value are being produced and contested” (Marcus and Myers 1995, 11). Yet anthropology museums hold the unique ability to interpret relational and postcolonial art practices, especially within in the realm of Native American art, through their “focus on elements inherent in Indigenous culture such as connection to the land, environment, spirituality, ritual, and ceremony” (Neale 2014, 309). It is clear that the field needs to take up a new narrative of Indigenous art, one that fuses the relationality of Indigenous art and its function in maintaining and forming cultural practices and identities within a settler colonial society.

**Art Market**

The art/artifact distinction has a continued effect today in how institutions and museum professionals both interpret and display their objects. What may be considered an ethnographic object within an anthropology museum comes to be “explained through extensive prose, initiating viewers into the esoterica of its manufacture, use, role in the society, and religious meaning,” yet the same object in an art museum may often be
displayed for its aesthetic value and appraisal with little to no information presented with it (Price 1989, 84). These methods of value association per Western art standards were “removed from the primary concerns of ethnographic collections, whose curators emphasized more the cultural significance of objects” (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 7). In other words, this continued distinction within collection practices of anthropology museums leads to the continued display of cultural alterity, while both art and anthropology museums omit narratives of Indigenous knowledge and technologies found within the aesthetic production of Native American visual material culture.

The value association of Indigenous visual material culture, and notions of “primitive” art, also affect how Indigenous artists interact with art markets today. As “primitive” pieces found their way out of ethnographic spaces and into fine art displays, they were able to leave “the realm of invisible rubbish” and enter “the realm of visible art” (Errington 1998, 65). Yet, their ability to break that institutional barrier is rooted in colonial and westernized interpretations that come with the colonial nature of both ethnographic and art-based museums. Deciding what constitutes as an art versus an ethnographic object comes from value placed by the connoisseurship of curators, invoking an image of authority and good taste, “whose opinions carry special authority for others” (Price 1989, 7). Curators become the authority figure on Indigenous culture deciding what parts of their culture are significant enough for representation, and depending on their institutional affiliation, determine how those objects are to be defined and categorized. This creates a dilemma for Indigenous artists, who can run up against the issue of rejection if their art is too “ethnographic” or not “ethnographic enough” (Neale 2014, 289). The Western generated definitions of art have created a colonial
blockade, one that keeps Indigenous art on the fringe of critical engagement with Indigenous art and artists (Garneau 2014, 325).

What tends to fall out of the framework of what is considered art by these institutions is Native American, or other Indigenous and Aboriginal groups, tourist art. Nor then, would the history of colonialism in facilitating the creation of this market, be discussed. As Amy Lonetree sees it, “extreme poverty and ongoing colonial oppression permeated tribal life” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, experiences that she sees as continuing to exist today (Lonetree 2012, 12). Tourist art became a source of income during colonial genocide and land loss; today, tourist art remains one form of economic growth for Indigenous populations still experiencing the ongoing repercussions of settler colonialism. In an increasingly globalized world, dissolving the notions of fine art versus Native craft through understanding the economic, historic, and social relations imbedded in their division becomes an important area of engagement decolonizing practices of representation (Price 2006, 180). Taking a deep dive into a distinction practitioners may have taken at face value, as opposed to understanding the structure of this distinction, may shape how both practices of collection and representation need to be reassessed within decolonial processes.

**Indigenous Aesthetics**

In taking a new narrative of Indigenous art, one that is pointedly removed from Eurocentric and Western ideals, it is important to outline how Indigenous definitions and uses of art are differentiated from these colonial narratives. Art, as a term applied from a western perspective, is challenged by Indigenous scholars and artists alike who find its
application in their work as rooted in tribal and ethnographic definitions (Mithlo 2008; Rice 2008). Westernized notions of Native art complicate and misunderstand Indigenous aesthetics and functions

in a way that is exclusionary insensible, and insensitive […] yet despite this misrepresentation, contemporary Native artists remain among the avant-garde, moving freely between traditional practices and contemporary theories, methods, and materials. In doing so, they challenge Eurocentric preconceptions, as well as colonialism’s program of marginalization (Rice 2008, 57).

Contemporary Indigenous artists today bring attention to this “paradoxical position” that Ryan Rice (Mohawk) describes above, by challenging ideas of pan-tribal art and Western classification through focusing on the diversity that exists within the Native American art world. Perhaps the most significant way in which art and visual material cultural challenges such preconceptions is that their continued productions assert that Native American cultures and peoples are still here and they are not going anywhere, “as long as Indigenous people continue to use the arts to reflect unique experiences within a contemporary society, they are fundamentally breathing life into those cultures” (ahtone 2012, 73). Their art is not primitive, ethnographic, or historical (even if traditional practices are invoked), it is what each individual artist makes of it. In understanding Indigenous art in relation to Westernized notions, Garneau defines it best:

Art is the site of intolerable research, the laboratory of odd ideas, of sensual and intuitive study, and of production that exceeds the boundaries of conventional disciplines, protocols and imaginaries. Art is a display of surplus, of skill, ingenuity, knowledge, discipline, time, labour and wealth. It embroiders status, disguises corruption and celebrates power. But art is also the stage where other surplus finds expression. It can be a way for the marginalized, refused, and repressed to return (Garneau 2013, 16).

Garneau presents this definition of art as a complex area of contemporary identity negotiation among Indigenous peoples with a settler colonial society. Indigenous art
occupies a space within cultural decolonization movements, a “perpetual struggle” that exists between Indigenous and settler peoples that can bring complexity to the “shared colonial condition, and how this legacy informs every person and institution in these territories” (Garneau 2013, 15). Part of that struggle is understanding how to be pedagogical about the effects of settler colonialism outside of safe and translated environments, like a museum. Garneau argues that Indigenous art holds an important space for an “immersion in difference” in which art makes space for difference, appreciation, and resistance in ways that are not overwhelming or provoke retreat from settler populations viewing the pieces.

In understanding a framework for Indigenous aesthetics, heather ahtone (Choctaw/Chickasaw) asserts that there must be a clear acknowledgement that “Indigenous epistemology does not coalesce with Western epistemology” (ahtone 2012, 74). Western art based narratives fail to account for the ways in which Indigenous visual material culture is an expression of lived experiences, honors traditional practices, incorporates intergenerational learning in technique, facilitates in ethno-endogenous epistemologies, and reiterates place based occupation in both materiality and narrative (ahtone 2012; Jackinsky-Sethi 2019; Yazzie and Estes 2016; Telford 2019). Indigenous aesthetics also deviate from notions of individual genius, in which art is an “integral and philosophical aspect of the community” (Mithlo 2008, 29). Indigenous communities play an important role in sovereignty and self-determination, both within and outside of the art world. Lakota scholar and activist Vine Deloria Jr. was widely outspoken about individually constructed actions of self-determinism and intellectual sovereignty, because “they mean that a whole generation of Indians are not going to be
responsible to the Indian people, they are simply going to be isolated individuals playing with the symbols of Indian” (Deloria Jr. 1998, 28). As we will see in Rose B. Simpson’s dialogue, part of the community connection to art even when art is made to be solely representative of oneself is created in the framework of cultural knowledge systems that can inform, or censor, what is presented within visual narratives. Most pertinent for this research is seeing the ways in which Westernized critiques of aesthetics fail to account for Indigenous experiences of colonialism, and the ways in which self-determination and sovereignty are asserted visually.

**Visual Sovereignty**

Visual sovereignty, as developed by Tuscarora scholar Jolene Rickard, views the work of Indigenous artists as “an ongoing strategy for survival […] to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization, and identity politics” (Rickard 1995, 51). She develops this idea based off her own upbringing among the Haudenosaunee, where she understood sovereignty to be “a form of direct action” from her grandfather Deskaheh’s involvement at the League of Nations in Geneva in 1923 (Rickard 2017, 81). Sovereignty, in this sense, was a legal assertion to recognize the Haudenosaunee as such. However, she argues that the idea of sovereignty must be detached from its legal and Western understanding of the notion as it does not “represent Haudenosaunee foundational concepts of natural law, nor does it adequately address intellectual, cultural, artistic, and visual expansion of the concept” (Rickard 2011, 470). It is from this background that she asserts the need for diversifying sovereignty through the reception of Indigenous art.
Interrupting the singularity of political sovereignty through diversification allows for understanding the inherently colonial understanding of its application to Indigenous populations within the United States (Deloria Jr. 1984; Barker 2005; Alfred 2005). Originally rooted in theological understandings of the divine right to rule bestowed upon from God, sovereignty in the United States came to be understood as that of nationhood, citizenship, and democracy (Barker 2005). Sovereignty, as understood in its legal application today, is related to “supreme political authority, independent and unlimited by any other power” (Alfred 2005, 33). This notion of political autonomy becomes complicated in relation to colonial politics and authority within the United States. Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2014) and anthropologist Jessica Cattelino (2008) both argue against the possibility of complete autonomy in Indigenous politics today instead argue that sovereignty be understood as assertions of refusal and practices of interdependency, respectively.

Sovereignty’s solely political application as it applies to colonial politics also excludes the narrative that sovereignty existed before settler contact, and places nationhood as contingent on being recognized as legitimate by other, recognized nations (Barker 2005). The Haudenosaunee Rickard references, the political decision-making body known as the Iroquois Confederacy, has been referenced as “nationals of a precontact Indigenous polity” who were among the first to create a national constitution (Simpson 2014, 2). Michelle Raheja (Seneca) asserts that the use of the term sovereignty is merely a placeholder for the multiplicity of assertions of self-determination today and understands the use of wampum as early practices of visual sovereignty; rights
to land retention, culture, politics, language, and economics are all visually represented within this material practice (Raheja 2007).

Disrupting the singularity of sovereignty through visual aesthetics today is useful in understanding how the colonial past affects the present, as well as how Indigenous artists continue to challenge the art/artifact divide in museum spaces. Deloria Jr. (1979) theorized that the continued use of cultural traditions by Indigenous peoples falls within the concept of sovereignty and is useful in communicating their social and political existence both historically and presently. In exploring the idea of art as tradition, Rickard works to understand how aesthetic practices function as a “strategic resistance in the twenty-first century to ongoing coloniality and the flattening process of globalization” (Rickard 2011, 475). Visual sovereignty can disrupt the notions of cultural hegemony and pan-Indianism that have been created due to the Westernized notions of Indigenous art presented within institutionalized spaces. In this visual disruption, a space becomes created to insert a counter narrative to colonial master narratives of Indigenous and American history; art has “served Indigenous people well as a response to contact and as a reworking of colonial narratives of the Americas” (Rickard 2017, 83). A continuation of aesthetic practices into contemporary spaces both engages in and deconstructs white generated understandings of Indigenous material culture while working to “reaffirm the validity of [our] sovereignty” (Rice 2008, 64).

**Museums and Visual Sovereignty**

Within museum spaces, considering these affirmations and assertions of sovereignty can not only guide practices of Indigenous representation within
exhibitions that are rooted in Native epistemologies, it also allows for understanding the sovereignty of knowledge that material culture holds. Indigenous epistemologies presented visually exhibit practices of agency and authority within the decision making to present or create a piece with a specific narrative (Yohe 2019, 173). The framework of visual sovereignty can also challenge gendered understandings of art, particularly within the framework of Indigenous women’s roles in the creation of visual material culture. Native women artists often become marginalized in scholarly discourse, “circumscribed not only by imposed anonymity but also by the sexist assumptions and failures of interpretation coded by the categorization as ‘craft’” and lacked attribution that leads to continued anonymity today (Berlo and Phillips 2019, 45). Challenging colonial gendered norms, like the *Hearts of our People* show aims to do, is an important aspect of decolonizing the patriarchy that exists within museum institutions today.

Art, as well as other expressions of visual material culture, plays an essential component of human action and how social relationships are formed, while both playing into and being affected by processes of globalization. How these ideas are articulated within institutional and academic discourse are especially important topics of discussion for museum anthropologists engaging with decolonial practices of collaboration with and representation of Indigenous peoples, both historically and presently. Theorizing the museum as a contact zone allows for an understanding of the inherently colonial nature of these institutions and calls for a revaluation of the power dynamics at play in museum collections and exhibitions (Clifford 1997). Part of that work involves how museums have displayed Indigenous cultures and objects, which requires reassessing how the art/artifact divide affects representation within their institutional walls. The idea that the
placement of “indigenous artworks somehow belong in majority (scientific or fine-art) museums is no longer self-evident. Objects in museums can still go elsewhere” (Clifford 1997, 211). Indigenous peoples are challenging institutional ideologies through their art as well as through their refusals to participate within dominate culture spaces and dialogue, an example of which will be presented in both Rose B. Simpson and Gregg Deal’s narratives. The work of Indigenous artists is placing institutions in a sort of identity crisis due to their shared collections and resemblances, as mentioned earlier, but it is not the work of Indigenous artists to resolve (Neale 2014).

Visual sovereignty could then be well served to intersect with practices of critical museology, in informing how relationships between Native communities and artists with non-Native museum practitioners can inform approaches to engagement. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache) makes the case for those interpreting ethnographic or historical collections to reevaluate how Native art is influenced by their “continuing crisis of representation”:

What is now a crisis for some is more than a century of genocide for others. The utilization of Indigenous knowledge systems as a theoretical construct for arts assessment may result in unforeseen paradigm shifts. It is crucial that core conceptual frameworks in arts discourse, such as authorship, ownership, and control are exposed as inextricably bound in individualistic, competitive, and legalistic frameworks that inhibit accurate cultural understandings (Mithlo 2006, 384)

Considering Mithlo’s idea that Indigenous knowledge systems being incorporated into art reception could result in an “unforeseen paradigm shift” is especially intriguing here. Indigenous ways of knowing become useful in not only decolonizing approaches to Indigenous arts, but in exposing hegemonic arts discourse to generate a critical turn inward by those who are partaking in it. Rickard has theorized about visual sovereignty
in a similar way in which its application can lead towards both an ideological power shift to generate a more appropriate Indigenous visual art theory while intersecting with post-colonial theories.

Within the framework of critical museology, it becomes necessary for practitioners to acknowledge the colonial and political roles their institutions have had in the representations of Indigenous peoples and what that has meant for the field of Native art overall. As institutions of human history and culture, they became a space that structured the “ways we think about other cultures” (Ames 1992, 49). Critical museology is rooted in understanding how power relations and economic regimes are exhibited through notions of patrimony and social identity, that:

interrogates the imaginaries, narratives, discourses, agencies, visual and optical regimes, and their articulations and integrations within diverse organizational structures that taken together constitute a field of cultural and artistic production, articulated through public and private museums; heritage sites; gardens; memorials; exhibition halls; cultural centers; and art galleries (Shelton 2013, 8).

While these practices of critical museology are important, it begs the question of how and by whom these practices are being informed. In order to have more holistic approaches to decolonial practices that involve Indigenous populations, visual sovereignty could serve as a guiding paradigmatic tool. An intersection of theories and practices of visual sovereignty with critical museology could work to ensure that museum anthropologists are actively working to restructure the ways in which they exhibit Indigenous peoples and cultures, and “develop[s] fresh insights and innovations necessary to ensure the future development of museums” (Shelton 2013, 14). Indigenous cultural representations to the public in these spaces has ramifications not only in art, but throughout their everyday lived experiences. Further, while visual sovereignty may seek
to diversify itself from political sovereignty, the recognition of sovereignty at all comes from both social and political recognition (Sturm 2011). In a space where both of the politics of representations are played out, museums offer a unique platform to facilitate sovereign assertions.
Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will present the theoretical frameworks used to design and analyze this research. I will first discuss sovereignty and a few ways Indigenous scholars have theorized understanding sovereign practices to guide an understanding of its visual application. I will then go into Tribal Critical Race Theory as presented by Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Lumbee). I will explore the tenets he uses to outline the theory, and how it is useful in understanding how the sovereign status of Indigenous peoples requires a diversification from Critical Race Theories. I will then discuss theories of relational and Indigenous aesthetics, to understand how they converge to guide an understanding of art as engaging. I will discuss how each theory applies to the methodologies in this research and how they will be used to structure analysis.

Visual Sovereignty

As I stated in chapter one, while visual sovereignty is the topic of exploration in this research it will also be used as a theoretical framework. In conjunction with narrative methodology, visual sovereignty will be used in understanding how these artists do, or do not, conceptualize this idea in their practices. In addition to using dialogue from the artists in this research to approach an understanding of visual sovereignty, I will intersect
visual sovereignty with other theories of sovereignty during analysis to explore its
potential praxis. This includes theories presented by Indigenous scholars that address
topics of recognition, cultural continuity, and practices of refusal (Champagne 2007;
Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014; Tsinhnajinnie 2008). Using sovereignty as a framework
for receiving Indigenous art, as well as historical and contemporary Indigenous societies
writ large, allows for an understanding of their unique cultural and political status that
separates them from other minoritized groups in the United States (Barker 2005;
Champagne 2007). It is important to note how using any form of sovereignty as a
framework needs to avoid essentializing Indigenous approaches to sovereign practices, as
Native Americans are incredibly diverse peoples with a variety of beliefs and
epistemologies that require an attention to their distinctions.

In thinking about the reception of Indigenous arts it is necessary to address the
politics of recognition that occur within a settler colonial state. Glen Sean Coulthard
(Yellowknives Dene) is particularly critical of colonial practices of recognition and
asserts that their “liberal politics of recognition” aim to reconcile relationships with
Indigenous people while still structurally committed to “dispossession of Indigenous
lands and self-determining authority” (Coulthard 2014, 151). The colonial recognition of
Indigenous population’s collective rights and identities by the dominant society are only
acknowledged “insofar as this recognition does not throw into question the background
legal, political, and economic framework of the colonial relationship itself” (Coulthard
2014; 41). These practices fail to address how colonial structures continue to create social
and economic oppression and indicate that Indigenous populations are dependent on
colonial institutions for their recognition. Citing Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred,
Coulthard points out that this approach is far from neutral and seeped in colonial hierarchy that effects how Indigenous peoples understand not only recognition claims, but how they see themselves, how they relate to themselves, and how they relate to the land. Similar to the arguments of Vine Deloria Jr., Taiaiake Alfred, and Jolene Rickard, Coulthard argues for Indigenous peoples to turn away from the politics of recognition through Indigenous resurgence of traditions. These critical practices take form as an “intellectual, social, political, and artistic movement geared toward the self-reflective revitalization” geared toward contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic realities (Coulthard 2014, 156). These practices, he argues, are better suited to shift colonial power dynamics that exist presently.

Indigenous resurgence used as a framework to circumvent colonial politics of recognition facilitates an understanding of and supports Rickard’s call for sovereignty to be diversified visually. Coulthard is weary of movements of resurgence being strictly directed at conversations of colonialism, much like Rickard argues regarding the work of Indigenous artist in that it should be understood “through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization, and identity politics” (Rickard 1995, 51). Discussions that weigh too heavily on colonialism do not address how indigenous peoples are building their futures from within their communities and traditions without the need for approval from colonial institutions, and how they are asserting sovereignty to do so. Resurgence also reframes the conversation of tradition from practices that are rigidly placed in the past into that of fluid and dynamic practices that respect their origins and respond to contemporary existence. Within the framework of visual sovereignty, Rickard asserts that tradition as both resistance to, and a
reworking of, colonial narratives has “served Indigenous people well” (Rickard 2017, 83).

Indigenous rejection of colonial politics of recognition has been similarly theorized by Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, who frames sovereign assertions among the Mohawk of Kahnawà:ke as practices of refusal. These practices manifest politically, culturally, and socially for the Mohawk as a means to “push back on the settler logics of elimination” through asserting Indigenous histories that contest colonial narratives and require colonizers to see the Mohawk on their terms (Simpson 2014, 12). An important aspect of Simpson’s work that is particularly relevant to this research, is what she describes as the practice of ethnographic refusal. This refusal is asserted by Mohawk peoples in their decision on how, and who, to share specific cultural knowledge with, which is sometimes not at all. Simpson is critical of anthropological work that does not account for the histories of anthropology, settlement, and power relations that can be expressed and understood through Indigenous narratives (Simpson 2014, 190). When Indigenous peoples speak “of themselves for themselves,” she argues, “their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that dominate representations of their past, and sometimes, their present” (Simpson 2014, 97).

When considering Indigenous art reception, practices of pushing back and refusal are important concepts to engage with. Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (Seminole/Muskogee/Diné) provides some insight into the artistic praxis of visual sovereignty via refusal in her reflection of her time at the 2007 Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art.

Tsinhnahjinnie uses the refusal of photographer Larry McNeil (Dakl’aweidi K’eet Gooshi H’it Tlingit) to highlight an example of visual sovereignty in practice. McNeil
refused to participate in an exhibition that asked him to play what he described as an Indigenous “supporting role” to photographers that glorified “common non-Aboriginal/Indigenous photographers’ voyeuristic gazes of Aboriginal/Indigenous communities” (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 15). This refusal was a refusal to be complacent with this role, and a refusal to “endorse the colonial curatorial practice” of a “self-congratulatory settler exhibition” (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 15). As Tsinhnahjinnie describes it, he dove into the waters of visual sovereignty by publicly calling out the exhibition and the museum in an email response back that included others within the field of art, museums, and creativity that might offer some feedback about the politics of representation in the proposed exhibit. While asserted as an individual action, this practice of visual sovereignty also served to uplift artists in their ability to shape their own past, present, and future through exercising their Indigeneity (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008).

Like Coulthard, Rickard, and Simpson all discuss, Tsinhnahjinnie asserts that one should not “misinterpret visual sovereignty as a constant fixation on the effects of colonialism”; it is also about understanding the beauty, knowledge, tradition, and technology that are present within Aboriginal/Indigenous arts (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 18). When considering technology and media within Indigenous arts, Tsinhnahjinnie understands “that it is traditional to utilize the latest technologies” (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 22). Video and other digital mediums create an outlet in which songs, dreams, visions, oral traditions, and languages can be passed on to future generations. Within the framework of visual sovereignty, this creates a “control over the future” to ensure Indigenous epistemologies live on to future generations (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 23). Digital media, like video and photography, can also be powerful in interrupting the
Western category of “the ‘Other’ in postmodern cultural criticism, which continues to reinforce all of the old stereotypes” (Rickard 1995, 51). Using visual mediums for intergenerational transmission of knowledge and in negating Western stereotypes, including notions of stoicism, Disney produced imagery, and romanticized, historical, pan-tribal notions of Indigeneity, shows how practices of turning away or refusal can provide insight into how sovereignty, visually or otherwise, asserts an Indigenous narrative of survivance and cultural continuity.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux) theorizes about sovereignty’s use in the continuity of Indigenous cultures through what can be understood as ethno-endogenous epistemology, “an analysis of the world from internal tribal perspectives consistent with one’s own experiences first and foremost as a tribal person” (Yazzie & Estes 2016, 12). This idea is framed by survival under continuing colonial occupation, and the idea of sovereignty as a preconquest framework that continues to extend into the shared experience of Indigeneity. Rickard also understands sovereignty to be “instrumental for our continuance and renewal,” in which their concept of sovereignty is about “self-defined renewal and resistance” (Rickard 2011, 467). However, it is important to understand the different ways in which sovereignty is used by Indigenous peoples to “realize their culture, values, and political and economic interests within the constraints and opportunities presented by changing colonial contexts, and increasingly, contemporary global, political, economic, and cultural contexts” (Champagne 2007, 360). I noted at the beginning of this section that it is crucial to avoid essentializing the idea of sovereignty to understand the various ways in which it is both understood and practiced. Rickard specifically (2011, 2017) calls for understanding how sovereignty is nuanced in
its application visually or otherwise, which will be discussed further in the analysis chapter of this research.

In conjunction with narrative methodology, visual sovereignty as a theoretical framework intersected with other theories of sovereignty will allow this research to work towards examining the concept through the individual level of artists to understand its application to the broader discussion of critical museology and decolonial practices. As Rickard puts it, “it is prudent to discuss tradition, art, and sovereignty based on a specific cultural location while reserving the right to connect these ideas to a broader discussion of aesthetic practice as a colonial intervention” (Rickard 2011, 472). Visual sovereignty will also work alongside theories of relational and Indigenous aesthetics to inform a discussion of Indigenous visual culture that centers the artist’s dialogues over Western narratives and understandings of their art. Both theories will be further framed and enriched by Tribal Critical Race theory, which is discussed in the next section.

