

The Center Will Not Hold

Ethnic mimicry in the arts:
colonialism's final frontier

BY JACQUELINE KEELER

WE LIVE IN A WORLD largely constructed by the wants and dreams of white men. When we turn on the radio, we hear their voices, and when we go to the movies, we see their dreams as if “written in lightning,” to paraphrase Woodrow Wilson. He uttered this phrase in 1915 after viewing D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, the first film to be screened at the White House. The film, notorious for making heroes of the Ku Klux Klan, swelled the ranks of a new iteration of the KKK and led to the lynching deaths of several hundred black Americans.

Even today, more than a century after Griffith’s film, search Netflix’s catalog and a sea of white male protagonists and their stories greet you.

There is little balance to this perspective available to non-white Americans. And we often fail to appreciate how unusual this situation is in human history. Back to the dawn of civilization, stories featuring cultural heroes, a heightened version of ourselves, have been part and parcel of the human experience. Although my Navajo grandparents were raised in a traditional Navajo society defined by stories of the hero twins slaying monsters that preyed upon the people, my son must view the world through mostly white and male heroes. And if Hollywood made a film about the twins, they would likely recast them as white. In a society predicated on a history of white supremacy, white men are always the center of any world, even a Native one.

In the art world, the centering of the white perspective has taken the form of ethnic fraud. Often called “Pretendians,” “fake Indians,” or now, after Rachel Dolezal, “transracial,” they pervade the space that is supposed to provide artistic expression to marginalized Native peoples.

In 2017, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City hosted *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World*, a major retrospective based on the Indigeneity of the artist, despite Durham possessing no provable connection to any Indigenous nation. Brushing aside concerns by Cherokee artists and scholars, organizer Anne Ellegood, senior curator

of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, accused the Cherokee Nation of being “colonized” for interfering with the right of someone—who by all appearances and genealogical research is a white man—to claim their identity and profit from it.

The title of this article is a take on the line from the William Butler Yeats poem, “The Second Coming:” “Things fall apart; The centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world[.]” Yeats wrote it in the period after World War I, when it became apparent that the old order symbolized by the British Empire was coming to an end, and as the Irish Republic was being born, finally throwing off the chains of hundreds of years of English colonialism.

In the context of ethnic fraud, what will the center not hold? I think most would agree that the center of Native American art should not contain a white man exerting his privilege to be whatever he wants. Indigenous identity cannot be so assumable that it is merely another spoil of colonialism.



How can the colonial power curtail its own people’s excesses, encouraged and created by a system of domination its very existence represents? For the past thirty years, this premise has been tested after Congress, lobbied hard by Native American leaders, passed the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 (originally passed in 1935), outlawing Native American ethnic theft in the arts.

“The Indian Arts and Crafts Act proved effective when the amendments were enacted in 1990,” says Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne, Hodulgee Muscogee), president of the Morning Star Institute. “Why? Because they carried the potential for a subpoena for not only the person falsely claiming to be Indian, but for those promoting a person as Native who is not. That made the galleries and museums and auction houses take notice, and many stopped carrying, promoting, collecting, selling pseudo-Indians’ work. News about those things—and exposés of specific pseudo-Indians—stopped a lot of the fakes’ schemes.”

The federal law instituted stiff fines and lengthy prison stays for anyone misrepresenting fraudulent Indian art as authentic. It also defined “Indian” as a member of a federally or state-recognized Indian tribe, or alternately, someone who is certified as an “Indian artisan” by a tribe. Enforcement of the law has been uneven over the years and not enforceable overseas. In the case of Durham, some suspect his 1994 move to Europe was to avoid prosecution. A report to the House Committee

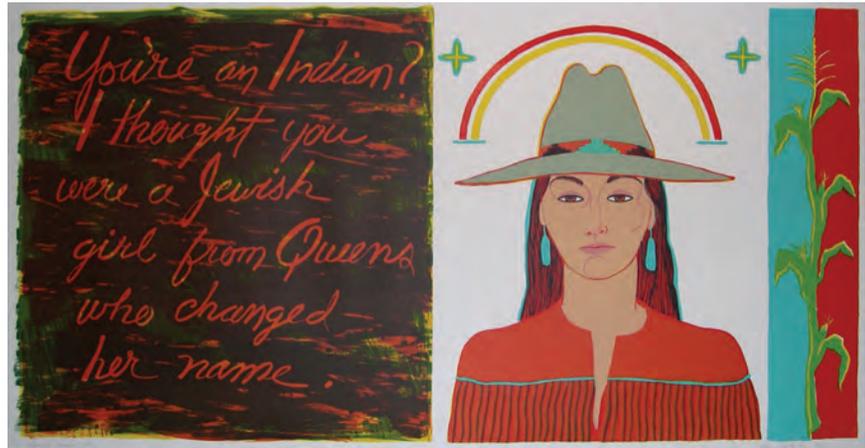
on Natural Resources found that in the first twenty years of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act's existence, only five people were found guilty under the law and two of those cases were later dismissed.

