

# BETWEEN ART AND CULTURE

## Performing First Nations sovereignty

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Over the last 20 years, I have noticed a blurring of the lines between political action, performance art, and cultural ceremony in ways that are exciting and challenging to the divisions between these often separated spheres of creating social change. My main goal in this section is to analyze at this shift and its relationship with a concomitant shift in Indigenous politics toward performing sovereignty, rather than seeking political recognition from settler governments.<sup>1</sup>

When I begin to discuss the notion of “performing sovereignty,”<sup>2</sup> I often turn to its opposite in visual culture: that is, images of First Nations children in what I call “assimilation diptychs.” The first photo is of a First Nations child in traditional clothing and hairstyle, and the second photo shows the same child after attending a residential school with a Western-style suit and short hair.<sup>3</sup> These before-and-after photos were meant to advertise the success of the schools in civilizing and assimilating First Nations into American and/or British culture. The purpose of the schools was described by the first Prime Minister of Canada John A. Macdonald:

When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents, who are savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly impressed upon myself, as head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.

*(1107–1108)*

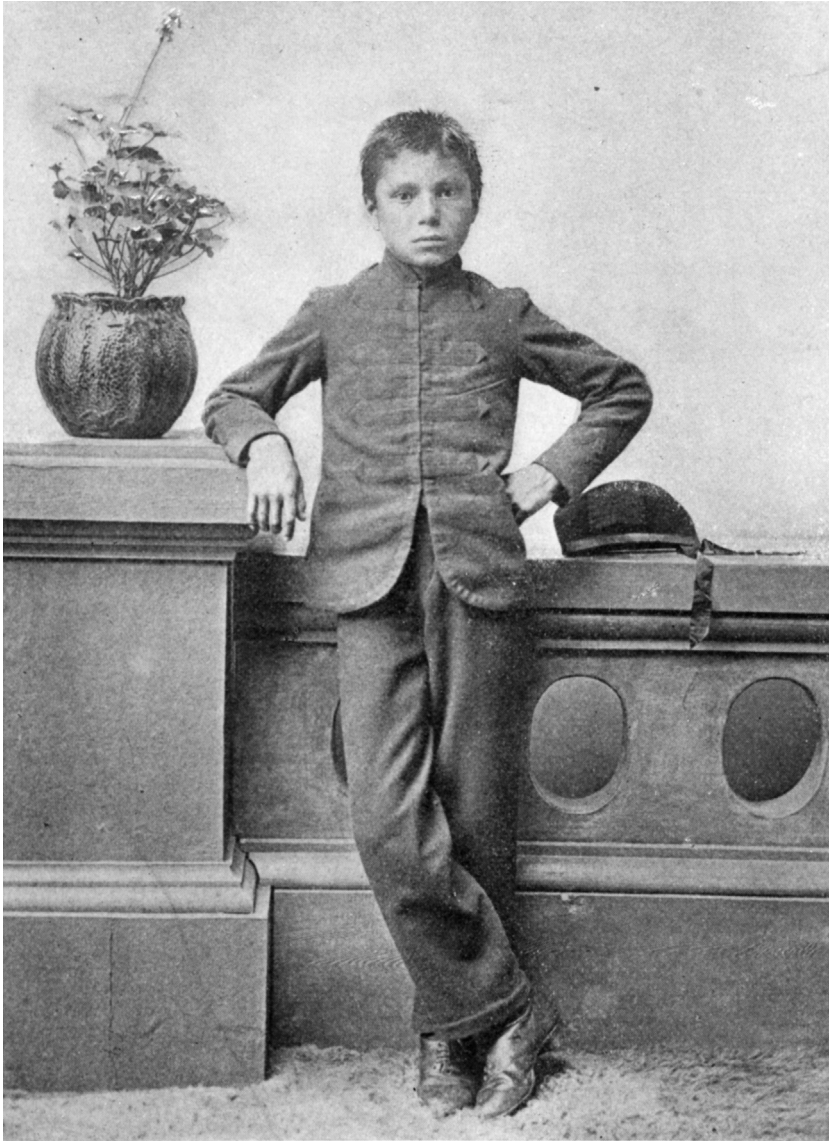
The schools forced Christianity, English or French, and European, Euro-American, or Euro-Canadian culture onto the children, often through extremely coercive means. Survivors of the schools often speak about them as if they were prisons for children. Despite the rampant abuse and cultural genocide that the schools represent, many First Nations people were able to survive and become leaders in their communities. The schools created deep identity crises because many no longer felt at home in any culture or space, but, at the same time, many became fiercely committed to holding onto their cultures because of the violence of its attempted removal in the schools.