**Tribal Critical Race Theory**

In conceptualizing Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Lumbee) explores how Indigenous educators coming out of the University of Utah’s American Indian Teacher Training Program use the set of skills acquired at the institution in combination with Indigenous knowledge systems in order to create curriculum that will “better meet the educational and cultural needs of their communities” (Brayboy 2006, 428). Part of meeting those needs is having an educator for Indigenous students that looks and acts like they do, while also being able to learn certain fundamental aspects of Western education like reading and writing. This processes of
Indigenous education by Indigenous educators for Indigenous youth, works to “meet the larger, community goals of self-education and sovereignty” (Brayboy 2006, 426). Stories lay the foundation for how those educators approach curriculum in order to accomplish that goal, as stories generate Indigenous based theories that are the “roadmaps for our communities and reminders of our individual responsibilities to the survival of our communities” (Brayboy 2006, 427). It is here that Brayboy inserts in the need for TribalCrit, as Western, university-based ontologies and epistemologies do not understand stories and theory to be one in the same. Brayboy describes how he was once told that he told good stories, but because of those stories, he would not be a “good theorist.” In developing TribalCrit, he aims to address why “locating theory as something absent from stories and practices” is problematic to both Indigenous communities and the anthropologists who work with them (Brayboy 2006, 426).

While presented as a framework for exploring Indigenous self-education, Brayboy aims for this theory to contribute to a larger conversation about “methods of conducting research and analyzing data in ways that center Indigenous ways of knowing and lead to American Indian sovereignty and self-determination” (Brayboy 2006, 441). He uses the structure of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to frame his approach to creating TribalCrit, while explaining that the need to build upon CRT is rooted in the necessary recognition of ongoing colonization, and understanding of Indigenous peoples as a unique cultural, political, and racialized group within the United States. An important use of CRT within TribalCrit is the focus on narratives and dialogue as a means of providing valuable sources of data. He explores how oral traditions and stories create theories of cultural continuity, education, self-determination, and sovereignty that are inherently rooted in
Indigenous epistemologies. In conjunction with narrative methodology, TribalCrit offers a base for understanding how the dialogue from artist’s in this research contributes to an understanding of visual sovereignty as a theory and its further application in decolonizing processes. While Brayboy presents nine tenets of TribalCrit, the ones most relevant to this research will be discussed below.

His first tenet, that colonization is endemic to society, is central to TribalCrit in understanding how “processes of colonization and its debilitating influences” affect the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples (Brayboy 2006, 431). While this is an important deviation from CRT that asserts racism is endemic to society, racism is a key facilitator in the colonization of Indigenous peoples. More specifically, how Western ways of thinking dominate discourse and power structures, and how this has facilitated in the shift away from recognizing Indigenous peoples as a legal/political group and into a racialized one instead. Failing to recognize sovereignty, and its absence from Western discourse, is as Joanne Barker (Lenape) argues, “the racialization of the ‘Indian’” (Barker 2005, 17).

Along with the third tenet of TribalCrit, “Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities,” these tenets are both important in the design of this research. This work has been structured in a way to acknowledge the continued effects of colonialism within Indigenous arts discourse while allowing the exploration of how sovereignty can be inserted back into the discourse of Westernized practices and institutions. These will be important concepts to return to during analysis, as each of the artist’s in this research touch on the ways in which colonization continues to affect them today, and how those processes affect their art reception and experiences.
In his fifth tenet of TribalCrit, Brayboy asserts that “the concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on a new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens” (Brayboy 2006, 429). Considering how Indigenous epistemologies facilitate understanding concepts of sovereignty, and what this means when considering decolonizing processes, these are important areas of engagement when considering critical museology. How does sovereign discourse shift power dynamics, and alter Western approaches to representing Indigeneity? This tenet works in conjunction with his seventh tenet, that “tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups” (Brayboy 2006, 429). Using a dialogical approach with narrative methodology provided space in this research for each artist to provide their own beliefs on the use and application of visual sovereignty, which shapes how this idea could be useful in an intersection with critical museology to present narratives of contemporary experiences framed by sovereignty within museum spaces.

Brayboy’s eighth tenet, that “stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being,” and ninth tenet, that “theory and practice are connected in deep explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change” tenets were also central in guiding my methodologies and analysis. The dialogue from the artists, as mentioned above, is key to shaping my own understanding of visual sovereignty and how I understand its intersection with critical museology. His ninth tenet is particularly influential in the use of critical ethnography. Brayboy describes TribalCrit as an endeavor to “expose the
inconsistencies in the structural systems and institutions-like colleges and universities-and make the situation better for Indigenous students” (Brayboy 2006, 441).

I mentioned earlier the shortcomings of decolonizing practices that fail to address underlying structures of colonialism within their institutions. This tenet will supplement critical methodology within a discussion of how critical museology can be enriched by an understanding and application of visual sovereignty, by presenting the need to be critically engaged with colonialism within institutional spaces to better understand and lessen the inconsistencies that occur in decolonizing practices. The main priority in this research is to create something meaningful and beneficial to the artists who influenced this work and use their knowledge to understand how to guide decolonizing practices that are more beneficial to Indigenous peoples and their communities through my own future practice.

**Relational and Indigenous Aesthetics**

When originally conceptualizing this research and its design, I did not consider using relational or Indigenous aesthetics as frameworks for how to analyze and discuss this work. It was only after examining how Rose B. Simpson discussed her struggle to find a source outside of anthropological ways of thinking about Indigenous art that would help her to define Indigenous aesthetics that I considered these approaches. She took a course at the Rhode Island School of Design in relational aesthetics, where she “realized that Indigenous aesthetics is so much based on a lifeway rather than visual sort of depictions of being” (Personal Communication). As she explained it, attempts to analyze Indigenous art from an anthropological approach does not provide an adequate
understanding of Indigenous experiences embodied within art practices, and does not provide an adequate theoretical approach. After our interview, I began to read up on both relational and Indigenous aesthetics to understand how to move my frame of thinking about art from an anthropological way to something that had resonated with at least some of the artists I spoke with instead. I want to both credit and thank Rose B. Simpson for this direction in my research design, as I found both frameworks relevant and necessary for a discussion and analysis of visual sovereignty and Indigenous art reception.

As I described in my literature review, Indigenous aesthetics inserts a counter narrative to the colonial reception of Native American visual culture. Heather Ahtone (2012) presents a definition of Indigenous art on the relationships that are created between symbols, metaphors, knowledge, stories, histories, cultural beliefs, and personal narratives. Indigenous values and epistemologies are centered as the key components to assessing Native art, as they “reflect the cultural values and beliefs on which they are grounded—there does not exist a universal measure” (Ahtone 2012, 74). Understanding the cultural source from which Indigenous art is produced, she argues, facilitates the necessary shift from a Western to an Indigenous paradigm. Indigenous aesthetics also create the space for understanding how the production of material culture is the “product of the need to survive” where artists create the “potential for a future where their cultures live, survive, and thrive” (Ahtone 2019, 37; 42). Given this, Indigenous aesthetics can further an understanding of how art functions in relation to Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s conception of ethno-endogenous epistemologies, and the role sovereignty plays in it (Yazzie and Estes 2016).
The idea of relational aesthetics, as presented by Nicholas Bourriaud (2002), is that art as relational is “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 2002, 113). He challenges art critics to think beyond the scope of aesthetic values within art and understand the “sphere of interhuman relations” that shape artistic experience and context within creation (Bourriaud 2002, 28). In thinking about art in this way, it can be understood as a means to facilitating community among both the artists and the viewers participating in the artistic experience; art becomes publicly engaged. Where relational aesthetics becomes differentiated with Indigenous aesthetics is that what Bourriaud described was more so a physically immersive art experience for the viewer. Exhibitions that he described as relational were spaces where the artist was present with the viewers, able to engage physically and dialogically. However, using his ideas in conjunction with Indigenous aesthetics can be complimentary. Indigenous aesthetics also calls for an understanding of community orientation over individuality within artwork; an argument further supported by the role of the individual in sovereign assertions. Similar to ahtone’s conception of Indigenous aesthetics, relational aesthetics further describes how these community orientations come to shape a set of interrelated connections that facilitate in the production of material culture. Indeed, Rickard (1995) understands that “all things connect and everything is relational,” which is necessary concept to engage with when both receiving, and critiquing, of Indigenous art (54).

Using these theories in a complimentary way to facilitate a discussion of Indigenous art and material culture practices can facilitate a shift from a Eurocentric bias
that privileges individual genius into understanding the context in which Indigenous visual narratives are being created. It also provides insight into the ways in which Indigenous artists are using art to be publicly engaging to both Native and non-Native peoples. This approach will be crucial during thematic analysis when each theme is contextualized based off the artists represented within that theme. Within a framework of visual sovereignty, these two aesthetic theories may also generate an understanding of how Indigenous visual narratives are not always defined by, and centered around, their experiences of colonization.
Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

In this chapter, I review the research design, methods employed, and ethical considerations of my project. I also address my positionality as a non-Native researcher, and how this is an important consideration of ethics and methods employed. This ethnographic research was undertaken with the goal of exploring visual sovereignty within contemporary Native American art from the perspective of five self-identifying Indigenous artists. The project was designed using critical ethnographic and narrative methodology in order to prioritize the artist’s dialogues regarding their processes and thoughts on the idea of visual sovereignty within art reception. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the artists and transcribed for thematic analysis. Each transcription was sent to the artist upon completion, for their records and review of the dialogue in order to clarify or redact any portion of the interview as they saw fit. It is their dialogue and opinions that work to form my discussion of the applicability of visual sovereignty within practices of critical museology. To refresh the reader, I will restate the research questions of this project:

- What does the practice of visual sovereignty mean to these artists through the presentation of narratives regarding self-determination and representation in their art?
• What are the most common social, cultural, and/or political themes that may arise in contemporary Native art, and how do they function within the framework of visual sovereignty? How are the narratives for pieces decided on?

• How do these artists see visual sovereignty engaging with individual and communal experiences of Native American existence?

• How do artists use the idea of visual sovereignty to engage with the post-colonial work of decolonization? If they do not consciously engage with the idea, does their work still function as a decolonial tool?

**Research Design**

In order to make this research meaningful and feasible, I set the goal of interviewing 6-8 Indigenous artists. Due to time constraints, I was able to interview five artists to inform this research. Beyond being a self-identifying Indigenous artist, the only other criteria were that participants were 18 years of age or older and were actively producing art at the time of contact. Initial contact with the artists were made through emails obtained through artist websites, in which interest in the project would then lead to scheduling their interviews. I was able to conduct three in person interviews with artists within the Denver area, and two phone interviews with artists that reside elsewhere. As mentioned above, semi-structured interviews were conducted that aimed to address my research questions, while working to understand their specific art pieces, processes, opinions, and engagements. This research was also designed to not keep anonymity of the research participants. It is important that their names and their voices be at the forefront.
on this topic and that their intellectual work and contributions to this research be credited properly.

**Ethics and Positionality**

My positionality as a white, non-Native, researcher is at the forefront of how this research was designed, implemented, and analyzed. I am not in a position to fully understand Indigenous experiences or epistemologies. However, as a student of anthropology and future museum professional, it is important to acknowledge Indigenous worldviews from what Native American peoples are sharing about them through public discourse, like art and art practices. Museums were built with Indigenous material culture, which is at the core of collections of culturally dominant institutions within the United States. Even if Indigenous research and representations are not at the core of an individual’s museum work, there should be a baseline for understanding the complexity of the Native cultures that have built their institutions and are represented within their collections and exhibitions. When we discuss theories and practices of critical museology towards Indigenous representations, it is imperative to implement Indigenous knowledge systems into disrupting objectivity and implementing diverse frameworks of knowledge within stewardship and representation of their material cultures and histories.

In using critical ethnography and narrative methodology, I centered the artists’ dialogues and opinions over my own. I chose theories to guide analysis that were presented by Indigenous scholars. Indigenous generated theory is about focusing on the concerns and world views of Native peoples in a way that centers their perspectives and
their own purposes for the research, which can be an important area to “plan, to strategize, to take greater control over [their] resistances” (Smith 2012, 40). I found this to be important as it is not only the most appropriate way to frame Indigenous dialogue, but it allowed me to understand theories outside of Western frameworks and thinkers that I have generally been presented with as a student. I presented each artist with a copy of their transcriptions for their records and review, if they so desired as this was not a requirement of their participation in the research. One artist provided feedback on their transcriptions, the rest did not. Each artist was also given copies of their profiles and analysis for their review in order to ensure accuracy and respectful interpretation. One artist provided feedback, the others did not.

Even through the implementation of these methods, I do not disregard the fact that my positionality will affect some aspect of how this research has been written. I understand that I do not now, nor will I ever, have a full picture of sovereign practices and their implications among Indigenous peoples. I have practiced personal reflexivity throughout this process in order to make this work meaningful to those who participated, as well as contribute to the broader discussion of Indigenous representations within museum spaces.

**Methodology**

**Critical Ethnography**

Indigenous art within the field of anthropology has historically been relegated to the ethnographic. Given the role Indigenous art plays in social relations, gender, identity, representation, and globalization it is necessary that critical ethnography be employed to
prioritize artists’ voices to integrate more appropriate theories and methods of representation. This includes the consideration of Indigenous peoples as culturally and politically distinct from other ethnic minorities within the United States, the nonconsensual relations they hold with the United States government, and how American Indian cultural emphasis on retaining culture, identity, self-government, and stewardship of land and resulting contestations with the U.S. government and society form a body of empirical social action that constitutes the subject matter of American Indian studies as an academic discipline (Champagne 2007, 353).

Taking this into consideration, it is important to center ideas of self-determination and sovereignty into methodologies pertaining to Indigenous peoples and Indigenous research (Smith 2012). The function of critical ethnographic work is to combine theory with method to understand how social relations produce knowledge, while specifying how the “social practices and points of view of people may be made topical” (Simon and Dippo 1986, 195). In addition to using this approach to address relevant experiences of art reception and practice to the artists in this research, my identity and positionality is essential to acknowledge. In doing so, critical ethnography acknowledges the limitations of ethnography as social practice in which research is “constituted and regulated through historical relations of power and existing material conditions” (Simon and Dippo 1986, 197). As a non-Native student of a Western university, I have been more exposed to theories and interpretations of data that are understood within Western epistemologies. While these theories are relevant and important, conducting research that takes into account the unique social position of Native Americans discussed above puts “American Indians and their cultures, institutions, and orientations of social, political, and cultural action at the center of analysis” (Champagne 2007, 359). This research was designed to
incorporate Indigenous created theories into the overall framework of design in order to
guide analysis in such a way.

In designing this research to be dialogic, I am prioritizing the artist’s knowledge
and opinions on visual sovereignty, and any decolonial intersections of this topic.
Through sharing transcriptions, analysis, and conclusions with the artists who provided
their knowledge on this topic, I intend to foreground their epistemologies on how this
research has been written and ensure that my own positionality has not affected how I
present their opinions. In using critical ethnography as a methodology framed by Tribal
Critical Race Theory and Visual Sovereignty, I aim to create research that serves the
interest of the artists I worked with to create this product, while diversifying my own
Western understandings of Indigenous aesthetics in order to inform how to acknowledge
and respect sovereign practices as a non-Native researcher and museum professional.
This all works towards the “performance” of integrating critical theory and praxis that
“moves ethnographic research out of conceptualizing and critique to solution, taking
social action, applied methods, and eventually pedagogy” (Rangel 2012, 50). The second
thematic discussion presented in this research will discuss how critical pedagogy is an
important factor of decolonizing work, while the third thematic discussion will present
how to consider sovereignty within decolonial methods.

**Narrative methodology**

Supplementing critical ethnography, narrative methodology works to understand
how the artist’s dialogues construct their realities and how their experiences can be used
to inform theories and methodologies. Through the creation of art pieces, the artists in
this research are creating a cultural product, which “like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality” (Bruner 1991, 3). In sharing their experiences, the artists in this work brought me into a space to understand how their work and lives are imbued by the past to inform their present (Ochs and Capps 1996; Osella 2006). These experiences included historical instances, interactions both within and outside of the art world, and personal narratives that all directly shaped their opinions on the topic of this research.

This methodology is employed in the next chapter, The Artist Narratives, in which each individual artists’ dialogue is heavily reproduced in their own words through extensive quotations and block quotes. It is important that their thoughts and opinions were foregrounded, allowing the various points of views and lived realities to be presented. This approach also allows the reader to gain context and background knowledge from the artists’ themselves as they move into the thematic analysis and discussion, to encourage how their words shape those chapters. The analysis and discussions chapters will also foreground their dialogue, as select quotes pertaining to the theme being presented will be pulled from their narratives to support and discuss the theme. In conjunction with critical ethnography, I aim to understand how their narratives can influence practices of reflexivity and the disruption of hegemonic discourse around Indigenous art practices while contributing to conversations of decolonizing praxis. I find it important to reinforce that while their narratives are foregrounded, I am in the position of being a researcher interpreting their experiences. In presenting each artist the opportunity to review my work, I aimed to ensure that the interpretations of their narratives were told in the ways in which each artist found appropriate.
Chapter Five: Artist Narratives

To explore the concept of visual sovereignty further, five self-identifying Indigenous artists were interviewed about their thoughts and opinions on the topic. While each interview was artist dependent, the interviews questions were created to address their perspectives on the idea of visual sovereignty. Topics and ideas explored within interviews included the process behind art making, narratives and themes within pieces, experiences as artists, the reception of their work, and overall thoughts on visual sovereignty. Each artist is discussed in depth below in order to allow their voices to be foregrounded. It is their dialogue that will guide thematic analysis and the discussion that will follow when considering Indigenous aesthetics, visual sovereignty, and critical museology.

Melanie Yazzie

A Professor of Art Practices at the University of Colorado-Boulder, Melanie Yazzie’s professional title is Head of Printmaking; however, she describes herself as a multi-media artist. Beyond printmaking, Yazzie experiments with a variety of artistic mediums including jewelry and surface design, paintings, mixed-media, ceramics, and installation art. As both an artist and an educator, she creates work that aims to inspire viewers to question the subject at hand—whether the visual narrative is Indigenous in nature or not. “The projects that I bring together are always about looking at history and
touching on things that go beyond just that seed of an idea, it’s hopefully going to make a
difference and reach out to other people to teach them.”

Sitting at her kitchen table, my conversation with Yazzie started with a discussion on how she chooses to identify herself when she is asked to give an introduction on who she is; “I guess it depends on the situation. I want people to know that I am a Professor of Art Practices at the University of Colorado-Boulder, head of Print Making at the University of Colorado-Boulder, and a contemporary Diné, or Navajo, artist.” I followed with asking if she always prefers to be tribally affiliated. Yazzie again emphasized that it depends, stating that if she is just doing a demonstration or facilitating a discussion about a print making process, she does not tend to affiliate. If she is asked to speak based on her experience as an Indigenous artist, which she says is typically the case, then she does want people to know, “I think being a Navajo woman living in this contemporary society is really important to me, and having people know that is something [...] that comes first.” This identification is key in how Yazzie conducts her work as an artist.

LH: Would you say your art is influenced by your identity as a Native woman?

MY: Yes, 100%. It’s my experience and I’m drawing from my childhood, my daily experiences, the travels and places that I’ve been to all comes into the artwork. And the way that I look at each piece is from my history and who I am.

She goes onto to further explain that the narratives she chooses to present visually in her art are created to actively change the perception of historical pasts and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples:
all of the work that I’m making is touching on these issues of how we see ourselves. The animals I work with, the imagery I'm working with, it’s always touching on some part of our history and sort of turning it sideways [...] making the viewer question what that image is about.

In calling the viewer to question the pieces, Yazzie openly invites dialogue that may question if the piece is “Native” enough. In one series she points to, Yazzie created visual depictions of her own experience with type 2 diabetes where she inserted numerical narratives into her work that represent her various blood sugar levels.

With those pieces that have the numbers with the diabetes in it, there will be people who are quote unquote the artist, or the one who understands art, and they’ll be having an argument with me about it not being a piece of Native art and then their relative, who is type 2 diabetic, or type 1, they’re looking at the pieces and once they hear it’s diabetic numbers they look at me and say, ‘this was a good day. Oh, and this piece is a bad day.’ Then the art person asks, ‘what are you seeing? What do you mean?’ and I say, ‘they just understood it,’ and they say, ‘what? I don’t understand, teach me, how did you see it?’ So the diabetic person, who is not the [art person] is then educating their family member and pulling apart the works and they’re educating the one who says they’re the artist and I love that. I think a lot of times there are perceptions of who is the artist, or the one who understands the work, and I’m trying to reach everybody and I’m trying to turn things in different directions to make people see things from different angles. And hopefully, making people question the way that they may have understood something.
In these pieces, she aimed to humanize her own experience as a Diné woman with diabetes, but because they were not stereotypically “Native” in nature, their reception was misunderstood by viewers. For Yazzie, providing context of contemporary Indigenous artists and assigning value to that work is why she is so active in public engagement. In one part of our conversation, Yazzie discussed how she openly accepts people who perceive print making as a simple process and challenges them to do better than she could.

I often have artists or people look at my work and will say, ‘oh I could have made that, that looks so simple, I could have done that, shouldn’t it be more realistic?’ and I say ‘great! Do it, show me, make it better than me.’ When they go and make something and bring it back to me, or show me, send me an image, I say, ‘make ten more,’ and then they say, ‘well it took a long time just to make that one’ and again, ‘make ten more’ and they say ‘well it’s really hard’ and I said ‘yes!’ When you put your heart and soul and your history into something it’s not simple, it’s really difficult.

Her experience as an artist-in-residence at the Denver Art Museum in 2012 was a platform for Yazzie to help breakdown stereotypes that surround Native art and artists, “it was about showing the public that Native artists are alive and well in the community.” As part of her residency Yazzie requested that she be able to create videos to use as educational materials for schools and classrooms. In making the videos, Yazzie’s goal was to give accessibility to those who were not in the Denver area or who would be interested in having her speak at an event, Native and non-Native alike, “the videos are meant for everybody and depending on where they’re at on their educational path it’ll hit
them in different ways, or they’ll get different things from it and that’s why the materials, or the information that goes out, is for everybody.” However, sometimes those videos do hold the most value for those within the Native communities she is sometimes asked to speak to.

I always say to people, when your questions come up of, who are these, who are the images or the works for, it’s for everyone because even in our own communities, more so in our own communities, our people have been colonized and don’t see or know how we see ourselves, or why we treat ourselves the way we do. I get Indigenous men all the time treating Indian women terribly and I meet with them and they say, ‘why are you a feminist?’ and I say, ‘you know what? We’re a matrilineal society, you’re speaking to a Navajo woman, you’re the one whose been colonized. What religion did you grow up with?’ And they say, ‘well I’m Native.’ I say, ‘no, what religion did you grow up with?’ and they say, ‘well when I was growing up my parents were Catholic or this’ and I respond ‘that’s why you’re behaving this way! You’ve been trained in that way because if you were trained traditionally, you would respect the voice of the women. Because you grew up Catholic, you’re growing up with that mix. Now you identify as Native and you’re doing this, but those things were taught at a young age and it’s because we’ve been colonized that if you hadn’t gone to Catholic school, or done that, your parents went to a boarding school. And at the boarding school they beat it out of us, so then your parents were bringing you up as this young male role model.’ And they’re always saying, ‘holy crap Yazzie’s out of the box’ and I’m like ‘Ughh!’ (laughs). So, the artwork is for all of our
communities because of all this crazy crap that goes on that I always say to people, we may be Native, and, but we ourselves need to be learning our history. Yazzie went on to further describe that sometimes “the most painful part” of her experiences within her own communities is when she goes to speak to them, “and their idea of what art is, is crazy.”

They think it has to be a warrior on a horse, it has to be this or that, and […] you’re Pueblo, why are you on a horse? If you were Comanche or if you were of this tribal group, I could see the horse thing but Puebloan people from this area were mostly in the fields, doing something up here. Yes, I’m sure at some point people were on horses, but it’s different.

Beyond facing issues of reception within her own community, Yazzie described how she feels that she sometimes needs to work harder as an Indigenous artist because of stereotypical perceptions that surround her identity. I asked her about her previous exhibitions, and what the process looks like for being sought out for exhibition. She explained that while she is trying to learn how to get her work out more through technological outlets, she can hardly keep up with the work she has now. She explained that she had not applied for an exhibition since the 1990’s, that she is often sought out by spaces that have already heard of her or seen her work. This success, she explained, did not come without hard work and identity related barriers.