Recently, however, the US Fish and Wildlife Service carried out "Operation Al Zuni," the largest bust of a distributor of fake Navajo and Zuni jewelry in history. In October 2015, three New Mexicans were charged with selling copies made in the Philippines and caught with molds used to copy authentic Native American jewelry. Federal agents shut down streets and raided four stores near the plaza in Santa Fe, which raised questions and alarm among tourists. The same fate befell Gallery 8 and Galleria Azul in Albuquerque, owned by Nael Ali, one of the men charged. In August of this year, the men were sentenced. Ali was sentenced to six months in prison and to pay \$9,048.78 in restitution. His supplier, Mohammed Manasra, was sentenced to two days in jail, forfeited 5,286 pieces of fake jewelry, and was ordered to pay a \$500 fine. These were not white people pretending to be Indian artists, but fraudulent people profiting from Native art traditions nonetheless.

These penalties are all far lower than the law allows, but hopefully sent a message to buyers and sellers in the Santa Fe marketplace. All told, Ali and four others who conspired with him, according to a federal indictment, sold or attempted to sell more than \$320,000 worth of fraudulent Native American jewelry. Senator Tom Udall, in a 2017 field hearing for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, claimed that 80 percent of art marketed and sold as Native American is counterfeit.



Three months before the sentencing of Ali and Manasra, the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts announced in a membership meeting that it might survive only another five years. The venerable 97-year-old institution brings in about \$120 million a year in business to the city of Santa Fe during its annual Indian Market, yet a yearly deficit of more than \$100,000 per year makes continuing operations unsustainable in the long run. The organization sets a high standard for authenticating Native American art, requiring federal enrollment in (or desig-



Kay WalkingStick, *You're an Indian?* 1995. Lithograph, 20 × 40 in. Edition of 30.

nation as a Tribal Artisan by) a tribe or Alaska Native Regional Corporation to sell at their market. New director Ira Wilson (Diné) has extensive experience from years of working as a Native American art expert and lead buyer at Shumakolowa Native Arts. At Shumakolowa (located in Albuquerque's Indian Pueblo Cultural Center), Wilson also educated the public about real Native American art and jewelry by conducting a "Real or Fake?" workshop on how to spot inauthentic pieces.

"Imitations and fakes take money out of Native American people's hands," Wilson said in a 2016 interview with the *Rio Rancho Observer*. "It's affecting our industry at millions of dollars a year."

And these millions that could be going to some of the most impoverished communities in the country.

"Unemployment on Pine Ridge is at 75 percent, and Navajo Nation over 40 percent," Liz Wallace, a Maidu/Washoe/Navajo jeweler, says. "Pretendians hijack the narrative of what we are about and the ways we are always fighting for visibility about crises that are arising, like Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women [MMIW]. All of this culture-vulturing keeps us actual Natives in poverty."

Native organizations like the National Congress of American Indians have tried to educate the public as to the true political nature of Native American identity. Native Americans are not just an ethnic or racial group, but citizens of pre-existing and persisting nations within the United States. While First Nations people in Canada and Indigenous peoples in Central and South America share many of the same struggles as Native Americans in the United States, they do not share directly in the political fate of federally recognized tribes.



Kay WalkingStick in her Easton, Pennsylvania studio. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Indigenous nations in the United States have a common political history of nation-to-nation relationships with the U.S., some of which are governed by international law (treaties), and others by precedents set by federal Indian law, a subset of US constitutional law. This means that the legal outcomes, both beneficial or harmful (and they are mostly the latter, particularly in the Supreme Court), of a federal case filed by one tribe are shared by all 573 nations. The same applies to treaties as well. If one tribe attempts to exert a treaty right in court and fails, all of the tribes that are signees lose the same right. Native nations and their citizens are, simply put, in the same political boat and sink or swim together.

Over and over again Americans fail to comprehend the political aspect of Native American identity, instead falling back to romantic stereotypes that are easily appropriated for their enjoyment. Little consideration is given to the role that political recognition of Native Nations' sovereignty plays in stopping the slide towards the "disappearing Indian," riding off

into the sunset, a sentimental image that soft-pedals genocide. This lack of awareness is not their fault, but a result of hundreds of years of US policy to cloud the existence of pre-existing Native Nations and their inconvenient claims to land and resources.

Native artists representing Indigenous nations, therefore, share in concrete ways, both personally and through their family networks and communities, the consequences of these federal relationships—whether that is health-care for vulnerable family members through the federally funded Indian Health Service, or housing and economic development in their home communities.



"Something I talk about is semiotic sovereignty," artist Mateo Romero (Cochiti Pueblo) says. "How we control [and] occupy our space in the art space." Semiotic sovereignty refers to the use of signs and symbols by a Native artist to reclaim sovereign cultural space that colonialism has been focused on taking. However, in a recent interview in *El Palacio* (bit.ly/mateoromero), Romero notes that "In absence of our own people generating this sovereign or conceptional

space, some members of mainstream culture just take it."

