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Visualizing Sovereignty in  
the Time of Biometric Sensors

In 2002, I was called in to act as a guest curator for the permanent exhibitions of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which was scheduled to open in early September 2004. The backstory on the NMAI's formation is now the subject of hundreds of articles and books,<sup>1</sup> and the inside story is slowly making its way to the historic record.<sup>2</sup> A museum that took an act of Congress to justify its existence today stands as the dominant imaginary of the Indigenous Americas.<sup>3</sup> NMAI has eclipsed the iconic and often stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples by its prominent location on what has been described as the last piece of available land on the Washington Mall.<sup>4</sup> It is ironic, as Indigenous peoples in the Americas, that we are the last civilization to be witnessed within the procession of America's monuments of conquest.

The NMAI's presence simultaneously recognizes Indigenous survivance while underscoring our colonial subjugation.<sup>5</sup> The echoes of Southwestern canyons in the building are juxtaposed against classical European architectural tombs, creating a renewed Indigenous alterity. The historical authority of the Greco-Roman and high-modernist architecture of surrounding museums reinforces the idea of the "natu-

ral” Native, instead of appreciating a history of continuously inventive Indigenous civilizations. My work on this project directly impacted my understanding of how the concept of sovereignty is located within “Indian Country” or “Indigenous space” in the Americas. Working against this problematic canvas, I struggled to make a curatorial intervention regarding the United States’ colonial-settler metanarrative about Indigenous presence.

Museum management refused established museological categories like fine and folk art or anthropological and material culture as organizing principles, which resulted in a confused reception by an audience expecting conventional classification.<sup>6</sup> Instead, multiple Indigenous worldviews were brought forward as cosmological stories but were set in apolitical frames. Although a single or linear history was appropriately rejected, it was replaced instead with fragmentary, decontextualized, community-based stories. The collection represented the voices of contemporary Indigenous people in elaborate media installations that suffered due to the absence of a more direct discussion about the devastation that occurred during contact.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than framing Indigenous experience as ongoing victimization, the direction of the museum was to demonstrate how Native people have prevailed or how they express “self-determination.” Armed with generational insight into the complex orchestration of Haudenosaunee (Iroquoian) governance, I recognized that the concept of sovereignty was instrumental for our continuance and renewal. I first presented sketches for a collection anchored in twentieth-century expressions of Haudenosaunee sovereignty. I wasn’t interested in authenticating Haudenosaunee existence but rather in taking seriously a civilization that has been thousands of years in existence. The Haudenosaunee have survived with political and cultural knowledge that makes possible theorization and criticism. Additionally, my focus on the Haudenosaunee was multilayered—historically, the Haudenosaunee played a critical role in the formation of concepts of democracy in the emergence of the United States and today are leaders in the forum on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>8</sup>

The museum rejected this approach, saying that the Haudenosaunee are not sovereign but quasi-sovereign.<sup>9</sup> I rationalized that the museum is funded in part by U.S. taxes, and the concept of Indigenous sovereignty is perceived as an erosion of U.S. authority over Indigenous autonomy.<sup>10</sup> This experience revealed how seriously the Haudenosaunee experience the idea of sovereignty while underscoring its problematic place as Native imaginary in North America. In response to the rejection of the use of the term *sover-*

*eignty* at NMAI, as a decolonizing strategy I argued that any colonial-settler nation can define the terms of Indigenous sovereignty within its own legal system, but that does not mean that Indigenous nations must accept those interpretations. The use of the concept of sovereignty by Indigenous civilizations is about self-defined renewal and resistance. A compromise position was reached. A modest display based on a quote from Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred, which illustrated the language of self-determination instead of sovereignty, framed some of the installations for the permanent contemporary gallery, *Our Lives*, and the museum opened on schedule.<sup>11</sup>

My experience at NMAI revealed how conflicted the concept of sovereignty is understood by Indigenous peoples across the Americas. For me, sovereignty is not an abstract legal concept but is part of my family and community experience. I was raised to understand my own subjectivity as a citizen of the Tuscarora “Nation,” which is part of the Six Nations or Haudenosaunee. The concept of sovereignty has become a unifying political strategy among the Haudenosaunee that has been instrumental in our ongoing struggles to maintain our communities, land, and traditions. We simultaneously appropriated the European word *sovereignty* and rejected a U.S. legal interpretation of it while creating a uniquely Haudenosaunee understanding. This position is based on the awareness that the Haudenosaunee assert a nation-to-nation relationship with the colonial-settler governments of the United States and Canada. Sovereignty within our communities has always been more than a manifestation of Western law; instead, it is a concept that embodies our philosophical, political, and renewal strategies. Until my experience at NMAI, I saw sovereignty as a “naturalized,” unquestioned concept central to my Haudenosaunee contemporary identity.

My experience with NMAI is directly related to a discussion about sovereignty because the museum is the most visible site of encounter available in North America in which non-Native people can engage with a contemporary Indigenous perspective. As part of the mission of the museum, a promise was made to address the objectification of Indigenous peoples by giving voice to contemporary Native people. And I would still defend the position that the appropriation of the term *sovereignty* was and remains a critical source of self-determination for Indigenous peoples globally. An exhibition on sovereignty could have been very useful in teasing out its multiple meanings and applications today in Indian Country. Further, Indigenous artists are calling for the use of this idea beyond a legal frame and shifting the discussion to an orchestration.