When I go and do these exhibitions, workshops, or projects, I deliver. I’m there early, I do a really great job, I keep in contact with people. When they say the deadline is this date, I try to meet that deadline or get on it as soon as possible, and I don’t fall back on what…out there people say ‘oh, so and so is on Indian
time.’ I try not to follow those stereotypes of that we’re late, or we’re laid back. I believe in going and finding the opportunity, or if I’m invited by somebody to do something that I respond immediately and follow through with it. And the word of that goes out in the community so that when a place needs somebody to exhibit, and they say ‘we need a go getter and somebody who is going to get this done, this thing didn’t happen, and we’ve been trying to find somebody’ then they’ll contact me, and they get a response immediately. And they just say ‘holy crap! You’re here and you can deliver a show’ and I say ‘yes, it can be done next week.’ And that, I think, my practice of meeting that, or that…I don’t know what you call it, request or invitation, enthusiastically is what has kept me going. I think at one point earlier in my career-I think I was in undergrad school, or grad school-when I was invited to stuff and I would say ‘I don’t know, I’m not sure’ and then I’d wait and then in a month or two I would contact the place and say ‘I think now I’m ready!’ and they would say, ‘we’ve moved on.’ And I really, ‘well when can I be in that again?’ and they’d respond, ‘well I don’t know you can contact us in 2 or 3 years.’ That happened once or twice and I thought, ‘holy crap I can’t pass these things up, I need to you know, get off my butt and say yes and make it happen and get there and be excited.’ Because I’d always be at these things and people explain these horrible stories of ‘oh well these Native men came and were totally drunk at the opening, came late and offended donors.’ Or, so and so said they could do it, but they couldn’t, and I just thought I can’t continue that, those stereotypes of who we are as a people. I need to break the
stereotypes, I need to try to perform in a different way, and be an example by my actions, if that helps. I don’t know, but that’s what’s kept me out there.

In doing engagement work, Yazzie sees herself aligning with ideas that are presented within Rickard’s idea of visual sovereignty; self-representation, self-determination, and understanding that there is more than the colonized perspective present within her art. In being able to reach out and educate from her own perspective regarding her history as a Native woman, she aims to show the value in Indigenous art and highlight the difficulties that are involved in creating a piece of art. Particularly in her role as an educator, she hopes that when her students see how difficult the art making process is, and how much personal and emotional work is required to make a piece. In doing so, she believes that this can spark a change further down the road. In one way, she hopes that it will trickle down to how her students may choose to fund their money into museums as they grow into and give the students more context as to why art they perceive to be simple is priced the way it is.

That’s why in museum programming and working with the children, or doing things for the younger generation, is so important because those-and I say to my students every semester when I teach classes at the university-I have students sometimes who will be in the class and they’ll say ‘I’m never going to make another piece of artwork again after this, this is so hard’ and I say, ‘that’s okay because I want you to leave this class knowing how difficult this process is, and what an artist goes through to do this work.’ So that when you go into your business degree program, and you go and give money to a museum, or you open up your own museum, you’re funding those things, that you will know what is
important about all of this and you will help change things because you went through this class and because we asked these questions about ‘what’s your history, who are you, where are you coming from’ and you got to hear from all your other classmates that when you’re in that situation to donate money, or help change things out there, it’s from this experience that will be informing your decisions on what you support […] When you [the student] become your business man, or whatever, or a scientist, when you go to a gallery and you see a piece that’s priced really high, that you will educate yourself about the artist and that work, and you will pay the price that is listed, and you will understand not just how that art piece was made, but years and years of education went to get to that point, or community work […] so, after you’ve tried to make something, and then you see somebody else do it, and then you see the story that they’re trying to tell, you won’t be arguing, or putting down that person, you will want to support them.

While Yazzie enjoys her role as an educator, she says she can find it to be a wearing task to be confronted with. She described it as exhausting to always have to explain both herself and her work, and there are people she encounters that just cannot have their perception changed in her opinion. This is due in large part to the investments people put into their professional training,

There’s so much invested in how, what is the proper way to do anything, that when we come in from a different angle we’re always going to hit this place where we have to be able to jump over a wall, or a, perceived ways of the proper way to do things. And that’s what’s happens with the art world, with anything.
She makes the particularly poignant example of how misrepresentation through stereotypes can continue to occur based off this training and the politics that are at play within museum and gallery spaces.

It’s really difficult because of the person who is giving the money to the Heard Museum, or to the National Museum of whatever in Washington, if they want a Native on a horse, and they want their collection in there, and they’re giving whatever million, then guess what? That stereotype is going to stay there. And a Native community member, who doesn’t have money, who wants to change things that doesn’t have the money, how much change can we make? So that’s why again, I make my work, and I travel, and I try to meet with people. And I work with young people in many different communities because I think it’s through educating young people that things can change. There’s a reason why missionaries work with the children.

Educating youth and children was a key point of conversation with Yazzie when we discussed her engagement work, particularly the videos she produced for the Denver Art Museum, and how she sees that aligning with ideas of visual sovereignty. To her, it is more productive to work with kids than it is to participate in galas because it allows her to “give them hope and help them see themselves in a more positive way. That is beautiful.” The space she is given through those online videos allows her to show them a contemporary Diné woman who is “alive, speaking on video” that can allow for continued education across generations. Yazzie describes that during periods of history the awareness of Indigenous peoples and contemporary issues ebbs and flows, but
that reeducation is always going to be a necessity. Starting with children is a way to normalize more understanding on Native peoples more continuously over time.

If we start with the little ones, and they start learning these things, the little ones will grow learning this stuff, and then they’ll be the ones who open a new future or sit on a board at a museum and say ‘no, Natives aren’t just on horseback. I did this workshop and whatever with Melanie Yazzie and she said that this is why the animals are important, and they don’t have to be realistic.’ Look at the petroglyphs, look at all of these different places around the world that comes from all of our humanity, that comes from all of our communities began in that place and that, and they’re able to tell those stories and that’s when I say, ‘yes!’ when they’re the ones educating without me being there. But it takes a lot of us to do that.

Starting with children and educating students about the value and context Indigenous work is not just important when considering how future money may be funded to museums or various institutions; it is about laying a foundation for any line of work they enter into. Yazzie discussed her father, who was a superintendent of schools and did a lot of work in Washington, D.C. Part of his work, was reeducating people “every couple years” about treaties between the Navajo and the United States government. Even among those in charge of federal level policies and relations, there were plenty of misperceptions and total misunderstandings about their rights as a sovereign nation; an important reason the videos she makes are just as much for non-Native populations as they are for Indigenous ones.
We aren’t given anything […] people have this perception that we’re getting these gifts, but we’ve actually lost all our lands, we’ve given away our way of life, and how can you repay that? You have people who are angry about different parts of American history that have happened to non-Indigenous people and all this land, everything, belonged to Indigenous people and now we don’t have it.

And so, when people say, ‘oh they have casinos, they get free this they get free that.’ It’s maddening because…it’s interesting when I meet people who talk about us having things tax free or we get different things from the government, I explain to them ‘where do you live?’ and they say, ‘well I own this home’ and I say, ‘how long have you had that? What if I just took that? And I could give you this crappy education or these ministers that could come and give you the word of god? (laughs) How’s that trade?’ and they say, ‘uh, what?’ and I say, ‘Yeah, it’s pretty stinky. Okay now imagine your homeland, or your home that is your family’s, all of this country, do you think it was a fair trade? Do you think we’re getting things for free?’ And they say ‘oh my god’ and I say, ‘yeah, that’s really bad’ […] It’s really exhausting and, but I think at times that’s why my art work and creating works that are positive and bringing joy is so important because so much of my every day, and the realities of our community, is so difficult. At times I have people who say to me, ‘Melanie why don’t you make protest pieces, why don’t you make work that is about these real things’ and I say, ‘because I educate and live that every day.’ When I made work about all of those issues, it was so exhausting. I felt I was making myself sick from the reality and the terrible parts of our history.
My conversation with Yazzie wrapped up with an anecdote about a friend of hers who is a Native art historian who found herself at an anthropology event. She describes how her friend observed that she was surrounded by “white men who had one way of looking at history” that she thought was “Crazy. They have their facts but they’re all trying to prove a theory that’s their own thing, but they’re really not engaging with community.” When Yazzie discusses the importance of people who can educate with relying on her or other Native peoples, and notes that it takes a lot of us to do that, she is (without saying it) highlighting the importance of engaging with theories like visual sovereignty in a realm of different disciplines.

**Gregg Deal**

Gregg Deal is a contemporary artist and activist whose work is, as he describes it, “unapologetically Native.” He creates pieces in a variety of mediums that include conceptual paintings, print making, performance art, murals, and canvas style prints. Using art as a medium, Deal facilitates conversation around a multitude of heavy topics that are at the forefront of Indigenous experiences; race relations, appropriation, decolonization, stereotypes, Native mascots, Indigenous identity, and pop-culture are all narratives Deal engages with (Deal 2020). In the creation of his pieces, he aims to bring a voice to contemporary Indigenous populations.

I had the opportunity to speak to Deal while he was painting an outdoor mural in the Five Points neighborhood in Denver over the summer of 2019. The mural, titled *Rise*, is an image of his eldest daughter that has duality in its representation of an indigenous woman and an indigenous person. As Deal spray painted the mural, we began our
discussion. I told Deal I was exploring visual sovereignty and the idea of self-
representation in art, and how that could be used as a tool for decolonialization and asked
for his thoughts on the topic. The conversation immediately became one of art and its
application in activism.

I mean, the use of like art and activism, or at least the tool of art and activism,
that’s not new. They’ve been doing that, like one form or another, I mean you
could see it in communist movements in Russia and in Cuba, even sort of
nationalist efforts in Mexico and China of course, and I think those are probably
some of the most prevalent, sort of propaganda-based art where it’s not activism
but it’s definitely creating a sense of awareness about ideals that the state wants to
instill. So that concept, and the way that I’ve always understood it, is that concept
of using art as a kind of mass media piece […] I mean we use art in those ways
anyways. That’s all advertising is, is art that’s been commissioned to specifically
talk about certain issues, and certain products so you can get it out there. So, it
makes sense that artists would use that same medium as a means to express
different ideas and different things which of course has been going on for a long
time. So the sort of resurgence of that among Indigenous communities has been
incredibly interesting I think, because Indigenous communities are taking a
vernacular that has already existed within their communities and their homelands
and they’re putting them out for mass media, for awareness, and raising
awareness and understanding of different issues and things.

This narrative highlights the idea that art is not a new medium for Indigenous
communities to engage with, but that it has now become a viable outlet in asserting their
place in contemporary society. While Deal recognizes that this representation is important, he also discusses how it reaches a point “where that becomes commodified, where it has become commodified.” This commodification as Deal describes, becomes a way of quantifying and validating contemporary issues in Native communities under capitalistic models of consumption.

Standing Rock was probably the last massive effort that non-Natives can put a finger on, as much as Native people, but it’s become a quantifying event, ‘did you go to Standing Rock?’ And most people will articulate their support of, or their participation in Standing Rock by wearing a cool t-shirt, which is, insane. Could you imagine somebody marching on the national mall and being with Martin Luther King [Jr.] and then suddenly there’s a whole slew of t-shirts out there that you can buy that proves not only do you support it, but that you were there? So it’s no longer a natural event that’s created with this idea of creating equity and understanding and changing policy, but is instead now something that’s used, which is very much the culture that we have with phones and everything else, that you need to prove to people not only do you support this, but you were there. And art ends up being taken as a result of that to help quantify and validate those things.

Deal compares Standing Rock to other areas of commodification such as graffiti art and punk music; where once these were things considered a menace to society, there is now profit. Using Indigenous art and activism in that same breath is an important and telling part of Deal’s point here. Indigenous history in the United States is a violent and difficult past to discuss, and often is not. Where once assimilation policies sought to
remove all things Native in the name of nationalism and territorial expansion, there is now a recognition that cultural symbols from Indigenous populations have become profitable. However, these symbols and image are often rooted in misinformation about what that art is or really looks like. For Deal, this is because the Western art world, and those outside of it, have no context of Indigenous art or histories.

I have a strong opinion about the definition of contemporary Indigenous art, because there is no definition. And because there’s no context for your average Western art buyer, it is often times relegated to a trope, or to a stereotype. Which is why you have an enormous amount of Indigenous artists, talented-incredibly talented Indigenous artists, in Santa Fe that are painting cowboys and Indians because they recognize that their market is going to be Western buyers who have a western perception. And the way that that stifles the, not necessarily movement, but certainly the voice of Indigenous people, of Indigenous artists, is because you’ve taken out any sort of authority that an Indigenous person would have to assert themselves through their art, and instead have created a market where they want, they need to make a living, they need to buy it. And if the western world, only recognizes Indigenous art as being something recognizable to western eyes, then you have a group of people that are, whether they know it or not, regulated to painting what non-Indigenous people want, and not what they want and expressing themselves as artists and in pushing subject matter, and ideas, and identity through art, which is the very thing that has created the different cultural movements within western art. And so as that’s happening, the western art world doesn’t recognize Indigenous artists as participants in the larger western art
machine, and that we are ultimately relegated to a corner in Santa Fe, without having any real opportunity to go beyond that. That often times contemporary artists that are finding success in the western art world are having to do so by omitting their identity, even just a little bit, before they come to the table as Indigenous people. Like we are only allowed to be Indigenous artists, Native American artists, and we’re not allowed to be artists that happen to be Indigenous. That every artist has something that is informing their work. If you’re black your ‘blackness’ may inform your work, your white-from Colorado-that may inform your work, as an Indigenous person, there is a lot that informs our voices and informs our work, and if for some reason it’s off the beaten path, then those western eyes decide that that doesn’t matter, that that’s not important because it doesn’t make sense to them.

Deal goes onto discuss that for Indigenous artists who do attempt to cross that expectation and do work that is more true to who they are and what they want to create, to present themselves as “modern living human beings,” they are taking a professional risk that could very well backfire. He explains further by saying that if he does not create work that is recognizable to the western art buyer, then he is not going to be able to make a living, “if I’m not willing to pull a punch, if I’m not willing to regulate myself down to something recognizable to a non-Native person, then I can be, and in many cases, going to be shooting myself in the foot professionally.” Deal discussed a time when he was creating art that was meant to sell, that was “safe enough” and could be easily consumed by the general public. This gave him what he described as an existential crisis, where he had to decide what his next steps would be as an artist.
One day I was talking to my friend who was actually here earlier, and he’s like, ‘you know, your performance art is really bad ass,’ because my performance art is usually art for the sake of art, so I’m not getting paid and I don’t have to please anybody—I can just do whatever the hell I want to do. Which has been incredible to do art for the sake of doing art, but then he goes, ‘but as bad ass as your performance art is, why don’t your paintings look like your performance art?’ And I was like, oh gosh he’s right! That I’m making work that’s safe and I’m making work that is you know, easy to consume and that I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t just be making work to make work; I should be creating art to create art in the same way that I do my performance work. But like I said earlier that’s a risk, that’s a professional risk. But it’s one that I have to do if I actually want to grow as an artist, then that’s something that I have to do in my willingness to grow as an artist and I think that only serious artists are willing to grow as artist. To take their licks, whatever they may be, and to process that, and to create good art from it. Whatever the struggle is, or whatever the blessing is, whatever is happening taking that and putting it through your cycle to create good art is what you’re supposed to do, so, that’s hard (laughs), that’s incredibly hard.

Deal had to consciously make the decision that he was going to put himself out on a limb as an artist and make work that more directly reflected his performance work, work that he notes he does more for himself than anyone else. However, he notes that because the Western art world has not started to understand the value of performance art yet, his installation and conceptual work needs to mirror the narratives he presents in that work. He does this knowing that his identity as an Indigenous person is “regulated by that
western sense of understanding Indigenous existence, which is to say that there is no
understanding of Indigenous existence.” Himself, as well as other Native artists, then
have to navigate how to work within the bounds of unequal power relations within the
Western art world, where he highlights that non-Native people have an immense amount
of power over Indigenous peoples, “I don’t have to appeal to other Native people, I have
to appeal to non-Native people.” Part of learning how to navigate that space was a large
focus of our conversation, and for Deal that meant not only the potential of having to
sacrifice part of your identity to have economic gain, that also meant learning how to
navigate feelings.

So much of what we end up talking about, or the things that are the most true, end
up being things that make people feel bad. And you know art, for a lot of Native
people is medicine. So creating art is very much about also kind of reconciling, or
rectifying, understanding Identity, existence, trauma, all of these different things.
Which I think, in the artistic process and just general artistic practice, that’s what
a lot of people do—is they’re navigating parts of their lives, part of their history,
part of what matters to them, in a way that can make their art rich, and can create
narratives that are new and exciting. And our trauma, our narratives, are not
terribly friendly in terms of non-Native people, particularly white people,
particularly colonialism and western constructs of you know, the interaction
between Europeans and Indigenous people. So, it just creates a lot of problems in
terms of like, how do you do that?

Deal discussed an instance where he underwent a vetting process at the
Smithsonian where the work that he ended up being able to show was “probably his
calmest work.” At the time, Deal was engaged in conversations that surrounded Native mascots and was outspoken about a certain Washington football team’s controversial mascot. While Deal had no intention of using his pieces that included those narratives in the show, he still had to deal with a reaction that he described as “predicated upon their fear of the unknown.” Deal acknowledges that within the Western art world that he is not in the majority of that space, even though he occupies that space as a person and artist, and that it can be difficult to facilitate conversation.

I’ve seen people that are well meaning, like do their best to try to you know, facilitate conversations that are important like that, and I’ve seen those same people get upset and refuse to work with Native people ever again because they had a bad experience because an outspoken Native person, is a threat. And, and maybe that threat is because there’s an incredible amount of truth attached to the things that are being said. And the truth of those things are hard to process, like you suddenly have to process something that you don’t know how to process, and you’re not really equipped to process. And you know I feel bad for them in that way because I do believe that people come by things honestly, but at some point I need to possibly think about the effect that I don’t want to, or I don’t have to, navigate your feelings. I say that, but the truth is that it doesn’t really matter (laughs). The truth is I have to navigate that whether I like it or not. Particularly if I want to have a career, particularly if I want to make and build relationships that

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3 As of July 2020, the Washington Football Team mentioned has officially changed its controversial team name.
are going to allow me to provide for my family, and that’s kind of crazy. You know just to think about that, that’s kind of crazy.

Deal discusses that in order to start to navigate how to rectify these spaces, both within and outside of art, there has to be a recognition that the culture we live in has been created on ideals of supremacy. Which, in turn, means there “has to be a relinquishment of the greatness that is supposed upon history.” This means discussing the so called ugly truths of people like George Washington (“was party to his regiment skinning Seneca people from the waist down and making boots out of those skins”), Abraham Lincoln (“who signed off on the largest mass hanging of American culture [of Dakota men]”), and Christopher Columbus. That there also needs to be a recognition of the inherent value that is already present in Indigenous art, due to the simple fact that is being created on the homelands of their ancestors and peoples.

We have a group of people that have already been given negative value in popular culture and through history in American culture, and so the double hit is that there already is value given to that [art], which is none. And then as an artist trying to prove to somebody that that value has importance in those spaces, I believe that things have value in those spaces all the time because those spaces are on Indigenous land, period. And so it’s incredibly complex. The way that Native people navigate this, the way that Native people sort of figure this out, and work with it and the way that their trying to reconcile it and figure out where they exist…I mean, it’s a hurdle that a lot of people don’t get past.

Deal agrees with the perspectives of others who gave their opinion in this research, in that educating children is a key place to start shifting the narrative, “because
they’re not carrying the prejudices and misunderstandings of spaces that have been occupied by white stories and white bodies.” However, he brings up two important points regarding education. First, he believes that it would take at least two generations before “we would even begin to see some significant change in the perspective of Indigenous people” and questions what that pay off would even look like. Secondly, he relates educational models in America to be of the same model of consumption that art has found itself in.

So, is it profitable for American education to teach the truth? That’s the question. It’s not whether or not they’re teaching things correct, whether or not they’re teaching things that are equitable, that doesn’t matter in the big scheme of things, we live in capitalism and capitalism states, is it worth our time? Does it make money? Plus what I mentioned earlier about the power of truth, the power of truth is that these things only work to build up a sense of greatness of our culture, of our country, of our people, so if we speak the truth, is it going to assert that power and is it going to make money? And if neither of those things are going to make money, if the truth about Indigenous people comes out in mass throughout the entire country as sort of a uniformly massive change in education, is it going to help capitalism and is it going to help continue to sustain the greatness of this country in all of its rhetoric and everything else? The answer is no. Our existence undermines every policy, every ideal, every part of the American dream that has ever been, so if that is true, then that means that our existence is dangerous, which taking art and taking activism and actually looking at that and seeing the value of
that, would tell me that we can only go so far with those stories and with those narratives before we begin to compromise the machine that is America.

Deal seems to allude to the fact that art can indeed be a useful tool to fuel those movements and question the grand Western narratives, but he questions ideas of sovereignty and what that means for art.

Do Native people even understand sovereignty? The Native people are saying sovereign, that we’re sovereign, that this is sovereign, or you know, Indigenous communities are sovereign. But the truth is our Indigenous communities are not sovereign, we’re beholden to the western power government from our enrollment all the way down to our allotments, for schools, for roads for you know, infrastructure […] So I don’t know that we’re truly sovereign in that way. We’re very dependent upon that, and I also, and it’s maybe not a very popular opinion, but this idea of decolonization. Nobody seems to be just moved by the fact that in order for me to explain decolonization to you, I have to do it in English. So it is, in effect, not decolonizing as I am explaining to you decolonization. And so, there’s these little elements of irony that exist as significant parts of our existence in the United States and it’s just so incredibly complex and so incredibly difficult that it’s sometimes hard for me…it’s hard to articulate any of those things, it’s just really hard. Because it’s so complex and it’s so difficult, you know? Like how do I explain to somebody these things? How do I help somebody else understand these things within the bounds of their own understanding, which is limited? That’s not to say that I’m against decolonization, I’m not against any of those things, but at the same time, thinking critically about those spaces, like everything
that I’m doing as a Native person, every concept that I’m coming up, every way in which I’m trying to articulate these opinions of those things, in my head, or out loud, are happening in the language of the colonizer. And so, what’s the validation, you know? How do I validate those things, how do I find value in those things, if I’m regulated down to the language of the colonizer?

As our conversation wrapped up, I asked if he had any final thoughts on visual sovereignty, on if it expanded the definition of political sovereignty or if it would be a useful concept to engage with, which was met with some uncertainty.

I don’t know what to think about things on the art spectrum. I mean, I know that I’m stifled as an artist. I know that I’m…that I’m struggling sometimes to say what I really want to say because my audience is overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly doesn’t understand what I’m saying or what I’m doing or why I’m saying it or why I’m doing it, um, but the value of my voice or the value of my people is essentially lost in all of these other spaces […] I know that the journey for me has been incredibly interesting and exciting and difficult, and eye opening, and the struggle is real and I don’t think that that’s any different than any other artist that’s there, except that I’m an Indigenous person, and the investment that I have in my work I believe has more meaning because this continent is the homeland of my people. And the value of that, I think is immeasurable. And I think that the key is to try to get people to understand that Indigenous people have a bigger voice in this country because they are, in fact, Indigenous.

Deal recognizes that there are key events taking place now that are happening to both advance Indigenous representation, narratives, and presence within the art world. He
cites the recent controversy surrounding the 2019 Whitney Biennial, where Indigenous and other artists of color pulled out of the exhibition in protest of the vice chairman on the museum Warren Kanders. Kanders was tied to a company called Safariland, that provided tear gas (among other weapons) to law enforcement involved in policing protests like Standing Rock, St. Louis, Baltimore, and ongoing resistance at the United States/Mexico border. For Deal, that was a significant part of “telling those spaces that those spaces aren’t sacred because you said they’re sacred, they’re sacred because we occupy them with our work.” He also talks about Indigenous artists that are starting to see value in their work outside of Native reception, such as Jeffery Gibson (Choctaw/Cherokee) and Kent Monkman, whose current exhibition work was discussed earlier. While he sees the hope in the movement foreword for these artists, he still recognizes that there is a long road ahead for both himself, and others that have been subjected to navigating Western ways of understanding and critique.