Courtesy Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan.

Thomas Moore before his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan in 1897.

In the diptych of Thomas Moore, the fault lines of cultural genocide hiding behind the discourse of assimilation, inclusion, advancement, and education become clear. Moore is Anishinaabe from the Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nation in Saskatchewan, Canada. He became a student of Regina Indian Residential School in 1891 at the age of eight. Four years later, he was sent home with tuberculosis (a common occurrence in the schools). He was named number 22 in the school because he was the 22nd student enrolled. Moore died at the age of 12, one of over 3,000 children known to have died because of the poor care and conditions at the schools. It is important to start thinking about performing sovereignty from the position of attempted cultural genocide that included schools, but also policies like the Indian Act and laws that banned



Courtesy Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan.

Thomas Moore after his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan in 1897.

cultural expression until 1951. The last school closed in 1996 (Joseph; Milloy). The act of dressing up and performing “whiteness” in this photo belies the very real tenacity of First Nations people to hold onto their cultural practices. Artists coming out of the schools—artists including Alex Janvier, Norval Morrisseau, and Robert Houle—were part of a cultural renaissance that sought to have First Nations cultures survive for future generations, while also innovating and adapting new modes of creation, in particular painting on canvas and installation art.

The most recent political movement called Idle No More,<sup>4</sup> or the Round Dance Revolution, swept across Canada in 2012 in the form of a cultural response to a series of new laws that deregulated environmental protection of waters and challenged First Nations sovereignty over

education and more. In my own involvement, I had decided to work with an amazing group of women: Charm Logan, Tannis Nielsen, Crystal Sinclair, Rebecca Tobabadung, and Grandmother Pauline Shirt. We worked together for three years and eventually were joined by Tori Cress, Shiri Pasternak, and many more. Organizing groups like ours were in most cities and First Nation reserves across Canada. A host of Round Dances hit malls across the nation, which inspired United States-based groups to join the movement, as well as sparking international round dances from Siberia to Croatia. This was one of the first times a ceremony was used as the symbol and main action of a sustained political movement asserting First Nations' sovereignty. In order to perform round dances in Toronto, we asked permission from Prairie Elders whose culture developed and performed the Round Dance. We received permission to perform them in the winter, which is not the regular season for them. We needed permission to break the cultural protocols of the ceremony. The dance itself, the story goes, came about to heal a young woman who could not stop grieving the death of her mother (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 21–27). It made perfect sense that a healing dance to turn mourning into celebration became the performance of protest in the streets to the continued assimilation policies of the Canadian government. It was a secularization of a ceremony but also the sacralization of public protest. The ceremony and the revival of Indigenous cultures was the basis for the movement and what continues to drive it today, as a result. Instead of knocking on the government's door for recognition, Indigenous people and their allies in the street were enacting cultural sovereignty through their daily actions. These actions of doing ceremony but also of building houses on traditional territories and teaching their children their languages, all form a network of performing sovereignty that ensures cultural genocide fails.

Two years before *Idle No More*, in 2010, I curated the exhibition *Mapping Resistance*, for which invited performance artists Rebecca Belmore, James Luna, Tanya Lukin Linklater, and Archer Pechawis, as well as storytellers Leanne Simpson and Doug Williams, to respond to the



Photo and courtesy Hayden King.

*Idle No More Round Dance for Indigenous Rights in Toronto's Dundas Square, 2012.*

twentieth anniversary of the Kanehsatà:ke resistance, also called the Oka Crisis of 1990. The Mohawk community of Kanehsatà:ke went head-to-head with the Quebec police and then with the Canadian army for 78 days in order to protect their burial and ceremonial grounds from becoming a golf course for the town of Oka. This standoff created a sense of unity among Indigenous nations, which in turn triggered actions of support and solidarity across the country. A lasting outcome was the devastating reality that the Canadian government would send in the army after its supposed citizens. On the twentieth anniversary of the Kanehsatà:ke resistance, I wanted to bring together a range of artists from North America to make site-specific work in public spaces as a way of physically claiming space for Indigenous bodies that are normally unseen or removed.