NMAI could have helped ignite a national dialogue about Indigeneity and sovereignty reflected in the existing and ongoing work of Indigenous artists and cultural strategists. Additionally, the reality that the United States reached a zenith of power in the twentieth century and mined from the cultural and material heritage of millions of Indigenous people throughout the Americas needs to be reconciled. What better location than the Smithsonian NMAI?

The appropriation of a European notion of sovereignty was a strategy to resist the further dispossession of our land and resources. The idea that Indigenous communities would assert a call for nationhood in our own terms, not as domestic dependents as defined by the U.S. government, is at the center of the sovereignty debate.<sup>12</sup> But the acceptance of colonial rule by many Indigenous people has made the possibility of being “self-determined” or “sovereign” impossible to imagine. Taiaiake acknowledges that sovereignty has been useful in calling out “settler states’ claimed authority over non-consenting peoples” but cannot be part of a liberation ideology until “we create a meaning for sovereignty” that respects the understanding of power in Indigenous cultures.<sup>13</sup>

### **Sovereignty as Nationhood**

The work of Deskaheh (Levi General), Sotsisowah (John Mohawk),<sup>14</sup> and Taiaiake witnesses, defines, and influences the way that Haudenosaunee people negotiate our realities in relationship to sovereignty, Indigeneity, and the law. Unlike many contemporary scholars, Sotsisowah recognizes the pivotal role of Cayuga chief Deskaheh in his attempt to gain international recognition for the Haudenosaunee at the League of Nations in Geneva, in 1923.<sup>15</sup> Since then, the struggle over the term *sovereignty* has been ignited between European and Indigenous interpretations. Deskaheh’s journey to the international court was unsuccessful in its attempt to get the League of Nations to recognize the Haudenosaunee as a modern nation, but it was critical in the formation of a sense of entitlement or autonomy that the Haudenosaunee express today.

Sotsisowah, the architect of Haudenosaunee strategies of renewal and resistance and author of *A Basic Call to Consciousness*, was instrumental to the Haudenosaunee presentation of three papers to the nongovernmental organizations at the United Nations in Geneva, in 1977. These presentations were intended to “introduce the people of the Western World to our

understanding of the history of the West and the prospects for the future” (*Basic*, 124). Sotsisowah argued that the West’s unchecked commodification of the earth will exploit the environment beyond its ability to renew itself. He called for a relationship to the natural world that arises from Haudenosaunee governing principles that he described as a “liberation theology,” in which the interconnectedness or “web” of all life is sacred and key to human freedom and survival. He suggested that Haudenosaunee political structure may be the oldest continuously operating governmental system in the world and arises out of the consciousness that it is the renewable quality of the earth’s ecosystems that sustain life. Therefore, a Haudenosaunee construction of *nation* or *liberation theology* is based on the philosophical teachings of the Peacemaker that “set out to give some order to society and to create peace among peoples and nations” (26). The operating governmental system set down by the Peacemaker was described by the Mohawks as “the Great Goodness” and by the Senecas as “the Great Law” (26). Sotsisowah describes the Great Law as “one of the few examples of ‘Natural Law’ available to modern [hu]man” (12). It is a law that clearly “precedes ‘royal’ law, or ‘mercantile’ law or ‘bourgeois’ property—interest law” (13). Central to the Peacemaker’s message is that “government is specifically organized to prevent the abuse of human beings by cultivating a spiritually healthy society and the establishment of peace” (10). Peace is defined as “the product of a society which strives to establish concepts which correlate to the English words, Power, Reason and Righteousness” (11). Thus, the law of Indigenous peoples and specifically the Haudenosaunee is not anchored in Western legal systems but represents philosophical principles that transcend the colonial mythology of a hegemonic authoritarian state. As Taiaiake asserts in *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, “To argue on behalf of indigenous nationhood within the dominant Western paradigm is self-defeating.”<sup>16</sup> His critique of nationhood is aimed at the modern nation-state construct, whereas Sotsisowah’s reference to the Haudenosaunee “governmental system” was more in keeping with the principles set out in the Great Law.

Deskaheh’s initial call for nation-to-nation recognition, Sotsisowah’s recognition of ancient Haudenosaunee governmental organizing principles as a template for autonomy, and key confrontational moments in the late twentieth century formulate a version of sovereignty for the Haudenosaunee that vacillates from nation-state assertion to strategic essentialism.