I don’t know that in my lifetime I’ve ever seen a Native artist have that, a living Native artist have that. So it’s a hard ticket, I don’t know what the answers are. I know that I can keep working, I know that I can keep trying to do the best I can and find value in my work or find value in new places and bringing stuff to light that’s new and exciting.

**Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand**

As a contemporary artist, Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand is well known for her comic style art and use of digital mediums to create art. She, like other artists in this research, is also proficient in a variety of outlets for art, including murals, watercolors,
scratchboard, and painting. On top of her artwork, Bad Hand is also the Chief Creative Director of áyA Studios as well as the co-producer and director of Indigenous PopX (now áyA Con). While Bad Hand still creates artwork, she told me that it is not as much of a focus for her. Rather, through her work with áyA Studios and Indigenous PopX she aims to bring visibility to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists.

I don’t really focus as much on my personal art, as I do for like, uplifting kids and getting other people opportunities. I think that’s part of the reason why I ended up being the director of Indigenous PopX is because I’m more interested in getting everyone else’s work out there. I’ve been doing art shows and talks and like, drawings and stuff since I was thirteen. So my first art show was when I was 13 at a coffee shop, and then […] I’m actually more at like 20-27 art shows, but I kind of feel like I’ve had my chance to share my voice. If people see my artwork and we talk about it from that point on that’s great, but I’m not so much worried about pushing my perspective anymore I want to push everybody’s perspective-mine is kind of an afterthought.

In the art Bad Hand has produced, either in the past or presently, she tends to focus her narratives on Native youth and Indigenous women. The issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women is a key issue for Bad Hand that she aims to bring awareness to, “it’s a big problem that is pretty important and should be important to everybody.” In addition to Bad Hand centering narratives around Native youth in her artwork, she also centers them at the core of her work outside of being an artist. She formally worked at Jefferson County Public Schools as a community liaison for Indigenous education, where her position provided academic, social, and cultural support
and mentorship for Native students. She also worked on art programming while she was there, including creating a summer program called Modern Myth Makers that explored “how we could really use the comics to teach starter knowledge and more traditional lessons” to the youth involved. This position is what led to her involvement in Indigenous PopX, which had its inaugural year in Denver over the summer of 2019. The Comicon type event is meant to highlight Indigenous art in the many forms it takes and is open to anyone who is interested in either submitting art or attending, Indigenous or not.

There’s so much amazing art there. We had a bunch of art lovers, comic book nerds, educators, Natives, and we are trying to be a little bit better with our marketing this year because I think a lot of people thought that it was only for Native people, and it’s not. My whole goal behind it is that everybody is Indigenous, it’s just we’re Indigenous from different lands, so naturally Indigenous Comicon, or Indigenous PopX here in Denver, you kind have a lot of Native artists. I think that we want to make sure that everybody knows that everybody is welcome. We’re not really excluding anybody, the only policy we have is that if you’re a jerk you’re going to be asked to leave, regardless of whether you’re a guest, or an attendee, or a celebrity or whatever.

Part of making sure people are aware that the event is open to Native and non-Native people alike is in the visibility the event brings to Indigenous peoples as contemporary members of society. She finds it particularly salient to bring this visibility to Native youth, described by Bad Hand as sacred and “culturally, they are the future.” In seeing representations of themselves in art, media, and pop culture, Native youth are given more of a variety of understanding who they are that is not rooted in essentialized
notions of Indigeneity. As Bad Hand discusses, this is key when thinking about identity building for these youth.

For youth, it’s extremely important to see more visual representation that look like more than Pocahontas. I always look at Pocahontas as a stepping stone for Disney because they did make the effort to get Native actors to play those parts, and then obviously from there we have things like Coco and Moana where they went in the community and they did a better job at really bringing a story like that [to life]. But for a lot of the kids that I taught in JeffCo, what I saw was that some of the ones that were very…they knew their culture and they definitely identified as Native, but there was still this kind of disconnect on whether they were actually identifying because they didn’t look like Pocahontas. So, they knew that this whole side of them was Native, but they were like, ‘well I’m not actually Native because I don’t look like Pocahontas,’ or I don’t look like this stereotype. And so, there was two sides of them—there was the side that they had at home with their family where they were just being themselves and they definitely were Native, and then there was the side that they brought to school where they were afraid to talk about it because they didn’t want to be kind of, attacked, for not looking the part. And I saw that with a lot of different students because you know that not all Natives look the same. There are 573 federally recognized tribes, and then there’s all the terminated tribes and the state recognized tribes, and all of them are different regions, different looks, like nobody looks exactly like the stereotype of the Native.
As for non-Native attendees, visibility can work to right some of the misinformation, or total lack of knowledge, that is a repercussion of having no historical context from formal education. She describes an instance when an educator was facilitating a class on Native American Heritage within the school district she was working. Even though resources were available within the district (three Native Community liaisons and a coordinator), there was no collaboration on the presentation with them and the teacher “decided the best way to teach would be to dress up as Indians wearing stuff from Party City.” While there was resolution after the fact, Bad Hand described the event as “a big deal because they wore Halloween costumes to present about Native people as opposed to asking real life Native people to come in and talk.” She notes that this a huge issue and relates it back to why this representation is crucial to seeing different sides of Native cultures beyond what formal education has presented.

We’re kind of reentering an area now where it’s great to be Native, it’s a really good thing. People talk about it, and we’re starting to get our issues in mainstream media, and more of the sovereignty fights and things like that. That is, that’s awesome, I’m really happy that that’s happening but you still have those parents, and some of those educators who weren’t taught that growing up […] that’s an issue I see with a lot of teachers. They still kind of look at Native culture as being romanticized, or in the past.

Bad Hand has had her own encounters with misunderstood ideas of contemporary Indigenous people. She describes a moment during a class she was facilitating for Pop Culture Classroom where a young girl asked, “are you a real Indian? I thought you were all extinct!” After she had a moment that she described as a “punch in the gut” from the
exchange, she went onto explain to her that Indigenous peoples are very much alive and well only to find out that the young girl was a Native American; her mother was a fluent Nahuatl speaker (a Native language and peoples from Central Mexico). In this story, the necessity of visibility for all groups of people becomes strikingly clear as a child who is a Native American had not even realized contemporary Indigenous people still exist.

During our conversation, she went on to describe another instance of issues of representation when doing press for Indigenous PopX.

I did two things with the City of Denver, and in both of them, they added Native music on top of what I was talking about to make me more Native and I’m still trying to figure out how to tackle that. We did an ‘I am Denver’ thing where they showed headshots of myself and my husband and my son, and we had a few where we were laughing and we’re there in t-shirts and just normal in front of my fireplace. But they put a Native blanket behind us—they moved a Native blanket in front of my fireplace—so that we’d have a Native backdrop. And then they had us like staring off into the space all stoic, and I was like, ‘oh my gosh all of these are just…this is a modern day ‘I Am Denver’ thing and these are all stereotypes.’

Then when we did the interview for Indigenous PopX, they put flute music behind me (laughs). So those are all things that you’re actually negating the purpose; you’re trying to show a contemporary view of real life people that exist in this world right now but then you’re bringing in all of these tropes, and all of these stereotypes that keep people in the past.

As our conversation turned to the notion of visual sovereignty, I asked her how she felt about the idea as a decolonial tool in art theory, critique and beyond. I wanted to
know how she engaged with the idea, or did not, and if she found it to be useful in the expansion of art reception from non-Native critics. Bad Hand stated that she liked the idea, but also had some concerns about the overall idea of what sovereignty is and how it is performed.

The only concern I would have is a lot of the time people kind of take that word ‘sovereignty’ and they make it where nobody else can tell those stories, and I’m kind of in mixed opinion about that. While I think it’s important that we tell our own stories, and we have the outlets to tell our own stories, and the opportunities, I also recognize that sometimes working with people to better tell their story is a better deal than counting on them to tell the story. For example, that’s kind of how we got to the language situations that we’re in, where so many of our Indigenous languages are going extinct. It’s because elders and people kind of had this idea of sovereignty where only that tribe could speak that language, so they weren’t teaching anybody else. And if the youth weren’t learning it, then they just didn’t learn it growing up and then they didn’t catch on when they got older, and then elders pass away, and then nobody knows the language […] I don’t necessarily look at us as owning things. For tribes to say that we own something, that’s actually a very colonial idea because we don’t own anything-we don’t even own our ceremonies, our ceremonies were given to us to share. And so, whenever anybody says that using sovereignty as us reclaiming and owning something it’s kind of an oxymoron to me because our whole culture is structured to give back to the community and to work in a cycle. We learn things and then we spread the knowledge. It’s supposed to be kind of that model of Indigenous knowledge, the
circle of courage, so it’s belonging independence, mastery, and generosity so we get into this point where we learn everything and we get, we master it, and then we give back to the community and the cycle starts all over again. It’s like spreading seeds to grow, and I think some of the ideas of really keeping stuff to ourselves can actually be toxic to Native people because it’s not our nature.

For Bad Hand, the idea of visual sovereignty becomes nuanced when considering how to even think about and enact sovereignty. She alludes to the idea that some groups hold that there are parts of culture that are not meant to be shared (something that will be discussed in Rose B. Simpson’s dialogue), and how having that notion can be detrimental to continued cultural practices. She brings up her uncle while we were discussing sovereignty, a non-Native anthropologist who has become accepted within her community as a “Native even though he might not physically be Native.”

He’s probably the only person I know who has all of these traditional Lakota songs archived, written, and in his brain. He can come up with any song on the spot […] everybody accepts him as Native and they accept him as having the right to speak those languages and sing those songs and things like that and that wouldn’t happen if you weren’t open enough to being able to welcome somebody in like that.

She talked how she understands the fear of appropriation that can occur when things are taken out of context and used for the wrong purposes. However, she says there can be a balance of sharing stories and ceremonies because it is the only way non-Native people can learn. This relates back to her earlier point where she sees the value in the collaboration of telling stories as much as she does of Native people telling their own
through art or various outlets. In being closed off, there creates an imagined boundary where there are certain people welcome and others that are not, which she argues makes becoming accepted difficult,

it’s really hard to be accepting of a culture when somebody tells you ‘no, you don’t know this so you’re not allowed to be here’, well teach me then. Don’t just exclude somebody and expect them to know everything about your culture and everything that’s going to offend you or hurt you.

She goes onto problematize the notions of sovereignty and blood quantum, and how using sovereignty to shut down dialogue with others is not a productive way to bring visibility to contemporary issues surrounding communities.

I mean it’s a hard topic to navigate […] it’s hard to keep sovereignty in terms of tribal nations because there are kids who have seven different tribes, and they don’t have enough blood quantum to identify as either one. So then by the ideas of sovereignty and keeping your tribal nation sovereign, it is that student actually part of your tribe? If they don’t meet the blood quantum then no, and that’s like crazy […] So the whole idea of blood quantum and tribal numbers and us being the only people in the United States who still have to show an ID to show what we are…that’s a colonized concept. Traditionally none of our tribes had to have a card that said, ‘hey look I’m more Native than you are.’ But it is a hard topic to navigate because like I said there’s positives and negatives to that idea of sovereignty. The idea of being all Native […] that’s why I’m trying to make sure people know that it’s [Indigenous PopX] inclusive. I don’t want it to be the ‘Native only’ party, because I feel like that’s not a…we all know each other’s
struggles, and we know each other’s perspectives for the most part. Between tribes there’s differences but there’s a lot of similarities and so having events where only Native people are welcome, you’re preaching to the choir. You’re not actually shedding any perspective that they don’t already know. And you’re not showing any issues or talking about anything that they don’t already feel passionately about. So, that completely negates the purpose of having art as an outlet, or having comic books as an outlet, because if the only people that are reading it are the people who already know that issue it’s kind of just like, it’s this tiny little area as opposed to being able to spread it out to more people for them to actually be able to relate.

In discussing art, she problematizes the idea of indigenizing characters that are not typically Indigenous. She finds that artists who do those sorts of pieces are putting themselves into boxes by utilizing those outlets instead of creating their own ideas of pop culture through characters. She relates this back to the idea of sovereignty, that you may have the right to choose how you are going to create your art and what you represent, but if they are going to be upset “at a white company for turning ninja turtles into warriors and sticking war bonnets on them, then don’t do it yourself because it’s the same thing.” She finds it more productive to create their own characters and incorporate culture without stereotyping themselves.

You just create your own characters, and you create your own meaning and you kind of let those characters be what they are. Or you can bring in other ways of incorporating them into your culture without putting a war bonnet on them, because the war bonnets are a hard one because they represent so much more than
just that image. Each of those feathers is a gift of being able to make an accomplishment. So that’s why only chiefs wore it, and so just drawing one on a character is easy, but it’s a whole other issue because the character might be a great character, and technically they might have won all of those feathers, but you’re still just drawing it. It’s not actually a ceremony purpose.

Interestingly enough, this conversation began as a conversation surrounding tribal affiliation. While Bad Hand does usually state her tribe, she finds that can also put her into a box. However, she stated that she is okay with having her affiliation acknowledged, because “that’s just stating your family.” Looking back at the interview transcription, I wish I had asked her to elaborate more on what she meant by putting herself in a box. I can only speculate, based off other interviews conducted, that she is alluding to the idea of being labeled an Indigenous artist limiting. In a sense, that there are preconceived ways in which she can create art and what non-Native critics and viewers would expect her art to look like.

Bad Hand was the third interview I had conducted, and by this point it had become clear that a lack of historical context and knowledge generally is a huge barrier in the reception of Indigenous art within non-Native artists. I had started to think about visual sovereignty outside of art spaces, within museum spaces and their role in society as educational institutions that have been engaged with Indigenous cultures from the get-go. I was interested in exploring the politics of representation within those spaces and wondered if visual sovereignty would fit into that. As our conversation started to wrap up, I asked her what her thoughts were on using visual sovereignty as a decolonial approach in museum settings.
Definitely having more contemporary examples in museums…having more contemporary examples of actual art made by Natives because a lot of the times museums have artifacts, and that’s where kids get that romanticized idea, even [Native kids] themselves. They’re like, ‘this is my culture, these are my ancestors, that’s not my grandma.’ They’re thinking that it is ancestors decades or hundreds of years earlier, and it’s actually…it could be only 60 years back or something like that. But, they look at those artifacts and they think past, they don’t really think, ‘oh this is what my grandma wears when she goes to Powwow,’ because they don’t have any modern regalia, they have past stuff and the things that we have reclaimed from our ancestors, and from battles and things like that. They don’t have the representations of what Powwow drums look like now because a lot of them don’t look the way they used to. People use plastic on some drums now which is kind of weird (laughs), but fancy feather dancers and things that they see at Powwows you don’t see at the museums, you see the past in museums. And then the kids go home and they see the present. And the present and the past don’t entirely connect in their brains, especially because it’s so far away, it’s far from being something they can relate to. That it’s kind like having that more representation, even of stuff that they create, like kids their age created. Most of our youth, they feel issues pretty deeply, and so when they do create stuff it’s amazing. I think when we have our students being able to have that voice in an actual museum, I think that would really help to bring in the modern day feel. This disconnect between the past and the present is a huge hurdle to overcome, but one that she thinks art can start to tackle. She brings up an artist from Indigenous
PopX whose work she thinks exemplifies this notion, Marlena Myles (Spirit Lake Dakota, Mohegan, Muscogee). In some of her work, she takes historic images of Native peoples and creates neon vector art with them to bring them into a contemporary space. Bad Hand sees this as “the perfect bridge between our past and our present” because it changes the reaction of the youth who see that piece. Instead of seeing the historic image of the Indigenous person as someone they cannot relate to, the image becomes a graphic design piece and changes their thought process about the image. Visual sovereignty in this sense may be useful both within and outside of art spaces, to start to challenge typical ways of thinking about contemporary Indigenous peoples.

**Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds**

As a multi-disciplinary artist, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds creates large scale art pieces that “advocate for Indigenous communities worldwide” while focusing on social justice and the “freedom to live within the tribal circle as an expressive individual” (Heap of Birds 2020). Our conversation began with a discussion about the narratives he chooses to put into his pieces, which come from his own experiences and occurrences in his life, “I’m always mining my own life.” He also draws from events, historical or contemporary, that inspire him to do more research; topics include areas like Standing Rock, massacres, Columbus Day, or Native American health disparities. In creating these pieces, he aims for a deeper understanding of these events to contribute to a broad narrative while working to understand them at a deeper level for himself.

LH: When you say to understand it [historical events] better, do you mean for yourself personally or for, kind of a more broad narrative?
HOB: Yes, well broadly but then for me to understand it. Understand myself, or understand my life, and I believe in that, that it’s going to be an active investigation, or your life is active, ongoing experiment, or I don’t know how you want to describe it, but that through that growth, and that quest, then the viewer is going to be interested in what you’re doing. You know, if you have something active going on, discovery, then maybe the viewer will have the same energy to understand, to care about what you’re making. Rather than trying to deliver a product that is complete, you know which, most bad artists like that-like all the sculpture in front of banks and stuff like that, you know it’s like they try to deliver something complete to decorate you know, a lawn or a plaza, and usually it’s horrible because there’s no flex to it, there’s no discovery, there’s no life to it. Art kind of has to have that kind of opposite approach.

A common theme across Heap of Bird’s works is the use of text that works to further the notion of art as active and continued discovery that can be facilitated through its use. In one way, these pieces work to bring visibility to Indigenous peoples. In another, this type of art also combats ways of making art that are rooted in western ideals. He discusses how his use of text in artwork started in graduate school, when he was experiencing resistance from the professors on topics he was passionate about. He cites that there was a lack of activists on staff, or any people of color, who were not open to types of art that went beyond formalism-a type of art that adheres to strict protocols of how a piece is to be created.
So they didn’t have much interest or, of learning about Native American history, or Native American people, so I had to struggle to get them to focus on what I was doing, and I was very heavily politicized at that point, I was learning about activist events with the AIM movement and so forth, and I was really immersed in that, and they…they actually kind of resented those experiences, and even throughout my undergraduate school too, there was no real push to sort of self-identity, and so anyway the text was a way to really combat their resistance, and of course like in New York, I’ve taught at Yale, I’m in New York a lot, and that whole sphere of historical painting is about formalism, it’s a formalist kind of school of thought about shape and line and pattern and, you know all color and all these wonderful things but, but not so much about equity, or human rights, or social justice. It came to be that in the 80’s, and I was there in the 80’s, so in order to fight the formalists kind of mind set, I ended up writing words because they, and I put up—actually I did walls out in the hallway, and I kind of had to find a way to communicate so they couldn’t hide formalism—the professors couldn’t hide behind formalist values. And so in a way certainly America still hides from Native people, you know there’s not much of an awareness about Native life. Even on all the demographics they’ll throw up unemployment and it will be like, black unemployment, white unemployment, Hispanic unemployment, even Asian unemployment but we don’t even rate on the chart. So we’re pretty invisible. So being, focusing on the words as a way to communicate visually, that’s a way to cut through the resistance and the amnesia. But then of course most people can read, my lines are short, so they’ve already kind of digested—or I say entered their
psyche, before they can even deflect it. And that’s what you have to be, you have to be quick too because if you get too literal and too much about, you know passionate kind of discourse on massacres and slavery and all these, you know people would turn you off. So, you got to kind of do it quickly so that’s where my short text comes in, especially with the public art it’s, it’s just seen before they can stop it.

Here, Heap of Birds hits on two parts of art we have seen other artists discuss in this research: art as activism and art as visibility. Our conversation then moved onto a discussion of his piece titled *The Wheel*, which also touches the idea of art being useful in reclamation of both land and religion. *The Wheel* is a sculpture Heap of Birds created for the Denver Art Museum that references the Big Horn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming. At the time of this writing, *The Wheel* is currently off display as the museum works on renovations to the North building (now the Martin building) which holds the Native American Art collection at the museum. Heap of Birds is currently in consultation with the museum regarding the piece’s new placement once construction is complete, a space that he describes will be better for the sculpture with “more land around it so you kind of breathe a little bit more.”

The Cheyenne people, as well as about a dozen other nations, hold ownership of the Big Horn Wheel and conduct ceremonies there at various times throughout the year. In this piece, Heap of Birds ensured that the sculpture was set up on the star patterns present during the summer solstice equinox (its new placement will be more aligned with the stars). This holds an important reference to the Earth Renewal lodge, a ceremony that Heap of Birds is an active part of. In creating the sculpture piece, he created a space for
nations from the Front Range to Missouri River that have similar religions to use the site for their events. The significance of the land *The Wheel* sits on what was a fact not lost on Heap of Birds. Rather, it was a key piece in its creation.

I felt that was important since Colorado is a site for the Fort Laramie treaty where they took the Native land away and then they broke the treaty and moved us into Southern Colorado, then broke a treaty again and put us into the Medicine Lodge Treaty in Kansas, and then they broke that treaty and they put us into Western Oklahoma, then they had the Sand Creek Massacre and the Washita Massacre so all these things had been very, very devastating to the tribe but we still kind of, we still hold the first treaty which is the Fort Laramie treaty, and that area of Colorado, that area of the country from Nebraska to Kansas to Colorado to Wyoming, that’s our original agreement with the USA, and so having that 50 foot circle, the solstice wheel, claims that territory back […] Of course it also has a history of Colorado imbedded in the sculpture, and the racism, the violence, the mining, you know and other things about you know farming and reservation creation, and the gentrification of Native life, assimilation, and then eventually going back to actually being empowered to enter the ceremony and reinvent you know, your history, or readdress it in a sense of, it’s a circular awareness of history and your empower[ment], you’re in control of it now, that’s what my life-it’s an autobiographical I guess.

Creating these large visual texts sculpture pieces can create push back for Heap of Birds from people who he feels “don’t really deal with the reality” that is Indigenous history. He discusses how he made a piece about Abraham Lincoln, who as Gregg Deal
also discussed, signed off on the execution of 38 Dakota warriors during the Civil War in Mankato, MN. While he just created “a thing that was true,” he experienced push back from those who didn’t want to “blemish their mythical president” and referred to him as the new Charles Manson. While this narrative implies pushback from non-Native people, Heap of Birds has also experienced push back from Indigenous populations.

There’s some infighting with tribes too certainly they don’t all get along, so I’m in a very kind of touchy area when I try to represent tribal realities that aren’t my tribe, but I feel compelled to help other tribes you know, if they’re being dismissed-and that’s where my Native Host signs come in […] I find that Native America and Native Canada to be very absent in honoring Native tribes and their realities and so a lot of my work goes in to humbly address that problem. But then when you do that some people say that you’re not from my tribes, you can’t speak for us, you know whatever, and so I’ve got to be sensitive to that and maybe I step off and let someone else do something. One place has said we don’t want the tribe represented here, we don’t want to know about the tribe, this isn’t their place anymore, but you got to push ahead to make progress. And by in large it’s gone pretty well […] People are going to be resistant, but I think you know if you, if you kind of have enough grace you know, and you believe in beauty and empathy, I find you can really articulate anything really and that’s…it’s not like shouting at somebody and assaulting them-that’s another way, but I don’t do that, I can explain anything I do, and I give lectures too, but so now actually all the things I’ve done people are researching, like you’re researching this, I think we have people in Oklahoma from Oklahoma City newspaper that are doing a piece
about one that’s up in New York-on Custer’s massacre, so I’m surprised by the empathy that the work generates but I think it’s effective. And so the pushback, I guess it can be like a flash point but through that we get, we can deepen the understanding and we always do.

These ideas of visibility and representation within his artwork steered the conversation towards that of visual sovereignty, and his general thoughts on the topic. Particularly given that his Native Host signs are a nod to the homelands of displaced peoples and are meant to give a nod of sovereignty in asserting ownership through the signs (Smith 2017). I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Heap of Birds had done work with Jolene Rickard before, and as he puts it, “we kind of grew up together in the art world in New York.” While Heap of Birds finds the idea as a good place to start thinking about art theory, he notes that there must be critical thought around what Native art is in the first place.

HOB: The whole vein of what we call Native art is just horrible because, it’s catering to the white gaze. Like all the tourist art, is anticipating a white viewer looking at it. And so, there-have you seen that Art in America I did, the cover of Art in America?

LH: I think I did yes.

HOB: The red one, and it says, ‘Do Not Dance for Pay’?

LH: Yes.