The late, great James Luna decided to use a World War II memorial site for his piece. He chose this site in part because it marks a war, and none of our wars are marked on our lands in this way. He began by talking to the crowd, performing a healing ceremony, before he changed into clothing that signified the Native warrior. A Native person in camo clothing, sporting a bandana over his face and holding a gun, became the new stereotype of a Native warrior after 1990 (Smyth). Once dressed, he performs a scene from Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin's film *270 Years of Resistance*. Obomsawin was the only filmmaker to stay behind the barricades with the Mohawk community and film their perspective for the whole 78 days. Luna suddenly yelled, "Everyone get down," and the audience dropped to their stomachs. With three words, Luna shifted the audience perspective. We were now lying on the ground with the Mohawk community getting shot at by the Canadian army. Suddenly our sympathy was with the Mohawks—with the people who are most vulnerable and precarious. Afterward, he burned the warrior clothing. The Kanehsatà:ke community still has to deal with the aftermath of the standoff of 1990—they live with it daily in their families. On top of that, the land issue is still unresolved. The burning of the warrior outfit was a way to cathartically release that pain and



Photo by Elizabeth Thippawong. Courtesy Wanda Nambush, Curator, Indigenous Art, Art Gallery of Ontario.

James Luna, *Untitled performance for Mapping Resistances* curated by Wanda Nambush, 2010.



Photo by Elizabeth Thippawong. Courtesy Wanda Nanibush, Curator, Indigenous Art, Art Gallery of Ontario.

*James Luna, Untitled performance for Mapping Resistances curated by Wanda Nanibush, 2010.*

experience of violence. All the anger, pain, loss was released momentarily in a small ceremony with fire. Often these artists walk this line when they are ceremonially engaged in the world: it bleeds over into their art practice. Ceremony and art join in the mode of healing. Luna offered a prayer at the end. He believes in the power of art to affect and to effect people. It is not mere commentary but an active agent in our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits. We are acted upon by the work. Luna demonstrated the transformative potential of art.

I curated a second performance art exhibition in 2012 called *House of Wayward Spirits*, which was dedicated to the idea of cultural change. It was a house made for the wayward, the contrary, and the transformative. A series of performance art works were created by Adrian Stimson, Rebecca Belmore, Archer Pechawis, Lori Blondeau, The Contrary Collective, and James Luna.



Courtesy Adrian Stimson.

*Adrian Stimson as Buffalo Boy, Buffalo Boy's Coal Jubilee, 2012. Photo documentation.*

Two performances took place in Queens Park (the park of Ontario's provincial government) the day before and the day of Canada Day (Monday, July 1). The idea was to not ask permission, much as the Idle No More flash mob round dances occurred without permits as a way to acknowledge that all land is Indigenous and all restrictions to its use are by foreign law.

Adrian Stimson's *Buffalo Boy's Coal Jubilee* played with the structure of the Queen's Silver Jubilee.<sup>5</sup> Buffalo Boy is a persona Stimson deploys to challenge outmoded stereotypes, to invert colonial values, to parody power structures, to queer history, and to tap spiritual and cultural legacies of the Blackfoot peoples to whom he belongs. Stimson chose a bronze monument in the park that featured an oversized horse ridden by King Edward VII. On the walkway to the statues, in coal, Stimson wrote, "We shall all serve Buffalo Boy." Buffalo Boy, as Shaman Exterminator (Buffalo Boy dressed as a shaman), strolled to the tune of "Pomp and Circumstance" with his Buffalo Robe and fishnets, while images of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee flash by on a large screen. He disrobed and laid his Buffalo Robe over audience member Rebecca Belmore in honor of all the dead who have suffered from the power struggles of colonial governments and settlers. Donning pearls, a buffalo corset, and G-string, Buffalo Boy saunters over to the King Edward II statue. The phallic nature of the statue is brought to the fore by the way he plays erotically with the horse, swinging suggestively between its legs. He uses eroticism both to point out colonial desire and to displace its power. The performance showed that kings and queens are no match for Buffalo Boy. However, he did not just assume monarchic power; his was a Coal Jubilee. Buffalo Boy buried himself in a huge pile of coal in a state of mourning for the loss of health and of land to the coal industry. The coal fueled the trains that allowed for settlement of Blackfoot territory and ultimately allowed for the extermination of the Buffalo, the animal most necessary to Blackfoot survival. Buffalo Boy linked the extermination of the Buffalo to the attempted genocide of Blackfoot people. The performance is connected to contemporary political protests against the extraction economy. Stimson was performing the dirty side of development. It is Indigenous land and bodies that suffer the consequences of the extraction economy.



Courtesy Adrian Stimson.

*Adrian Stimson as Buffalo Boy, Buffalo Boy's Coal Jubilee, 2012. Photo documentation.*



Courtesy Adrian Stimson.