Sotsisowah, a key engineer of twentieth-century Haudenosaunee interpretations of sovereignty, lived through the resistance movement of

Red Power in the 1960s to 1970s, was at the 1972 takeover of the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) building in Washington and the second Wounded Knee the following year. These events were important moments in the transference of Haudenosaunee notions of sovereignty and activism that culminated in a renewed desire to address an international audience. The delegation of Native leaders at the United Nations in 1977 became an important assertion of nationhood or sovereignty between Deskaheh's earlier trip and work that is going on with the UN today on the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Taiaiake benefited from having a critical distance from these events but rose to national prominence during the resistance by the Kanien'kehaka communities at Oka in 1990.<sup>17</sup> The impact of Wounded Knee, the American Indian Movement, and the 1977 intervention at the United Nations in Geneva for many represent the key moments of the demonstration of sovereignty in Indigenous and nation-state negotiations. The Haudenosaunee performed sovereignty and created a physical record to be witness to these encounters. The subtext of this version of sovereignty was about both Western and Haudenosaunee ideas about law. It is perhaps this narrow focus on the conflation of sovereignty as about only Western legal jurisprudence that has led to Taiaiake's assertion that "sovereignty as it is currently understood and applied in indigenous-state relations cannot be seen as an appropriate goal or framework, because it has no relevance to indigenous values."<sup>18</sup> Taiaiake calls for an interpretation of sovereignty that is detached from its current Western legal meaning. He is also influenced by the work of Lakota intellectual Vine Deloria Jr., who recognizes that "state-delegated forms of authority . . . are inadequate because they do not take into account the spiritual need of indigenous societies."<sup>19</sup>

### **Diversifying Sovereignty**

A narrow interpretation of sovereignty based on Western legal jurisprudence, therefore, does not represent Haudenosaunee foundational concepts of natural law, nor does it adequately address intellectual, cultural, artistic, and visual expansion of the concept. A singular idea of sovereignty as a legal construct has evolved into multiple interpretations by Indigenous artists, but many Native scholars caught in a system of Western validation have not embraced a more fluid and diverse interpretation of sovereignty. I argued in 1995 that the legal-political assertion of sovereignty in the twentieth century has always coexisted with a complex expressive imaginary

of visual sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior's 1995 term *intellectual sovereignty*, informed by Deloria's understanding of sovereignty "as an open-ended process," acknowledges multiple historic interstices.<sup>21</sup> Lenape scholar Joanne Barker later considered the use of *intellectual sovereignty* as a political shift from land-based sovereignty as an "attempt . . . to decolonize the theoretical and methodological perspectives used within analyses of indigenous histories, cultures, and identities from the legacies of intellectual colonialism."<sup>22</sup> Ottawa-based scholar Karen Ohnesorge, influenced by the work of Salish/Kootnai artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Indigenous artists in North America, has applied *artistic sovereignty* to the decolonization of the landscape genre in their art.<sup>23</sup> Pueblo filmmaker Beverly Singer's 2001 notion of "cultural sovereignty" as "trusting in the older ways and adapting them to our lives in the present" also reinvigorates the concept of sovereignty.<sup>24</sup> Further proof of the expansion of the term *visual sovereignty* gaining recognition as a paradigmatic tool in the analysis of Indigenous photography is evidenced by the "Visual Sovereignty" photographic conference of international artists and photographers at the University of California at Davis in 2009.<sup>25</sup>

There is a need to expand art criticism and visual theory to include a discourse read across Indigeneity, colonization, and sovereignty. Critics can readily see gender inequities due to the naming and canonization of the concept of feminism, yet they struggle to factor in an Indigenous perspective.<sup>26</sup> Sovereignty could serve as an overarching concept for interpreting the interconnected space of the colonial gaze, deconstruction of the colonizing image or text, and Indigeneity. Thus, informed scholars and critics would understand how to discuss 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 addition to the discourse around decolonization.<sup>27</sup>

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith acknowledges that "Indigenous communities have struggled since colonization to be able to exercise what is a fundamental right, that is, to represent ourselves."<sup>28</sup> Indigenous cultural formations can be discussed from multiple locations (perspectives can be colonial, reservation based, sovereign, national, postcolonial, cultural, or diasporic), and they are created from multiple locations as well. What can we learn from these artists who plumb inherited traditions while appropriating global culture?

It is prudent to discuss tradition, art, and sovereignty based on a spe-

cific cultural location while reserving the right to connect these ideas to a broader discussion of aesthetic practice as a colonial intervention. Stuart Hall argues for a “cultural politics of the local” to resist cultural imperialism: “The subjects of the local, of the margin, can only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their own hidden histories. They have to try to retell the story from the bottom up, instead of from the top down.”<sup>29</sup> Inevitably Indigenous artists confront their relationship to the philosophies or traditions that frame their cultural mapping with their artwork. If these philosophies or traditions are not understood, the artwork is typically narrowly confined to thin interpretation based on old-fashioned identity politics. Tradition as resistance has served Indigenous people well as a response to contact and as a reworking of colonial narratives of the Americas. Why should tradition even matter in a globalized, transnational, cosmopolitan, colonial settler space like North America? What is the relationship between tradition, art, and Indigenous sovereignty? Artfully deployed within Indigenous communities, traditions are a reinvestment in a shared ancient imaginary of self and a distancing strategy from the West.

Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson views Iroquois artists as crucial to the construction of an “Iroquois self, society, and tradition within this past that is both ours and not ours,” and “most importantly, their work helps us to construct and live within a present that belongs entirely to us.”<sup>30</sup> Simpson recognizes that Indigenous artists resituate traditional subjects from a frozen past to a dynamic present. She argues that in this act, “the pieces suggest movement, the passing of time, the dialectic of history, and, most importantly, the process of tradition.”<sup>31</sup> Laura E. Smith reinforces this view: “The deconstruction of photography has unraveled photographic fixity over certain notions of the Native Americans; other writers such as Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, and Frantz Fanon have explored the challenges faced by everyone to ever realize a complete sense of self.”<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, where are the intersections with cultural theory and art world analysis for artists from cultures like the Haudenosaunee or any discrete First Nation community? Are they seamlessly integrated into the discussion of globalization as transnational or forever fixed in anthropologically defined notions of authentic culture? Transnationalism still hangs onto nation-state formations but privileges the flow of people across national borders. It cannot accurately locate Indigenous space within the transnational, while simultaneously ignoring Indigenous self-determination and, ultimately, inherent rights. Specifically, North America remains a problematic space because it has yet to acknowledge the habitual movement of

Indigenous peoples across U.S., Canadian, and Mexican borders or Indigenous homelands.

### Performing Sovereignty

The invisibility of Mohawk (Haudenosaunee) sovereignty, Indian/white racism, gender inequity, and poverty collide in Courtney Hunt's 2008 film, *Frozen River*. Set within the territories of the Mohawk Nation that straddle the U.S.-Canada border, *Frozen River* captures the sense of desperation felt by many women struggling to care for their children in the dire economy of upstate New York. One of the film's two protagonists, Lila Littlewolf, a Mohawk woman, lives in a camper in a wooded area of Akwesasne. On the New York side of Akwesasne, unable to secure mortgages, most Native people are forced to live in substandard housing because homes are either paid for in cash or built over a long period of time by the homeowner. The fact that Lila lives in a camper registers as completely dysfunctional in contrast to the more established trailer home of Ray Eddy, a white woman who becomes Lila's collaborator, referred to as a "smuggler" in the *New York Times* film review in 2008.<sup>33</sup> The economics of coloniality are starkly illustrated but not seen. The object of desire for Ray is to buy a doublewide trailer home. The object of desire for Lila is to recover her baby, taken due to her economic hardship. Forced to make a choice where there are few good options, the two women become "transporters" of South Asians, who are seeking a better life in the United States.

The film provides enough detail for the audience to recognize it as a countercolonial narrative. The *New York Times's* review was representative of the invisibility of Native space to the dominant culture. The reviewer discussed the film as representing a border issue between Canada and the United States but ignored the assertion of Mohawk nationhood or sovereignty in which no border exists. Instead, most commentary focused on the film's overt racial inequity. Although racism is embedded in the film, the structure of colonial economics bounds the real-life drama. The geopolitical location of Indigenous space in North America is intentionally invisible: intentional in the sense that neither Canada nor the United States wants its citizens to understand their role in the continuous colonization of Indigenous space in North America.

Where does *Frozen River* fit in a discussion about sovereignty as a transformation of cultural and governmental traditions? As perverse as it may be, Lila is living out the modality of an assertion of sovereignty and

tradition by crossing Western borders that divide traditional Mohawk lands. A narrow stretch of the St. Lawrence River freezes over so thick that cars and even trucks have been known to cross, carrying unstamped cigarettes, unregistered guns, and undocumented human beings. Some people in the Mohawk communities believe that the trade of cigarettes and other goods within their own homelands is not smuggling and that suppression of this trade represents a form of economic colonialism or subjugation. Few would argue that the movement of human beings through this channel is unethical.

My focus within this discussion is the way the issues of Mohawk sovereignty and women's agency are represented. Emotionally, the film is dark, but it is visualized in stark whites, conveying a cold visual and sensory palette. *Frozen River* dares to depict the face of white poverty in North America as graphically as poverty-marked Indian Country in *Thunderheart* (1992; dir. Michael Apted) and *Smoke Signals* (1998; dir. Chris Eyre). Close-ups of Ray Eddy's white, smoke-creased skin framed by dry, graying blond hair, underscore the toll of economic hardship on the underclass in North America.

The conflation of Indian women with the land is an essential underpinning of this film, although here the white woman is the elder to the Mohawk woman, an alteration on the classic theme of the Indian as disempowered elder. The liminal transit zone of the frozen river is the U.S. empire in the state of economic meltdown or thaw. The condition of settler colonialism in North America can be seen through Eddy's skin, reflecting the emotional turmoil of capitalist abandonment as the inevitable cracks in the ice as the river thaws.

In contrast, Lila Littlewolf's plump, smooth brown face and her human cargo represent the pending flow of cultural difference in colonial North America because the migration of people from the Global South is inevitable. Somewhere deeply embedded in this crossing is Mohawk agency as Lila practices an inherent right or tradition to move freely in her homeland.

### **Visualizing Sovereignty**

The deployment of tradition as strategic cultural resistance is part of Haudenosaunee history. Following in the footsteps of Deskaheh, Lila's treacherous passage on the frozen river is not based in personal defiance but is mapped into the consciousness of Haudenosaunee people as a right to test colonial borders. Similarly, Haudenosaunee artists visualize sovereignty

through key episodic “traditional” or historical moments. The beginning or creation story, the art of diplomacy as embedded in wampum belts, and the Peacemaker’s journey are part of a tradition that informs the work of contemporary Haudenosaunee artists like Samuel Thomas, Marie Watt, G. Peter Jemison, and Alan Michelson.