HOB: And so that’s me calling out all the Native artists in America, like don’t-quit doing that, you’ve been doing it for, you know, decades if not over a decade-over hundreds of years-and where has it gotten us? You’ve been trying
to cater to their needs, there’s a mythical Indian person and you’ve been side stepping all the social responsibilities of your reality to make money. And to be liked, to be embraced by the colonial power, so you’ve got to stop doing that and you’ve got to represent yourself. And I guess you can call that visual sovereignty (laughs), but of course you just start with that. And if you’re going to call it that, what have you been so far? You know (laughs), it’s a new thing-what the heck you been doing so far man? You got to, you know, you got to really push back and deal with reality, which is a lot of really negative experiences Natives have in this country so, so yeah I’m a supporter of that and I live that, that existence.

Here, Heap of Birds openly calls for Indigenous artists that might choose to cater to a tourist, or white gaze, to start to really think about what they have been doing, and why they have been doing it. Instead of “dealing with reality” and their experience as contemporary Indigenous peoples, they chose to focus on making art that will sell to those who expect their art to look a certain way. Recalling back to Gregg Deal’s dialogue, he attributes this to making ‘safe’ art that will sell for profit in an economy that might not be so keen to narratives that are foreign, or uncomfortable, to them. Heap of Birds continues on to state that Indigenous people have been sequestered, which he attributes to a “dysfunction of culture and the violence of America against Native people.” He brings the conversation back to the notion of religion, and that all Native people have “ongoing, living historical engagements with religion and this earth.” It is from this notion that he understands what sovereignty is, including visual sovereignty.
Within that practice, you know for the Cheyenne people, you know there’s a
dance, we call it a dance, and within that there’s dancers, and within that there’s
instructors, and there-it’s like a complex prayer, but within all of that-all those
systems-what I’m going to get to is, there’s painting on your body. And this goes
through all the different tribes, I think you can even call it tattoo, which was
even tatau-it was actually from Samoa-but the marking on the skin, permanent
markings on the skin, all these things mark the body in a prayerful way and those
are never ever changed to be the artist’s sentiments so, those are tradition, they
can’t be alerted, there’s a doctrine, there’s an instructor that teaches you how to
do that and they’re done for prayerful experience, and that’s sovereignty. In terms
of visual sovereignty, that’s the only real sovereignty because that’s got nothing
to do with anybody else, nothing to do with anybody else-white people, even
talking to white people or, maybe expressing Native, you know, social justice. No,
all it is a primal experience of this prayer that you’re making for only your tribe,
only the dancer you’re working with or, and so I’ve been, I’ve done that, I’ve
danced that dance for 16 years, you know, I’ve been in that for 30 years overall,
and so-I’m an instructor-and so as an artist, I’m very aware of what people call
‘tradition’, but they always think it’s on canvas or some crazy thing (laughs) it’s
got nothing to do with canvas. You know all that stuff is what Jolene talks about
is-it’s very fitting and very important today-but that’s, that’s like a few steps
removed from what I’m discussing. That there are, you know visual practices that
are traditional but it’s on a body, and it’s in a, kind of a closed network of priests
and dancers and warriors and medicine women, and they’re very particular. But
again, it can’t be changed by how you feel. You can’t make it blue when it should be red, you can’t make it a bird when it should be a snake, you can’t change any of that to suit yourself. And so to me that’s the most sovereign thing is, it can’t be altered. It’s always been made that way, and it always will be made that way. But I think today when I talk about those kind of things, very few artists standing left are really equipped to conduct those ceremonies, you know they’re more like studio artists. And so when you talk about studio art, that’s a whole other world that’s more personal and flexible. But what I want to focus on, in this talk we’re doing now, is a traditional one. Not traditional imagery but the whole practice is traditional; you can’t alter any of it. And that’s what seems so important, to either conduct that or if you don’t have, to reformat. That’s the real challenge for all artists is to go back and, learn from the elders, to reformat that whole ceremonial life and rebuild it because that’s what saves you is that understanding, you know? [...] So how would they know, and if they don’t do it, why don’t they do it? Some of them better get busy you know.

Visual sovereignty, and sovereignty at all, becomes a conversation of tradition that continues on in a living present day through ceremony. He critiques what we know and call Native art and thinks beyond how “traditional” art in that vein is on canvas. He acknowledges that Rickard’s work is viable and important in today’s art world, but that there has to be critical engagement with how we even start to think about those concepts. As for art and representation, he follows the same questioning of what that means, and how to conceptualize it. When I told him I was interested in how art could be representative, he responded with the following:
And that’s where the problem kind of starts, is that, you know representation, where though? Like, representation should be in yourself. Like in my own body, sitting in this chair, like or, under the tree outside on this cloudy day […] or mentoring younger men. Not a picture of me, you know, and that can be, and that’s what everyone does in media, so you exist in media, but that’s not really that important. I mean it’s significant, but of course if you can’t self-represent you know, your own psyche and your own body and your own religion, then what good is a picture going to do? I mean I think a lot of things that happen, I was telling my wife about this today but, a lot of people that are on the fringe of Native art are in academia, which are actually a lot of people that are mixed blood people, that aren’t from communities. They think Native life exists in a head space, you know, it’s like an essay or a value or a painting or a video show or, you know, or a book they wrote you know, that Natives lived…Natives should exist as a headspace-a trip they take, or, and that’s not true. I mean Natives only exist in reality with each other, that’s where they really exist is in-when they camp together, when they come together to sing, or they have a Powwow, or they have a birthday party, or, that’s Native life. And the headspace thing is like, really bogus. It’s like it can be pushed around, shoved around, lied to, it can be a big fake thing. But try faking out the elders, you can’t do that (laughs), you can’t go there. And do some kind of cheap essay on them, they aren’t going to take it and they’re going to…so that’s, so representation to me, is, is me. Like sitting, like an Indian sitting here, or my son just left you know, he and I sitting together that’s Indians, it’s not like an essay about us, you know. But we’ve already
jumped over the fence and we’re kind of all lost on the other side of the world, and people think it all exists as some kind of, theory you know? And that’s something else, that’s not Native life.

This response circles back to his previous critique of what is called Native art, and the issues that arise when these artists are not dealing with their realities. If they cannot work through those issues, how are they to be representative of themselves? He further criticizes the idea that people in academia, Native or not, are never going to be able to represent Indigenous life in their essays and work because the sheer fact that Native life only exists in the interactions with each other. There is no theory or notion of headspace that is going to enlighten people about Indigenous lives and how to represent them. He goes on to discuss a narrative about an artist who was a photographer in South Australia tasked with completing a photo documentary about Aboriginal men in prison. In a method that reminds me of Sol Worth and Jon Adair’s *Navajo Film Themselves*, the artist gave the men in prison cameras to represent themselves. Heap of Birds uses this narrative to discuss how museums are not willing to give up that representational power.

So that’s reality, so if you want to know what it’s like to be an Aboriginal in prison, give the Aboriginal a camera. And that’s what museums never do, see? Museums always will do reporting on these people over there and put it over here. And so the solution is to open the door and let the Indians make the exhibit, or, you know make them-kind of let them control things. And so, and that’s what’s really, and if you talk about representation see, there you go. You’d have what you should have, is real people. Not a replica, or a report about them-a well
meaning report. You know you really need to have them dictate what it is, then they’ll represent themselves you know?

As I had already been thinking about the application of visual sovereignty in decolonization efforts within museum settings, a conversation I began having with Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand in the previous interview, I was glad to have Heap of Birds bring this conversation up. I discussed decolonial processes within museum spaces, and the ideas of hiring Indigenous consultants to assist in renovations or projects that are not kept around after the project is finished. Did he think visual sovereignty would be something viable to push decolonial efforts forward, and what would those look like when pushing these ideas forward in art, or museums? I was curious in what it would take to push representation forward within those efforts.

The more direct you can be with communities the better off you are, that’s my thought. Less theory, but more hands-on involvement—where it’s more of an exchange. You know as a curator, you know they would go learn from the community, and the community would actually add their engagement back to the museum and it’s more of a collaboration right, than an exhibit about the other. It’s kind of giving up some of the power, and decolonization that’s what it’s about, that they have all the power; they can colonize you, brutalize you, and then take your resources. So you know actually, or in the academy, you want to give your power—if you want to be, if have equity you have to give your power back to the community that you’re trying to represent, I guess. And share it, and then from that point you’re going to build something a lot better than another exhibit about somebody else you know? But it’s still kind of rare. It’s good you’re talking to
artists because we make our own exhibit, we make exhibits about ourselves, we
don’t, we don’t make art about somebody-something else-we make our own uh,
embodiment of what we believe. So it’s a good place to start with is artists.

To be even more explicit with how visual sovereignty could be understood within
museum spaces, he gets quite literal with architecture and the idea of circularity. He
relates circularity to a “sovereign, Indigenous forum globally and by in large the straight
line is a colonial format.” Life cycles, planets orbiting, economies, and rivers are all
things that represent the circularity that is inherent in our life; an idea that was also
brought up among other artists in this research.

The circularity is inherent in reality, and so that’s one simple thing that can
always be utilized in terms of sovereignty is to acknowledge the circularity of life,
rather than the linear life, or the square/rectangular life you know, that we’ve kind
of put all this grid all over the earth and all this land surveying, it’s a grid
formatted so it can be sold you know? But the rivers go in curves and nothing
goes in square, nothing runs that way (laughs) but we’ve imposed that, that net
over the world. So having the curvilinear and the circularity exposed as a template
is very sovereign to me, very Indigenous, and it’s an opposition to what-but all the
museums are squares, all the galleries are squares, like even within your structure
of your institution all universities are squares, so all the structures and kind of
anti-Indigenous, or anti-Earth. So trying to disrupt that would be useful.

The conversation with Heap of Birds wrapped up after this discussion and left me
with a different (and more challenging) way of understanding sovereignty than I would
have realized existed before. While this research started off as a way to critically think
about the topic of visual sovereignty, this particular conversation really highlighted the nuances of sovereignty and what that means to me, a non-Native researcher, who would have to think beyond a theory and a head space to truly understand the topic. His idea that starting with artists, people who tell their own stories, was at least reassuring that I was on the right path.

**Rose B. Simpson**

As a mixed media artist, Rose B. Simpson creates abstract pieces of art that occupy a multitude of pieces: ceramic sculptures, metals, fashion, performance, music, installation, writing, and even custom cars are outlets she explores in her work. For Simpson, the intention behind her artwork is “seeking out tools to use to heal the damages I have experienced as a human being of our post-modern and postcolonial era” (Simpson 2020). This means dealing with the realities that Indigenous peoples face, like stereotypes and objectification, in creating art that appeals to both the psychological and physical states of being. Alongside her work as an artist, she is an outspoken critic of the colonial nature of art theory and the museumification of cultures.

After I explained to Simpson my research, and what I understood visual sovereignty to be as it stood at the time, I asked to her to tell me what influenced her work and how she chose the narratives she presents visually. Like the other artist I spoke with, I was interested to see how she conceptualized the idea of visual sovereignty, and how she may engage with it. “I think that…. it’s interesting how I would say, ‘what is visual sovereignty?’ right? And I think for me, you know, I’m not a 100% sovereign because I’m still connected to my tribe.” For Simpson, navigating sovereignty, visually
or otherwise, has a direct effect on what narratives she presents to viewers. She goes on to further explain:

So it’s interesting when you talk about visual sovereignty because as someone whose connected to my tribe […] because you know if I make something that I’m not supposed to make, by way of culturally or religiously, spiritually…because Pueblo people we have survived genocide-our culture has survived genocide better than other cultures because we learned to not share. You know? To keep things secret. I’ve had people from my tribe be kicked out of the tribe, actually like ex-communicated, because they made something they weren’t supposed to, by way of too much cultural information. I’m a person who grew up in the Indian Market scene with a mom who was a famous Native artist, I got to see how so many Indigenous people approached cultural information, right? And how it was so…it’s really easy to put feathers on it and sell it, you know what I mean? So easy. We’re still objectifying and sort of commodifying our culture, you know? And I saw that as an option, but I also knew that as a Santa Clara Pueblo person […] that’s a non-option to a certain degree you know? And because of that, it pushed me to be I guess, more abstract. Or to venture further into how I can communicate very specific issues without being culturally exploitative. Or commodify my culture in these easy to swallow pills. And so that has been a blessing because I’ve had to really search to see what is behind that, what is behind that, and what is behind that? To the core of, what makes us all human? And what makes us all kind of Indigenous to this planet? That’s not super specifically Santa Clara, right? And in that way, I can communicate with the
larger humanity, right? Because we have a shared experience as people on this planet. And I think that has been a blessing because it’s allowed me to abstract my work in a way that if I were…if I had the option to put a feather on it, I might have taken it, you know? Because it’s easy and we like to do the easy thing in our lives. But because that wasn’t an option in the same way, it’s been a blessing. So I think, by way of visual sovereignty, you know that being, you know my intimate relationship with my community that I still choose to be a part of, that I’m still an active part of, I live here, my life is all about this place, and I’m not only juggling a conversation with the larger quote unquote Western art world, I’m having to juggle a conversation with my tribe as well, and my community. So, I don’t know if that’s necessarily sovereign but I think it creates an opportunity on both sides because of the abstraction that I tend to try and use with my work, it kind of frees me from some of the critical eye from the tribe, but it also deconstructs the stereotypes the western community have on Indigenous art. So, in a way, that builds its own language you know?

In being so closely tied to her community, Simpson asserts that she is not actually sovereign and that this directly affects what she will, or will not, present in her art. In doing so, she had to become more abstract with how to make her art to avoid the commodification of culture that both Gregg Deal and Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand discussed. It was easy to make something that would make a quick buck, but in creating something that was her own, she was creating her own language of communication through art that was safe from tribal scrutiny. In essence, she created a unique experience that was reflective of the shared humanity and common experience of being Indigenous.
to this planet (a similar view we saw earlier from Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand). Part of making that abstract work, and deconstructing western stereotypes of Indigenous art, means questioning the conversation that surrounds the notion of Native crafts.

I would say that my perspective…it’s really funny I did a seminar in craftivism when I was in graduate school at RISD, and a lot of people were looking at you know, craftivist artists who are knitting tea cozies around light poles and graffiti art and things like that. And I was thinking as a Native person craftivism doesn’t apply to Native people because we already have to participate in crafts if we want to be participating in our ceremonies and stuff because we, simply for the fact that we can’t buy our stuff at Walmart, you know what I mean? And so, we already carry crafts in us. So for an Indigenous perspective, craftivism would be something like Marcus Amerman who is beading Janet Jackson on the cover of Rolling Stone, you know what I mean? That would be craftivism in an Indigenous perspective. Or Melissa Cody who is weaving non-traditional Navajo designs right? That would be craftivism from a Native perspective. And it doesn’t necessarily fit in the craftivism conversation outside of the Indigenous art world.

You know what I mean?

What the Western art world calls Native crafts, Simpson corrects as inherent in the use of ceremony and alludes to the idea that what we know as art has always been a part of traditional aspects of culture that maintain today. Hock Aye E Vi Edgar Heap of Bird’s position on the traditional use of art is recalled here, as well as the idea that Gregg Deal discusses for how art practice continues today express different ideas. Simpson has
devoted a lot of time to trying to define how the outside world understands Indigenous aesthetics, an effort sparked by her time at the Rhode Island School of Design.

I did my master’s at RISD in ceramics right? And some of the conversations I had there were just obnoxious you know? I didn’t have…I fully understand the amount of, unconscious[ness] around Indigenous peoples, I was like ‘what? You’ve got to be kidding me’ you know? People are incredibly racist and incredibly unconscious and so I decided…our thesis requirement was six pages (laughs), so then I wrote like 80 because my professors had to read it (laughs), and I was like, ‘no you’re going to sit down and read this’ (laughs). I don’t know if they all did but my thesis is in the RISD library next to you know Kara Walker and all other people at RISD so I felt it wasn’t just ‘oh I had to meet a requirement’ it was, ‘no you are changing things.’ And because of who you are and the space you have something very important to say. What I was frustrated by when I went to school at RISD was that I was looking for text that defined or redefined Indigenous aesthetics, that wasn’t from an anthropological perspective, and so I ended up reading Vizenor, I read Deloria, I read Mithlo. I tried to find the thing that I was trying to say. And it was me, I was trying so bad to say ‘no, this is not what it’s about.’ What you think Indigenous art and aesthetics is about is wrong and it’s because of your approach and theory. And I studied relational aesthetics and I took a class with this teacher Yuriko Saito who wrote this book *Aesthetics of the Everyday* and in her seminar, I realized that Indigenous aesthetics is so much based on a lifeway rather than visual sort of depictions of being. It’s actually a mannerism, and so I tried to write my whole thesis around
not what you do, but how you do it. And the only references that I could find were actually in Japanese aesthetics and relational aesthetics like Nicolas Bourriaud. I was pretty frustrated, so I came back to New Mexico and I went back and got my second master’s degree in creative non-fiction, very specifically to write the text that I didn’t have in Indigenous aesthetics for scholarly use. I co-taught a seminar with my brother who was a PhD in Puebloan studies or something like that, and we taught Indigenous aesthetics as kind of a think tank to see what the students would come up with and we read Foucault, we read you know all the Western stuff, and then I put Yuriko Saito and Nicolas Bourriaud, and within this think tank of students I realized you can’t write Indigenous aesthetics in the language of the colonizer. We’re already stunted when we even begin this conversation because we’re using the English language, and English and western references.

Simpson ended up using her thesis as an extended artist statement intended to be used as a tool to both redefine and reclaim Indigenous aesthetics. She, like Hock Aye E Vi Edgar Heap of Birds discusses, had to use her art to educate those that were in charge of educating her. Like the other artists I spoke with in this research, she attributes that back to the lack of context surrounding both historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples. This lack of context lends to the additional burden of having to be the point of contact for further education on Indigenous related topics, a point we saw Melanie Yazzie discuss earlier. In addition to being stunted in conversation that deals with the language of the colonizer, the artists in this research all face the added hurdle of
making the reception of their art digestible to the western art world using practices and theories they have to develop.

As the conversation rounded back to ideas of sovereignty, Simpson talked about the fact that a lot of Indigenous artists are not speaking about it (tribally, politically, visually) because some of them are removed from their tribes in one way or another. She notes how it would be easier for her to leave her reservation and live in places like San Francisco or Albuquerque as she already frequents those places for work. However, because she remains in her community the conversations she has about art and aesthetics are informed by her lived experience in the Pueblo. What she is able to share, or not, is all informed by the fact that she has grown up and lived in that community her whole life, “So because I’ve lived and grew up at Santa Clara I have cultural knowledge because of experience that I could share that could get me in trouble…and if I did share that stuff I would lose something that I love dearly because it’s all I know.” What she is able to share she is able to push the envelope with, which Simpson attributes to how she is physically perceived by non-Indigenous people.

I think you know just to be real, I’m white too, you know what I mean? I have white passing privilege which gets me into situations that other Native people may not have just because of the selection I’ve had in the world. So because of my white passing privilege, I’ve kind of had access in ways that I don’t think is across the board. You know what I mean? And I feel there’s a lot of responsibility in that. And that because I have…when I speak, people will listen almost because of the way I look, you know what I mean? And I think that if I can, I should. If I can push boundaries and make people uncomfortable and say the things that are
hard to hear, I should. If my life isn’t in… I realize that I can say more than my mom did, or has in her life, and I can say more than my grandmother and great-grandmother because my life is less threatened. And that’s an actual fact, right? That there’s internalized genocide that says you can’t say what you need to say because if you do you will be killed. And because I’m further away from that fear of speaking up, then I have to say all the things that my five, six generations before me couldn’t.

One particular aspect of Indigenous art and aesthetics that Simpson is outspoken about, is the power that Indigenous peoples and artists give museums, and the patriarchy that exists within them. Instead of focusing on “our kind of victimry to western culture, and aesthetic and art/art world,” she would rather explore the ways in which their power is fueling their institutions. In a recent exhibition at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in New Mexico, Simpson was asked to submit a piece of written literature for the exhibit’s catalogue. She asked her brother to write it on her behalf and specifically asked him to write about colonialism in museums and the “museumification of culture.” The essay, however, was not met without pushback. The museum’s director called the essay “horrific” and B. Simpson had to have what she described as a “long conversation with them to get them to let that essay slide because they didn’t want to do it, and I had to say, ‘I told him to write that’.”

I was like, what else is a museum for other than a platform to critique museums? Everybody should be looking at ourselves, no matter what we do, we should look at ourselves, and how we’re…the things we do come from, why, and see if we can evolve you know? And be held accountable. And maybe just because something
is the way it is doesn’t mean it has to be that way, or was always a good thing you know?

Part of her experience growing up on the reservation was that she learned to live off the land, without money or electricity, “we still know…we still have our seeds, we still have our animal husbandry practices, we know how to hunt, and better yet, we know how to pray and make it rain.” Those practices all became engrained in what Simpson describes as a neuropathway in her head, where she knows she can always go back to that. When she left RISD and those around her were concerned with becoming famous artists, she went back home to revisit those practices. She wanted to remember what was important to her, so that “when I go out there, I can say the things I need to say and I won’t have anything to lose.” As she says, she is set with just those practices, and is not reliant on the outside world, including museums, to give her anything. Rather, museums are a tool she can use rather than one she needs to rely on.

So in the end you know who I care about, who I’m going to let edit me, and who I’m going to be concerned about what they think about my work, is not going to be buyers, it’s not going to be galleries, it’s not going to be museums, it’s not going to be the western world, it’s not going to be any of that—it’s going to be my tribe because in the end, that’s where the most power in my foundation is in my life. And that might be a form of sovereignty, is to be like ’I don’t need you!’ I just don’t. I’m grateful you’re there and I see the opportunity and I see the privilege and I see the importance of getting into those places and saying what needs to be said, but there is a difference between I see this as a tool that I can use, and I need this to survive. And I think…thinking “I need this to survive” is
still giving away all of our power and that’s still colonial. That’s still the genocidal and colonial perspective of that all.

While she does see museums as a space to have her voice heard, it can sometimes be stifled due to the patriarchy she sees as alive and well within those spaces. She describes a male friend who is a person of color but has the same white passing privilege that she discussed earlier in our conversation. She discusses the opportunities he receives because of that, as well as his gender, and finds it “really interesting that he’s become a voice for missing and murdered Indigenous women” through his artwork. “I find it interesting that the male voice is still safer, even if it’s an Indigenous voice it’s still, there’s a lot of nights where men are um, definitely put ahead of women still.” She does see some positive experiences happening to combat that issue, such as the Sovereign Voices exhibition at the Denver Art Museum (where she was the only female artist), and the Hearts of our People show at the Minneapolis Institute of Art that strictly featured Indigenous women artists.

Simpson also discusses that she has started to be asked to participate in shows that are not strictly about her identity as a Native woman. Places like the Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, Gat Shainman gallery in New York, the Ford Foundation Gallery, and the Campden Museum of Art are all upcoming exhibition spaces for B. Simpson that are not simply focused on contemporary art and nothing to do with her identity. However, being sought out for exhibition due to her background is still a common occurrence for her, “but generally it is because I’m Native, you know? And I think that you know, pros and cons. Being Native’s an honest conversation, but I still feel…it’s still ghettoized you know?” In her experience exhibiting in the Sovereign
Voices exhibition, she sat on a panel with her fellow artists which included Kent Monkman, Jeffry Gibson, and Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo) where she described that there was an entire aspect of identity not being talked about.

All of a sudden, I look around the panel and I was like, there’s a big elephant in this room that nobody’s talking about. And it was that everyone was queer, right? Nobody’s talking about this, and this is actually a really interesting subject you know? And then Kent had then brought it up because a lot of Kent’s work… Kent’s work is about being gay, it’s very much about his identity, right?

The narrative had been focused on their Native identities rather than other, just as influential, parts of their identity that are influential to both their work as an artist and their lived experiences. That focus on strictly Indigenous identity as artists, and the lack of context that surrounds that identity, can cause an additional stressor when preparing for an exhibition, “when I’m getting ready for a show opening at say the Wheelwright museum or my gallery in Santa Fe, I prep myself psychologically for the offensive comments that I hear all throughout the evening.” Just as she is being asked to show in spaces that are not focused on her identity, Simpson ended our discussion with a positive narrative of how she is seeing a shift in that necessity.