*Adrian Stimson as Buffalo Boy, Buffalo Boy's Coal Jubilee, 2012. Photo documentation.*

Artists also used performance within political events themselves to bring new connections among art, ceremony, and protest. Artist and hereditary Chief Beau Dick, following the lead of his daughter's involvement, wanted to connect his practice to the Idle No More movement or at least make his practice useful to it. As a result, he created *Cutting the Copper* in 2014. Dick decided to take a Kwakwaka'wakw ceremony that had not been performed for decades and recreate it on Parliament Hill in Ottawa—the site of the Parliament of Canada—in order to transform the tradition for today's challenges. The original ceremony involved the breaking



of a copper—a metal plaque traditionally used to measure the status, wealth, and power of Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs—in order to signify the breaking of agreements and promises. The breaking of the copper meant shame for the receiver of the broken copper. Dick was actively saying the Canadian government had broken its promises, agreements, and treaties to the Earth and to the Indigenous people and should be ashamed of itself. What struck me most about the ceremony—artwork—protest was the sound the men made as they tried to break the copper, which is a very difficult and physically demanding process. Their yells sounded like anger but also like sadness. The physical act itself was a visualization and enactment of the trauma of colonialism and the struggle against it. This ceremony is a governance structure that shows an understanding of how broken political agreements or oppressive laws physically affect the body and how a value system that does not acknowledge the importance of the Earth should bring about a feeling of shame. The work also questions political movements that do not act according to the values of the society that one is fighting for. In other words, if I am fighting for an Anishinaabe existence, then my own actions must be Anishinaabe in their values and effects. It is also a meaningful gesture illustrating how our traditions can be adapted for here and now.

Similarly but in a gallery context, Ursula Johnson created the work *We Are Indian (L'nuwelti'k)* in 2012. She toured Canada asking for volunteers to sit for her in a live performance. Johnson would weave a black ash bust around your head and shoulders. When I participated, she explained everything she was going to do and said to tell her if I was uncomfortable at all. As the black ash strips were woven to the point of covering my face, she made sure I was still comfortable. She has created over 200 busts so far. She attaches a tag to your bust with your name and Indian status. In Canada, a person needs to be registered as an Indian under the law to be considered a First Nations person legally (Vowel). Johnson draws attention to how the law divides us, but in actuality when we travel around, meeting one another, our acceptance is not based on a legal technicality. The law is meant to eventually get rid of Indian status by slowly using



Courtesy Franziska Heinze.

Beau Dick, *Cutting the Copper* performance, 2014.



Courtesy Franziska Heinze

*Beau Dick, Cutting the Copper performance, 2014.*

blood quantum to remove people's status. Johnson uses the traditional medium of Mi'kmaw black ash basketry ("History—Wisqoq") that she learned from her great grandmother but in a new contemporary way. The medium allows her to show cultural continuity and the relevance of ancestral knowledge while also accounting for change. *We Are All Indian* performs this "radical inclusivity" (L'Hirondelle) both through the act of its creation and when the busts are all exhibited together (Johnson "L'nuwelti'k [We Are Indian]").

The Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore, like James Luna, has birthed contemporary Indigenous performance art as a site-specific, public, embodied, affective, political art practice. As part of both the performance art exhibitions previously discussed, she created works that brought out Anishinaabe ways of being, seeing, and doing in highly aesthetic, beautiful works that also challenged societal commitments and acts. In *X*, her response to the 20th anniversary of the Kanehsatà:ke resistance of 1990, she painted more than 10-foot-tall "Xs" on a public wall, while her assistant constantly erased them. The performance had many facets, but the main thrust was this action of continually marking and erasing, a colonial condition most First Nations people find themselves in. Many of our ancestors signed treaties with an "X" because they did not write English. Those documents became broken promises and allowed for a considerable theft of land to the point where, now, First Nations have only 2% of all the land in Canada (Pasternak "Arthur Manuel's Battle").

For *House of Wayward Spirits*, Belmore created *Facing the Monumental*. Belmore thought that Anishinaabe would not build monuments and that, instead, our monument is the 150-year-old Indigenous tree in Queen's Park that stands witness to colonialism but still survives. Belmore wrapped the tree in craft paper, which made it look like it was wearing a gown, and in the process created a temporary monument to Mother Earth. Near the end of the performance, she placed an Indigenous woman in the tree, making woman and tree seem as one, and then sits contemplatively in front. As an ending twist, gunshots start to ring out in the park as the speakers

play the 21-gun salute. Many of us started to weep, thinking of all the violence our women face, that the Earth faces, in the name of nationalism, capitalism, and colonialism. The affective relationship created in her durational, quiet, and beautiful works allow an audience to experience loss, celebration, freedom, oppression, and much more that can be cathartic, transformational, futurist, challenging, confrontational, and emotional. It allows me to ask how change happens in people's bodies and hearts and how that is taken into a political realm.