The contemporary relationship between materiality and cultural content can be seen in the work of Cayuga artist Samuel Thomas’s rendering of key archetypal Haudenosaunee concepts, including the “tree of peace” and the “celestial tree” (see figure 1). His use of white glass beads is both aesthetically interesting and tied to the authority of the color in wampum belts made originally with quahog shells. The color white is often described as representing a consciousness of peace in Haudenosaunee iconography. Thomas’s use of whiteness is significant because the historic antecedent to this form of beadwork was typically made with exuberant color as a gesture toward the fecundity of life as described in the Creation Story and the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address.<sup>34</sup> An example of this earlier type of beadwork was exhibited in a 1996 exhibition *Across Borders: Beadwork in Iroquois Life*. The central analysis of this exhibit was to reveal beadwork made primarily by Kanawake Mohawk and Tuscarora women between 1830 and 1860, as a strategic economic, traditional, and sovereign translation (see figure 2).<sup>35</sup>

This period marked the greatest loss of Haudenosaunee homelands of the Five Nations where they were dispossessed of over 80 percent of their ancestral homelands and forced to negotiate for the territories that remained.<sup>36</sup> The Tuscarora had experienced that loss in North Carolina in the 1700s and witnessed the Seneca loss during the 1700–1800s. I argue that tradition is also a strategic sovereigntist resistance in the twenty-first century to ongoing coloniality and the flattening process of globalization.

The most well-known wampum belt is the Two Row Wampum, or in the Mohawk language, Guswentah or Kaswehnta. The belt symbolizes an agreement or treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch in 1613 acknowledging mutual respect. Graphically, two parallel rows of purple quahog shells are grounded in a rectangular field of white shell, signifying equitable trajectories ad infinitum.<sup>37</sup> The belt today is the basis of all subsequent treaties with European and North American governments, including the Treaty of Canandaigua of 1794. Artists today complicate and affirm the original meaning of the agreement evoked by the Two Row Wampum. Seneca artist Marie Watt’s work (see figure 3) refers to the metaphor of the two parallel lines, but her use of red wool also evokes the colonial fur

trade in North America.<sup>38</sup> Two black stains or tears on the face of Seneca artist G. Peter Jemison (see figure 4) allude to the first use of wampum as described in the teachings of the Peacemaker, which is canonized in the condolence ceremony. The performance video *Wiping Away the Tears* (see figure 4) recasts the gesture of compassion as originally enacted by the Peacemaker, where an eagle feather is brushed against the face of a person to wipe away the tears, symbolizing a clearing of the mind. Jemison's use of this metaphor set within the chaotic setting of Times Square in New York City is in dialogue with Watt's red woolen "paths." Both works employ the attempt at equity engrained in Haudenosaunee consciousness as a call for "clear thinking" or the "good mind," which is the essence of the use of wampum as linking human beings to the "force that created this world," referred to commonly as the "Giver of Life" or the Creator (*Basic*, 10). Watt's use of red wool and Jemison's Times Square backdrop capture the violence in our path historically and today. By framing this rupture within the visual trope of the Two Row Wampum, or Guswentah, a call for balance is made by these artists.

Mohawk artist Alan Michelson's site-specific public work *The Third Bank of the River* (see figure 5), permanently installed near the U.S.-Canada border in Massena, New York, confirms the endurance and power of the original agreement of the Two Row Wampum.<sup>39</sup> He contemporizes the original Two Row Wampum binary as an installation made with colored glass melted into glass, providing multiple points of view in an attempt to address the confluence of cultures at this site.

Michelson's work represents the mobility of Haudenosaunee traditions through cultural formations. Two Row Wampum is an abstract visualization of cultural and political equity, and it lends itself to the modernist aesthetic of the twenty-first century. Michelson's appropriation of the Two Row Wampum as an intercultural locator transgresses aesthetic cultural boundaries and appeals to a broad art world audience. His traditional palette of purple and white anchored in a structure true to the original form subverts the subtle meaning of opposing shorelines at the Three Nations Crossing bridge at Massena (Mohawk U.S. side), Akwesasne (Mohawk Canadian side), and the United States and Canada. The installation of the ancient symbol of the Two Row Wampum seductively assures Haudenosaunee people that our right to move freely in our ancestral territories is being respected at this international border. The location of this abstraction of the Two Row Wampum is what will be recognized as a concrete marking of Mohawk space between the colonial governments of Canada and

the United States. Ironically, the installation is largely obscured to most travelers unless one is detained and has to enter the homeland inspection station (see figure 6). Nevertheless, this work does open up a space for non-Haudenosaunee people to consider continuous shared space of both Indigenous and non-Native peoples in the Americas. The backlit, electronic glow of Michelson's custom, colored glass installation subliminally connects the condition of biometric surveillance in our lives today with the Two Row Wampum, complicating a Haudenosaunee assertion of "our right to move freely in our homelands." In tandem with Watt's blunted red paths, Jemison's black tears, Thomas's beaded *Ganradaisgowa'h-Peace Tree, Series III, 2005–2007* (see figure 1), and *Frozen River*, this art forces a new reading of the Two Row Wampum that allows the Haudenosaunee audience to view it not as parallel and separate paths but rather as a series of perpetual entanglements.