I think that, I’m seeing some of us kind of breaking out of those [boxes] more and more and I think that that’s good […] I just recently had an opening in San Francisco, and it was a photo show so it was you know, a lot of pressure, and I was prepping myself and…like I did this whole psychological prepping to do this, and I go down there and I didn’t hear one like, obnoxious comment or offensive comment the whole night. And then I was really… it caught me really really off
guard because I’m so used to it but I realized that the people who went to that opening were going to see my work because they were interested in my work and my cultural affiliation was a non-issue. And so nobody was like, ‘oh let’s go to this opening and go poke an Indian’ you know, there was none of that. I had really interesting questions and people were really interested in my work and in aesthetic ways and in political ways, and social commentary ways and not so much this really tokenizing thing that I’m so used to. And so I’m super excited about that and I hope that more Native artists get to experience that because it changes your neuropathways of what’s possible, and the problem is now that I’ve experienced that I’ll go back to my art openings in Santa Fe and my patience for what I hear is going to be zilch you know (laughs), because I realize that we’re trained to put up with a lot of this because that’s what you know right? And you just keep hearing it and that’s normal but I want Native people to know that’s not normal and that’s not okay, and you don’t have to engage in conversations like that.

From my discussion with Simpson it became clear that she is starting to see some positive trends in the art world as far as reception and understanding of her identity as an artist, but there is still a long way to go. Perhaps a small, but significant start, is understanding that identity politics in Indigenous aesthetics is not a top priority when considering critique and reception. Our conversation actually began with a discussion over cultural affiliation, and how she would like to be introduced.

Any other…a lot of people will introduce me by my tribe, and I sometimes think that’s not necessarily the most important thing about me. You know what I
mean? [...] So yeah, you know ‘Santa Clara Pueblo Artist’ and I’m like well yeah, but (laughs) you know? Do you introduce Nick Cave as, ‘An African American artist Nick Cave?’ You know what I mean, no! (laughs) You know people say that down the line, it’s not the first thing people know.

While it is clear that her cultural identity is an influence on her life, her work, and her narratives, that is not unlike any other artist. Simpson is an educated, vocal, and foresward thinking mother and artist who has valuable input to contribute to a complex and important area of discussion in the art world.
Chapter Six: Central Themes

From the artist’s dialogues presented in the last chapter, there are several themes that arise from their visual narratives and art practices. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss each theme that arose during the artist’s dialogues including the functionality of their art, factors that inhibit their art and/or art reception, and their opinions on sovereignty (visually or otherwise) and its role within decolonization with each theme further supported by relevant subthemes. I continue to pull through the ideas presented within the artist narratives within this chapter, in order to show how I generated the theme and used their dialogues to justify the definition of these themes. Each theme builds on the other to generate an understanding of visual sovereignty, the art/artifact divide, Indigenous aesthetics, and decolonial praxis as informed by the artist’s narratives. These ideas, as shaped by the artists narratives, will be further discussed in following chapter, thematic discussion.

Theme #1: Functionality of Art

In designing this research, I was interested in exploring the social, cultural, and/or political themes that may arise within contemporary Native American art, and whether or not those narratives functioned within a framework of visual sovereignty. I aimed to consider how Indigenous art and aesthetics produced by the participants in this research
embody both communicative and educational outlets on the historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples. I wanted to further explore how their art defied Western stereotypes of “traditional” or “craft” based on definitions of what constitutes the genre of Native American art through discussing the variety of mediums they employ and the narratives they choose to present. Through exploring the narratives and mediums of the art and art practices of the participants of this research, I aim to engage in a discussion of how visual sovereignty can serve to disrupt the art/artifact distinction held within museum spaces, and how to understand the necessity of this disruption within decolonizing practices framed by critical museology.

In discussing the visual narratives the artists choose to integrate into their pieces, each artist expressed how their life experiences and identities shaped the themes they present in their art works. Yazzie discusses how her art is always influenced by her identity as a contemporary Navajo woman, drawing from her past as well as daily experiences. She generates pieces that touch on she sees herself and how other people see themselves in order to generate other ways of thinking about topics and imagery that are seemingly familiar. This extends into her role as an educator, where she encourages students or people in her workshops to really think about the topics they choose to engage with to understand the history behind anything they are interested in. In doing so, she challenges how people have understood things in the past, and what their art process will do to change how they think about various topics and issues in the future. Yazzie also incorporates her journey with diabetes into some of her pieces, represented by numerical narratives based on her own blood sugar levels and how they express her daily experiences with the disease.
Heap of Birds conceptualizes his work in a similar manner to Yazzie, in that his own personal experiences and life occurrences influence what he chooses to speak on. He also presents narratives through his work that he is empathetic towards, or historical events that he has researched before. In his dialogue he discussed his piece *The Wheel*, which holds function within ceremony for a large number of Indigenous peoples, functions further as an acknowledgement of the sacred land the piece sits on while working to address Colorado’s history regarding Indigenous peoples. This will be discussed further in this section as I move into how Indigenous art functions in asserting visibility and in an educational capacity.

Bad Hand discusses how she generally gravitates towards narratives surrounding historical and contemporary realities, specifically focusing on Native youth and issues that face Native women such as missing and murdered Indigenous women; an issue Bad Hand said she finds especially important to bring awareness to. Bad Hand engages in a variety of mediums as an artist, including comic books, watercolor, digital paintings, fine art, murals, scratchboard, and painting. These outlets, and her focus on Indigenous youth, are productive in teaching “starter knowledge and more traditional lessons” within Native communities. Simpson’s discussion of her art based narratives revolved around the topics of Indigenous aesthetics and tribal sovereignty, while working to communicate and connect the shared experience of humanity. She tends to create her pieces as more abstract visuals in order to avoid sharing too much cultural information, while working to “reclaim and redefine” the Indigenous aesthetic, perspective, and definition.

I did not specifically ask Deal about how he personally chooses his narratives for pieces, as I failed to ask him during the interview. He did however discuss the concept of
art as medicine, and that its creation can generate reconciliation and work towards understanding identity, existence, and trauma. As Deal asserts, this process is not any different than artists from any other background, who mine from the same concepts in order to create their narratives. He notes how when it comes to Indigenous art, their narratives can be stark for non-Native peoples who are not familiar with the histories and traumas of Indigenous peoples within the United States. Non-Native peoples then have difficulty in traversing those subjects, who may not wish to engage in the assimilative and genocidal history of the United States’ policies toward Indigenous peoples. He also presents the idea of art as activism, as a means to insert Indigenous voices into the larger public to raise awareness and understanding of a variety of issues; a concept he notes is not a new practice. In this sense, activism and awareness go hand in hand with visibility while offering an understanding of issues from Indigenous perspectives and voices.

It is important to foreground these narratives when moving into a discussion over how the artists within this research create pieces that fall outside Western definitions of Indigenous art. In considering how these artists redefine Indigenous aesthetics, their dialogues and visual narratives will inform how I approach the need to reassess the art/artifact divide within the lens of critical museology in the discussion of this theme. The next part of this theme will present the subthemes found within the artist’s dialogues of how their art is conceptualized in how each artists uses their art and profession in a way that functions as an educational and communicative outlet for bringing about cultural visibility—an important connection to Deal’s point of how art can produce awareness.
Art as Educational and Communicative

Yazzie’s art practices that revolve around an exploration of herself and her own history extend into her role as a Professor of Art Practices at the University of Colorado Boulder, as well as her participation in artist talks, workshops, and other various events. These practices allow her to work with people individually as well as with groups to tell their stories, while sharing her own. She discusses how as a Native Artist in Residence at the Denver Art Museum she was able to be in a space that presented contemporary Indigeneity publicly in a way that broke down stereotypes through the ability to interact with viewers while in her workspace. In her time there she discussed how she created educational videos to be distributed to teachers via online platforms that would provide some background on both her work, and Indigenous artists and art at large. The videos were a means to engage with the past while making a connection to the present, to highlight the continual and contemporary existence of Indigenous peoples. In working to bring contemporary Indigenous visibility while shedding light on the past, Yazzie sees this work as important to both Native and non-Native peoples, “it’s for everyone.” For non-Native people, this work can curb assumptions they may have about Indigenous realities and Indigenous art. Within Indigenous communities, however, Yazzie sees this work as important because of their colonization through the hands of the United States government. As she puts it, “we ourselves need to be learning our history.” Visibility to Indigenous histories and realities is a topic that Bad Hand navigates further in her work.

As an artist, a former community liaison at Jefferson County Public Schools, Chief Creative Director of áyA Studios, and co-producer of Indigenous PopX (now áyA Con) Bad Hand uses her platform to educate while bringing visibility to Indigenous
peoples; a visibility that is important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Representation is particularly important for Indigenous youth, who she notes need more representation beyond Disney stereotypes to prevent the disconnect that can happen when they may understand their Indigenous identification but do not look like the images and stereotypes put forward in popular culture. It is further important to present narratives that supplement the information on Indigenous peoples left out of United States history books, information that is important for educators, elders, Native, and non-Native peoples alike. This is a big reason why she keeps Indigenous PopX (áyA Con) as something open to the public and does not restrict vendors to Indigenous peoples only; doing so is not productive to getting Indigenous perspectives to a broader audience and negates the purpose of art as a communicative and educational outlet. Using art as that connection from the past to the present, and showing continuity, is an important way for Indigenous youth to connect to their contemporary Indigenous identities and sees her comic books as one way to work to bridge that gap. Having accurate representations regarding Indigeneity, and representation from Indigenous peoples is an important part of identity building (Fryberg 2008). The role museums have in this representation and identity building are certainly a point of consideration when we think about visual sovereignty’s role in critical museology.

Heap of Birds works to bring visibility, while educating on historical instances, within his work. In some of his pieces he employs the use of image and text to visually communicate, a process that began while he was in graduate school to communicate with his formalist-oriented professors. His pieces that are based on the use of image and text employ short words and phrases to “enter their psyche” before viewers are even aware of
what they are reading about. This is important in these works, because he notes that discourse on topics such as massacres and slavery turn people away from the art and the artists, in a similar vein to Deal’s notion that non-Indigenous peoples have difficulties with these subjects. Heap of Birds notes that through empathy it is possible to articulate these topics in ways that people will absorb them, even if they are resistant at first. He also participates in lectures that aim to generate a similar conversation as his art pieces, where even through pushback he is able to generate a deeper understanding of Indigenous histories and contemporary realities.

Simpson uses her platform as a means to redefine the idea of Indigenous aesthetics through the creation of academic literature on the topic, due to her frustration at the lack of texts outside of anthropology that defined her perspective and process. Relational aesthetics was the closest theory she could find, which is the reason this idea became a partial theoretical framework for this research. Upon completing her master’s in ceramics at RISD, she went back to New Mexico to get a second master’s degree at the Institute of American Indian Art in creative non-fiction “very specifically to write the text that I didn’t have in Indigenous aesthetics for scholarly use.” Part of writing that text included holding a seminar with students with her brother Dr. Porter Swentzell, to hold a think tank on Indigenous aesthetics. During this process, she realized the barrier she faced in attempting to write on the topic in English using Western references, “you can’t write about Indigenous aesthetics in the language of the colonizer.” She ended up working to create a manuscript as an extended artist statement that not only deconstructed her own process in what she was doing, but something that would provide a more
appropriate description of her Indigenous perspective while more clearly defining an Indigenous aesthetic.

**Art as Visibility**

It is clear that the idea of art as educational and communicative bleeds into the notion of art as visibility of contemporary Indigenous existence and historical pasts. Each artist within this research touches on the issue of visibility, and the necessity of their representation within dominant culture society in order to raise awareness on Indigenous specific issues that stem from their pasts and continued colonial existence. The visibility that accompanies the function of education and communication within the art and art practices of those within this research contribute to identity and identity building, cultural continuity, activism, human rights, and social justice. Visibility can further be used in ways that reclaim land, generate critique, and question misconceptions held by non-Natives regarding Native American peoples.

Heap of Birds in particular discusses how he uses his series *Native Hosts* as a means to bring visibility to the original stewards of the land on which the signs sit, as he finds that Native America and Native Canada are insufficient in addressing Native nations and realities. Further, his piece *The Wheel* functions beyond its ceremonial purpose to raise awareness to the state of Colorado’s history that non-Native Coloradans might not have a context of, including “the racism, the violence, the mining, you know other things about you know farming and reservation creation, and the gentrification of Native life, assimilation.” Its placement on the land is a recognition of the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Ute Nations and peoples traditional homelands, as well as Colorado’s role.
in the Fort Laramie Treaty that removed Native peoples and revoked Native lands in 1868. He explains that the Cheyenne still hold the Fort Laramie Treaty as their original agreement with the United States, which also functions as a visible assertion of land reclamation. These two series that Heap of Birds describes here diversify the function of his art beyond the Western focus of aesthetics and beauty, while simultaneously presenting works that are embedded educational tools that hold duality in functions for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

In addition to her academic work, Simpson uses her Indigenous identity to use her voice to bring awareness and visibility. As a woman of mixed ancestry, she discusses that her white identity is also an important factor in allowing her to say what she wants to say and be heard. She describes this as a responsibility and a privilege that she can use to push boundaries that may make people uncomfortable, because of the very fact that historically and presently this is not an experience that all Indigenous people had or will have. Within her position as an artist, and her role as an academic, she specifically aims to address the power Indigenous peoples give to museums and their position to Western culture and aesthetics. She is critical of the colonial nature of both museums and art theory, the museumification of cultures, patriarchy within institutional spaces, and the stereotypical notions of Native American art, which will be discussed further in the next themes highlighted in this research.

Deal’s “unapologetically Native” pieces assert the contemporary existence of Indigenous peoples in society and bring visibility to their voices. Deal engages in a variety of mediums that facilitate in this, with his large-scale murals and performance pieces being some of the most publicly visible to Native and non-Native peoples alike.
These assertions of visibility through representation are important because this land is Indigenous land, much like Heap of Birds acknowledges in his work. Like Simpson, Deal is also critical of the Western art world and Institutional spaces that continue to relegate culture from a colonial lens into cultures that can be consumed and commodified. He is critical regarding the lack of context Western art buyers have of contemporary Indigenous art, something he notes does not have a definition, that stifles Indigenous artists in that the Western art world does not recognize them as participants as equals alongside them. The next theme will go deeper into Deal’s dialogue regarding the Western art world and Indigenous artists, but it is important to highlight these critical ideas here as a part of Deal’s work as an artist and how he integrates this into his work. In his performance piece *The Last American Indian on Earth* for example, Deal dresses in the “flesh-and-blood version of a stereotype” where he uses himself as “an instrument of awareness, exploring questions of Indigenous identity and America’s problematic and often inept relationship with her nation’s First Peoples” (Deal 2020). Not only is he confronting public misconceptions about Indigeneity, he is presenting a counternarrative to Western art’s expectations to what Indigenous art looks like through this very public assertion of Indigenous visibility.

Deal’s engagement with defying the stereotypical ideas of what the Western art world may expect Indigenous art to look like by way of craft or “traditional” is seen in the works of the other artists in this research as well. Each artist utilizes a range of artistic mediums, including but not limited to sculpture, screen printing, comic books, digital outlets, performance pieces, conceptual paintings, murals, canvas style art, ceramics, mixed media, jewelry and surface design, installation pieces, watercolor, scratchboard,
music, fashion, writing, and metal working. These diverse presentations of their artwork contribute to a conversation of Indigenous aesthetics, while their narratives and conceptualizations support why Indigenous aesthetics is a more appropriate framework for receiving Indigenous art. This also speaks to a broader discussion about visual sovereignty and critical museology, which will be explored within the discussion of findings in the conclusion.

**Theme #2: Factors that Inhibit Indigenous Artists and Art Reception**

I have so far discussed how the aesthetics produced by the artists in this research encompasses a diverse range of mediums and narratives, that inform artistic communicative and educational practices, encompassing historical pasts as well as contemporary realities. Their diverse art and art practices inform a conversation regarding Indigenous aesthetics that can be used to diversify definitions of Native American art outside of Western stereotypes and categories of “traditional” or “craft.” I understand that in creating work that is influenced and shaped by their personal experiences, that this is a practice of visual sovereignty through the creation of pieces that represent their own diverse modes of self-expression. While each of the artists in this research have been successful in their own right, they all expressed a variety of issues that have affected their experiences as artists who are Indigenous, and the reception of their art, within the Western art world and beyond. This theme explores the inhibitions the artists in this research presented that affect their work as artists and the reception of their artwork. In doing so, I aim to inform a discussion regarding how visual sovereignty within contemporary Indigenous art and art practices can inform reflexivity during decolonizing
practices of representation, as well as practices of critical pedagogy within exhibition and collection spaces as framed by critical museology.

**Lack of Context**

At the close of the last theme, Deal touched on the lack of context surrounding Indigenous histories, experiences, and contemporary realities. This was an issue that came up every other artist’s narratives as something that inevitably affects how their art, art practices, or identities are perceived through a Western lens. Deal also discussed how contemporary Indigenous art lacks any sort of definition, and how the inability to contextualize Indigenous existence affects the reception of Indigenous art. In turn, Native art becomes “relegated to a trope, or to a stereotype.”

Yazzie presents how these inaccurate understandings of Indigenous art come to be solidified within institutional spaces through monetary donations from those who may want their collection within a museum. A lack of consciousness surrounding Indigenous peoples is what led Simpson to write a thesis that far exceeded her required limit so that her professors would understand her frustration with the lack of texts that defined her aesthetic; the same reason she continued on to work on a text regarding Indigenous aesthetics while obtaining her second master’s degree. A lack of context regarding Native Americans is what fueled Heap of Bird’s use of image text within graduate school and beyond to move beyond formalist values while shedding visibility on Indigenous peoples and histories. A lack of Indigenous context and visibility regarding Indigeneity is something that certainly causes issue beyond the art world, and a topic I want to delve
into a little further before continuing on with how this factor inhibits Indigenous art specifically, as this was a point brought up in dialogue by a couple of participants.

An inability to contextualize Indigenous histories, experiences, or contemporary existence creates stereotypes that are enacted against Indigenous peoples, artists or otherwise. Bad Hand describes how a lack of Indigenous histories being presented in formal education is an issue regarding Native representation to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth and peoples that reinforces inaccurate tropes and stereotypes. In Bad Hand’s dialogue we see her describe three instances in which she experienced these misrepresentations play out before her eyes: the little girl who was under the impression that Indigenous peoples are “extinct,” the teacher who dressed up in Party City gear to teach about American Indian history, and her experience with having Native music or Native blankets used to make her appear “more Native” during interviews. In all of these instances the ideas of Native cultures as “romanticized or in the past” affected the ways in which non-Native peoples were understanding and interacting with Indigeneity. She saw how these stereotypes and tropes affected her students, describing that there were “two sides” to her students, the side they brought to school and the side they had at home. The role of museums as platforms for representation and contextualization of Native Americans, particularly for Indigenous youth, is an important point of consideration during the discussion of this theme.

The trope of Indigenous peoples being extinct puts Yazzie in a position of being commonly misidentified:

in public sometimes people think I’m Latina, that I don’t speak English, and that’s always interesting. That just because I’m the way I look in different situations
people assume when I’m somewhere that I might be the janitor, or somebody serving at a restaurant, and so I feel like I’m constantly in that situation of educating people about who I am.

When she lived in Mexico, she was advised by the family she lived with that she should not identify as an Indigenous person, that it was a “bad” thing to do. I regrettably did not ask her to elaborate more on why this held a negative association, but Yazzie did say that she identified herself as Indigenous anyway because she is proud of her heritage. In her road to becoming a successful artist, Yazzie describes that it was her willingness and enthusiasm to participate and accept invitations to exhibit that got her to where she is. Part of that was influenced by overcoming the stereotypes that surround Native American peoples that she would hear at various events she would attend, including stories surrounding the consumption of alcohol. The role museums have within visibility through representation and identity building are certainly a point of consideration when we think about visual sovereignty’s role in critical museology.

**Classification of Indigenous Art**

An overall lack of context regarding Indigenous peoples and histories bleeds into the next factor that inhibits the artists within this research, Western and Eurocentric expectations of their art, which relegates Indigenous art down to historized and romanticized stereotypes and tropes of what Indigenous art should look like. Within Yazzie’s narrative we see the issue of her work with diabetic numbers receiving pushback for “not being a piece of Native art.” While diabetes is certainly a disease many humans cope with, it is also very much a part of Indigenous experiences. Native Americans have a greater chance of becoming diabetic than any other group in the United
States and are twice as likely as white people to have diabetes (Center for Disease Control 2017). To assert that the numerical narratives on her experience with her health is not a “Native” piece of art, is an unfounded assumption based off a lack of knowledge regarding these statistics and Western understandings of Indigenous aesthetics. Further, because these narratives fall outside of the realm of what a non-Native person considers Native art to look like, those who argue with her about it are seemingly placing less value on those pieces.

Deal discusses the position of Indigenous artists to either comply with what non-Indigenous peoples expect from Native American art or be sidelined by the “Western art machine.” He notes that finding success is sometimes a process of omitting identity, or through being stifled as artists who are subject to a market driven by Western ideals where they need to make a living in order to survive and continue on in their profession. Creating pieces of Indigenous art that are digestible to a Western gaze is an issue that came up among each of the artists during their interviews and relates to the next idea of commodification and craftivism as discussed by the participants of this research.

Commodification and Craftivism

Yazzie sees these Western expectations of Indigenous art arise within Indigenous communities whose idea of Native art is something that “has to be a warrior on a horse.” Bad Hand further touched on this issue as well in her discussion of how Indigenous artists may fall into this practice in Indigenizing characters found in popular culture by way of putting feathers or war bonnets onto them, something she associates with one stereotyping their self. Having grown up in the Indian Market scene in Santa Fe,
New Mexico with a mother who is a famous Native artist, Simpson saw how easy it was to “put feathers on it and sell it […] we’re still objectifying and soft of commodifying our culture, you know?” (Simpson’s mother is Roxanne Swentzell). Heap of Birds’ piece entitled *Do Not Dance For Pay* was created to “call out all the Native artists in America.” He described how tourist art created by these artists is expecting a white audience, and that they need to stop trying to cater to them and instead focus on the social responsibilities they have as artists. Deal describes the idea of tourist art as what leads to talented Indigenous artists in Santa Fe “painting cowboys and Indians because they recognize that their market is going to be Western buyers who have a western perception.” This is problematic, because in appealing to non-Native peoples Deal recognizes that a non-Native person is in the position of deciding the value of his work. Even if the person judging the value of their work is Indigenous, Deal notes that they are generally approaching that decision through Western ways of knowing. Western expectations of Indigenous art resonates with a conversation of Native craft, which Simpson is critical of.

In her opinion, the conversation of craftivism does not even apply to Indigenous peoples because the definitions and ideas of Western craft and Native craft are vastly different, in that Indigenous craft is something carried with Native peoples due to the necessity of participating in craft to participate in ceremonies. For her, Indigenous crafts are represented by people like Marcus Amerman (“who is beading Janet Jackson on the cover of Rolling Stone”) and Melissa Cody (“who is weaving non-traditional Navajo designs”), whose works do not necessary fit into the Western conversation of craftivism. Heap of Birds also commented on what “people call ‘tradition’” but it is not an idea or
concept found on a canvas. Tradition as Heap of Birds described it to me is beyond that of anything found in the realm of studio art and traditional imagery, it is “on a body, it’s in a kind of close network of priests and dancers and warriors and medicine women, and they’re very particular [...] it can’t be changed by how you feel.” Studio art is more flexible he says, but if one is going to have a conversation about tradition and artists there needs to be a clear distinction of what that word actually represents and defines. Heap of Bird’s equates this description of ceremony and tradition as an important in his understanding of what sovereignty and visual sovereignty encompass, which will be discussed further when the nuances of sovereignty are presented in the conclusion.

### Institutional Push Back and Colonialism

Having no context of Indigenous peoples, or their art, has caused these artists to experience pushback on their art or their everyday experiences, institutionally or otherwise. Within Yazzie’s dialogue, we saw her discuss how she has experienced negativity from Indigenous peoples themselves regarding her work; an experience she finds fueled by ongoing colonialism. In the last theme, I presented how Yazzie creates pieces of work that are meant for everyone but that it is important that Native people themselves need to be learning their histories due to the ongoing colonization at play among Indigenous communities. She takes issue with Indigenous men who call her a feminist, reminding them they are in a matrilineal society and that their colonization has led them to be trained in a way that does not respect voice of the women. The boarding schools, she describes, derailed the teachings of traditions (“they beat it out of us”) that makes her outspoken position as a Diné woman have people view her as “out of
the box.” Within her work as an artist, she equates colonization with the reason that many Native people understand art to be a “warrior on a horse”; an idea sparking from romanticized colonial projects of historicization that place Indigenous peoples in the past. It is also important to consider the role of colonial patriarchy, as discussed in the last theme, as a project that further fuels a dismissal of matrilinealism.