The visibility of iconic expressions of sovereignty has little reach beyond galleries and museums. Social media sharing through Instagram, for example, has made it possible for individual artists to reach audiences directly. However, a "breakthrough" Native social media star has not risen to the level of crossing over to mainstream media and genuinely shaping public consciousness in a culture-changing way, although Native political organizers have successfully utilized semiotic sovereignty through memes and hashtags to bring worldwide attention to Native issues like mascots, Standing Rock and MMIW.

Some claiming Native descendance have used the history of genocide in this country to account for their inability to document their purported Native American ancestry. The space occupied by many with such marginal connections to Native identity vis-à-vis the millions of federally enrolled tribal members in this country is striking. America Meredith

(Cherokee Nation) of *First American Art Magazine* charted the citations in JSTOR of “Who Represents Cherokee Art in Scholarly Literature?” Fully 81 out of 143 citations were to Jimmie Durham, an artist with no proven ties to the Cherokee Nation or people. Kay WalkingStick, an actual citizen of the Cherokee Nation, came in second, with 18 citations.

So, what really is going on here? After all, a Native person like myself, who is one-sixteenth English by descent, could never displace all English artists in the London art world.

The Cherokee Nation requires only proof of a single ancestor on the 1893 Dawes rolls to enroll, not blood quantum, and has over 355,000 citizens, and there are additionally two other federally recognized Cherokee tribes. So, all things being equal, most of the artists cited in scholarly articles about Cherokee art would be citizens of one of these tribes, and those possessing extremely marginal identities would occupy a minimal footprint. But the opposite is true. Once again, why?

“By falsely claiming to be Indians, they find that many new doors of opportunity are open to them in their careers,” says artist David Bradley (Minnesota Chippewa), well-known for over 30 years for his fight against ethnic fraud. “But for centuries, non-Indians practiced genocide on Indian people and stole nearly everything that Indians have of value, and now that our very identity has become a marketable commodity, they want to steal that too.”

Liz Wallace wants to do a photography project and call it *My Grandmother Was a Teutonic Princess*. “I’ll put on a fake blonde wig and everything, like those girls on Instagram. And say things like, ‘Can you see it in my cheekbones? I actually have a little Swedish ancestry.’”

However, unlike Wallace, many seek to claim an identity they cannot prove. Just before the 2018 midterms, Senator Elizabeth Warren unveiled her DNA results to silence President Trump’s claims she was lying about being part Native. The implications, however, of her reliance on minuscule DNA was that Native identity is race-based; a key Republican critique of tribal sovereignty. Just weeks before, a federal judge in Texas found the Indian Child Welfare Act to be “race-based” and thus, unconstitutional. The Cherokee Nation declared Warren was “undermining tribal interests with her continued claims of tribal heritage.” In this way a seemingly benign desire to be “Indian” serves a more insidious purpose: furthering the political extinguishment of tribes.

And make no mistake, the problem Indigenous nations pose is political, because it is through a political status as

nations under international law that Native nations possess legal claims to the land the United State occupies. And it is the political identity of Native Americans that poses the greatest threat to American hegemony and why Native people are by any measure—via youth suicide, murder, rape, and poverty rates, et al.—the most vulnerable people living within the boundaries of the most powerful nation on earth. Disappear the people, and the nation disappears. Replace them with white men pretending to be them, and the colonialism becomes a closed loop.



There are signs, although scant, of a positive shift: Increased enforcement of the law sends a message, as does greater awareness and education. But the greatest lesson to be learned is really from Indigenous cultures themselves. I remember my lala, my Dakota great-uncle Phil Lane, Sr. telling me that our ancestors took cues on how to be from the natural world. They looked around and saw everything in the world was round. Trees were round, plants’ stems are round. So we used that round shape to order ourselves in what we called in Dakota a *hocoka*, a circle. And the greatest expression of this was the *tiospaye*, the circular encampment of tipis of relatives we once lived in. And across that circle created by relationships and obligations, our ancestors created a world that made them fully human. No person occupied the center of that circle. If anything could be said to occupy that space, it would be the love and respect they held for each other. These are ideas of how to be a people; I learned this from my Dakota family. And this is why true Native art has so much to give the world.

A quote from my great-great-great aunt Ella Deloria in the book *Speaking of Indians* encapsulates this:

“I can safely say that the ultimate aim of Dakota life, stripped of accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must be a good relative. No Dakota who has participated in that life will dispute that. . . . Without that aim and the constant struggle to attain it, the people would no longer be Dakotas in truth. They would no longer even be human. To be a good Dakota, then, was to be humanized, civilized.” ■

Jacqueline Keeler is a Diné/Thanktonwan Dakota writer and contributor to *The Nation*, *Yes!*, and many other publications. Her book *The Edge of Morning: Native Voices Speak for the Bears Ears* is available from Torrey House Press and the forthcoming *Standing Rock to the Bundy Standoff: Occupation, Native Sovereignty, and the Fight for Sacred Landscapes* will be released in 2019.