I'm drawn to the representation of Sophronia Thompson's dew eagle in the great white pine, its branches chaotically twisted and sprouting plumlike berries (see figure 2). The frugal use of white and black both recalls early beadwork and looks ahead to the colorless, bleak space of colonial America. The beaded tree is set on a black beaded doily with strings of beads framing the outer edge. It is easy to dismiss this nineteenth-century "traditional" form as folk art, while it can be seen as a revealing expression of Haudenosaunee culture. It is actually the scene in *Frozen River*, where Lila and Ray are creeping across the ice as it begins to crack that reveals the significance of Thomas's *Peace Tree, Series III*. This beaded sculptural form is like the car caught on a sheet of cracking black ice in the twenty-first century. Thomas and Haudenosaunee people keep reinvesting in inherited cultural formations—one bead or step at a time—as an attempt to reach the other side.

Perhaps we really do not want to reach the other side, and the expression of sovereignty through tradition is the continuous journey of life. This is expressed in the following Seneca story:

A woman is sitting by the moon and she is busy embroidering with porcupine quills; near her is a bright fire, and over the fire hangs a kettle with something boiling in it. By her side sits a large white dog who watches her continually. Once in a while she gets up lays aside her work and stirs whatever is boiling in the kettle. While she is doing this the dog unravels her work. This is going on continually. As fast as she embroiders the dog unravels. If she could finish her work, or if she ever does, then the end of the world will come that instant.<sup>40</sup>

Tradition is also a strategic sovereigntist resistance in the twenty-first century to ongoing coloniality and the flattening process of globalization.

I've come to view sovereignty as an Indigenous tradition whose work is strategically never done. The emergent space of sovereignty within aesthetic discourse is not marked or theorized and needs to be articulated as a framing device to interpret the work of Indigenous artists. The incorporation of expanded ideas of sovereignty in combination with contemporary analysis of Indigenous art has the potential to shift consciousness within Indigenous communities and surrounding colonial settler nations. Internally the recognition that visual expressions of Indigenous artists are as crucial to the sovereigntist's agenda as legal reform is within the debate. Alan Michelson's installation at the border is much more than public art. It is part of a continuum initiating with the original Guswentah wampum, linked to the stance of Deskaheh in 1929 and the depiction of Lila's car inching over the same river. They all are reminders that sovereignty is not something foreign for the Haudenosaunee; it is a complex negotiation about our own sense of place and ownership.

#### Notes

- 1 See "The National Museum of the American Indian," special issue, *American Indian Quarterly* 29.3-4 (Summer-Fall 2005), for a response from Native academics. For journalistic and cultural critiques, see Marc Fisher, "Indian Museum's Appeal, Sadly, Only Skin Deep," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2004; Paul Richard, "Shards of Many Untold Stories: In Place of Unity, a Mélange of Unconnected Objects," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2004; Edward Rothstein, "Who Should Tell History, the Tribes or the Museums?" *New York Times*, December 21, 2004. See Moira G. Simpson, "Native American Museums and Cultural Centres," in *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era*, ed. Moira G. Simpson (London: Routledge, 1996), 135-270, for an analysis of Native North American museums.

Discussions relevant to the display of Indigenous representational issues within the museum include Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1998); W. Richard West Jr., ed., *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagg, eds., *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery* (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002); and Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

- 2 See Jolene Rickard, "Absorbing or Obscuring the Absence of a Critical Space in the Americas for Indigeneity: The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian," *Res: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (Fall 2007): 56-74; and Paul Chaat Smith, "The Terrible Nearness of Distant Places: Making History at the National

- Museum of the American Indian,” in *Indigenous Experience Today*, ed. Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 379–98.
- 3 For a history of the formation of the National Museum of the American Indian, see West, *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian*. For a history and analysis of the transition from the former Museum of the American Indian to the NMAI, see Ira Jacknis, “A New Thing? The NMAI in Historical and Institutional Perspective,” *American Indian Quarterly* 30.3–4 (Summer–Fall 2006): 511–42.
  - 4 Edward Rothstein, “Museum with an American Indian Voice,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2004.
  - 5 See Gerald Robert Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2008).
  - 6 For an overview of the complicated development of Native representation in museums, see Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, “Our (Museum) World Turned Upside Down: Re-presenting Native American Arts,” *Art Bulletin* 77.1 (1995): 6–10.
  - 7 Based on testimony gathered from Native communities, Native people wanted to be present in the museum and not represented through the museum’s collection. This resulted in a very small percentage of the NMAI collection actually being put on display.
  - 8 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, September 13, 2007, [www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html) (accessed November 18, 2010). Historians argue that Indigenous nations, particularly the Haudenosaunee, influenced the foundational principles of the U.S. Constitution in *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the U.S. Constitution*, ed. Oren Lyons et al. (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishing, 1998).
  - 9 According to the Native American Rights Fund, “Native American governments are recognized as governmental sovereigns and have been referred to as quasi-sovereign domestic dependent nations by the courts.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “The Native American Policy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,” 1994, [http://library.fws.gov/Pubs/native\\_american\\_policy.pdf](http://library.fws.gov/Pubs/native_american_policy.pdf) (accessed November 19, 2010).
  - 10 As a Smithsonian museum, NMAI is funded in part by U.S. tax dollars, but as reported by Edward Rothstein, “NMAI raised \$100 million of its \$219 million from private sources (a third of that from Indian tribes made wealthy from gambling casinos).” Edward Rothstein, “Museum with an American Indian Voice,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2004.
  - 11 For a discussion on the Our Lives gallery, see Mario A. Caro, “You Are Here: The NMAI as Site of Identification,” *American Indian Quarterly* 30.3–4 (Summer–Fall 2006): 543–57.
  - 12 Article 1, section 8 of the U.S. Constitution vests Congress with the authority to engage in relations with tribes. When the governmental authority of tribes was first challenged in the 1830s, Supreme Court chief justice John Marshall articulated a fundamental principle that has guided the evolution of federal Indian law—tribes retain certain inherent powers of self-government as “domestic dependent nations.” U.S. Department of Justice, “About Native Americans,” [www.justice.gov/otj/nafaqs.htm](http://www.justice.gov/otj/nafaqs.htm) (accessed September 14, 2010).
  - 13 Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Don Mills, ONT: Oxford University Press, 1999), 55, 54.