Heap of Birds also describes push back he has received from Indigenous peoples regarding his Native Hosts signs, where he discussed that some tribes do not want him to represent their tribes or that he cannot speak for them. In his pieces or practices where he presents historical narratives, he receives further pushback with people who may be uncomfortable by these narratives. In a piece about Abraham Lincoln’s involvement in the execution of 38 Dakota warriors outside in Mankato, Minnesota he was called “the new Charles Manson […] I just made a thing that was true.” In the last theme, I discussed how Deal’s narratives of Indigeneity are not always the most palatable towards non-Indigenous and white viewers. Narratives that are not the romantic narratives “cowboys and Indians” and are of issues regarding identity, history, or trauma end up “making people feel bad” and create the need for Indigenous artists to learn how to navigate that space, Deal says.

Navigating that space can be hard, for as Deal puts it, there is already little value assigned to Indigenous art because they are a group of people that “have been given negative value in popular culture and through American history” and success hinges on proving the value of their work to the right person that can be an insurmountable hurdle for some artists. Deal asserts that Indigenous art is inherently valuable in the Western, colonial spaces that artists navigate because “those spaces are on Indigenous land,
period.” Yet if Indigenous artists create something that is unrecognizable to Western eyes, to “jump past the expectation and do something that is more true to themselves as modern living human beings,” Deal or other artists can take what he calls a professional risk in which their art may not sell, in turn affecting their income. As he puts it, if he is not willing to “pull a punch” and place his work within a narrative that is recognizable to non-Native peoples, “then I can be, and in many cases, going to be shooting myself in the foot professionally.” In Deal’s dialogue he discussed an instance where he was vetted at the Smithsonian before a show, something he relegates to the fact that they were afraid of what his pieces may say; afraid they might not be what they were expecting to see. Their fear, he notes, is rooted in misunderstanding of what an “Indigenous person is, what they do, that they exist.” Yazzie also describes how it can be difficult to change the perception of curators, due to the amount of time they invest into their training and formulating their careers.

Deal describes the inability of institutions to back their voices as a problem that lends the Indigenous voice to “novel” even when progressive acts of decolonization are happening, stating that even the National Museum of the American Indian “does very little to work with Indigenous artists.” He describes how the museum presented an exhibition in 2018 called Americans, which presented how Indigenous peoples faces, likeness, names, and illustrations have come to be a significant part of Americana and consumer culture. As the exhibit went up, Deal describes how there was a resurgence of Indigenous artists using those exact items that are in that exhibition-Land ‘O Lakes butter, Indian Motorcycles, Disney's Pocahontas [...] Boy Scouts [...] that are reclaiming those
items and incorporating them into their work as a comment to their identity as it relates to Indigenous existence in popular culture.

The exhibit, however, could do “nothing to show that work, to support that work, to even bring that work into that space to a context of the non-Native viewing public.” This was a missed opportunity to exhibit the fact that Indigenous peoples still exist, and how Native artists are “taking control of those spaces [popular culture] that they have traditionally not occupied, appropriately.” This speaks to the issue that because institutions plan for shows so far out, and on a strict timeline, that it can be difficult to respond to current events.

Institutional pushback is something Simpson also describes in her written piece for her show’s catalogue; an essay that critiqued the museumification of culture written by her brother, Dr. Porter Swentzell. She had to have what she described as a “long conversation with them to try to let that essay slide because they didn’t want to do it.” In the end, the piece was published in the catalogue but the very fact that the museum tried to push back on what was a critique of institutional practices is telling. As she described it, “what else is a museum for other than a platform to critique museums?” Within institutional spaces, she described how before shows she will prepare herself mentally for comments that she hears throughout the evening from exhibition guests. She states that Indigenous peoples are just trained to put up with that, that “you just keep hearing it and that’s normal” but she aims to ensure Native people to understand that it is normal, and they do not have to engage with negative comments and conversations. She also discussed her experience at the Denver Art Museum for the exhibition Sovereign Voices, the first “fully Indigenous show, that was outside of the ghettoized Native wing,
or floor.” Herself, Kent Monkman, Jeffry Gibson, and Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo) were exhibited “with the contemporary artists” and were able to participate on a panel to discuss their work and the show.

However, as Simpson describes the panel experience, there was an elephant in the room: that no one was talking about that everyone on the panel was queer, but instead were focused on Indigenous identity. She is also critical of the patriarchy that exists within museums spaces, and that she will sometimes see her male friends have a more amplified voice than hers, even on topics like Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, “I find it interesting that the male voice is still safer, even if it’s an Indigenous voice […] there’s a lot of nights where man are definitely put ahead of women still.” Part of making spaces equitable for Indigenous artists as Deal describes it, is that there has “to be a relinquishment of the greatness that is supposed upon history”; for museums engaged in decolonizing work there must be that continued relinquishment of power dynamics that are associated with that history. There must also be the acceptance of their responsibility to be informed from the firsthand narratives presented to them within Indigenous art and art practices, as well as an acknowledgment of the inherent colonialism that has fueled the various negative elements these artists describe in their dialogues.

**Theme #3: Sovereignty and Decolonization**

This final theme explores the different ways in which the artists approach their understandings of sovereignty, and if they find visual sovereignty to be a valid concept to engage with. This theme will also explore the ways in which the artists may see positive steps forward happening regarding Western ideas of Indigenous art and art reception, and
how they foresee change happening in the future through acts of decolonization. There is no one way to approach an understanding of sovereignty, and as mentioned earlier, attempts made to essentialize the concept fail to consider the variety of ways that sovereignty is practiced and understood among Indigenous peoples. In presenting the artist’s diverse opinions and understandings of sovereignty (visually or otherwise), this theme will culminate in a discussion regarding how to apply sovereign influenced praxis within institutional spaces and the need for continued critical engagement with sovereignty in decolonizing practices.

**Sovereignty**

I asked Yazzie if she thought her work at the Denver Art Museum in creating videos as educational tools would be something she described as a practice of visual sovereignty, in which she agreed that it was. She was able to facilitate her own representation as a Diné woman and generate materials that framed her Indigenous art through her own self-determination. Her role as an educator, as well as her work in doing artist talks and workshops, further provides Yazzie the opportunity to shift people’s narratives about Indigeneity and Indigenous art from her own life experiences. While Yazzie asserts that she cannot speak for any specific Indigenous community, including her own, everyone has a human experience that she is able to connect with-Indigenous or not. Her workshops and role as an educator allow her the chance to form relationships with people “who want to learn a process, who want to see their own history and who want to make pieces about their life stories, to help heal or to help educate people about things that they’re passionate about.” Through her practices of sovereignty and self-
determination, she is able to reach a broad audience through her art that asserts the contemporary existence of Indigenous peoples while using her platform to assert the importance of critically engaging with history.

For Deal, the idea of sovereignty is more complicated, and questions whether it is a concept that Indigenous peoples even understand and if they truly are even sovereign. Indigenous peoples may assert that they are, but for Deal he discusses that their reliance on Western government for enrollment, education, and infrastructure negate that idea. Similar to Bad Hand, Deal takes issue with the idea of blood quantum, a requirement that forces a reliance on a Western, colonial system to determine who is and is not Indigenous; “there’s not a sovereign thing about that.” Bad Hand asserts that blood quantum is a difficult topic to work through, but an important concept to engage with when discussing how to understand sovereignty and its applications. The idea of visual sovereignty is something that Bad Hand supports, but like Deal is concerned with what that idea actually means and encompasses. She is concerned over who has access to tribal information, who is allowed to share it, and what that means for Indigenous peoples who hold multiple tribal affiliations and may not hold enough blood quantum to hold membership in any nation. She recognizes that it is important for Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories and have the outlets available for them to do so, but she also asserts that it is sometimes necessary to work with others to accomplish that goal.

Indigenous peoples, as she describes, do not own things (including knowledge) and keeping things to themselves is a colonial idea. She understands the fear that some Indigenous people may have with sharing too much of their cultural information, because “we’re in a world know where almost nothing is sacred […] I can understand all of those
ideas of sovereignty,” but she is concerned that if cultural knowledge is not shared that things can be lost; an idea she equates to the situation of Indigenous languages going extinct. In a similar fashion to Heap of Birds, she understands and asserts the need for knowledge to be circular in order to give back to communities, and in keeping an understanding of sovereignty as something used to reclaim or own something is an “oxymoron” because that just is not how the community works.

Bad Hand presents a practice of sovereignty that contrasts the way that Simpson understands the concept to be asserted. Simpson describes an understanding of sovereignty that is rooted in her tribal affiliation and experiences that requires her to juggle a conversation between her tribe and the art world. Because she is still connected to her tribe, she does not see herself as 100% sovereign because if she creates a narrative that shares too much cultural or tribal knowledge she can be reprimanded by her tribe. While we see Deal describe commodification as a negative experience within Indigenous art, Simpson finds cultural commodification as a means to communicate tribal related issues without exploiting tribal knowledge. She asserts that this may not necessarily be sovereignty, but that it allows her to build a language through abstraction that deconstructs stereotypes while maintaining tribal privacy.

Having “grew up together in the art world in New York City,” Heap of Birds was familiar with Jolene Rickard’s concept of visual sovereignty and understood it to be a good starting point in the discussion of decolonization. He finds that there needs to be more of a push by Indigenous artists to deal with their tribal realities and to push back against the desire to make art that is more likely to be “embraced by the colonial power.” Visual sovereignty, as Heap of Birds describes it, goes even deeper than that. For
him, the concept is directly related to ceremony, religion, prayer, and connections to the earth. Bodily markings that cannot be changed per anyone’s desires, that are tradition and passed down from generation to generation is how he understands visual sovereignty, because it is not about talking to people or expressing social justice, it is a “primal experience of this prayer that you’re making for only your tribe, only the dancer you’re working with.” He says that Rickard’s work is important to engage with, but it is a “few steps removed” from what he finds needs to be addressed among Indigenous artists, that their challenge lies at going to learn from their elders, to “reformat that whole ceremonial life and rebuild it because that’s what saves you is that understanding.” When I stated that this was an entirely new way of understanding visual sovereignty for me, he asserted that most artists have the same reaction and they need to understand why they do not think along these lines and why they are not practicing their traditions.

**Decolonization**

For Yazzie, it is especially important that education regarding Indigeneity and Native art start with youth, “to help them find a better way of seeing the future.” In conducting outreach for the young people, she aims to reach a variety of communities because it is their generation that can generate change; something she equites to why missionaries work with children in her dialogue. Museum programming for children is something she sees as important because of this, and that this will lead to those children eventually growing up and can educate without her being there with them. This is critical when we consider how to progress decolonizing efforts moving forward in
ways to avoid continually exploiting Indigenous time, resources, and emotional abilities in requiring them to constantly be in a position of educating others.

As for how visual sovereignty could facilitate in decolonizing practice, Deal expresses dismay at the fact that decolonial work occurs within the English language. Deal is not against ideas of decolonization but recognizes the complexities and ironies that exist within that space, and within Indigenous existence in the United States. He struggles with how to articulate and validate his opinions on those topics, when they are “happening in the language of the colonizer.” Deal also agrees that starting with young people and education can change the fabric of things but is concerned with how long it would take for education to generate any real change. Deal further questions if that education is something that is profitable because Western education is based on models of consumption and capitalism, “is it worth our time? Does it make money?” Speaking the truth about the history of America, and its relationship with Indigenous peoples is something that undermines the “American dream” that he asserts never existed to begin with. Therefore, art and activism, as he understands it, can only go so far before “we begin to compromise the machine that is America.” So, regarding how visual sovereignty can diversify Indigenous art reception, Deal is not so sure how to think about it. He asserts that he is struggling to say what he wants to say due to the fact that his art is generally being viewed by a white audience who lacks context for his work. He notes in his dialogue that he does see some promise regarding the works of Gibson and Monkman, but when it comes to Deal’s performance work there is still some work to be done for the value of that to be understood in the same way installation and conceptual work is.
Deal sees that changing over time, and he believes that he’s “got a seat at the table” when performance work in the United States is recognized as something that is valuable. While still a colonial state, Deal discusses how he finds Canada to be much further along in their relations with Indigenous peoples and artists than the United States. He states that he does not know the exact steps to move forward, but he himself just keeps creating work that he finds the value in to continue to contribute new and exciting narratives to the art world. In his dialogue, Deal described the 2019 Whitney Biennial in which Indigenous artists and other artists of color pulled out of the exhibition in protest of Warren Kander’s association with Safariland. In their refusal to participate in the exhibition, Deal described how those artists were asserting that it they knew their work was already valuable and did not need a museum or a biennial to tell them that. This is both an important assertion of the value Indigenous art holds in large scale exhibitions like Biennials, but also an important act of refusal.

Bad Hand expressed that she sees some positive steps forward regarding sovereignty hitting more mainstream discussions, which is why she finds it important to have more widespread representation of Indigeneity to ensure that youth, parents, and educators be aware and informed of their existence from an Indigenous perspective. She discusses how Indigenous art that shows “more contemporary existence” would be a positive step forward in terms of how to apply visual sovereignty. The art of Indigenous youth would be particularly beneficial, as it would generate a voice within museums that would modernize that space for them and would generate a clear and meaningful integration between the past and present.
Heap of Birds questions visual sovereignty’s relationship to Indigenous representation, as he asserts that representation should always be in one’s self. Images, pictures, media and exhibitions may exist, but they do not encompass Indigenous reality. This reality as Heap of Bird’s describes, is something that only exists when Indigenous peoples are together with each other and is not something that exists within a headspace, theory, or in an essay. He questions those on the fringe of Native art who participate in these types of representations, (“which are actually a lot of people that are mixed blood people, that aren’t from communities”), who believe that Native life can be molded or shaped, which will not be received well by the community or tribal elders.

This is something he sees museums falling into, where they will present information on Indigenous peoples without allowing them to represent themselves. For him, the solution is for the museums to open their doors let Native Americans make their own exhibitions. Being heavily involved and direct with Indigenous communities is an important step in moving Indigenous representation forward, especially for curators creating exhibitions about Indigeneity. In giving up some of their power, curators who are involved in decolonizing practices would then embody those ideas by going out to communities, having continual engagement, and conducting collaborative work in order to “have equity” and work towards giving some of that “power back to the community that you’re trying to represent.” Heap of Birds stated that starting with artists is a good place to start, because they are essentially making their own exhibitions about themselves. Structurally, museums can incorporate circularity within their exhibition and institutional spaces, “that’s going to be sovereign,” as he asserts that linearity is a colonial format. Showing the circularity of life and disrupting those colonial formats that
are “kind of anti-Indigenous” are practices of decolonization that he asserts would be helpful within museum spaces.

Simpson’s narrative highlights some ways in which she personally engages with what might be considered personal decolonizing work, through her return home and learning practices that keep her connected to her tribe. She does not concern herself with how people feel about her art, including buyers, museums, and galleries but rather places her focus on her tribe, “that’s where the most power in my foundation is in my life. And that might be a form of sovereignty, is to be like, ‘I don’t need you!’” This plays into how she understands the role institutions have in Indigenous art and art practices; they may provide important and privileged opportunities, she notes, but she does not need their existence to survive. While she describes instances where she had to prep herself before shows, Simpson has started to see a shift in those comments in that people are more interested in her work, political views, and social commentary over her identity. She is being asked to a part of more shows that are about other significant parts of her identity or because her work being valued by institutions. It is necessary to acknowledge these areas of important and positive progress, as presented by Simpson and the other artists in this section, while acknowledging that there needs to be continual engagement with decolonizing practices in order to ensure these steps continue on and become more common place. Particularly when we consider both her and Deal’s issues with the idea that decolonization occurs within the English language, and how to acknowledge that fact while working towards meaningful dialogue and progress within institutional spaces.
Chapter Seven: Thematic Discussion

This chapter presents the discussions of each of themes addressed in the previous chapter, as informed by the narratives of the artists. It is important to reiterate that while these discussions are informed by the artists, they are representative of my own research and knowledge on how to address such topics as the art/artifact divide, colonial recognition, and critical pedagogy. Each discussion is listed in the same order as the themes were presented in the last chapter and will further inform the discussion and conclusions of this thesis in the next chapter.

Functionality of Art Discussion

Each artist’s narrative highlights how the participants of this work create artwork from their experiences that diversify the definition of Native American art. They also use their visual narratives and art practices in ways that function as sources of education, communication, and visibility on their continued existence and presence in contemporary society. They move beyond Western art ideals of formalism as discussed by Heap of Birds, to inform a discussion over Indigenous aesthetics and its framework for receiving their artworks. Within this discussion, I will use their narratives and experiences to shape how I understand these dialogues to be engaged in a discussion of visual sovereignty. Further, I will discuss how their narratives and Indigenous aesthetics can inform a critical
discussion over the art/artifact divide within museum spaces and why they should be considered within decolonizing practices framed by critical museology.

The definition presented for this research of visual sovereignty within Indigenous art and art reception included the idea that Native artists determine their modes of self-expression within their visual narratives. Each artist within this theme cites their own experiences, histories, and realties as the influences that inform their art and art practices that are not rooted in Western art ideals or aesthetics. Their relationships with their identities, their communities, education, and their professional experiences are all important aspects that in some way shape their art and their actions. Relationships are an important role to consider in the reception of Indigenous art for a few reasons, as ahtone (2009) asserts. First, relationships need to be considered within Indigenous arts because they are “a part of the coded language embedded in all aspects of Indigenous American culture. Drawing relationships is a fundamental way of understanding nature and of forming one’s personal identity” (ahtone 2009, 376). This includes the way in which the relationality of Indigenous art shapes relationships to “place and cultural heritage” within its production (Neal 2014, 288). Further, relationships can be understood in how Indigenous art practices are not at odds with Western art ideals but rather take an “approach which is more prone to finding relationships and shared commonalities” (ahtone 2009, 376). This sentiment is echoed within Deal’s dialogue where he discusses how art for Native peoples is a journey of reconciliation, understanding identity, existence, and trauma. He notes that this is “the artistic process and just general art practice, that’s what a lot of people do,” in that people mine areas of their lives and histories to generate narratives that contribute to the art world. We see this in Simpson
and Yazzie’s dialogues as well, in which there is a shared common element to art that is we are all humans on this earth navigating through life.

While their art may be created at an individual level, there is some aspect of community to some of their narratives in the ways in which tradition, education, and visibility are asserted that are generated for Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers alike. Focusing on points of difference or distinction within Indigenous art within Western art reception and critique only furthers a cultural dichotomy through the lens of ‘othering’. Rather, considering ideas of visual sovereignty in which art is shaped by experiences, not unlike any other artist’s process, can be useful in lessening this divide and lend understanding to how Indigenous artists contribute “not only to the legacy and continuing development of cultural expression, but also to the larger context of art history” (Rangel 2012, 216). Indigenous art should also then be considered for how it can contribute to the larger context of museology through sovereign functions of cultural expression, continuity, transmission, visibility, and education.

Considering Indigenous art and the way its aesthetics defy Western standards of classification is useful in understanding how to reevaluate the art/artifact line within institutional collection spaces as a decolonizing practice. In this process, it is important to renegotiate collections already held within museums, as well as how museums will collect, care for, and present objects in the future. The Hearts of our People exhibit mentioned in the background is representative of an exhibition that renegotiated how to present Indigenous art that spanned historical to contemporary that did not focus on the arbitrary division of ethnographic versus aesthetic within representation. Rather, the exhibit blended “works of art from antiquity to the present and made in a variety of
media, from fiber to contemporary time-based media, releveling the ingenuity and innovation that has always been foundational to the role of Native women” (Feldman 2019, 7). The exhibit’s focus on Indigenous women worked to further a conversation on how collections have gendered implications and undertones of colonial patriarchy where women’s works were often unnamed, uncredited, or represented as “decorative or secular” as a result of “anthropological texts and art writing since the mid-nineteenth century” (Berlo and Phillips 2019, 44). This is a particularly important point to consider under decolonizing practices framed by critical museology.

As museums work to evaluate their discourse, they must acknowledge their foundations in colonial patriarchy as is discussed by both Yazzie and Simpson. Colonial patriarchy within museum spaces has generated dialogue about Indigenous women that is assimilative into Westernized notions of gender roles, fails to credit the role of Native women within cultural production, and fails to address the powerful role of Indigenous women within matrilineal societies (Smith 2012, 33; Mithlo 2008, 8). Further, the vast variety of art presented by the participants in this research renegotiates what it is to create traditional art, which recalls Tsinhnahjinnie (2008) assertion that it is traditional to utilize the latest technologies. This, as she asserts, is visual sovereignty in that Indigenous artists are controlling how their cultures and knowledge are passed on to the next generations. Within critical practices of institutional reflexivity, and in practices of collaboration, museums could integrate this idea of sovereignty into their practices through the engagement with Indigenous art and artists who are using their platforms to define and redefine Indigenous art and aesthetics.
Hearts of Our People also furthers dialogue about what constitutes Native art, broadening the definition of Western art standards in much the same way as the artists in this research do,

the absurdity of imposing upon Native cultures the post-Renaissance Eurocentric divisions between art and craft may seem obvious. There is no evidence, linguistic or otherwise, to suggest that Indigenous North Americans ever made such distinctions; they make none today (Berlo and Phillips 2019, 46).

Reconsidering how collections have been divided by the art/artifact division is critical with objects that are already held in collections, in order to reassess how they have been presented in the past and generate more appropriate and accurate narratives surrounding those pieces moving forward. It also serves to take objects from immutable artifacts on shelves disconnected from personhood to cultural objects with a life force (ahtone 1, 2018). In considering what this means for contemporary Indigenous art and future collections practices, practices can be shaped that continue to make connections and relationships between tangible and intangible, communities, and museum professionals (ahtone 1, 2018). As collaboration with source communities is a key practice within decolonizing work, engaging with how art can sustain and build those relationships should be factored into decolonizing practices regarding representation in exhibition and stewardship of collections.

The artists all discuss how their experiences shape their narratives, and how in some way or another function as mediums in which educational experiences and cultural visibility occur. They create relationships with themselves and their identities, as well as with the communities in which they are engaged. It is for this reason that ahtone asserts that art is a valuable outlet within museum spaces to make connections and act as a
cultural exchange between artists and audiences, and that institutions are in “a distinctly privileged position to engage in this exploration and discourse” (ahtone 2018, 2). The artists discussed work that encompasses a variety of historical instances and contemporary realities that are often absent from discourse within education and educational outlets; IllumiNative’s research found that 27 states make no mention of Native Americans in K-12 curriculum, and 87% of state level history standards “fail to cover Native people’s history in post-1900 context” (IllumiNative 2018). Museums, as educational platforms, must be engaging in decolonizing practices that continue to enhance education regarding both Indigenous histories and contemporary realities to create a more informed (and potentially empathetic) non-Native audience. Looking to Indigenous artists and their art, who express visual sovereignty though creating narratives based off experience, would be beneficial in creating a “reciprocal relationship[s] that will benefit the objects and the communities (both Indigenous and museum audiences alike)” (ahtone 2018, 2). As some of the artists in this research expressed how their art is meant to function in this reciprocal relationship, it follows ahtone’s assertion that Native art is a valuable outlet for museums engaged in practices of professional and institutional reflexivity as informed by critical museology.

Deal, Simpson, and Heap of Birds all present dialogue regarding how they use their platform to critique colonial and Western institutional practices and aesthetics when it comes to Indigenous art and objects. Engaging with them, their work, and their dialogue would become an invaluable outlet for continual reflexivity regarding institutional practices and representation within exhibit spaces. While I have presented in this discussion that Indigenous art can serve an educational function, it is important to
acknowledge that Indigenous peoples should not always be required to hold an educational position on Indigenous histories, traumas, and contemporary existence. Yazzie expressed that always falling into this role is “exhausting,” and Deal asserts that he does not create work where

I hope that I can help teach a bunch of white folks things that they don’t understand. Honestly, I don’t care if white folks get it or not, because art isn’t about making…art is not about making something that is equitable and understandable to everyone, art is about making art […] at the end of the day, your feelings don’t matter in the work.