During *Idle No More* (2012–present), many actions were deployed that mirrored ceremonial structures or artistic practices. We held candlelight marches to honor the global resistance fighters, our ancestors, and those we have lost to oppression. We conducted water ceremonies led by Grandmother Pauline Shirt to heal the water but also to help people develop an affective relationship with the water: to feel its spirit and our relationship to it. I am convinced that people need to physically experience relationships in order to develop the value system that sees the Earth, animals, and all of creation as a web of relations. The bleeding of boundaries between art, protest, and ceremony is the consequence of an Indigenous worldview becoming more mainstream, even if it remains largely unacknowledged. The Indigenous worldview could be called post-Cartesian, but it existed before Descartes was born. The system we live in is based on valuing reason, rationalism, and the Enlightenment project. We are still engaged in this project, especially institutionally. This includes a mistaken connection of vision with the location of knowledge. We value what we can see and know with reason and facts. I have been taught by many knowledge keepers that Anishinaabe believe the human is made up of the mind, body, and spirit. Part of living a good life is learning to keep them in balance.<sup>6</sup> When we think of knowledge, we bring all three of these aspects together under the notion of *debwewin*, or truth. Truth,



Courtesy Wanda Nambush, Curator, Indigenous Art, Art Gallery of Ontario.

Rebecca Belmore, *Facing the Monumental*, 2012. Photo documentation.

in Anishinaabe teachings, can be arrived at only if you engage the mind, body, and spirit. It is the heart knowledge that connects everything together. Emotion, truth, intuition, and the unconscious are central. In the West, the spirit is externalized as a substantive being—a substance—a being up there, for me. Spirit, for Anishinaabe, connects us to all of creation. It connects my body to my mother's body to the Earth's body. Colonial trauma breaks the connections between these bodies but also has developed new pathways to rebuilding those same connections. So much art practice already works in the area of heart knowledge. Artists often work from a place of intuition and experimentation. As a beginning, all I am able to do is connect the relationship of the body to ceremony, the relationship of the body to politics, and the relationship of the body to art, and examine how the interpenetrations of each into one another can transform us into beings with an ethic of care. This worldview understands the role of heart knowledge in linking the mind, body, and spirit together. How is this truth creating real possibilities for a future that honors life, in itself?

### Notes

- 1 Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism whereby indigenous populations are replaced by a settler government, which, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty. Settler colonial states include Canada, the United States, Australia, and South Africa. Settler colonial theory has been productively used to analyze conflicts in Israel, Kenya, and Argentina and in tracing the colonial legacies of empires that founded settlement colonies.
- 2 I started using this phrase 18 years ago to speak to the notion that sovereignty is an embodied practice that has to continually be created through this very embodiment of culture in daily practice. It is my effort to grapple with Judith Butler's notion of performativity in the context of Indigenous sovereignty. I wrote about it in my MVS thesis and exhibition called *Sovereign Acts* (2012, University of Toronto).
- 3 In 1837, the British government decided that assimilation was the forward strategy for indigenous residents of the colonies. In Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, the Indian Residential School system was created as means to forcibly assimilate indigenous children into Western culture. Attendance was mandatory; therefore Indian Agents regularly removed children from aboriginal communities. Many of them never saw their families again. As a rule, students were punished for speaking their native languages or keeping any indigenous traditions, and some were subjected to medical experimentation and sterilization. The last residential school in Canada didn't close until 1996 (Feir 433–480).
- 4 Idle No More has become one of the largest Indigenous mass movements in Canadian history, organizing hundreds of teach-ins, rallies, and protests that have changed the social and political landscape of Canada. The movement was initiated by activists Nina Wilson, Sheelah Mclean, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon in November 2012, during a teach-in at Station 20 West in Saskatoon called "Idle No More." It was held in response to the Harper government's introduction of Bill C-45, implementing numerous measures, many of which weaken environmental protection laws (Kino-nda-niimi Collective).
- 5 The Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II was held in 1977 and celebrated with a series of parades, parties, and religious ceremonies. In honor of the occasion, rose gardens were planted in Ontario's Queen's Park.
- 6 Our cultural knowledge is passed on orally and is learned in relationship. Some people have written some of it down. I have learned from my grandfather Howard McCue, my mother Caroline McCue, my 17 brothers and sisters, and Grandmothers Shirley Williams, Edna Maniowabi, and Pauline Shirt, to name a small number of all the knowledge keepers of many nations who have taught me so much.

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