- 14 John Mohawk (Sotsisowah) and Segwalise, introduction to *Basic Call to Consciousness*, ed. Akwesasne Notes (Summertown, TN: Native Voices, 1978), 19–26; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Basic*.
- 15 Most Haudenosaunee citizens would consider themselves sovereigntists. My focus on Deskaheh, Sotsisowah, and Taiaiake is based on the impact that Deskaheh's 1923 attempt to address the League of Nations; Sotsisowah's 1977 attendance of the UN meeting in Geneva and his work in *A Basic Call to Consciousness*; and Taiaiake's *Peace, Power, Righteousness* and *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2005) have had on the interpretation of sovereignty in the Haudenosaunee territories.
- 16 Taiaiake, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 58.
- 17 Taiaiake, *Wasáse*, 46.
- 18 Taiaiake, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 54.
- 19 Deloria cited in *ibid*.
- 20 See Jolene Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," in *Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices*, *Aperture* no. 139 (New York: Aperture, 1995), 51–59. Carlton University students Heather Igloliorte and Carla Taunton have organized a panel at a University Art Association of Canada conference at the University of Guelph (Guelph, ON, October 14–16, 2010) that "focuses on Indigenous arts in national and transnational contexts. Among current investigations of Aboriginal art in Canada is the exploration of assertions of Indigenous agency, autonomy, and self-determination through artistic and performative practices. This session is framed by Tuscarora scholar Jolene Rickard's argument, in 'Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand.'" University Art Association of Canada, [www.uaac-aauc.com](http://www.uaac-aauc.com) (accessed November 18, 2010). Also see Jolene Rickard, "The Occupation of Indigenous Space as Photograph," in *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, ed. Jane Allison (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1999), 51–71.
- 21 Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Literary Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 97.
- 22 Joanne Barker, "For Whom Sovereignty Matters," in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 25.
- 23 Karen Ohnesorge, "Uneasy Terrain: Image, Text, Landscape, and Contemporary Indigenous Artists in the United States," *American Indian Quarterly* 32.1 (Winter 2008): 43.
- 24 Beverly Singer, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 2.
- 25 UC Davis News and Information, "Visual Sovereignty Photography Conference, April 4–5, 2009," March 23, 2009, [www.news.ucdavis.edu/search/news\\_detail.lasso?id=9058](http://www.news.ucdavis.edu/search/news_detail.lasso?id=9058).
- 26 See Julia V. Emberley, *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), for a discussion about Native women's views on feminism.
- 27 A single notion of sovereignty is further complicated by the recalibration of Indigenous presence in play concerning the election of President Barack Obama. Native Americans are not consistently named in the "/American" categories that elected Obama because our numbers are not significant enough to have an impact. From a sovereigntist perspective, Indigenous people are not minorities within our own homeland, and

from a Haudenosaunee perspective, the goal is not to be a minority citizen in a colonial state but to be a citizen of an Indigenous nation. This perspective is not consistent across Indian Country, where many want to be American/Native American or dual citizens.