Deal acknowledges that the lack of context most people have, and how this lends to a misunderstanding of his and other Indigenous artist’s work, is an issue within art reception but that it is not his job to fix it. All of the artists in this work are participating in art-based practices where they are putting their knowledge and epistemologies out into a public sphere via art-based narratives, artist talks, artist workshops, academic writing, and within platforms of formal education. The second theme explored how a lack of context of Indigenous peoples is one of the factors the artists expressed that affect the reception of their artwork. The need for museums to engage with contemporary Indigenous art as a form of visual sovereignty through its intersection with critical pedagogy, and how this is a necessary step in self-education, will be further asserted in the following discussion.
Factors that Inhibit Indigenous Artists and Art Reception Discussion

Exploring the factors that have inhibited, and continue to inhibit, Indigenous artists brings to light the ways in which Western art ideals continue to sideline Native artists if they do not assimilate to their understanding of what Indigenous aesthetics are. Further, the lack of context these artists discuss plays to a larger conversation of assimilation and erasure that are a part of the ongoing project of colonialism as framed by Wolfe (2006). It is important to acknowledge the role of Western museums and cultural institutions within the ongoing project of colonialism given their colonial nature, and how art and Indigenous artists can provide room for institutional critique and reflexivity as presented in the discussion of the last theme. Decolonizing practices and conversations can further facilitate how ideas of visual sovereignty can inform dialogue in how to enact critical pedagogy that is transparent about institutional practices. This process also needs to work to generate representation that provides accurate context regarding Indigenous histories and contemporary realities in ways that facilitate positive identity building for Indigenous peoples. This is an important consideration in making museum spaces more equitable arenas for Indigenous peoples, while working to prioritize Indigenous epistemologies through process of collaboration that actively dismantle the presentation of Western knowledge’s superiority within dominate culture spaces (Lonetree 2012; Smith 2012).

Considering the ways in which Indigenous art can inform critical pedagogy within museum spaces also furthers a conversation regarding the art/artifact divide within collections spaces. Critical pedagogy works towards making museums more democratic spaces through institutional critiques of the content and style of museum exhibitions in
order to understand how knowledge has been unequally distributed in order to redress the
social consequences and inequalities of misrepresentation (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Lindauer 2007). Originally conceptualized by Paulo Freire as a tool to critique the ways in which educational systems sustain inequality, critical pedagogy’s application within museum systems is important in considering the cultural myths and stereotypes that are sustained within museums in order to reflect critically on “the histories we celebrate, the stories we tell, the policies we enact” to understand “what, how, and in whose interests” knowledge is produced and disseminated (Lindauer 2007, 307). This concept serves well to intersect with TribalCrit in understanding how Indigenous art embodies knowledge that builds theories to inform praxis while providing an outlet that is a more appropriate lens in which to describe contemporary tribal realities (Brayboy 2006, 441).

Brayboy understands one of the functions of TribalCrit as a means to expose and work to remedy “inconsistencies in structural systems and institutions” in order to make situations better for Indigenous students (Brayboy 2006, 441). The tenets of TribalCrit can intersect with visual sovereignty and ideas of Indigenous aesthetics as presented in the last theme to further an understanding on how to highlight the inconsistencies in the art/artifact divide within institutional spaces. As expressed in the literature review, anthropology-based museums and art institutions collected similar objects they found valuable but presented them in different ways to highlight either their cultural significance or aesthetic qualities (Clifford 1988, 227). However, while these object systems of art and anthropology are institutionalized and powerful, they are not immutable […] historical self-consciousness in the display and viewing of non-Western objects can at least jostle and set in motion the ways in which anthropologists, artists, and their publics collect themselves and the world (Clifford 1988, 229).
I have already asserted how the *Hearts of Our People* show challenges these distinctions, and successfully, through an interdisciplinary approach between Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators and artists to move beyond taxonomic representations in order to present an exhibit that included a “multiplicity of perspectives and an openness to diverse approaches” (Yohe 2019, 11). An interdisciplinary approach to museums and exhibitions is an important part of approaching institutional reflexivity, which works to identify what is or is not represented in museums, and the role institutional representation has in global processes, politics, and identity (MacDonald 2006).

Tsinhnahjinnie’s assertion that utilizing the latest technologies within art practices is traditional, and Rickard’s (2011) understanding of tradition as “strategic sovereigntist resistance” to ongoing practices of colonization and globalization, places contemporary Indigenous art and artists as key players in an interdisciplinary approach in how to generate representation that is informed and contextualized from Indigenous epistemologies. Through their visual narratives, artist talks, writings, workshops, and educational roles they are creating theory per Brayboy’s understand that narratives, dialogue, and stories are valid sources of information and data that build Indigenous sourced theory. Practices of visual sovereignty through artistic mediums integrates an interdisciplinary approach to critical museology through the theories, representation, and contextualization the artists build through their dialogue. They are also engaging in Cook-Lynn’s theory of ethno-endogenous epistemology in that they are analyzing their world and their experiences from internal perspectives. This concept aligns with Brayboy’s fifth tenet of TribalCrit, in which they are conceptualizing their cultures,
knowledge, and power are in significant ways through an Indigenous lens that can further inform how sovereignty can, and should, shift institutional power dynamics through collaboration.

In her conceptualization of visual sovereignty, Rickard asserts that it is not meant to be a theory solely directed at identity and colonization. Though we do see how identity influences the artists in this research, and the ways in which colonization affects their art reception, focusing too much on these ideas within their art overlooks the significance of their narratives that are created without the need for colonial approval. Rather, these aspects should be used in conjunction with TribalCrit to engage in a conversation that can inform practices of critical pedagogy. Just as Brayboy asserts that colonization is endemic to society, practices of critical pedagogy need to be transparent about how colonialism is inherent within museums and how this has affected Indigenous representation to both Native and non-Native visitors. For cultural decolonization is “the perpetual struggle to make both Indigenous and settler peoples aware of the complexity of our shared colonial condition, and how this legacy informs every person and institution in these territories” (Garneau 2013, 15). This includes the ways in which colonization has affected Indigenous peoples, as specifically discussed by Yazzie, Bad Hand, and Heap of Birds. Certainly there should be an acknowledgement of how colonization and the removal of Indigenous peoples from lands that were being stolen from them was one factor in the creation of the tourist art market, which became a method “for Indigenous people to carve out ways of making a living during extremely difficult economic times” (Lonetree 12, 2012). The ways in which this market also served to create a uniquely American and nationalist identity are also important points of consideration (Mullin
1995). As Neale (2104) puts it, to deny that institutions and non-Indigenous peoples had a hand in “cultural production, interpretation and presentation of Indigenous material, amounts to a form of paternalism as well as blindness to the realities of how steeped contemporary Indigenous art, from its production to its reception, is in the contemporary world” (307). Being transparent about the role settler-colonialism had in creating museums in the first place, as well as its continued affects within institutional practices, would enact critical pedagogy within discourse.

This is also an important way to combat the colonial recognition of decolonizing practices that Coulthard (2014) is critical of. Colonial recognition is rooted in the continued occupation and access to Indigenous lands and resources, “by producing neocolonial subjectivities that coopt Indigenous people into becoming instruments of their own dispossession” (Coulthard 2014, 156). Within efforts of decolonization, Coulthard sees these efforts as largely guided and framed by colonial approaches which run the risk of being performative efforts that do not acknowledge the root cause of the practices. Non-Indigenous professionals who conceal rather than be transparent about the collaborative work that happens within dominant culture spaces “constitutes control without accountability: it’s a way of speaking through and about rather than with the people” (Neal 2014, 307). Decolonizing practices should be producing narratives that acknowledge museum’s legal, political, and economic frameworks both historically and presently to enact both institutional reflexivity and transparency to museum visitors. Doing this work also requires an acknowledgement of “the colonial aims of land disposessions and sovereignty usurpation” and how power relations and practices to transform them “has also made it impossible to credibly ignore the impact that colonial
patriarchy continues to have on our national liberation efforts” (Coulthard 2014, 157). Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing, as Garneau (2016) asserts, are “antidote” to the disorder that is the “patriarchal, capitalist, and racist histories, habits, and ideas that we clot under the worlds ‘Western’ and ‘colonial’.” This institutional disclosure would give museum guests an understanding of why decolonizing practices are being engaged with in order to present an opportunity for them to understand the role institutions have had in misrepresenting Indigenous histories, identities, and understandings of Indigenous art to them through Western understandings of these areas.

Further, for those engaged in this work who may consider themselves allies, they must “understand the historical and embodied facts to the satisfaction of the First Peoples they hope to work with, “a practice that also requires personal reflexivity in “their motives and be able to explain their need to engage in this work” (Garneau 2016, 38). This practice then needs to be explored and explained by institutions, and be transparent, if they consider themselves to be spaces that work with, rather than about, Indigenous peoples. Per Deal, culturally dominant institutions must relinquish the supposed greatness they hold and acknowledge how their exhibitions and representations have lent to the misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and inability to contextualize Indigenous peoples or existence that continues today. This misrepresentation affects not only the ability of Indigenous peoples to participate as artists within the larger Western art world but extends beyond into how Native peoples and youth understand and view themselves as we see Yazzie and Bad Hand discuss.
**Sovereignty and Decolonization Discussion**

In the previous two discussions, I understood visual sovereignty to be practiced through the ways in which the artists conceptualize their art through personal experiences shaped by both historical and contemporary narratives. Their narratives and art practices function as arenas where visibility and education are transmitted to the broader public, including museum professionals, where information is being presented from Indigenous epistemologies and theories to contextualize their own histories and lived realities. However, it is clear that visual sovereignty is not such a clear-cut concept. There must be critical engagement with the idea in order to sort out the ways in which it may intersect with other assertions of sovereignty in order to better understand how it can be used to inform decolonizing praxis, as well as how to represent sovereignty within exhibition spaces.

In working to define sovereignty as something beyond its colonial roots and political agenda, it is necessary to situate it in its historical, social, and cultural contexts and understand who is enacting it and what it means to them in “the work of defining their relationships with one another, their political agendas, and their strategies for decolonization and social justice” (Barker 2005, 26). Each of the artists above present a different understanding of what visual sovereignty is, if it is viable, who should be practicing it, the ways in which it becomes complicated, and how to consider its role in decolonization. However, there are some common threads that appear within each of the artist’s dialogues that can be used as important points of consideration when informing a discussion of visual sovereignty within Indigenous art reception, and what it may look in practice as informed by the artists above.
One of those threads is the ways in which practices of refusal can be understood among each of the artists in this research. There is a refusal to adhere to any Western prescribed visual depiction of what Indigenous art looks like, with each utilizing a multitude of mediums that challenge Western concepts of what traditional Native art is. In the case of Heap of Birds, who works as an artist and dancer in traditional ceremonial practices, he challenges an idea of what Western aesthetics understand tradition to be. In using their own, personal experiences to shape their narratives, they are challenging the anthropological conceptions of Indigeneity that have long been a concern of the discipline; conceptions that have trickled down into generating misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples writ large. This refusal further plays out in the ways in which some of the artists refuse to let the Western art world hold power over them, like Simpson describes, or stop them from partaking in mediums like performance art that they have not quite figured out as Deal asserts. Like Tsinhnahjinnie (2008) and Simpson (2014) both argue, these acts are important ways of asserting the ability of Indigenous peoples to shape their own past, present, and future that is not reliant on Westernized representations or ideologies.

Refusal also plays into the idea presented by Coulthard (2014) of turning away from the colonial politics of recognition through the practice of resurgence. While resurgence in this sense can take the shape of intellectual, social, and political critical practices it can also formulate artistically in ways that work towards shifting colonial power dynamics. Drawing from feminist scholar Leanne Simpson (Anishinaabe), he defines acts of resurgence not as a literal turn toward the past, but as fluid acts that recreate cultural and political acts from the past to support contemporary needs and
communities (Coulthard 2014, 156). We can see how the art produced by the artists in this research fits into this context, particularly within the realm of visibility, education, activism and the creation of pieces meant to work for Indigenous peoples like Heap of Bird’s *The Wheel* and Bad Hand’s efforts to provide traditional knowledge to Indigenous children through comics. Resurgence and practices of turning away from colonial recognition are not meant to be strictly directed at discussion of colonialism. Rather, they also address how cultural practices have “much to offer regarding the establishment of relationships within and between peoples and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity and respectful coexistence” (Coulthard 2014, 48). Conversations of refusal and resurgence can also be aimed to inform how the artists in this research are further engaging in practices of cultural continuity and ethno-endogenous epistemologies.

The last theme presented the idea of visual sovereignty working into theories of TribalCrit, in which the narratives and dialogues of the artists shape theory that is informed firsthand from their lived experiences. This can also be understood as ethno-endogenous epistemologies, which is an important concept to consider within critical museology and decolonization as Cook-Lynn frames this concept in how to ensure tribal knowledge and perspectives continue on within the constraints of colonial occupation (Yazzie and Estes 2016). She asserts that American Indian Studies, and those involved within in, must concern themselves in developing and theorizing about Indigenous sovereignty, as it is meant to “defend and ensure the survival of” ethno-endogenous epistemologies and tribal thinking (Yazzie and Estes 2016, 14). These frameworks of survival and tribal sovereignty are informed by practices that have preceded colonization, much in the same way that Indigenous resurgence utilizes historical, pre-contact practices
to inform practices that support communal needs. Ethno-endogenous epistemologies and ideas of cultural continuity, as she understands it, are a “necessary evolution of sovereignty into a defensive and heuristic site for resisting systematic attempts to destroy tribal knowledge” that are framed by “political claims to rightfully define who we are in this world, and how we belong to the land and how the land and its stories claim us” (Yazzie and Estes 2016, 14; 19). The art created by those who participated in this research can be equated to these ideas. We see Deal and Heap of Birds acknowledge the importance and significance of Indigenous lands, Simpson assert how important it is to learn traditional ways of living in order to sustain herself, and Yazzie and Bad Hand use their art practices in ways to facilitate education framed from their own ways of knowing. Bad Hand in particular uses her art in ways that ensures tradition is passed along and Indigenous youth can see a continuity between historical pasts and contemporary realities to shape identity building.
Chapter Eight: Findings and Conclusions

In her call to address visual sovereignty within Indigenous art reception, Rickard makes the argument that “to consider Indigenous art without understanding the complexities and nuance of sovereignty would be a parallel omission” (Rickard 2017, 84). As seen with the narratives and discussions of this research, the idea of sovereignty presented by those within this research is incredibly nuanced and there is no one way to approach the concept. Visual sovereignty as it is understood by the artists in this research does not lend to a conclusive answer regarding if it is a viable concept to engage with, or not. However, there are some key takeaways from their narratives and the ways in which other ideas of sovereignty intersect with the concept visually that both diversify political sovereignty and can inform how to intersect sovereign and decolonization practices within institutional spaces.

One practice in which this concept can inform is the ways in which Indigenous knowledge is presented in museum spaces. In their understandings of sovereignty, we see Bad Hand and Simpson present two different views on how and to whom to share tribal knowledge with. Smith (2012) understands tribal knowledge as a “unique” commodity that flows between information that should be protected and aspects of culture that may be “commercial but there is no regime for ensuring benefits flow to the communities who created or have possessed such knowledge” (220). Collaborative dialogue framed through
understandings of how Indigenous peoples utilize sovereignty in sharing knowledge can better inform how museum practitioners must move with respect around these ideologies that are both cultural and political, as these beliefs will vary from nation to nation. This can work to avoid practices that commodify Indigenous knowledge in ways that are profitable for the museum, and ensure that there is benefits to the collaborators, their communities, and museum visitors-Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. While perhaps this cannot be understood as visual sovereignty, it could be framed under what Lisa King (2017) describes as producing legible sovereignty through rhetoric that can strengthen how museums communicate Indigenous knowledge.

Legible sovereignty presents the context of storytelling and theorizes how “we can understand museums as a visual, material, experiential rhetorical act” and how rhetorical sovereignty is used by Native communities to claim their right “choose and claim public discourses such as a museum to self-represent” (King 2017, 2). The artists in this research all express the ways in which their experiences shape their narratives that are meant for public consumption, and in the case of Simpson, ways that are tribally and culturally appropriate. King roots her understanding of this concept in Smith’s (2012) call for Indigenous based research to be rooted in self-determination further supported by Lonetree’s (2012) understanding of how museums engaged in decolonizing practices should be supporting these, as well as sovereign, movements. For Lonetree, this is an important part of making museum spaces collaborative arenas for sharing Indigenous knowledge that move from arenas of “oppression to places that matter” (Lonetree 2012, 173). However, Lonetree also finds this a necessary space for telling the hard truths of Indigenous history and colonization.
Deal and Simpson both expressed their dismay that decolonizing practices take place in English, in the “language of the colonizer.” Museums perhaps need to swallow this hard truth, and shift from what they understand to be decolonizing practices to what Garneau (2013) describes as noncolonial practices. As discussed in the last thematic discussion, Garneau sees cultural decolonization as a struggle to understand and assert the complex relationships and coexistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, in which noncolonial practices may be better suited to understand and emphasize the separatism of Indigenous peoples, as well as the adaptations they have made throughout experiences of colonization (Garneau 2016). This concept is applicable to understanding how Indigenous artists embody noncolonial work as something that “revives customary practices” (Garneau 17, 2013). Outside of the realm of Indigenous art, the term extends into forcing colonial institutions to critically engage with what they call decolonial practice:

I use the word noncolonial to distinguish our work from the logical impossibility that is decolonialism, or post-colonialism, in territories in which the descendants of non-Aboriginal invaders still rule over Natives. Decolonial theory may make sense in places that have actually shed their colonizers, but if in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States what is done in the name of decolonization and reconciliation is not premised on the restoration of Native land and sovereignty, these words and activities are smoke screens concealing the machinery of assimilation. Reconciliation is an effort to make settlers more comfortable with their inherited crimes and privileges […] Settlers need narratives that acknowledge their ancestors crimes-apologize for their horrible histories-if they are to make their presence ethically tolerable (Garneau 2016).

For Garneau, part of working towards these noncolonial practices is asserting “narratives and relations that understand Aboriginals as hosts, and settlers as guests”; an idea visibly asserted in Heap of Bird’s Native Host series (Garneau 2016). Museums engaged in decolonizing work would then be well served to acknowledge the difficult
truths of their institutional pasts through practices of critical pedagogy and exhibit Indigenous sovereignty through their transparency about whose lands their institutions reside on. Certainly we see Ames (1992) call for museums to contextualize and critique themselves but understands that it can be difficult to implement feasible changes due to the economics and politics that surround museums. In understanding mutual adaptation as a key point in understanding noncolonial practice, perhaps Heap of Bird’s suggestions on how to interrupt colonial architecture should also be considered as a feasible project of critical pedagogy and museology within these spaces.

It may not be feasible to tear down and completely construct new cultural institutions, but there are certainly adaptations within exhibition spaces that can be made possible by incorporating circularity in design in ways that interrupt linear notions of history and representation. While the artists do not all agree on the concept of visual sovereignty, or understand the idea in different ways, in considering the various ways in which sovereignty at all is understood or practiced outside of its political agenda is something museums must be engaging with. Considering the fact presented by RNT earlier that invisibility is a barrier to sovereign assertions, the platform museum’s hold and the decolonization work they are engaged with are the perfect pairing to exhibit sovereignty with exhibitions.

Contemporary Indigenous art may be a good start to considering how to exhibit not only sovereignty, but other aspects of Indigenous life. Each artist presents a functionality of art that includes ideas of education, communication, visibility, and tradition that while not always framed by visual sovereignty, certainly provide a starting point for discussions of gender, identity, representation, and social relations that work to
deconstruct colonial narratives. Yazzie and Simpson both touch on ideas of patriarchy within anthropological thought and museums, respectively, which needs to be inserted into practices of decolonization in order to reassess how indigenous women and their cultural objects have been misrepresented within exhibition spaces similar to the way *Hearts of Our People* does. Deal asserts that the ways in which Indigenous art is conceptualized is not unlike that of any other artist, which begs the question of the ways in which Indigenous art is labeled dichotomously. As each artist creates art that functions in ways that negate the stereotypes of Native art, they further bring to light the arbitrary distinction of art/artifact that has divided how and what cultural narratives are presented within Natural History museums and art institutions. This acknowledgement, as Mithlo (2006) asserts, would result in a paradigm shift in which arts discourse informed by Indigenous Knowledge Systems exposes the factors that museums have produced that inhibit arts reception and cultural understandings.

I cannot conclusively, given the diversity of understandings on visual sovereignty, respond to if this is a concept that the artists see as engaging with the communal experiences of Native American existence. However, while each artist creates work that is meant to be representative of themselves and their experiences, we see the ways in which their art is used to engage in conversations with a broader audience through the public accessibility of the work they are creating. Each artist has participated in artist talks and workshops, or has generated essays, that all focus a dialogue on contemporary Indigenous art and its definition, their experiences as Indigenous artists, and issues that may find within the Western art world. Particularly for the experience of Indigenous community, Bad Hand, Heap of Birds, and Simpson all discuss how their art is either
meant to function for their community (comics as educational outlets, art pieces for ceremony), or to be protective of communal cultural knowledge.

**Conclusion**

In the background section of this research, I discussed the statute of Theodore Roosevelt that sits outside of the AMNH. At the time of writing up the discussion and conclusion of this research, it has been announced that the statue will finally be removed from outside of the museum (Bishara 2020). The statute, originally created to “celebrate Theodore Roosevelt” who authored works on natural history and is a founder of the museum, is being removed “because it explicitly depicts Black and Indigenous people[s] as subjugated and racially inferior” (Bishara 2020). The statute has been under fire from Decolonize This Place since 2016, and while the group supports the removal of the statue, it is important to acknowledge that they are still calling for the museum to take action on their other two demands: rename Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day, transform “the museum’s racist exhibition spaces,” and repatriate human remains and sacred objects; objects like Chief White Antelope’s shirt and the Haudenosaunee False Face Masks (Bishara 2020).

The Guggenheim Museum has also come under fire for racist actions, with the Curatorial Department sending a letter to their director “demanding immediate, wholesale changes to what it described as ‘an inequitable work environment that enables racism, white supremacy, and other discriminatory practices’” (Pogrebin 2020). In addition to addressing these concerns, the curatorial staff who submitted the letter also called for transparency and “accountable decision-making processes in the department” (Pogrebin
2020). They addressed concerns over the concealment of racism within the institution, with one curator even stepping down for his own role in being complicit with the actions of the museums that suppressed and “systematically disenfranchised many” (Pogrebin 2020).

All of these actions are a direct response to the nation’s questioning of government, law enforcement, and other arenas of authority in response to the murder of George Floyd which has generated widespread protests across the country; even during the global COVID-19 pandemic (Boucher 2020). Museums have come under the same fire, with questions surrounding whether or not they can continue to exist as arenas of whitewashed American histories. How do museums move forward in 2020, when many museum spaces still hold Indigenous remains and objects at the core of their collections? For Marz Saffore, an organizer from DTP, there must be significant change:

It's critical that we move past identity politics. It's not enough to hire an Indigenous curator. It's not enough to have one Black person on your board. Museums as we know them have to be abolished. I don't want my voice to be added to museums that are often trophy cases for Imperialism (Boucher 2020).

Rickard calls for visual sovereignty to be understood outside of the realm of identity politics, and while this research does not conclusively answer if it is a viable concept to engage with, there are certainly points of conversation that are useful in considering how to intersect this concept within museum spaces as presented above. One of those points is the ways in which museums facilitate in identity building, and the affect their representations have on global processes. On top of addressing ways to include sovereignty within museum spaces, part of that is the inclusion of critical pedagogy within museum spaces that acknowledge their roles in colonial patriarchy, projects of
settler colonialism, racism, and racist policies that have all trickled down to public and global perceptions of race and cultures. Rickard understands visual sovereignty as a paradigmatic tool that can lend to the engagement of not only Indigeneity, but the colonial gaze, image, and text that could be applied writ large. The ways in which Indigenous art facilitate dialogue on the various topics expressed by the artist in this research lends to the idea of exploring art from a variety of peoples and cultures further, to understand the ways in which their art and art practices could facilitate practices of decolonization and critical museology.
References


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