- 28 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed, 1999), 150.
- 29 Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalizations and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony King (Binghamton: SUNY Press, 1999), 34–35.
- 30 Audra Simpson, "The Empire Laughs Back: Tradition, Power, and Play in the Work of Shelley Niro and Ryan Rice," in *Iroquois Art: Visual Expressions of Contemporary Native American Artists*, ed. Sylvia S. Kasprzycki, Doris I. Strambrau, and Alexandra V. Roth (Altenstadt, GER: European Review of Native American Studies, 1998), 48.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 32 Laura E. Smith, "Photography, Criticism, Native American Women's Identity: Three Works by Jolene Rickard," *Third Text* 19.1 (January 2005): 53–66. Smith references the work of Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative Function of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 3–9; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), as informing the construction of contemporary Native American identity.
- 33 Stephen Holden, "Only a Few More Smuggling Days Left before Christmas? It's Not a Wonderful Life," review of *Frozen River*, *New York Times*, August 1, 2008.
- 34 A reproduction of Samuel Thomas's *Ganradaisgowa'h-Peace Tree Series III, 2005–2007* can be seen in *Kwah i:ken Tsi Iroquois / Oh So Iroquois / Tellement Iroquois*, ed. Emily Falvey (Ottawa, ON: Ottawa Art Gallery, 2008), 54. The "tree" is made of black and white seed beads with a beaded bird on top and strawberries hanging from the branches. The bird on the top is meant to represent the eagle that watched for danger and the berries are gifts from the Creators' world. A number of Tuscarora beaded pieces from the mid-1800s were beaded in red and white. Earlier renditions of this tree were in color, so it is significant that Thomas chose to use only black and white.
- 35 For an understanding of the history of beadwork in the 1800s, see Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999). Also see figure 2 for an example of early Tuscarora beadwork by Sophronia Thompson.
- 36 For an archival chronology of the dispossession of the Iroquois, see Laurence M. Hauptman, *Conspiracy of Interests: Iroquois Dispossession and the Rise of New York State* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001).
- 37 The idea of traditional form as an economic strategy for survival is now canonical through the scholarship of Janet Berlo, Ruth Phillips, Trudy Nicks, Mary Louise Pratt, and others.
- 38 A reproduction of Marie Watt's work can be seen in Ryan Rice and Emily Falvey, *Kwah i:ken Tsi Iroquois / Oh So Iroquois / Tellement Iroquois* (Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and the Ottawa Art Gallery, 2007), 57.
- 39 As described on the Web site of Alan Michelson, a GSA-commissioned public art-

work for the new U.S. Port of Entry in Massena, New York, consisting of panoramic views of the four St. Lawrence River shorelines and three entities—Canada, Akwesasne Mohawk Territory, and the United States—at the complex border. Alan Michelson, <http://alanmichelson.com/> (accessed November 19, 2010).

40 Barbara Alice Mann, *Iroquois Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).



Figure 1. Samuel Thomas (Cayuga), *Ganradaisgowa'h-Peace Tree, Series III*, 2005–2007, glass seed beads, 14-gauge wire, velvet, wood, and wampum shell; 24 x 15 inches. Courtesy of the artist

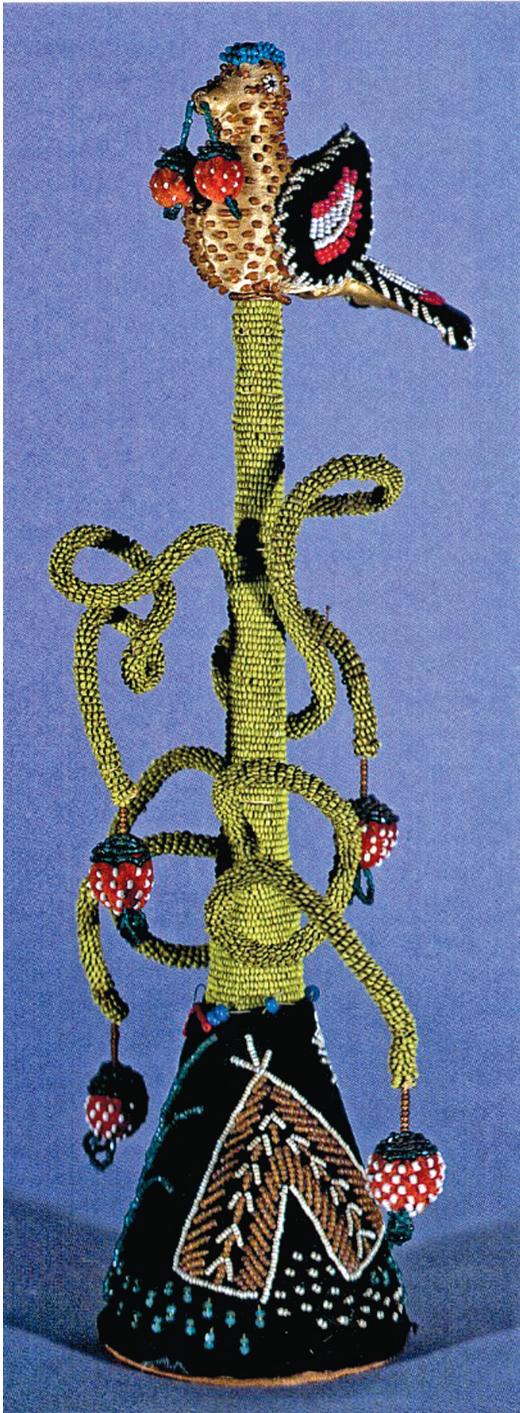


Figure 2. Sophronia Thompson (Tuscarora), *Tree of Peace*, c. 1860, glass beads, wire, and fabric; 12 x 8 inches; accession number 92.1342. Courtesy of Niagara County Historical Society, Lockport, New York



Figure 3. Marie Watt (Seneca), *Teiohahake*, 2005, silk ribbons and reclaimed wool; 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. G. Peter Jemison (Seneca), *Wiping Away the Tears*, 2002, video. Photo by Brenden Jemison. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. Alan Michelson, *The Third Bank of the River*, 2009, ceramic glass and colored glass; 69 x 489 inches; courtesy of the artist



Figure 6. Alan Michelson, *The Third Bank of the River* (exterior view), 2009, ceramic glass and colored glass; 69 x 489 inches; courtesy of the artist